

# Making Jam in the Woods

My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World

2



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# Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World Vol.2

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MORI NO HOTORI DE JAM WO NIRU Vol.2 ~ISEKAI DE HAJIMERU SLOW LIFE

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First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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[contact@crossinfworld.com](mailto:contact@crossinfworld.com)

[www.crossinfworld.com](http://www.crossinfworld.com) Published in the United States of America

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Digital Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-086-6

Print Edition ISBN: 979-8-88560-087-3



Making a feast with a big

Seerel fish!

Adelaide  
Dustin

Margaret

Phew,  
this mouthfeel  
is perfect.  
I'm satisfied!

Making Jam  
in the Woods 2

My Relaxing Life Starts  
in Another World





Miselle' s Festival of Eve

It's like a  
paper lantern  
festival.

*Something that connects  
this world and mine.*



# Prologue: In the Corner of the Woods

**MISELLE.** A countryside village near the Royal Capital.

Down a short path from the village center, there's a small plaza surrounded by short green shrubbery. Behind that is a small river where you can hear the voices of children having fun as they fish. An elm tree with large, wide branches and a two-story stone house standing next to it. The building was reserved by the women's association for their gatherings and acted as the main social hub for the village as it hosted a wide variety of events. Beside it was a colorful flowerbed illuminated by the early summer sunshine streaming through the tree canopy.

If you were to capture this scene and put it into a frame, it would look like a postcard image. I am still enamored by the vast sky, which is free of telephone wire obstructions.

Me living here still feels like a dream.

As a result of an accident at work, I sustained injuries, lost my voice, and ended up in this world where both magic and fairies exist. I had somehow also come into the very important position of Spirit Caller.

Spirits keep the world in balance and help keep the peace. And those whom they summon from other worlds to aid in their duties are called Spirit Callers.

I often wondered why such an important role that's integral to not only the nation but the whole continent was given to me: a shop assistant approaching her thirties. I was very fortunate to meet kind people who helped change my outlook on things.

*If I can't return to my old world, then I want to stay with the woman I love most dearly. My savior.* That selfish wish was granted, and I have spent my days in the green and peaceful village of Miselle ever since.

I've filled my time by doing chores at Lady Adelaide's estate and helping at Dr. Daniel's clinic a few times a week. Everything takes time as we don't have any

modern appliances to rely on to help with the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. However, this kind of lifestyle reminds me of my childhood with my grandmother, so it hits close to home in all the good ways.

“Hey, miss, let’s play. Mom will be back soon!”

I was ushered towards the clinic waiting room by some children. My kindergarten teaching license was finally getting used in this new world.

“I wanna play with the dolls.”

“I wanna juggle the bean bags!”

I looked behind me to see the trails the golden Fairy Lights left against the blue sky. I could feel the warmth of the tiny hand pulling me along—well, it’s time to play babysitter at the clinic again.

# Chapter 1: Private Chats in the Waiting Room

I saw Lord Walter and Mark off in the horse-drawn carriage before returning to the clinic with the children in tow. The waiting room was as it always was.

It wasn't odd for either Mark or the doctor to look after the clinic when one went out on home visits or to the capital. Even the patients were used to it at this point. Patients, such as those who were only here to collect medicine, would offer their spot to others who seemed to be doing worse than them or children suffering from a high fever. They would head home and return later when the clinic had quieted down somewhat.

The clinic waiting room was busy all morning. However, around the afternoon it had returned to how it usually was—quite empty.

The people of Miselle were truly warmhearted and welcoming. At first, they did have their guards up, as is expected of a village in the countryside, but once they had warmed up to me, it was like living in an area where everyone knew you. Dr. Daniel was right when he said that not a lot happens out here.

Well, there was the fact that since everyone knew each other, that acted as a sort of crime deterrent. That also meant that people tended to get into your business. Though many people weren't too pushy about it, and most things were forgiven as long as you weren't outright rude to everyone in town.

For example, Lady Adelaide is a noblewoman, as well as the mother of the count presiding over this region. Her residence is towards the back of the village, near the forest, so she isn't particularly close to any of the villagers. It wasn't that she avoided them; it was more that they kept their distance. Lady Adelaide is a classy lady, so they treated her like she was out of their league. Although the one exception to this rule is the women's association—they didn't act like that there.

That said, I think the association is just different. They welcomed me, a newcomer to the region, right into their ranks and were still fussing after me to

this day.

“Oh, Margaret. Ms. Terry’s cat had kittens, right? Did you go see them yet? What’s that, not yet? In that case, I hope she brings them so you can see them; she should still have a few kittens. They are so cute. They’re this small, and they’re so fluffy and warm. They toddle along when they walk; it’s just so cute, I can’t take it!”

Ms. Mei, who was waiting to have her twisted ankle checked at the clinic, showed the size of the kitten with her hands, reliving her encounter with them as her cheeks flushed red. Her son Roy was sitting beside me on the blanket, occupied with some bean bags.

“I said that I’d love to have one this time, but it was a no-go...” she continued. “Even though they’re so well-behaved and cute!”

Ms. Mei managed the village grocery store along with her husband. She slid up extra close to me and spoke in a hushed voice about her husband, Thomas. She talked about how he had such a strong physique, he made lifting and carrying the food sacks easy. He was incredibly reliable. He was polite with customers but had a very striking appearance. He looked like a pro wrestler or a martial artist, and he even played a part in helping with the village’s safety.

“I can’t believe he’s scared of a little kitty when he has a face that would scare the hair right off your back!” she complained. “If we had a cat at our store, don’t you think I wouldn’t have gotten injured?” She laughed dryly as she massaged her swollen ankle. It looked painful.

Ms. Mei had been chasing after a mouse she had spotted in the warehouse when she stumbled and fell over.

Her husband had hated cats since he was a child. She said it had something to do with how he always used to tease stray cats and would get scratched as a result. *Ah, I get that feeling. You never forget your childhood traumas.*

Like when I was in kindergarten. One morning, when I left the house, a large black and white dog suddenly appeared. I think it was a Dalmatian. It had no leash or collar, and it suddenly chased after me. I panicked and ran into the house of a neighbor who I went to school with every day, and the ordeal ended without incident, but I was so surprised.

It probably just wanted to play with me, but having a large, unknown dog jumping towards little kindergartner me...it was no surprise I couldn't keep my cool. What began as a calm morning turned into me being the protagonist of my own disaster movie. As a result, even now, I still get nervous around Dalmatians. According to those who have Dalmatians, they are a playful, energetic, and smart breed. *I apologize for having an innate fear of a whole breed.*

The weird thing was, there were no families in the area who owned a Dalmatian, and I never saw the dog again after that... *I'm pretty sure it wasn't a dream.*

So I understand how those childhood fears carry on into adulthood. Though, that said, imagining "a tough guy who's terrified of kittens" was enough to make me laugh out loud.

"Not to mention, he thought I didn't realize that he disliked cats!" Ms. Mei exclaimed. "Like I wouldn't realize. I've been with him since we were kids. He always used to freeze up when we came across a cat in the street, and he'd act like it was nothing."

Ms. Mei and her husband were childhood friends who had grown up in the village together. She was even there when he was scratched by the cat that started his trauma, and since then, he always kept his distance from them, so it was well-known he didn't like them.

"He tried his best to hide it, so I just let him think he had me fooled," Ms. Mei laughed. I enjoyed hearing about it, but once again, I had become privy to yet another villager's secret.

I had attended the women's association meetings several times now, and I thought people had opened up to me since. However since I started working at the clinic, I felt I was further closing the distance between myself and the other villagers.

A lot of people really enjoy opening while they're waiting.

I have no blood relatives in the village, plus I can't talk, so they probably think I won't go around spreading their secrets... It reminds me of the tale, "The King's Ears are Donkey Ears."

There are people who, after having opened up to me like a book, then proceed to give me stuff, help me out, and say that I'm a reliable, good person —improving my reputation in spades.

*But I'm not really doing anything special. I'm just listening. I do get a little overwhelmed by their high praise, but all I'm really doing is listening to them like I am with Ms. Mei. And it's not like they're going into heavy topics about their life, so I just kind of go along with it.*

For example, they talk to me about the real price of a coat they bought with their secret savings or how they secretly ordered a light bulb.

Or how they received a plate as a wedding gift, but they never used it and instead put it up somewhere high to display, but in reality, it had broken, so they had to patch it together and were unable to use it when they actually wanted to.

Or a family that loves the mother's corn soup, but it's not that person making it; it's their mother who lives three doors down who makes it. Stuff like that. *I wonder if the village is at peace, or is it just people's secrets that aren't all that dramatic?*

From seeing a corsage made with picked wildflowers before they show their mother to a child telling me it's an absolute secret before revealing the location of a bird's nest. There was also a child who once showed me the skin a snake had shed. Yeah, it's a child's treasure, all right. I was just a little surprised, as one would expect.

Ms. Mei, who had been passionately talking about how cute the kittens were, was called into the examination room. Roy, seeing his mother was no longer there, started to tear up a bit. *There, there.* I picked him up onto my lap and comforted him with a hug.

*Mommy will be back soon,* I smiled as I met his gaze. His eyes were wet with tears. He had a vacant look on his face. He seemed to be interested in my hair that was dangling in front of him. He reached out his small hand and grabbed my bangs, pulling them with force. *Owwww,* I thought to myself before lightly knocking my forehead against his.

The little ones who come here adore skinship. It always puts them in good

spirits when I touch their cheeks or forehead like this. *I wonder if they like the warmth.*

*Hey, Roy. I found out about your daddy's secret. He's afraid of cats. Even though they're so cute. Do you like kitties, Roy?*

I pulled him closer and gave him a tight squeeze. He cheered up and was now giggling with joy. I moved him from my lap back onto the top of the blanket, where he happily played with the bean bags again. *He's not that fussy.*

The doctor says that this amount of help around the clinic was helping him. I was happy to hear that, but I always wondered if there was more that I could do. It was simply impossible for me, who had always worked, to rest on the laurels of being a Spirit Caller and live a carefree, leisurely life.

Even then, I still couldn't use my voice, and the wound on my leg wasn't completely healed. Regardless of that, although limited in what I could do, I did my best with the housework at Lady Adelaide's place and helping at the clinic in my free time.

Lord Walter, who had returned to the Royal Capital, said he would try to come up with some ways I could work, but... *I wonder what I can even do.* Reading and writing were no problem, so I could probably manage clerical work. But there wasn't much demand for that in the village. Even if I got some work from the capital, it'd take time and effort for it to be sent to me and then back to the client.

The only thing I could say I had going for me as kind of a side gig was advising others about skincare and making my own products.

At least my experience working for a cosmetics maker and the many years standing on the floor of a department store have proved to be helpful here. I shared some tips on how to care for skin and hair with the other ladies, and it seemed to have spread within the blink of an eye.

The women of this world—or rather, it could only be this village, I'm not sure—rely solely on “perfumed oil” for their skin care. It's oil with the scent of flowers added. There's a variety of different types and they're all nice. The bottles are cute too, and at first, I thought it was perfume. Incidentally, the one Lady Adelaide uses is scented with lily of the valley, which suits her to an absolute T.

It was good quality, and it was kind to skin, the only small flaw being the price.

You only use it in small amounts, so you can just buy it once and use it for a long time which gets you more value for your money. But compared to the price of food, which was relatively cheap, I felt it was too expensive. To give a number off the top of my head, beauty lotion would be around 30,000 yen, cream would be around 50,000 yen. Around that, at least.

They weren't the kind of prices that allowed for your everyday housewife or young woman to buy without much thought. Even I often refrained from buying any... To be honest, I received one from Lady Adelaide back when I didn't know how much they cost. Now, I use it very preciously.

There were several women who bought some then shared it amongst themselves. There were some people who used too much, but one of the basic rules of skin care is that you use precisely the right amount.

I never wear a full face of makeup like I used to at work in Japan. With my early-to-sleep, early-to-rise lifestyle, accompanied by a wonderful diet, I felt the condition of my skin was good, although I was concerned by some dryness.

For a long time, Japanese women have become very accustomed to skin lotions, to the point that after washing their face, they often want to splash on some sort of watery substance. Thus, since coming here and getting accustomed to life here, I set about making a skin lotion I could liberally use.

It contains chamomile as well as a lot of herbs. I was also able to get my hands on good-quality olive oil, so I mixed that in, too.

My knowledge of handmade beauty products ended at "my grandmother's loofah water," a beauty item made from loofah extract. I was unable to get my hands on glycerin or any chemicals, so I didn't have much confidence in the final product, but it seemed the quality of the herbs was good enough. After putting this on, it made my perfumed oil last longer. I didn't have to use it too much, and it was highly effective.

I extracted essence from ingredients that had been soaked in alcohol, then boiled dry herbs like you would when making a Chinese herbal medicine before watering them down. Oil should be added based on the condition of your skin.

Then, you stir it every time you want to use it, like you would a salad dressing. It is an incredibly straightforward item. There were no preservatives nor refrigerators in this world, so I would make enough for two to three days and use it all up within that time frame. I rarely made it in bulk.

Also, as it uses both plants and alcohol, it's important to do a patch test when first using it. You don't want to cover your face in the stuff and get an awful rash. It's best to test it somewhere on the inside of your arm where it won't be noticed, then after confirming the area doesn't turn red or get itchy, you can then use it.

It wasn't that complicated to make, so I thought it was already a thing in this world. Then it turned out that they had nothing known as skin lotion, and they appeared mystified and shocked by it. I guess once they had worked out how to make perfumed oils, they didn't really set their sights on anything else.

When I tried my product on Lady Adelaide, who seemed intrigued by me making the skin lotion, it had an immediate effect. She was always pretty; however, her skin was a little textured and damaged from working in the fields and working outside in general. The skin lotion made her skin smooth and dewy.

It seems my product had become the talk of the women's association before I started attending, as they had noticed the change in Lady Adelaide's skin. When I attended my first meeting, the latter part ended up becoming a demonstration on cosmetics.

I taught them all about how to use skin lotion and how to look after their skin and hair, and that's all it took. You feel better when your skin is in good condition. As a result, the women of the village were quick to accept the new product, and I had now become somewhat of an advisor on the matter.

In all honesty, I do think their skin had improved since my lessons, but I was still unsure if I could make this hobby into a job.

Since I could only communicate through writing, it took a lot of time to advise someone, and as I wasn't a dermatologist or an esthetician, all I could do was give out advice. I didn't have specialized knowledge about medicine or how to manufacture it. I was just a *little* bit knowledgeable about such things. Yeah, I

*really should have picked up a trade.*

I saw Ms. Mei and the others off, when Ms. Linda dropped in at the clinic. She checked to see if the waiting room was empty, then approached me with a question about cosmetics.

Ms. Linda was a seamstress. She was to get married next month.

Marriages here were half arranged, half out of love, but it did seem that arranged marriages had a lot more feelings involved. Commoners were different from nobles in that they had no special connection to other families and simply helped others find love because they enjoyed it.

They often see someone of a marriageable age and casually introduce them to someone else, thinking that they'll be a good match, or they'll mention them. Weddings weren't considered anything special; they were more regarded as one of the main foundations of life and the next step in adulthood. If that were still the case in Japan, the age of marriage probably wouldn't have gotten that high over there.

Even so, I wasn't the one to say what's right or wrong. After all, I was in my late twenties with no plans to marry.

I wonder why, though. It's not like I didn't want to marry, or I decided to be married to my job or anything. Even when I was dating my long-term boyfriend, we never once talked about marriage. Then before I knew it, I was already approaching this age.

I guess the main reason is that it just kind of happened.

When asked, that's how I usually answer, yet I'm always met with a face like, "I don't really get that."

Ms. Linda was to have an arranged marriage, or rather, she was introduced to someone. She was on the older side for being a bachelorette—in Miselle's terms. She was in her early twenties; however, it seemed people were unable to stand her being single, and they had been working in the background to set her up with someone.

They decided to get married when they met for the first time, however they had only met several times since.

“He didn’t seem like a bad person,” Ms. Linda smiled.

I had never taken part in one personally, so I couldn’t say for sure, but I guess that’s how it would go at a matchmaking meeting that was set up with marriage in mind. If you learn to meet in the middle, you can become a family.

As evidence of that, Ms. Linda seemed positive about the marriage. I could tell she had accepted it, and her joyful expression made me want to wish them well.

Although they would have a wedding, only nobles hold a reception after. Commoners are presented with registration papers all the same, and there would be someone to hold the ceremony. They would wear nicer clothes than usual, take pictures to commemorate the moment, and the bride would have a bouquet and a flower crown. Then, it seemed typical for the families and those close to them to hold a quaint party afterwards.

Although they don’t go over the top, it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so I can understand that they want to embrace the moment and doll themselves up. Pictures made for good keepsakes, too.

I covered everything from cutting the damaged ends of her hair to putting an oil pack on, how to do a simple face massage, and even covered finger care. I went over so much with her; we had plenty to discuss.

“Okay, got it. I’ll start doing that right away.”

She pinched the end of her hair with her fingers and gazed at it as she smiled. She didn’t seem to have any doubts about the marriage at all. She had taken her hair down for me to look at. She had an elaborate hair ornament in her hair.

The ornament, which was in the shape of a small bird and seemingly made from gold, looked cute. I complimented her, causing Ms. Linda to bashfully smile and blush. Apparently, the hair accessory was a gift from her fiancé.

It seemed that the standard gift that men would give their partners or wives here were accessories they could wear in their hair. In Japan, it was mostly rings.

Here in this world, gloves were often a part of everyone’s day-to-day wear, so rings would be hidden. It also seemed that rings with jewels were reserved for

nobles, as common folk often worked with their hands, so they wouldn't be able to wear it.

Not to mention, rings were generally reserved as heirlooms that would be passed down within families. They weren't something that people often wore.

For adult women, long hair was the norm, and tying their hair up was common. Hair accessories were different from brooches and necklaces in that they weren't decided by the clothes you wore that day, so they were often worn in everyday life.

When I first came here, I had medium-length hair, reaching just past my shoulders. It was a length that children usually sported in these parts, so I wondered if that was the reason why people often thought I was younger than I was.

My hair had grown since then, so I hoped that it had started to reflect my actual age. Midsummer was on its way, so it was probably about time I learned how to tie my hair.

When I worked on the sales floor, I often wore my hair as a chignon, and here, Lady Adelaide would sometimes tie my hair for me, but I wanted to try out different styles and have more variations...which then led to Ms. Linda teaching me different up-styles for my hair.

She taught me a simple yet sophisticated style. She showed me how to do it. Even though she didn't have a mirror, she was able to style her own hair seamlessly. It was perfectly even. I guess it was to be expected she was good with her hands—she was a seamstress, after all.

“Margaret, are you here?”

No children that needed looking after would be coming today, so I continued to ask about current popular hairstyles when Mrs. Tanya poked her head into the entrance of the clinic.

“Ah, you’re here,” she said. “Just wanted to say thanks for the other day. Thanks to you, John is feeling a lot better.”

“Ah, Tanya. How are you feeling?” Ms. Linda asked.

"Oh, you're here too, Linda? Now that I know it's morning sickness, I'm relieved. I feel a little rough around the edges, but I felt like moving around a little."

She pointed to her chest as she entered the clinic holding John. I was relieved to hear that John had recovered from his cold. I was a little worried.

"Margaret, here, take this."

Mrs. Tanya handed me a small paper bag. Or more accurately, she passed John over to me, who was holding a paper bag. I reflexively hugged him. *Huh, what?* I cocked my head.

"This is thanks for the other day. It's carrot cake," Mrs. Tanya explained.

*Ohhh, cake made by Mrs. Tanya! Even though I didn't really do anything much, I'll gladly take a piece of cake! Mr. Tom gave me peaches today, too. I just keep getting given things. Perks of the job, eh?*

"Dan keeps saying, 'Pregnant women should be eating meat and vegetables, not sweets.' He's so annoying," Mrs. Tanya shrugged her shoulders.

*That's why she went with carrot cake...? But I guess a sweet is a sweet.* Mrs. Tanya could make gold from nothing.

"Ahaha, isn't your husband sweet?" Ms. Linda laughed.

"The retiree from the grocery store even said the same thing. Thanks to that, my kitchen is just full of vegetables," she sighed.

"Ah, the grocery store's..." Ms. Linda trailed off. "I don't really get along with Tom. I used to play near his store when I was younger and he'd always get mad at us, so I'm a little scared of him. Although, we were in the wrong for being annoying."

Mrs. Tanya was nodding in agreement, but was Mr. Tom really like that? He does seem a little bad-tempered, but he's always been super chatty with me.

His often-stern face would completely change when he laughed. It was cute. When I told the two of them that, Ms. Linda seemed especially surprised. "I've never seen him laugh; I can't believe it."

*"Huh, he laughs a lot. He has a cute smile. I'm not just saying this because he*

*gave me peaches. I really mean it,” I told them through writing.*

“I guess he would smile for you, Margaret. Well, anyway, he did make the carrots super cheap, and I baked a lot of cakes, so would you like one too, Linda? You can stop by my house on the way home,” Mrs. Tanya offered.

“Really? I love the cakes you make, so that’d be great. You’re good at cooking,” Ms. Linda responded.

“I’m awful at cleaning, though,” Mrs. Tanya said.

“That I know!”

As we were in the clinic waiting room, they were talking in hushed voices. But I realized how close they were. When I asked them about their relationship, they looked at one another.

“We started talking quite recently, sometime after you came here, Margaret. Our houses are quite far apart, and I don’t often go out. I had no idea Tanya was like this,” Ms. Linda explained.

“And what do you mean by ‘like this?’”

“I mean exactly like that.”

They laughed with one another. *Yeah, they’re good friends.*

“When Margaret first came to the women’s meeting, didn’t you make a seed cake, Tanya?” Ms. Linda asked.

I nodded, remembering that well. It was the height of spring. I had just become able to walk again. I can still remember how nervous I was going to a women’s association meeting for the first time.

Dr. Daniel had informed the villagers ahead of time. Most of them seemed shocked at the idea that such an auspicious person as a “Spirit Caller” had come to this small village. They probably had some expectations, too...

*I heartily apologize for being such an ordinary person. I’m sorry I’m just some ordinary, country-bred woman in her late twenties who worked at a department store.*

On that day, it was naturally quite awkward. Before one as mighty as a Spirit

Caller, the conversation didn't flow, and there were a lot of awkward silences. Just when I was close to voicelessly yelling "I beg you, please just go on as normal!" the criminally late Mrs. Tanya triumphantly barged in, handing me a basket.

"Are you the Caller? Welcome! It's lovely to meet you!"

She confidently walked over to me and gave me a friendly pat on the back, causing the elder members of the women's association to go pale. Relieved by her affable attitude, I smiled and put my hand out for a handshake.

"T-Tanya," someone whispered, trying to stop her.

"Hm? The doc said to just be normal," she said. "Ah, here, I baked this to welcome her. Let's eat it together."

There was a mountain of seed cake in the basket she handed me. It was a simple seed cake. It seemed to have dandelion-like shaped seeds in it as a spice. She had put iced sugar on it as a finishing touch. The surface of the cake was crunchy and a charming golden brown.

Spurred on by Mrs. Tanya, it was soon teatime. Being able to eat something delicious alongside a cup of tea helped relax the atmosphere.

Then, when I got across that I really am just an ordinary person and I don't expect them to worship me or keep any sort of etiquette, the atmosphere became even more relaxed.

Hidden in the sweetness was a slight bitter accent of caraway. It reminded me of my feelings at that moment...so I felt a little tearful.

Plus, it seems that through that incident, Mrs. Tanya's cooking abilities became well-known.

"It was after she told me the recipe for the seed cake. Even though I made it the same way, Tanya's version is much more delicious," said Ms. Linda.

"When you say something so nice like that, it makes me want to make it again," responded Mrs. Tanya.

"That's my goal. Looking forward to having it once your morning sickness calms down!"

As I watched the two of them laugh, John, who sat on my lap, then pushed the package into me. *Oh, you're saying 'here you are'. Thank you!*

I gestured "thank you" and accepted the carrot cake. He then stretched his free hand out towards my face.

*Hm, are you excited?* His eyes were sparkling as his small, childlike hands grabbed my cheek. He then suddenly bonked his forehead off mine.

*Ah, this is that thing from before.* We did it multiple times. *Is it that fun? Roy, along with everyone else, likes it, huh. Okay, let's do it again. Ready, bonk.* I put a bit of an accent on the "bo" part, almost voicelessly singing it. *Hehe, that makes him giggle.*

"Margaret, did you play with him like this before?" Mrs. Tanya asked. "He really likes it and does it at home a lot too. Plus, he's even started to talk a little!"

"Is that so?" Ms. Linda responded. "Hey, John. Try and say something so we can hear."

*Oh, I really want to hear that.* John looked around at Ms. Linda, me, then his mama, Mrs. Tanya. He then took his hands away from my cheeks and leaned his head to the side.

"Shyo?"

*Ah, what a cute voice!*

"He spoke!"

"It's not a lot yet." Mrs. Tanya said with a smile.

*Ah, kids learning to talk are so cute when they slur their words.*

Considering his age, he is a bit late developing his speech. However, it appears he understands us just fine, so there were no worries about his listening ability and comprehension.

I heard that kids who were late speaking store all the words internally leading to them having a surprising vocabulary. There were times when they did speak, they could put together two or three sentence words. *Hehe, from now on he's going to be even more chatty. Mom and friends have been waiting for this.*

I looked at his smiling face as his small hand once again gripped my cheeks, this time pulling them together.

We bonked our foreheads. Then rubbed them together. Even without much force or anything, it hurt, but looking at his big, clear eyes and his smile, I let him off the hook.

*Hehe, cuuuute.* I felt myself going back to my kindergarten teacher roots—  
“Good boy, John! Can you say ‘Yes’ in a loud voice?”

“Eesh!”

...Hm?

He then raised my hands in the air and looked right at me. Before I could blink, he had both of my cheeks again, and bonked me on the forehead.

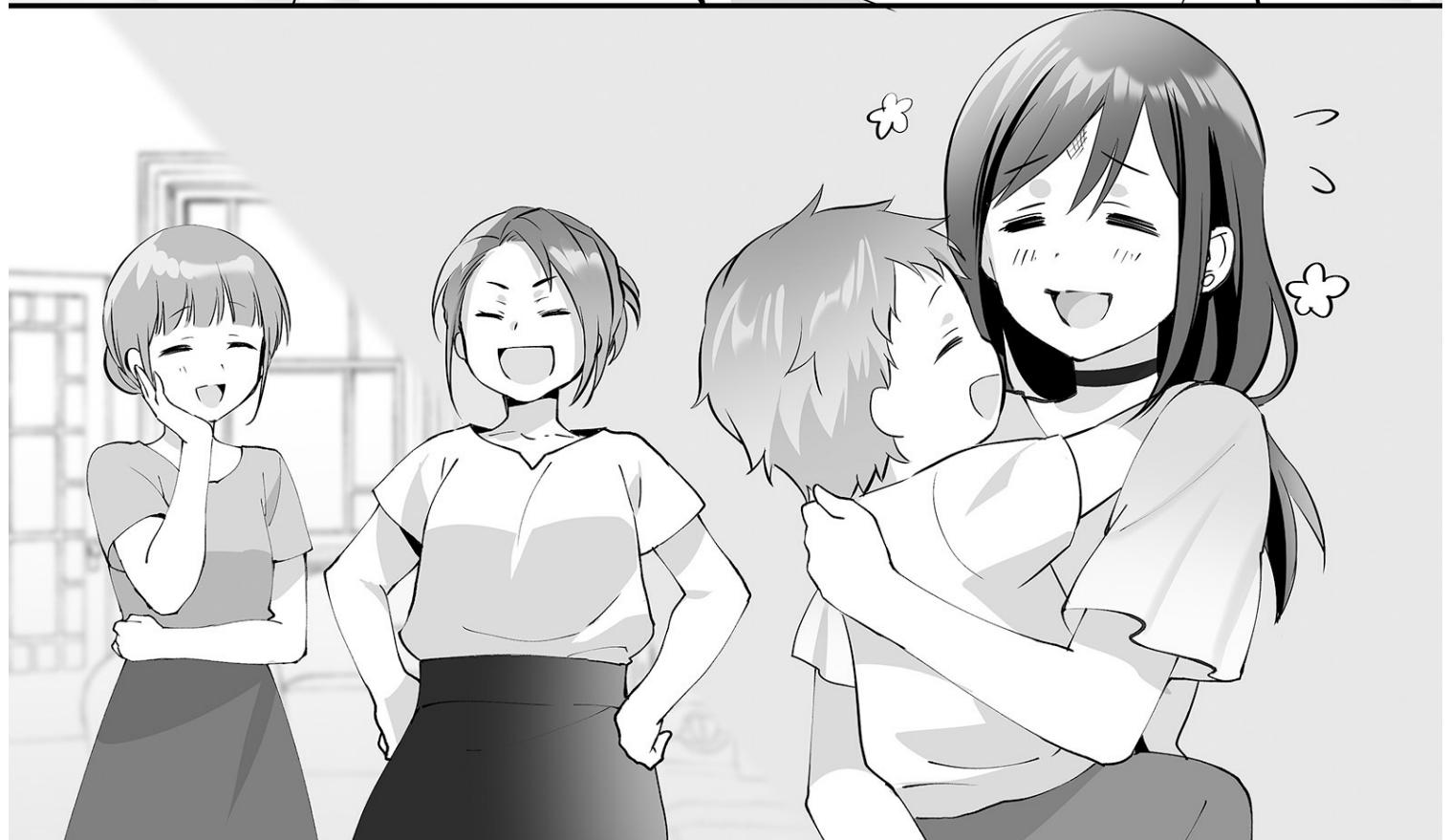
“Eesh! Bwong!”

*Huh. Wasn’t that what I was thinking...?*

“What’s bwong?” Ms. Linda asked.

“I don’t really know, but he seems fond of saying that when we put our foreheads together,” Mrs. Tanya responded. “Isn’t it like he’s singing? I wonder if he heard it somewhere.”





Both Mrs. Tanya and Ms. Linda were looking in our direction with warm smiles. John was giggling.

I was probably smiling, too. Underneath that smile though, a weird feeling was bubbling up. My heart began to beat faster.

Heat began to gather in my cheeks.

*...John?* I thought.

“Bwo-ng!”

*Do you like bonking our foreheads?* I asked in my thoughts.

“Wike?”

*...Buddy. Bark, bark,* I said in my thoughts.

“Bork! Bwong, bork!” he repeated.

He let go of my forehead and suddenly stood up on my lap. He was staring out of the window expectantly, looking for something.

“Oh, he’s saying new words. He’s going to be such a chatterbox,” Ms. Linda laughed.

“Bark, bark? Was Buddy outside?” Mrs. Tanya looked around, too.

Unable to find Buddy, John looked over at me with a dissatisfied look. There was no ill will in his eyes... *Uhm, wait.*

*Hold...hold on a sec.*

*Whaaaaaat?!*



**WORKING** in sales means having to be at the workplace all the time. What’s paid time off? Never heard of it. In an industry where there were rarely spare personnel, taking the day off for small ailments was unheard of. Unless it was something serious, like when Sakashita-chan was hospitalized.

While I am aware it’s a thankless job, the theme at drinking parties often revolved around “You have no idea how bad I was feeling, yet I still came to work.” Come to think of it, it’s not much different from when old people brag

about their ailments.

Anything from colds, hangovers, stomach ulcers, hernias, period pains... Topics that, when spoken about frankly, would cause a few furrowed eyebrows outside of these parties. However, that was the reality of it, so there was no helping it.

Every year, I would always get ill after the long summers.

No matter how careful I was regarding sleep or eating, it was difficult to escape the pent-up exhaustion from summer spanning multiple months. One could say it was so like me not to get tired from the heat during the summer but instead closer to fall.

Fatigue, a slight fever, and a recurring high temperature.

The one person out of five who noticed I wasn't doing too well when showing a temperature of over 38 degrees was the chief team leader. What gave me up was that, to hide the fever, I was wearing a lot more makeup than usual. I was in no state to work. Thus, when she left the job, I made sure that no one would ever see through me again.

Remembering that, I put on my best customer service smile to hide my unrest and saw out my duties as childminder in the clinic for that day.

It seemed Dr. Daniel saw right through me. He said it all with one phrase, "What's wrong?" I was glad that he noticed, but I didn't know how to respond. I felt a lump in my throat. It was annoying that I was struggling to accept it myself.

He patted me on the head as he always does while reassuring me to take my time.

As I opened the door to the clinic, I noticed Buddy had come to meet me. I gave him a hug and we began walking to the estate together.

As I walked, I remembered John, his innocent voice reverberating in my ears.

"Bwong"

"Wike?"

"Bork! Bwong, bork!"

The muddled confusion in my chest grew.

*He was responding to me, wasn't he?*

*But I can't talk. Well, it's not that I can't talk, but no sound comes out when I do. When I hum, I mouth the words, when I sneeze, only air comes out... There's no way someone can hear me. But then, how did he respond to me?*

There's no way I can say for sure that wasn't a coincidence, he could have just been continuing the conversation. But John wasn't the age to be able to read the room and guess what I was saying. I noticed he was even saying "bwong" in a similar accent to mine.

In that case, it's completely normal to think that he was indeed holding a conversation with me.

But there was no way he could have heard me.

*Maybe John has a lot of mana—wait, can't be that. There are a lot of people who have magical ability and aren't nobles, though. Like Hugh, for example.*

*However, although Hugh had enough magical ability to be considered an outlier, he wasn't able to hear my voice, and without me being able to write, I wouldn't have been able to talk with him.*

Ah, I'm going around in circles. I'm going back and forth so much in my thoughts that even my footing feels uneasy. If it weren't for Buddy occasionally nudging me with his nose, I probably would have walked the wrong way home.

No matter how much I thought about it, I reached the same answer: "Why?" and "I don't understand."

*Even though it's regarding me, I'm the one who doesn't understand it the most. It makes me uneasy, and it makes me feel unstable. I mean, I have no voice or magical ability. That's who I am in this world, yet that pretense is about to be destroyed.*

*Plus, even if I had had a conversation, there's no way for him to say that he understood. What got across? My voice? Or my thoughts?*

*Ugh, this is so complicated.*

While harboring an ever-growing uneasiness and doubt, I found myself close

to the estate. I usually enjoy the walk home, but today I was too preoccupied to take any of it in. Although it could be blamed on the sun beating down on me as well as the condition of my leg, it took me way longer than usual to get home.

The wind enveloped me, stopping me in my tracks. I lightly shook my head and looked around.

If you turn where there are three oak trees lined up, you'll be close to Lady Adelaide's estate. I like the view of the village from the top of this slight hill.

Facing away from the estate and turning around, the view of the village bathed in the evening sunlight expands across my eyes.

The honey-colored stone houses, the main streets of red brick.

There's lots of nature, and there's even small rivers babbling. It's a small, quiet village surrounded by fields and pastures. There are no asphalt roads or tall buildings like I'm used to seeing. There are no trains or airplanes, no supermarkets or convenience stores.

While not convenient, I didn't feel like I lacked for anything.

Looking closely, I realized there were types of vegetation I had never seen before. Although the breeze and sunlight were like my old world, the atmosphere felt different. Even so, it was a familiar yet calming view.

I exhaled the breath I was holding, feeling the weight of the basket on my arm. Inside were peaches from Mr. Tom and a carrot cake from Mrs. Tanya...

I kept meeting kind people, and I felt that I had gotten a lot more accustomed to living here. Although this didn't resemble the countryside scenery of Japan, it was thanks to my calming time with the residents here that I began to feel like I could call this place home.

I closed my eyes and thought about all the important people I had met.

*Lady Adelaide, Dr. Daniel, Mark...Mr. Hugh, Lord Walter, Lady Rachel. Everyone from the village. And of course, Buddy.*

I let out a deep sigh, running out of air. I then took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the air of Miselle. I exhaled, feeling like I let something out as I breathed out.

*Okay. No matter how much I think about it, I don't know what I don't know. I can't do what I can't do.*

There was something more important than thinking about things I didn't understand.

As I looked to the side, I made eye contact with Buddy, who was silently approaching me. Relieved by the familiar sight, I felt warmth come back to my fingertips as I stroked his silver-gray fur-covered back.

*...Why am I struggling over this alone? I have people I can talk to. People who have always supported and looked after me... The favors I owe are beginning to pile up. I'll do anything to pay them back for everything.*

I stopped in my tracks and looked at the scenery. Buddy stood beside me, patiently waiting.

Thinking back, Buddy has always helped me. When he first found me, he notified Lady Adelaide, he even brought Dr. Daniel and Mark with him.

*I wonder if Buddy has been able to hear me all this time. He always comes when I call for him.*

I put the basket I was holding on the ground as I hugged his neck, bringing his face close to mine.

“...Thank you, I love you,” I spoke to Buddy. Unsure if it would get across, I voicelessly whispered my feelings from the heart.

As I slowly moved away, Buddy licked my cheek. It tickled, causing me to laugh as I stood up. As I did so, I saw something bright pass by in the corner of my eye. It seemed the fairies had come to join us.

I began to walk the road back home as the Fairy Lights flew around more reserved than usual.

As we approached the estate in the woods, Lady Adelaide, who would usually be inside, was outside tending to the front garden. She was probably worried about me returning home later than usual.

She spun around upon hearing Buddy's bark and looked relieved. It was heartwarming to see.

*I took my time coming back, I'm sorry I'm late!* I hugged her to convey how I felt.

Lady Adelaide's lily of the valley perfume spread on the wind. I felt relieved with such a familiar smell, and then suddenly felt incredibly hungry. We laughed together as my stomach made a gurgling sound, and then we headed inside.

The unspoken words, "I'm home," resonated in my chest.



**THE** past week, there was always someone else at the house with us, so it had been a while since it had just been Lady Adelaide and me. It felt like the estate had suddenly become empty. I did think it had gotten a little lonely, but Lady Adelaide had been on her own for years. So, it was a little odd for me to say that it was lonely with just the two of us.

While preparing dinner, I showed off the peaches and carrot cake I'd received. When I told her that they were from Mr. Tom, Lady Adelaide was surprised.

