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🍴 Dinners! with My Darling:

How the Former Monster King
Ate Her Way to Happiness

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Dinners with My Darling: How the Former Monster King Ate Her Way to
Happiness Vol.1

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Dinners with My Darling: How the Former Monster King Ate Her Way to Happiness Vol.1

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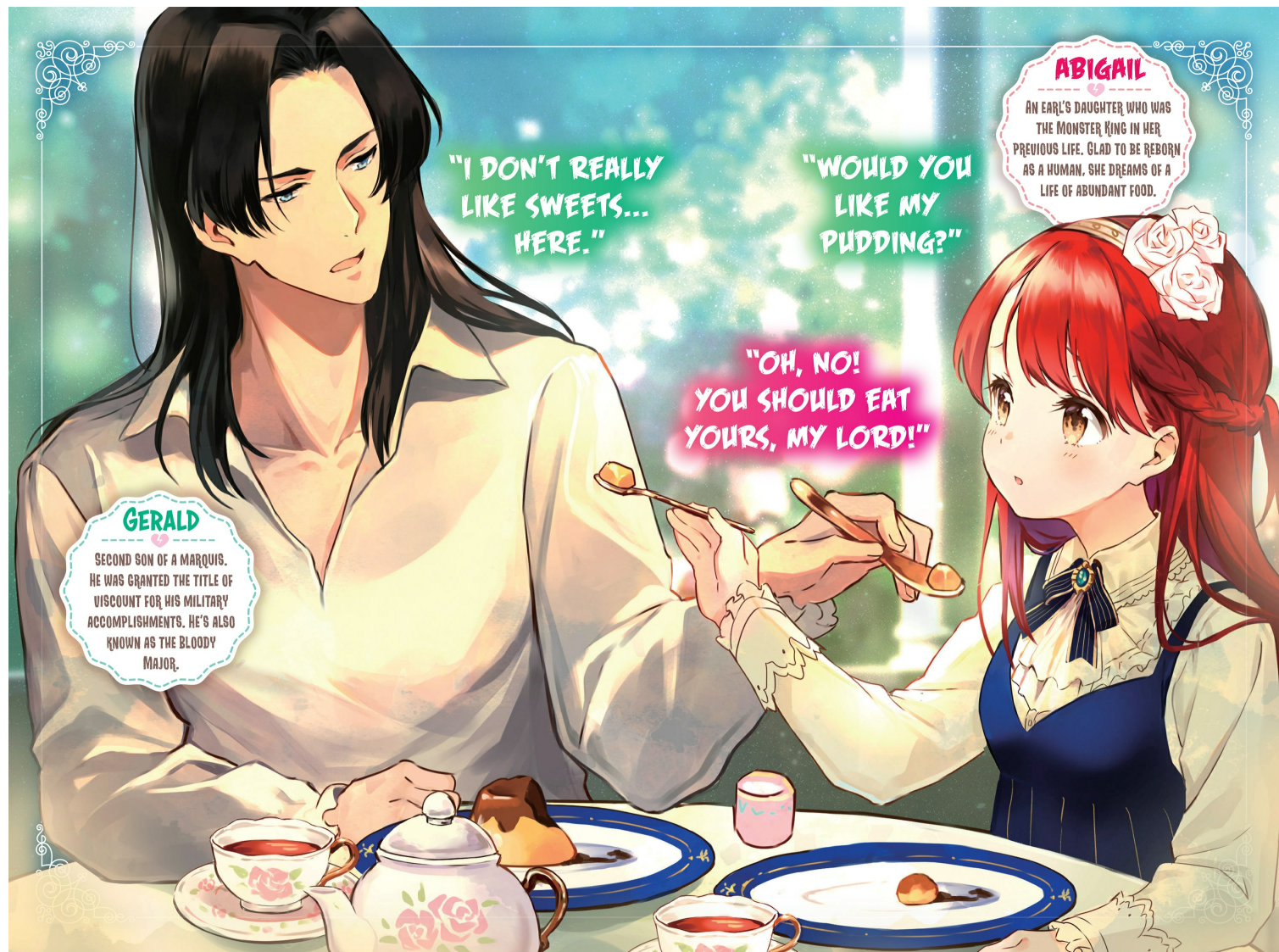
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GERALD

SECOND SON OF A MARQUIS. HE WAS GRANTED THE TITLE OF VISCOUNT FOR HIS MILITARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS. HE'S ALSO KNOWN AS THE BLOODY MAJOR.

"I DON'T REALLY LIKE SWEETS... HERE."

"WOULD YOU LIKE MY PUDDING?"

"OH, NO! YOU SHOULD EAT YOURS, MY LORD!"

ABIGAIL

AN EARL'S DAUGHTER WHO WAS THE MONSTER KING IN HER PREVIOUS LIFE. GLAD TO BE REBORN AS A HUMAN, SHE DREAMS OF A LIFE OF ABUNDANT FOOD.



"IT IS SWEET!
SWEET FLOWERS!"

"SWEET."



"TH-THIS IS A
BAD SAUSAGE."

"O-OY,
WHAT'S WRONG?!
WHY ARE YOU
CRYING...
OH!"

"...APOLOGIES.
YOUR BEAUTY
STUNNED ME."



Chapter One: The Kind Human Who Gives Me Food

“I’LL never love you,” says the man who has become my lord husband. His expression is as stern as the solemn furniture in our room, a needlessly large bed and set of matching furnishings probably crafted by a famous artisan. The dim light filtering through the lamp shade on the bedside table makes the high bridge of his nose stand out and adds a shine to his black hair.

Slightly puzzled, I wait for him to elaborate.

“...Do you understand?”

All right, no elaboration, then. *I guess that means I can ask questions.* “What does my lord mean, exactly?”

“...What?” my husband, Lord Gerald Noel Drewett, asks in a lowered tone. His brow furrows.

The matter is crucial to me, so I need to know for sure: “...I’d like to eat.”

“Huh?”

“Am I not allowed to eat?!” *How unimaginable! A true life-or-death situation!*

“What are you saying? I’m not planning to deprive you of clothing, sustenance, or shelter...”

“So I’ll be given food?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you!”

I clench my fists in triumph. I, Abigail, have succeeded! No more sneaking into the kitchen for scraps! The cook at Earl Longhurst’s mansion, my family home, always pretended not to see me, yet I never felt comfortable having to hide to eat.

My stepmother and stepsister often seemed to have a hard time deciding whether they wanted to kill me or suffer me to live, though I wonder if they

knew that depriving a person of food for two days isn't enough to cause death by starvation.

I can bid goodbye to that life now. Maybe I won't be fed my fill, but at least I won't be so hungry that I become nauseous.

Since my lord husband has decided he won't starve me, I need to do my best as his wife to ensure he doesn't change his mind. I straighten and look him right in the eye. Oh, the blueness of them shimmers and shifts between light and dark, from the bright cerulean of spring water under the afternoon sun to the deep navy of the night sky. The effect is surely a sign of his great magical prowess.

"What would you like me to do?" I inquire.

"What?"

"I learned that a wife must allow her husband everything on their first night together, and I don't wish to trouble my lord too much, so...there." I pull the ribbon at the collar of my thin, fluttering nightgown, letting it fall open to expose my front. I marvel at how easily the garment comes apart; I hadn't noticed its construction because the maids dressed me so hurriedly.

My lord husband appears shocked. "Stop, stop, stop! No need to undress," he gabbles as he grabs the robe he placed on the sofa earlier and moves to cover me. "Didn't you hear? I said I'll never love you."

"Oh! Is this what you meant?"

"...You're even worse than they say." The frown on his face deepens as he turns to leave the room.

...I guess that means it's okay for me to sleep here?



MY lord husband is Marquis Drewett's second son, and I think he serves in the military. The bed is so warm and soft that I fall into a deep sleep, and when I finally wake, he has already left for work. Maybe I should have tried to rise to see him off. Instead, the head maid greets me with a pinched expression... *Maybe I wasn't allowed to sleep here, after all? Afraid to incur more*

displeasure, I decide to stay silent.

Oh, how warm and clean this bed is. I hope I'll be permitted to use it again.

"...My lady, would you like some breakfast?"

In addition to his status as the marquis's second son, my lord husband also holds the title of viscount thanks to his military achievements during some war or conflict that occurred a few years prior. Thus, the world knows him as Viscount Noel. The residence I occupy, a manse in the capital, belongs to him, and as his wife, I suppose I am the lady of the house. But that realization hardly sinks in as I stare at my breakfast tray.

A fluffy and runny omelet made with cheese and something else—maybe chopped vegetables? A round bun with gleaming smooth skin, the crisp exterior belying a soft inside. Sausages bursting out of their skins, dripping with fat, and full of meaty juices that spurt with each bite! And the soup is a clear golden color and seasoned with a flavor I don't recognize. Vibrant, glistening fruits, their sparkle like that of my stepmother's beloved jewels, whose sweetness I've yet to savor.

I want to eat more, to taste those fruits, but my stomach hurts and I can barely manage another mouthful. In the end, I'm able to nibble one bite out of each fruit, and although I desperately want more, that is all I can handle.

"That was so delicious... I'll finish the rest for lunch."

The head maid's face twists again. I know I'm to return my leftovers to the kitchen where the servants can have their pick of what remains, so nothing goes to waste, but that's not fair. I want to eat more. *I didn't want to have such a small appetite! What a useless stomach! How pathetic!*

"If the food was to your liking, I will bring up a new tray for lu—"

"What?!"

The head maid blinks twice at my outburst. A *new* tray? Enough food for both breakfast and lunch?! Can it really be true? Will I not have to go hungry at all?

"What is this...? A hot and delicious meal for lunch too...? How wonderful it is to be lady of the house..."

The head hesitates as though she has something to say but dares not voice it. I decide that she must be very kind, so long as she continues to feed me.

Before I was born Abigail Longhurst, I was the Monster King in what I guess was a previous life. Or so the humans called me. Back then, the humans who brought me food were kind too.

The Monster King came into being amid rock and withered grass. Living in such a place, it inevitably grew hungry. It didn't have any arms or legs initially, so it got around by wriggling or slithering on the ground.

Once I became Abigail, I no longer possessed the Monster King's thoughts, yet I somehow still remember events as they transpired—such as the Monster King's early days.

When the Monster King was still small and slithering, another monster flew down from above and grabbed it. The other monster probably wanted to bring it back to a nest as food, and it was whisked away into the sky. Once it realized what was happening, the Monster King started to struggle, to fight for its survival.

Suddenly, the offending creature let out a squeak and dropped its prey, and the Monster King landed in a forest that was home to several other monsters.

The Monster King's small size made it the perfect morsel, and though it was repeatedly attacked, it managed to retaliate, and those monsters became the Monster King's meal instead.

The Monster King was relatively strong, yet that was only one reason it was eventually dubbed the Monster King. It could also call lightning and summon fire. Oh, it only did the latter once. The trees were engulfed, and the surrounds grew so hot that, no matter its efforts, it couldn't extinguish the inferno. In the end, it resorted to freezing the air above the wood to smother the conflagration, and the entire forest was reduced to a wasteland.

And so the Monster King lived.

Humans sometimes wandered into its area, lost. By then, it was as large as a man, perhaps because it ate so many types of monsters. It had sprouted lots of hands and feet, eyes and mouths. For some reason, however, it never devoured

anyone unless they attacked it first.

Most humans who saw it merely fled in panic, dropping all they carried and running at the sight of the Monster King. And occasionally, amid their abandoned belongings were delicious lunch boxes! Filled with food that didn't smell of raw meat or blood. The food was slightly salted or sweet.

Indeed, I no longer possess the Monster King's thoughts, but I remember the taste well. *But the sausages this morning were so much better than any meat the Monster King had... I'm so glad to be a human...*

"...? M-My lady?! Are you all right?! My lady!"

The head maid's shouts echo from far away as I clutch my aching stomach in a hidden corner of the room. *See? I knew she was a kind soul.*



"**WHAT** is the meaning of this, Master Gerry?" demands Tabitha, the head housekeeper who has been tasked to serve as a stand-in maid. She stalks after me, pushing my steward, Ethan, aside. I had sensed her glare when she greeted me in the entrance hall, her expression an order to "get over here, *now*." As much as I wish to escape, I know she's not going to let me go that easily. The interrogation starts as soon as the doors to my private quarters close.

"...Don't call me Gerry," I sniff.

"What is the meaning of this, *Master Gerry*?" she repeats, her face so near that our noses almost touch. I avert my gaze, and Tabitha merely steps back into my line of sight.

"What are you talking about?"

"Your lady wife. Yes, that lady wife you left alone on your first night together, your wedding night! I never knew you to be so immature, Master Gerry. Whatever has become of your marital education? Ethan? Care to explain?"

Ethan, the steward, is also Tabitha's husband. Seemingly overcome with agitation, she speaks to him without her usual professional tone. He'll be of no help to me. I glance at Rodney, my best buddy and the house butler—and also Ethan and Tabitha's son. He refuses to meet my gaze. Is he forsaking me too?

"You know that this is nothing more than a political marriage pursued against my will," I argue. "Even you were against it a few days ago, Tabitha."

Her voice turns icy. "Master Gerry."

"...Sorry. Anyway, she's the daughter of a distant relative of the general, forced upon me for the sole sake of forging ties or securing factions or something. I've personally nothing to gain from this union. Besides, she's got a rotten reputation. I've done more than enough by marrying her."

"A rotten reputation? Have you tried to discover the truth of that for yourself?"

"...No."

"Oh! I've always heard that your intelligence is on par with your strength, but I guess that's all just hogwash, isn't it?" Her hazel eyes are frigid and flinty, rendering me speechless. I may be a strong soldier, but even I can't win against the woman, my former nursemaid.

"...The lady collapsed this morning after breakfast," she informs me.

"Yes, I heard. I assume a doctor was called?"

"I could tell that nothing happened between you two, and knowing that you've probably abandoned her, of course I had to call the doctor."

"Wait, what? Abandon?"

"You heard that right! Anyway, the doctor checked her over, and she's malnourished."

What? Malnourished? The earl's daughter?

Tabitha uses my stunned silence to continue her attack. "She probably hasn't had a proper meal in a while, so the heavy breakfast really upset her body... I didn't know her preferences, as well as assumed she would be tired, so I overprepared. Oh, even a chick could have eaten more than she did. Then she said she'd eat her leftovers for lunch... Oh, it must be because the earl remarried so soon after his first wife passed. How she must have suffered in that household. How horrid..."

Suddenly, I recall the girl undressing the previous night without a shred of

shame or modesty.

“...She’s all skin and bones, Master Gerry! You saw how frail she was and still left her by herself?! Ohhh! To abandon such a vulnerable young maiden! Did we really raise you to be so immature?! Oh! How very deplorable!”

I cannot get in a single word edgewise.



I’VE been revived.

The feast must have given my stomach a shock after my years of starvation. The pain appears to have prompted those memories of the Monster King, but I’m feeling better.

I also remember thinking that the head maid is such a kind soul, kind because she gives me food. ...But perhaps I had somehow angered her?

“My lady...? Is bread porridge not to your taste?”

I shake my head as I stare at the small dish on the tray. Since the incident the day before, I’ve been unable to rise from bed or eat. When I woke this morning, the head maid... *Oh, she wants me to call her Tabitha.* Tabitha told me to rest as she set the tray before me.

And wow. The steaming bread porridge looks so thick and is emitting a soft, yummy aroma. But...

“This is baby food... Have I been bad, Tabitha?”

Since I retain memories of existence as the Monster King, I guess it’s normal that I can recall details of my current life from when I was a baby.

This here is weaning food.

“Well...” Tabitha’s hazel eyes are strangely misty as she kneels beside the bed and gently takes my left hand in both of hers. “This isn’t just food for babies. It’s comfort food for the sick or those with weakened bodies.”

“But I’m fine now.”

“Oh, no. Your stomach is still weak... Did you enjoy yesterday’s breakfast?”

“The sausages were delicious. The omelet too.”

“I see. How about you eat this bread porridge so your stomach can heal, and we’ll take it from there? I’ll slowly add more dishes to your meals, and once you stop hurting, you can have sausages again. I’m sure you’ll be able to eat a whole sausage without issue by then.”

“A whole sausage...” That’s three, no, four mouthfuls. I managed only one that morning prior. To taste that juicy meat four times!

“So please do your best to finish this bread porridge.”

“Yes!”

Tabitha pats my hand before letting go. I grasp my spoon, scoop up some porridge, and bring it to my mouth.

...Wait, this doesn’t taste like bread at all! There’s milk and something else...! What a mellow flavor! It isn’t what I had as a baby; it tastes and even smells much better!

“Is it tasty?”

“Yes!”

“That’s good.” She smiles as she watches me eat. She’s really such a kind soul.





STOP, stop, stop, stop, what is this? That's a child, isn't it?!

"Please don't peek, Master Gerry."

"Don't you call me Gerry too," I snap.

The exchange between Tabitha and Abigail that I'm witnessing from the doorway of the master bedroom into the private chamber resembles one between a child and her nursemaid. Barely any emotion animates Abigail's face, but Tabitha looks just like how I remember her from my own childhood.

I steal another glance through the doorway to see Abigail blowing continuously on a spoon for much longer than is necessary to cool its contents.

Is that really the rumored evil woman? The harlot who flits from man to man?

The doctor confirmed that she is a virgin, so the gossip is definitely exaggerated, and that anyone could witness her as I am and think her wicked seems impossible. I would be far more convinced if the rumors concerned a lack of intelligence.

I'm being prejudiced. I sigh and move away from the door.

"Do you feel ready to be her husband now?"

I sigh once again, loudly, annoyed at the sight of Rodney's grin. "Wife or not, she was treated unfairly," I admit. "All those rumors were probably started by people who don't even know her."

To be honest, I still doubt that I will ever love her. And while that's not uncommon for marriages between nobility, I shouldn't have told her as much on our wedding night. In my shallowness, I accepted hearsay at face value and sought to strike her before she could me.

"It's good that you can reflect and learn, Master—"

"Now you're being annoying on purpose."

I am beginning to realize her intention when she undressed before me. I assumed she was open to consummating our union despite the lack of love between us. But if she was so badly neglected by her family that she was on the

brink of starvation, then maybe she never expected affection from me in the first place.

I squat, my head in my hands.

Rodney nudges me with his knee. "Master? Please don't crouch here."

"Shut up and leave me be."

"It's a terrible thing. After being abandoned on her wedding night, she'll face disrespect from the servants."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, nobody wants to serve a mistress of whom the master of the house doesn't approve. Did it not occur to you that your actions will influence how she'll be treated by the household?"

"I don't remember hiring such superficial servants."

"Father and Mother don't either. But this is the first time they'll have to serve a lady of the house. We Kofis are the only help who followed you here from Drewett Manor, so I can't guarantee that the others will be respectful to their new mistress. Of course, they will be dealt with accordingly if anything happens." Rodney pauses, then his voice loses its carefree tone. "But if that does happen, the lady will be hurt. That's the consequence of your careless treatment of her. Are you really a man who can do that to a woman you don't even hate?"

I wish he'd stop talking... My gut is already cramping.

Chapter Two: I'll Get Bread If I Work, So I'll Work to Get Bread

I'M now able to eat three meals each and every day.

And it's all delicious! Never in my life as the Monster King, or even in my time as Abigail, have I enjoyed such feasts on a daily basis.

I was limited to the bread pudding for about three meals more but was soon given white bread as soft as pillows. Then, thick soups teeming with ingredients, including meat that melted in my mouth! Last night, I had stew with diced vegetables cooked so soft that I could mash them with my tongue.

And today, at long last, I have been presented with a whole juicy sausage for breakfast. It's a small one, so I finish it in two bites, but there's also bread, soup, and fruit. Tabitha has kept her promise.

Isn't she just incredible? Even more so than my tutor back at the Longhurst mansion. She smiles happily and murmurs, "Oh my!" when I tell her as much.

"You're still only managing a fifth of what I eat. You should try for at least half," my lord husband says with a serious expression. He is off work that morning, so we are dining together.

"Of course. I'll soon be eating twice as much as you, my lord."

"...I look forward to seeing that."

The day I experienced bread porridge for the first time, my lord husband came to me with a strange apology: "Sorry. Th-That wasn't the right way to treat my lady."

I didn't understand why he needed to apologize, so I told him not to worry about it. He gave me another weird look in response.

But since then, he has shared mealtimes with me whenever he can.

I don't mind whatsoever, of course. After all, he is the most important

member of the household, and I'll be guaranteed food if we eat together.

We still spend our nights apart, however, and that soft, clean, huge bed remains solely mine to relish. *I need to think of another way to serve him as his wife so he doesn't change his mind about me.*

"But Tabitha, I want to work too," I explain to her later.

"...I'm not sure where this is coming from, but there is no work for you to do in this house, my lady," she replies as she snatches the mop from my hands. "Come, you haven't taken your stroll today."

And with that, I'm chased out into the garden.

I meander under a parasol held by a maid-in-training. I'm on my third round of the grounds. The garden is really quite large, and I've been told not to roam too far, so I stay within sight of the manse.

When I first met Tabitha, she introduced herself as the head maid, and I've since learned that she's actually head housekeeper and was merely performing those duties temporarily. My lord husband used to be the lone master of the house, and no maids attended him. But now that I'm there, they're retraining some of the staff to become my personal servants. In other words, Tabitha has become very busy and can no longer serve me all the time. *I'd rather have her with me, of course, but I guess it can't be helped.*

"Do you know what work a wife can do?"

"...I don't know, my lady."

That day's maid doesn't talk much, so we continue our walk in silence. As we start on our fourth circuit, I sense her gathering courage to speak, and I swivel to her expectantly. *But wait, who's that behind us?*

"Maybe it would be good to work on gaining the lord's affec—"

"You have failed," Rodney declares as he pops up behind her, causing her to jump in fright. I'm mildly amazed by the height she achieves.

My lord husband is there too, and in an evidently sour mood to boot. Before the maid can say anything more, Rodney chases her back to the mansion while my husband takes over the parasol.

“...So this is what he meant,” he mutters under his breath.

“Is something the matter, my lord?” I ask.

“No. I’ve finished my work, so I’m taking a break now.”

He crooks his right arm and offers it to me. I stare at it. A long moment later, he takes my left hand and rests it atop his elbow.

“Oh, you’re escorting me! My tutor talked about this before!”

“...Yes.” He turns away for a beat, as if to hide his face, but soon schools his features into his usual calm expression. What he doesn’t seem to realize is that my short stature allows me to witness his struggle anyway. *Come to think of it, I was around this height when I was the Monster King.*

“What were you talking about?” he asks.

“What?”

“You, with the maid.”

“Oh, I was asking what work a wife can do. Tabitha took my mop away.”

“How did you get one in the first place?”

“I have to work if I want to eat. Back at Longhurst, I’d get bread if I helped the maids, so I’ve gotten really good at cleaning.”

I could do so only when my stepmother and stepsister were out, naturally. Fortunately, they are very social people, so I was able to secure bread every two days or so.

“Yes, I see... I see.” He coughs. “Seems like we still need to sort out a few things.”

“A few things?”

“No matter, but as my wife, you’re not to do the maids’ work.”

“Yes. Tabitha said the same thing. By the way, what kind of work do you do, my lord? I can aid you in managing a territory but was told you don’t have one.”

I have to confirm what I heard. Maybe he does oversee a fief or farm, and I can help him with that. But my stepmother didn’t care about such things, so

perhaps it isn't work suitable for a wife after all?

"That's true. Aside from my military work, I handle only the Drewett busi— Wait, you mean you helped manage the Longhurst lands? That's quite a large estate; there must have been lots to do."

"Yes. I can replicate the earl's signature perfectly."

"Stop, stop, stop, stop, what?!"



I wait for her to finish the bread porridge in its small soup bowl before stepping into the bedroom. Abigail radiates accomplishment as Tabitha, in full-on maternal mode, watches over her.

Although Rodney teased me for my naivety, I'm mature enough to know that I've been cruel to a harmless child. After witnessing her earlier, I can't see her as a grown woman—yet I should try at least to treat her like family, and that has to start with an apology. I don't need Rodney to tell me that I should have done so sooner; I do possess a conscience. A very noisy conscience.

"Sorry. Th-That wasn't the right way to treat my lady."

Abigail stares up at me from the bed, where she reclines against a pillow, mouth open in surprise. I wish I hadn't stuttered. I've had to apologize for very little in my twenty-two years of life, so I'm simply not used to it. My jaw clenches.

"Don't worry about it," she finally replies in a flat voice.

Under the bright sunlight, her straight dull red hair looks dry, and her youthful face pitifully pale. Her eyes are much too large for her slender jaw and a shining gold color instead of the amber I thought I saw the night of our marriage. Despite their clarity, her eyes are devoid of emotion. She reminds me of a chick that has fallen out of its nest, like the one I reared as a child, and the comparison makes me uncomfortable.

At Tabitha's suggestion, we begin to take our meals together, and I discover that despite her mistreatment in her family home, she seems to have nonetheless received an education, for she behaves as a perfect nobleman's

daughter should.

“I was told that if I can’t prove my worth as a lady, my husband won’t get his money’s worth from our marriage,” she declares with pride when I ask her about her it.

I see. I guess that’s technically true, but who the hell would say such a thing to her? And why is she so proud of it?

A few days later, I come to realize why I can’t suppress the desire to protect her.

“I have to work if I want to eat. Back at Longhurst, I’d get bread if I helped the maids, so I’ve gotten really good at cleaning,” she says casually.

Because to hear that makes my blood boil.



“THIS!”

Smooth, yellow, and wobbly, topped with a layer of roasted brown and surrounded by a neat row of fruits sliced into bite-size pieces. *This is pudding! I know it! I’ve seen my stepsister eat it!*

After a final stroll around the garden with my lord husband, we decide that the weather is nice enough to have lunch, lovingly prepared by Tabitha, outdoors under the gazebo.

There are lots of little sandwiches with different fillings, and I find it hard—but also so much fun—to choose which to eat first. As I savor the chicken, then cucumber, and, lastly, egg sandwiches, my lord husband plows through three servings of each variety. Just when I’m thinking of going for one more, it is served! The pudding!

I glance up at Tabitha, who nods to tell me that I can begin dessert.

I scoop out a bite, and the pudding on my spoon and plate wobbles!

“...It’s fresh,” I breathe.

My lord husband emits a spluttering sound, and I ignore him, focusing on the pudding instead. The yellow and brown heap on my spoon jiggles and almost

spills over the edge before I close my lips around it. A sweet and bitter caramel taste floods my mouth. The pudding rolls around on my tongue, then quickly melts. *Oh, it's gone! Even without me chewing it! Where did it go?!*

"Wow, it's sweeter than carrots..."

My lord husband finally composes himself enough to reply, "Ahem... Y-Yes, it is... I guess."

I've never eaten anything so sweet. Fruits are sweet too, but this is a different type of sweetness.

"I don't think this existed when I was the Monster King... So this is the pudding my stepsister used to enjoy back at Longhurst..." I sigh. Even my breath tastes sweet. "I'm so glad to be human."

"...Hmm?"

Another, then a third bite, and the inside of my mouth starts to feel sticky. *This is made of egg, right? Is that why it does that?* I pick up a berry, which is also sweet, but of a sort that cuts through the pudding's flavor.

"'King'?"

"Yes. The potatoes from that little village near the forest were the sweetest food I had back then."

"Not that, the other place..."

"Longhurst?"

"Yes, Longhurst... You had pudding there with...Nadia. That's your stepsister, right?" My lord husband looks like he's having trouble speaking. Has the pudding glued his teeth together? It can't have, not when it's so soft and melty.

"I never dined with them," I answer.

"...You mean..."

Oh, another bite of pudding after the tartness of the berries! So fluffy!

"Abigail," he says, "don't you hate the people at Longhurst?"

I stare at him, spoon still in my mouth. I know that's rude, yet he's caught me by surprise. "Hate?"

“Yes.”

He has not touched his pudding much at all. *Is he not going to eat it? Does he dislike it? But it's so scrumptious.*

“I used to be the Monster King, and I never thought about hating humans. So, no, I don't hate the people at Longhurst.”

“Monster...?”

“Yes. Oh, there's only one bite left.” I sigh once more as I maneuver the last blob onto my spoon. “Where did the rest go...?”

“Monster...king?”

“I was known as the Monster King before I was born as Abigail, so I don't hate humans since they're weaker than me.”

“Oh... I see. I see... Would you like my pudding?”

“Oh, no! You should eat yours, my lord!”

An incomprehensible expression occupies his face as he holds out his spoon to me.

Recently, I've discovered that his ever-changing blue eyes house a softness within them that makes mealtimes with him feel so much more delicious. I want to enjoy the pudding together too.



ABIGAIL is staring at her plate as though she doesn't understand why it's empty. *Yes, that's what happens when you eat the food on it...*

But the pudding must be very important, since she's rattling off these mind-blowing answers as if merely discussing the weather.

I glance at Tabitha, who nods, so I offer my pudding to Abigail. Tabitha nods again, vigorously, while Rodney frowns. Ethan appears to be on the verge of fainting, which isn't like him at all.

“Oh... I see. I see... Would you like my pudding?”

“Oh, no! You should eat yours, my lord!”

"I don't really like sweet foods... Here." I raise a spoonful of pudding, and quick as a flash, her still-protesting lips close around it.

...Wow, that was fast.

To be honest, I was initially going to hand her the plate, but something came over me. Maybe it was all that talk about monsters. *Or maybe I kind of want her to look at me rather than the pudding.*

But before that thought can take root, Abigail, after casually licking the pudding off the spoon, leans back. I scoop up another spoonful and hold it out, and it's gone again, lightning fast.

"...Little Piyo!" I murmur in realization.

"I'm Abigail."

"Master has awakened some memories..." Rodney whispers loudly. But he must have noticed too! He raised it together with me, that chick that fell from its nest!

"Wouldn't you like some"—she swallows—"my lord?" Another bite. "It's so tasty"—another swallow—"Oh, it's gone."

I am so engrossed by feeding Abigail that I failed to notice the empty plate. Somehow, I feel a vague sense of accomplishment...

Abigail also looks blissful, then seems to remember herself and straightens. "I can help you with your work now, my lord."

That must be her gut reaction to being fed. Maybe she will feel better if I can give her something to do, after all. I think for a moment, sipping on some herbal tea Rodney has poured for us. Abigail has yet to lift her cup and stares at it intently as if willing it to cool faster.

"All right, but I can't bring my military work home. As for the business... Rodney, what do you say?"

"Maybe she can learn to handle the regular duties of a lady of the house? We'll do it slowly, of course, and be very mindful of her health."

"Yes, I see. Well, I'm in no hurry to do any socializing, so Tabitha, let's go at Abigail's pace," I decide. I don't really remember what Mother did in the

position but imagine it includes attending events and taking charge of the household. Tabitha will be able to guide her well in that.

“Duties for the lady of the house! I’ve seen how it’s done! I can do it too!” Abigail crows.

Somehow, that is slightly worrying.

“Can I ask what you think it’s about?” I hazard.

“I’ll call merchants to the house and give them things for free.”

“No, leave that sort of thinking at Longhurst. Tabitha, please teach her correctly.”

Beginning with allowing someone to forge the signature of the head of house, and now this, that family is starting to sound very shady!

“Will Tabitha be teaching me?” she asks.

As her health improves, Abigail has been showing more emotion. Though her expressions are still mostly mild, her eyes contain a new sparkle. She must be happy to hear that Tabitha will be serving her. She seems to have taken quite a shine to her.

“I’m good at learning. I learned how to manage a territory all on my own,” she reassures us.

“On your own?”

So she wasn’t just in charge of signing documents?

True, the Longhurst estate is a wealthy one and therefore near impossible for one person to oversee alone, so I had imagined that the earl utilized talented assistants to help him.

“One of the previous heads of the Longhurst family was a capable man,” Abigail says. “I learned his way of governance by reading his notes and records. How to prepare for disasters like river floods and landslides, how much to stockpile for emergencies, how to counter sudden monster stampedes.”

“Hm? ...Were you really the one who did all that? Shouldn’t the earl have dealt with it himself?”

“If memory serves me right...” the usually silent Ethan mutters, “Longhurst was one of the regions that suffered surprisingly minimal damage from the record heavy rains four years back.”

Four years ago? When Abigail was twelve?

“Because I was the Monster King, I know all about weather and monsters,” Abigail comments. She finally takes a sip of tea after multiple blows across the cup, then lets out a contented sigh.