"Oh, you don't say. He can be a little hard to please, and he rarely ever goes out of his way to talk to young people," Lady Adelaide explained.

Ms. Linda said the same thing during the afternoon. *But I don't think he's like that at all.*

Even though the clinic wasn't that busy at the time, the waiting time was longer than usual. He looked bored, and there were no small children around, so I sat next to Tom. He was the one who started talking to me about this and that.

He told me about his younger days, about how Miselle used to be back in the day. He talked a lot. It was fun. All I did was listen, but then he gave me some peaches. *I'll have to say thanks when I see him next. I wonder if it'd be better to give something in return.*

When I mentioned this to Lady Adelaide, she said that there would be no need to do anything in return. "I think he'd be happy if you went to his store sometimes and did some shopping."

Mr. Tom was a retiree who used to work at the greengrocer. Due to his age,

he rarely went out on the shop floor to work, but he often hung around there.

We always had the delivery people bring us goods from the store, so I rarely went, but now that Lady Adelaide had mentioned it, I decided I would stop by the store on my way back from helping at the clinic.

The early ripe peaches I received were small and a little hard. The taste was good enough that they would be delicious eaten as is, but I decided to make half of them into a compote.

Compote, which is made by lightly boiling fruits in a sweet syrup, is another method of food preservation. It doesn't last as long as jam does with all its sugar, however it can be made from a variety of fruits. I liked to use peaches and pears.

Fruit wasn't cheap, so for someone on a meager wage living alone, they were considered a luxury item. It was unheard of to throw away fruit even if the taste wasn't that great. Since I had gone out of my way to buy it, when it didn't quite hit the spot or wasn't that good, I'd boil it and make it into a compote. *It's always a bummer though, huh? You're super excited for the fruit, so you crack open the skin and the taste isn't that great, or it's not ripe enough.*

On the other hand, I would make overripe peaches into jam. Peach jam is so delicious. Just like apricot jam, when paired with butter, leads to a great balance of sweet and salty. Normal toast becomes something like you'd be served in a hotel. It's best enjoyed with tea.

Avocado is the same, however it's hard to tell the condition of the fruit just from the outside, if it's not rotting, it would be a little wrong to say something to the store. I always felt like I had achieved something when I managed to make something out of a not-so-perfect fruit.

It's simple to make compote.

It's a lot easier than jam just for how long it doesn't need to boil. I don't even measure out ingredients. I base the amount of sugar on how I'm feeling that day. I decided I'd make the peach compote when I had a break from preparing dinner.

*First, wash the peaches, then insert the knife vertically, cutting until you reach*

*the seed. Then, rotate the fruit around to cut it open. Lightly twist it with both hands until it separates into two, just like you would with an apricot.*

*When twisting a soft peach, it can break the flesh of the fruit, so it's better to use hard peaches when making compote.*

*Take the seed out from the other side with a spoon. That's the preliminary preparations complete.*

*Then put water and as much sugar as you like into a bowl, and white wine if you have it. Boiling them together will make syrup. You can also squeeze a lemon and add that to it. You don't have to put that into jam, but I feel like it gives compote a refreshing flavor—that's my preference, though.*

*Place both halves of the peach face down in the syrup and turn the heat on. Bring it back to a boil, turn down the heat, then allow it to simmer for around five minutes. If you boil it with the peel still attached, it changes the color into a lovely shade of pink. Simmer it for around three to five minutes based on the size of the peaches, then remove it from the heat. Leave it in the pot to cool and it's done. Easy, right?*

*Once the syrup has cooled, you can remove the peel from the peaches. This is like peeling tomatoes after boiling them; it's fun since the peel just slides right off.*

Other than just eating them as is, they can be used to make a tart or a cake. You can put the syrup in some carbonated water or add it to iced tea. There's a lot of ways to enjoy it. You can make a jelly by combining the fruit and the syrup, another simple yet delicious idea. Compote is just one dish that can be made.

With access to a fridge, they can hold for around a week, however when stored in a cool place at room temperature, they hold for around two to three days. I always end up eating all of it, so I can't say for sure how long.

You can also make other fruits into compote. A lot of people make it with apples, but I often go for an easier method: I don't add sugar; instead, I simmer the apples with a little bit of water. I often used to cut up leftovers and heat them in the microwave.

Speaking of apples, I used to like boiling them with sweet potato and raisins. Adding a little butter makes it so rich and makes it even more delicious.

The finished peach compote is cute, round, and smooth, like canned peaches. *We'll have this for dessert tonight, and we'll have the slightly hard peaches tomorrow.*

*Oh...I just remembered Mark won't be at the clinic today, so it's just Dr. Daniel on his own. I should have invited him for dinner. I was so occupied with my own issues I didn't realize. That's no good. I need to work on that. I'll invite him next time.*

The doctor always returns home to the clinic after dinner, but he should stay with us sometimes. Then he wouldn't have to worry about the roads at night.

Being alone with Lady Adelaide might have been a problem in the past, but now I was here. We had a lot of rooms that weren't being used, so we could prepare one for him.

I had heard before that there were rarely any emergencies during the night. Plus, Mark's house was right next door to the clinic, so Dr. Daniel could leave the night shift to a young man like Mark. *When they need more hands on deck, hmm, I guess Mark could run here and let us know.* I walked slowly, so it usually took me around fifteen minutes to get from the house to the clinic—and well, today it took a lot longer than usual, but it wouldn't be that long for the average person.

"That's right. I'll ask him next time. Though I think he'll say no," Lady Adelaide responded. After dinner, as we enjoyed some tea and knitting in the living room, I brought up the idea to her. She looked a little troubled, then seemed happily deep in thought.

*Hey, Lady Adelaide. I love you. I love Dr. Daniel, too. I absolutely adore seeing you two together.*

*...So, it should be all right for you two to be together by now.*

The count, Lady Adelaide's deceased husband, was said to be twenty years older than her. I heard that marriages with such age gaps are common among the nobility, and it's not hard to guess why a man of his age would want a

younger second wife.

It's hard to say whether it was the same for her. Be it due to political maneuvering or something else, I hope there was something to be nurtured there. However, Lady Adelaide had chosen this residence to retire to and had spent most of her time alone. There was a reason for that, although quite sad.

The two of them are so friendly and close, yet they always draw the line at "two old friends." Even without putting it bluntly, I could easily imagine that these two had something going on in the past.

*But I think they both deserve to be happy.*

Lady Adelaide became a widow around the time Lord Walter was still in school. How long had it been since then? The count had successfully left behind a well-raised son. Even Lord Walter likes Dr. Daniel. You can tell that just by looking at him. He probably sees the doctor as another father. That's why—I had yet to say anything.

I thought of all that as I watched Lady Adelaide busy herself with her sewing needles.



**THAT** night, I lay on my bed and thought about everything that had happened that day.

*All right, calm down. Be positive.*

Let's look at it objectively and say: John and I *were* communicating.

However, I don't know if he "heard my voice" or if my words or intentions somehow got across to him. At this point, that part isn't too important, so I'll put that to one side for now.

What I'm more curious about is *how*.

I wonder if we have some form of connection... We did touch our foreheads together. Speaking of which, Roy also likes that. I wonder if that's it.

I wonder if touch is important.

Then, where? Holding hands...I did that when Hugh used his investigative

magic with me.

Ah, me writing in their hand is like me holding their hand. So, the connection isn't the hand. If something was getting across to them, then they would have said something.

It can't be my head, because people often pat me on the head. Mark touched my face. It could be anywhere, but I can't imagine it being my feet or my stomach. In that case, is it my forehead? Not a hand on my forehead, but their forehead against mine?

Hmm... I guess I won't know until I try it. I have no way of confirming it on my own.

John wanted to do it again today, too, so that means it's pleasant for him at least. Kids are often quick to stop doing something if they don't like it.

I'm not sure how it is regarding magic; it never once hurt or made me feel bad. I guess I can feel at ease regarding that.

So, who should I test it on?

...Lady Adelaide. She'd probably be so happy if she could understand me. But, if it didn't work, she'd probably take it badly. She's a nice person who cares for me more than I do myself, so I should probably mention it after it's clearer what it is.

What about Dr. Daniel? It would be reassuring to have a doctor there just in case anything happens while testing it.

I wouldn't mind putting my forehead together with the doctor, but...that may not be the case for him. He might hesitate a little having to do it in front of Lady Adelaide, but he would never admit it.

Wait a minute! That's right. I'm not the one who gets to choose; the other party has the right to say no.

In that case, who's more likely not to say no, I guess Mark...and Hugh, who loves investigating things.

Okay. It's a little tricky. I feel like it'll be awkward with either one of them.

Thinking of it, can I even tell anyone?

Both Lord Walter and Hugh told me that regarding the magic from the forest, I can't tell anybody outside of those who were there at the time of their investigation. They mentioned if we go spreading it all willy-nilly, people who want the magic for themselves may cause issues.

I have no "magical ability," so no one is coming after me, allowing me to live a peaceful life.

That means I can't carelessly talk about this.

I'm glad I didn't accidentally say anything to Mrs. Tanya. If it does lead to trouble, I don't want her to get involved.

*Ah, what a bother.*

I should probably tell them, try it and talk about it at the same time.

Even then, even if I do pick Mark or Hugh, they're not here right now...

*What should I do, Buddy? "Waiting" is so hard. You're amazing for doing it. You're so capable!*

## Interlude: Walter Dustin

THE road connecting Miselle to the Royal Capital wasn't paved, but the dirt path was well-trodden, and the ride was smooth. After taking only one break, our carriage progressed smoothly and our destination was just around the corner.

Mark sat opposite me. He moved the curtain and looked outside the small window to confirm our location, then put the medical text he was reading into his bag. In its place, he took out a pile of documents held together by a paper clip—the registration forms for him to remove himself from the Disraeli family and become Daniel Reynold's adopted son—and began checking them over.

When I first heard about his plans, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. But I understood how he felt. However, watching him go ahead with it like this brought on a different kind of feeling.

"You're really going to do it, huh," I remarked.

"It's a long time coming," he said. "I wanted to do it when I first came to Miselle, but the doctor recommended I wait for the right time. Anyway, I think now is that time."

"I see."

"Even back then, I could have left that family, but it took until now to have everything in place."

Mark's family was one of the established old families in the capital. Among the noble families that were already hard to deal with, his father, the current Count of Disraeli, was particularly difficult to handle.

He reminded me of my deceased father, who kept certain criteria and a certain aristocratic stubbornness. Being authoritarian figures, they were required qualities to have. However, one would never say he was easy to get on with. I remembered the education I received as an heir. Mark no doubt knew all too well the difference between a legitimate child and an illegitimate child.

"I'm shocked the count approved of you becoming the adopted child of a baron," I said.

The Count of Disraeli was the type of man who ignored anyone he deemed lesser, whether they be commoner or nobility. I wouldn't put it past him to oppose his biological child—illegitimate or not—being adopted into a family of inferior status. Even more so when this was all his son's doing, not his own machinations.

"Approve?" Mark snorted. "It was the opposite. The count has no interest in his children. However, if you bear the Disraeli name, you are forced to be educated. He would put us against one another and would name the victor successor, however, if we didn't reach his level, he wouldn't hesitate to introduce a successor from outside the family. He respects lineage but has no respect for blood relatives," he explained, seemingly uninterested as he carefully put the documents back into the paperclip.

Mark was said to be an "outstanding" member of the Disraeli family.

He has always stood out due to his grades and looks ever since we were students; however, he really began to stand out when he began to work as an apprentice to the former head physician for the royal palace, Dr. Daniel.

Everyone thought Mark would complete his studies in a short time and then stay in the Royal Capital as a researcher, but he ended up kicking his position in the medical department to the curb and returned to the medical clinic out in the remote countryside.

I had spoken with Count Disraeli's legitimate sons a few times at the House of Lords. While I wouldn't say they were ordinary, they lacked the brilliance that Mark had. That was why I feared the count would not be quick to let Mark go.

"I thought the same," Mark responded. "However, the count is exhaustively egotistic. He no doubt thought there was no point in chasing someone who was leaving, and that if they left, there wasn't much value to them in the first place."

Or his wife wholeheartedly approved of Mark leaving the family and welcomed it, thus leading to the count realizing he'd do nothing but benefit from it. *There is nothing but merit to this*, I lightly chuckled to myself.

"I guess there's also that side to it, too," I said. "As for your former job in the capital, it'd probably be a bigger issue for them if a doctor of your skill suddenly got swept up and taken by the House of Lords."

"On the contrary, my mother's side was much more annoying about the whole thing. Although they lack the capability to rule, all they wanted was the title of Count... At least with this, I can finally shut them up." He gave the documents in his hand a light shake as he sighed. "It's finally over."

"Who is acting as a witness?" I asked.

"Do you want to check ahead of the administrative officials?"

He wore a smug look as he passed me the documents. In the column for "Witnesses" were the signatures of the head of one of the three big families and a marquis. I stared in astonishment. These lords were on the same level as the royal family. Not to mention, in both official and private situations, they were not easy men to deal with. I often felt nervous when negotiating with them, and I left no stone unturned in my preparations beforehand.

"...I'm shocked. I can't believe you got His Lordship."

They were supporters whom no one would dare to oppose. I asked him how he managed to get lords on board who even rejected requests from the Royal Palace.

"Let's just say I have connections," Mark retorted.

"Now I want you. I feel like the House of Lords would be a good place for you. What if I give you a special exemption from summons and an exemption from mandatory knight service?" I offered.

"Hugh said the same thing." His bitter smile in response to the invitation said it all—he wasn't the least bit interested. I knew as much.

"I get it. Do you really have no intention to return to the Royal Capital as a doctor?" I asked. "Surely you won't be satisfied with the clinical work and research in Miselle."

If he'd already gotten people of that rank on his side, then he could ascend to even greater heights if he were in the capital. Especially as *the Daniel Reynolds'*

successor.

Those connections, coupled with his talent—there was no way that Mark wasn't aware that he had better things to do than be a doctor in a village. Our government was constantly struggling to develop our healthcare system and getting the right personnel for it. He would be ideal for such a role.

"Because of my time in Miselle, I am who I am now," he said. "It's hard to cut it from our life. For both me and Margaret. I have been thinking about the possibility, but now's not the time. The most important thing is that I free myself from the obligations of my family."

I could tell from his voice that he was focused on the future.

"Although I haven't interacted with you much up until now, it seems you are a different person than you were before," I noted.

"The same could be said for you. You've changed a lot too."

Mark shot back in response to my remark. Realizing how right that was, I pulled out some writing materials.

"Everything looks fine on the documents," I said. "I'll put my signature on it now. With this, the rest of the process should go smoothly."

"I appreciate your assistance."

I passed back the documents to Mark, who looked a little surprised by my actions. Soon after, the driver called out to let us know we had reached our destination.



I parted ways with Mark in front of the Royal Palace and got caught up to speed by one of my subordinates I'd bumped into as I headed to my office. As I reworded the reports in my head to tell my boss, the prime minister, later, a familiar voice sounded in the hallway.

"Walter! You're back. Good timing."

"Julius."

As I turned towards the voice, my eyes met a familiar face. Approaching me

was a man walking with his legs spread wide, wearing a bright smile on his face. He amiably patted me on the back.

The person who had startled my secretary next to me as he closed the distance was the eldest son—Lady Rachel’s older brother—of House Lindgren, Julius.

He was my subordinate when we were knights, and he was one of the few people, along with Hugh, who was comfortable with my intimidating appearance. Even after I had left the knights, I kept up with him personally. What was so fun about him? He often burst into my house with a bottle of alcohol in one hand.

His family had a higher status than mine. However, it may have been influenced by our times as knights, but he was a peculiar person who often insisted that we were friends.

He was currently working as an aide to his father, who worked as a connection between all facets of the Royal Palace and oversaw the finances. He was masquerading the encounter as a greeting after not seeing each other for a while, but he probably had information he didn’t want overheard.

I dismissed my frozen subordinate, who was still shocked by the arrival of the eldest son of a marquis, and I continued walking towards my office. As I expected, we exchanged small talk until Julius had found an area with fewer people. He began slowing down.

I matched his speed. He lightly pushed away his blond hair, which was the same color as his sister’s, and narrowed his light purple eyes.

“Thank you for looking after my kid sister,” he said. “I wasn’t sure what to make of her sudden request, but it seems like she had a great time. She’s been in high spirits since coming back.”

“I see.”

“She went straight to writing another letter expressing how she wanted to go again. She’s not one to get that excited often. She’s so much cuter than normal, so I couldn’t say no. Just what magic did the Caller use on her in Miselle?”

I gave a wry smile in response to his slightly sulky tone of voice, although he

seemed amused by the whole thing.

The young lady of House Lindgren, who had visited mother's estate in the woods, seemed to enjoy not only working in the kitchen but even picking berries in the fields. At first, I thought she was just doing it to be polite; however, I soon realized she was enjoying herself. That especially seemed the case when she had to leave.

"There was no magic involved. All she did was welcome her in. It seems your sister left quite the impression on the Caller, too. It would be great if they could deepen their friendship without much burden," I responded normally, however, the well-groomed man in front of me furrowed his brows in surprise.

"...Rachel isn't the only one acting weird. Something is off about you too, Walter," Julius observed.

*I just heard that earlier. Am I that different?*

"You're imagining things."

"No, that's not it... Hey, Walter. The two people my sister got on with were you and the Caller in Miselle, right?"

Julius, who fawned over his sister, Lady Rachel, often hid his true intentions behind his words.

"Are you asking if there was someone else?" I responded.





“Ah, of course! I forgot that this is the type of man you are!”

He pressed his fingers onto his forehead as he yelled at the ceiling. Some of the staff who were passing by moved over to the other side of the hallway, pretending not to see anything. Although he had a graceful appearance and was good at his job, he often went off into his own world mid-conversation.

“Honestly, it just had to be this anti-social man. He’ll never realize it, and I’m not telling him. Ah, Rach might be sad, though... Ah, I absolutely cannot allow that. People keep on telling me she’s of age, but I have absolutely no plans to make her into a wife yet...”

He was mumbling something, but I chose to ignore it. However, this was no different from how he acted when he was drinking at my home. The difference was that we were at work, and we were working.

“So, what do you really want?” I interrupted his musings. “I just got back, so I have things to do.”

“Ah, yeah. By stuff to do...you mean, reports.”

Julius put his work face back on and casually scanned our surroundings. He then approached me like before, placing his elbow on my shoulder, doing his best to make it seem like we were still catching up. He lowered his voice.

“There seems to have been some developments regarding the forest spirit. Ever since Hugh Tausend returned from Miselle, he’s been busy. Plus, he was curious when you would be returning. I’m not privy to talk about it, so you’ll have to go ask at the Magic Academy.”

The spirit in the Royal Capital Forest was confirmed last year. Although there had been reports that they couldn’t communicate with it and didn’t know when exactly it would show itself. It was expected that with the arrival of a Caller, things would settle down.

Hugh, who’d accompanied me to Miselle, should have all the information regarding Margaret. *But why is he waiting for me to return?*

“Understood. I will get in touch with him immediately.”

*It would be good if the information the Magic Academy has could benefit*

*Margaret, but I do wonder if it will.*

“I would also like to visit her in Miselle,” Julius said. “But it would be rude to constantly keep turning up in Miselle uninvited. I’ll patiently wait for her to come here.”

*That won’t be happening any time soon. I bit my tongue and decided not to say it out loud. Only a few people know about the highly-kept secret Spirit Caller, but if the report of the visit goes public, it won’t be too long before everyone knows about it.*

*I must do my best to ensure she can continue living a peaceful life with my mother in Miselle.* Doctor Daniel had already laid the groundwork regarding that, but there would always be someone who would be willing to do anything to get what they wanted.

“She has become important to my younger sister, so I can’t stand by idly,” Julius continued. “I’ll at least help chase off any pesky nuisances.”

“That’s unexpected from you,” I responded.

“They’re persistent. They take no notice of their own social standing and cling to Rach. I ought to just get rid of them all in one fell swoop...”

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear you.”

He was mumbling again, lost in his own world. I realized both the good and bad of having a quick mind.

“Oh, well, that’s all really. You can leave the riffraff to me,” Julius responded.

“All right. Thanks.”

“D-Did you just thank me?!” he gasped.

“...Julius.”

“Ah, never mind. See ya,” Julius said with a wave of his hand as he quickly walked off.

I let out a light sigh as I watched him leave and finally headed to my office.

I finished my report to the prime minister, then returned to my own work. I took some time out to visit the Magic Academy, but I was told that both Hugh

and the head of the academy were in the forest with the spirit and had yet to return.

Although they usually returned after around half an hour, there were times when they would be there all day. Unable to predict when they would return, I left a message with the secretary—however, it would be a few days later when Hugh finally got in touch with me.



A personal research laboratory in a corner of the Magic Academy. Basically, I was under the impression that a “research laboratory” was a place where miscellaneous items tend to accumulate. And whenever I came to Hugh’s research lab, my assumption always felt that much truer.

In the cramped room was everything from access-restricted magic grimoires to shiny rocks with mysterious uses. There were a wide variety of items with no rhyme or reason between them.

“Hey, thanks for coming over here,” Hugh greeted. “Ah, everything has its place, so don’t touch anything. Some of it is dangerous.”

“...Has its place? In this mess?” I asked, skeptical.

“I said, everything has its place,” Hugh stressed casually. However, it felt like there wasn’t even an inch of organization.

That said, he was able to hand over documents to the staff members who came in without much trouble, so he must’ve had his own system.

“I feel relaxed when it’s a little scattered about,” Hugh explained.

“A *little*. We have very different concepts of ‘a little.’”

“It’s handy. Have a seat,” Hugh offered, but a plant pot had taken the only seat on the only sofa in the room. As I took a seat on a strangely high stool, the owner of the research lab moved his embroidered robes as he leaned up against his desk.

“Sorry, I was late getting in touch,” he said. “So, we saw the Fairy Lights with Margaret, right? When I got back to the Royal Capital, I was able to go into the Spirit Forest. But listen to this: time is a little strange there.”

“What do you mean?”

Seemingly enjoying himself, Hugh began to explain while waving one hand around. “Usually, only the headmaster of the Magic Academy was allowed to enter the forest, but he didn’t really care about it and never reported anything. Apparently, it seems time flows differently in the forest.”

He went on to say that the first time he went into the forest and met with the spirit, it felt like an hour had passed. However, when he returned, it had only been a few minutes. There had also been times when he had only exchanged greetings and not much else, and apparently, half a day had passed.

“Can that even happen...?” I asked.

“I finally understood why sometimes the headmaster would return in seconds, or other times he wouldn’t return at all. I thought he was just going along with the spirit, but that wasn’t the case at all. Watches don’t even help when in the forest. It’s interesting, right?” Hugh spoke as he took out a pocket watch that was showing the correct time. Even though it had just been fixed, it stopped working when he entered the forest. “The forest, the spirit, and time all do what they want. It’s got me stumped!”

“You don’t look at all stumped.”

It was hard to believe that when he was wearing a big, content smile on his face. I pointed it out, but he just brushed it off like he always does. Not unusual for a research fanatic who puts his research interests above all else.

“So, do you need me for something?”

I was interested in the spirit and the forest, but if he had business with me, it probably had more to do with the Caller than it would have to do with me. Hugh wasn’t getting to the meat of the conversation, so I probed about it. As I did so, his eyes avoided my gaze. Ah, did he forget the point? He probably did.

“Yeah, about that. Walter. It asked for you.”

“Asked for me?”

Hugh giggled to himself as the corners of his mouth turned up into a smile. He then held his arms wide open, holding a pose as if he was welcoming me.

“The spirit of the forest wants to meet you, Walter. We don’t know when it’ll next appear, but if it calls for you, come straight away.”

I never expected that proposal or that demand.

## Interlude: Rachel Lindgren

**EVEN** though I had such a relaxing time in Miselle, getting shaken about in the horse-drawn carriage on the way back to the Royal Capital felt like it took a lifetime.

Luckily, my motion sickness wasn't that bad. The fact we were able to return around the same time as usual, even though we took a lot of breaks and went at the usual speed, was no doubt the work of the spirits.

Although our manor was in the Royal Capital, it was in a prime location, close to the Royal Palace. The stylish Lindgren Royal Capital manor was part of a row of high-ranking nobles' townhouses. The white building on the large grounds had been around for many generations, and yet it didn't seem old. It gave off a more historical feel.

As I approached my family home, I was able to see my older brother Julius and butler Graham waiting in front of the carriage entrance.

It appeared my brother had just arrived back from the Royal Palace, as Graham was holding his hat and luggage. Once he noticed the carriage I was riding in, he smiled and stood still, waiting for me.

"Rach! Rachel, welcome back! When I heard you were going to stay in Miselle last night, I was shocked. Plus, you don't look so sick this time. Did you not get any motion sickness?" Julius asked.

He opened the door and took my hand to help me out of the carriage. As he did so, he squeezed me tightly with a welcome-back hug.

Julius had been oppressively affectionate for as long as I could remember... My father was the same. Maybe it ran in the Lindgren family. *Knowing when to just accept things is a crucial skill to have in this world.*

Waiting for him to release me only cost me time, so from a gap in my older brother's arms, I greeted him and confirmed some items with the butler.

"I have returned, Juli. I'm doing fine. I didn't get hit with bad motion sickness. As I wrote in the letter, I apologize for the suddenness of it and for causing you to worry. Graham, did you get in touch with Lady Gertrude?"

"Yes. She said she is looking forward to the next opportunity to get together," Graham responded.

"I'll send her another letter so please prepare some flowers. I'll send them with the letter," I responded.

"Understood," Graham responded with a bow. As I nodded to him, my older brother finally released his grip on me, took my hand, and led me towards the house.

"The daughter of the Auric family, huh? Did you have plans with her?" he asked.

"I told her that I mightn't be able to make it to tea. It's quite all right, since I had seen her not too long ago," I responded.

One must be good with meaningless small talk and blending into high society. The one who taught me that was my brother Julius. Even doing the absolute minimum, such as attending every social event, reaped the greatest rewards.

Seemingly satisfied with my response, Julius escorted me to the living room. Before I could even sit down, he began firing off questions.

"So, Miselle... How was the Caller and Lady Dustin?" he asked.

"They were wonderful people," I said. "So much so I want to go meet them again tomorrow."

"Oh, now, now," he tutted.

"I'm being serious, brother."

His surprise was unexpected. I mean, it was so fun... Well, it was not *only* fun. It was a warm, happy time.

I sulked, causing my brother's joyful eyes to narrow.

"I know you're not lying from that face," he said. "However, I really didn't expect you to want to become friends with the Caller. You usually are quite

cautious, yet it's so strange for you to let your guard around someone you've just met."

*Was it that obvious?*

*I often keep my guard down at home, which isn't good,* I thought to myself, cupping my cheeks with both hands as Marie-Louise prepared tea. The sweets we were having with the tea were, of course, that blueberry cake.

It was a simple yet sophisticated cake on a gold embroidered plate. I thought it looked wonderful with any cream or elderflower adorning it.

"Oh, how unusual," my older brother commented with a surprised look as the cake was placed before him. He often doesn't eat with me, so I rarely ever prepare sweets for my brother.

"I know that you are not very fond of sweet foods. However, it is a souvenir from Miselle. Would you like to try a little?" I asked.

"If you recommend it, gladly," he said with his amiable charm and a smile on his face before taking a piece with his fork.

As he moved the fork to his mouth, I waited with bated breath.

"...Hm. It's sweet, but it's not overly sweet, and the blueberries are nice. It's delicious," he said before taking another bite. I was so happy; I unknowingly clapped my hands together.

"Right? I made this cake!"

"You did? Oh wow."

He looked at the cake with his eyes wide before looking to Marie-Louise to confirm. I felt so proud after he said it was delicious, not to mention he had such an unexpected reaction I felt like my prank was a success.

"I can confirm it is true. She did everything from start to finish," said Marie-Louise.

"Margaret taught me how to do it. It was so fun," I added.

"Haah... I see you're already that friendly," Julius responded.

He began eating again and cleared his plate in no time at all. I also picked up a

fork.

The cake had cooled enough that the texture had properly firmed. The berries that were scalding hot when they were fresh from the oven were now cold on the tongue, and I could better taste their sourness. It paired well with the tea Marie-Louise prepared, and I felt my cheeks warm at the memories of the fun times I had in Miselle.

“I made apricot jam, too. Let’s have that at breakfast,” I suggested.

“I didn’t expect you’d end up helping in the kitchen when you just went to meet someone,” Julius responded.

“Oh, I requested that they absolutely let me. It was so fun that I have even been thinking about doing it here, too.”

“I can already see the chef’s troubled face,” he quipped.

“Oh dear, are you also against it, Juli?”

I shot Marie-Louise a sharp look as she slightly nodded as if to say she completely agreed with him. I went out of my way to remember the recipe. Not to mention...if even Lady Adelaide works in the kitchen, then isn’t it normal to think that I should also do so?

I’ll never forget Lord Walter’s kind gaze as he watched the two of them cook that night. If he looked at me with a similar expression, I would—

“Rach? What’s up?”

“N-Nothing. I’m fine.”

I hurriedly lifted my cup up to hide my dreamy expression.

My brother was skilled at noticing slight changes in one’s actions and expressions. He was aware of my feelings for Lord Walter, but he had never commented on it. That was a good thing, as I hadn’t even spoken about it myself yet.

I had so much to ask him about his time in the knights working with Lord Walter and how he often went to visit Lord Walter. But if he were to ask, “Why do you want to know?” ...I wouldn’t be able to fool him, nor just be straight about it and tell him. I can’t do anything about these feelings.

*I am complicating things, true enough, but...*

"So, what kind of person is the Caller?" he asked.

"Hmm... I would say 'a mysterious person' sums her up well."

Julius raised an eyebrow in response to my vague reply, urging me to go on.

*How do I even get it across to him? It's difficult to put into words just what kind of person Margaret is. I guess that's because she was raised in a completely different world from ours.*

"She's special but not. She seems like someone you'd find anywhere, but also nowhere. She's that kind of person," I explained.

"Rach. Now's not the time for poetry," Julius responded with a laugh as he leisurely crossed his legs, leaning his elbow on the sofa. "In other words?"

"I've fallen in love with her!" I declared. "So I can go again, right?"

My brother responded with a wry smile. "If Father permits."

"Thank you, brother! I wonder when I can go. Marie-Louise, prepare a letter at once!"

I was in very high spirits, if I say so myself. I began planning out my schedule in my head, freeing up some time regarding my social appointments.

"I'm feeling a little jealous... It seems like either way, the Dustin family will end up snatching you away," Julius grumbled.

"Hm, what did you say, brother?" I couldn't hear him well, so I asked. He pointed to the empty cake plate.

"Oh, I said I wouldn't even think it was your first time since it was so well baked."

"Really? Thank you. I hope mother and father enjoy it too."

"Of course, they will. Especially since you made it, Rach."

*I'll be happy if they compliment me.*

Doing things I thought I couldn't do or doing things I never did before was fun and surprisingly went well. I was made to realize such an obvious facet of life.

The time I rode with Lord Walter in the horse-drawn carriage. My time in Miselle. I truly wanted to experience it all again.

“...Juli, I think I’m going to try my best.”

“Don’t burn yourself in any ovens. If I or Father see your fingers bandaged up, we’ll both collapse.”

“I-I’m not that awkward with my hands.”

While I wasn’t a complete klutz, he wasn’t wrong for thinking that, either.

My heart was relieved I was able to decide what to do, and I enjoyed the last of my tea as it traveled down my throat.



A short while after that.

In a room in the Lindgren residence, meticulously cared for down to every single flower in the garden, a breathtaking scene unfolded. A sea of colors spread across the room, vibrant enough to rival the flowers blooming in the garden.

“Lady Rachel. How about this? I used specially made dyes. The color is even more vibrant.”

“The embroidery on this is unusual. It has the characteristics of a faraway country and...”

The merchant spoke as he showed me an array of fabrics. They were incredibly beautiful. The fabrics were especially smooth to the touch and were the most brilliant I had ever seen. My eyes were drawn to the soft yet prominent orchid color.

*We could use the fabric as a drape and expand the chest part a little. However, it would be better to have the volume of the skirt a little more reserved. It would make for a wonderful dress. That’s right, a dress that an adult woman standing next to Lord Walter would suit perfectly—*

“This color would suit you well, my lady.”

As expected, Marie-Louise was no doubt thinking the same thing. Encouraged

by my personal maid, the summoned merchant became more animated and excited.

"Yes, yes, the color would elevate your grace even more. When combined with this lace, you'd be even more elegant and wonderful."

*Oh, they're right. This is so nice... Wait, no. That's not the time for this.*

"I understand it's nice. However, what I ordered was different, no?" I pointed out.

The merchant looked troubled in response. "Ah yes, I do have them. However, they're not very fitting for the situation, so I wondered if they were worth showing..."

The merchant nodded in response before dejectedly rustling through his items, pulling something from inside and spreading it out. "It's an old item, so the color has faded in parts. It isn't moth-eaten, at least."

The embroidery had held up, and it was flexible. The material itself wasn't that bad. I could tell that it was an item they wouldn't want to show customers, as they were a store that served nobles, and they took pride in their work. I could understand why, and it seemed it would be difficult to get what I wanted.

"You could take the good parts and make them into accessories," he explained. "However, I can't deny that the pattern is a little outdated."

"...I see. My ask was unreasonable."

I left a few instructions for my staff and left the room that was adorned in luxurious and gorgeous fabrics, heading back to my own room.

*Plunk!* I fell onto my favorite sofa and mulled over the fact that today yielded no results either. Marie-Louise then brought over a tea cart with a tea set on.

"Ah, I'm fed up," I groused. "That was my last hope."

"It was a shame, my lady."

"I even introduced him to Lord Howard... I've searched so much, and yet I still can't find it. What should I do? I have no more time left."

Since I came back from Miselle, I had been exchanging letters with Margaret

and Lady Adelaide. As a result, I had made plans to visit them again in Miselle.

Last time, it was meant to be a simple meeting, and it was a very sudden visit, so I went there empty-handed. I decided that the next time I would bring a gift, and after having spoken with Marie-Louise, I decided to bring them “fabric.”

Miselle didn’t have much in the way of stores. I assumed that was due to how close it was to the Royal Capital. Margaret’s leg had yet to fully heal, and Lady Adelaide never came to the Royal Capital, so I thought that I could choose something here and take it with me.

That said, Lady Adelaide’s tastes were quite old, and a little retro... Well, she pulled it off in spades and looked like a queen. I’m fond of the look too, but it’s different from what’s popular now.

If it didn’t match her tastes or was too far removed from what she already had, it might trouble her, so I had been looking for something that was similar. *I never expected it would be this difficult, though.*

“It’s a bit late for anything else. They don’t drink alcohol, and they can make their own sweets incredibly well. They have plenty of flowers in the garden... Ah, I can’t think of anything,” I lamented.

“What if you ask Count Dustin?” As she silently placed a highly fragrant cup of tea before me, my confident maid made an outrageous suggestion.

“Wh-Whaaat?! What did you just say, Marie-Louise?”

“Although he has always been distant, he is still a member of that family. He lived in the same estate as Her Ladyship in the Royal Capital, so he may be aware of her taste in color or any stores she often visited,” Marie-Louise explained.

“B-But I can’t...”

“Do you have time to hesitate?” Marie-Louise spoke as she expertly began to prepare a letter-writing set.

*Ah, how did you know that I hid that stationery there?*

“I believe it is time for you to let these shine. You’ve been keeping them for important times like this.”

I felt my cheeks redden as Marie-Louise spoke, giving off a “now is as good of a time as ever” attitude.

The white and glossy stationery outlined with a silver stamp was a souvenir from Father when he visited another country. The lace-like pattern adorned around the edge was so pretty that I decided to save it for an important person, on an important occasion.

“This too,” she said as she lined up my hidden items on the writing table. Neither the pen nor ink had been used. I had kept these for an especially important moment, too. “Get to it, my lady.”

Marie-Louise smiled as she completed her preparations.

I had decided that I would try my best with these matters. Being embarrassed about it would get me nowhere. Realizing now was the time to act, I finally picked up the pen after finishing off the tea she gave me in two large gulps.



I had expected Lord Walter to refuse as he was often busy in his position as the Prime minister’s aide. Contrary to my expectations, I received a polite response from Lord Walter via my father two days after I had resigned to my fate and wrote the letter.

Three days later, I found myself shaking around in a horse-drawn carriage, sitting across from Lord Walter, doing my best to act like I was okay.

“I sincerely apologize for asking such an excessive favor...” I said.

“Not at all, pay it no mind. I should be the one saying thank you,” he responded.

Although I had spent a long time worrying over what to write in the letter, I ended up just being honest and outright asking for help. Lord Walter accepted the request, and after confirming some old family records, he accompanied me to the store.

“My last trip back was for work, so I didn’t bring anything with me either. I’m not sure what women like, so I’m grateful for your advice,” Lord Walter spoke with a slight smile.

I felt my heart skip a beat, making a loud noise as it did so.

Ever since our time in Miselle, I have been able to hold conversations with him that are more than just greetings. Though I still fell entirely victim to such small gestures. *All right, time to go full power on keeping my cool.*

“I-I’m relieved to hear you say that,” I responded.

When Lady Adelaide was in the Royal Capital, she would often go to stores that her husband had picked out for her when buying outfits for public events, but it seemed there were a few stores she frequented for personal use as well.

She only regularly visited small stores and even kept in contact with two stores after ten years. One of those stores was under new management and sold different products now, so we were headed to the remaining store.

Marie-Louise had accompanied us too, but sitting across from Lord Walter in this cramped horse-drawn carriage... I had completely forgotten about my motion sickness, and the dream-like time flew by. Eventually, we arrived at the store just outside of the Royal Capital.

Lord Walter offered me his hand as I pulled my best poker face and stepped down from the carriage. My heart was loudly pounding away as I thought to myself, *I wish he’d never let go of my hand. Yes, I need serious help.*

Dresses and small items decorated the store window. As we got closer, we could see that they mainly dealt with styles popular in the Royal Capital. That wasn’t a bad thing. However, I realized the items were a little different from Lady Adelaide’s usual taste.