“Because you were Monster King?”

“Yes, so I knew how to prepare. The records included measures taken when similar events happened in the past.”

Perhaps she was abused so badly at Longhurst that imagining herself as a reincarnated Monster King is how her young mind tries to protect itself. I suspect Ethan and the others think so as well, judging by their somber faces.

That said, were her disaster countermeasures’ successes a fluke, or does she actually possess some kind of special ability?

Special abilities are so rare that they’re referred to as Gifts. And while I’ve heard of plenty of ability types, I’ve never come across one that enables its user to predict the weather or occurrence of monster stampedes.

Gazing down at my herbal tea, I recall Abigail’s golden eyes framed by long lashes. Usually, the color and luster of one’s eyes indicate the nature and strength of their magical prowess. Gold is a rare color, and hers shine so brightly that they could very well be an indication of her power.

“Abigail?”

“Yes?”

“Your family didn’t mention you knowing magic or having a Gift. Did you hide that knowledge from them?”

If they had known of her abilities, surely they would have sold her for a higher price instead of marrying her to me.

“I didn’t attend the baptismal ceremony that assesses magical prowess, so the Longhurst family doesn’t know. They’ve not asked me about it either,” she

shrugs.

“But don’t all nobles undergo the ceremony...?”

“They said that my eye color is unlucky and that it would be an embarrassment, so I didn’t go.”

“How is that family allowed to exist?” I growl. “Can I ruin them?” I would merely have to expose the fact that the earl let Abigail sign his documents. Once that is out, others will undoubtedly dig up more scandals.

“But I can’t use magic, my lord. This body can’t withstand it,” Abigail says, indifferent. “But I may be able to do something in an emergency, so you can just leave it to me.”

“No. In any emergency, you leave things to me and stand back. Please.”



THE room is filled with steam from my bath. A maid gently dries my hair with a towel, then brushes it as Tabitha rubs my hands with cream with a floral scent that tickles my nose. She caresses them, interlacing our fingers to coat my palms, kneading the cream into every inch of skin, even to the tips of my fingers.

“Soon your hands will be perfectly beautiful. They’ve gotten much better already. It must have hurt when they were all dry and cracked. Yes, Tabitha will make it better.”

Tabitha always speaks so when she attends to me after my bath, her voice like a slow song. The water and her massaging hands make me feel warm and cozy, and I start to drift off. *So cozy and drowsy...*

No, I have to ask her about tomorrow. I’m to begin my training as lady of the house. But learning does not equate working. Back at Longhurst, I did lessons with my tutor, and that never earned me any bread.

“I’d like to do some cleaning tomorrow as well,” I attempt.

“Cleaning is not a job for the lady of the house.”

“But I want to continue having three meals a day.”

Thanks to my stomachache episode, I've been confined to bed and unable to do any housework. Even so, I was given lots of delicious food to eat. I tried to clean once I felt better, and Tabitha confiscated my mop. I used to earn bread in other ways back at Longhurst, however, so I'm certain I can come up with something else to do. *If only I can think of it, Tabitha will surely let me work.*

"I can clean mold in the basement if you give me a rag."

"There is no mold in our basement."

"I'm good at doing laundry too. I can clean even the muddiest of bedsheets."

"Our sheets do not get muddy."

I always thought it strange how the bedsheets at Longhurst were muddy. *Anyway, this isn't working. This mansion is too clean.* What else can I do? I can supervise a fiefdom, but my lord husband has confirmed he doesn't have one.

"My lady." I glance up to see Tabitha smiling. She takes my hands in hers and kneels at my bedside. She regards me with tearful eyes. "Your job isn't to clean or do laundry. Your job is to eat three full meals a day, take luxurious afternoon naps, and retire early each night."

"But I'm already feeling fine."

"Not yet, you can get even better. Then you'll be able to eat breads, soups, and even three sausages, in one meal."

"Three!"

Every meal at the manse comprises various dishes. Currently, I can polish off almost everything set before me but can't manage more than one sausage. There's just too much else to eat.

"Once you're fully healed, then you can start learning about what we talked about today, how to be the lady of the house. But until then, your job is to eat well. So I guess you'll learn how to be just a lady first?"

"How to be a lady! Will you be my teacher?"

"Yes, we'll start with that. You have to get better first, and if the weather's good tomorrow, you can go for another stroll. Would you like that?"

“Yes! The weather tomorrow will be good!” As the former Monster King, I know exactly what the weather will be.

Tabitha just smiles indulgently and resumes massaging my hands.



AS a military man, I receive two consecutive days off for every ten days of service. Most of that time is spent handling the Drewett territory’s affairs on my family’s behalf, and the day before and that morning are no exception. After spending nearly all of my time off working, I find Rodney’s knowing grin as I head into the garden somewhat annoying. His grin only widens when I tell him that the excursion is nothing special, that I always go outside once I finish my tasks. *Shut up.* He hasn’t said anything, but he needs to be quiet.

“...What are they doing?” I ask after a beat.

“Mother says it’s a lady’s education... I hear that our lady really wants to work, so Mother is trying to compromise.”

“Compromise?”

I’d hurried there because I was informed that lunch is to be served in the gazebo again, and I find Tabitha and Abigail sitting across from each other, pressing their index fingers into the corners of their lips. *A lady’s education...? Oh, they must be practicing the aristocrat’s smile.* I also learned that as a child.

“According to Mother, our lady’s choice of words is childish and her expressions lacking even if her behavior is ladylike, which means she probably never had many conversations with real people. Her education at Longhurst with her tutor was likely based on reading books.”

“That’s not real education,” I grumble.

Rodney shrugs. “That’s why they’re starting with facial expressions.”

Following Tabitha’s lead, Abigail removes her fingers from her face, then looks puzzled when her lips fall back into a straight line instead of maintaining the shape of the smile... It’s funny to watch. I approach the pair, hiding my amusement, and Abigail turns as if sensing my presence.

“...That’s too much,” I say. She has pulled her lips up so far that her canines

are showing.

“Ish it?” She turns back to Tabitha, who instantly doubles over. *I see, so Tabitha is struggling not to laugh as well...*

“My lord! I’m practicing how to smile!” reports Abigail, sitting up straighter.

“Y-Yes. You’re...working hard. Well done.”

“Yes!”

I suppose she feels that she’s making good progress. Her golden eyes shine bright as she looks directly at me. Yes, she’s *definitely* proud of her efforts.

“Tabitha...says to...push and squeeze my cheeks...like this!”

“That’s for practice in your private chambers, my lady,” Tabitha reprimands.

“Oh, right!”

Rodney lets out a loud cough behind me. *Stop that. I’m doing my best to hold it in myself.*

Abigail demonstrates what she’s learned, then halts when she remembers she’s to practice alone. Tabitha and Rodney are all smiles as they serve lunch. She really is starting to resemble Little Piyo more and more. Little Piyo used to chirp nonstop whenever it saw me.

Her chirping, however, abruptly stops when she catches sight of the food on the table.

“It smells like meat! The thing sandwiched between the white thing is meat!”

“...Yes, it’s called lasagna. There’s also *burrata* cheese and strawberry caprese, and buttermilk soup with mushrooms and bacon. The lasagna is hot, so please be careful.”

“Strawberries!”

The lasagna is cut and doled out, and her portion is less than half of mine. I could probably finish the square in one gulp. Her cup of soup is small too. Yet the chef has done well; Abigail bites down on a tiny spoonful of strawberry and cheese—likely half the size of one of my bites—and her gold eyes turn dark and soft as she narrows them in bliss.

...It's only as I feed my strawberry to her that I realize that I think my wife is really cute.



“WELCOME home, my lord.” I meet him at the entrance hall as he returns from work, and he hoists me upward after passing his jacket to Ethan. Supporting me with his left arm, he pops a souvenir into my mouth. *Oh, it's marshmallow today! And there's something inside!*

“Is it good?” he inquires.

“Yes! There's chocolate inside! It's soft but sticky!”

“I see.”

It has been about half a year since I came to the manse, and my lord husband often smiles at me now. His eyes, with their ever-shifting shades of blue, soften as he regards me, which makes me feel strangely ticklish.

Since my arrival, I've grown bigger. I can eat snacks like that day's marshmallow without spoiling my appetite for dinner. I still can't eat twice as much as my lord husband, yet I think I'm getting close.

My lord husband carries me into the house. Rodney follows behind, replacing the lid on the box of treats. When he catches my eye, he silently lifts the cover once more to allow me a peek. *Wow!* Lots of colorful marshmallows sit inside! Just like the gems the jeweler brought over recently!

“My subordinate tells me these are the latest trend. You can have more after dinner,” my lord husband tells me with another small smile. “By the way, how are preparations for tomorrow coming along?”

That evening's main dish is chicken with crispy grilled skin bursting with clear juices and fat when I slice it with my knife. I bite into a forkful and savor the tender and juicy meat, the spices tingling on my tongue. There's also a fluffy side of potatoes.

My lord husband's piece of chicken is twice as big as mine. *I wonder what part of the chicken that came from?*

“...It's nothing special. Yours is just sliced for easy eating,” he remarks.

Oops. Guess I stared too long.

“We’re all ready for tomorrow,” I reply. “Tabitha has given her approval too. I just need to try on the dress later.”

“I see.” He glances at Tabitha, who nods at him. All is well.

The following night will be our first attendance of a social event as a married couple. When daughters of nobility turn fifteen, they make their high-society debut at a ball at the royal palace. Since I didn’t do that, the occasion will technically be my debut. I’m still not sure what I’m supposed to do exactly, but because it will be held at the palace, there is bound to be lots of food, which is most exciting.

I know there’ll be dancing because my lord husband has practiced with me numerous times. When I told him I like the part where he lifts me high and pivots, he spun me around so much that I got dizzy.

It reminded me of soaring through the sky as the Monster King, and the memory of the scenery from high above delighted me. *Maybe he’ll do it again tomorrow.* As a human, I can no longer fly. No matter how much chicken I eat, my body simply won’t grow wings.

“Oh,” I realize.

“Hmm?”

“I just remembered. The territory in that direction belongs to the Drewett family, yes?” I point roughly northwest.

My lord husband follows my finger and frowns. “Well, I guess. We have a small parcel of land outside the capital.”

“I don’t know the precise distance, but I heard the call of a rumbling bird coming from those mountains around noon today.”

“A rumbling bird? They call?” he asks, befuddled. Ethan, standing nearby, tilts his head in puzzlement as well.

Rumbling birds are small but amazing monsters. They’re mostly shy and won’t attack unless someone messes with their nests. “They call when landslides happen near their breeding grounds,” I explain.

“...When’s this landslide?”

“Rumbling birds are timid, and they panic when they sense an impending landslide and hurry to move their nest. They call when this happens, but because they’re so cautious, they signal long before the landslide occurs. So, maybe in three months?”

“So far off?!”

“They’re timid.”

“Mount Kinzar is the only mountain in that direction, at the eastern end of Drewett territory.” Before I can blink, Ethan has pulled out a map from somewhere and unfolded it for my lord husband. It’s so big I doubt it fits into a pocket. Ethan is so mysterious—always producing whatever my lord husband needs, whenever he wants it. Maybe that is his Gift.

My lord husband glares at the map and nods. “The village at its foot is small and can evacuate quickly. But the mountain is large... It’s hard to know how far to tell them to go.”

“As I said, rumbling birds are timid creatures, so they build their nests deep in the wilderness,” I explain. “The villagers will be fine if they don’t approach the mountain during that time. Also, the landslide may choke the river with mud and change its course, so people will have to watch their water sources closely. That was what we did at Longhurst.”

Three months is plenty of time to prepare. My lord husband instructs Rodney to send a bird to his father bearing the message.

“You surprise me all the time... I’m grateful for your Gift.” Rounding the table, my lord husband kisses me on my forehead close to my hairline. “Thank you.”

He has grown accustomed to giving me kisses on the head or cheek. I often saw Earl Longhurst kiss my stepmother and stepsister in such a way, but he never did so with me, so I was startled when my lord husband first tried it. That evening’s peck is a reward, though sometimes I don’t understand the meaning of his kisses and feel all jittery and fidgety.

I’ve been giving him such reports regularly the past half year. He was initially bewildered by my warnings, but since there’s no harm in precaution, he has

started to convey them to his father, Marquis Drewett, who arranges the necessary response.

Nobody at Longhurst believed me, so I simply issued the orders to prepare on my own. I never encountered questions so long as I added the earl's signature to the documents.

How did I warn people when I was Monster King? The nearby villages sometimes left food at the outskirts of the forest, so perhaps they were happy with my actions? I can't really remember.

In my lord husband's household, my words are taken seriously, and I am even thanked.

For the first time, I realize that there may be better rewards than food.

Chapter Three: I'm Sure There's So Much More to Eat at the Castle Feast

"I'M ready, my lord!"

We are to head to the ball soon, and I've arrived at Abigail's rooms where she has been since morning with Tabitha and some maids from the Drewett's main household. I find my wife standing proud with arms outstretched. Her face is stoic as usual, yet her eyes, which have begun to betray more emotion, are lively.

In the past six months, her damaged red hair and dry skin have slowly regained their shine and luster. Her cheeks are rosy on her smooth, pale face. Half of her hair is twisted into an intricate updo, from which swings a flower-shaped ornament of platinum and sapphire.

Normally, her makeup is so light that I can hardly tell she's wearing any, but that evening, her brows are trimmed and her lids shadowed with red, complementing her ruby-bright hair and those sparkling golden eyes.

Her collarbones, which used to protrude so sharply, curve from her neck to her shoulders, delicate and sensual. Her dress, gathered under her bust, has morphed her slim silhouette into a soft feminine one... Throughout the past half year, up until that very morning, she has never looked so grand...

Rodney kicks me in the heel as I stare at her puffed chest.

I understand. I must compliment my wife and praise the servants for doing such a good job.

"Y-You've gotten big..." I attempt.

"Yes, I have!"

"No... That's not it, Master," Rodney scolds in a whisper from behind me. Thankfully, Abigail doesn't seem to have noticed my blunder.

"Erm, your hair. It's tied up."

“Half-up, Master! It’s called the half-up style!” hisses Rodney.

“Yes. The half-up style. Well, it’s nice... Won’t get in your face.”

“Yes! It’s perfect for eating dinner later,” she nods enthusiastically.

“Of course. And your dress...”

“Empire, Master! Empire!”

“Ah, yes. The empire dress is interesting.”

“I can eat lots and not feel constricted!”

“I see. That’s nice.”

“Yes! Tabitha chose it for me!”

I step backward onto Rodney’s toes to shut up his snickering. Who’s he to spoil Abigail’s good mood? Then I turn to the Drewett maids at attention nearby. “...As expected of my father the marquis’s household, you have done a great job. My little chick looks like one of those twilight birds residing in heaven’s garden.”

“It will be nice if you can someday convey such eloquent compliments directly to your lady wife, Master...” murmurs Tabitha.

Despite Abigail’s claim that she’ll one day be able to eat twice my portion, she has grown to stomach only half of mine. Because she wishes to eat as much as me, the cook has been skillfully serving her meals such that she seldom has leftovers, likely by plating identical dishes for us in different sizes.

Tabitha’s knowing gaze weighs on me. *I get it already!* I don’t wish for Abigail to have another stomachache episode either. If she feels unwell, she’ll no doubt hide in some corner of the house again. And when Tabitha discovers the little chick curled up and shivering in the wardrobe or bathroom, I’ll be yelled at for feeding her too much or for not preventing her overeating.

I am suddenly tempted to skip the ball. *Maybe keeping this cute little chick at home is the better choice.*



THE palace’s great ballroom is so huge that I think our whole mansion could

fit inside.

Since my lord husband is attending the ball as Viscount Noel instead of the marquis's second son, we are allowed in early. Apparently, the higher one's rank among the nobility, the later one's entrance. Even so, his rank is prestigious enough that the hall is already packed with people. As I'm escorted through the space, whispers start to ripple across the crowd in a wave.

Of course, I can discern them all, as well as trace them to their speakers. The former Monster King has exceptional hearing.

"Hey, it's the Bloody Lieutenant. Rare for him to show up at a ball."

"Who's that girl? I heard they're married."

"He's the Bloody Major now. Got promoted long ago."

"I think that's the Longhursts' second daughter. A far cry from the beauty of her sister..."

"They don't even socialize much—and to think they're splurging like this."

I study my lord husband's appearance as we walk along side by side. His usually unbound black hair is slicked back, and he looks broader and taller in his formal military attire. The decorative gold buttons and cord, plus the scarlet sash draping diagonally from his right shoulder, complement his pristine white jacket well.

Sensing my gaze, he leans toward me. "What's the matter?"

"Don't worry, you're not bloody at all."

"Oh." He smiles a little, embarrassed.

Immediately, the hushed voices turn to surprise.

"He's smiling."

"That stern facade has fallen."

"Did he actually smile?"

"Ignore them," he says. "They won't dare to do anything but gossip."

We reach the far wall where a man brandishes a silver tray of several glasses

of colorful liquids. Some are the hue of honey, others scarlet and teeming with bubbles... We've only just met, and he's letting me choose from so many yummy-looking drinks.

"The castle people are so kind," I muse.

"...He's just a waiter. Don't follow him." My lord husband requests a nonalcoholic beverage, and I am given a tall and thin flute filled with purple liquid. "It's grape juice. Don't drink anything unless I give the okay," he warns.

Tabitha said the same. Since I've never had alcohol before, I am not to accept drinks without my lord husband's approval. I take a sip. My tongue tingles with a refreshing flavor despite the beverage's lack of bubbles.

"Is it good?"

"Yes. My lord?"

"What is it?"

"When can we eat the food lined up over there?" I inquire.

"O-Oh. Soon, I think."

"If I take just one bite of each dish, I'll have enough room to try everything."

"You can eat, but in moderation... Tabitha will nag me again if you get another stomachache."

"It's castle food, so I'll be fine."

"You trust too easily."

When Tabitha spoke of preparation for the ball, I imagined something simple, say, donning a dress. But I was busy all day with an early bath, massages, and hair-braiding. And although I had a good lunch, we didn't have time for tea.

Tabitha deemed me yet unfit for a corset, so I'm clad in a slim dress with a low neckline. That way, I can still eat as much as normal. And while we enjoy feasts at home, the palace spread seems more sparkly and is even decorated with flowers. Flowers are typically bitter, but since they're at the castle, I'm sure they will be sweet.

When we first decided to attend the ball, my lord husband sat me down for a

serious talk. Apparently, my stepmother and stepsister have been circulating malicious gossip about me, and his reputation isn't all that great either. People may consequently say mean things or treat us with disrespect, and I'm to merely remain my usual self and stay close to him. He reminded me of this so many times that Rodney yelled at him for being "crazy overprotective."

We are discussing which buffet table I plan to sample first when a group approaches us in greeting. The person my lord husband speaks to in a casual tone is a military comrade, and the other an acquaintance of his father the marquis. He appears slightly grumpy talking to the latter.

Everyone offers me a smile, and I return the version Tabitha determined the best. I've practiced my aristocrat's smile much the past six months and was told that it is all I have to do for the evening.

Sometimes my lord husband pulls me close by the waist or pushes me behind him. When I ask him why, he tells me not to worry. The reason must not be something I need to know as his wife.

"...Shall we grab a bite?" he finally asks.

"Yes, please!"

The royal family has already made their entrance and performed a collective bow, which I feel was done very nicely. I remember Ethan mentioning that we'll have to line up to greet them personally, yet my lord husband claims we don't need to, so I don't worry about that.

He guides me to the table we agreed to start our feast with, and when I turn, he's no longer there. *When did he disappear?*

...I was instructed not to choose drinks without his assent, but no one said anything about *food*. Surveying the platters, I plot what portions of which dishes I'll try so I can be served quickly once he returns.

"...Oh, how unfortunate. This isn't a place for someone like you."

I examine a large flower—*is that actually meat? Wow, it really is!* Pale pink and sliced to resemble fluttery petals, its aroma belies its appearance.

"...Hey."

I promised Tabitha I'd eat some greens too, and since this looks like a flower—

“Hey, are you listening?! Abigail!”

At my name, I glance up from the buffet to see my stepsister Nadia glaring at me. Though half of her face is obscured by a fan, I recognize her.

“...Oh? So you *are* Abigail.”

Tabitha taught me how to use a fan to conceal my facial expression, so I know that Nadia isn't using hers right, because I can still see her upper face twisted with some emotion.

“Yes. I am Abigail Noel. Long time no see, Miss Longhurst.”

My lord husband and Tabitha told me I'm to pretend to not know the Longhursts should I see them. I was also informed that there's no need to be polite if they try to speak to me. So I stand tall and lift my chin as I reply.

A vein throbs at my stepsister's temple.

I've learned etiquette; I know how to act. I am married to my lord husband and am no longer a Longhurst. I am Viscountess Noel and will behave as such.

Back then, although I wasn't afraid of them, I never stood up to the Longhursts. My stepmother and stepsister didn't hurt me with blows, just deprived me of food. *Though I suppose I did defy them by secretly helping the maids and sneaking into the kitchen to eat leftovers.* I didn't complain because I thought that was how humans lived. As the Monster King, I also received food if I worked. Therefore, as a child and newly minted human, I concluded that my stepmother didn't feed me because my efforts were lacking.

“...Humph. I heard that Viscount Noel is a barbaric savage, but I guess he still knows how to dress up his wife,” my stepsister snorts as she looks me up and down.

A barbaric savage? I tilt my head in confusion. I don't quite understand the way humans dress, or how or why society judges an individual, yet my lord husband is very polite and kind when he feeds me, so I know she is not speaking the truth.

I was married to him after a simple contract signing, I abruptly realize, and

without a wedding ceremony. *Maybe she hasn't met him and doesn't really know him as a person.*

"But even all dressed up, those eyes are still creep—"

"...Excuse me, do you know my lady?"

"Huh?"

My lord husband is suddenly there, his hand at my waist. I want to tell him about the meat flow—he is smiling so beautifully! I've never seen him look like that before!

"Oh, huh? 'Y-Your lady'? Viscount Noel...?" stammers Nadia.

"Sorry, Abigail. I was held up by an old friend." He swivels his smile in my direction, ignoring my stepsister whose cheeks have reddened. Tabitha would definitely approve of that smile! She said that my lord husband isn't good at smiling, but...!

"You're doing well, my lord. Tabitha will be happy," I tell him.

"What...? Anyway, have you decided what you want to eat?"

"Yes. I'd like that meat flower."

"...I see. Sure."

He summons a waiter to serve us some flowe—meat! *Wow!* Even cut, it still looks like a tiny bloom on my plate!

"E-Excuse me, Viscount Noel."

"Is it tasty?" he asks me.

"Of course!" I nod. "It's so yummy! And it smells good too, different from meat!"

It's almost translucent on the plate but has a nice chewy texture with an aftertaste like, *oh, what is it...* Oh yes, like smoked wood. The flavor reminds me of the overpowering odor from when I accidentally burned down the forest as the Monster King, but less pervasive and so delicious!

"Excuse me! Viscount Noel!" repeats my stepsister.

“...What do you want?”

It is so scrumptious even with the side of leaves, all chewy and crunchy together.

“I believe this is our first meeting. I am Nadia Longhurst, eldest daughter of Earl Longhurst.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Gerald Noel Drewett.”

“Well, I hope my sister Abigail hasn’t been too much trouble. She can be quite—you know.” She stretches a graceful hand toward his arm, and he dodges her touch, bending down somewhat to rest his cheek on the top of my head.

I want to eat another serving of flower meat, yet the meat heaped with glossy sauce on the next plate looks great too. *Oh, and how about that dish?* Whatever it is, it is colorful and covered in clear jelly.

“Abigail is a wonderful, talented, and lovely wife. My father is glad to have such a blessed addition to the Drewett family.”

“Th-The Drewett... Marquis Drewett...?”

“Incidentally, it’s a surprise to see you here, considering the Longhurst territory is currently grappling with so many disasters. Oh, or maybe that is the exact reason you’re here, for the territory’s sake. How very noble, and just as expected of Abigail’s sister. I hope you meet your destined person soon.”

“Come again...?”

“Come, Abigail, let’s take a break from the food and go for a stroll.” In one smooth motion, he takes the plate from my hands and replaces it with another topped with tender meat. *When did he get that?! Can I keep eating as we walk?!*



“...**THESE** people are all the same!” I grumble as I plant Abigail on a bench on the terrace. I could only stew in annoyance as men gazed at her with disrespect and open lust during our circuit of introductions. Once we are alone, I can’t help but utter my disgust aloud.

My reputation in high society isn’t the best due to the prejudice held toward

my military accomplishments, so I'm accustomed to people talking behind my back, yet the groundless lies circulated about Abigail have enraged me more than I expected.

"I can cut this meat with just a fork, my lord."

"...Yes, that's beef cheek. I always have it when I visit the palace."

"Cheek!" She dips her chin, happily chewing on the stewed flesh. "It's cheek," she announces again as she spears a forkful and holds it out to me.

Abigail seems immune to others' malice, or perhaps she simply doesn't care. She didn't bat an eye when some of the servants were rude to her, I recall. Of course, I quickly fired anyone who mistreated her, and all has been peaceful at home lately, but at the ball we are once again confronted by discourtesy.

The past six months, I've researched as much as I could into Longhurst and eventually discovered that the gossip surrounding Abigail is nothing more than a decoy to distract from her stepsister's misdeeds. Rumors that a daughter of Longhurst was seducing men indiscriminately framed Abigail as the temptress... Naturally, anyone with a discerning eye would have noticed Nadia's behavior at various events and realized the truth, but my indifference, or rather, incompetence, with regard to socializing prompted me to believe hearsay. Tabitha chastises me for it so often that I don't even try to defend myself anymore.

"Is it tasty?" inquires Abigail.

"Yes, it is." I savor the meat, my irritation slowly melting away.

A tiny smile blooms across Abigail's usually impassive face, so small that it's easy to miss. To everyone at home, however, such an expression is a heartwarming change to witness.

With the backing of the high-ranking family of Marquis Drewett and a well-known close relationship to me, the second son and a viscount in my own right, Abigail's status among the aristocracy will strengthen and solidify. That's also why I decided to attend tonight's ball.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

“I can eat more.”

“O-Oh. We can get more food later.”

“Yes, please!”

I shared frequent reports of the Longhursts’ activities with Abigail but was invariably met with responses so vague that I doubted whether she was even listening. Even my interaction with her stepsister moments before appears not to have bothered her at all. Her attention was solely on the meat...

“Abigail.”

She glances up from her empty plate, staring at me with those golden eyes.
“Yes?”

“Those baseless rumors about you should go away if we continue to attend functions like this.”

“...Yes,” she answers. *Does she understand, or does she just not care...?*

“As you may have heard, my own reputation isn’t stellar either.”

“They said you are bloody. You’re not bloody, my lord. Don’t worry.”

“Erm, yes. It’s never bothered me, and it still doesn’t, but I realize I should have warned you before we came.”

“Warned... A warning... Is that what I should have done as your wife?” she asks.

“No, it is what I should have done.”

“My lord, my stepsister said she didn’t want to marry you.”

“O-Oh.”

“Because you are scary and only a viscount.”

“I’m glad we didn’t marry then. But how annoying...”

Was Abigail’s stepsister unaware that I’m the son of a marquis? That seems impossible, yet judging by her response just minutes prior... I consider my probe into the earl’s family. I delved quite deeply in my quest to learn more about Longhurst and its inhabitants. I should have done so before my marriage to

Abigail, but since I'm merely the marquis's second son, and my brother has already borne his own son who will inherit the title and territory one day, the political and social context of our union seemed of little import.

My intense study uncovered folklore still imparted to children living in the rural areas of Longhurst, an indigenous tale that us aristocrats would otherwise never encounter:

Don't go into the forest, or the many-armed Monster King will grab you.

Don't go into the forest, or the Monster King will see you with its many golden eyes.

Don't light fires around the forest. Don't eat near the forest.

These warnings are repeated endlessly to children, accompanied by a terrifying description of the being known as the Monster King. The man I sent to investigate believes that one of the reasons the story remains so deeply rooted in their culture is because many monsters who yet appear in Longhurst possess golden eyes.

The earl's current wife was a commoner. Her daughter greatly resembles the earl and lived in the fief's city until she could enter the earl's household as a member of his family. Thus, both women would have grown up hearing the legend, and even the earl himself could have been swayed by it.

I can understand why Abigail is hated for the color of her eyes. Yet her family probably mistakenly assumes that denizens of other territories are aware of their folktales, which explains why Nadia was so hostile to Abigail in such a public setting.

"That's why I married my lord instead," Abigail continues. "I'm glad I did."

"...I see."

Those golden eyes, filled with a quiet light like the moon floating in the night sky, seem to transfix me. *Argh, I need to stop thinking such thoughts!*

"Yes. I understand why they say you're scary. It's because you're strong," she says.

"...Haha! Yes, I guess I am." I look away, pretending to stifle laughter while I

hide my heated face with a hand.

“But you can’t hurt the weak. It’s better to act ignorant, as you did just now.”

“Is...that so?”

Her tone sounds peculiar, and our eyes meet again. Those eyes, so emotionless on the day we first met, the moon’s facsimile on the surface of a still lake.

“Because attacking one human will bring thousands more in retaliation.”

“Huh?”

“My lord is strong, but to defeat a thousand humans is impossible.”

“Y-Yes. That’s true.”

Abigail nods gravely. “My lord, there is a dish of clear stuff filled with colorful things next to the meat on the table.”

“Oh. Yes, there is. Shall we go get some?”

“Yes!”

Abigail stands in triumph and pivots toward the ballroom, her mind likely full of thoughts of which foods to eat in what order. The strangely nonhuman aura I felt a moment prior is gone.

I’ve witnessed it several times over the past half year, instances of her Gift in action.

It can happen when we’re out strolling in the garden or having afternoon tea together, or when she welcomes me home in the entrance hall. Without any warning, Abigail will abruptly stare into space, then pronounce catastrophe like an oracle: the irrigation canals will run dry, a flash flood is imminent, strong winds will flatten crops, and more.

Once, she predicted a small-scale monster stampede in Longhurst.

Frenzy sheep are creatures known for being hot-tempered, yet seldomly target and attack humans. A large flock recently trampled Longhurst’s granary, dashing all prospects of a harvest, and without any stockpiles in reserve, the earl is sourcing donations to cover the loss.

The earl may be Abigail's biological father, and although he didn't personally abuse her the way her stepmother and stepsister did, he is just as guilty in my eyes due to his inaction. But Abigail's feelings come first, and I told her that if she so desired, the Noel family would offer aid and assistance to the beleaguered fiefdom. She didn't seem to understand, however, or perhaps care at all.

"I left documents with instructions on how to manage stampedes. Frenzy sheep don't like to be obstructed and will make a fuss when that occurs. But we can influence their movement by placing some of their favorite kajuka fruit and grass in the direction we want them to go. My instructions clearly state to plant kajuka in the undeveloped regions of the territory. It bears fruit in just three months. It is the earl's job to follow my instructions; if he doesn't, that's on him. I am Viscountess Noel now and no longer work for Longhurst. They don't even give me food."

Following her wishes, I refrained from sending supplies, focusing instead on Abigail's soothing voice as she chirped on about the stubborn and unyielding frenzy sheep and how they grow angry at the slightest hint of trouble.

In the beginning, I believed that the Monster King was an imaginative creature Abigail concocted as a way to protect her young self in the face of prejudice, but recently, I've started to suspect that maybe she is telling the truth after all. Tabitha and the others think so too. Her Gift is too viciously useful to be anything other than the erstwhile powers of a real Monster King.

Gifts are a rare occurrence, so details on the different types and how one works aren't widely known or understood. It is also taboo to investigate and experiment with someone's Gift without their consent and therefore impossible to confirm if Abigail's abilities are indeed a Gift. So, lacking any true answer, I decide to trust her, as any husband should his wife.

Besides, Abigail may have a stronger heart and mind than I do, to the point where she isn't worried or troubled by much. Even so, passion swirls in my heart, and I find I just want to hold her tight and stow her away from toil.

Monster King or not, she is still my little chick.

Back in the ballroom, Abigail has glued herself to the buffet table, grimacing

up at me in disapproval.

“Why are the castle flowers bitter, my lord?”

“...Because they’re for decoration. I look away for a moment, and you’ve eaten them... Come here and spit them out.”

Hugging her small body close, I make her spit the flowers into a handkerchief.