*I guess this store changed too...* I thought as I looked up at Lord Walter. He was checking the sign.

“This is the right place,” he said. We were shown into the store and shown around by the couple who ran it. Inside, we spoke with a woman who seemed to be a lot older than Lady Adelaide.

“I bid you all welcome. I must apologize for my impoliteness—my legs are not once what they were, so I’m afraid I must remain seated,” the older woman spoke.

"Please don't trouble yourself," I said. "Cutting straight to the purpose of my visit, I heard that the late Count Dustin's wife used to frequent this shop when she lived in the Royal Capital."

"Yes, gratefully... She was a very kind lady. She even came here to personally say goodbye when she left the capital," the older woman responded.

"I wonder if you would happen to have any fabric that is similar to what she liked back then?" I inquired.

The older woman grinned, then signaled to the shopkeeper, who was keeping himself at a distance. The shopkeeper, who must have been her son, took some fabrics out of a cupboard and then laid them out on a table before us. There were subdued floral patterns, elaborate solid-colored hems, and fabrics that looked soft to the touch.

Compared to the latest designs, these fabrics had more of a relaxed design and weren't all that colorful. However, they had a certain feel about them—they felt refined. They were exactly what I was looking for. I was overjoyed.

"This is all we have. We still have some of the artisans from back in the day left, so if you have time, we can have it newly prepared for you," the old lady continued.

"Oh, I see. That's great. Um, Lord Walter, what do you think...?" I asked Lord Walter.

*Should we pick one, or should we take them all?* I glanced at Lord Walter, who looked unusually out of his depth as he stared at the pile of fabric. No, his eyes weren't on the mountain per se, but one specific bolt of fabric.

"...This fabric," he muttered.

"Do you remember it?" the older woman smiled as she asked.

Lord Walter, unable to hide his confusion, nodded slightly as he spread the fabric out over his hand. "My sleepwear as a child was made from the same fabric..."

"That was requested by Lady Dustin, and we especially prepared it here at our store. Skilled artisans spent hours weaving the thin, soft fabric. Dyes will harm

the fabric, so it can't be made in any color. However, it's suited for children or those with sensitive skin," the old lady explained.

"My mother asked for this?" Lord Walter asked.

"Yes, she requested it a few times. She personally made the clothes herself. She spent a lot of time ensuring it would be comfortable to wear."

"I see... I've only just learned that now."

The old lady, who seemed quite anxious regarding Lord Walter and his stern appearance, seemed relieved as she smiled.

Nobles of our level are rarely raised directly by their parents and blood relatives.

The Lindgren family was quite generous about that fact. Unlike other families, my brother and I interacted with our parents a lot. Ladies I knew from other families often were unable to recall ever having personal conversations with their family members. No doubt it was the same case for the Dustin family.

Every family was different, so I had no right to comment. However, watching Lord Walter carefully hold the fabric, he looked like a young boy—

"...Lady Rachel. What do you think?"

"Ah, y-yes, Marie-Louise. I'll take all that is here. If that is okay with you, Lord Walter?" I responded.

"Yes, that should be fine."

Lord Walter responded, looking at me with his usual calm expression, although his eyes seemed somewhat free of a burden.



I picked out thread and buttons to match the fabric before we headed home.

"Would it be possible to leave the cloth and threads to me? I'd like to combine them in such a way they're easy to look at," I proposed.

"Yes, of course. I'll have to leave most of it up to you," Lord Walter responded.

Our conversation in the carriage home was a lot more relaxed, probably due

to the fact we got the items we were looking for. Marie-Louise looked amazed; she would no doubt say that Lord Walter is the special cure for my travel sickness when we arrive back at the manor. *I'm already aware of that! I can't deny it, either!*

Once the carriage passed through the gate to the Lindgren estate, I could see my parents were standing together, waiting to greet me at the carriage stop.

"Father?" I asked, surprised to see him.

"Oh, what do we have here?" he smiled.

*I wonder how long they've been waiting. Shouldn't Father be working at the palace around this time?*

My mind filled with questions as Lord Walter stepped out of the carriage before me, offering me his hand. I suddenly forgot about all those small trifling matters as he did so.

I felt like I was walking on clouds until Lord Walter moved his hand away, and I came back to reality. I could feel an intense gaze on me—my father's. *I wonder what's happened?* His lips, hidden by his mustache, were twitching. That was a solid sign he was not in good spirits.

My mother was standing beside him, seemingly enjoying herself, when she winked at me. *Ah, I see. That's a signal for "we'll talk later." It's going to be a long night.*

Lord Walter must have been equally shocked that my parents had waited to greet us. Even I didn't know. However, if he did feel that way, it certainly didn't show on his face. He tactfully greeted my father, exchanging a few sentences regarding work, before preparing his own carriage to return home with. Seeing how professional he was just made me fall even more in love with him.

I stared after him longingly, so much so that I didn't realize that his carriage had left until I was prompted by Marie-Louise. That's because when he left, I swore I could still feel the warmth of his hand on the back of my hand.

I could feel my cheeks and ears burning red with excitement, with no chance of it stopping any time soon. I'm sure the easy air between us in the carriage was simply due to me being present when he had that flash to the past. That's

why I decided to put a lid on both my desire to hug him when I saw that boyish look on his face and the feelings causing my heart to race. All while hoping the day would come when I could act on them.

## Chapter 2: Veranda Confession

**WHILE** I was spending time with Buddy seeing if I could be as good as him when it came to “Waiting”, the day Mark would return to Miselle from the Royal Capital snuck up on me. It had only been two days since he left, but it felt so long... I never knew I’d get so impatient. *This old dog is still learning new tricks, apparently.*

Mark’s carriage had dropped him off at the clinic, but it was my day off from helping at the clinic, so I was still at the estate in the woods, meaning we had yet to meet. We had plans to eat dinner with everyone that night, so I would see him then.

*I guess I’m going to have to find a way to bring up what I discovered while he was gone. I wonder what interesting stories from his trip he has. I hope he has at least one interesting story to tell.* I had a bunch of things occupying my mind, but the main issue was what to do for dinner that night.

*“Hey, Lady Adelaide, should we go with that well-received pie? Though it’s quite humid today, so maybe something chilled would be better.”*

As the two of us racked our brains over what to do for dinner, the usual delivery people arrived. They had brought groceries and various other items, but something seemed different than usual. Just as I was wondering what had happened, they pulled out a heavy-looking wooden box, gingerly handing it over to me. “We’ve brought this along with us today.”

I opened the lid and peeked inside with Lady Adelaide. There was a beautiful fish lying on a bed of ice. *Wow, it’s huge.*

“Oh my, how unusual,” Lady Adelaide responded. “It’s a Seerel fish. Quite the catch.”

“It was special ordered by someone,” the deliveryman responded, “but it seems they made a mistake and no longer need it. I’ve decided not to sell my

stock to other stores, and I thought maybe you could make good use of it. I'll sell it for cheap, so please take it off my hands."

There was no one else in this village who would be able to prepare a fish like this.

"The best I could do with it is roast or bake it," the deliveryman said, sounding despondent.

*Ah, if this were red meat or fowl, it would be a different story.*

Some of this country bordered the sea, but Miselle was inland, meaning it was hard to come by seafood. Even then, with us being close to the Royal Capital, which had a good flow of goods, sometimes smoked or oiled seafood would appear at the markets. When Lady Rachel and the others from the capital visited us recently, I was able to serve them smoked salmon, and even that seemed to be a rare commodity.

The most that could be fished around these parts was river fish. They weren't too fishy and didn't have that bottom-feeder smell or taste, so I loved eating them. The only downside was that they were about the size of sweet fish—they weren't all that big.

Fishing had become a way for some of the bigger village children to get pocket money. They even bring some to the estate when they manage to catch a lot. Hearing the energetic voices of the kids often gets me excited, and I'll go out to meet them. I can't help it—they look so proud of their catch, it's adorable. Their faces always turn bright red when Lady Adelaide compliments them for their large haul. *It's such a precious sight.* From us they get sweets instead of money. They'll then trot off home wearing big smiles.

The fish the deliveryman brought to us today was nothing like the village's river fish—it was almost two feet long. If the children had caught this, I would've wanted to make a *gyotaku*, an ink rubbing of the fish.

*There's probably no one in the village who can fillet a fish this size. Maybe Pat from the restaurant? Did they ever serve fish there? This was probably the restaurant's mistake; they likely ordered the wrong item. It would be a shame not to buy it since the deliveryman went out of their way to look for it in the Royal Capital.*

"This is a rare commodity in these parts, it would be a waste to just roast it. I'd prefer someone of your skill to make something tasty out of it," the deliveryman said.

"Even then, I'm not confident I can prepare such a large fish well... Oh, Margaret, would you be able to?" Lady Adelaide asked.

*Yes! Yeeeess! I can do it!* I proudly put my hand on my chest and smiled. It was decided. Thus, dinner that night was decided, too. *Coming home to such a luxurious fish is going to be one hell of a homecoming.*

They sold it to us for cheap. It felt more like we were just buying the ice instead of the fish, it was that cheap. Ice was quite expensive. That said, it was so big I wondered if they could take some with them when I cut it up. *It's so big that, even with the guys from the clinic, the four of us couldn't eat all of it.*

Lady Adelaide agreed it would be a good idea. The deliveryman said that it would be too much to accept, so he would take just enough for his family. He seemed happy about it. *Sharing makes it more delicious!*

After that, I headed to the sink outside with a board and a knife. I heaved the fish onto the board and filleted the fish.

Naturally I didn't have a Japanese deba knife, a type of large knife, so I had to go with a large knife that cut well enough. I descaled the fish and removed its head under the flowing water. I made sure to quickly separate the flesh before my hands warmed up.

Every time I put the knife in, I was reminded of the old women from the apartment block I lived in. *Thank you.* They had taught me how to do this, and it had come in handy once again.

I was close with an old man two floors above who enjoyed fishing as a hobby. Every time I visited him, he shared some of his catch and told me how to prepare the fish. Of course, he had never been able to catch a fish this big, but he had often bought big fish and shared it with the residents of the apartment building.

Lady Adelaide had called it a Seerel. *I've never seen one of these before.*

I ran into the same thing with the plants of this world. Every time I thought

they were similar to what I knew, there would be something different, or the name would be different, or the insides would be the same as something I knew, but the exterior was different. There were other interesting things, like the season they grew in being different.

The same went for this Seerel. Its appearance was like a rainbow trout, but its insides were the color of sea bream. The white flesh was firm, but once heated, it became soft and fell apart.

Lady Adelaide suggested that we make a meuniere. *Yeah, that would be delicious. Steaming it would be nice, too. Or even sashimi... Wait, do people here eat raw fish? How about carpaccio? The color of the flesh is pretty, it would look great displayed on the table. Ah, wait, you make carpaccio with beef and not fish, now that I think about it.*

“You’re skilled at this, Margaret,” Lady Adelaide observed. “Were you a culinarian in your old world?”

“*Oh, no, not at all.*”

But thinking about how Japanese households often make not only Japanese food at home but food from around the world—that’s pretty high-spec. I mean, the methods and seasonings are so varied, and the same goes for the cookware. If it were just Japanese cuisine, if you have a *gyouhei* nabe and a bamboo steamer, then that would probably be enough. If you need to fry something, you do not need a frying pan but a *shichirin*, a type of grill, and a net.

I thought about all of that as I filleted the fish. Even though it had been a while since I last used this skill, I had done it quite well. *I guess it’s muscle memory at this point.* From there, I would slice the meat and divide it, but it was so big. Even when I sliced it, it was still huge. *How luxurious.*

We had no plastic bags, so I wondered how the deliveryman could even take it home. Then I remembered that they deliver food. They had come with a perfect container for it. They always just handed us the contents of the groceries, so I never really looked at what they were in.

*Oh, I can put ice in the bottom, too.* This was also a kind of magic device; it was a container that would keep the temperature all throughout the day. The lid was secure, so there was no need to worry about the contents of the box

spilling out. If you put an ice pack in the bottom layer of the container, it keeps it cold. If you put a heat pack in, it keeps it warm...

It was a handy item, but it wasn't too practical: it seems they could only really make it to the size of a large tissue box. If they made them bigger, it would be the beginning of a distribution revolution. They could distribute a lot of fresh fish from the sea that way... *I surprise myself with how motivated I am by food.* There were probably other things that required temperature control.

Such as, well, you know, medicine, or wine and cheese...and I did it again. Back to food. I guess wine came to mind because I thought of alcohol in a medical sense. My thought process seems a little wrong there. I ruminated on that for a while as I put the cuts of fish into the magical storage device.

Speaking of magical devices, there were a variety of them around. Like the other day, when I went to Mrs. Anna's general store, I was given a house tour by little Mariella, who wanted to show me around.

Mrs. Anna was fine with it, and I found myself getting excited over their new stove, which didn't need Sparksticks to start it, an item they had that resembled a toaster and another that resembled a mixer. They had a lot of things that I thought would be useful at Lady Adelaide's place.

But I honestly enjoyed a life where everything took a little more time and labor. I didn't help at the clinic every day, so I had spare time. I enjoyed using my hands and body.

Also, they had another magical device at the store: a fan.

In a world where home heaters were hearths that used firewood or charcoal, there were naturally no air conditioners. The summers didn't get that hot, so it was fine even without an electric fan. So it seems it was just doubling up as a decoration in the store.

Although I called it a fan, it wasn't a normal fan where the blades spun around or a folding fan that would move the air when you fanned it. It had a round base with a pole around a foot tall, with the wind coming from the pole. As usual, I had no idea how it worked.

Since it didn't have a propeller, it was safe for small children to touch, and it

was also easy to carry. It was always a bother to clean not only fans but also items that spin in general. I remember the times when I tried to clean the extraction fan above my gas stove when I lived alone, and I'd always burn my hand. Oh, and the official name for the device in this world wasn't "fan." It didn't have a propeller, nor was it a folding fan. It was more of an air blower.

The people in this village who had one of these air blowers outside of Mrs. Anna's store were Pat's restaurant and Mrs. Tanya's, where her family did blacksmithing work.

Mrs. Tanya's house was split into both a workplace and a home, but since the forge was always on, there was always hot air blowing through the house. "It's warm in the winter, but in the summer, it's way too hot. But we have a real good one in our house!" Mrs. Tanya laughed as she taught me about her air blower.

She said not too long ago that she felt a little nauseous, but I wondered how long morning sickness usually lasted. *Does it get better once they enter the stable period of their pregnancy?* She had just found out she was pregnant, and I assumed that pregnancies lasted nine months here too. *Oh, but there are a different number of days in the year, so I wonder if that changes things.*

Since it's Mrs. Tanya, I trust that she's doing well, but I wondered if I should take some fruit and go see her. *I want to see John, too. I wonder if he's gotten better at speaking. He'll probably want to bump foreheads again.*

My mind went to all sorts of places when I cooked. Putting my ever-spinning thoughts to the side, I continued slicing up the remainder of the fish.

I had left the cooking to Lady Adelaide, so once the fish was prepared, I'd hand it over to her to finish. As for the leftover fish, I decided to put the leftover cuts in salt and then marinate them in oil with garlic and herbs.

I gave some of the oil-marinated fish to the deliveryman, and he happily went home. *"Make sure to fry it and eat it by tomorrow,"* I had instructed him.

The head and the bones of the fish would make for a good *dashi*, so I decided to make soup with them.

I scraped the flesh off the backbone, then finely chopped my beloved parsley-

like herb and mixed it in, making it a form of fish ball. *This should be delicious, too.*

I decided not to go with the carpaccio this time. The fish itself was fresh and suitable for it, but I didn't know if our guests tonight would care for it. *I guess freshly caught fish would be better for that. If we're able to go to the sea, we'd be able to eat some then. I look forward to that.*

I remembered that Lady Rachel's aunt had a vacation house by the sea.

A vacation house... I bet the seaside towns in this world have breathtaking scenery as well, and probably make a good escape from the heat in summer. Although it would be a good idea to begin trade in that sort of area, I didn't know a lot about it. *I'll ask about it later.*

I thought about all sorts of things as I managed to make full use of the Seerel fish, leaving nothing behind.

*Phew, nothing like a good day's work!*



I had a light lunch as always, baked bread in the afternoon, then made dessert.

Since we already had baked sweets, we opted for fruit at Lady Adelaide's suggestion. *This is like a fruit salad...or rather, it is a fruit salad.*

I cut loquat, cherries, blueberries, and plums—in other words, all the fruits we had on hand—into similar sizes. We then put some lemons and oranges through a fruit press, using the juice with sugar added, and then cooled it.

Usually, if this syrup were being made for adults, we would add white wine or liquor. I'm banned from drinking alcohol, so this time, unfortunately, I had to make an all-ages syrup. *My dear guests, when it's time to eat, please feel free to put your desired alcohol on the dessert.*

I sulked slightly. Lady Adelaide chuckled at me as she prepared the salad. *Next time. Yes, next time, I'll sneakily have a drink.*

*If they see me, they'll stop me. So, if they don't see me, I'll be fine. Yeah. I don't have to report it, and if they don't know, they can't worry about it. Perfect.*

*It's decided.*

I spent the day planning to enjoy a lone drink. The sun soon set. The doctor and Mark had finally arrived.

*...Oh my.*

As I headed to the entrance hall to welcome them, I reacted like a shocked old lady.

*"I'm back. It's nice to see you after two days— Uh, Margaret, are you all right?"*

As soon as Mark came into the house, he cupped my face with both hands and looked right into my eyes. I should have been the one asking if *he's* all right. I mean, Mark looked incredibly refreshed. I was shocked. Even Dr. Daniel looked amused.

I felt like Mark's expressions had begun to soften compared to when I first arrived. However, while I wouldn't say he looked like a different person, it was close to that.

*Is this the real Mark? Doctor, is this really Mark? What did you do in the Royal Capital?*

I snapped my head back and forth between the two of them, tilting my head in confusion.

*"...Margaret."*

I reached my hands out and grabbed Mark's cheeks, pinching and pulling them to make sure he was real. He looked handsome as always. He gave me a weird look before moving my hands away.

*"Look, she's surprised. I win," Dr. Daniel announced.*

*"I said I'm not putting a bet on it," Mark retorted.*

*Huh? These two seem a little...*

Mark's tone of voice was the same as always, but he seemed a little more relaxed, or should I say, closer to the doctor?

*"Well, let's eat first. I just grilled the fish, so let's eat while it's hot," Lady*

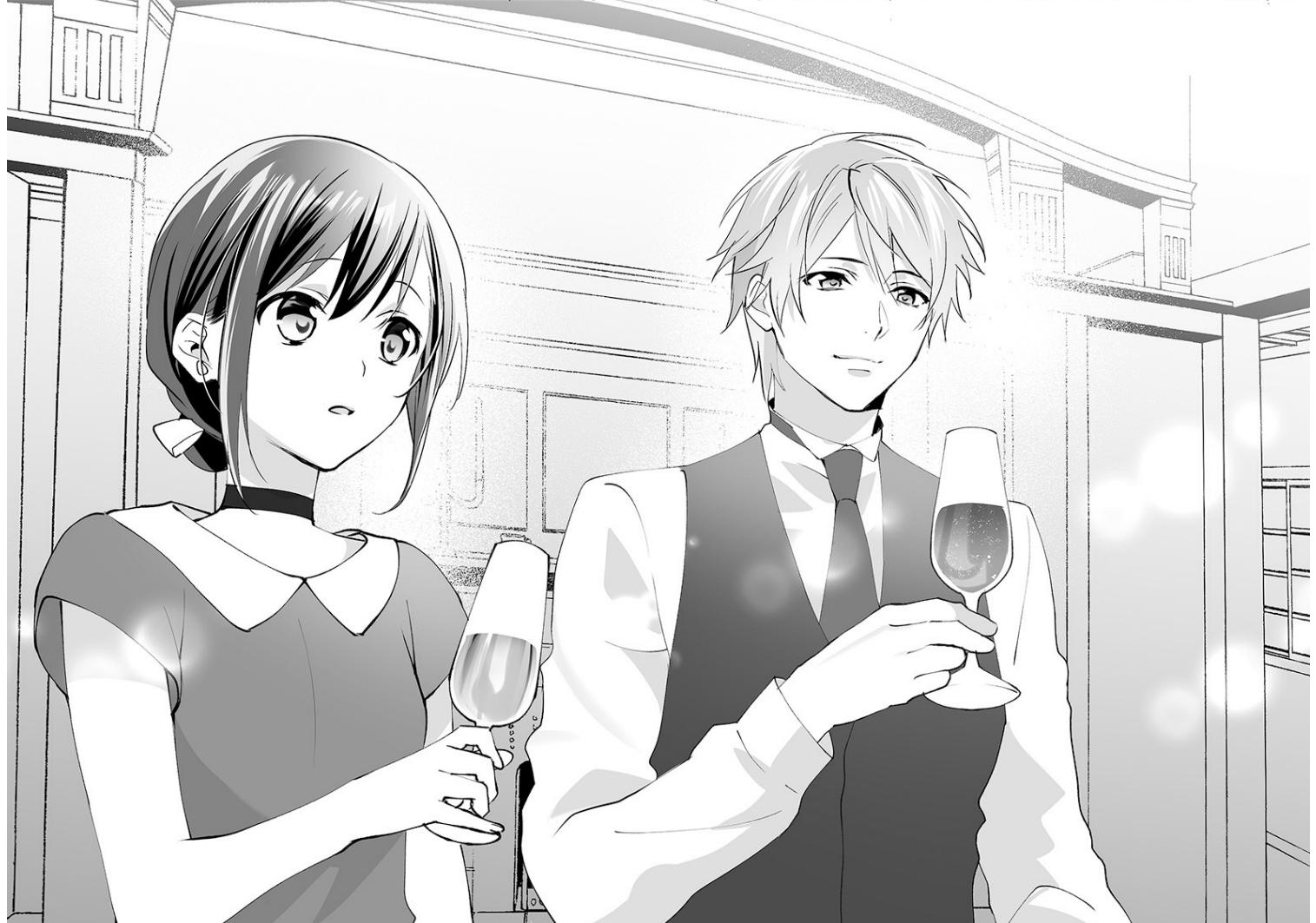
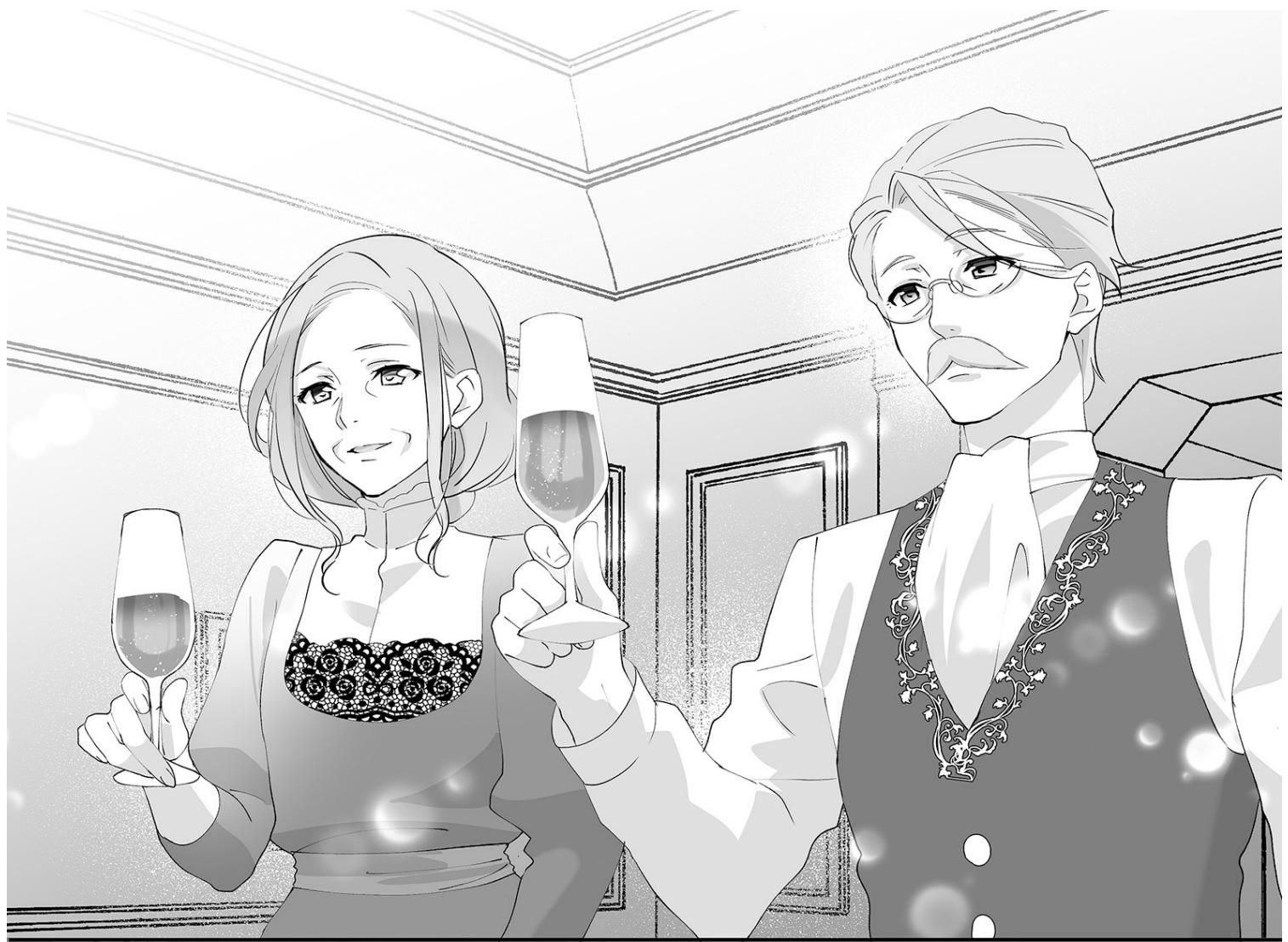
Adelaide said nonchalantly, with a knowing expression, and showed the boys to their seats at the table.

Everyone had champagne as their pre-meal drink. *Huh, why? That's unfair. I wanna drink too.*

Although I was vowing to myself earlier that I'd enjoy a lone drink, I shot Mark, who had poured me apple soda, a defiant look. He, of course, patted me on the head and completely ignored it.

The apple soda is fine and all, but I like champagne...and there's rarely an opportunity to have it at the dinner table. It seems that they drink champagne to celebrate in this world, too.





*Hey, wait a minute, something has happened, hasn't it? Why does it seem like I'm the only one out of the know?*

I tilted my head in confusion. Dr. Daniel looked at me with crinkled eyes, raising his glass. "Now, let us have a toast for Mark Reynolds on his return from the Royal Capital!"

I was so shocked that I forgot to lower my glass.

The thought, "*I was the only one left out,*" flashed across my mind. I wasn't mad for long, though, and I ended up grinning as I ate.

*I'm glad that's what it was. I see, I see. Mmm, the fish is delicious. The soup is too. Ah, the apple soda is nice. I could get drunk on juice today. Yeah, I really could.*

*...I'm happy for them.*

"Is this Seerel? What a treat," Dr. Daniel said.

"We got our hands on it by chance, but it was good timing. It was surprisingly big. It was a bit too much for me, but Margaret knew exactly what to do with it, thankfully," Lady Adelaide explained. "It was about this big," she continued, showing the length to both Mark and Dr. Daniel with her arms. The doctor's eyes went wide when he saw how big it was. It seemed they were rarely that big in the Royal Capital, too.

"Margaret cut up a fish that large?" Mark asked.

"She certainly did. Skillfully, too," Lady Adelaide said.

I recommended the soup to Mark, who was shocked as he ate. *The fish balls are delicious.* It's full of nutrients that will help you get your energy back after such a long journey. *Aah, delish.*

"Oh, it's delicious... You really can make anything, huh," Mark muttered after having several mouthfuls of the soup, as if to confirm the taste of it.

He seemed half-astonished by the fact, which was a compliment for a foodie like me! I made eye contact with Lady Adelaide and we giggled together.



AFTER dinner, we had our routine tea time in the living room. Mark approached me in the kitchen as I prepared the tea.

"So, Margaret. Care to tell me what happened?"

*Wow, Mark, you're close. Super close.*

I turned around while holding the container with the tea leaves. Mark had both hands on either side of me on the counter, closing me in. He was smiling. I couldn't escape.

I nodded several times, gesturing for him to help me carry the tea before we got into it.

In the living room, Buddy was lying on his stomach in his favorite spot, right in front of the hearth. Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide were enjoying a conversation on the sofa. I gave it some thought, then signaled to Mark to meet me on the veranda, which connected to the living room.

I didn't want to interrupt their conversation, and if I was going to confirm my suspicions, it would probably be best to go somewhere quiet... In actuality, even if Mark could hear me, I didn't know how loud it would be.

On the table on the veranda were cups of tea and a candle with herbs to repel insects. Mark hung a magical device that was like a lantern from a support beam. I then sat in the rocking chair, and Mark sat on a bench beside it. Our usual positions.

In all honesty, the bench was more stable and better for my injured leg, but I just loved the rocking chair. After all, I always wanted a veranda with a roof that allowed me to look over the garden from a rocking chair.

*This probably looks like a scene out of a film.* Well, all that could be seen from the veranda were fields instead of gardens. But that was all right. There was still a lot of greenery, and there were even flowers blooming. *The bean plants are like sweet peas, and look, over there are some marigolds. Good enough for me.*

The light from the living room leaked onto the veranda via the sheer curtain that separated the two spaces. It lit up the floor of the veranda slightly. The breeze was refreshing and there were no clouds. The only thing in the sky was the slightly large, bright moon.

I realized Mark had a lot he wanted to say, but I took a sip of tea first. I put some milk in this time. For some reason, it made it easier for me to say what I wanted to say.

I was glad that he noticed something was up. He saw my face, and that was the first thing out of his mouth. I hadn't even said anything, nor had the doctor said anything either.

Plus, he asked "What happened?" rather than "Has something happened?" He already knew that something had indeed happened. Although I had lost confidence in my poker face, I was happy that he had noticed such a small change. I found myself smiling.

I took another sip of milk tea. *Ah, delicious. Huh, is Mark not having any? Make sure to drink it while it's hot.* I gestured for him to drink. *I didn't add any milk to yours.*

"...I'm worried here, you know. I can tell something happened while I was gone. Or is it something you can't rely on me for?" Mark asked, all sulky and serious, as if he thought my grinning was my attempt at trying to avoid the topic.

*I'll tell you. Thank you for waiting.*

I readied myself, putting my cup down. I took Mark's hand and began to trace my finger over his palm. It's all fine having a hypothesis, but without actually doing it, I'm not confident I can explain it well. If it doesn't work, I'll explain everything...though it'll take a while. I should have grabbed a pen and paper.

I traced out "I have something I want to try" on Mark's hand. He nodded in response. I then added, "If it hurts or feels weird, stop me at any time."

I let go of his hand and stood up from the rocking chair. I moved around the table and stood directly in front of Mark—he looked a little suspicious. I asked him to stay silent by putting my index finger up to my lips, then took both of his cheeks in my hands.

*I could feel his slightly rougher skin in the palms of my hands. Ah, even though he's so good-looking, he's still a guy, I found myself suddenly thinking. I can't get excited at a time like this... Deep breaths. Stay calm. You can do this.*

I had no idea what would get transferred or what he could hear, so I needed to calm down.

“Uh, what are...?”

*Hey, quiet now. I pressed my index finger lightly against Mark’s lips, asking him one more time to be silent. He obediently kept his mouth closed. I beg you, don’t mess it up now. I don’t know how to explain it to you, and this is a lot for me already.*

*It would help even more if he closed his eyes, too, but I can’t ask for too much. I can close mine instead.*

I put my hands on Mark’s cheeks again, and as I looked into his blue eyes, I leaned forward, getting closer to his face. I then slowly closed my eyes and put our foreheads together.

**“...Mark, can you hear me?”**

There wasn’t any response for a while, so thinking it hadn’t worked, I stepped back. Suddenly, Mark jumped up, and our foreheads collided. *Ow! That hurts.* Mark stood up with such force that the bench made a loud noise as it fell over. I was relieved that the cups and other things on the table were safe. It would be dangerous if the candle fell.

“Margaret!! Was that...voice?”

*Oh, it looks like it was a success.*

When I opened my slightly teary eyes from the pain in my forehead, I saw Mark standing before me, looking absolutely flabbergasted through my blurry vision... *Wait, why are you so red? It looks like I did something naughty. Well, I guess I did do something.*

Even though he’s always fussing over me and acting so cool about it. Now he’s got a face like he can’t believe what just happened. It was my first time ever seeing him like that, so I forgot all about my throbbing forehead and felt myself going red.

“What happened?” Dr. Daniel asked.

“Oh, the bench fell. Are you two all right?” Lady Adelaide followed up.

Alerted by the noise, Doctor Daniel and Lady Adelaide came out to the veranda. Buddy was peeking out from behind their legs.

"Ah, no, I apologize. Everything is fine," Mark responded, covering his mouth with a bright red face.

The doctor and Lady Adelaide seemed like they knew Mark was hiding something, and they looked at each other, seemingly agreeing not to probe any further.

"All right. Let us know if you both need anything," Lady Adelaide responded.

"Mark, I trust you," Dr. Daniel followed up.

In order to avoid the awkward situation, Mark began to upright the bench as Dr. Daniel gave him a stern warning. He patted Buddy on the back as he returned to the living room with Lady Adelaide, leaving Mark, myself, and a very happy Buddy alone on the veranda. *They really got the wrong idea. Both of us had red faces, and I even had teary eyes.*

Once we could no longer see Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide, and the curtain had fallen back into place, Mark tried his best to contain his confusion as he spoke with his hand on his forehead. "Margaret, what was that...?"

*Um. Let's sit down. Would you like some tea?*

I took Mark's hand and sat him down on the bench. He was unusually flustered. I handed him a still-warm cup of tea and sat beside him. Buddy sat between us, facing me.

I took a sip of tea then let out a sigh. My hot cheeks surely weren't only a result of the tea. I petted Buddy on the head, who was resting his chin on my lap. I could feel Mark's gaze on me and I looked toward him.

Mark, with the cup still in his hand, used his long fingers to push aside my bangs and softly stroked my forehead where our heads had collided. His touch was reminiscent of a doctor's.

"...I'm sorry. That hurt, didn't it?"

*Hehe, your forehead is red too, Mark.* We both started rubbing the red spots on each other's foreheads. The whole thing was silly.

"It's nothing to laugh about," he pouted. "I am so confused right now."

*Ah, what a relief. I thought I was the only one to be so shocked by it. If he had calmly begun to analyze the situation, I would've felt bad about myself.*

As I was smiling, Mark laughed slightly as he removed his hand from my forehead. He then rested his elbows on his knees, holding his head with both hands. In the time it took me to take three sips of tea, he let out a big sigh, sat back up, and was facing me directly. I returned his gaze and his sky-blue eyes softened with fondness.

*Badum.* My heart made a pleasant sound.

Seeing him happy made me happy. He didn't deny what happened; he was happy for me. Now I knew—I was worried about how he would respond.

"All right, I've calmed down. Tell me all about it."

I nodded and put my cup on the table.

I started by telling him about when I was looking after John at the clinic. Well, I wrote on his palm like always. Mark confirmed everything I wrote by repeating it.

Even though I only used words, he was quick on the uptake, so it didn't take too long. It didn't take him that long to get a good idea of the situation...as I expected, but it was a little frustrating.

"Have you told anyone else, like the doctor or Lady Adelaide?" Mark asked.

He seemed quite happy that he was the first person I told. *I see. So that was the right thing to do.*

However, when I told him that I was thinking of testing it with him or Hugh, he sulked, saying I didn't have to go to Hugh. *Well, you're not the expert like he is.*

When I told him it seemed to work on Buddy first, that didn't seem to bother him as he was the first *person*. He stroked Buddy's fur as he said so.

He then went on to say I shouldn't mention it to anyone else. That I agreed with. *Yeah, that's probably best.*

"We must first see if there's any connection to the magic power in the forest," he said. "I know we must, but...having Hugh do it..."

*He really doesn't like that idea, huh? I guess he's against us having our foreheads so close together.*

I went on to explain that it had worked like that with John, so I tried the same method with him and that there was so much I couldn't work out on my own.

Mark nodded, then after a while, we tried lots of different methods...and I mean lots and lots.

*Ah, all right, okay. That's enough. I'm sure he's just been doing some of these for the fun of it for a while now.*

We did it to the point that neither of us felt shy about having our foreheads so close together. As a result, we were both totally fine with it. I realized that humans really are adaptive animals. It got to the point where I felt like I'd have to be more careful about it in the future. I might end up doing something out of line in public.

In the end, we confirmed that:

"It only works when foreheads are touching" and "My words can be conveyed to the other person."

As far as Mark could tell, there was no magic involved. There was a chance that the magic being used was the magic from the forest, which Mark couldn't sense, but as of right now, it caused no harm to the other person.

*I'm glad, what a relief. It's a bit late to do anything about it, but at least I know that John will be fine.*

That and, not everything I'm thinking is conveyed. Just like talking, it's only what I "say" that is conveyed to the other person. So, if I whispered quietly, it would be quiet; if I sang a song, they would hear the song.

Plus, it didn't seem like they heard it as a sound, but rather, it resonated directly within their minds. I guess I was *not* actually making noise, so that made sense.

But then, was it my voice, or was it someone else's voice?

“I’ve never heard your actual voice, so I have no way of comparing,” Mark commented.

That’s true. I’ve never been able to use my voice since coming here.

“It didn’t seem weird, and as far as impressions go, it seemed like what your voice would be. It wasn’t that high-pitched and was quite relaxing. It was a little different when you sang. It sounded like you were singing to a child,” Mark said, chuckling.