JUST as planned, we are served plate after plate as we move down the buffet. There is meat with a small egg buried inside, slightly spicy sausages, and pasta with minced meat, all delicious. While the meals at home are as tasty, the castle feast is more sparkly.

“Our chef places more emphasis on taste than appearance, and that’s why I hired him,” my lord husband replies when I share my observation. I agree; as long as it’s delicious, I don’t mind either.

I eat a few vegetables too, some type of curly yam, because I promised Tabitha I would. Per my lord husband’s instruction, I take a bite of each dish, then pass the rest to him. That way, I have room to eat more.

“My lord, my lord. What is that?” I ask again. The first time I asked, he told me he’d answer later. We’ve since tried everything on the current table, so it is already later.

“...Oh, I can’t recall the name of that. It’s some sort of cream puff, look.”

“Cream puff? I’ve—oh! How small. There are lots of small cream puffs!”

The miniature, colorful cream puffs are heaped high on the platter, some crowned with silver bits, and others with something long and pink.

“It’s like a big mountain... I don’t think I can eat it all.”

My lord husband makes a stifled noise as his shoulders shake, then he signals to the waiter, who puts two puffs on a small dish for us. *Oh, just two? Where on the mountain did they come from?* The pile looks as big as before.

“The castle people are amazing...”

“You really trust too easily.”

I bite into mine, and it crumbles in my mouth. *Oh, oh! They're different from the puffs we have at home!* They're so small yet are stuffed with two types of cream!

"My lord, my lord. Please try this. It's so, so small, but it's good!" I insist as I hold up the second cream puff.

He takes a bite. "Yep, fresh cream and custard... So sweet."

"...It's so small, yet it has two— ...My lord?" I have spotted another plate lined with lots of small, vibrant cakes and a bigger one occupied by what appears to be yellow worms. *Is that cake too?* "My lord, what's that squiggly one?"

"Hmm? The chestnut cream cake?"

"Are there insects in the ca—"

"Not insects. It's chestnut."

"Chestnut! How did that spongy fruit turn into this smooth cream?!"

"Are chestnuts spongy?"

"I ate them when I was the Monster King. They were thorny and spongy."

"You ate them whole. Right... I see..."

So tasty... Chestnuts taste so good now... I'm so glad to be human.

Before I know it, I am seated on a sofa at one end of the ballroom. *Oh.* The dish is gone from my hands, replaced by a cup of herbal tea.

"...My lord, the tea Rodney brews is more delicious than this!"

"He'll be happy to hear that. Do tell him when we get back."

"Rodney's better than the castle people... Incredible..."

"...Abigail."

"Yes, my lord? Rodney does so well, I'm thinking of bringing him a cream puff —"

Abruptly, my lord husband places a finger to his lips, then moves to stand in front of me. *Am I not allowed to bring cream puffs home? Will they crumble if I do?*

“Long time no see, Gerald.”

“Why didn’t you come visit us, dear? And to get married without a ceremony...”

I hear a couple talking to him. The man has a strong voice, and the woman a slightly hoarse one.

“I’ve been in contact. Didn’t I send a messenger bird just last night?”

“That came from Rodney, didn’t it? And it was all business matters!”

They are speaking in a casual, familiar way, yet I sense irritation from my lord husband. Maybe I can peek around him...? I try to move, and he steps left; my view is blocked. *How did he know I wanted to look?* He didn’t even need to turn.

“Why won’t you introduce us to our new daughter-in-law?”

“Yes. We’re so looking forward to meeting her.”

Are they his parents, then? Indeed, I’ve never met them, or at least I don’t recall doing so. My lord husband clucks his tongue in annoyance. Tabitha would be upset at such rudeness.

I’ve heard that he doesn’t get along well with the rest of the Drewett family, although I don’t know the reason why. Yet he sent a message to warn his father about the landslide when I told him about the rumbling birds.

“I didn’t hear any news that you’d left the estate. Since you made it here, that means you must have set off yesterday?” my lord husband guesses.

“We left this morning and sent you a message only after we reached the capital. I mean, if we’d told you any earlier, you would’ve tried to run away. And to think I even lent you my maids. That was how we were sure you would turn up tonight.”

“Why would I run away...? Abigail, these are my parents.” Finally, he holds out a hand, and I take it as I stand to curtsy how Tabitha taught me. She instructs me so much more gently than my tutor at Longhurst did... *Oh, yes, he shushed me before. Am I allowed to greet them now?*

“Oh, what a beautiful curtsy. Come, let me see your face.”

She praised me! Tabitha, she praised me! I glance at my lord husband, and he nods.

“It’s an honor to meet—”

“Oh my, what a cute girl,” the marchioness interrupts as she clasps my hand in both of hers with a smile. “No need to stand on ceremony.”

Gently but firmly, my lord husband pries his mother’s hands away, then wraps an arm around my shoulder to pull me close.



Marquis Drewett's blue eyes, the same color as my lord husband's, widen in surprise. Though they are a similar hue, my lord husband's eyes shift between shades and hold a stronger spark, so they're more beautiful than the marquis's. I look at the marchioness's green eyes, crinkled in amusement, and conclude that she's of average magical prowess as well.

"...This is my wife, Abigail. Now, we have to go."

"Stop, stop, stop, stop, wait!" Marquis Drewett says.

Wow! That is what my lord husband always says! The two of them are so alike!

The couple tries to stall us, and my lord husband blows them off, saying he will speak to them later. We depart without any more fuss. I guess he is too powerful, after all.

"Sorry about that," he murmurs as we step onto the dance floor.

"What's the matter, my lord?" I ask. I'm good at dancing. It is the first thing Tabitha complimented me on.

In the past, I was always hungry and lacked the strength to leave the house, but after my time at the Noel residence, my condition has improved to the point that I'm healthier than the Monster King ever was. Although I can't use magic yet, I think I'll be able to soon. That said, humans don't grow more arms or legs, no matter which monsters they eat, so maybe my body isn't as versatile as the Monster King's was.

But it *is* light; I can move about so easily! I used to trip over my own feet all the time when I was the Monster King.

Pairs of people swirl by, dresses fluttering, and I do a swish too. Turn and swish.

"...Um, that's a little too much," my lord husband says. "You just ate dinner, so let's move more slowly."

"Yes!"

Slowly, smoothly, like swimming in potage. He nods in approval and gives me a gentle smile, though it's soon supplanted by a frown.

“I didn’t know my parents would be here. You were supposed to meet them before our marriage, so it was inevitable they’d show up someday... It must have been a surprise.”

“Yes! The lord marquis is exactly like you!”

“O-Oh...? Well, unfortunately, they’re typical aristocrats, so, for your protection, I’ve not told them much about your Gift... I don’t want you to be taken advantage of or away, so don’t follow them even if they promise you delicious food.”

Does the marquis have tastier food than what we have at home? Or even better than the castle feasts? I find that hard to imagine. “...I’ll go only if my lord and Tabitha go too.”

“Ah, yes, well, let’s just agree on that for now... The next piece has a quick tempo. You still seem fine, so I’ll need you to work hard now. Show me what you’ve got.”

“Yes!”

The current music fades, we bow, and he grasps my hand once more. “Just like how we’ve practiced, Abigail.”

“Yes!”

I take a big step forward.

Since my lord husband seldom attends social events, I rarely have reason or opportunity to dance. That’s why I received special training with Ethan for the ball, and I’ve gotten quite good at it.

A bounce in my step, then turn with a twirl, slipping past the other dancing humans.

I feel as though I’m running through the woods.

Hopping over treetops.

A gentle breeze caresses my cheeks every time I’m lifted high.

I watch with interest as my lord husband’s black hair, tied in a single tail, follows our movement.

Then I jump and he easily raises me again. The gowns across the ballroom look like a field of flowers.

When I was the Monster King, I flew over forests. And though I'm not as high in the air and in an enclosed space, to dance feels so much more lovely and fun.

I spin in a circle and fall into my lord husband's arms.

He smiles at me happily. His shimmering blue eyes are deeper and clearer than the sky over trees.

"...Well done, my little chick."

The song ends and we bow a final time. He presses a kiss to my hair as he guides me off the dance floor, his hand on my waist. He seems to like chicks and calls me one sometimes, so I've gotten skilled at imitating bird calls. I decide to show him.

SCREECH!

My lord husband immediately pulls me to him as everyone nearby turns to look. Gasps and screams echo throughout the ballroom, and loud calls of alarm rise from the palace guards.

He tugs me closer. "...Was that you?" he whispers in my ear.

"Yes. That's the call of a thunderbird!"

"That sounded too real?!"

Thunderbirds can grow as big as the ballroom we stand in, and their cries at dawn announce daybreak. Which I find a little redundant since someone can tell when the sun is rising just by looking at the sky.

"Anyway, don't make noises like that outside our estate. Let's pretend that never happened. Now, look proper, as proper as you can." He offers me his left arm and I'm escorted out of the ballroom quickly. But once we're in the carriage, he can't stop laughing the entire way home.

Despite his promise, we don't see his parents again, but that's okay because I think I did a good job looking proper.



“I’M sorry, Rodney... I forgot the cream puffs.”

“Please don’t worry, my lady. Shall we have some for tea tomorrow?”

“Yes!”

Since our arrival back home, Abigail has been telling Tabitha all about the sparkly castle feast and its bitter flowers. Rodney asks about the cream puffs, and she recounts the reason she wanted to bring them for him. I laugh out loud at Rodney’s look of shock.

“Did you meet with the old master? You seem to be in a good mood despite that,” Ethan comments as he takes our coats, and my laughter dies.

“...Did you know they’d be there?”

“No. I got the message only after you’d left.”

“Seriously... That was probably their plan. Well, it was inevitable that we run into them sometime, and I guess I’m grateful they decided to be civil tonight.”

“You’ve always been at odds with the old master. I fear you may actually dislike them...”

“Oh, be quiet. Neither of those things is true.”

But Ethan’s right. While no hate exists between us, to see them pretend to be people they’re not frustrates me. I keep those thoughts to myself however, knowing Rodney will surely chide me to be careful not to cause offense.

“Did the evening go well?”

“Yes. That Longhurst harlot dug her own grave.”

“Oh, was she there? That’s unexpected.”

“The earl’s going to find it impossible to find her a good match to help tide over their troubles.”

Longhurst’s prosperity was built on Abigail’s contributions, and from my research, I’ve judged the earl to be mediocre at managing his territory. Only the gods know whether he’ll ever recover from the losses incurred by the recent stampede.

When Abigail was confined in their home, there was no one to censure the

Longhursts for their abuse and incompetence. But with my father the marquis and me on her side, everyone knows who presently has the upper hand between Abigail and the struggling earldom. In fact, some will probably swarm to exploit their misfortune.

“You say the evening went well, yet you’re home early. Did something happen?”

I burst into another immobilizing fit of laughter.

Maybe I should ask her to imitate the call of a rumbling bird next!

Chapter Four: I Perform My Wifely Duties

WE are having tea after dinner one evening when Ethan passes a letter from the marquise to my lord husband. “The harvest festival,” he states.

“Oh, it’s that time of year already?”

We haven’t seen the marquis and his wife since the night of the ball; they apparently returned to the marquise immediately after the event. Rodney says they needed to hurry back to prepare for the landslide predicted by the rumbling bird I heard.

But the harvest festival... *Is it what I think it is?*

“What is the harvest festival, my lord?” I inquire.

“It’s a festival held in autumn to celebrate a bountiful harvest. Most territories have one or something similar. I’ve not attended ours for many years, but it’s the biggest event in the whole of Drewett, and I used to participate as part of the marquis’s family until I came to the capital.”

“A festival in autumn...”

“They send me an invitation every year. Shall we go this time? I can apply for military leave if you’d like to attend...”

As he muses, I think hard. *If it’s a festival in autumn, then that must be it.* “Is there a Monster King in Drewett territory, my lord?”

“Hm? I don’t think so. Why?”

“Isn’t there? Oh, then who will exterminate the monsters? Will you do it, my lord? But, oh...”

“Stop, stop, what is this? Where’s all this talk about exterminating monsters coming from?”

I take a deep breath and explain.

Back when I was the Monster King, I learned that fall is breeding season for

monsters.

While the Monster King never attacked other monsters unless they attacked it first, the villagers living nearby started to leave food at the edge of the forest in exchange for protection. Sometimes, they begged for help with those other monsters, and gave the Monster King more food if it fulfilled their requests.

Before long, the Monster King was often tasked to kill the abundance of monsters that appeared in autumn. First, the pleas came from the village children. Those children grew up to have children of their own, who then also grew up and bore yet more. Such stories were passed down through generations, and the Monster King eventually gained its title.

After the gluttony of autumn, however, the Monster King was always left hungry by winter. It had grown big by then, and the food from the village wasn't quite enough to sustain it.

But then the village would hold a festival, grilling monster meat and potatoes for the Monster King. That tasted so much better than the raw flesh and vegetation it usually ate. The Monster King couldn't grill food by itself. It always ended up charring the fare or setting the forest on fire.

"My lord, the food in our home tastes so much better than grilled monster meat and potatoes. I don't really fancy harvest festival food anymore," I conclude.

"...Abigail, stop." My lord husband sits down next to me on the sofa and places his hands gently on my shoulders to turn me to face him. "First, we don't exterminate monsters for the autumn festival."

"No?"

"No. The festival is to celebrate the successful harvest of crops. There are no monsters involved."

"No monsters. So I don't have to be the Monster King?"

"You're no longer the Monster King, are you, Abigail?"

"Oh, right. I'm human now."

How careless of me. Besides, I can't use magic anymore. I feel that I've gained

enough energy to be able to control it, but both my lord husband and Tabitha tell me not to do dangerous things unnecessarily, so I haven't tried yet.

He cradles my face in his hands. "Even if you still have the powers of the Monster King, I won't ever ask you to use them, nor will I make you work for me. Even if others request your help, I will reject them. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Never forget that."

...I don't remember what I thought or how I felt as the Monster King, but in retrospect, I think it was mistaken. It shouldn't have killed all those monsters unprovoked. Of course, newborn monsters strike indiscriminately, yet it could have simply avoided them. Otherwise, most creatures rarely attacked the Monster King, because they knew it was stronger.

Before the villagers' requests, the Monster King never sought out other monsters unless it was hungry.

So how did my lord husband know that I don't want to hunt them at the harvest festival?

When I ask him, he just points to his lap, signaling for me to sit, then caresses my cheek with his big hand. "You are Abigail, Viscountess Noel, my wife, and my cute little chick. You don't need to be anything else."

"Yes."

He presses his forehead against mine and gazes into my eyes. His fingertips feel a little dry, his palm rough and warm and...

"...What are you doing, Abigail?"

"Your hand smells nice, my lord."

"O-Oh? But...must you sniff me like that?"

He smells really good. He's always smelled pleasant, but his hand smells so good. *What is it?* I press my nose into his palm and inhale. *I know!*

"My lord! Potatoes! You smell of potatoes!"

"Wait, stop! Stop sniffing; I'm gonna go wash my hands! Potatoes?!" He tries to rise as Rodney cackles loudly by the door.

But he smells so good. The fluffy scent warms my stomach.

It's the same sensation I experienced as the Monster King when I was given grilled potatoes.



ABIGAIL is nestled in my lap, leaning against my chest with my hand pressed tightly to her cheek. She has finally stopped sniffing me, so I've given up my quest to wash my hands. *Why potatoes? Did I have any today?*

She looks relaxed and dreamy, a sharp contrast from the stiff expression she wore during our conversation a few moments prior. She'd seemed upset and anxious, her gaze wavering when she asked who was to exterminate the monsters at the harvest festival. That was my first time seeing my usually placid wife so agitated, and I was caught off guard.

"The Monster King first discovered how tasty human food was when it found some left by humans who'd come into the forest," she recites slowly and haltingly as if recounting a fairy tale. "One day, it encountered a village child roasting a small potato over a fire. When the child saw the Monster King, he threw the potato to it and ran away."

To hear such an account is strange, because Abigail claims that she doesn't remember what she felt or thought as the Monster King. *Either way, I'm certain the kid intended to hurt the Monster King with the potato, not feed it...*

"It's dangerous to leave flames unattended in the forest, so the Monster King put out the fire and ate the potato, which made its tummy feel so warm. It was the first time a human had fed it. The Monster King had eaten food dropped by fleeing humans before, but to be fed made the potato taste so much better somehow."

"...Yes, I see."

"Human food is so warm and yummy, so I'm sure the Monster King didn't mind granting the humans' requests or working for the sake of the harvest festival. I mean, it often went to the edge of the forest to wait for work."

"Oh... So did the Monster King enjoy the festival?"

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, I guess you don’t remember.”

She shakes her head, rubbing her face into my chest. “No, the Monster King was not invited to the festival. The villagers hated it when it left the forest and entered the village. The Monster King had lots of hands and legs and mouths and eyes; it scared everyone if it turned up, so the villagers left piles of roasted monster meat by the forest’s edge instead.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ethan’s face crumple as he looks up at the ceiling. *Stop, go away, before those emotions rub off on me.*

“But the Monster King has many eyes, so it could see what was happening in the village.”

“Many eyes?”

“Yes, because it was the Monster King. Everyone would gather around a large bonfire, dancing and laughing and eating meat and potatoes, and drinking soup from a huge pot while singing. My lord?”

“Yes?”

“Will the Drewett festival have a bonfire too?”

“Yes. On the last day of the festival, they construct a huge platform in our biggest plaza and burn a selection of the year’s crops, just a small portion, to thank the gods for the good harvest and pray for the following year’s too. It’s like a gift for the god of harvest.”

“A gift? So both the gods and the Monster King receive gifts.” Abigail’s giggle sounds like a breath of air, her lips curving in the smallest arc.

I don’t think the Monster King technically received any gifts, since it was the one who provided all the meat in the first place, but I keep that to myself. “There will also be lots of wooden stalls selling meat skewers, soup, and sweets,” I say instead.

“Stalls? My tutor used to talk about those. They’re different from eateries because customers stand right there to eat the food. My tutor said it’s rude and common behavior.”

“Well, I did that as a kid and enjoyed it. Oh, and stalls that sell flower-shaped candies. I’m sure there’ll be several of those this year too.”

“Flower-shaped candies.”

“Yes, sweet flowers... I’ll buy you some if we go.”

“Yes, please!” Murmuring about sweet flowers, Abigail presses my hand to her cheek once more. Not long after, she is fast asleep.

In Longhurst folklore, the warning to children to not enter the forest accompanies another story. One of a frightening and terrible Monster King and its legion of golden-eyed minions, and their assaults on nearby settlements.

The troubled villagers turned to the human king for help. In the tale, the king sends one hero, ten knights, a hundred wizards, and a thousand soldiers to the forest, yet the Monster King prevails. It had one weakness however: its magical prowess waned in winter. So the army waited for winter, then launched a united attack against the Monster King.

The knights severed its legs with their ten swords. The wizards bound its arms with one hundred ropes of thorn. The thousand soldiers blinded its eyes with their spears.

Then the hero chopped the Monster King in half.

With the Monster King defeated, peace returned to the village—for the time-being. The creature could rise again, and thus the children are told to stay away from the woods.

But history is always written to favor the victor.

Magical prowess weakened in winter? The Monster King helped the villagers by annihilating all the monsters in autumn, and in doing so ensured it had nothing to eat the following season. The army would have known that well.

By offering the Monster King a “gift” insignificant for the work it would have done, they secured their own safety and rations for the coming winter.

The villagers aren’t afraid of the Monster King because it is a monster. They’re afraid it will return for revenge.

...It’s ridiculous. A tale of ugly betrayal by a bunch of foolish humans.

I pick up the sleeping Abigail and carry her to her rooms, which Tabitha has already prepared for the night. I order Rodney to arrange for my application for military leave, and Ethan to plan for the trip back to my family home.

And stop walking with that spring in your step, Ethan; it's not like you. Stop, before your emotions rub off on me.



MY lord husband is granted many days of leave, and we embark on a leisurely journey in a large carriage, reaching Drewett Manor after six days.

The Drewett and Longhurst lands are on opposite sides of the capital, and during my trek to the Noel residence in its center, the curtains on my carriage were drawn so I couldn't see outside. When I can actually watch the passing scenery, I find that travel is rather fun. I witnessed farmers harvesting wheat in wide, open fields and children helping out on their homestead. They waved at me as we passed, and I waved back.

I spotted a huge mountain in the far distance and asked if it's Mount Kinzar and was informed it is not. My sense of direction must be messed up from the continued travel.

Oh, yes! We had an encounter with bandits too! Our five guards, together with my lord husband and Rodney, managed to quickly fight them off. Ethan isn't with us; he stayed behind to look after our home in the capital. I tried to help defend us as well, but Tabitha caught me and insisted I stay inside the carriage. Everyone was so strong, and my lord husband the strongest, yet he merely grimaced when I told him that, and chided me for watching the fight. But I wasn't afraid. In fact, I could have helped. I'm his wife, after all.

Regardless, he is really powerful, and I was considering taking up swordsmanship to be just like him. Since I'm not allowed to use magic, I thought I could learn to handle a sword instead. I picked up a sturdy stick from the ground during one of our rest stops, and Tabitha quickly took it away.

"You always get strange ideas in your head," my lord husband said. "Besides, shoddy self-defense is more a hindrance than a benefit. When trouble arises, just run. And you should eat more so you can run when you need to."

His lecture angered Tabitha. “That’s not why she has to eat!” she squawked.

Anyway, I wonder if Drewett is my lord husband’s true home. If he was only later named viscount due to his military achievements, I suppose that the fiefdom is his hometown. Either way, we are to stay with the marquis’s family. My husband initially wanted us to lodge somewhere in the city, and the marchioness rejected that idea.

I intended to greet them properly upon arrival but fell asleep in the carriage, and when I awaken, I’m already lying in bed in one of their guest suites. Tabitha, in the room with me, tells me that my lord husband’s chambers are situated quite distant from mine. I sigh in defeat; I should have tried to stay awake.

“Abigail, now that you’re up... What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?” asks my lord husband as he strides in, having changed out of his travel clothes.

“...Good morning.”

“Morning. You look awful. What’s the matter?” He sits on my bed and places a hand to my forehead, which is silly, because I don’t have a fever.

“I fell asleep. If I’d been awake, I could have requested to room with you, my lord.”

“Oh, but it’s not proper for a lady to be in my rooms...”

“But our rooms are next to each other back home, just separated by a door. I like having you close, my lord.”

“...F-Fine!” he grumbles as he sprawls beside me, burying his face in a pillow. “I’ll move into the room next door, then. Will that be better?”

“Yes!”

I did it. My lord husband will be near me. Tabitha gives me a big smile.

The morning after we decided to visit Drewett for the harvest festival, I woke to find my lord husband slumbering beside me. Since then, I sometimes slip into his bed to sleep too. That wasn’t something my marital education covered, but to share a bed must be good! I’m a wife! Performing my wifely duties!

“My lord, weren’t you going to show the lady around the castle? I’ll need some time to get her ready though, so please come back later.” With that,

Tabitha chases him out of the bower, stopping to ask someone in the hallway to prepare the neighboring room for him.

But wait? Castle? Did Tabitha just say castle?

“My lord!”

“What?”

“A castle! You said we’re to stay with the marquis—and he lives in a castle!”

“Well, the manse is smaller than the royal palace, but I guess it’s still a castle.”

Later, he leads me on a tour before dinner, and we pass through a large dining hall, ballrooms, and galleries. All in a castle! We enter the courtyard and I glance up to see—a castle!

Its spiky towers are so tall I can’t glimpse the tips, so I lean backward to look. My lord husband catches me when I lose my balance.

“It’s so big because it’s a castle...! My lord! Did you grow up here with Rodney?”

“Hmm? Tabitha was my wet nurse, so yes.”

“That’s why his tea is so tasty! Because Rodney is a castle person! How incredible!”

“You really like castles, huh...?”

...That means my lord husband, Tabitha, and Ethan are castle people too. I gasp. “My lord! Can you—”

“No, I can’t cook feasts or brew delicious tea.”

Oh. But he is still very strong. It must be because he is a castle person.



THE following day, I find myself in the manor’s large garden filled with lots of colorful blooming flowers. On the far side is what my lord husband calls a hedge maze. He said he’ll show it to me later but is currently overseeing the training of the marquis’s private army. He must be doing so because he’s strong.

I’m there to attend a tea party at the invitation of the marchioness. It’s my

first time at a tea party. My lord husband's older brother's wife—*what shall I call her? My sister-in-law?*—is present as well. Although we haven't been formally introduced yet, my lord husband told me the day prior that her name is Lady Stella. So the tea party comprises the three of us.

We're seated in a gazebo around a couple of three-tiered cake stands. They are richly laden with miniature scones, cakes, and sandwiches, yet there are only two of them. For the three of us!

Three plates lie on the table as well, filled with small cookies and snacks, some of which I don't recognize.

Back at home, my portions are preapproved by Tabitha before they are served to me, so what shall I do? Am I allowed to sample each item? I turn to Tabitha, who stands in a corner of the gazebo, and she shakes her head slightly. *I guess not. I have to make some choices...*

"Are you being treated well in the viscount's home?" inquires the marchioness as we sip our tea. "I know that Tabitha is so very capable, yet you seem rather...reserved, so I hope everything is well."

Lady Stella smiles at me, a perfect smile. I wonder if she learned how to smile from Tabitha too. *Tabitha's so amazing.*

I've practiced how to perform a proper greeting before taking a seat at a table, but when I tried to do so, the marchioness cut me off and told me to "do away with those formalities." She said the same when we met at the ball. That means she won't be addressing me by name, I've learned, and I wonder how I'm supposed to know whether she's speaking to me. *But she's looking at me now, so I guess she is talking to me.*

"Tabitha is very kind," I say.

"...Oh, sure. You are a viscountess now, and you were an earl's daughter before that, so I'm glad to see that your manners reflect your status at the very least."

"Yes." I feel that the marchioness is trying to hint at something, but all my focus is on the food just set before me. *What is this? ...A branch?* I doubt I can pick it up with a fork. *Oh, they didn't give me a fork anyway.* It's also too long to

finish in one bite.

But it's for me. All three of us were served cake, yet I'm the only one whose plate holds a branch. So it must be for me.

"Come, please eat up. My son doesn't really like sweet food, so your chef at home must not make many dessert—huh?"

I've picked up the branch. I can't tear it into smaller pieces as I would with bread, so I try biting into it. It's hard, so hard my teeth can't rip it either. The marchioness appears stunned, then emits a small cough. Lady Stella quickly produces a fan and hides behind it.

Huh? I suddenly taste fish. Strong, salty fish. I still can't cut through it with my teeth, so I continue to chew. It's tasty. *I could get addicted to this.* It's full of intense fishy flavor, so leathery and tough.

I peek at Tabitha and note that her brows are slightly furrowed. *Am I wrong? Is it not tasty?*

"...D-Do you like it...? You really don't stand on ceremony, do you?"

I nod, unable to reply with the branch still in my mouth. The marchioness nods in return. It truly is tasty.

"I guess your marriage was inevitable due to military politics, but I recently heard that Longhurst has run into some trouble. Either way, I'd like to take you under my wing so that your family's scandals won't tarnish our reputation. It would be a shame if you were to act like your sister."

The piece feels a little softer in my mouth, so I try pulling at it with my fingers, yet it still won't break off. The salty taste has also worn away, although the fishy flavor lingers, more potent than before. I wonder if it'll retain its yumminess forever.

"...Mother."

Oh, that's my lord husband coming toward us. He's such a fast runner. *Is their training over already?* It feels a little too soon for that.

He comes to a stop beside me, breathing heavily. "...Please don't send her invitations without asking me first."

“Oh, why not? This is a ladies’ tea party; the husbands shouldn’t intervene. It’s rude, especially when you come barging in like that without warning,” his mother sniffs.

“And what type of tea party serves salmon jerky? Abigail, let’s go ba— ...Wait, you like this?”

So this is salmon jerky. It’s tasty, so I nod.

“O-Oh, is it too hard to bite...? Give it to me.” He snatches the jerky from my hand and swiftly polishes it off in two bites. And I only managed the one!

The marchioness looks on in amusement and interest as he glares at her.

“Your teeth are strong too, my lord,” I comment, but he doesn’t answer.

“...In Drewett, serving jerky at a tea party is a humiliating way to tell your guest to keep quiet and listen obediently. It’s a disgrace to see you doing it,” he snaps at his mother.

“Oh, you’re reading too much into it. I just want her to learn our ways now that she’s a part of the family.”

“No need for that. She belongs in my household, independent of this place... Let’s go, Abigail.” He grips my hand and leads me away from the gazebo, Tabitha trailing us. The jerky is tasty but leaves my mouth dry, so I’m grateful to receive some water when I return to my room.



THE first thing Abigail asks for upon reaching our rooms after that disastrous tea party is water. I know the incident hasn’t fazed her, yet it’s left me disgusted.

I sink into the sofa and try to curb my nausea. Abigail plops down next to me.

“Thanks for informing me, Tabitha,” I manage.

“It’s fine,” she says with a sigh as she pours some water for Abigail and hands it to her. “The invitation came so suddenly that I could only send a messenger to let you know.”

“No problem, I’m glad you chose to accompany her... Was Lady Stella treated

this way too when she first came here?”

In Drewett, women often serve salmon jerky at tea parties when they wish to humiliate someone. The parties are a means for women to exchange news and gossip, so menus that require much chewing are uncommon. Besides, jerky is bar fare. Its presence reveals the host's intention to everyone in attendance: for the guest to shut up and listen... Well, it certainly shut Abigail up, though that was only because she found it delicious and was savoring the food.

My mother had preempted Abigail's self-introduction at the ball and then abruptly invited her to a tea party. Her strange behavior had given me a bad feeling, so I rushed over in a hurry.

“No, Lady Stella was treated fine... Both the lady marchioness and Lady Stella's marriages were political in nature too, so I thought they'd understand my lady's position. But to treat her so poorly...” Tabitha trembles as she looks down at her feet. “It's just, seeing the lady marchioness do that... Could she have been upset by my lady's inexpressiveness...?” She sniffs, close to tears.

“Whash wrong, Dabisha?”

Tabitha turns to see Abigail gazing up at her while munching on a piece of jerky, and she collapses in a heap on the floor. Abigail flinches in surprise, then crouches to peer at the housekeeper as she chuckles through her sobs. *Come on, Tabitha, not you too. Stop before your tears rub off on me.*

“...Why do you still have that...? You really like it?” I ask Abigail, dumbfounded. When did she grab a piece without anyone seeing? Abigail just nods. “...I see. Well, that's good, I guess.”

Sadness threatens to overwhelm my anger at the thought of my aristocratic mother upset with Abigail. *Damn, stop it, Tabitha!*

When Tabitha finally recovers enough to dry her tears, I ask her to recount the events of the tea party once again.

Although I was definitely raised under better circumstances than Abigail, the Drewett household is, after all, a noble family, and our lives aren't as ideal as the commoners imagine it to be. I myself didn't realize the difference when I was younger. Only when I interacted with my lower-born military subordinates

did I realize that our family dynamic isn't normal.

It's not that I don't care for them, and I respect them for their kind and benevolent rule of the Drewett demesne. Yet they've always felt more marquis and marchioness than father and mother to me, Tabitha and Ethan a better example of close parental figures. Perhaps that's because I'm the second son, so fewer expectations weigh on me than upon my older brother, the eldest and heir—about which I've no complaints, of course.

That's why I can't understand Mother's attitude toward Abigail. If she suspected they wouldn't get along, why not simply keep her distance as she does with Lady Stella?

"It seems that Mother isn't as aware of Abigail's Gift as I thought," I realize. "Even if she doesn't know the details, she should understand and be grateful for what Abigail has done for the marquise... Strange. I wonder what Father's thinking."

But if the royal family were to learn of Abigail's Gift, I wouldn't be surprised if they desired her for themselves. In fact, we could even be suspected of treason for not reporting her abilities to the Crown. Perhaps that's why Father has spoken little about Abigail.

"...The lady marchioness has always lived a blessed life, first as a nobleman's daughter, then a marchioness," muses Tabitha as she stares out the window.

"That's still no reason to disrespect my wife."

Tabitha turns to me with fondly narrowed eyes. She wore the same look whenever she complimented me as a child for "doing a good job." To be subjected to it as an adult feels rather strange. *I wish she'd stop.*

"It seems like you're really growing into a good husband, Master. This old maid is overwhelmed with emotion."

"...I can't afford to be immature forever."