*That’s because I’m only good at singing songs for young children. Even at karaoke, I sing nursery rhymes. Got a problem with that? People get excited when I get into it. Children who are good at singing even join in the alto parts, or we’ll have a two-part chorus or even singing in a round.*

What I sang to Mark was “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” It had a simple melody and easy lyrics. When I sang that beautiful song in both Japanese and English...I realized something. No matter if it was English or Japanese, whenever I went to speak, it would strangely change into this world’s language.

Although I could understand their language from the start, when I first came here, there was a little bit of a distance between this language and Japanese. When spoken to, I would first think of the Japanese, then understand what was said to me. It felt like the languages were being simultaneously translated within my mind.

For example, when I heard “dog,” it would automatically translate into *inu* in my mind, and then I would be able to picture the image of a dog. Recently I’ve stopped translating to Japanese in my head and can understand it immediately. The same goes for the language I think in, that’s also the language here.

*I wonder if I’d be able to understand real Japanese still.*

I felt like I would slowly forget Japanese...and that it would just remain a memory.

After all, my name didn’t even exist in their language.

I must have gotten too lost in thought. I snapped back to reality when Mark touched my cheek with his hand.

"Are you tired? I'm sorry, I made you do a lot."

He looked worried. I shook my head in response. *I also wanted to know.*

I smiled and met his eyes to reassure him... *Ah, right. I have something important to tell him.*

I traced "*I have something I forgot to tell you*" on his palm after I took his hand from my face. I then put my hand on his cheek, pulled him close, and softly put my forehead against his.

**"Welcome home, son of Dr. Daniel."**

Even if he hadn't become his adopted child, the two of them would always be like father and son.

*I believe that bonds formed in the heart have a deeper meaning than something tangible.*

Mark was a little shocked, but then he had a big grin like a child and gave me a tight hug. *I feel like today I'm seeing so many of these expressions for the first time.* It felt like he was showing me a treasure he had been hiding.

"...It's all thanks to you, Margaret."

It seemed he didn't mean for me to hear the words he whispered near my temple. I didn't feel like I had done anything special, so I just remained silent and lightly rubbed his back with my hand. We stayed like that for a while until Buddy began to tug at the hem of my skirt.

I bumped up against something that seemed to be in a pocket on the inside of his clothes when I pulled away. It seemed Mark had forgotten about it as well.

He took my hand and placed a light box on top of it.

"I also forgot something," he said. "I wanted to surprise you, but instead, I was the one getting all the surprises."

*Oh, no, I'm surprised, all right.* Even though he was acting like it was no big deal, he did seem the slightest bit upset, too. It was cute.

*He's always treating me like a child, it's nice for me to see this side of him, too. I often forget, but age-wise, I'm older. So, what did he get me?*

"It's a souvenir," he said. "I'll tell you about some stories from my trip later. I feel like today isn't the best time for that."

He urged me to open it by putting my hand on top of the box. Inside the box, there was an indigo blue piece of cloth, and in the dim light, I could see a silver hair ornament sparkling in the light.

Wow.

It was so pretty, I unknowingly let out a sigh.

It was shaped like a comb and along the edge, there was a thin lace knit decorating it. There was an ivy pattern with a small flower. It was exactly to my taste. *Huh, how? How did he know my taste? Did I ever mention it? Was this just pure chance?*

Surrounded by flowers that resembled jasmine, there were three blue stones randomly scattered about. They weren't huge, but they also weren't small—they matched the color of Mark's eyes... Sapphires.

*Wait, hold on. The box is simple enough, but this isn't something you really give as a souvenir, right?*

Working in a department store for so long, you get friendly with people working on different sales floors. Not only did I talk with the accessory department on the same floor, but I also had connections with the upstairs pearl and watch department. My eyes were well-trained when it came to jewelry.

Plus, I often looked at Lady Adelaide's high-quality possessions enough to know that these were real sapphires. They weren't gaudy enough that they stood out, instead they were delicately crafted to lightly sit on the skin. They did have a fantastic jewel shine, though.

"It's said sapphires bring protection. You should wear it," Mark added.

*So, they are real sapphires?!*

I looked at Mark in shock. He said it like it was no big deal as he casually took the hair ornament out of the box. He turned me away from him and put the hair ornament into my hair, which I had styled in an up-do today.

Mark looked pleased, muttering, "It suits you well" to himself.

*Wait a minute, what's with this surprise attack, anyway?*

*Like, let me get this straight. This goes beyond a souvenir. It doesn't even seem like something you'd get someone you just started dating as a present. We are dating, right? I think?*

*Speaking of which, Ms. Linda did say at the clinic a while back that men give hair ornaments to girls who are their partners...so yeah. I'm his partner.*

*I mean, it's so pretty, I'm grateful, but if I lose it somewhere, I'll cry about it, so I can't ever wear it.*

"If you lose it, I'll get you another. Please wear it every day," he insisted.

*Ack, he read me like a book!*

Mark laughed, then stroked my cheek with his slender finger.

He really does touch me a lot. I can't get accustomed to it, and I still blush, but it's not like I don't like it. I guess that's because he's always doing it. His timing, plus his amount of force, is always perfectly aligned with what I'm comfortable with. He's good at looking at people, likely due to his job as a doctor.

I took his hand that was touching my cheek and took a breath.

*"...Thank you. I'll treasure it."*

He took the hand that I used to write on his palm and lightly kissed me on my fingertips.

"I hope you will."

With his other hand, he took a stray piece of my hair and curled it around his finger with a satisfied smile. *...Ahh. How sweet is he.*

I picked up my now-cool cup of tea to help cool down my bright red face.



**AFTER** that, we headed into the living room with Buddy and decided to tell Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel about my situation.

Just like I did with Mark, I sat beside them on the sofa and put my forehead

against theirs. Lady Adelaide was a little flustered, asking me what was wrong. We were so close I could hear her breathing.

As I moved away, I could see tears forming in her reddish-brown eyes.

“...Margaret, it should be me saying that,” she whispered.

I finally got to say “Thank you” to her, yet with her responding to me like that, I ended up crying too. That then led to Lady Adelaide getting even more upset, and we ended up crying and laughing together, causing a very flustered Dr. Daniel to look for an explanation from Mark.

Then it was Dr. Daniel’s turn. He seemed mentally prepared, so he didn’t get that much of a shock. Instead, he seemed quite happy and patted my head as if to say, “Well done.” That ended up striking a chord with me. *Am I just a crybaby now?*

As a result, Dr. Daniel and Mark ended up staying the night since they had stayed late, waiting for me to calm down.

Lady Adelaide and I split the work and began preparing the guest rooms, when she noticed my hair ornament.

“Is that from Mark? It’s beautiful. It suits you, Margaret,” Lady Adelaide commented. She came for a closer look. “Oh my, orange flowers. Hehe, he’s quick to act.”

*Oh, the flowers are orange flowers. I thought they were jasmine from their shape.*

There were some orange trees near the woods, but I couldn’t recall if I ever saw them flower. When I first saw them, they would have just been flower buds. I wasn’t too sure what they looked like as flowers. They probably flowered in spring. Around the time I was stuck in bed, unable to move, they had probably finished blooming.

I felt like there was a slight scent of flowers in the air back then...but my memory from when I first came here was a little foggy. It was most likely due to me being in shock, but I think I was in a far worse mental state than I realized back then.

Just thinking about what would have happened if I didn't have Lady Adelaide looking after me then...made me feel lucky that I landed in Miselle and not the Royal Capital.

Lady Adelaide had a huge smile on her face now. As she was putting a pillow inside its cover and lightly patting it down, she said, "Hey, Margaret. Orange flowers are a bride's flowers."

*Yes. Wait, what?*

"Men usually give them to their fiancée, or brides use it in their bouquet or flower crown when they get married," Lady Adelaide continued.

*...Huh?*

"I'm not sure how it is for youngsters now, but back when I was younger, that's how it used to be," she said. "You came here at the start of spring. I'd like you to stay here a little longer. At least until the real orange flowers bloom."

I didn't know how to react to that.

Her eyes were still slightly red, but she gave me an impish grin as she looked at me. She seemed so happy. I could only crouch, my cheeks going red for the umpteenth time that day.



**THE** cooler days of summer were short and passed by in an instant. Before I knew it, we were in the height of summer. The way the seasons slowly passed us by reminded me of my hometown in Hokkaido.

As it was summer, it was hot through the day, but the humidity wasn't that bad, and on days there was a breeze, it was a comfortable temperature in the shade and indoors. The temperature went down at night, so I didn't have to worry about sweating overnight, and I slept well. *Yeah, I don't mind these kinds of summers. If anything, I like them.*

The fields out back were a vibrant green, and the summer vegetables were in season. Every day I harvested a variety of vegetables, ate them, and used them for preservation or cooking. The weeds were also in season...though it would have been nice if they could have given me a little bit of a break.

I was impressed by their will to live even though I kept pulling them up every time. *Well, I know it's not your fault, weeds.* Having weeds made sure that the insects went to them and not the flowers, so I never pulled all of them out. I just wanted the weeds around the center of the field and towards the gate to hold back a little.

The main things I had been harvesting were tomato, cucumber, and eggplant.

Even the bigger tomatoes were able to fit into my hand, and the smaller ones were firm with a deep flavor. They were like large cherry tomatoes. They were delicious on their own. Heating them up made the flavor even richer, and it paired well with meat. When made into a sauce for roast chicken, the sour and sweet tomatoes went perfectly with the fat of the meat. There was no better match. It could be made all together in the oven; it was simple and delicious. A good recipe.

There were also smaller, or should I say, cherry tomatoes, and cucumbers that were a similar size to that of a baby corn.

In this world, they also liked pickled vegetables in a sweet vinegar with spices. They were often served as a palate cleanser between meals, or pickled cucumber was finely diced then added to a softly boiled egg or yogurt made for an improvised tartar sauce. Onions and cheese went nicely with it too.

The eggplants, when in season, were like Japanese eggplants. They were long and narrow like usual, but on one side of the field, the seeds were bigger, and eggplants, like American eggplants, were starting to ripen. They're a useful vegetable in that they have many uses, but when it came to eggplant, I enjoyed grilled eggplant with small pieces of sliced *bonito* and soy sauce. Unfortunately, they didn't have bonito or soy sauce here.

While I fondly thought of soy sauce, it didn't make me feel homesick. After all, Lady Adelaide's cooking was so delicious, and I was very content with the food here in this world.

Me being easily swayed by delicious foods was just my personality, or rather, that's just who I was.

Even then, there were still plenty of delicious foods and cooking methods I had yet to come across, so I was more curious about that. Like with grilled

eggplants, instead of bonito and soy sauce, I could have it with salt and olive oil and a little bit of lemon squeezed over the top. That was delicious.

I thought about that day's meals as my hands were busy with harvesting vegetables. It didn't take long before my basket was full of glossy vegetables.

I stood up with a stretch, then looked around my surroundings, seeing all the different kinds of vegetables and flowers that were growing. Lady Adelaide's fields were like treasure troves. Tomato, basil, lace flower, and dahlia were all growing together, swaying in the breeze.

The green of the forest became deeper with each rainfall. It was a dazzling green.

Mark came to the forest almost every day, stating that now was the best time to collect herbs and stems for herbal potions. We had recently been eating breakfast together, and on the days I helped at the clinic, we would head there together.

My work at the clinic was going smoothly and I had taken to the role well.

There were people who visited the clinic just to see me, and while I felt it wasn't helping with the chaos of the waiting room, neither the doctor nor Mark minded it, so I didn't stop it either. When the clinic was busy or when we had sick patients, they wouldn't come visit, and if they did come, they would help where they could. It made me think it might be good if we had more helpers in times of need.

Sometimes, when heading home from the clinic with people I was close to, they would invite me to their house. It was always a fun and interesting time.

Although not unique to Miselle, it seemed the houses here were built from stone and were quite old, and all had the same appearance on the outside. The layout of the houses seemed to be similar, too. Japanese houses were full of variety, and while they had a certain style and feel to them, wooden houses also gave off the impression that they were more flexible and had a longer lifespan.

The mansion I was staying at with Lady Adelaide was quite big, which was expected as it belonged to a count. It was the only three-story house in Miselle,

and it wasn't completely made from stone—a part of it was also made from wood. It was a marvelous design.

Normal houses were quite small in comparison and were designed to be easy to live in. The rooms themselves weren't that big, but every house had a garden. There were a lot of smaller front gardens with large back gardens. It felt very British in that regard.

The houses themselves were made from stone; however, there was wallpaper and waist-high partition walls, with tapestry hanging up so they didn't feel cold inside. The windows were small, so it felt a little dark, but honestly, it made for a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere.

In place of natural light, there were a lot of lights, which was marvelous. Rather than having one light on the ceiling illuminating the whole room, they used indirect lighting more effectively, similar to Lady Adelaide's estate.

*They probably don't have a big light that can act as a single light. The mansion's living room and entrance hall are lit by chandeliers, after all.*

Most lighting was magical devices.

Lady Adelaide wasn't very fond of magical devices, so she only had what was necessary in the estate, and even then, it was an older model. However, ever since I came, she made sure to introduce a lantern that I could use when I walked.

That new lantern wasn't working lately. When using it, the light would flicker and turn off. I had a look inside, but I had no idea what I was looking at. Which is to be expected. There was no battery or lightbulb inside.

There seemed to be a magic stone moving around in a part I couldn't see. I had no idea how it worked. But the same could be said for a battery or a lightbulb—I knew what they were, but I couldn't say with confidence I knew exactly how they worked.

Plus, I had no magical ability or sense for magic, and Lady Adelaide didn't know enough to be able to fix it. So, I decided that I would take it to the clinic with me next time and ask Mark about it. *I wish I could just fix it myself, though.*



“DID she buy this at Miles’? If you take it to him, he should be able to fix it for you,” Dr. Daniel told me around the time I finished working at the clinic for the day. It seemed the magic stone wasn’t working well.

*Ah, so I can’t fix it myself.* When I asked about it, it seemed it wouldn’t be too hard to fix, it’s just that special tools were required. *Well, nothing I can do about that.*

The doctor and Mark were surprised when they realized I wanted to fix it myself...but isn’t that normal? I told them that living alone, I often had to fend for myself. They told me to learn to rely on other people more in response.

*I do rely on other people. I mean, I’m talking to you both about it now, aren’t I?*

“Shall we go together?” the doctor asked.

*Oh, you’re coming with me? It would be a great help if he could explain what’s wrong with it. I haven’t gotten my magical writing device back yet, so if the store is busy, I’ll end up causing them trouble.*

“I’ll go, sir.”

“Mark, stay and look after the clinic. You already applied to be an independent physician; you must start getting experience.”

“...Understood.”

“You have to work.”

The doctor grinned as Mark sulked. Their relationship was cute. I looked at them with a grin when Mark started ruffling my hair to get back at me. *Okay, soooorry.*

Mark had told me that when he went to the Royal Capital to apply to become the doctor’s adopted son, he had also taken the opportunity to submit the documents to become an independent physician. He said it so nonchalant, but... isn’t that a big deal, Mark? Isn’t that what you’ve been working for and trying so hard for?

He said it so nonchalantly that I almost thought it wasn’t that big of a deal, too. But Mark was almost too impressive—or rather, out of the ordinary in that

he was still working as an assistant. Even Lord Walter was surprised when he found out.

I heard how he had received a special prize for combining modern medicine methods with herbal medicines. I knew he was writing a thesis, but I didn't realize it was *that* incredible of a topic.

There was that, and the fact that he often got asked to return to work in the Royal Capital. *I can see why. The central part of the country will have far more cases for him to study and to make better strides in his research.*

He didn't seem to want to return, but his work was important, and he was a doctor, after all. He seemed to be thinking a lot about the future. I found myself hoping he would talk about it with me sometime.



I finished my work at the clinic and went with Dr. Daniel to Mrs. Anna's store, where the lantern was bought. As it was a small village, most of the stores were in the center of the village. It was a short walk from the clinic.

There was a wooden sign suspended with black iron fixtures inside the store. It had a unique atmosphere, and it was cute. Through the window on the side of the glass door, you could see all the various items inside. It really was a general goods store.

The doorbell jingled as I opened it. Mrs. Anna was sitting directly behind the counter sewing. Deeper in the room, there was a rattan cradle with a sleeping baby, with a sleeping Mariella next to the baby... *Oh, it's afternoon nap time.*

"Welcome, Margaret. Oh, hello, doctor," Mrs. Anna greeted us in a quiet voice, smiling as she pointed at the sleeping children.

Dr. Daniel replied in a similarly hushed voice. "Anna, could you have a look at this? It hasn't been working very well lately. I think there's a faulty connection somewhere."

He explained the problems with the lantern in my place. Mrs. Anna took the magical lantern and tried turning it on and off again.

"Oh, I see. You just bought this, right? Wait here a moment, I'll go have him

take a look at it," Mrs. Anna said, frowning. I nodded as Mrs. Anna headed further into the shop to give the lantern to her husband who oversaw repairs.

Having some time on my hands, I decided to have a look around the store.

There was a wide variety of items in the small store. It was always interesting to explore when I visited. They had various sizes and shapes of the magical lantern I had, as well as desk lamps too. They also had magical air blowers.

There were pans, kettles, and other kinds of cookware... *Oh, there's an iron.* The iron was also powered by magic, but it resembled a *hinoshi*, a traditional Japanese iron. My grandmother used to use one. It brought back a lot of memories.

It was shaped like a ladle. At the end of the handle, there was a bowl that would have charcoal in it. Around the time I was born, it seemed it was reserved to be used on traditional Japanese clothes, but we never used charcoal at home, so I remember hearing that we sold it off.

I had only ever seen it in pictures, never in real life. I was often told that it would glide over the clothes well. *That was probably thanks to the heat from the charcoal. If it were clumsy ol' me, I'd no doubt burn the clothes.*

Lady Adelaide also used a magical iron, but the model in the store was a lot lighter, had a higher heat, and could be used for longer. *I see, so electronics evolve the same way here too.*

Household appliances were the most commonplace magical device, however, the hottest commodity among the housewives of Miselle seemed to be a laundry machine...which was understandable. I was told that it didn't use water but instead used mana to clean...that was not understandable. I cleaned clothes by washing them in a basin with soap then wringing them out to dry.

I had also heard that the laundry machine was still a fairly new invention, so it was incredibly expensive to the point that high-class laundry stores were being made available to nobles to try it out. *But I really think that families with small children would want one, too.*

Dr. Daniel was on the opposite side of the store, looking at writing tools. *Oh, that glass pen is pretty.*

There was a section alongside the counter for women, featuring cosmetics and various cute accessories. Mrs. Anna probably looked for brooches, gloves, hair accessories, ribbons, and the like when she went to the Royal Capital.

There were also picture frames and small perfume bottles. *I used to love this kind of stuff when I was still in school.* I had a lot of fun times going to a tableware store or general store just to enjoy looking at what they had. I remember bleeding my pocket money dry to buy some extra nice cutlery once.

I think it's a common phase for girls to go through, buying their own cutlery to use or picking out specific various general goods to use. It was an important process in order to discover your own personal taste, though at the time, you never think of it like that. *There's a lot of things like that, where you realize what it was after the fact.*

I reminisced as I looked around the store, and before I knew it, Mrs. Anna had returned from the back.

"It's as you said, doctor, there's a connection issue with the magic stone. It seems he can fix it right away, so is it okay if you wait a little? In the meantime, have this, Margaret. Here's some for you too, Doctor," Mrs. Anna spoke as she poured us some fruit-infused water. Dr. Daniel and I took a seat at the counter while we waited.

Mrs. Anna apologized and explained that they always check if it works when they sell an item, but it seems they had overlooked it this time. *Ah, it happens. There's bound to be defective products, and it's no problem if I can get it immediately fixed like this.*

They generally just sold the items they had procured, but the owner of this store was very experienced with magical devices and would offer repairs as well, so I felt confident buying their products. They had repaired pans for me in the past. I respected those who were good with their hands.

Mrs. Anna liked to make a variety of things too; the doilies and sachets around the store were handmade by her. She didn't have time to make her own clothes, but she did hand-sew her daughter Mariella's clothes and hats. *She's amazing.*

She was a very creative person, and it stood out in the clothes she picked for

herself as well. She didn't do anything like wear two or three hats at once, but she did dress as if she were a mannequin. She would wear a lot of accessories or wear clothes with eye-catching colors. When I first met her, I was quite surprised.

When I asked her about it, she said she wore all the new items that she wanted to show off. I understood it as her using herself as a walking advertisement. *Those types do exist—like a fashion designer wanting to show off their latest line by wearing it themselves.* However, she seemed to worry that it wasn't translating into sales.

We got close when she asked me, a newcomer to the village, what I thought.

It was probably hard for her to talk with the people in the village. Remembering my own work, I ended up talking about it a lot with her. I remember recommending something like, "You should wear less and only focus on a few items—that will catch people's attention more."

After all, when humans are presented with too many options, it makes it even harder to choose.

*Like lipstick. There are so many colors that you're at a loss what to choose.* Even the company I worked for had hundreds of colors, and they would often release new colors or limited-edition colors depending on the season. I often struggled over what to choose along with the customer. Well, I get that's a different situation, but similar enough.

The one that suits you the best is good enough. One that makes your skin look great, and matches any outfit you wear—wait, even I want one of those.

Anyway, no matter how wonderful an item is, if it's mixed in with too many other items, it's easy to miss. There are people who enjoy looking for treasure among the riffraff, and I think that it's fun, but I feel like treasures should be treated like treasures. Especially in stores.

Mrs. Anna listened intently, and started to think of outfits where she could wear one or two accessories that she wanted to stand out most. She had given up on trying to make every item stand out, since as a general store, they had too many items for that to work. She had received some good feedback from the customers when she put certain items on display after that. I was happy to

hear she had taken my advice to heart.

Especially this part of the store reserved for women, it seemed she had asked her husband and her father-in-law if she could do it. However, it didn't do great for sales, and she was feeling a little guilty about it. *Yeah, I know that feeling.*

One thing led to another, and we ended up getting along after that.

"But I'm glad you realized it's not working well," she said. "You'll probably use it for the Festival of Eve, right?"

*That's right.* I nodded deeply in response.

The Festival of Eve was a huge festival held in this country. It was named after the Summer Eve Spirit, which had appeared a long time ago. Although it was known as a festival, it seemed they didn't carry a *mikoshi*, a small portable shrine, or have any food stalls. Nor did they have fireworks.

It started around two hundred years ago. It was said they had a long stretch of bad weather and bad harvests. The surrounding countries were going through the same thing; however, they were just barely able to make enough to get by. However, that year, this country was suffering from a catastrophe.

They were unable to buy anything from other countries, and they had no harvest to look forward to. People began dying of starvation, riots began to break out, and there were rising concerns that war would break out on the borders. As the whole country was starving and on the brink of destruction, the Summer Eve Spirit appeared.

In an area not far from the Royal Capital, a Spirit appeared, like its name would suggest, on a summer evening. It was said that starting with that village, the climate began to stabilize throughout the land, people were able to farm again, and thousands of citizens' lives were saved.

After that, the country continued to flourish until the Spirit hid itself ten years later...or so it was said.

Spirits appear when there is a clear reason for it, like the situation I just explained. There are also times when they appear for not-so-obvious reasons.

From what I had read in books, it seems they appeared without reason far

more than they did with reason. The Spirit that called for me was the latter; there was no political imbalance, nor was there any violence in the world. Things were relatively calm. Not to mention, they didn't always appear even if there was a gruesome war.

Spirits didn't appear for human convenience, but more when the world itself needed them. Ultimately, it seemed even if humans were to go extinct, if the world was safe, it was all right. So, if the Spirits were upset, they would not be afraid to get rid of whole countries.

I thought it was very natural to be grateful for the prosperity they brought, but to also fear them. After all, Spirits were Spirits—they weren't human. But it was strange that the Spirits called for a human from a different world as their assistant. The reason for that wasn't recorded in any books, and even when asking people about it, no one had an answer for why.

Well, not everything has to have a reason, and even if I did understand why, it wouldn't change anything. If I ever get to meet the Spirit in the Royal Capital forest, I may learn something.

A ritual for the night of the Festival of Eve is held at a temple in the Royal Capital. At the same time, other towns and villages hold bonfires in their public squares, offering thanks to the Summer Eve Spirit.

Hearing that made me feel a little weird when I considered the influence of the Spirits, as well as my position as a Caller.

The Caller for the Spirit from two hundred years ago was recorded in a book I had borrowed. He was a man and quite aggressive—he went marching into the Royal Palace and dove right into their politics. *I couldn't do that. No way.*

This year, since a Spirit had appeared in the Royal Capital's Forest ahead of the Festival of Eve, it seemed the Temple had plans to hold an even bigger event. They wanted to reveal me as the new Caller. However, I had yet to go to the Royal Palace and meet them, so the existence of a new Caller was yet to be made public.

*I'm in no rush. They could also just let me be, but I doubt they will.*

I had left most of the negotiating and planning to Dr. Daniel and Lord Walter.

Even though it all had to do with me, there were a lot of political and diplomatic matters involved, all of which were most definitely above my pay grade.

I did think it was a bit of an issue that I had just left it all to them, but I had no idea what to do. Even at my old workplace, I remember being confused by a higher-up who had no idea about how things worked, sticking his nose in where he shouldn't. I felt like I could say the same to myself if I did get involved in all this.

That executive no doubt had good intentions and was trying to help improve the situation. But they were completely off the mark. While what they said made sense, it just wasn't realistic, and was the exact opposite of what we needed. There were a lot of times like that. I was in an awkward position where I couldn't really say no, either... *I guess that's perfectly applicable to me right now.*

I didn't want to cause anything bad to happen to the country that Lady Adelaide and everyone I cared about lived in. So, I left it to people I could trust, and if anything were to happen, such as me being used or I find myself in a bad position, I would have no one else but myself to blame for trusting them.

It wasn't that I had simply stopped thinking about it. I was learning about everything little by little. Their politics were different, and it was hard to say what constituted general knowledge and if social conventions were the same. There was still a lot I didn't know.

But I guess at the bottom of it all, it was people interacting with people, which is the same no matter where you are. Meet, talk. Understand, accept.

There wasn't a lot I could do, but I was content to just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

On the day of the Festival of Eve, everyone gathered in the public square for the bonfire. There were no lights. The only light came from the portable lanterns, which were a must.

Lady Adelaide's estate was surrounded by forest.

There were no private houses, so it was pitch black. I even felt unsafe with just candlelight. It was somewhat okay when there was moonlight, but I felt like

I was going to get swallowed into the darkness... I deeply felt how humans were a part of nature. *Lamps really are amazing.*

“Oh, that reminds me. This came recently. Isn’t it nice?”

As I thought about everything while drinking the fruit-infused water, Mrs. Anna took out some hair ribbons and showed them to me. She said she had planned to bring them out onto the shop floor tomorrow. There were thick ones, thin ones, and a variety of different colors.

Mrs. Anna had a pet theory that matching with others was boring, so she had made sure to order a wide variety. The main attraction to these ribbons was their size as well as their bright colors, which would catch people’s eyes.

*She’s right. The deep gold and light purple colors give off an air of elegance.*

“Since you have black hair, Margaret, I think this white one would look lovely on you,” Mrs. Anna recommended as she handed me a thin ribbon. “You should braid your hair with it.”

*Oh, I see. I can use it for that, too, and not just tying my hair up.* She also told me that corsages could be braided into the hair as well. And those ribbons weren’t just for children—anyone could wear them.

“You’ve never used it in a braid?” she responded when I wrote that on her hand. “Well, I’ll show you now. Start by braiding your hair right next to your ear, then secure it here...and put this hair accessory here. Oh, wow, Margaret, how pretty is that.”

Mrs. Anna began to do my hair for me, telling me how to style it myself. She then complimented the hair ornament Mark gave me. “Someone loves you,” she nonchalantly remarked. I almost choked. *I’m glad I wasn’t taking a sip.*

“It suits you perfectly. Don’t you think, doctor? For something like this, usually a couple goes together, and the girl picks out what she wants. Everyone has their preferences, and if you don’t really know that person, it’s hard for men to choose.”

*Um, please spare me.*

Dr. Daniel was grinning as he looked over at me, and I felt myself getting

embarrassed. I just couldn't get used to it. *Japanese people have always been reserved.*

I tried to hide my embarrassment by looking at other ribbons. The doctor then suddenly picked one out. It was a similar size to the ribbon I was wearing. It was a pale lavender color with a light polish...it reminded me of Lady Adelaide. *Oh, is he possibly...*

I wrote in Dr. Daniel's palm, and he seemed happy I agreed with his choice.

"She used to wear them all the time," he said. "I haven't seen her wear one for a while, though."

We both smiled and nodded at each other.

We left Mrs. Anna's store with my repaired lantern and two ribbons. *I'm excited for the Festival of Eve.*

## Chapter 3: Miselle's Festival of Eve

THE preparations for the Festival of Eve began about half a month beforehand. Decorations for the festival were made from paper, slender wooden planks, and straw. They're hung outside of people's homes until the day of the festival when they are burned on the bonfire. By doing so, everyone can send their feelings of gratitude and affection to the Summer Eve Spirit.

It reminded me of how we burn decorations on New Year's in Japan or how we eat grilled foods over fires during the first month of the year.

The decorations that we made at the women's meetings were like Western Christmas ornaments. They were simple yet charming. Seeing all the decorations in the shape of stars and flowers hanging in people's doorways reminded me of lanterns or the decorations you'd see on *tanabata*, a Japanese holiday in July.

That night, I was sitting on the veranda, which was decorated with the Festival of Eve decorations, as I waited for Buddy, who had gone out to play in the yard.

Although the summers here were comfortable for me, the sun was quite strong during the daytime, and the temperatures were quite high. So, Buddy would play outside in the early morning and in the evening when it was cooler. This was often the time when he would bring Fairy Lights from the forest with him. It had become a bit of a routine for them to fly around and play with us whenever I brushed Buddy's fur after he'd return late in the evening. But it seemed like he hadn't played enough today, because Buddy went back out right after dinner.

Lady Adelaide said that Buddy could see well in the dark and that I didn't have to wait as he would come back on his own. I couldn't help but worry, though.

Plus, I had a secret agenda to enjoy a quiet drink by myself as I waited.

I was seen as a person who couldn't handle her alcohol, so even outside of

the house, and even in the house, I was banned from drinking alcohol. I didn't remember getting *that* drunk, but the people around me—namely when Mark was there—fussed so much, I put up with just having juice.

Even then, sometimes I just wanted to enjoy my drink. *After all, I am twenty-eight. Well, in this world, I'm twenty-six, but I'm still an adult, no matter how you slice it.*

Dinner had been sauteed pork with a garlic and red pepper tomato sauce. A type of Basque meal. The sweetness from the paprika and onion was delicious, and it was a flavor I wanted to pair with alcohol. Mark wasn't here tonight, so if I wanted to drink with my meal, I could, but I thought I was admirable for resisting.

It was now late at night, and Lady Adelaide had already retired to bed. I had a hot cup of tea in my hand. Mixed in with the usual scent of the tea was a tiny bit of brandy.

I really wanted to have a crisp sip of white wine or a glug of liqueur, but I settled with this. If I was *that* weak to this world's alcohol, I didn't want to be found passed out from it. *This amount is fine. It's not a lot, and the heat would've burned off most of the alcohol anyway. I'm being mature about this, all right.*

I was seated on the rocking chair on the veranda as I looked up at the vast starry sky above the woods. I raised my glass to toast the sky. As there were no streetlights, even I was able to see the stars across the sky with my bad eyesight. Naturally, it was a little blurry, but I was glad I was able to see more than just the brightest stars in the sky.

I had gotten used to not being able to see that well, and it wasn't that much of a hindrance. *However, on nights like this, I wish I had my glasses. Maybe then I'd feel like I'm falling into the starry sky.*

I blew the steam off the surface of my cup as if dispersing the alcohol with it, and took a sip.

A gentle warmth spread through my chest... *Hehe, this is kind of fun.*

There were stars in the sky and paper stars hanging up on the veranda. I

mindlessly gazed at The Festival of Eve decorations swaying gently in the cool night breeze.

Then, Buddy came running out of the forest, panting. He seemed exhausted from his fun little jaunt through the woods. As he bounced along, almost as if he was dancing, I noticed there were Fairy Lights flying around near him. *They really get along well. Welcome back.*

He drank all the water I had prepared for him near the veranda and then ran over to me, still panting with his tail wagging. *He's so cute.* I put my cup on the table and lightly wiped Buddy's paws before taking all the sticks and leaves out of his fur. I then brushed his coat. The fairies, noticing that Buddy, who was now lying flat-out on his stomach, wouldn't want to play right now, began to look at the decorations hanging up on the veranda.

One by one, they would cling to the decoration, sit on it, and use it like a swing.

They didn't have a voice like me, but I was able to understand what they were thinking. They seemed to be having fun. I could tell they were giggling as they played. *Wait, are these decorations especially for them? So they can come and play with them in the night when no one is looking?*

I couldn't say they weren't made with that in mind. It would be so heartwarming if that were the case.

Even though it was late, they were playing quite energetically. Appearance-wise, they looked like children, but I wondered if they were older than that. *I wonder if they even have ages—Ah, wait, don't shake it so much! It'll fall!*

I jumped up and put both of my hands on the decoration, which was being swung in all directions by the fairies. As I tried to stop it, all the fairies assembled around my hands.

*"Hey, the Festival of Eve is soon. Have you ever been? It's my first time going. I heard it's beautiful, but I wonder what it's like."*

I silently spoke to the fairies. They all tilted their heads in confusion, then chatted among themselves before finally going back to the decoration. They grabbed it, pointed at it, and shook it as they looked over at me.

*“Yeah, that decoration is for the Festival of Eve. On the day of the festival, they burn them as an offering to the Spirit that was once in this country.”*

They clasped their hands together as they nodded. *I guess they understood what I meant.* They then flew around me and Buddy, sparkling brightly, before heading back to the forest. Leaving behind an exhausted, groomed, and satisfied Buddy and my very cold cup of tea... There was still around half of it left, and I had been yawning for a while now. *Ah, I’m beat.*

*What a shame. I’ll have tea with brandy another time.*

Unable to fight off the fatigue, I went back inside with Buddy. As soon as I got back to my room, I dove right onto my bed. I pulled Buddy close to me in place of my blanket and fell into a deep sleep.



**EVER** since I started working at the clinic, I no longer had home visits, and instead, the doctor and Mark would look at my leg injury—which had yet to heal—when I was there to help.

It hurt if I put any force on it, so running and just standing on my left leg wasn’t really an option. When I couldn’t walk well in the beginning, I put a lot of the burden on my right leg, which hurt it as well, so I tried to even the burden onto both legs when I walked now. By doing so, it made me a lot slower.

My arm and shoulder had fully recovered, so they worked as normal. Since it was the most heavily damaged, my leg was taking the longest to heal—or rather, it seemed to have stopped healing altogether. It had the doctor confused every time he looked at it.

That said, it was only my left leg. I was slow, but I could still walk. Compared to when I was bedridden, the difference was like night and day. The only annoying thing was the stairs. I was unable to go up and down them smoothly, nor could I skip steps. Whenever I go up to the second floor at the clinic it makes Mark worry, so I make a point of holding onto the handrail.

Lady Adelaide fussed after me just as much; they were both prone to worrying. It’s not that I didn’t like others caring about me. It’s just that I rarely looked after myself that much, and I felt that they were looking after me *too*

much, so I couldn't relax.

We had gotten used to communicating via touching our foreheads together. However, we had yet to reveal it to the rest of the villagers, so the only people I spoke with were Lady Adelaide, Mark, Dr. Daniel, and Buddy. As a result, I didn't do it often.

With Lady Adelaide, I'd do it when saying good morning and good night, or when we had to discuss a more intricate recipe. There was a lot we could get across to one another without talking, so we used it as a kind of skinship. Even though she was used to being kissed on the cheek, it was cute that Lady Adelaide still blushed a little when we touched our foreheads together.

I did it with Dr. Daniel even less. I guess I only used it when saying goodbye when leaving the clinic. It was a little embarrassing, but I guess the doctor was more worried about what Lady Adelaide would think. I thought he was being cute about it, but it seems he wasn't just being conscious of Lady Adelaide but also Mark looming behind me.

"I get that it can't be avoided sometimes," Mark said. "It's not like I don't understand, either." I was patted on the head as if to say, "This is me trying my best to hold back."

As for Mark, well. Yeah. I did it the most with him. He seemed to have a little bit of a scheme going on, since recently Buddy rarely came to pick me up from the clinic. Instead, Mark often walked me home.

Lady Adelaide's estate was the only one in the forest, and I rarely bumped into anyone on the way. As there was no one around, we would often stop to put our foreheads together, or rather, Mark would push his forehead against mine, meaning that I would often get home late. Lady Adelaide had gotten used to it and was no longer worried when I got home late. She patiently waited for me instead. It was kind of embarrassing, yeah.

We didn't talk about much. But Mark listened to even the most mundane things like they were interesting, and I found myself unable to say no.

If we were careless about it and got caught doing it, people would probably think we were just a young couple in love, which was a scary thought. The people in the village always looked at us with warm expressions as it was.

Mark was popular with the young women of Miselle, so I was prepared for someone to say something, but that never happened. A bit of an anti-climactic outcome, I'd say. I had gotten excited, preparing for how I would respond if someone said, "I'm way better than you! I'm young and cute!" to me. But it never happened. *What a letdown.* Two women did once say:

"Yeah. Well, just from looking at Mark, I can tell it's pointless."

"Yeah, it's pretty reckless to try to worm your way in there."

*Yeah. I know that he's quite sweet and openly loving, so no comment.* I wondered what had happened to that dry personality of his from when we first met.

Speaking of sweet, Mark brought me back some well-known high-class sweets as a gift from his time in the capital. They were buttery and sweeter than the sweets I make, and they were decorated with such lavish icing. *These are made to be souvenirs.* Although they were baked sweets, one was enough—it was like *yokan*, a Japanese dessert made from red bean paste and agar-agar.

Mark suggested I take some to a women's meeting, so I did. They cheered with joy, they were so happy with them. That day we had something of a party, and Mark's favor seemed to have risen a lot among the women, but...was he aiming for that?

The day went by as normal until around afternoon, when Lord Walter and Lady Rachel visited Miselle.

Compared to all the years of Lord Walter not visiting at all, this was quite close to his last visit, so Lady Adelaide was delighted. *And Lady Rachel is as beautiful as ever!* She was wearing an overcoat made from a thin lace as a summer outfit. It looked so refreshing, and she gave off a more mature aura. It suited her wonderfully.

"Hello. It is lovely to see you again!" Lady Rachel greeted us.

"Welcome. You must be exhausted, so please rest a little. Walter, you have to go back today, right?" Lady Adelaide asked.

"That's right. In the evening," Lord Walter responded.

"Will you be staying for dinner?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, not. I would love to another time."

*He's busy. But it was good that he had managed to come here even though he was busy. I wonder if he's resting properly back in the Royal Capital.* They didn't seem to have any labor laws in this world, so I worried a little about a workaholic like Walter. But if I were to ask about it, he would just respond "It's fine." I hoped he was at least able to breathe for a moment when he came to Miselle.

When asking them about their visit, I learned Lady Rachel would be staying with us, and Lord Walter would return to the Royal Capital. Then he would come back here next week, and the two would return together. *Oh, I see.* I glanced over at Lady Rachel and nodded with a giggle. Lady Rachel's pale white skin turned a bright red.

"I-It's not like that. I'd be happy if it were, but that's not the case," Lady Rachel objected in a quiet voice with teary eyes. But that wasn't enough to convince me and Marie-Louise as we shared a grin over it.

"My father and older brother said that if I am to regularly travel here, I need an appointed bodyguard," Lady Rachel explained. "I said that Miselle wasn't that dangerous, and having Roy and Marie-Louise would be enough. It would be an issue having that much of an escort with me. However, my father would not give in and demanded I have an additional escort during the journey..."

*Well, you are the daughter of a high-ranking noble family, after all.* I heard this in passing from Marie-Louise earlier, but it seemed the Lindgren family consisted mostly of men, with Lady Rachel being the sole, long-awaited daughter. Her family, especially her father and her older brother, seemed to fawn over her a lot.

*"But, surely, wouldn't Hugh be the ideal escort? He has an ample amount of magic power, and he works for your family, right?"* I asked.

Lady Rachel put her hands on her cheeks as her eyes looked about wildly. "U-Um, when Lord Walter heard about it, he signed up to be my escort..."

"*Oh. He himself did? Ohhh. Ah, sorry. I'm grinning.*"

Lady Rachel, who was at the point of tears, was adorable, but I did feel a little bad for her. I asked how she was feeling and if her motion sickness was all right this time around.

Ever since getting out of the carriage, she had been talking energetically, and judging from her complexion, she was doing fine. But she was a noblewoman. Unlike me, she was probably able to control everything, even the color of her face. *I wish she wouldn't be so reserved, though.*

Lady Rachel seemed relieved that the topic of the conversation had changed and responded with a smile. "Um, I was well looked after, and I was able to take several breaks. Also, strangely enough, I feel a lot better when I'm with Lord Walter..."

*Can I squeeze her and rub her cheeks? I tried to change the subject, but we went right back to it. She's so adorable.*

I could see from her repeatedly lacing her fingers and unlacing them in front of her chest that she was troubled but happy about the whole thing.

*Hey, how come you haven't realized her feelings yet? Are you possibly doing it on purpose... There's no way, right, Lord Walter?*

*I guess, since he's divorced, there's probably a lot going on, and he might have shut the idea of any romantic relations out of his heart. But even so, I couldn't help but think he was just that oblivious to it.*





Lady Rachel, Marie-Louise, and I were chatting about stuff like that when Lord Walter called for me. He seemed to have finished his chat with Lady Adelaide.

“Apologies for how sudden this is, Margaret,” he said. “I have a message from the Royal Palace. From Hugh, too.”

*Ah, come to mention it, we’ve been standing around since Lady Rachel arrived. I apologize for holding you ladies up. Please rest a little.*

I nodded in response to Lord Walter and excused myself from Lady Rachel and Marie-Louise as I headed to the veranda with Lord Walter.

The veranda was an excellent place to enjoy the breeze and it was one of Buddy’s favorite spots. He was always in his usual spot in front of the hearth, or during the summer, he would be either out on the veranda or lying under the shade of a tree.

I was relieved to be in Miselle where we could enjoy the summer even without air conditioning.

Summers in Tokyo were so humid, and the nights were so stifling. People, dogs, and cats all suffer from it. I often saw people taking their dogs for walks after the sun had set. Even when I headed home late from work, the asphalt would still be holding the heat from the day, making it dangerous for animals and children.

On the way to the veranda, I stopped by the kitchen to prepare two glasses of fruit-infused water that I chilled with the ice from our food delivery that morning. Lord Walter was playing with the Festival of Eve decorations that were hanging from the roof beam while he waited.

*“Do you want to take some with you? I’m sure they have wonderful decorations at your townhouse in the Royal Capital, but since it is a festival, it’s surely okay to have a lot of them.”*

“We should have enough, but...I guess I’ll hang some up at my workplace, too,” Lord Walter responded, picking one he liked. It was a star-shaped decoration made by Lady Adelaide. He laid it on one side of the table, sat down on the bench, and started talking. “Have you heard about the Festival of Eve?” he asked.

*“Yeah, the gist of it, anyway. If only you and Lady Rachel had come a little bit later. We could’ve enjoyed the festival together.”*

“It’s a shame, but I work every day. We’ll have visitors from other countries coming to see the Festival of Eve, so I’ll be busy hosting and coordinating everything for them. On the day of the festival, I’ll be going between both the Temple and the Royal Palace.”

He responded like it was nothing. *I get it.*

I’ve had to work during festivals and holidays, too. Retail is especially busy when it’s a holiday. It was hard for me to get tickets to visit home around then, so I often worked those days, saving my vacation days for *Obon*, New Year’s, and the consecutive holidays in spring and fall. It was easier to get flights or tickets for the *Shinkansen* on weekdays, too.

I took a sip of the fruit-infused water while I reminisced. It felt cold as it passed down my throat. I took a breath, and Lord Walter moved on to the main subject. Ah, I should mention that I expected the conversation would be complicated, so I prepared a pen and paper rather than just tracing on his palm.

“First, the message from Hugh,” he began. “Your magical writing device is being repaired, and it’ll take a little longer. There’s nothing wrong with it. They’re just waiting on some materials to be delivered.”

The magical writing device was being made by a team of people, and they were apparently led by a woman. *Aah, that explains the ornamental design on the board and the feather pen. Makes sense now.*

I had heard the high-level magic users were mostly noblemen, but there were women at the Magic Academy, too. No doubt they were a minority like Hugh. I asked Lord Walter to confirm my suspicions, and he nodded in response.

“In terms of magic power, she’s probably on the same level as the headmaster of the academy and Hugh,” he said. “If you ever come to the Royal Capital, she’ll probably want to meet you. It seems she wanted to visit Miselle, but with her position, it’s difficult for her to leave the Royal Capital.”

It seemed she was a high-ranking noble, and due to issues with security, it was difficult for her to move around freely. Lady Rachel was here in Miselle

even though she was the daughter of a marquis. Even so, it was more difficult for the woman from the Magic Academy to leave... *Yeah, I'll just pretend I didn't hear that part.*

The magical writing device was handy, but it wasn't like I couldn't go about my daily life without it. I was just happy they made it for me. Plus, I was able to talk with Lady Adelaide by putting our foreheads together, which, come to think of it, I had yet to tell Lord Walter about.

I had decided I would tell Hugh and Lord Walter about it. However, the doctor and the others suggested it would be better to tell them directly, rather than putting it in a letter that anyone could read.

This country's postal service wasn't bad by any means, but it also wasn't very secure. Often, items would get lost or sent to the wrong address, and sometimes, it would take longer than a month for items to arrive.

So, it seemed it was common knowledge to tell people in person if it was important or to entrust it to someone trustworthy. Recently, the doctor and Mark took a break from going to the Royal Capital with the Festival of Eve being so close.

They told me to only inform the people who were present when Hugh used Investigative Magic on me, so that meant I couldn't mention it to Rachel. I was a little shocked that I had to be *that* careful about it, but there was still a lot I couldn't really judge with my limited knowledge of this world, so I just nodded without objection.

*I wonder if I'll have time to talk to Lord Walter about it before he leaves tonight. I guess it'll be hard. Roy is seeing to the horses, and he keeps coming and going from the garden. Lady Rachel is in the living room with the windows and doors open... I'll just have to wait for my chance.*

Lord Walter carried on telling me about the condition of the magical device. After that, he moved on to the message from the Royal Palace, or rather, their invitation asking if I could visit when I was feeling better.

*"I still don't want to leave Miselle, and if my foot doesn't improve, I can't see Dr. Daniel giving me permission to leave."*

Lord Walter agreed in response. “Yeah, I thought so. Ever since Hugh met you and the Fairy Lights, he’s been able to enter the Royal Forest where the Spirit is. Things don’t seem to be progressing easily, but they have started talking a lot more. The Spirit even asked for me.”

“Huh? The Spirit? You met it?”

“I was just told by Hugh that the Spirit wanted to meet me. The Spirit hasn’t appeared since, so I haven’t been able to see it yet. We don’t know what it wants, but the others seem to think it wants to see you more than me.”

*“That’s why they asked me to come to the Royal Capital again—I see now. I thought it was a little weird that they were asking again so soon, but it was because of that. However, I think they’re wrong. Just a hunch, though.”*

“They’re wrong?”

“Yeah. Um, I feel like it’ll be a while before I meet the Spirit. Plus, if the Spirit needed to meet the Caller earlier, why did they summon me here to Miselle, which is far away from where they are, rather than closer to them in the Royal Capital?”

Lord Walter carefully followed the words as I wrote them before he replied. I felt like he was really taking my thoughts and opinions to heart when he did that.

“That’s true...” he said. “But although there is a distance between here and the Royal Capital, they *are* in the same country, so it’s not that far. Maybe their precision wasn’t that great since they were summoning you from a different world far away?”

I guess there would be a margin of error. That could be the case, but Spirits have the power to destroy whole countries if they so wish. Of course, this Spirit had just appeared, so maybe they were a little off. But they do have immense power, so surely, if they needed me closer, they would have been able to do that on their own.

*“I think I appeared here in Miselle, and not next to the Spirit, because I’m needed here. That, or the Spirit wished for me to be here.”*

I couldn’t really prove it, but I just had a feeling that was the case.

Lord Walter rubbed his chin as he nodded. "If that's what you think, Margaret, then there's no reason for me to deny it. If I do get to meet with the Spirit, I'll confirm it with them."

I thought this before, but Lord Walter was a man of status and incredible ability, yet he always lent an ear to people and wasn't quick to deny their opinions.

I bowed my head in appreciation, showing my respect. The Spirit no doubt just wanted to see what Lord Walter was like. He was like an older brother to me, after all. I kept that part to myself, though.

*"Oh, that reminds me. It doesn't matter when, but if I do go to the Royal Capital, there's a bakery I'd like to visit. Would I be able to go there?"*

Lord Walter laughed, looking surprised in response to my request. "I should have expected as much. I guess *that's* more important to you."

*"Hear me out. Dr. Daniel brought me some chocolate as a souvenir from the Royal Capital. Well, it wasn't chocolate, but chocolate chips."*

I hadn't seen any cocoa or chocolate since coming to this world, so I just assumed that they didn't exist here. Then I learned that this country can't harvest cocoa, but they have been able to import it from different countries.

One of the doctor's patients in the Royal Capital is the owner of a long-established bakery. He hasn't been able to import a lot of chocolate just yet, but he has been using the high-quality imports and making new test products. They were quite rare, so he shared some with the doctor, who shared it with me.

I was surprised, but I was happier than anything else. I love chocolate. I had given up thinking there was nothing I could do if it didn't exist here, but I was absolutely delighted to have chocolate again.

As a result, the doctor jokingly asked if I wanted my pay for the next month to just be goods from that bakery. I honestly would have preferred that.

I used those chocolate chips to make chocolate chip scones. Once it cools down here, I want to make chocolate chip cookies...!

The bread he brought as a souvenir was delicious, too. I wondered if the flour tasted different. There were a lot of items similar to the mini bread rolls and butter rolls I often make, and even they were delicious.

The bread from that store seemed closer to French bread, which added more water to the mixture. The slight sour scent of the sourdough starter was great... The sweet bread was delicious too.

Although it was a job for them, the fact that they loved to bake bread really came through their products. *It's also wonderful that they continue to try new things.* It's only natural that I wanted to go visit the store in person.

I explained all of this to Lord Walter. "I thought you'd be more interested in going to the jewelers," he responded.

*"Oh, I do apologize for being such a glutton. I do like pretty things, but I'm good for now. I'd like to look at books and fabrics, though."*

As I wrote that, Lord Walter's eyes went to my hair ornament and stayed there. *I wonder why.* He looked like he wanted to say something, but this ornament was my little secret for right now. He chuckled before changing the subject.

"Speaking of books, that reminds me. You said you wanted to look at children's books, right?"

Lord Walter took several books from his bag and spread them out on the table. I had spoken to him before about wanting to have some picture books at the clinic when I helped look after the children. He had remembered that conversation.

Lord Walter told me that they were books he had received as a child. I picked them up.

*"Oh, okay. I can see that."*

"I purposefully looked for books with a lot of illustrations, but this is all I could find," he said.

They weren't my idea of "picture books."

I flipped through a rather thick book—it was all words. The writing was quite

big, and there were about ten pages worth of illustrations. I wonder if that's why it was considered a children's book.

The contents covered this country's history and the Spirits, and the wording was easy enough. It felt more like a textbook. I had an idea of what to expect from Mark, and it was pretty much as he had said.

The gold, foil-stamped leather cover made it seem more high quality. It made me realize that books were mostly aimed at adults here.

I continued looking at the book I had in my hands as Lord Walter spoke.

"Magical device development has come a long way lately, and we've been able to print and design paper," he said. "Soon, we may be able to make books like what you have in your world. But technicolor might still be a bit too difficult," Lord Walter teased.

*Huh, so he can joke around, too. I wonder what it is. He feels like he's more expressive than he was before. I wonder if I've just gotten used to him, or was he always like this? It feels so natural.*

He looked a little puzzled as I focused on him. I put the book down and shook my head. "It's nothing." It seemed my attempt at fooling him failed, as he ended up patting me on the head.

*See, look. Even you've noticed that you're way more relaxed.*

If I looked at him too long, his usual frown might come back, so I moved my gaze over to Buddy's wagging tail.

Lord Walter's eyes, which resembled Lady Adelaide's in more than just their color, looked happy.

Once I finished talking with Lord Walter, I headed into the living room. Marie-Louise was spreading fabrics out on the top of the table.

"Please choose one of your liking, Lady Margaret," she suggested.

It seemed they had been brought as souvenirs. The skillfully laid out fabrics were gentle yet beautiful colors—they all seemed to fit Lady Adelaide's taste.

There were relaxed floral patterns, elaborate embroidery, and a variety of pale blues. *Oh, is this double gauze?* There were light beige fabrics that were

soft to the touch. *Oh, there's some here, too.*

"Oh, that fabric....."

Lady Adelaide's eyes turned towards the fabric I was holding. I handed it over to her, and she stroked the fabric as if to confirm something. Her eyes softened.

Lady Rachel, who had been watching over us, began to explain. "I felt that we were a little intrusive last time, so I went to Mrs. Green's store with Lord Walter."

"Oh, you went out of your way just to do that?" Lady Adelaide asked.

It seemed that it was a store that Lady Adelaide used to frequent when she lived in the Royal Capital. That explains why there were a variety of fabrics that suited Lady Adelaide's tastes. Her choosing that store was less just being polite and more Lady Rachel being extra considerate. Lady Adelaide seemed pleased to hear that the store owner was doing well.

*So, Lady Rachel and Lord Walter went shopping together in the Royal Capital, eh? Things seem to be progressing quite well between them.* I glanced over at Marie-Louise and she returned a small nod. *Hehe.*

"My, that takes me back. They still have this fabric. I used to use this to make pajamas," Lady Adelaide spoke as she spread the fabric out to have a closer look.

*Aah, the gauze fabric is perfect for pajamas and duvets.* It would be cool in summer, and warm in winter. It was easy on the skin. I liked it too.

"I remember," Lord Walter said.

"Really, Walter?"

"Really. I remember it well."

Lady Adelaide was shocked he could remember as he would have been so small, but Lord Walter reassured her he did. Lady Rachel seemed dazzled by the two of them.

Marie-Louise showed me the other fabrics she recommended. In the end, I decided to take a light green piece of fabric, recommended by Lady Rachel, and a relaxed indigo-blue piece of fabric with small white flowers.

*This indigo fabric...reminds me of the fabric used to make yukata. I guess I could use it to make a yukata. I had made one in my home economics class back in high school. I remember helping a classmate who wasn't very good at sewing. Well, when I say helped, I ended up doing all of it, so that was probably why I could remember it so well. The measurements for a yukata are different, so I'll have to make a whole new stencil, but the work is around the same for both Western clothes and yukata.*

*The people of this world weren't familiar with *yukata* or *kimono*, so it wouldn't be a big deal if I made it wrong. I could use it as a gown. Yeah, I'll do that.*

*That evening, I saw Lord Walter off as he returned to the Royal Capital, then I called for Dr. Daniel and Mark, and we had dinner together. There's something extra rewarding about cooking for a lot of people. I like eating with a large group on occasion.*



**THE** next day, I was woken up by birds as usual. After breakfast, I invited Lady Rachel to come blueberry picking, as the fields were jam-packed with ripe blueberries. Lady Rachel seemed overjoyed, as if she had been waiting for me to ask.

She was a lot more accustomed to it than before, but her expression clouded when she investigated my basket. "I can't keep up with you, Margaret..."

"Lady Rachel, I don't think this is something you should compare," Marie-Louise said.

"That may be right, but I feel like I'm doing a lot better than before," Lady Rachel said proudly, changing her tone.

*"Yeah, that's true. As for me, well, I went strawberry and blueberry picking a lot back in my world. Even then, people were shocked at how quickly I could pick them."*

Even the blueberry farmer offered me a job during harvest season. *It's just fun for me.*

"So, Margaret. What will we be making with these today?" Lady Rachel

looked at me with wide, expectant eyes. She seemed to really enjoy making sweets with me last time.

*"That's right, I'd like to make something like a cake or a tart like before, but since we have so much, I'm thinking about making a jam."*

As I told her that, her eyes sparkled as if remembering something. She probably anticipated a freshly made treat or a taste test of something. *She's so cute, even this early in the morning.*

We returned to the kitchen. First on the agenda was removing the stray twigs from the blueberries. I spread out all the blueberries we had gathered on a large table, and we went through them one by one. It felt like the kind of work I'd do at the women's association. It also kind of felt like we were preparing for something at a cultural festival we often had at school.

It felt the same when I was removing the roots of bean sprouts; doing it alone felt like it was going to take forever, but doing it with someone else made it feel like I was making progress. *It's an odd feeling.*

Once we had finished removing the stems, we rinsed the blueberries thoroughly. We then dried and measured them.

The blueberries were full of flavor. They were delicious enough just to eat as-is, so when making the jam, it would be fine to reduce the sugar amount. However, we often ate blueberry jam with yogurt, so I decided to keep the sugar content at around half of the amount of fruit. The yogurt in this world was more on the sour side.

When making jam, I always put sugar in first. But there were methods where you could first boil the fruit without adding any sugar, and once you had got a certain amount of water content out, you could then add the sugar.

If we were to strictly compare, the color when it's prepared is different depending on how it's boiled, but that doesn't really matter much when you're just making it to use at home. It's best to do what you prefer, or what is easier for you. Of course, it's not a bad thing to be specific with the preparation.

Making jam is fun, and it's such a great feeling when the finished product is delicious. That's why I think it's best to just focus on making it rather than

worrying about *how* to make it.

If it isn't boiling enough, turn up the heat. If you boil it too much and mess it up, then take that experience with you next time. It's all right not to be perfect, and failures make for good conversation. My grandmother taught me that. It's the best way to enjoy cooking.

Blueberries are easier since, unlike strawberries, you don't have to set aside time to wait for the water to come out after adding sugar. Once we finished weighing it, we put the fruit and the sugar into the usual copper pan and lightly stirred it while applying heat.

Lady Rachel, Marie-Louise, and I took turns standing in front of the pan and removing the scum that rose to the surface as it boiled. Blueberries boiled a lot quicker than strawberries or apricots. When they cool, they harden up, so it's important to not boil them too much. Depending on the amount, it can take less than fifteen minutes for it to be ready.

*It is summer, though. It's tough being in front of the fire.* We boiled the blueberries as we swapped places frequently.

When making jam, the jam can jump out of the pan, so it is imperative to wear an apron. Lady Rachel had brought her own apron to use. It was frilly and reminiscent of a newlywed... When I told her that, she went bright red and panicked. I ended up grinning again.

"I wanted the same one that Marie-Louise is wearing, but I got told I couldn't," she pouted.

"Naturally."

*Yeah, I don't think there are many daughters of a marquis wearing aprons made for maids.* Marie-Louise shook her head at Lady Rachel, who was sulking. *They're as close as ever.*

As I didn't cut back on the sugar this time, I added the tiniest bit of lemon juice. *I want to add a little bit of sourness.*

Speaking of which, I vaguely remembered that there were other ways to make the color more vibrant and for it to harden quicker other than lemon juice... Something about if the sugar content is low, it means the pectin won't

work as well so you put lemon juice in. Well, my jam was always filled with sugar, so it rarely ever didn't harden.

Speaking of pectin, when using frozen blueberries, it's best to cook them while they're frozen. If they're defrosted by either room-temperature air or running water, the pectin will break down, and the berries won't harden. When making cakes, I put frozen blueberries in and then covered them in flour. The water comes out when they defrost, too.

As she prepared the glass jars with Lady Adelaide, Lady Rachel reminisced on the last time we had all made sweets together. It seemed they were a hit with her family.

"Everyone said the apricot jam and the blueberry cake were delicious!" she exclaimed. "Even my older brother, who doesn't really care for sweets, ate all the cake in seconds! He also really liked the jam. My father still doesn't believe I made it."

"He probably can't imagine a noble lady such as yourself being in a kitchen," Marie-Louise said.

*Ah, noble ladies don't cook much, do they? She cooks here, though. I wonder if that's all right? Although a bit late, I started to panic. Are we breaking a noble faux pas?*

"It's fine, Lady Margaret. Lady Rachel was looking forward to this. Please do not worry," Marie-Louise informed me. Then she lowered her voice as she continued, "If anything, it also creates an opportunity for Lady Adelaide and her to talk."

*That's a relief.*

I really had no clue about the difference in common knowledge between nobles and commoners and any of the unspoken rules. It would spell trouble if I were to do something wrong, so I was told that if anything bothered me, to mention it or ask without hesitation.

I looked at Lady Rachel, who was continuously stirring the jam in the pot, keeping her eyes fixated on it. I wanted to give her a voiceless cheer. *Do your best!*

*Such a wonderful young lady has her eyes on Lord Walter, yet he doesn't realize...*

"Um, is it almost ready?" she asked.

It seemed the jam had finished while we were having fun chatting.

I turned the heat down, scooped out a little, and dropped it into a bowl with cold water in it. It gently swayed to the bottom, then instantly solidified with a satisfying *plump*. It had been boiled perfectly.

*"All right, it's done!"*

The blueberry jam looked almost black. I put the jars upside down. As they cooled, I put the remaining jam in a small bowl. I felt a passionate gaze on me... Lady Rachel. *Ah yes, the taste test was a special privilege left to the one who did it.* I giggled. This time, we ate blueberry jam with cream cheese together with everyone.



**WE** stood side-by-side cooking in the kitchen together and ate with Dr. Daniel and Mark at dinner. While I was helping at the clinic, Lady Rachel would stay at home and do some needlework with Lady Adelaide. Lady Rachel had brought her own needlework kit with her. A noble woman's hobby: embroidery.

It was a moving sight, seeing the very familiar embroidery, which I had often read about in novels, being done in real life. Well, Lady Adelaide embroidered quite often. Not only embroidery—she could do pretty much anything. And she was good at it. In fact, she was in a whole different league.

The view when I returned from the clinic was wonderful.

Sitting on the sofa in the living room, enjoying a lively conversation, were two women sewing and embroidering a dress. The curtains swayed with the wind, and there was a dog lying down near their feet. They looked up at me, made eye contact, and smiled softly; it was like a scene out of a movie, or rather, a painting.

The calming atmosphere was so relaxing, I almost hesitated to go in. They saw me immediately, though.

Although Lady Rachel was higher in standing, she seemed nervous at first being left alone with “Lord Walter’s mother” Lady Adelaide. *You must be careful around the mother of the person you like.* She wanted to show Lady Adelaide her strong points. *But Lady Rachel, you’re already perfect.*

*Even if you’re unable to get any eggs from the chicken hut and keep on giving up, that isn’t a bad thing. If anything, it’s even cuter, which is a plus. It is a little surprising when the chickens suddenly spread their wings and flap them. They block you, too. They don’t do it on purpose...I think.*

She had lost the battle against the chickens again today, and she seemed regretful. I had plucked one of the stray chicken feathers from her hair, and she gave me a solemn thank you.

“Thank...you... I couldn’t get any today. B-But, I’ll definitely get it next time!”

“I’ve never heard of a noblewoman being good at gathering eggs. Don’t worry so much...”

“What do you mean, Marie-Louise? I should be able to do at least this much!”

*Lord Walter can’t gather them either, you know?* However, for him, it was more an issue with his height. The chickens were small, so they lived in a small hut. We even had some perches for them.

When I told Lady Rachel about the time Lord Walter couldn’t really move in the chicken hut as it was so small, she looked delighted, realizing she had come across an unknown side of him.

“*You both have something in common. Birds of a feather flock together.*” As I wrote that on her palm, it looked like steam was coming out of her head. “*Do you need some water?*”

“Y-You seem quite close to someone, too,” she sputtered. “That hair ornament is very beautiful.”

*Oops. Well, I had that one coming.*

*I would like to tell you the name of the jewelers, but unfortunately, I don’t know it.* There was no engraving of the store name anywhere, nor was anything written on the box. I hadn’t heard from Mark about where he had bought it,

either. Even if I asked, I wouldn't know *which* store it was.

"It has to be *that* store," Lady Rachel said rather confidently. "There's no mistaking that jewel cut."

While I felt it was quite unique, just how high-end was it that Lady Rachel could work out the brand from a single glance? *Oh, that Mark. How could he say he'd buy me another one if I lost it?*

Lady Rachel then mumbled, "I would love to have the same, one day..." as she looked off into the distance.

*Oh, um, okay. I'll do my best not to lose it. In fact, I might just not wear it and keep it safe inside my dresser. Though, I probably can't do that.*

As a noble, Lady Rachel had perfect manners, social abilities, and probably was excellent at diplomacy, however she could use none of those perfect skills when it came to Lord Walter.

There was a little bit of an age gap, but they weren't far apart enough for it to be weird. They'd make a good match. However, just like my older brother, I felt that Lord Walter would find it counterproductive if outsiders started meddling in his affairs. ...*So, I'll support you. From my heart.*



**DURING** this visit, it seemed Lady Rachel had become accustomed to Lady Adelaide's relaxed nature, and she seemed a little less tense. When it came time for Lord Walter to pick her up the weekend after, they were already getting on as friends.

*Goodbyes are always painful.* Lady Rachel kept saying how much she wanted to be able to attend the Festival of Eve in Miselle.

"You have work to do in the Capital, right?" Lady Adelaide asked.

Lady Rachel, like Lord Walter, had a role to play as a noble in the Festival of Eve.

"Yes. Every year, I must help out at the Temple... It's been planned for about half a year now, so I can't really say no. It's a shame," she pouted.

"Our bonfire, well, our everything, is tiny compared to the Royal Capital's. But

I must say, compared to the grand Temple Festival of Eve, I feel like ours is a lot more personable,” Lady Adelaide explained the differences, to which Lady Rachel promised that she would spend the festival here in Miselle next time.

Lord Walter stood afar, watching the two enjoy their casual conversation. “...I expected nothing less.”

Although it seemed he was in awe of her social skills as a young noble lady, that wasn’t the case at all.

*Ah, look, the blueberry jam.* Lady Rachel made it, packaged it, and even put a cute label on, saying she was hoping to give some to Lord Walter, too.

She had gotten excited, wondering if he would like it, if he’d try it—very much like a girl about to give a gift to the boy she liked. *Well, that may be the case here.*

So, I had hoped that he would graciously accept it with some nice complimentary words. *Wait, is he talking about food processing? Wait, Lady Rachel, are you all right with that? I guess she’s just happy with being able to talk to him. Ah, it’s so sweet, I’m on the verge of tears.*

This prime minister’s assistant, who was also a count, was very skillful at conversation after having spent time in the Royal Capital dealing with sly foxes. However, when it came to love, he seemed to wear his special guard against it with pride.

*I wonder if I’m just simple as they always read me like a book.* I felt a little down realizing that.

Watching the two have the most ordinary conversation, I felt a little apologetic and found myself apologizing to Marie-Louise for Lord Walter’s lack of tact.

“The same goes for our young lady...”

We looked at each other with wry smiles.

*Well, Lady Rachel. Do your best. You’re both two birds of a feather, after all.*



**THE** night of the Festival of Eve was a nice night. The roads, which had been

dusty thanks to a few days of good weather, had been washed clean by the rain that had fallen the night before. The rain had also brought the forest, fields, and flowers back to life.

All the stores had closed in the afternoon. After lunch, everyone started preparing for the festival in the evening. The same went for the doctor's clinic; outside of emergency patients, the clinic was closed for the day. The whole village was taking part in the festival.

I was also preparing for the festival. I cleaned myself of all the sweat from the day and changed into a new set of clothes. I tied my hair up using a ribbon like I was taught. My hair was a lot longer than it was when I first came here. As I picked up another ribbon, Lady Adelaide came into the room.

"Ah, Margaret. Do I have to tie mine up too?"

Lady Adelaide knew what the answer was, yet she still seemed apprehensive. *Cute but not good. You can't escape.* I grinned as Buddy had placed himself in front of the door, keeping her in the room.

I grabbed Lady Adelaide by the shoulders and sat her in front of the dresser. She had finally given in.

"Now, now...be gentle," Lady Adelaide said with a wry smile. I nodded to her in the reflection of the mirror and put a cape around her as I began to do her makeup.

There wasn't a wide variety of makeup here. There was no foundation, only powder, blush, eyebrow pencils, and lipstick. Their features were already quite defined, and their eyelashes naturally curled upwards, so there was no need for a curler or mascara.

As for lipstick and blush, depending on the product, it could either be a vibrant color or have no color at all. The difference in products was quite large; however, none were grainy, and they were all comfortable to use. The makeup I had chosen came from Mrs. Anna's general store, and they had quite good reviews. It was fun trying various products out.

I wanted to give Lady Adelaide, who often wore light makeup, a more dynamic look. It was dark at night, so it would be hard to see the colors if not.

I had applied makeup to a lot of people in my eight years of working in a department store. From my experience there, I was confident that brighter colors suited older people. A lot of people didn't like to stand out too much and preferred a less striking color, but beige was *very* prone to washing people out if it wasn't the correct shade.

It would be different if the color was more pearl-like or if we used gloss to make it stand out, but there were a lot of people who didn't like that. It's not like I didn't understand why, though.

I would never just recommend bright red lipstick. However, a more playful color could make their face appear brighter and their skin clearer. That and, the corners of their mouth do begin to sag, so I would use a lip brush. Small things like that could do wonders.

I finished applying the makeup to Lady Adelaide, and as expected, she looked wonderful. I was rather pleased with my work, but I went straight ahead and began to untie her hair. In my hand, I had *that* thin ribbon. I began to braid her hair with the ribbon that we found in Mrs. Anna's store. I hadn't told her yet that it was from Dr. Daniel. I wanted him to be the one to tell her.

Her soft, wavy silver hair that looked like silver threads paired well with a gently tied light purple ribbon... Ah, she looked great. I had done my best to make it so that she wouldn't stand out *too* much as she wasn't very fond of that, but I had styled it so it would be seen beautifully from behind. I had braided her hair with the ribbon, imagining Dr. Daniel looking at it as I inserted the last pin. *All right, finished.*

I took the cape off her, handed her a handheld mirror, and spun the chair around. "It's a little flashy," Lady Adelaide muttered to herself as she looked in the mirror, but she seemed delighted. *It suits you. The doctor chose well.*

Just as we finished getting ready in my room on the second floor, we heard the knocker from downstairs. Buddy led us to the door with his nails clicking on the floor. There waiting for us were Dr. Daniel and Mark. In their hands was a magic-powered lantern and decorations that had been hanging in the clinic.

"Hey, good evening, Ade. Happy Festival of Eve."

"Good evening, Daniel. Same to you."

As they shared Festival of Eve greetings, I took my basket with the decorations from the veranda in, and we all went outside together. Lady Adelaide and the doctor walked ahead while me, Mark, and Buddy trailed behind.

The sun was just beginning to set.

The magic-powered lantern was giving off light, however it wasn't dark enough to warrant it. The breeze, still slightly warm with the heat from the day, rustled through the trees and shook both mine and Lady Adelaide's ribbons in the back of our hair.

I was unable to hear what they were saying due to the direction of the wind, but from Dr. Daniel's face, he had noticed Lady Adelaide's hair. Based on how he was touching it, I could figure out what they were talking about. Proud my mission was a success, I was unable to hide my smile.

"They seem to be enjoying themselves. Yours suits you, too," Mark commented as he looked at the two in front of us. He lightly touched my hair.

I nodded in agreement and pointed at both mine and Lady Adelaide's hair.

*Look, look. We have the same hairstyle. Only the colors of the ribbon are different.*

I had started noticing it when Mrs. Anna mentioned it, but the older women in the village often braided their hair with ribbons. When Lady Rachel was here, I asked her how it was in the Royal Capital. It seemed to be the same there, too. "My mother likes to do it too," Lady Rachel had said. *I guess age doesn't really matter, after all.*

However, Lady Adelaide, who always kept her hair in a simple style, rarely said yes to me styling her hair. If she was really against it, I wouldn't have done it. However, that wasn't the case. She was more reserved. The doctor had even said she used to wear her hair like that when she was younger.

Judging from Lady Adelaide's personality, once she had married into the count's family, while she probably wore accessories for the family or to keep up appearances, I had a feeling that she rarely ever wore them for herself.

*So, maybe she had forgotten how to do her hair like that.*

In my old world, there was a certain festival style: wearing yukata and pairing up a hairstyle with it. I waited for a good time, told her about that custom, and asked her if I could do her hair. Since the day of the festival was special, I begged for us to match. She finally agreed the day before the festival.

**"I did my best. I honestly did my best!"**

"I get it, I get it," Mark said.

I was telling Mark everything by putting my forehead up against his. As we did so, we fell a little behind the doctor and Lady Adelaide.

Even though they told us they'd leave us behind, Mark made no effort to walk any faster. While laughing, I took his proffered arm, and we walked towards the village square together, with Buddy in tow.

The venue for the festival was the village square, where the women's association meetinghouse could also be found. The river that ran behind that would act as the main stage for the festival. By the time we had arrived at the village square, the sun had set. The village square was dyed with the colors of the early evening. A lot of villagers had gathered, all holding their own magic-powered lanterns. The way they swayed and moved about reminded me of fireflies.

By the river, a few bonfires were lit. There were wide baskets woven with iron holding firewood, bonfires that looked around six feet high, and smaller fires that resembled open fires. The village plaza looked unusual, with wavering fires everywhere.

The flower and star-shaped decorations we had would be put into the fires, then sent down the small river.

"Here, use this,"

Mark had brought a long rod with a curved end. It had a stopper-like bend in the middle. *Ah, I see. You pick up the decoration by the cord and put it into the fire. This won't be dangerous for kids.* As soon as I had that thought, some of the older children took the initiative and began putting the decorations in the fire.

I wanted to learn by doing instead of watching someone. *I wonder if it wards*

*off evil, or if it brings good luck.*

Even the smaller children who wouldn't usually be allowed near the fire were being helped by adults. They seemed to be having fun as they giggled and cheered.

We headed to the edge of the village square, close to the downstream part of the river. I was brought here after being told there was a wider place to stand. When I peered into the stream, which was flowing slightly lower than the rest, a magical scene unfolded.

The river was lit up with orange flames.

I thought the decorations would sink once in the river. However, I was shocked by how many stayed afloat. I found myself speechless at the sight. They continued to flow down the river. It was like a paper lantern festival.

*It's like the summer bon festival, Grandmother.* My grandmother and I used to watch it together. Boats and lanterns would float down the river within the city. The fires floating off into the dark sky, followed by white smoke, were forever ingrained in my memory.

I'd felt lonely as my grandmother told me in a kind voice that the people from the past returned to us briefly on this day, and we sent them back on lanterns. I had panicked and tightened my grip on my grandmother's hand. I could see the back of my brother as he walked ahead in the crowd of people. My mother and father waited on the other side of the bridge. *I want to catch up to them, but my red geta sandals make it hard for me to move. The air, still wet with moisture, flowed through my ribbon.*

*What should I do? I'm going to be left behind.*

The surface of the water resembled black obsidian. My heart was filled with awe as I watched the small fires slowly glide on the surface.

*Something that connects this world and mine.*

As I stood fixated on the surface of the water, I felt someone softly take my hand.

It wasn't my grandmother's hand. I felt relieved. I blinked suddenly and

looked over at the person. Mark had put one of the paper decorations in my hand, bringing me back to reality.

He looked me in the eye as if he were checking if I was okay. I realized I must have made him worry. I took a breath and smiled.

*“Thank you. I’m all right.”*

“Were you surprised? I don’t know why, but the fires on these decorations don’t disappear as soon as they’re on the river.”

*“Yeah, I was surprised. By this scenery, too.”*

“It’s weird, considering they’re just made with paper and straw,” he said.