She straightens, takes the rest of the salmon jerky from Abigail—I hadn't even noticed she was still chewing on it—and claps her hands together. "Come, my lady, let us arm ourselves for dinner!"

“Arm ourselves?”

“The lady marchioness has always lived in the lap of luxury, but that’s all right. You’re the strongest person I know, my lady, and Tabitha will always support you.”

“...Yes! Tabitha is amazing! How did you know I’m strong?”

Tabitha just clasps her hand and smiles.

Nope, they’re definitely not on the same page at all.

Chapter Five: Castle Shrimp Aren't Just for Decoration; Rather, the Shrimp I've Always Known Are Fake

THERE'S so much food I don't recognize.

When I was the Monster King, a large river ran through the forest I lived in, and it teemed with tiny shrimp. Whenever I drank from the river, they flowed into my mouth as well, adding a nice accent and crunch to the water. They were so miniscule, however, that they had little flavor and merely smelled a bit muddy.

The shrimp at Drewett Manor, served whole, are so much bigger... At least I suspect they are shrimp. They're different in color and size but have the same shape.

Longhurst and the capital are both landlocked, unlike Drewett, which boasts a large fishing port near the main city. Seafood is one of the territory's primary exports, and since seafood spoils quickly and is consequently not as readily available in the capital, it is all the more popular in Drewett.

While I know much about monsters and forest plants, I'm not familiar with domestic animals like cows and horses. That's why I imagined that the people of Drewett raised cattle in the sea for food. When I ask my lord husband, he tells me there are no cattle in the sea, only fish. We do eat fried fish at home, so I didn't expect those in Drewett to be anything special, but the fish served at the marquis's manse are raw. Or they look raw to me. And I think they're fish. There are red ones and white ones that glisten with freshness. I didn't realize humans ate raw food too.

"...These dishes are unique to Drewett. Isn't it a little too much to serve these so suddenly to a guest unfamiliar with them?" comments my lord husband.

"Oh, but Abigail's not a guest, is she?" the marchioness says. "I'd love for her to eat her fill of our local delicacies and grow used to them soon."

"I told you just now: our household is independent, though we will contribute

to Drewett as relatives of the marquis.”

“Don’t start a fight before we’ve even started eating, Gerald. And Mother, you’re teasing him too much. Come, let us toast to Father,” my lord husband’s brother says, then invites the marquis to dine.

I was formally introduced to everyone before we sat down: the marquis, Lord Wallace Carey Drewett; my lord husband’s brother, Lord Stuart; and the marchioness, Lady Katrina.

The marquis heads the long dining table, the marchioness then Lady Stella to his left. To his right are Lord Stuart, my lord husband, and myself. A mountainous banquet is piled between us. Rather than be served courses in succession, we seemingly must request which foods from the spread we’d like, and they’ll be plated for us individually.

Tabitha said to arm myself for dinner, yet I was not given any armor or sword, just told to enjoy myself.

But it is definitely a battle to me. So many dishes I’ve never seen before, and I’m aiming to taste them all. But I certainly can’t try everything, or doubt I can, so I’ll have to choose... What a conflict, to want to sample everything and to have to hold back!

First, a shallow white dish is placed before me although I didn’t request it. *Oh well*. It contains oval chunks of white topped with thick gold sauce—shrimp and whitefish quenelle, I’m told. I think I can finish the dumplings in two small bites each, yet when I start to eat, I realize I can manage with just one big bite. The fluffy mass falls apart in my mouth, so juicy and mild and delicious. White meat is usually fatty, but whitefish tastes light.

“...There were rumors circulating after the last ball that a certain stubborn and antisocial viscount has fallen deeply in love with his young wife, and I now see that they’re not rumors at all,” Lord Stuart says. “I asked Father about it when he returned and have been looking forward to witnessing it for myself. Anyway, rather rude that you left without greeting the royal family, no?”

“I heard that the pervert fourth prince wouldn’t be coming, but he made an appearance anyway. Otherwise, I would have.”

“Gerald!” reprimands the marchioness.

Oh! The next dish has arrived on a square blue plate. When will I be permitted to choose from the feast before me myself? *Oh well. Is this pale yellow thing meat?* It appears raw and brushed with something shiny and oil-like, and there’s also a sparkle of some other substance too, just like the food at the ball. Maybe because it is also castle fare.

“I’m only speaking the truth. The royal guard is the jurisdiction of the knights, so their contact with the military is minimal, but there’s still— Abigail, that hors d’oeuvre is a scallop; you’ve not had any before. You can skip—”

I swallow.

“...Or not. Is it tasty?”

“Yes! I’ve heard of scallops. These are scallops? They’re delicious without the shell, like chestn—”

“Exactly. I’m glad you like it,” says my lord husband, cutting me off with a cough.

“Yes!”

There were shellfish in the forest river too, but these are mixed with chopped onion, red and yellow paprika, and oil, and are plump and crunchy and sweet. I ate plenty of raw meat as the Monster King, and to learn that humans eat raw food too and can make it taste so delicious? *Humans are amazing...*

“...Shells?” mumbles the marchioness under her breath.

Do the shellfish in Drewett not have shells? Shells are grainy and taste bad, so eating shellfish without the shells is much easier.

“W-Well... You really show no hesitation even with unfamiliar food. I’m glad you like it. I heard that you’re a gourmand, but I’m sure you have your likes and dislikes as well. It’ll be hard to socialize if you can’t get used to our cuisine,” the marchioness adds aloud.

“Is that why you served salmon jerky to Abigail at the tea party, Mother, to prepare her for socializing?” quips my lord husband.

“Huh? You mean that tea party with Stella?” Lord Stuart looks to his wife.

“Did Mother do such a thing?”

“...Lady Abigail seemed to like it,” mutters Lady Stella. Her shoulders are trembling although her expression remains calm. *She’s really good at that.* I wonder if she doesn’t like salmon jerky. Or maybe she does? She wasn’t served any so I’m not sure.

“I did. It was tasty,” I say.

“O-Oh...? Then it’s fine, I suppose.”

The huge shrimp in the middle of the table seem to still have their hard shells. *How are we going to eat them?* My lord husband has strong teeth, so he’ll be fine. I should have no issue either, unless they’re just for decoration, like the flowers at the ball... *That would be a shame...*

“Either way, you’re making assumptions, Mother. I understand your concerns, but I don’t plan to let Abigail attend any social functions without me. Therefore, she’ll only need a few simple lessons to learn the local customs. Besides, don’t you find it a little domineering and unbecoming to dictate my wife’s social education without explanation or even consultation with me?”

I sense a harshness in his voice. I’ve never heard him use that low, hard tone... *Oh, maybe I have.* I’m sure that was how he spoke to me on our wedding night. He’s been so kind ever since that I’d forgotten. Perhaps he is in a bad mood.

The marchioness merely lifts an eyebrow. “...So you didn’t greet the royals that night, fine. But Gerald, aren’t you being too overprotective? I know Abigail is cute and innocent, but you’re a military man. Your status as a marquis’s son will protect you should the royals take offense—but think of Abigail. Coddling her and locking her away isn’t love, and it’s going to hurt her reputation as a noblewoman.”

“Father, please explain to Mother. The fourth prince is excessively drawn to women, and the other nobles are judgmental. Abigail is my wife and also the jewel of the Noel family. I won’t let anyone, royal or otherwise, take her away.”

The marquis frowns, and the expression makes him look just like my lord husband. I frown too, but not too much, not when Tabitha’s praised me for my smile and calm countenance.

“...I understand that her Gift is especially unique and rare, but Katrina’s not wrong,” the marquis says. “There are aspects of socialization between noblewomen that we men cannot meddle with. Despite what she experienced growing up, Abigail is still young, and it’s important that she learns how to stand up for herself.”

“I’m good at learning,” I comment.

“See? Thank you, Abigail,” the marchioness replies.

Oh, I know this dish! It’s sweet pumpkin soup. We have it at home too...but it smells different. *Is that fish?* The server whispers the name to me, crab bisque. Castle people are so kind, always so calm, and they smile so well.

“This is crab, my lord.”

“Y-Yes. Is it good?”

“Yes! I wonder how many of those tiny crabs are needed to mak—”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Is the soup-crab different from the ones in the forest river? I glance up at my lord husband and he nods, so it must be. The bisque is salty and flavorful. So tasty. All these yummy dishes are so thick and smooth.

I’ve had the quenelle, a small serving of scallops, and the soup, which came in a bowl as big as my lord husband’s. Will I become full if I finish it all? Studying his bowl, I realize the dishes I eat from at home are always smaller than his. I didn’t notice it before because our plates are the same color, and I assumed we were eating identical portions.

I look at the shrimp again. *Can we eat those? Or are they really just for show?*

“Father, Mother, that’s why I’m saying you’ve misunderstood.”

My lord husband gestures, and a shrimp is deposited on his plate! *So not just decoration! Right?! Oh! Oh!* He is using his knife and fork to separate the head and peel off the shell so cleanly! *Oh! Is the shell not for eating?! Do we not eat the whole shrimp?! But those knife skills! Must be because he’s so good with swords...*

“I simply wish for people not to underestimate Abigail.”

I bite down on the piece of shrimp he holds out to me on his fork, and flavor bursts in my mouth. It's delicious! The taste isn't muddy, but salty, sweet, and juicy! *This must be what real shrimp are! The shrimp in the river must not've been shrimp at all! Who would have guessed!*

"She is mentally much stronger than me and can certainly stand up for herself."

I swallow, and he offers me another piece. So tasty!

"So I'm not coddling her—"

"Do you always do that, Gerald?"

"...Huh?"

His hand stops moving, and I gasp in despair. *No, it's not in my mouth yet. My castle shrimp!*

"...If you don't coddle her, then what are you doing right now?"

My lord husband's face begins to turn a bright red. Lord Stuart and Lady Stella look away, their shoulders shaking, while the marquis and marchioness stare with wide eyes.

The shrimp! Am I not to have any more castle shrimp...?

"...I..."

"You?"

The shock is gone from my lord husband's face, though he is still flushed. "I just like doing it."

The shrimp resumes its trek toward my mouth. So delicious!

"Stop, stop, stop, stop, what are you saying? Gerald!" shouts the marquis.

"He's definitely your son, bad habits and all," the marchioness sighs.

"Wait! Tabitha? Has my son always acted like this...?!"



NOW I've done it...

I saw Abigail staring at the shrimp, and before I knew what I was doing, I was

feeding it to her.

My face grows hot as I avert my gaze, and I glimpse Rodney standing by the wall. Though his expression remains professional and calm, I can see him gripping the cloth of his trousers tightly. *Damn him...!*

Not to make excuses for myself, but I had no choice. Abigail learns well and possesses self-control, so I'm not worried about her etiquette, yet when she is faced with an unfamiliar situation, her actions can be bold and unexpected. Such as when she ate the decorative flowers at the palace. We try to prepare her at home, but there are inevitably some ingredients we cannot buy in the capital, so we cannot expose her to those dishes. If I'd left her to eat the shrimp by herself, she would have tried to consume them whole.

Besides, seafood is a local cuisine, and the denizens of Drewett are accustomed to eating it. In fact, the dinner that night usually wouldn't be served to guests from outside the territory. Seafood is hard to eat, so simpler food is prepared to prevent visitors from embarrassing themselves.

I understand that Mother isn't malicious and merely wishes to educate Abigail in how to be a proper noblewoman. Every female aristocrat has to learn that, and Abigail's past circumstances meant that she couldn't do so as a child. Since Mother means well, I'm fine with her attempts as long as she isn't openly rude to Abigail.

I school my features and feed Abigail another half shrimp, then finish the rest myself. My wife's eyes shut in bliss. ...Her face just makes me feel so accomplished. The routine is really becoming a bad habit.

After ensuring my parents understand my stance, I continue to feed Abigail throughout the rest of dinner. I don't normally do so for so many dishes, but the portions sizes are just too big! If I feed her, I can control her intake so she can taste a greater variety. *That's all there is to it!*

Dessert is a tart topped with fresh green grapes, and Abigail's jaw drops. Since it's the last course, there's no need for me to monitor her portion, so she can eat it on her own. She'll be glad to have the chance to attack the dish by herself.

The meal has since been quiet as everyone enjoys the food, yet soon Father speaks again, hoping to restart the flow of conversation. "I see you've decided

to stop with the feeding,” he observes.

I ignore Father’s jibe, watching Rodney’s hands clench into fists.

“Anyway, your recent letters have indeed saved our territory from much damage, and I’m grateful for that, so I will honor your request to offer Abigail the marquise’s protection. But her Gift doesn’t tell her what to do next, and at the end of the day, it was your advice on how to proceed that benefited us, was it not? She may be able to predict the future, yet without someone to come up with countermeasures, her Gift is quite meaningless.”

“I apologize if I didn’t make it clear before, but I’m not the one who proposed those countermeasures. It was Abigail,” I state firmly.

“...Huh?”

“I should have shared what I learned when I looked into Longhurst. I’m sure you did some research as well, but you might not have known what to look for. Regardless, the one managing Longhurst’s territory these past few years was actually Abigail.”

Mother tilts her head in confusion, and I meet her gaze. “Mother, I understand the importance of acting a proper noblewoman, and I don’t intend to downplay it. In fact, I hope you educate Abigail as a normal mother would; it’ll be a valuable experience for her. But to be honest, she is fundamentally ill-suited for the traditional role of an aristocrat’s wife—and she makes up for that with expert skills in territory management. I don’t own any land, yet she has gladly offered her aid and advice based on years of experience at Longhurst because she wants to be useful and make me happy.”

That is what Tabitha was trying to tell me. My parents, especially Mother, have lived their entire lives believing that a nobleman’s wife’s only job is to socialize, considering it their duty. I’d like to change that.

My offer of expertise in exchange for protection is nothing out of the ordinary. The Drewett family is heavily influential, which is why I chose to ask them to be Abigail’s shield. But I still have to prove that her defense will benefit the marquis’s line, land, and citizens, and is not just a means to clear her bad name.

In reality, Abigail may not care about her reputation. Her sense of empathy is extremely low, and she only works if she thinks she will receive food in return. Despite that, my happiness seems to please her as well.

A childhood without praise, affection or acceptance, compounded with memories from her previous life, have caused Abigail to barely perceive herself as human. The Monster King lived all by itself, and Abigail mirrors that understanding, in her own world even still.

“As I mentioned, Abigail is mentally strong and takes no heed of hateful gossip. You could say she’s indifferent to it, but I’m not. I’m guessing you’re not either, Mother, which is why you wish to teach her how to handle any hostility she may encounter, right?”

“...Yes. There are many gaps in her knowledge of high society, which means she can’t protect herself.”

“But she doesn’t need to protect herself if she isn’t bothered by the gossip. Abigail already knows what hate is, has been exposed to it all her life. I don’t want her to experience any more. Tabitha, Ethan, and Rodney are supportive of this too and will help when I’m unable to. They understand my wish to keep Abigail from harm, which is why I have no intention of adding socializing to her wifely duties, at least for now. Please understand that.”

I lower my head to hide my face. Abigail tends to blurt out her experiences and powers as the Monster King, and if word gets out, she’ll be kidnapped in an instant. No country would pass up a Gift that allows its user to predict and even control monster stampedes. *This is no joke.* I bow further in supplication, for Abigail’s sake.

Damn! I can sense Rodney clapping out of sight! Just you wait!

“Thank you for the meal!” chirps Abigail as she munches the last of her grape tart, the usual satisfied glow on her face. I still don’t understand why she always has a post-food glow.



DEEP-AMBER liquid flows from a small pot, forming a thin, straight line. Then, with a flourish, the stall owner manipulates the pot so the syrup curves on a

metal plate. The liquid candy glistens as it thickens and narrows, the owner lifting and lowering, then swirling the pot, all in one smooth motion.

“How’s this, little girl?” He skewers the intricate creation on a stick, then peels it off with a spatula.

Wow!

“A butterfly! Wow! A butterfly, my lord! A beautiful butterfly!”

“Oh, is that your lady wife? Apologies, I didn’t think....”

“...No worries. You have good skill, mister.”

I know this shape! It’s a swallowtail butterfly! There were some just like it in the forest! They tasted powdery and not very delicious, yet the villagers would come attempt to catch them anyway! *Wow!*

“Mister! Mister! How about a quartz knife butterfly?! Can you make a quartz knife butterfly?!” I ask.