The decorations weren’t placed on any pedestals. There was no wax attached to the paper, nor was it manufactured to stay lit. The decorations were simply made of folded paper, shaved wood, or woven straw. I had made my decorations, so I knew that for a fact. There was no magic at work either.

Even as I watched where they were floating to, they kept traveling deep inside the woods, with the flame never extinguishing.

“If we were to set them alight without letting them travel down the river, they would burn away like normal paper. Also, if we hadn’t hung them outside for about half a month, they wouldn’t float like this,” Dr. Daniel expertly explained.

“Did you try that yourself?” Mark asked.

“Of course. I tried it with Ade,” Dr. Daniel smiled.

*What was that just now? Lady Adelaide has a mischievous side to her.*

I turned to look at Lady Adelaide. Her cheeks blushed slightly red as she looked upwards, mumbling, “Something like that *may* have happened before.”

I pictured a scene of a young Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide playing with the decorations together. It was like looking at an old film. Even though I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I felt like it was a moment that had happened.

“It doesn’t work on any day aside from the Festival of Eve,” the doctor said. “I guess today *is* special.”

*That's probably why the Festival of Eve and the people's feelings for the Spirits are still prevalent now, two hundred years after the fact.* I felt like I had gotten to know the connection between the people of this country and the Spirits better.

I still didn't really feel as if I played a part in all of this as a Spirit Caller. Seeing everyone enjoy the Festival of Eve was heartwarming, though.

*The Spirit would probably enjoy this view, too,* I suddenly thought to myself.

Hugh did say that my light-colored eye was linked with the Spirit. However, it didn't seem like we shared sight.

*Are you able to see this? They're lighting all these beautiful fires for a Spirit that came before you. This is also all for you, too.*

I wanted to send the scene before me to the Spirit.

I stood there for a while, gazing at the fires as they continuously floated past.

"All right, we should do it too. If we keep standing around watching, it'll be over before we know it," Dr. Daniel said, getting started.

The ritual would be taking place at the Temple in the Royal Capital right about now. One to two hours after sundown, every area would be lighting bonfires and sending their decorations down the rivers.

Lady Rachel would be participating in the ceremony at the Royal Capital. She must wear a special outfit. From what I had heard, it was like that of a shrine maiden. *She'll no doubt look stunning in it.*

She also mentioned she would be meeting with visitors from other countries. *I guess high-ranked nobles also must work as diplomats, too.* However, Lord Walter said that other noblewomen weren't as busy as Lady Rachel, so she must have been the outlier. She was very excited to spend the festival here in Miselle next year, but I guess it'd be tough for them in the Royal Capital without her.

Dr. Daniel picked up the stick and approached the fire. The fire sparked and jumped about as the star-shaped decoration he placed in the fire went up in bright flames. He then carefully took it to the riverside, softly placed it onto the

river, stepped back, and watched it float away.

It made a soft yet gentle *plop* sound as it was placed on the water, the flame still burning as it joined the other flaming decorations and floated away. *Beautiful.*

As we watched it float off out of sight, Lady Adelaide joined in, and Mark let a few decorations float away, too. All of them floated away, still burning. *With this many, surely one of them will end up sinking. I guess that won't happen.*

"Okay, Margaret. Watch your step."

I was given the stick with a flower-shaped decoration attached to the end of it. I then put it close to the fire. I moved over to the riverside so I could place it on the surface before the fire burned out.

I lowered the end of the stick a little and swung it lightly. The decoration landed on the surface of the river with a *plop*—a flower of flames. For some reason, I felt like mine was shining differently from the others. I wondered if it was just my imagination. Among all the other fires, even when it had floated far away, I could still tell which one was mine.

After it turned off into the woods and disappeared, I lit another decoration and took that over to the river. We took turns doing so until all the decorations we had brought were gone. A lot of time had passed, and the once busy village square was now a lot quieter.

Caught up in the festivities, a lot of small children who still wanted to play had ended up being led off by their parents to go home. It was like being in a dream. There were only a few people left who were burning the remainder of their decorations, having conversations while standing around together.

The flames on the river slowly began to reduce in numbers, however, every now and then one would come by. Even then, it was still a beautiful sight.

"Well, shall we head home now?" Dr. Daniel suggested.

Mark and the doctor offered to walk us home to the estate in the woods. I looked around and every woman was accompanied by someone. It was a custom and just general etiquette to escort a lady. It wasn't one's duty, however I had come to understand that it was very much just the norm from

seeing the people around me.

Times when the numbers weren't correct when doing inventory count, and I had to catch the last train; times when I was coming home from a drinking party—I always walked alone, my path only illuminated by the streetlights, with the sound of my footsteps as my only company. I never once questioned if it was normal. I thought that I would be useless if I couldn't do everything alone. I had gotten way too accustomed to being alone.

I was worried that if I ever actually spoke the words, *I'm lonely*, then it would come true. I had no idea that I had kept the words so deep within me.

It was no one's fault. I was the only one who was afraid of being helped.

Even if it were my older brother's unrefined concern, or my sister-in-law's reserved concern, or clumsy signs from a lover—I always feared that their help and support would disappear, so I ended up setting up a boundary. Never once thinking that I may be the cause of my own loneliness.

*I get it now.* I certainly kept myself from getting hurt that way, but I hurt myself in a different way.

I turned around to face the river once again, leaving my thoughts with the fires floating away. *I'm sorry. And thank you. I hope that you are all happy, whether you remember me or not.*

"Oh, Buddy is here too."

I turned towards the origin of Mark's voice, where I could see Buddy in the woods, running joyfully back to us. I gave the out-of-breath Buddy a tight hug. I could feel his heart thumping. He was warm.

"Shall we get going?" Mark held out his arm. When I went to take it, a floating light appeared in front of me.

"...Oh my."

I heard the doctor hold his breath as Lady Adelaide responded in surprise.

I thought they were remnants from the fires. But they were Fairy Lights.

*Huh, why?*

They often came to me to play, but it was always when there was no one else around. They would just suddenly appear. *So how come they're appearing now, when there's a lot of other people around?* Buddy could have brought them with him from the forest, but even then, this was a first.

They spun around me in circles, seemingly enjoying themselves. I could do nothing but look up. I was taken aback when one of them suddenly stopped at exactly my eye level.

I then put out my hands as always, and the fairy landed on my finger with a *plonk*, before stretching its body out and floating in the wind. They looked like a child holding onto the side of a pool, floating happily. *They're always so cute.*

*Hey, what happened? I'm always happy to see you guys, but there's a lot of people here today. You're attracting a lot of attention.*





Mark and Lady Adelaide, who were standing just behind me, had become used to seeing them sometimes at the estate in the woods. They had overcome their initial shock and calmed down a little. But that wasn't the case for everyone else. Everyone was standing still, speechless at the sight.

The fairy tilted its head. I looked around me and there were fairies dancing around the bonfire, chasing after the decorations in the river, and flying around together. *W-Wait, there's that many...?!*

*I wonder if they normally all come out on the Festival of Eve? Wait, no, looking at how surprised everyone is, that can't be it. I mean, I get why they're so surprised.*

As I looked around, the fairy that was on my hand made some sort of signal, and all the fairies came to gather around me.

There were some fairies I had yet to meet. One by one, they took turns greeting me—if you could call it that. They spun around in front of me and bowed. *Oh, one of them is pulling a face. Hehe, funny.*

*...Ah, I get it. I told them about the Festival of Eve before, so they came to see what it's like.*

The last fairy gave me a light kiss on the cheek before flying to join the rest of the fairies who were waiting. They all gathered together, then shot off through the night sky along the river, disappearing into the forest like a shooting star.

Leaving behind an eerily quiet village square and the sound of firewood cracking.

*So, um...what should I do?*

I thought about saying something to try and play it off. But that wouldn't work. They all saw what had happened with their own eyes. The Fairy Lights were beautiful, and it seemed that the fairies even played with the villagers. It was cute.

Although I was a Caller, I had managed to convince everyone that I was just an ordinary woman. But this would now cause everyone to see me as having something to do with the divine.

I felt the atmosphere grow colder as I could sense the distance once again forming between me and the villagers. *Oh no, I feel like I'm gonna cry.*

“What a wonderful sight. Thanks, Margaret.”

The first person to call out and break the painful silence was Mr. Tom from the greengrocers. For some reason, I didn’t think his teary eyes were caused by the reflection of the bonfire.

“She really is a Caller, huh?” Tom said.

“We told you that ages ago, old man.”

*Ah, Mr. Pat, you don't have to talk about me like I'm special. Just talk to me normally like you always do, talking about meat or your vast knowledge of greens. Just be normal.*

Seeing my troubled face, Mr. Tom grinned. “Well, at any rate, she’s still ‘Miselle’s Margaret.’ Make sure to come by the store again, okay? We got some real nice oranges in.”

*Aah, grandpa, I love you! I'll go! I'll go first thing tomorrow!* I jumped into his arms as he laughed and patted me on the back like I was his granddaughter. Lady Adelaide, as well as everyone else there, looked shocked seeing Mr. Tom act like that.

“Mr. Tom...seems to be having fun...”

“...It’s a Festival of Eve miracle.”

*Hey now, who are you talking bad about?* I huffed and puffed as I promised Mr. Tom once again that I would drop by his store, and he left to go home in good spirits.

Eventually, having gotten over their shock, everyone went back to normal and said goodbye to me as we all left for home. Surely everyone would be talking about what happened tonight, along with the Festival of Eve miracle.



IT was all so sudden.

Although she seemed to have struggled a little tonight, I called out to

Margaret, letting her know we would be heading back. She seemed to have enjoyed the Festival of Eve. Just before she took my arm, she suddenly stopped.

I looked around, wondering what had happened, and that's when I spotted the Fairy Lights. I had seen them at the estate in the woods before, however whenever they noticed me, they always flew away. They only looked like balls of light to me, however to Margaret, they appeared like small children. They fluttered around in the air.

I panicked and looked around us. There were golden balls of light everywhere, and the villagers who had seen them were all standing stock still in shock. It seemed like they could also see them; it wasn't just us.

I turned to look at the doctor, who appeared equally surprised, but he shot me a look that said, *Stay calm*.

I carefully used a slight amount of magic to observe the situation around Margaret, trying not to alert the Fairy Lights as I did. I couldn't sense anything wrong or any dangerous magic being used. It didn't seem like anyone had planned for this.

The balls of light flew around the bonfires, the river, and around Margaret. At first, she seemed surprised, but she now had a joyful expression.

"What in the world is going on...?" I asked.

"Who knows? We humans can't even begin to understand the whims of the Spirits. However, it is a wonderful sight." It seemed the latter half of Dr. Daniel's sentence was aimed at Lady Adelaide as his eyes crinkled behind his glasses.

"It's beautiful. I often see them at the estate, but it's my first time seeing so many," Lady Adelaide responded.

"They probably came to see the Festival of Eve," he said.

Suddenly, all the lights began to converge around Margaret. She was covered in lights, making it look like she was glowing.

In the dark of the night, she shone brighter than the bonfire. All the balls of light gathered around her made her look like a Spirit...I was deeply moved by the sight.

The Fairy Lights then collected into a group and began to shine even brighter as they flew high into the sky. They followed the river and disappeared out of sight. The scene was not something out of a dream, nor did it seem like reality. Unable to blink, the scene etched itself into my eyes.

I wasn't a very pious person. In fact, I had lived all my life without much interest in the Spirits or the Temple. Even though Margaret was a Caller, what was important was that she was just herself. Her being a Caller was just an addition to that. Those feelings have never changed.

*However, what happened tonight...*

It was quite plain to see that everyone now firmly believed in the existence of the Spirit Caller. As a result, everyone would start looking at her as if she was special again—something Margaret didn't want.

The last Fairy Light left, and Margaret looked at me with a strained smile. As soon as I reached out to hold her hand, I was interrupted by someone's voice.

“What a wonderful sight. Thanks, Margaret.”

Someone had gratefully thanked her; I sensed no malice in his words. He then continued to call Margaret “Miselle’s Margaret,” which almost made Margaret cry.

“...Mr. Tom stole your moment.”

“Doctor.”

“Something like this will likely happen again. Can you handle it, Mark?”

I had heard that line before. He had said the same thing when I had first come to his clinic and he presented me with a difficult case with unique symptoms and forced me to decide how to handle it. It was less a question about whether I could do it, and more of him questioning my resolve as a doctor.

Just like that time, I already had the answer.

“Of course.”

The doctor nodded with a satisfied look as he offered Lady Adelaide his arm. “We'll be off,” he said as he left the village square.

Everyone was surrounding Margaret and talking excitedly. I called for her and she turned to look at me. There was no longer a sad look in her eyes.

"It's late. Let's get going," I said.

She nodded in response, then waved to everyone as she left, coming right over with Buddy.

*No matter what. This is your home.* It was a comforting feeling as she laid her hand on mine.

## Interlude: The Royal Forest - Walter

I received a message just around the time I started finishing up work. Ahead of the Festival of Eve the next day, the Royal Palace had an unsettled atmosphere as evening approached.

I did have plans to meet with the state guests visiting from other countries in the afternoon, but as some urgent work had just come in, I left that job to someone else—Julius. His younger sister was performing her duties in the Temple, and he had complained vehemently about wanting to go support her. Well, at least now listening to him had paid off, since his wish came true by taking over for me.

The message urgently requested my presence. As I hurriedly made my way down the corridor, a carriage was already waiting outside. Hugh was there waiting for me. Prompted by Hugh, I entered the carriage. As soon as I had entered, the door closed behind me, and the carriage set off.

“I apologize this is so sudden,” Hugh said.

“It’s not like it’s your fault, Hugh,” I responded.

“Hm, well, I guess I’m also being led around by the nose too. The Spirit had appeared for a little while but disappeared before I could come to get you. It met with the headmaster, who was already near the forest, and no one else. It’s been a while since I’ve seen the Spirit myself.”

“...You sound excited,” I remarked.

“How could I not be? Oh, and the headmaster already went on ahead into the forest. Hopefully, he can buy time before you get there. The Spirit often goes straight to sleep, so let’s see how it goes today.”

I wasn’t expecting that. I just assumed that Spirits and fairies didn’t sleep or eat.

“Do Spirits sleep?” I asked.

"Yeah, well, in the reports it's written that its appearance is unstable, when in reality, although the Spirit looks like an adult, they're still like a child inside. They're often sleeping, and when they are awake, they talk to us for a little while, then sleep again. It's hard to predict when they'll be awake. Last year, around the time the Spirit first appeared, they were gone for months at a time. It's only recently that they started to appear around once a week. Pretty much right after Margaret came."

Hearing his explanation, it made sense I might have been called out here without having a chance to meet the Spirit. In that case, it would probably be better to wait until the Spirit grew up a bit more—I mean, stabilized—and we had a better idea of when the Spirit would appear before we brought Margaret to the capital to see it. She did say it would be a while before she met the Spirit, and it seemed she was right about that.

"We have no idea when the Spirit will appear," Hugh said. "All we do know is when it has appeared, a light starts to emit from the forest."

"A light?"

"Yeah. Some people assume it's all of the Fairy Lights combining. The light has some amount of magic power, so we're able to sense it."

The Royal Forest was the site of the Old Imperial Palace. It was close to the current Imperial Palace and looked like a normal forest at first glance, but it was closed off to humans by a barrier. The land near it is a part of the Royal Academy and, in general, is an off-limits area to the public.

There were rare occasions when someone had gotten lost and ended up in the forest. And there were also some occasions when people would disappear from the Royal Capital, only to be found a few days later in a different place within the forest. They usually had no recollection of anything and, at times, didn't even know their own names.

As a result, the forest was known among the public as the Forest of Illusion.

There was evidence of powerful magic being used, as well as an old tome filled with a large amount of magic power located deep within the forest. It was essentially a part of the Royal Palace's jurisdiction as it was in the Royal Forest. However, for the sake of investigation, it was given to the Magic Academy to

study.

The large dome barrier that covered the forest from the air to even the ruins underground was invisible. The only two people to have seen the barrier for themselves were Hugh and the Magic Academy's headmaster—two people with an unusually large amount of magic power. It wasn't until Hugh and the headmaster that we were finally able to prove the existence of the barrier that was only ever referred to in the old tome as something that "Repels all who try to enter the forest."

When I think about that, it may have been inevitable that a Spirit would appear in this age and in this country.

"Magic that usually can't pass through the barrier is only able to during that time, and we can see the light then. Even though it goes through the barrier, it doesn't really do anything. On the contrary, when our magic passes through, there is a light, and that's around the time the Spirit appears," Hugh explained.

"I see. That makes sense," I responded.

"However," Hugh continued, "that's classified information from the Magic Academy, so keep that one a secret. The only people who know are the headmaster, a select few from the Magic Academy, and the inner circle of the Royal Palace. I didn't plan to tell you either, Walter. But then the Spirit personally asked to speak with you."

"The inner circle...so His Majesty and the royal family. You seem to be having a lot of fun, Hugh," I remarked.

"Hehe, I am. Of course, I am."

He grinned from ear to ear. I let out a little sigh. *I'm about to meet the Spirit. I ought to get myself together before Hugh sucks me into his pace.*

"Ah, that reminds me," he said, "you went to Miselle recently, right? Did Margaret say anything to you?"

"Define anything."

"So, according to the headmaster, when the Spirit appeared briefly earlier, the Spirit asked about Margaret's voice and then disappeared. The Spirit has

never been particularly concerned with her voice, so he was wondering if there had been any changes,” Hugh explained.

*That's the first I've heard about that.* I knew they didn't say a lot about the Spirit. Due to the situation, they couldn't really reveal much, and even then, Hugh wasn't just sprinkling the information before me, even though I hadn't got any clearance to know. It was a way of gathering information, and a certain amount of control regarding that was required.

I thought back to my last time in Miselle, and sure enough, it did feel like Margaret had something she wanted to tell me. I assumed her not telling me was her waiting for the right time to do so, thus I didn't really dig any deeper. I wondered if it was regarding her voice.

“I can't say I heard anything about that.”

I had no reason to tell Hugh my theory. It wasn't payback for them keeping things confidential, nor was I lying when I said I hadn't heard anything.

I hadn't actually heard Margaret say anything, I had just assumed, after all.

“I see,” Hugh hummed. “I imagine there'll be a lot of happy people if she does become able to talk.”

Our discussion continued, and before I knew it, we had arrived at our destination.

The Royal Forest was on a hill. As we got out of the carriage, the remainder of the late evening sun had begun to set into the horizon of the city. I looked around, and I could see the academy I had once attended.

First, I was led to a simple guard watchpoint run by the Magic Academy on the edge of the forest.

“I had heard a watchpoint had been set up. I see this is it,” I commented.

“At first we borrowed a conference room from the academy over there, and while it was close, it was still quite a distance, and it was hard to discern how long it would take to get here. There's no one other than the headmaster who can just teleport whenever they like, so we decided to set it up right next to the forest. Ah, we got permission, of course,” Hugh explained.

"I knew that from the reports, but this is my first time seeing it up close. It's bigger than I expected."

Although it had been a rushed project, it had a stable and a watering hole. There was also a large workshop outside with a roof. The watchpoint itself was a little bigger than a commoner's home.

"We have several people on guard at all hours, and a lot of people even stay over. We often have royalty come by, so we need to make sure we can accommodate them too," Hugh said.

"Yeah, I have no complaints. I assume they expected that this would take some time, seeing the scale of it all," I said.

Under the eaves, there were decorations for the Festival of Eve. That showed that the workers of the Magic Academy regarded this watchpoint as a place where they spent most of their time.

As I entered the watchpoint, I noticed a wide window that faced toward the forest. This room seemed to be their main place of operation. Hugh began speaking with an employee who was sitting at the table working while staring off into the forest.

"Is the headmaster already there?" he asked.

"Yes. It doesn't seem like the light is weakening, so I'd reckon he's still there. You can go straight away." Hugh nodded, and the employee took out a document from a huge pile. "If I could have both of you sign here. Yes, perfect. If you need anything, let us know."

"I'm praying I don't get sent out the other side of the forest this time," Hugh said dryly.

The employee laughed. "Let's hope so."

I put down my things and followed Hugh outside.

"...The other side of the forest?" I asked.

"Yeah, the entrance is here, but we'll be led out of the forest when we go to leave. But the exit depends on the whims of the Spirit. There's no time or paths in the forest," Hugh said casually. "Oh, are you nervous?"

"Meanwhile, you seem to be having a blast," I responded. "Are you sure you're not the one deliberately asking the Spirit to send you out a farther exit?"

"How could you think I'd do such a thing?" Hugh made his voice sound extra hurt as he shrugged and averted his gaze.

*Just as I thought. It's not the Spirit or the forest's whims—it's his.*



**AS** we could see the light, that meant magic that usually wouldn't be able to pass through the forest barrier could pass through. However, that didn't mean the barrier had disappeared. We had come to a stop at the edge of the forest. Hugh pointed and explained we were at the entrance. The vegetation was a deep green, and there was ivy growing that blocked the way, making it difficult to even see an animal trail.

When I asked Hugh how we could enter, he said that only people who had been given permission could go through.

"Hmm, it'd be quicker if you tried yourself," he said. "Try putting your hand in that gap in the ivy. If it's no good, it'll repel you. There'll be a loud snapping sound and you'll be pushed back a little, about ten steps backward."

"I don't quite think that's a little," I groaned.

"It'll be fine. If you have really been summoned, then that won't even happen."

*Put another way, people can be mistakenly summoned and end up being sent flying when they get repelled. I couldn't say I enjoyed risking myself for a summons I hadn't actually received personally.*

However, it seemed Hugh had left it to me to find out what would happen. He was looking at me, clearly enjoying himself. We didn't have the luxury of time, either. I did as he said and put my hand in the gap. "...Oh."

I swallowed my breath, surprised, as a strange shuffling noise sounded, and the ivy formed a tunnel. I could see the rest of the forest through the tunnel.

"Ah, what a relief. You've been welcomed in. Come, come. Let's head on in," Hugh said.

Urged on by Hugh, I headed into the tunnel. The ground was covered in undergrowth, and judging by the feel of it when I walked, it felt like no one had passed through there before.

I looked back and the opening behind Hugh began to make a sound, closing up the entrance to the forest. The scenery outside the opening was concealed by trees that suddenly appeared, and the tunnel that I had just passed through had also disappeared, returning to what appeared to be an endless forest.

There was only one path leading deeper into the forest ahead of us. I expected it would also be replaced by the undergrowth and close off behind us as we went.

“...I see the forest is quite cautious,” I said.

“Ah, you think so? Hmm, I see. I guess you could see it that way.”

“Hugh, do you—does the Magic Academy not think that?” I asked.

“Hmm, we thought they were playing.”

*That’s an optimistic outlook.*

“I see. Well, you have met the Spirit directly, so I’ll take your word for it,” I said.

“Huh, you didn’t deny it,” he said, surprised.

“I have no evidence to deny it with.”

It was just my own opinion; I had no real reason behind it. I just had that sense.

Although it was dark outside, inside the forest, it looked like it was midday. It gave off the feeling I was in another world.

The branches and leaves that hid the sky had bright sunrays peeking through. It was a serene area filled with nature. There was no wind, nor was there the sound of leaves rustling. Occasionally, I could hear the call of a bird. As we followed along the path, which seemed to change its direction on its own, we came across a huge white building. It wasn’t that big, but it did seem detached from everything else. On the other side of the building, a small lake glittered.

“Is this our destination...where the Spirit is?” I asked.

“Yes. According to the documents from the old dynasty, the Old Imperial Palace was built on the other side of the river. This area was one of the plots within the palace grounds—a concert hall,” Hugh explained.

“A concert hall... Was that written in the documents?”

“It wasn’t really written there, but you’ll see. Today it’s a lute. That’s right, Walter. You’re going to be surprised when you meet with the Spirit.”

“What—”

That was all I could say before I was interrupted by Hugh putting his hand on the door of the building. The door began to open with a creak. As the door opened, I could hear a lute. We entered what seemed to be a lobby. The hall, decorated with a colored glass ceiling, didn’t feel antique at all. The light from the ceiling reflected off the clean, white stone. It was dazzlingly bright.

Hugh looked over his shoulder and urged me to follow as he walked with very accustomed steps towards the inside and pushed open two doors. A strange, other-worldly music, unlike anything I had ever heard, began to grow louder, no longer obstructed by the doors. Once we entered the room, we no longer had to search anymore.

“...You’re late.”

“We made it in time. Have you been enjoying yourself?”

Seated on a red colored sofa with his legs crossed was the Magic Academy’s headmaster. He never looked in our direction as he spoke. Hugh replied as nonchalantly as ever.

The headmaster noticed me standing beside Hugh and nodded towards me in greeting. I returned the greeting. He was wearing a plain black robe and had his long, white-silver hair neatly tied back. He had an overwhelming amount of magic power oozing out of him, giving him an overbearing presence despite the fact I could tell he was suppressing it. His frigid gaze was all chilling as ever, but his aura seemed oddly tranquil.

The room was larger than a living room and was round in shape. On the softly

curved walls, there were a number of latticed windows. The lake and opposing shore were visible through one of the slightly distorted windows. The delicate wooden mosaic floor, along with the relaxed floral wallpaper, resembled the estate in the Miselle woods. The sounds of the string instrument had stopped, being taken over by Hugh's voice echoing around the room.

"Dear Spirit, sorry to have kept you waiting. I have brought Walter along."

There was an instrument that resembled a piano in the center of the room. There was a person sitting comfortably on top of the piano, holding a lute. Several Fairy Lights fluttered around them.

They had golden hair that shimmered like the moon. Pale white skin and indigo eyes as dark as the night sky. The Spirit looked like a young woman. However, gazing at their face, they had the expression of someone who had been around for many years.

Although her faintly glowing form resembled that of a human, she was by no means actually human.

*So this is a Spirit.*

Our eyes met, and the corners of her eyes softened as she smiled. For some reason, her expression reminded me of Margaret.



**WE** didn't spend a lot of time with the Spirit in the concert hall. As we talked, the Spirit seemed to grow tired of talking and began to play the lute, before saying she had grown tired and disappearing into thin air.

The Spirit was ambiguous with her words, or rather, there were some words that I struggled to understand. There were times when it was barely even a conversation, and I could see why the headmaster was struggling to get anywhere with this. Even then, both seemed to be enjoying themselves.

It seemed talking with the Spirit required a lot of magic power. I didn't lack magic power, but even just watching Hugh, the Spirit, and the headmaster talk, seemed to suck down my magic. If it had been any other ordinary person, they would have been drained of magic power and no doubt left unable to move. That may have been one of the reasons why humans weren't allowed to enter

the forest.

The Fairy Lights guided us out of the forest. This exit was a short distance away from where we'd entered, but we could see the Magic Academy watchpoint from there. When I looked back at the ivy closing up the entrance to the forest, the moon cast its light on the three of us from the highest point in the sky.

I took out my pocket watch. As I opened it, it began to spin, stopping at just past midnight. As I stared at my watch, dumbfounded, Hugh called out to me.

“Could I keep you a little longer? I have to make a report.”

“That’s fine. Is it always like this?” I asked.

They did say that time didn’t exist in the forest. That certainly was the case, but if this were to continue, it could cause real issues for people’s lives outside the forest. The headmaster went often and seemed unaffected, but that was probably impossible for the average person.

The burden on the staff who had to wait may be too great. *I know that this is confidential, but these matters should be reassessed.* I decided that it would be better to talk about it with the headmaster when we arrived at the watchpoint.

“Well, it varies,” Hugh said. “We actually got to talk a lot today. Didn’t we, headmaster?”

“That’s right, she’s rather stabilized. I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact it’s the Festival of Eve tomorrow.” The headmaster put his hand on his chin in thought. He was no doubt reflecting on his conversation with the Spirit.

“But yeah, I’m pretty lost on what to do,” Hugh said. “What do you think, Walter?”

The Spirit disclosed a lot of information regarding the Caller. A lot of it was new to me. Especially—

“We could not tell Margaret and keep it secret,” Hugh suggested.

“That’s not an option.”

Even if I don’t think it was information she would welcome, she ought to know the truth. I didn’t think of her as someone who would blindly follow

decisions and commands without knowing why. Although I hadn't known her long, I knew that much about her.

"That's right. It is Margaret, after all. In that case, we need to do a little fine-tuning of the situation," Hugh replied.

"I'll take care of things in the Royal Palace," the headmaster said.

"Ohhh, it's unusual for the headmaster to take the initiative," Hugh teased. "It's going to rain cats and dogs during the festival tomorrow— Ah, I'm sorry, I got too carried away."

Hugh looked shocked as the headmaster raised his hand, summoning a blue flame. Hugh ran off toward the direction of the watchpoint.

The headmaster let out a small sigh and closed his hand, extinguishing the flame. Then, his feet were enveloped by a bright, round sphere. "Let's head back, Count Dustin. I ask that you do not mention this to anyone for a while. Even the Caller herself," he said.

"Understood."

It wasn't something I could easily talk about.

I wondered what Margaret would think. Would she be angry? Would she cry?

How would she respond when finding out that she wasn't meant to be the Spirit Caller?

How will she react when she hears that her leg, which won't heal, and her losing her voice, were due to the Spirit? If Margaret hadn't come to this world... I wonder how I...or my mother's life would look like right now?

I shook my head at the unpleasant thought.

The clouds in the sky began to cover the stars.

An uneasy wind blew through the watchpoint, stirring the Festival of Eve decorations slightly.

## Chapter 4: The Spirit and the Caller

THE day after Festival Eve. I didn't have to help at the clinic, but I kept my promise to Mr. Tom and headed to the grocery store with Buddy tagging along.

Last night was exhausting. The fairies *really* did just come to play, so I didn't feel like blaming them. The most important thing was that they had fun. Although it goes without saying, the villagers really got a shock.

I had finally moved on from my position as a "slightly strange newcomer," so I started to feel anxious, worried that they would start treating me differently because I was a proven Spirit Caller. I was just an ordinary person; it was too much for me to be treated differently.

Mr. Tom had impeccable timing last night. I had no idea if he had planned it, but he had saved the day.

Mark acted like himself while we walked back home. He said it should be all right, and he sounded like he believed it too. Thanks to that, I felt a lot better. *Even if people look at me differently, that doesn't change who I am, so I can just carry on as normal.* I doubted it would be that simple, but that was the only way I knew to get through it.

All the shopkeepers from the village were out cleaning up the village plaza. I arrived in the village center a lot earlier than usual this morning. As everyone was busy helping with the cleanup, a lot of stores were still closed. Buddy and I were the only ones out on the streets. The children who were usually always playing outside were no doubt still asleep after having stayed up late the night before.

Although it contradicted what I was just thinking about, I wasn't really in the mood for walking through large crowds of people on the heels of yesterday.

I took a deep breath.

I gave Buddy, who was looking up at me, a pat on the head as we carried on walking. I had reached my destination without bumping into anyone curious

about me being the Spirit Caller.

“Ah, Margaret. You’re here.”

Mr. Tom usually sat inside the store, but he had taken his chair outside and was sorting beans. I had expected that a retiree like Mr. Tom wouldn’t have been asked to help clean up. He told me that as everyone was helping clean, he was looking after the store for the day.

The shiny bean he held in his hands resembled a plump green bean. It was a little different from what I was used to harvesting from Lady Adelaide’s fields. It was bumpy and the area with the seed seemed rather expanded.

Mr. Tom realized I was staring at it with a quizzical look. He handed one over to me. “This has yet to be sold on the market. There’s a seed inside. That tastes good, so I recommended boiling the whole thing in salt to eat.”

As I listened to him explain what they were, I realized they reminded me of sugar snap peas. *I think I’ll also take this freshly harvested, bright green one too.*

I pointed at the other items I wanted to buy, and he picked them up for me.

Mr. Tom kindly put them into the basket I had brought with me. Given that he was an elderly man, his movements were slow, but he was always careful with his hands—the vegetables that he placed in my basket had never gotten crushed or snapped.

As I was admiring his careful movements, he added vividly deep orange fruits to the basket. “Here, an orange. You can take these home with you.”

Even though I said I would pay for it, Mr. Tom responded that I had shown him something wonderful last night, so he gave them to me as thanks.

*But I didn’t do anything special. I didn’t ask them to appear.*

“I never thought I’d see anything like that in my lifetime. Thank you,” Mr. Tom grinned. “I feel like I got another thirty years of life out of that.”

*Well, when you put it like that, I guess all I can do is graciously accept. Okay, I’ll make some marmalade with these oranges, and I’ll bring that here in return.* I knew Mr. Tom had a sweet tooth.

The store’s current owner had told me that in secret. According to her,

although Mr. Tom insisted sweets were for children, he was often secretly disappointed when he didn't have any dessert after meals. Having a sweet jam on his bread in the morning was vital to his day. *Ah, that insider knowledge proved to be helpful.*

*I wonder if I should bake a cake, too? Ah, wait, the butter might melt in the summer heat. In that case, I might make some muffins with orange peel.*

As I enjoyed thinking about what I'd do with the oranges, I communicated my thanks to Mr. Tom. I noticed the people who had been helping with cleaning the plaza were walking past the store. It seemed they had finished for the day.

I ended up freezing a little. I first made eye contact with Mr. Pat.

“Out shopping, Margaret?”

I nodded in response.

“Yesterday was quite the surprise,” Mr. Pat spoke while patting Buddy. His demeanor remained unchanged from usual.

“Ah, that reminds me! I went home with the kids early, so I didn't get to see it. I missed the show.”

“What a shame, Terry. I thought it was a pair of cat eyes lighting up. Right, dear?”

“C-Cat? A ca-cat, ah, uh, yeah. It was so pretty.”

Mrs. Mei brought up the topic of cats to her husband, who was afraid of them. She winked at me. It seemed she had managed to get rid of some of her disappointment over being unable to have a kitten. Her husband tried to hide his feelings by clearing his throat. I struggled to keep my cool and not burst out laughing.

The villagers all wore smiles and spoke to me as they usually did. I didn't sense any fear or reverence from them, nor did it feel as if they were treating me any differently.

I was incredibly relieved. Mr. Terry, the owner of the wine shop, seemed disappointed he wasn't there to see it. He asked me if I had summoned the Fairy Lights. I shook my head.

*“They do what they want. They come when they want, and they go when they want.”*

“I see. I guess they probably appeared because of the occasion, being the Festival of Eve and all.”

“You never know. You might be able to see them next year if you’re lucky. All right, you best get going,” Mr. Tom scolded. “You two should also stop chin-wagging here and get back to work at your stores. If you’re going to hang around, you can help clean.”

Mr. Pat and Mr. Terry both wore wry smiles.

“He still treats us like kids.”

“What’s that, Pat? You want me to start treating you like grandkids? Haha, sorry, I got enough of those already,” Mr. Tom joked.

“M-Mr. Tom just cracked a joke and smiled!”

Mr. Terry was far too shocked. *As I said, Mr. Tom was always like this.* Though it seems even his daughter, who had returned with everyone else, was shocked too. *Bonk!* Mr. Tom’s firm and calloused hand landed on my head. His touch was gentle and a little uncertain. I felt like I had become one of the vegetables he sold.

“Margaret, you should get back too,” he said. “You have people waiting for you at the estate, right?”

*Yessir.* I threw my arms around Mr. Tom to express my thanks. Mr. Tom frowned, although he laughed as he handed me the basket.

I then waved bye to everyone, who was still taken aback by that touching scene, and left the store along with Buddy.



**AS** soon as I returned to the estate, I got to work on making the marmalade. *Time to go all-out with this one.*

I showed the oranges I had received to Lady Adelaide. “Wow, he gave you a lot,” she’d replied, shocked. *I did try to pay for them...* She agreed with my plan to make sweets with the oranges to repay Mr. Tom.

There were orange trees in the forest nearby, but the softness of the skin and the color differed. They seemed to be different types of oranges. I cut a piece of orange. The inside was rich with color, and they were sweet. They could be served as dessert as they were. The oranges in the woods near us were quite sour. I still liked them, though.

I decided to make half of the oranges into marmalade. *This marmalade is going to be so luxurious. It's gonna taste delicious.*

Marmalade was different from strawberry and blueberry jam in that it took a rather large amount of time to make. The most important parts of the preparation process were separating the peel and pulp and finely chopping the peel.

I first cleaned the oranges and then cut them into halves. I then used a towel to wring out the juice. *Ah, it's such a sweet, refreshing citrus smell. I love it.*

Lemons made for a great marmalade, so I decided to add lemon to this one, too.

The seeds that came out would help the jam thicken. I didn't plan on eating them, but I would boil them together and then take them out after. Back in my old world, I would put them into a disposable tea bag and boil them that way, but unfortunately, we didn't have those kinds of handy goods here.

I could put them into a gauze-like thin cloth, however, and Lady Adelaide had a round, golden sphere-like tea strainer, so I decided to borrow that. It was like a smaller version of a tea-leaf strainer. I put the seeds inside of that.

Once I had finished straining the juice, I cut the peel into halves, pulled out the segments, and chopped them finely in a vertical direction.

*When cutting, the peel can produce oil, so it's a good habit to keep sharpening the knife. If you try your hardest to cut it with a blade that isn't sharpened, it can slip, and you can hurt yourself. Yes, I am speaking from experience. Hehe, something like that happened to me. It's essential to look after your tools.*

I put the finely cut peels into a bowl, gradually adding water to help reduce the bitterness. *I guess it'll take about two to three hours.* So, I decided to leave it in the kitchen for now. I'd continue with it after lunch.

After that, I drained the water and moved it to a pan. I then added just enough water to the pan, boiling it until the peel became soft. By doing so, it becomes less sour and less tough to eat, making it easier to add sugar. It was like the astringency of *azuki* beans.

This was around the time it started to take longer. *The whole time I'm working, I can smell the sweet orange scent...it's like aromatherapy. It refreshes and relaxes me.* Oranges were useful for that.

Then, I finally measured it out.

I measured the pressed juice and the boiled orange peels.

I prepared water equivalent to the weight of the peels. I then used sugar around half the amount of the juice, peel, and water. *Half is better...there's a lot of calculating required in cooking, or more specifically, when making sweets. I can understand why so many men take a more logical approach when teaching how to cook.*

I felt like I was almost finished at this point. All that was left to do was put everything into a pan and boil. *Just throw everything—the juice, the peel, the water, and the sugar—all of it into the pan. The seeds will release all the pectin that will help it harden, so make sure not to forget to put them in too.*

It depended on how many oranges there were, but it usually ended up being a lot, so I often made sure I had a big pan ready. I preferred the material to be enameled or stainless steel. That, or my long-desired copper.

I mixed it, making sure to keep stirring while removing the scum from the surface. Like strawberry and other jams, I boiled it on high heat until it was bubbling. The orange peels had turned white when I boiled them and then drained the water. When I boiled them again, their color had returned. *I wonder where the color comes from. Maybe the pressed juice.*

There were recipes where you didn't use any water to make it, but it would boil down quickly and burn easily. I figured the gelatinous part would harden easily, too.

I had settled on this method of making marmalade a while back and hadn't really experienced anything else, so there could have been better ways of doing

it. Lady Adelaide said that she didn't wring the juice out and used the flesh from the fruit instead. *I might try making it like that next time. I wonder how it differs.*

*For those who prefer a more bitter taste, I'd recommend reducing the amount of time you soak the peels in water. The size of the peels can also change the mouthfeel, so it's always good to see what you like best by making it a few times.*

*Marmalade can be made with any sort of citrus. They are all made with the same method. I always used to make marmalade with *natsumikan* and *hyuganatsu*, another form of summer citrus, when I received them from neighbors. I think this is the first time I've made it with oranges. I wonder if I've ever used them back when I was a kid.*

Marmalade is like blueberry jam in that it hardens when it's cooled, so when it's starting to feel a little loose, turn the heat off.

To check how thick it is with marmalade, I didn't drop some in cold water. Instead, I put a small amount in a small bowl and allowed it to cool. In the cases where I did overboil it, I would use it like yuzu-cha, or citrus tea, and boil it so I could still enjoy it. Even a mistake turned into a success.

I enjoyed boiling them, sterilizing them, putting them into jars, and squeezing the lid on tight—and done! *Phew, finally.*

I had this feeling every time, but whenever I finished making jam, I felt a sensation of success. *I probably like seeing all the jars lined up. I'm sure I'm not the only one who sees them sparkling.*

I used jars that were all uniform in shape—they felt like the kind you would see in a store. But I did like deliberately using different-sized jars. The smaller ones made for great gifts as people didn't feel too pressured about using them, so they were invaluable.

Some people didn't like jam or marmalade if they weren't an official product, so I kept the smaller ones for those who were fine with homemade gifts. Some people felt like that for a reason, so I thought it best not to try and force it on them.

*Me? Oh, I was always open to homemade products.*

*That reminds me of when I lived alone.* Not long after moving in, I became acquainted with an older woman who lived in a detached house behind my apartment block.

We both lived alone, and we'd often talk over the fence. She used to give me curry and boiled dishes a lot. She often said it wasn't fun cooking for just herself and would bring me the extras she couldn't eat by herself. She'd bring the whole pot with her to my front door and ladle it out right there, saying, "It's scary if you don't know where it came from, right?"

We talked for about two years until she had fallen ill and had to go to the hospital. Then I heard that she would be going to live with her son. Thus, we parted ways without me ever getting to say goodbye. Her family seemed worried about her living alone and visited her often, so even if she hadn't been admitted to the hospital, it probably wouldn't have been long before she went to live with them anyway.

Her cute bungalow was demolished not long after, and apartments aimed at single people were built in its place. I felt quite lonely after that, and when it came time to renew my apartment lease, I ended up moving away from that apartment building, too.

I loved the hydrangeas that bloomed outside of her front door when they were in season. I enjoyed looking at them from my window. However, when they demolished her house, they also removed all the flowers. *If only she could have taken at least some with her.*

There were jam and sweet stores in this world, but even those were of the homemade variety, so it was very common to share. That's why I often gifted what I made here. It reminded me of when I lived alone and my time in my hometown.

Back then, I did most of the receiving, though. *Even now, I feel like I receive more than I give.* Before these oranges, I had received peaches and carrot cake — *Wait, am I a kid who needs looking after?*

*Surely not...at least, I hope so. I'll do better.*



I considered taking something else to Mr. Tom along with the marmalade. I thought about muffins, but I always made those, so I thought something different would be better. Then, I saw it. Hiding deep in the kitchen storage room was a magic-powered whisk!

Lady Adelaide wasn't fond of magic devices, but she kept some in the kitchen. She hadn't bought the whisk. It seemed it had been made as a test product and given to her to try. She never had any use for it, so it rarely ever surfaced from storage.

That said, it was quite big and heavy. It was different from the hand mixer I used to own. It needed to be placed on top of a table to be used.

Muffins, in general, didn't require a lot of beating. As for sponge cakes, not many eggs were required for smaller sizes, so they could be beaten manually with a bit of elbow grease. As a result, this large, bulky magic device rarely had its moment in the spotlight and was tucked deep away.

*Oh, with this I can make chiffon cake! I did a little dance. Chiffon cakes require the eggs to be beaten fully, and if I can make a meringue with that, it'll reduce the difficulty. Not that my recipes are difficult to make.*

The ingredients for chiffon cake were eggs and sugar. Butter wasn't required, so it was easy to make.

I separated the egg whites and the egg yolks, and then I put sugar into each and whisked them well. I whisked the egg whites until they formed peaks and whisked the egg yolks until they had become white. While it depended on the number of eggs, doing it by hand could be difficult and even tiring. There were even times when my arm hurt the next day, but I still hadn't whisked the mixture enough.

The only thing stopping me in the past was that fact, but I could use the magical device to whip the mixture without much work now.

Like with the air blower, no whisker or beater rotated. Once the mixture has been put into the special bowl, it begins to whisk it. The bowl fitted perfectly into the device, so it was hard to see what was happening inside. When I asked

Lady Adelaide about it, she said that it doesn't only whisk, but it can also knead. It could even be used for making bread dough. Lady Adelaide preferred using her hands though, so she never used it.

She also said that even though it was difficult to see inside and that one had to rely entirely on the machine, when she did try, it seemed to work fine. If it didn't lose moisture and separate while mixing it was fine with me. *I could always stop it when it's almost done and finish it off by hand.*

As a result, I made an impressive egg white meringue. As for the egg yolk, I finished it off by adding orange juice, grated orange zest, and olive oil.

I added flour and the meringue to the bowl with the egg yolk, then lightly stirred it with a wooden spatula. The mixture was perfectly fluffy and very well done—if I say so myself. I ended up clapping.

The issue, however, was the shape.

I didn't think that chiffon cakes existed here, but I couldn't find anything that would fit a chiffon cake in Lady Adelaide's utensil rack. Chiffon cakes were known for having a hole in the middle, and that hole was incredibly important.

Since chiffon cakes were so soft, once taken out of the oven and left like that, the middle of the cake would drop down. The cake was usually kept in the pan and cooled upside down to avoid that happening.

The hole in the middle of the cake allowed for the heat to be evenly distributed while baking. It also meant that the cake wouldn't fall out when turning it upside down to cool by reducing the amount of surface area it touched.

*I should also mention that when using a chiffon-shaped pan coated with fluorine, the batter can fall out when it's cooling, so it's important to be careful.*

I only ever owned aluminum molds, so I couldn't compare, but I had heard stories about that happening. The dough rises quite high while it clings to the mold, so it's best to have a mold that isn't too smooth and has a good amount of adhesion. It'll bake more deliciously that way.

Thus, since having the middle hole was so important, I opted for a Gugelhupf mold.

I kept a close eye on the oven, my heart thumping as it baked, but it came out all right in the end. *So, you can bake a chiffon cake in a Gugelhupf mold.* The cake itself was simple, so the diagonal corrugated sides in the Gugelhupf mold made for a nice design.

I couldn't take the bottom of the mold off, so it took a bit of work to remove it, but I had made sure to cover it in butter and flour so I didn't have to worry about it breaking or tearing.

I baked one to test, then baked one to give to Mr. Tom. I felt like that gave me a good grasp on how to make it, so I decided to make it more often. It got glowing reviews from Lady Adelaide, too!



A few days after I had received the oranges, I stopped by Mr. Tom's store before going to the clinic.

"Oh, you're back," Mr. Tom said with a slight smile, this time coming out to the front of the store.

*Oh, is he being tsundere?*

When I passed him the marmalade and the chiffon cake, he had a disinterested look on his face, yet he took them all the same. I feel like his eyes lit up for a moment.

*"Oh yeah, I almost forgot. The chiffon cake has a lot of eggs and water content in it, so it loses shape easily. Also, food spoils quickly in summer, so make sure to eat it as soon as possible."* I made sure to warn him.

"Got it. I should eat it as soon as possible. What an urgent dessert," Mr. Tom replied.

*Yes, yes, because I said you must eat it quickly, you have no choice but to do so. It's not like you love sweets and want to eat them as soon as possible.*

As I watched him take the cake and marmalade into the back of the store, his daughter laughed as she saw him, giving me a wink.

"He's super happy. Thanks, Margaret."

She also silently apologized for his grumpy reaction, but it should have been

me saying thank you. At first glance, Mr. Tom seemed difficult to read, when he was actually easy to read. *I just adore him.*

According to what I heard the day after, the cake that I had given to him had been eaten within the day. And so, the marmalade was used every day on his bread in the morning, and his daughter had overheard him mumbling that he was running out.

I celebrated my success. *I'll make some more for him.*



**ONCE** the festival had passed, the season continued at a leisurely pace.

The temperature in the morning and evening was cooler, and it wasn't that hot for long through the day either. That said, the summer vegetables continued to grow in the back field, and the rays of sunshine were still bright. Even so, purple flowers that resembled Japanese anemone had begun to blossom, signaling that the end of summer was approaching.

I had heard from Lord Walter that since meeting me and using the Investigative Magic, Hugh had been able to meet with the Spirit of the forest. He had divided up most of his work among his colleagues and took every opportunity to travel into the forest with the headmaster of the Magic Academy, and it seemed he had been quite busy.

I had word from Hugh in a letter that Lord Walter sent to me after the Festival of Eve that once he had some time, he would run to Miselle with the repaired magical device, but... *Um, Hugh?*

"Long time no see, Margaret. I'm sorry it took longer than expected. Oh, have you gotten even *cuter*? Ah, you were cute before, of course, but now even more so!" Hugh was the same as ever. "I wanted to come sooner," he pouted. He had even suddenly appeared in the field like he did the first time I met him.

*Um, Hugh?*

*Who is that woman with the impressive presence about her behind you? There seem to be around five guards and maids with her. Honestly, I'm a little afraid to ask.*

She looked older than Lady Adelaide. She used a cane, but her posture was elegant, and she had a royal aura about her, as if she was the queen of some country.

*Um. I'm just doing some weeding in the field. No one told me you'd be coming today nor that you would be bringing guests. Hel-lo?*

"Tausend, the Caller seems troubled," the older woman said.

"My apologies," Hugh said. "I was so delighted to meet with her again, I forgot myself for a moment. Ahem. Margaret, this is Her Majesty the Queen Dowager."

*Whaaaat!! Why did you suddenly bring a royal with you? Buddy, help!*

I had no idea how to bow in this situation, so I simply did the bow that Lady Adelaide taught me and stood stock still. The Queen Dowager smiled at my troubled expression.

"Dear Caller, I am the one who is honored to be in your presence. Could you please raise your head?"

*"The Queen Dowager. Does that mean she was previously queen and is now the mother of the current King?" I asked Hugh.*

"That's right, she's traveling incognito today. You don't have to be so stiff, Margaret."

*Hugh, how can you be so relaxed? Show some respect.*

"I stopped by the clinic on the way, so I think the doctor and Mark will be here soon," Hugh said. "Is Lady Adelaide in the kitchen? Your Majesty, shall we?"

"Ah, yes, it has been a long time since I last met with Countess Dustin," Her Majesty said.

"Margaret, you should come on inside when you're done here," Hugh said.

The entourage all bowed to me one by one as they headed toward the house.

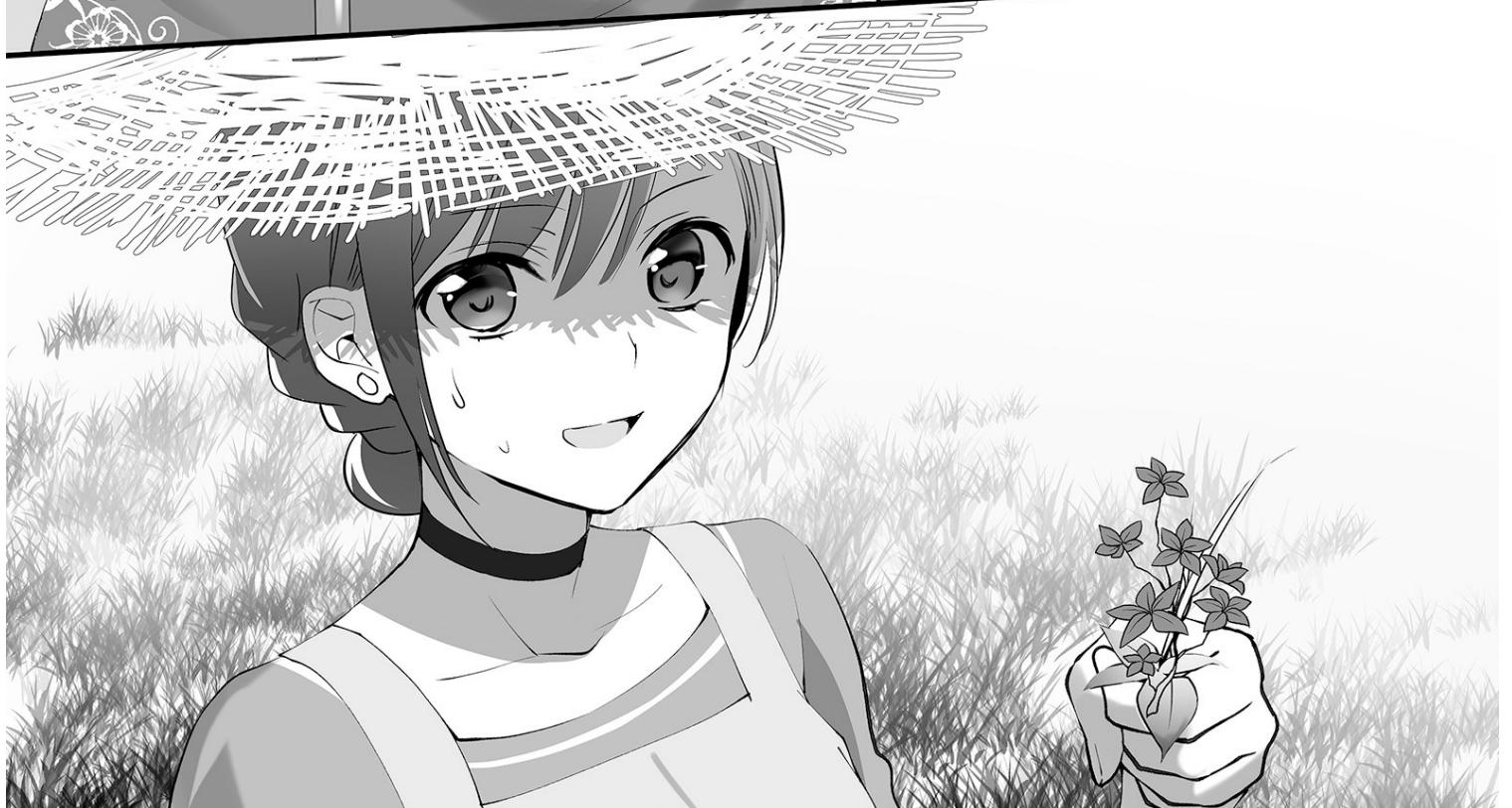
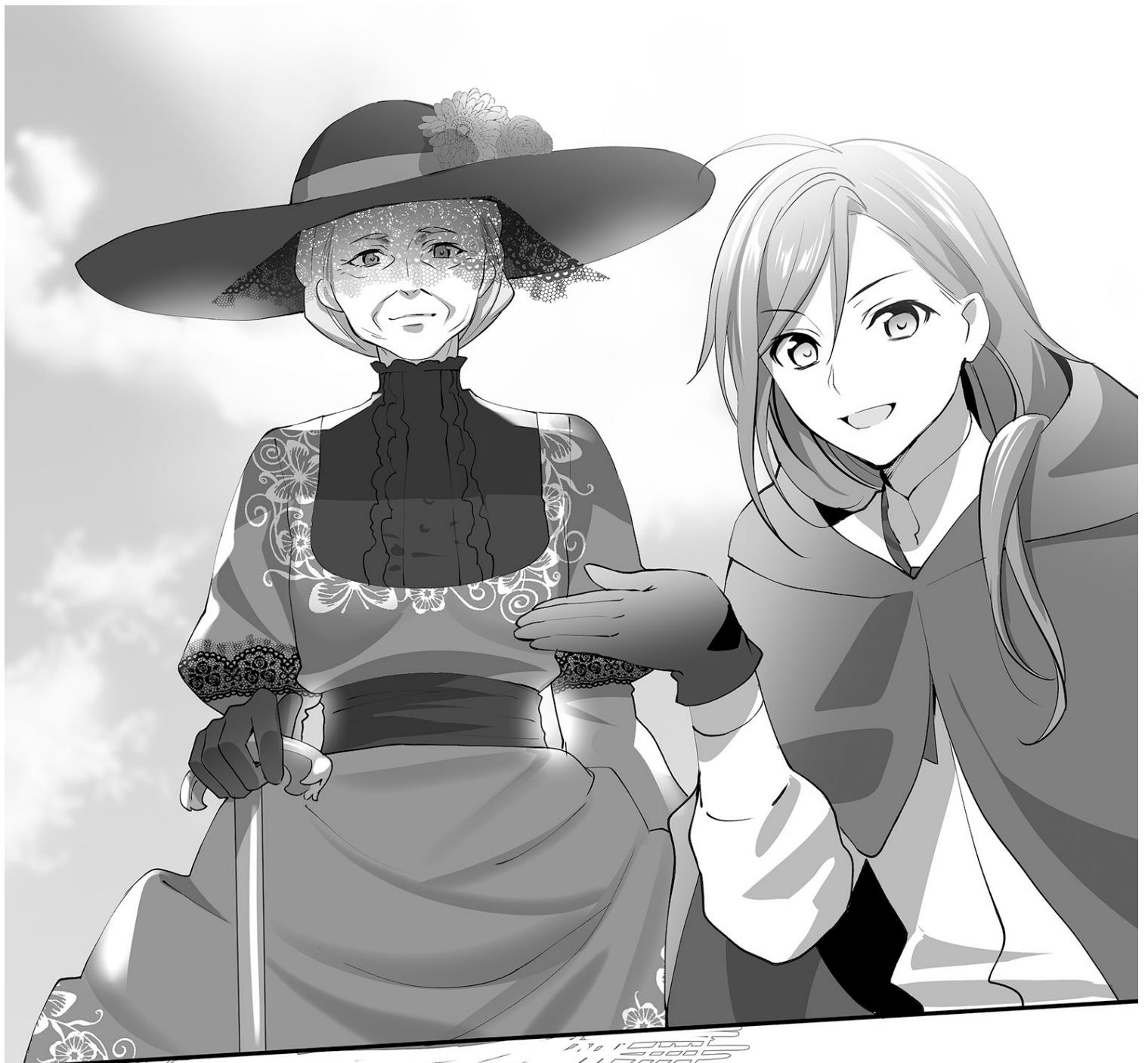
*...Ah, even though he is showing the Queen Dowager around, he's going to enter from the kitchen of all places. I can already see Lady Adelaide's face. She's no doubt in the middle of kneading dough. What a time for a visit.*

I stood dumbfounded for a while. Then, Buddy pulled at my skirt with some Fairy Lights he had brought with him from the forest, bringing me back down to earth. *That's right, I gotta go. I'm sorry, let's play together later.* The fairies spun around as if to show they understood and returned to the forest.

I let out a large sigh as I saw them off and staggered over to the outside sink to wash my hands.

Everyone was gathered in the rarely used parlor. *I wish I had been in the mood to clean yesterday. I wish.*





I sat between Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel, and the Queen Dowager sat on the sofa by herself. Mark and Hugh stood on either side. Buddy sat by my feet.

The Queen Dowager's maids and guards were only in the room until we exchanged greetings. She then ordered them to leave, leaving only a record keeper behind in the room with us.

Hugh had either soundproofed the room or set up some sort of barrier. As it was still hot during the day, the windows were wide open to allow some form of ventilation, but Hugh reassured us that the barrier would still be effective.

It seemed to be a high-level spell, as even Mark was slightly surprised by it. *I guess Hugh really is a powerful person from the Magic Academy.*

Lady Adelaide was naturally shocked by the sudden visit from the Queen Dowager, but she had calmed down by the time Dr. Daniel and Mark arrived. I was told multiple times to just act normal to ensure the conversation went smoothly. I had to do my best to keep calm.

*You're such a vibrant and wonderful woman, Your Majesty. But your aura is starkly different from a normal person.*

Her clothes were high quality for traveling clothes, and while I didn't sense any arrogance or haughtiness from her, she had a certain presence about her that made me shrink away.

The doctor, Lady Adelaide, and Mark were all nobles, so they were no doubt used to it. Or they were just hiding their nerves. Hugh was simply being Hugh.

"Usually, I would await your arrival at the Royal Capital," the Queen Dowager said. However, there is something urgent I must pass on, so I came here instead."

*Um, uh, Your Majesty, you're being so friendly right now, I don't know what to do. I thought there were a lot of dos and don'ts when speaking to high-ranking nobles, but I guess that isn't the case. Or is it the case? But just not right now?*

She apologized for not notifying us earlier about her visit, but it was done for safety reasons. *Yeah, even if it was an official visit, we'd still be shocked, so there's no helping that. Even then, don't apologize. There's no way the Queen*

*Dowager should be lowering her head in front of me. I'm gonna break into a sweat soon.*

*Agh, I'm so nervous that the magical device feather pen I'm holding is shaking ever so slightly. Speaking of which, they had incorporated everything I asked for. Amazing. Awesome.*

When I asked what I should do to thank the people at the Magic Academy who had made it for me, Hugh told me to bake some sweets. *Is that good enough? I'll bake a ton, then!*

“As the matter pertains to the nation’s highly classified information, it was originally planned so that the King himself would visit. However, Count Dustin dissuaded him from doing so, stating it may cause undue concern. Especially as he would be meeting with a woman, it was decided I would be more suited for this occasion.”

“I understand. I thank you for your kind consideration.”

*Thank you, Lord Walter. Your Majesty the King, please forgive me. I am just an ordinary person.*

I felt like I had heard words like “top secret” and other words that didn’t give me peace of mind. *Ugh, I guess I must listen to what’s coming next.*

“All right, I’ll get the explanation ball rolling,” Hugh said. “First, the day before the Festival of Eve, the headmaster of the Magic Academy and Walter met with the Spirit of the Forest.”

*Ah, I remember Lord Walter saying the Spirit had called for him. So, he met with it. He didn’t write about that in his letter...though I guess he can’t. That’s right, I’m still not supposed to write about my voice in letters, either.*

Even though Lord Walter worked in the Royal Capital, he would have to be extra careful with matters concerning the Spirit. He was also the kind of person to just meet with someone in person rather than explain something in a letter.

“I guess it was because the Festival of Eve was so close, but we were able to talk a lot with the Spirit,” Hugh continued. “As a result, we learned a lot. Walter was meant to come today, but he couldn’t find the time. I mean, the Queen Dowager is a busy woman too, y’know?”

*Oh, don't apologize with him, Your Majesty. This is enough already, I promise.*  
My heart was going to give out on me if they kept being so formal towards me.  
Hugh made me feel a bit more relaxed by reassuring me that he was there too.  
His laid-back attitude was helpful during times like these.

"The Spirit wishes to meet with you, but due to a few reasons, she's unable to leave the forest. So, she asked I pass on a message," Hugh said.

*A message? I wonder what it could be.*

"First of all, the Spirit wants to apologize for your leg injury. It won't heal any more than it has."

*...Oh.*

It didn't bother me if I walked slowly, but recently, it felt like it wasn't making any progress, no matter what the doctor did for it. Hugh talked about it apologetically even though it wasn't his fault. Before I could reply, Lady Adelaide questioned him.

"What...do you mean?"

"According to the Spirit, she was meant to summon the Caller a bit later. They didn't expect a Caller to arrive now," Hugh explained.

"Hugh, hold on," Mark interjected. "Could you explain it a bit better?"

*Huh? Ah, thanks, Mark. I heard something concerning there.*

Hugh apologized for jumping the gun with his explanation. "Okay, so, this will be a long one," he said. "Callers are summoned not long after a Spirit is born. They use a certain amount of power to summon them. However, the Spirit in the forest still doesn't have the required amount of power to summon you."

*...Come again?*

"The role of the Spirit and the Caller is to maintain the peace and stability of the world. For example, last time, when a Spirit appeared two hundred years ago. The cause of that was the international conflict starting to brew due to poor harvests. However, even if there aren't catalysts like that, a Spirit can still appear. I believe that's the case this time for you and this Spirit."

*I had read about that in a book and already discussed it a bit with the others.*

I nodded to show I understood, and Hugh pressed on with his explanation.

“The Spirit was confirmed to be in the Royal Forest for the first time last year, but they were born a while before that... Mark, do you remember when there was a highly contagious disease breaking out in one of the northern territories belonging to the baron about five years ago?”

Mark looked a little shocked at the sudden subject change, but it seemed he knew what Hugh was talking about. “Yeah. I remember that most of the locals had been infected. The source of the disease has yet to be discovered, and the territory is still under the care of the Royal Capital.”

“No one lives in that territory anymore,” Hugh said. “No one *can* live there. It’s been five years, and only now has vegetation begun to grow back. However, it is still a barren land where you can’t even drink the spring water.”

The doctor, who was sitting next to me, responded to Hugh’s story. “At that time, I received a special request for aid from that territory and headed there myself. Only a few people from the Magic Academy who specialized in healing were permitted to go, and by the time we got close to the region, it was already too late... It was awful. It wasn’t the result of a contagious disease—there was nothing we could do for them.”

The doctor was wearing an uncharacteristically stern expression. He was no doubt recalling that time.

“In fact, it wasn’t a contagious disease, instead it was a man-made disaster,” Hugh said. “In summary, some no-good forces used the baron to cause trouble in this country, then used that to host a coup d’état back in their country, hoping to take it over. There were certain individuals from a certain country who had planned to do such things, but there was a flaw in their plans.” Hugh glanced at the Queen Dowager as he continued talking. “Similar to when a Spirit summons a Caller, they opened a hole in the Realm. By force. And through this hole, they summoned a demon.”

*Demon. There’s a word I never expected to hear. Well, in a world where there are Spirits and fairies, I wonder why I never thought there could be other creatures. It’s not that strange for there to be demons, too.*

Lady Adelaide held her breath beside me.

"I-It's prohibited for humans to connect to the Realm," Mark said.

"That's right, Mark. If demons were to swarm through, the whole continent would be engulfed in a sea of flames. Fortunately, the spell was imperfect, and only a few small demons had made it through. The Magic Academy dealt with both the demons and the hole in the Realm. However, the northern territory and the people living there were annihilated in the process. We were unable to interfere with the disturbed balance of things, and the Spirit was born as a result."

That incident brought about the birth of one of the Spirits who kept the balance in this world. Five years ago.

"If the balance was disturbed by a natural disaster, then a newly born Spirit is usually enough to handle it. But this is different. I guess you could say they were keeping the status quo until now. As she slowly accumulated her power, the Spirit was finally able to appear in the Royal Capital Forest just last year."

Hugh paused for a moment. He looked right at me to confirm I was listening. His emerald-colored eyes were beautiful even at times like this, even though he seemed a little anxious.

*I'm a little afraid to hear what comes after this. My heart felt heavy.*

"A Spirit usually needs around ten years to stabilize, and then they summon a Caller after that. However, since there was a hole forced open in the Realm, it remained unstable even after we forced it shut. It looked like it was about to open again."

"Then the Magic Academy should've—" Mark interjected.

"Of course, we closed it again," Hugh responded. "However, unlike last time, it was like the other side was trying to claw its way through. In other words, there was nothing we could do on our side. Guard it, close it, repeat. Every time it upsets the balance, and when the balance is unstable, it makes it easier for the hole to open again—it's a vicious cycle. The only way to stop it would be to stabilize the world, but only the Spirit can do that. But that very Spirit lacks the power to do so."

"So, it summoned Margaret...?" Lady Adelaide asked in a quiet voice. Hugh

nodded.

“Correct. A Caller was called to help the inexperienced Spirit protect the world. Even though it’s a little earlier than planned.” Hugh looked at me with an unusually stern stare. “That’s you, Margaret.” I was so taken aback I forgot to blink.

“These kinds of irregular summons are brought about by the world’s will, so it wasn’t the Spirit that summoned you,” he said. “That explains why it wasn’t prepared, as well as why it was unable to protect the Caller when they crossed realms. There was a crack in the barrier meant to protect the Caller. I guess it’s like you should’ve been wrapped in a membrane...like a cocoon, but the membrane was brittle. Usually, you’d be healed within the cocoon, but the injuries you sustained in the other world didn’t heal. Not only that, as you were forced between the worlds without the barrier working, you lost your voice. The Spirit regrets that, and the fact that her power wasn’t enough to protect you.”

Something squeezed my right hand. It was Lady Adelaide. Her hand was a little cold to the touch.

“She— Ah, right, the Spirit is a woman too,” Hugh added. “Anyway, right after you arrived, she started channeling her power to you instead of herself. Remember when I said there was magic coming from the forest and being sent directly to you? That was the Spirit’s power. There’s a time limit when healing wounds sustained by crossing realms, so she was trying her best to heal you before that time was up. If Dr. Daniel hadn’t attended to your wounds, you probably wouldn’t have recovered as much as you have now.”

*“...So, uh. That was a lot of information to take in at once, so I’m a little confused. Okay, so, to summarize: I was never supposed to be here.”*

I wrote on the magic device, but my letters were all messy.

“That’s right,” Hugh answered. “Usually, a Caller would’ve been summoned in around five years at the earliest. Time flows the same between worlds, and what’s been done can’t be undone. It’s not entirely implausible for you to have been the one summoned in five years, but the odds are low.”

Hugh had cast his gaze down, but he gave it to me plain and simple.

*If things worked out how they should have, I would've died in that accident, not come to Miselle, and never met Lady Adelaide or Mark...*

"...I can't even imagine it any other way. I'm glad that we have Margaret. I don't even want to think of Margaret not being here." Lady Adelaide's hand trembled.

"Same for me. Even the mention of another possibility makes me sick. I prefer having our Margaret here," Mark insisted, sounding a little angry.

"No matter how you look at it, the one we have here now is Margaret. There's no changing that. I don't even want to change it," Dr. Daniel chimed in, patting me on the head as he always did.

"Yeah, me too. I'm glad the Caller is you, Margaret," Hugh said. "But we can't deny that you were put under an immense physical burden and were permanently harmed by this world you rightfully had no connection to."

Hugh's voice was unusually weak, driving home that it indeed was the reality. I was left speechless. The Queen Dowager, who had been quiet up to now, finally broke her silence to speak.

"The incident that started everything involved the king of another country and a noble from this country. The effects of using such forbidden magic to summon a demon are immeasurable... I can say now that as a protector of this nation, I do not think both countries were wrong to cover it up and treat it as highly classified information. I am satisfied that the situation has somewhat calmed down with the appearance of the Caller. However, I don't feel the same about how things have affected the Caller herself."

The Queen Dowager looked down. She then slowly opened her light blue eyes, showing quiet sincerity.

"Margaret, thanks to your arrival, the Spirit's power has increased, and it has fixed the hole in the Realm and protected this world. Despite this, it came at the cost of a sacrifice from yourself. There is no way for you to return to your old world, and you will have to live out your years here and in this hindered condition. As the country that was one of the causes of this situation, I ask that you let us compensate you... Nay, rather, we must compensate you."

*“W-Wait. Wait a moment.”*

I began to frantically move the pen.

If what I heard was true, that meant I was accidentally summoned just as I had that accident, and that's why I'm alive today. *Then, I was able to meet with everyone I care about here. If anything, I'm grateful. I don't see it as a sacrifice at all.*

“My legs are weak as well,” the Queen Dowager said sadly, “so I understand how inconvenient it can be. Plus, your voice is gone, too.”

*“Your Majesty, while I can't run, it's not that serious. Not to mention, if I had survived that accident in my world, I doubt that I would have recovered enough to live my life the same as I had been. As for my voice, now that I have the magical writing device, it's not a bother at all. Especially now that it's been improved a lot. I don't need any compensation.”*

“We also pulled you away from your loved ones. Although your parents have passed, you no doubt had family, friends, and people important to you.”

*“W-Well, when you put it like that, I guess. Indeed, I didn't live without people in my life.”*

However, it wasn't like there were people whom I would regret leaving behind, and it wasn't like I had built many deep connections. *Plus, it's not like I'm the only person ever to have to say goodbye to people I love... What was important was meeting new people.*

I finally realized that after coming here.

“Okay, then, let me give you a specific reason for accepting it,” Hugh interjected. “For the country to keep up appearances, could you at least accept some compensation?”

“...Will that be the end of it?” Dr. Daniel asked.

“Reynolds, not only you, but Count Dustin wrote in his report that the Caller wishes to lead a quiet life. Once this matter has been dealt with, I vow that we will not interfere anymore. On my name as Queen Dowager, the Royal Palace and the Temple will not ask you to do anything you don't want to do, Margaret.

If we can make it public that we are protecting the Caller, we can restrain other countries from getting involved, too."

The doctor nodded at me gently upon hearing her promise.

"I know that you've always done your best on your own, so you're no doubt perplexed... But how about this? Could you at least accept it for us?"

Looking at everyone's expressions, I could see they all felt the same way.

Lord Walter did say that he wanted me to live with some sort of compensation. I understood that it was for my safety. My not wanting to accept it was me being selfish.

...I wanted to do something.

Me wanting to be independent was because I wanted a reason for being here. I suddenly found myself in a different world, being called a Spirit Caller. I felt strange having such an important role even though I was unable to do anything.

I wanted something that made me feel like it was all right to be here. I wanted something that would allow me to feel that I was able to stand on my own two feet, but...

Me being summoned here was pure chance.

*If I have people who are happy that "I'm" here, then I may not need to long for a deeper reason.*

Feeling someone's gaze, I looked up and locked eyes with Mark.

"I told you, right? You'll find plenty of reasons. You belong here."

*You didn't have to just come out with it.* I should have smiled, but I began crying instead.



**BY** the time Lady Adelaide had replaced the tea, I had somewhat calmed down. Once I had calmed down, I felt embarrassed about crying in front of people, not to mention a member of the royal family!

*Ah...is there a hole for me to crawl into? Buddy was happily digging a hole in the back garden earlier; I wonder if I could fit into that?*

The Queen Dowager's smile was more embarrassing than reassuring. Buddy seemed to understand I had silently called for him as he got up onto my lap. I cuddled into him to hide my face.

"I see she is as sweet as everyone says," the Queen Dowager commented.

"She has been getting close to Marquis Lindgren's daughter, recently," Hugh said.

"Ah, Rachel. That will be good for her, too."

The Queen Dowager asked that I continue my relationship with Lady Rachel, and when I replied that I wanted the same, she smiled at me. *Aahh*.

"Oh, by the way, it seems Callers losing their memories is more of a recent thing," Hugh once again introduced a new fact. "We don't have records on every Caller, but there are a lot of stories. What I can say is that there were other Callers like Margaret who were prematurely summoned. Those Callers had also sustained injuries or had something inconvenient happen—among them were people who had lost their memories. Regardless of those incidents, knowing about another world can either be a bane or a boon. In order to keep such information from being spread around and bringing danger to the nation, precautions were put in place; namely, it being made common knowledge that the Caller 'had lost his or her memories.' Even if they actually hadn't," Hugh explained.

*Ah, that makes sense. That's a natural step for the rulers of a nation to take. Which reminds me, when I first met Hugh, he asked me a lot of questions about my old world... Did he want to confirm I could remember? I thought he was just curious, but I wonder if that wasn't the case.*

"The summoning of a Caller is due to the will of the world," the Queen Dowager's voice echoed around the parlor, "so if the world wishes to summon a Caller with the knowledge to destroy nations, then that is also the will of the world. I believe we ought to accept that, and I do not have any intention to manipulate information about Margaret. However, if you feel uncomfortable being asked, Margaret, then we shall do something about it. From what I had read in the reports about your personality and way of life here, not to mention that you had lost your voice, I did not think that there would be such an urgent

need for us to interfere. But I leave that decision to you.”

*“As far as my knowledge goes, I wouldn’t be able to do anything like cause an Industrial Revolution or a Reformation. Not to mention, I have absolutely zero magical ability,” I wrote.*

*They have just as many older women teaching them stuff here as I did back in my world, and if needed, I can probably help with expanding knowledge about cooking and cosmetics, but that’s about it... I wouldn’t worry too much.*

“That reminds me, Margaret. About your voice.”

*Voice? Yes, my voice. Wait, are we about to talk about that?* I looked at the doctor, Lady Adelaide, and then Mark.

“I have something I would like to share regarding that,” Dr. Daniel said.

“Ah, doctor, what is it? The Spirit had said something about Margaret being able to communicate, but they didn’t mention that she could speak,” Hugh said. “I was wondering about how she would communicate or how to even test for it. I’ll be relieved if you know how. Also, I heard it’s really limited.”

“*Limited?*”

“The Spirit lamented the fact that their power was too weak, even in this department,” Hugh went on. “Animals, small children who have yet to speak, and babies can hear your words. It seems to have expanded its scope lately, but only to those you consider family, according to the Spirit. Any more than that, and it’s too big of a burden on the Spirit.”

“Family? Margaret’s family is in the other world, though...” Dr. Daniel said.

“It is of course taking her family in this world into consideration,” Hugh said. “It seems to apply to people Margaret views as family and who view her as the same, without being limited by blood ties. Animals and children are closer to the Spirit, so it works for them regardless, but not for adults. As Margaret has no magical ability of her own, for it to not be a burden on the person she is speaking to and herself, both parties need to have a strong bond.”

“Oh.”

“Oh my.”

The doctor and Lady Adelaide looked right at each other over my head as they were sitting on either side of me. *Family...well, yeah. Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide are basically like my mother and father here.*

I was honestly glad that they thought the same of me.

*Then, huh, what about Mark? Is Mark family?*

“After a while, once the Spirit gets stronger, the range of it will change again, apparently,” Hugh explained. “Right now, it’s only parents, children, and spouses. It’s limited to people with that kind of connection.”

*Huh... What was that? What did Hugh say just now?*

*Parents, children, spouses.*

*Spouses... WHAT?!*

Hugh grinned as he stepped forward to close the distance between us. “So, for me to hear your voice, I’ll have to become your husband. How about it?”

“Yeah, there’s no need for that. None. That role’s already filled.” Mark shut down Hugh’s carefree offer as Buddy moved off my lap and stopped Hugh in his tracks.

“Huh, just when I thought Margaret had gotten even cuter. That’s why!”

*H-Hey, Mark, why do you look so smug? Hugh is even grinning as he strokes Buddy... What should I...ack.* I hid my face into Lady Adelaide as I hugged her. She gently patted me on the head.

“Seems that orange flower wasn’t too hasty after all, Margaret,” Lady Adelaide said warmly as she fixed my hair accessory.

*Where is that hole? Buddy, please, take me to the hole you were digging so I can throw myself in it.*



**AFTER** that, the matter of compensation became the main topic. Despite it involving me, my brain just couldn’t keep up anymore, and I ended up leaving the rest to the doctor and Lady Adelaide as I retired to my room—or rather, I was told to go and rest a little.

I took my shoes off and dived onto my bed. Burying my face into my pillow did nothing to help. My head was still spinning, and I couldn't calm down.

I turned my head to the side so that I wouldn't mess up my hair and gazed at my very familiar surroundings. I could see the ceiling decorated with crown molding, the wooden window frames, and the pale green wallpaper. It was pretty and not something you would see in an ordinary Japanese home.

It was probably due to the fact there were no magical devices, but the room didn't feel like it was in a different world. It felt like I had time-skipped to an old village in Europe.

That said, even though there were magical devices in this world, they weren't the answer to everything. For example, magical devices that acted like telephones weren't very widespread and weren't an item often seen in ordinary houses. High-level magic users could form a sort of contract and communicate telepathically with people who were far away.

Even the average Joe had some form of magical ability, so there was no need for any other sources of power, only magical stones that were mined as minerals. Magic stones with a high level of purity were important. Stones that were in circulation were just ordinary stones that had been infused with magic by a high-level magic user.

It was probably better to think that Lady Adelaide preferred those with more need for magical devices to have them, rather than saying she didn't like them. She thought that magic stones should be reserved for more important things, such as people who were unable to move about freely or used in clinics and research. She could do most things with her hands, anyway.

She couldn't get along with the nobles in the Royal Capital, not because they used magic stones, but more because their status was based on how many they had in their possession, even if they didn't use them. She could understand if they were donating to help further research and, as a result, make them more widespread. However, they simply wanted the highest quality magical devices just to show off. Lady Adelaide couldn't get over that fact. She once let that little tidbit slip when we were chatting.

To be honest, I understood how she felt. It was more of a psychological issue

that wasn't something that could easily be changed. If I were to spend money on a luxury car or jewelry, even if I understood their worth and how wonderful they were, I'd feel like they were a burden more than anything else.

*I wonder how long she struggled with that fact before finally being able to say, "I'm just not fit to be a noble."*

Lady Adelaide often made donations to the researchers but very rarely bought the products, so the manufacturers began to distance themselves from her. To them, it felt like their achievements weren't being recognized, which was saddening.

I thought about that as I gazed at the curtains fluttering in the wind when there was a quiet knock at my door. As I opened it, I found Mark standing there with a tray with two cups. Steam rose from the cups.

"It seems most of the details have been decided," he said. "It'll be a while before it's all finalized, though, so I came to check on you... Fancy a drink?"

*I see. Sure, thank you.*

Mark came into the room. I sat on my bed and Mark pulled out a chair and placed it opposite me before sitting down. We each took a cup.

*...Delicious. Warm drinks are so relaxing.* We stayed silent for a while, blowing on our drinks as we drank them.

"There was so much new stuff to learn today. I guess that makes sense when there hasn't been a Spirit or a Caller in this country for centuries," Mark muttered as he looked down at his cup.

*It's been two hundred years since the last appearance of either. It makes sense there's still a lot they don't know.*

"Back when there was all that fuss with the baron's territory, I was still a student, so I was unable to go with Dr. Daniel. Everything was carefully controlled, from the information about it and who could come and go... A lot of people were speculating about things in the Royal Capital. The doctor didn't tell me anything when he came back, either. To think that's what happened."

*Hearing about demons and summoning sounds like something out of a novel*

*or a movie, but it's a reality here. I mean, I'm only here because I was summoned.*

Mark looked at my face as if to confirm something. Then his gaze moved to my bare legs hanging just off the edge of the bed. The scar was barely visible on my left leg.

"The doctor and I had spoken about how weird it was that all your other wounds healed except your leg," he said. "It seemed like our treatment hadn't been working lately."

*That's right. I'm sorry for making you guys do treatment for no reason.*

I finished drinking and put my cup on the side table. I then took his hand and guided him to sit next to me. I had unfortunately left my magical writing device in the parlor, but it seemed like Mark wanted to talk without it. Whether I was going to communicate by tracing on his palm or putting our foreheads together, it was difficult to talk face-to-face.

I asked him to tell me how things went with the Queen Dowager after I'd left the room.

"They're going to make the compensation an amount that won't cause you much trouble, so don't worry about that," he said. "As for where to live, I assume you don't want to leave this forest yet?"

*"Huh, why? Can I not stay here? It's not as bad as it was before, but I still feel a little uneasy about leaving."*

As I wrote that in his hand, he contemplated it.

"Although the flow of magic from the Spirit should have stopped, it's still being sent from the forest, according to Hugh. It's probably to keep healing you... Yeah, it's probably best you stay here still."

*"Hey, you didn't answer my question."*

Mark then began to hesitate as he continued speaking, seeing my dissatisfied expression. "Ah, everything is fine for now. Just, you know. This estate and the land surrounding it all belong to Lady Adelaide. She's getting on in age and in the future— Ah, don't cry."

I ended up bursting into tears. Mark panicked as he wiped away my tears with his fingers, but my tears showed no signs of stopping.

...It's not like I didn't already think of that.

After all, it was always like this.

My grandmother, my mother, my father, the people who I had made friends with when I lived in the apartment block—everyone, everyone, all passed away before me.

Even so, I didn't want to think about it. I didn't even want to imagine it happening to Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel.

"I'm sorry. That's not what you want to hear right now, is it."

Mark wrapped his arms around me and hugged me. I couldn't stop crying. He apologized again. I nodded as I buried my face in his chest. *For some reason, I'm easily upset today.*

I slowly began to calm down as Mark gently stroked my back.

"Lady Adelaide asked that the forest, including a section of the land around it, be given to you."

I looked up in surprise. Mark had a slightly troubled smile on his face.

"After Lady Adelaide passes, this territory will probably be returned to the Dustin family. And that's fine if Walter is around. However, what happens after that? We don't know what the future holds. While I believe it's difficult to show any form of disrespect to the Caller, you did say you want no regrets. No doubt the land will be returned to the Royal Family, and they will grant you a part of it to make this happen. You don't have to use it. Just continue living here. If you're going to take it, please do. For Lady Adelaide's peace of mind, at least."

*For Lady Adelaide...*

*Wait, what? Since when was I sitting on his lap? Um, all right, is this that so-called lap-hug? He's had a solid hold on me for a while now, but, huuuuh?*

*Plus, why does he have such a panicked and tormented expression?*

Mark put his forehead on my shoulder, his blond hair tickling my neck.

“...I don’t even want to think about the possibility of you not being here.”

His voice sounded like he was begging me not to go, as if I were going to disappear at any moment. He was holding me tight enough it hurt, and he was trembling.

“I honestly have no idea how I even lived up to now. Since being saved by the doctor, coming to Miselle, and meeting you...it feels like my life is just starting.”

He sounded pained, and he tightened his grip on me. I somehow managed to move my hand and stroke his hair.

Mark eventually looked up, turning away to hide the pain in his eyes.

“Every morning, I wake up and wonder if it was all just a dream,” he whispered. “I wonder if I’m just having the best dream ever and that I’ll wake up in the Royal Capital, back to where I was nothing more than a shell of a man.”

I placed my hand on his cheek and drew him closer. **“You don’t need to look so lost. You don’t need to be so uncertain.”**

I put my forehead against his cold forehead. Even though he appeared to be so full of confidence, he always harbored such worries. *That’s why he always touches me to check if I’m still here.*

**“I’m still here.”**

“I know. You belong here, Margaret. But hearing what Hugh said, I felt like I’d been hit in the head. The fact what we have now might have never been, I—”

**“Mark. Have I ever once said I wanted to go back to my world?”**

“...No, but...”

**“I can’t help but remember things and reminisce. Most of my life was spent there. Around twenty-eight years’ worth. But, on the day I first woke up here, I cried.”**

“Margaret.”

**“I knew that this was now my world. I cried a lot back then. But with that, I bid farewell to my old life and that world.”**

The reason I came here was because of that accident. I thought I was going to die, but I wasn't afraid. Because everyone was already waiting for me on the other side. I wasn't sad that I would die, I was sad that they had left me behind.

*But now...how should I put this? What can I say to make you feel relieved? Even though I feel so relieved and safe here in your arms. I know more than anyone else how it feels to be left behind. I know how it feels to leave people behind.*

It had begun to feel like he was clinging to me rather than holding me tightly.

**“And what helped me thoroughly believe I could make a life here was because Lady Adelaide, Dr. Daniel, and you, Mark, were all here for me.”**

“...I should have known that the reason you would look so uneasy at times was not because you wanted to go back to your world, but because you were struggling with being the Caller.”

*As long as you understand that much.*

**“You know, I never expected that my time would suddenly stop. That my life would be cut short. And because I experienced that, I know now that being here, and being able to live like this every day is a precious gift. You know, Mark, I love you.”**

Mark was shocked and pulled away. Rather than looking speechless, he looked dumbfounded.

*That reminds me, I never said it before. I could see myself reflected in his blue eyes. Even I could tell what the woman with teary eyes and a big smile reflected there was thinking: I love this man.*

We touched our foreheads together once again.





*I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so sparse with my words.*

**“I love you dearly.”**

*Even when you treat me like a child, when you spoil me, although I'm not used to it and I'm often bewildered, I like it. You always think of me first. I don't think I have anything special about me that means I should be treated like that, but every day I am treated with undeniable kindness, fulfilling me to the point of overflowing.*

“Margaret.”

**“What should I do? How do I get this across to you? I've dated people in the past, but this is the first time I've ever felt like this. It's my first time being in love, so I don't know what I should do. Hey, Mark, I love—”**

The words were returned to my lips.

Every time he placed his lips on mine, I felt breathless. I had no idea this kind of thing could be so exciting. My head felt cloudy, but I could feel his long fingers supporting the back of my head. Each time he kissed me, I felt like I was going to melt away.

He moved away for a moment. His expression was the same as always, but his gaze felt more piercing than usual.

My confession poured directly onto his lips; his arms tightened around me—getting across much more than words could say.

His fingers moved searchingly through my hair as I heard the faint noise of my hair ornament being placed down on the table. My hair cascaded down. Summoned by a sigh that still had the remnants of a breathless kiss, I opened my eyes slightly. I caught my breath, trapped by his passionate gaze.

My mind was filled with thoughts. *I want to spoil him. Just as he has spoiled me, feeling the contours of my face and the nape of my neck—leaving no part untouched.*



**THE** discussion after Margaret had left for her room carried on a lot longer than I expected.

Her Majesty the Queen Dowager, stating that we wouldn't likely get another opportunity like this, wanted to decide everything down to the smallest detail that was within her power.

"If these things are decided with me present, then it will stop the House of Lords and those from the Temple from saying unnecessary things."

I was entirely grateful for that.

Daniel was also forward with his opinions, and once most of it had been decided, the conversation continued a little longer as we settled on the rest. The finer details would be left to Walter to finalize within the Royal Capital.

I had sent Buddy to get Margaret. I felt a little relieved seeing Margaret coming down the stairs with Mark holding her hand. Her eyes were a little red, but she didn't seem as worn out as she did before she left for her room.

After seeing the Queen Dowager off in front of the estate, I returned inside. I decided to relax a little and headed to the veranda. As I sat down in the rocking chair, I felt like I was glued to the chair, unable to move. I was more exhausted by it all than I'd thought.

"Ade, you alright?"

Even though Daniel had taken the initiative during the negotiations, he seemed a lot more energetic than me. He handed me a warm cup of tea.

"Thank you... I guess you're used to stuff like that after working as a royal physician for so long," I replied.

"That was a long time ago."

"It's been longer than a decade since I was last at the Royal Palace," I said.

As I accepted the cup of honey-infused tea prepared by Margaret, Daniel also took a cup and sat on the bench beside me. He had left the clinic to Mark and had decided to stay here for the day.

I breathed in the sweet scent of the tea. Although it was summer, my body felt cold. I felt the heat travel through my fingers holding the warm cup.

"Seems like I was fairly nervous," I admitted.

"She's a good person, but she does have an aura of unapproachable majesty about her..." Daniel said knowingly. "But wouldn't you say your nervousness stems more from what you learned from her than being in her presence?"

"That... That could be it."

"They also spoke about a lot of things I didn't know," Daniel mumbled.

*There's no need for you to look so guilty. It wasn't your fault.*

"I'll continue to look after Margaret's injuries. Even if I can't heal them, I'll make sure that it doesn't get any worse," he vowed.

"I'm not worried about that because she's had you every step of the way," I told him. "But she's still so young. I wish I could swap places with her."

"Margaret's leg isn't that bad, you know."

"I know, but..."

*Yes, really. I was less shocked about her leg no longer recovering, but more that there was a chance she might not have been here at all.*

I felt more shocked that I wouldn't have been able to meet her. I didn't feel as shocked that she had suffered such an injury or that she had to endure the loneliness of being away from her family by accident. She treated me like a mother and I viewed her like a daughter.

I was shocked at my selfishness. It scared me.

"...Ade. Even if Margaret had sustained an even greater injury coming here, I would still be happy that she was here. I think the same goes for Mark, too."

The sound of water came from the kitchen. Daniel looked towards it. The ever-hard-working Margaret, seemingly feeling better, or rather, wanting to move around, had begun preparations for dinner.

Although I was fully aware of how much she enjoyed living here without the use of magical devices, I couldn't help but feel guilty.

"You know, I'm most surprised by how I feel," I said. "I have gotten so used to a life with Margaret, it feels like the most natural thing in the world... Even though it's only been half a year since she's become a part of my life."

"This isn't about time, though. It's pure love," Daniel said jokingly, no doubt to raise my spirits. It did cheer me up, and I felt myself smile.

"...Hehe, you're right. In that case, there is nothing I can do about these feelings," I responded.

"Exactly. Look at Mark, for example."

Mark, who had become Daniel's adopted son, had changed a lot since meeting Margaret. It was incredibly plain to see. He was very stubborn when she first arrived. As the days passed, all his rough edges softened. In the months after spring, even his features had changed somewhat, revealing the true Mark. He had a youthful generosity, was sharp-minded, and equally sharp-tongued... He seemed hopeful for the future now.

"Margaret is a strange one, isn't she? Even though she doesn't mean to be," I mused.

She was quick at breaking down people's walls with her smile and aura. She was incredibly warmhearted, without an ounce of stubbornness or doing so simply to keep up appearances.

The reason why she was so easily accepted by the villagers wasn't because she was a Caller, or because she had taught them about cosmetics. It was because she was Margaret.

She was the type of person to reveal her true self straight away, hiding nothing.

*I wonder if Margaret knew. Ever since Tanya came here after marrying, she was unable to get used to living in Miselle. Anna had pushed people away as the older women didn't like her loud and flashy clothing.*

Margaret had heard the rumors and gossip, but didn't take any of it at face value. She met with the ladies herself and drew her own opinions. And I followed suit, influenced by her.

Although Tanya was quite expressive in both her words and actions, she was a brilliant cook and a very warm person. Then you had Anna, who was always in high spirits, acting as the advertising for her store.

Even the sullen-faced Mr. Tom, whenever Margaret dropped by the store, would always join in the conversation and end up laughing with joy.

I felt like I was able to get closer to the villagers and cross a line I hadn't before thanks to Margaret. I wondered if it was because she had to do it for work and was good at it, but she had remembered the faces and names of all the villagers—even babies who were just born. Even though she didn't have a voice to call out to them.

Whenever she went into the village, she always bumped into someone and would tell me about it while laughing when she got home. It was always someone unexpected.

*"I can't deny all the rumors," she'd said. "However, how people take it and how they feel differs from person to person. Someone might call some grapes sour, but they might be sweet to me. Even if they are sour, I would make them into jam. It'd probably be delicious."*

When both her parents died, and she was at a loss with what to do with her life, the first people to reach out to her were her supposedly narrow-minded neighbors and one of the most hated, scariest teachers in her school.

Not many people could dislike someone who accepted them for who they were. That applied not only to Mark, but also to me and Daniel—even Walter.

Ever since Margaret had begun walking around beside Mark, she'd gotten a few jealous looks from the younger women in the village. It was a well-known fact that he only had eyes for one person, and knowing Margaret's nature, it didn't take long for their jealousy to turn into pure envy and watchfulness.

I'm sure they quickly discovered their jealousy was misplaced when they saw Mark fawning over her so much.

Margaret had a reliable, older sister presence when interacting with others, but she became just like any other girl in love when she was with Mark because he'd doted on her so much and gotten her to drop the walls she'd kept up. That was one part she struggled with: learning to rely on others. She had spent so much of her life relying on just herself that she struggled to break that habit unless someone went as far as Mark did.

*She will no doubt be fine with Mark by her side.*

I found myself thinking of another couple in the distant past who they reminded me of. Even though there was no future for that couple.

I was the youngest daughter of a count with a name that was only recognized locally, and Daniel was the second son of a baron. We were childhood friends who were always together, and then before we knew it, we were engaged. We had zero doubts about how our future would look together.

My father, who handled all our family affairs, suddenly died one day. It then came to light that the territory he owned had an unexpectedly large amount of debt.

It was a common tale.

It wasn't all bad, however.

Both my family and the territory were saved by my marriage to a man I didn't love. I became pregnant with Walter, and I was able to live without any financial worry.

This estate in the woods was originally Count Dustin's estate. By being here, I was able to meet Margaret.

*And as a result, I'm now sitting here with Daniel drinking tea. There's nothing left I could wish for.*

"...I wonder if she would still love me as I am now," I said.

"Of course she would. You're her mother, after all."

"And you're her father, right? You heard her voice, didn't you," I joked.

Daniel suddenly set his cup to one side and looked at me with a serious expression. "Ade. Let's become a real family."

"Daniel?"

"I know it might be too late to say it, but you are the only one for me. It's only ever been you. Is it selfish of me to want to take your hand, that I couldn't take back then, and stay with you until the end?"

*Is this a dream...a perfect dream?* My hands began to shake on the rocking

chair's armrest.

"I cannot change the past. You were stolen away by the count, and I threw myself into my studies," he continued. "Even after becoming the head physician for the Royal Palace, I couldn't change the past. I couldn't save you, even though I knew you were struggling in the Royal Capital."

"Daniel, that's not the case at all."

"No, it is. I can no longer deny it, for your sake. However, Ade, what comes after is different. I should just be happy being by your side, but seeing Mark and Margaret together made me want something more."

He laughed awkwardly as he stood up and knelt on one knee in front of me. He placed his warm hand on my hand that was gripping the armrest. His hand was warm, large, and slightly calloused. A hand I had held many times back in the day. His hand that always guided me—and yet I was the one who'd shaken it off.

"...It wasn't your fault. Honest," I said.

"Yeah, I had expected you would say that. That's why, Ade. Will you let me spend my future with you? Will you let me make up the lost time with you? Through summer, through winter. We'll be able to go to the Festival of Eve together so many more times. I no longer want to waste any more days."

I wanted to think it was a dream, but his grip strengthening on my hand brought me back to reality.

"I-I can't. I won't be forgiven."

I had neglected him for all those years. How many years—how many decades had passed since then? I broke off our engagement and became another man's second wife to save my family, whereas Daniel stayed single that whole time. It wasn't difficult to see who was in the wrong when it came to our relationship.

However, he wouldn't let me escape his sincere gaze.

"Do you need anyone's forgiveness but mine?"

"Daniel..."

"I guess we have to start over with me giving you an orange flower again,

eh?"

*Ah. So, you were the one.*

"You told Mark about that, didn't you? Kids these days don't know about that custom."

"Back then, I couldn't fulfill what that signified. But now, I'm able to."

He smiled as he softly joined both his hands with mine, then he slowly lifted them and showed me. I had stopped crying after I had gotten married, but ever since meeting Margaret, I found myself crying a lot.

"I'll give you another set when the orange flowers bloom," he vowed. "But I'm not waiting until spring."

My hands were rough from working in the fields and cooking every day. They weren't like noblewoman's hands at all. Back then, he'd said that he loved my hands. I was his Ade, and he fell in love with me for that, not my status. Then he had placed an orange flower into my hair.

The white flower from that day continued to bloom inside of me, never once withering.

"...I'm an old lady now," I said.

"I'm also an old man," Daniel replied. "Looks like we get to be old together, after all."

I couldn't see his smiling face through my tears.

## Epilogue: The Scent of Apples on a Fall Day

*“OUR country has once again been bestowed with a blessing.*

*The Royal Palace has announced that a Spirit Caller appeared in a village near the Royal Capital. The Caller has lost their voice and sustained an injury, so they are recovering at the estate of the local lord.*

*Based on advice from a Royal Physician, the Caller will not be traveling to prioritize their recovery.*

*Many nobles from inside and outside the country, as well as many state visitors from other countries, have asked to meet with the Caller, but it has been decided that they will have no direct contact. This is out of concern for the Caller’s well-being.*

*The Caller prefers to be left alone, so the Royal Palace also asks that these wishes be obeyed.*

*It is said they are a beautiful young woman with black hair and two different colored eyes, evidence of the Spirit’s protection. She enjoys working with her hands, is skilled at cooking, and is said to have a close connection to both children and animals. She is often said to be like a Holy Mother.*

*Currently, the existence of one Spirit has been identified on our continent, along with their Caller. They are working together to ensure the safety and prosperity of this world.*

*They both hope to lead quiet lives.*

*With the appearance of the Caller, the Temple plans to hold a ritual this year...”*

*“Hold on. What do they mean by that? Who’s a Holy Mother?”*

I felt dizzy reading the newspaper-like report that the doctor had brought back from the Royal Capital. Mark supported me as I staggered, taking the newspaper out of my hands before I dropped it. He looked at it amused.

*“...I don’t think they wrote anything strange,” he said.*

"That's right. That's just how it is," Dr. Daniel agreed.

*I had heard from one of the government staff that it's necessary for me to have some degree of "sacredness" about me, but it's embarrassing! If the people from the village read this, they're gonna be shocked, thinking, "Who's this about?" Especially when they realize just how different I am from what's written here. Ahh... I can't deal with this.*

"By the way, can this newspaper thing be found here in Miselle?" I asked.

"They said it's being made available throughout the nation. It'll probably arrive here within the week," the doctor responded. I put my head in my hands.

*"Stooooop. Give me a break. All I can imagine is they'll be disappointed when they meet me! Don't laugh at me, you two! Honestly!"*

"Hugh and Walter both said that you were like the Spirit. I don't think they can be wrong about it, can they?"

*No, Mark. They're wrong. Entirely wrong.*

*"The Spirit and Margaret are similar. Their general presence and even their expressions are reminiscent of sisters. I was a little surprised when I first met the Spirit, but it strangely feels right somehow."*

Hugh had said that the last time he visited us. He said our general presence was similar, but he didn't say our faces were. *Writing it like that could cause misunderstandings. Some might even say it's a scam.*

The only people who had met with the Spirit were Hugh, Lord Walter, the headmaster of the Magic Academy, and maybe one or two other people, so who knew the reality of it? However, I had heard that the Spirit was gorgeous.

*She had light blonde hair that resembled rays of moonlight, indigo-blue eyes that resembled the night sky, and pearl-white skin... She was a goddess. There's no way I resemble her. If anything, she's closer to Lady Rachel.*

"Also, Daniel, is it true she's been summoned by other countries?" Lady Adelaide asked.

"Well, it would be suspicious if no other countries asked to see her. How about it, Margaret, would you like to go?" the doctor asked. "You can go to as

many as you like.”

I made an exaggerated gesture, signaling “no.” I had yet to even step foot in the Royal Capital, and I could visit there on a day trip. How on earth was I gonna get to different countries? *It's not that I dislike traveling. It's just not an option for now.*

Plus, if I go to one country, then I'll have to go to all of them. I'd have to stay for some time while there, and it would all just be discussing diplomatic matters.

It wouldn't be a normal sightseeing trip; there would be welcoming parties, I'd have to visit the royal families, would have to worry about security, and so on.

*However, if I were to go, I'd sneak into the cities to eat food.*

Seemingly understanding my intentions, the doctor laughed and nodded as he folded up the paper. He then took something else out of his suitcase, wrapped in cloth. It seemed rather special. It was around the size of a small dictionary.

“Oh, it's finished,” Mark said. “Let me have a look.”

Dr. Daniel looked a little shy and delighted as he passed it over to Mark.

Mark carefully accepted it with both hands. I shuffled closer to him, and we both looked at what he was holding. He slowly removed the deep red velvet fabric, revealing a single picture inside a frame.

Pictured were Lady Adelaide and Dr. Daniel dressed up quite formally.

*Ah, what wonderful expressions.*

Lady Adelaide was sitting on a chair, and the doctor was standing beside her... *Doctor, you must look at the lens. He's just looking at Lady Adelaide.*

I pointed it out to Mark, who then quickly began to tease the doctor.

“The photographer told him countless times, but it ended up coming out like that,” Lady Adelaide said.

“I couldn't help it. I can't keep my eyes off you,” Dr. Daniel responded.

Lady Adelaide, who was serving the doctor tea, began to turn a shade of red.

Mark and I exchanged knowing glances. I placed the picture of them on top of the mantle and accepted a cup of tea from Lady Adelaide. I grabbed a shawl and headed out to the veranda.

*Fall is here.* The air was clean, and the sun's rays were warm. All the colors around the estate had changed into a golden yellow. Aside from the evergreen trees, the forest was preparing for winter.

I stroked Buddy, who had joined us on the veranda, and sat down in the rocking chair.

"...They're sure close," Mark said.

*They really are.* I wholeheartedly agreed with Mark, who was warmly watching them through the window to the living room.

A while after the Queen Dowager had visited, Dr. Daniel and Lady Adelaide went to the Royal Capital together. They had informed Lord Walter of their engagement, and he had given them his blessing. Using his position as the Prime Minister's assistant, he began the preparations straight away. They had even gotten support from the Queen Dowager herself to make their marriage official without any delay.

The other day, they had a simple ceremony in the Temple and returned to Miselle. They had told the villagers that they had no plans for any showy celebrations; however, the rest of us were secretly planning to throw a party for them.

*I mean, it's something you'd want to celebrate.*





Mark had to look after the clinic while they were gone, and as usual, I was unable to make the trip to the Royal Capital, so Lord Walter and Lady Rachel acted as witnesses and helped with the photo. *I wish we could have seen it. With our own eyes.*

That's why the villagers were so excited and planning in secret with me.

Dr. Daniel was now living at the estate with us and commuting to the clinic every other day.

The clinic had been officially handed over to Mark, who had become an independent doctor, and he was living on the second floor of the clinic. Although he still came to the forest to gather herbs and he ate dinner with us almost every night. When there were no issues at the clinic, he would even stay here.

Some of Dr. Daniel's patients in the Royal Capital had also been gradually transferred over to Mark. He would often be called to the royal clinic and made the trip out to the Royal Capital a few times a month. He seemed quite busy.

He told me that he was taking days off and looking after himself, but both Mark and Lord Walter were similar when it came to their work. *I guess they're stepbrothers now.*

As I thought about that, I pulled out two letters I had received today.

One had Lady Rachel's family crest pressed onto it, and the other was a plain envelope from Lord Walter. Based on his advice, I was now writing a book when I wasn't helping at the clinic or doing housework. The book had stories aimed at children, and I guess I could call them fairy tales. Lord Walter recommended that I write about things from my old world and make it into a book.

There were no books for children here. Although papermaking and printing technology continued to improve, books were still regarded as high-society items. It wasn't that this world had poor literacy—there were normal people who wanted books.

I planned to write a book with stories from another world and then use the sales to help the children. Such as donating to orphanages, hospitals, schools, and so on. If I did that, then no one could claim the Spirit was favoring certain

people or things.

As I had some physical constraints and was unable to work outside, this was a great idea. I could do it at home, and it was related to children.

*"You can just stay with us forever without having to do anything extra. Though I imagine you'd feel better about receiving compensation while having something to do."*

My big brother Walter had said that to me when he suggested the idea. He really understood me well.

I had changed the main characters and settings to match this world, but the meat of the story was exactly how it was in my world. Names like Cinderella and Tom Thumb often had meaning to them, so it was rather difficult to decide on those. The base knowledge of the stories was different from this world, so there was a lot I had to match up. I didn't have to rush, though, so I was slowly progressing through it.

I had planned to make one story one volume long, with pictures throughout, so that it would be easy for children to enjoy on their own. But that proved to be quite difficult. I eventually settled on one volume with three to four stories with pictures—a sort of fairy tale anthology.

The sample copies I left in the waiting room at the clinic received good reviews. *After some more touch-ups, the first official edition will be released around spring. I don't know how it'll be received, but I hope people at least enjoy it.*

Lord Walter had written about how things were going in the Royal Capital and the progress with my books, but his letter was short and to the point—very much like him. When I first looked at it, I thought it was a report of sorts. I didn't really mind, but if he also wrote normal letters like this, then... Well, Lady Rachel would probably be happy with even that. He probably also wrote it on his own and didn't ask one of his subordinates to do it, even though he was so busy.

I folded up Lord Walter's letter and opened the other one.

The handwriting was beautiful and fluid, as expected of the daughter of a

marquis. It was asking about plans for her next visit...

“When is she coming next?” Mark asked through the steam from his cup. He was seated next to me on the bench.

The letter was addressed to me, but I passed it to Mark since it had been written in anticipation that all of us would read it.

Her father and brother had to work in the Royal Palace, meaning Lady Rachel had to spend a lot of time in the Royal Capital. However, she also had her life in her home region. She wanted to come to Miselle next month before she went there.

“...Rather than asking about a schedule, she’s just talking about food,” Mark laughed as he looked over the letter.

Recently, when Lady Rachel came to Miselle, she spent a lot of the time in the kitchen learning how to cook. Noblewomen only had to talk about cooking and tell their chefs what they wanted. They never needed to hold a knife.

Lady Rachel hid her apron in her bag when she came to Miselle, wearing a big, content smile. *She always looks so cute, so I’m sure it’s fine.*

“She seems to be excited to make jam when she’s next here, asking what flavor you’ll make. Did you already decide?” Mark asked.

*“Since they’re in season, I guess apple jam. We have a lot too... Ah, that reminds me, look.”*

I stood up and opened the lid of a wooden box that was on the veranda. Inside were bright, glossy apples. They were big, ruby-colored ones and some golden ones too.

“That box wasn’t here yesterday, was it?” Mark observed.

*“Look, do you see a few bruises here? Mr. Tom said he couldn’t sell them, but I think that was just an excuse to give them to me. I mean, look, these bruises are hardly anything. I’ve seen ones being sold like this before.”*

*So, I’m going to make sweets with them and give them to him. He’ll probably say, “Oh, I don’t eat stuff like this,” before eating all of them, wearing a pout. I wonder what I should make. I always get excited at the thought of making*

*something for this secret sweet tooth.*

*Apple pie was usually the go-to choice. I could put walnuts and raisins in, but I think I'll just stick with the usual apple filling.*

*It's best to cut up some raw apples and put them in, so that when it's freshly cooked and hot, the juices from the apples come out when you cut into it. However, since I planned to take the apple pie to Mr. Tom... *To conserve the firmness, I'll lightly sweeten the apples with cinnamon and make the crispy pie crust that Mrs. Tanya taught me how to make. Yeah, that sounds good.**

*Hmm, what else could I make? Baked apples, tarte Tatin, apple pound cake, apple jam. Ah, I could even make it in a sauce to pair with meat dishes.*

I picked up one of the red apples. It had a sweet and sour nostalgic smell.

The weather was nice, but it was colder in the evenings. I could smell the scent of the apples in the cold wind. It reminded me of a cold, windy day when I was a child. Of the times I sat in front of the oven, waiting for the apple pie to finish baking.

Although I was mostly raised by my grandmother, the person who first taught me how to make sweets was, in fact, my mother. She was often busy at work and rarely ever at home, but when she was, we would bake sweets together. The blueberry cake I made was a recipe that she taught me, too.

She would let me do the work I was able to do as a small child. I got better at it, and they tasted more delicious than the ones that were sold in stores. Even cookies with the ends burnt, and apple pie where the filling spilled out—to me, they were the best kind.

I would put on oven gloves and ever so carefully take it out of the oven as if it were a precious treasure. I would then put it on my favorite plate and enjoy it when we had our snack time.

Cooking and making sweets is fun. It's even more fun when you have someone to enjoy it with. If it's with someone you love, then it really is a precious time. Now that I was here, with these dear people, I had so many more precious times waiting for me.

"The wind is picking up. Should we head inside?"

I was still holding the apples and staring off into the distance. Mark put his arm around me... *It's warm.*

I turned around in his arms, and when I looked up, I was met with eyes that matched the color of the sky. I laughed, and we put our foreheads together, the tips of our noses touching.

"See, you are cold," he said. "Are you going to make apple pie?"

**"That, and apple jam."**

Mark's finger moved from my cheek to lightly play with the new pearl earrings he had given me. He told me that I should store the earrings I had received from my grandmother and mother and keep them for when we had children. I thought it was a little early to be thinking about that, but Mark seemed serious.

Lady Adelaide had told me to wear an orange flower crown, so we were waiting for spring to get married.

I was about to head into the kitchen and prepare for the pie. There were berries from the last batch this year in the sink, waiting to be made into jam.

*Hey, Mark. Ever since coming here, I've never once felt lonely. Isn't that great?*

I stood on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around Mark's neck. He seemed to understand and leaned forward, putting his forehead on mine.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

**"How glad I am to have met you."**

"How about Lady Adelaide, the doctor, and Buddy?"

**"Don't be mean. I'll not give you any pie."**

Mark laughed, "We can't have that now, can we?" before taking an apple from me as I urged him to go inside. We left the veranda behind us with Buddy, who snuck in between us.

As I walked into the living room, I felt like someone had called for me, so I turned around. Fairy Lights were sparkling beside the handrail on the veranda. A bright, golden-colored oak leaf came blowing through on the wind, landing at

my feet. The golden leaves should have been long gone by now. It seemed to be a gift from them.

I slowly picked it up and gave a wave to the fairies, who were dancing around happily.

The flowers, birds, and fruits. The people I love, and even this world I've come to live in. Nothing ever stays the same. That's why I love my life here so much. My coming here and meeting all these people was a miracle caused by pure chance.

The golden-colored fairies flew and danced around on the last winds of autumn. I had a leaf that was the same color as them in one hand, and my other hand was connected to here and my old world. To me and to everyone here.

A single star shone brightly over the forest, and I wished that I could enjoy the next season with everyone, too.

## Afterword

**LONG** time no see, and to the new readers, hello. I am Kosuzu Kobato.

I sincerely thank you for picking up the second volume of *Making Jam in the Woods*. I submitted the first draft for this volume in February last year. I hope it warmed you up. Although we're at the beginning of spring, there is still a chill in the air. Thanks to all your support, I was able to get this book serialized.

This volume will be in bookstores in July. The story itself begins around the start of summer. The fact that this second volume managed to align with the seasons was a very happy coincidence.

This volume also differs greatly from the web novel version.

Margaret continues living her slow life in the countryside and discovers the truth about Callers. She also learns a lot about her benefactors' past as her relationships deepen with the passing of the seasons...

As I was able to write in more detail than during the web serialization, around two-thirds of this book is new material. Similar to the volume before, I hope people who have read the web novel can enjoy this volume.

I want to borrow this space to thank those who have helped and supported me. I would like to thank Yuichi Murakami for drawing such a wonderful cover for this volume as well. I have lost count of how many wonderful illustrations I was able to see during the rough draft and polishing-up phases. Seeing the scenes being made into wonderful drawings often leaves me feeling mystified and a deep sense of appreciation that is difficult to put into words.

I would also like to thank Editor Y for continuing to advise me during the second volume. Your accurate advice and knowing what to say whenever I was lost or struggling was a boon to my writing.

I want to thank everyone in the editing department, the proofreaders, cover designers, printers, marketing, and the bookstores for all their support.

And to all my author friends: the inspiration you all give me is something incredibly difficult to come by. I am incredibly grateful that I was able to meet you all in the wide sea of the Internet.

I would like to say thank you to my family for looking after me with a smile on days when I spent more time sitting at my desk than I did in the kitchen.

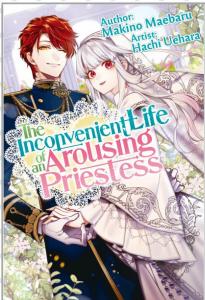
And to the readers for supporting me, and to those reading this, I thank you deeply from my heart.

I hope you all enjoy reading this volume.

Kosuzu Kobato

**2018**





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