“Huh? Those monsters from legend? I’ve never seen one of those... They’ve got wings of super high-grade quartz, right?”

Quartz knife butterflies were rare in the forest, and humans not from the village occasionally ventured deep into the woods to capture one. All of those humans were eaten by monsters. One managed to actually find the butterfly, but he was eaten in the end like the rest. And when the quartz knife butterfly sensed the Monster King watching nearby and flew to attack, it was also eaten. It was unexpectedly yummy. A rare treat. But ever since I became Abigail, I’ve not eaten another butterfly. *Until now.*

“They have leaf-shaped antennae, six wings, eight legs, and their wing pattern looks like small, round eyeballs surrounding a large tiger’s eye,” I tell the stall owner.

“Is...that even a butterfly?”

“It is. And they run very fast.”

“The butterfly runs?”

“And they’re covered in spicy powder that made me feel dizzy, but it was

sweet—”

“Abigail, I thought you wanted flower-shaped candy?” interjects my lord husband.

“Oh, yes! Flower-shaped candy!”

He has brought me to see the first day of the harvest festival, and Rodney accompanies us, following at a distance.

Back at Longhurst, I rarely left the house, and even after marrying my lord husband and moving to the capital, I seldom have the chance to explore the city. I was still weak back then and didn’t know my way around.

So the festival is my first time walking in public. There are so many humans! Lots and lots!

But I am all right. My lord husband holds my hand and easily guides me through the crowd. Large groups of street performers are scattered throughout the plaza, and he sometimes lifts me so I can watch a show. There are people throwing lots of balls into the air and catching them, and dancers in bright makeup. The acts are entertaining, and the audience seems to be having fun.

As for food, I try sausage wrapped in a bun, and meat skewers too. I have to eat the skewers seated because my lord husband says it’s dangerous to eat those while walking, but I’m able to sample the sausage on the go. He holds it steady as I take a single bite. The crepe with tuna and lettuce is tasty too; he ensures my one bite of it is stuffed with filling. I don’t get to the fruit water though.

Many stalls are peddling flower-shaped candy, and we found one that allows me to watch the cooking process. The samples at the front look nicer than the others too.

“Y-Yes. What flower would you like?” asks the owner.

“...What flower...? Strawberry?”

“Haha, that’s cute.”

Oh, I made a mistake. Strawberries are fruit. I reconsider. *What flowers are sweet? Maybe red clover?* I look up at my lord husband for help, and he comes

to my rescue.

“Bluestars, mister. A small bouquet, please.”

Bluestars! *I know that one!* They’re featured on the Noel family crest and bloom in our garden! But I also learned that they’re bitter.

“...Anything is sweet as long as it’s made of candy,” he reminds me.

“Oh, yeah!”

I hear Rodney cough behind us and swivel to look. He smiles and waves, so I wave too. I turn back to the stall to see that the owner’s not using the small pot.

Instead, he drops a lump of candy onto his worktable, then uses a rod to roll, fold, and stretch it again and again. The candy starts to shine the longer he works, and soon he shapes it into a long stick and cuts it into small pieces. He forms the pieces into balls before pressing them open with his thick fingers. Finally, he pokes and slices at them with a skewer and a pair of small scissors—and suddenly they are flowers. *They were just candy a moment ago!*

“Here you go, my lady.”

I accept a bundle of skewers, each crowned with a glob of candy from which sprout many small bluestars. They quiver with my every move, just like real flowers. “Thank you! ...It’s sweet! Sweet flowers! They’re sweet flowers, my lord.”

“I’ve been doing this for many years, and I’ve never seen a young lady eat as fast... You have a lovely wife, my lord.”

“I do, thank you.”

I start on another; there are still many flowers left. I wait for my lord husband to finish paying the owner, then hold out the bouquet to him.

“Sweet,” he observes after a bite.

“It is sweet! Sweet flowers!”

“It’s a big bouquet, so you can get Tabitha to display it for you. That way, you can take a bite anytime you like. Does that sound good?”

“...Yes!” My lord husband is so smart. He’s amazing! “I’ll display it in your

room, my lord.”

“Oh? ...Sure.”

“Yes, and we’ll each eat one before bed. But it’ll be a secret.”

“Haha! Yes. Otherwise, Tabitha will get mad at us.”

“It’s a secret!”

I’m not allowed to eat after I’ve brushed my teeth, and I’m looking forward to going to bed with sweetness in my mouth.

Chapter Six: Because I Am My Lord Husband's Wife

IT'S the last day of the harvest festival.

A wooden pyre is being constructed in the plaza, just as my lord husband said. As members of the marquis's family, we are seated on chairs on an elevated stage overlooking the square. The marquis has just finished his speech, and the bonfire will likely be lit soon.

Lots of humans surround the firewood structure as well as a nearby platform laden with sacrificial crops, and everyone looks happy. Many appear to be drinking alcohol. They sing in boisterous voices and dance on unsteady legs. The scene is lively and fun, but...

"My lord, my lord, that's so big. That's the bonfire stand, right? It's so big. Will they burn it all?"

"What's wrong, Abigail? You seem nervous."

My lord husband drags his chair closer to mine and wraps an arm around my shoulders. I fit nicely in his arms; the position feels right, so I like it when he does that. His embrace is probably the best place to hide when I have a stomachache. Maybe I'll go to him the next time one occurs, though my stomach hasn't hurt for quite some time.

"With so much wood, the fire will be huge. Won't the nearby houses and shops burn too?"

I love fire. It's warm, and gazing into the flames often lulls me into a doze.

But every time the Monster King lit up the forest by accident, it was never able to extinguish the blaze. The first instance was really a shock. The Monster King was still small back then and scurried about trying to douse the flames with water, yet the trees merely burst open when soaked, causing the conflagration to spread. *How can the humans here handle fire when the Monster King couldn't?*

My lord husband is laughing. "It'll be fine. We do this every year, and we always make sure there are many powerful wielders of water magic around. I'm skilled at water magic myself. Besides, nothing bad has happened so far."

"You are skilled with magic, my lord?"

"Of course!"

"That's good! You're strong, so it'll be fine."

"Haha! I'm glad you think so."

I know my lord husband possesses great magical prowess, and he's handy with a sword too. He was drilling the marquis's private army earlier that afternoon, even though he's so much stronger than them.

I wanted to learn from him, so I attempted to pull a practice sword from an overstuffed box while they exercised, but I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried, the box was too tall, and I couldn't yank the sword out completely.



The marchioness, who was passing by, asked me what I was doing. When I explained, she told Tabitha to please stop laughing and stop me. As she walked away, I noticed her shoulders trembling slightly.

Oh, but that's not the point—I haven't actually seen my lord husband wield magic yet. He usually does so only at the military training facility. While greater magical ability enables a user to cast more powerful magic, it doesn't ensure that the user can execute the spell well. I know that because the Monster King was strong but not good at magic. It only knew enough to survive.

But since my lord husband trains at work and is so strong, he must be an adept. *He's so amazing.*

Loudly and abruptly, the children standing before the pyre start to sing. The song is in an ancient tongue and the same that the Monster King used to hear from the village. The children don't sing as well as the villagers did, maybe because they are young and the language unfamiliar. The performance quickly finishes, and men in white robes light the bonfire.

Perhaps the wood is covered in oil, for it burns with raging vigor, scattering sparks everywhere. Everyone cheers and the people nearest the fire begin to toss offerings of wheat, flowers, and potatoes into the flames, and... *Oh?*

"My lord."

"Hmm?"

"That person..."

Someone in a dull-brown robe is weaving through the crowd toward the fire, holding a bunch of dried flowers.

"That person looks like my stepsister."

"...Where?"

I point her out and describe her appearance, yet he can't seem to spot her. That's not his fault; my vision is very good.

"Damn it... Where is she?"

My lord husband was upset when his parents informed us that Earl Longhurst

and his stepdaughter could be in town during the harvest festival. Their presence was wholly unexpected, and I was warned to stay close to my lord husband or Rodney. *I wonder why.* My stepsister is too weak to do any harm.

She is weak, but...

Why does a human like her have that?

“My lord, my lord. What my stepsister carries is more dangerous than she is.”

“Dangerous?”

“Those are summoning blooms. The smell of its burning petals drives monsters insane, and they will come. Why does my stepsister have it?”

Rodney dashes to the stage as my lord husband calls for him.

Summoning blooms grow only near the river flowing through the forest in Longhurst, and due to the moist environment, they seldom catch fire. But when they do, the scent aggravates all monsters within sniffing distance and provokes a mad rush to douse the fire and the offending odor.

The air is still in the plaza, but higher up... *Ah yes, a strong breeze.* Monsters in the nearby forest will surely catch a whiff of the flower should it burn.

I tell my lord husband and Rodney as much. The marquis and marchioness are in the vicinity and hear me too, their faces growing pale.

Immediately, the marquis orders his guards toward my stepsister while Lord Stuart mobilizes the private army. Aides run to fetch swords and leather armor.

“There she is!” shouts my lord husband as he finally glimpses my stepsister. He’s strapping on some light armor. “Abigail, you—”

Before he can finish, the marchioness steps swiftly between us. “Tabitha, take Stella and Abigail back to the castle and send me my guards.”

“But Mother—”

“Why are you dawdling, Gerald? Hurry and go! I’ll stay over here, so I won’t need protection. Leave the wives to Tabitha.”

“Mother, I can—” Stella starts.

“You are not yet mistress of the castle, so stand back. This is my duty as the

lady of this land.” She turns, instructing the attendant servants to organize a rapid evacuation of the plaza such that the crowd does not panic.

The marchioness is also weak, without much magical ability, and yet...

The Monster King used to witness such scenes. Monsters and humans are alike in that the strong safeguard the weak, but humans are special because the weak will also try to defend the weak.

The Monster King still cannot understand why.

From the top of the stage, I can see everything. The humans around the large bonfire in the plaza’s center are still dancing and laughing. At the edge of the swarm, the marquis’s private army and servants are calmly escorting people out of the square. Some of them complain when told to leave, but nobody seems confused or frightened.

My lord husband kisses me on the forehead and orders me to stay with Tabitha, then slips through the throng toward my stepsister.

To extinguish the fire will require too much magic, so her capture is likely the easier option.

“This way, my lady,” Tabitha urges as she tugs on my arm.

My stepsister appears oblivious to the stealthy approach of the marquis’s army, Rodney, and my lord husband. She stumbles as the surge of the crowd pushes her closer to the pyre, and I watch as dried petals shake loose from the withered bouquet in her hand with each staggering step.

“...My lady! We need to head to the castle.” I swivel to see Tabitha’s lips quiver before setting in a firm line.

“But my lord husband is strong,” I say.

The marquis’s family, my lord husband, and even Rodney—everyone is panicking despite his strength. We don’t have to run away. But maybe Tabitha doesn’t know that.

“Lady Abigail!” pleads Lady Stella as she grasps my hand and pulls.

Both Lady Stella and Tabitha look scared, perhaps because they know they are weak.

So why don't they flee? Why do they want to bring me along?

I'm strong. At least I think I am.

I just cannot understand humans.

At that exact moment, the guards apprehend my stepsister, and her mouth opens in a silent scream. One soldier tries to snatch the bouquet from her, and she writhes, bites his arm... That surprises me. She was always so calm, but, having failed her task, she has become like a raccoon caught in a trap.

Tabitha and Lady Stella's hold on me loosens. Possibly because they can see that my stepsister has been caught.

The soldiers, guards, and my lord husband part to form a circle around her, and... *Oh*.

"Everything is fine now, my lady," sighs Tabitha. "The young master and the others will require some time to settle everything. Shall we head back to the castle first?"

"The wind will blow," I say.

A stiff breeze is coming. Numerous tiny sparks leap from the bonfire as if plucked and thrown into the sky.

My vision is good, and I can see every withered petal of the blooms whirling away from my stepsister and all over the plaza. The bouquet itself has crumbled into small bits, each riding the wind. I watch my lord husband and Rodney reach heavenward to try to catch the pieces.

The wind fans the fire, and the flames leap ever higher.

My lord husband and Rodney manage to grab most of the broken bouquet, and—*oh... They've fallen over...* A host of tiny petals swirls toward the pyre.

"My lady?"

I pull free of Tabitha and Lady Stella's weak grips and approach the edge of the stage.

The marchioness called it duty. She is the wife of the marquis, and I am the wife of Viscount Noel. Although he owns no territory, he seems happy

whenever I apprise him of events happening in Drewett. When he is happy, something tingles within me. When he praises me, I feel warm, the sensation like when I was given potatoes. If I perform my wifely duty well, surely he will praise me more. “Because I am my lord husband’s wife, I will aid him in his work.”

Besides, if the petals burn, the monsters will come.

...There are strong humans here. The monsters must not come.

When the forest was ablaze, the Monster King froze the air into what was essentially a block and dropped it on the flames, the strategy evidently effective.

But a block will be too big. It’ll hurt my lord husband.

I have no need to worry. As Abigail, I’ve learned the right way to extinguish a fire.

I inhale a deep breath. I’ve not cast in Abigail’s body before, yet the magic roils inside me.

Faster... Stronger...

Something keens in my ear. I can hear Tabitha’s voice from far away, though I don’t know what she’s saying.

Surround the fire... Like putting a lid on a pot...

POOF! It winks out with a soft sound.

I did it! Fires go out when they’re covered; I learned it right! My first use of magic as a human was successful. Maybe more successful than when I was the Monster King!

My lord husband stands hurriedly and stares at the smothered pyre, dumbfounded. He turns in my direction. “...Abigail!”

The other humans are all abuzz too.

“The bonfire’s gone out”

“What? Why?”

“How did that happen?”

He begins to run toward me, screaming my name. *Oh?* Tabitha is shouting too.

My nose feels itchy, and I rub at it with my hand. My fingers come away bright red.

Bright red? *Oh, I'm a human now, so this is blood.*

My lord husband is suddenly by my side.

"My lord—"

"Ah, Abigail! Don't move. Just stay there."

"—my nose is bleeding."

"Y-Yes. Come here." He gingerly wraps his arms around me and lifts me off my feet. Instead of letting me sit on his arm, he lowers me to the ground. Tabitha dabs at my face gently with a handkerchief while calling for a doctor or medic.

"...Are you hurt?" he asks.

"Hurt? Oh, my arms and back hurt."

"Are you dizzy? Nauseous?"

His barrage of concern continues, and I shake my head each time. The questions are so rapid-fire that I can't clarify that all I'm feeling is a muscle ache.

I don't remember what the Monster King thought, yet I remember its experiences and emotions. The pain is nothing compared to when it was pierced by a bunch of spears, so I'm all right. And the stomachache I developed from overeating was also much worse.

"Abigail, Abigail, Abby..." Tears well in my lord husband's blue eyes as he presses his cheek against mine. His skin tickles.

I wonder if I'll be praised for doing my job well.





“**WOW**, that was crazy,” whistles Rodney.

“...Shut up.”

I hold Abigail fast in my arms as I burst into the pavilion set up for the marquis’s family near the stage. Rodney managed to secure a doctor immediately, and the man starts to examine her.

“The nosebleed seems to have stopped... And it looks like my lady just has a muscle ache,” the doctor reports.

I almost fall off the chair, but I catch myself before Abigail, who is still in my lap, can tumble to the floor.

“Then why did you panic?” I scold Rodney.

“You were panicking yourself, Master, and as your butler, I mirror your anxiety,” he answers. He’s regained his usual calm, yet beads of cold sweat still dot his hairline.

Abigail’s stepsister Nadia struggled violently during our attempt to subdue her, displaying none of the elegance she affected at the ball, and although we couldn’t draw our swords in the crowd, we were successful in the end. The dried summoning blooms had scattered on the wind, however, and while Rodney and I tried to capture all the petals, the task was impossible.

Then, with a gust of wind, the bonfire went out with a soft *poof*.

The unexpected turn of events left me blinking in confusion, which quickly turned to relief when I realized that the flowers could no longer burn. I’d told Abigail that the situation was under control, yet with such a large crowd present, the extinguishing of such a large blaze without harming anyone would have been difficult. How had the fire gone out, then?

Abruptly, I recalled Abigail’s words: “*I can’t use magic, my lord. This body can’t withstand it.*”

My chest tightened and I turned toward the stage. Abigail stood upright at its edge as though ready to give a speech, her entire chest—nose to breast—covered in blood!

I had immediately lost my cool.

“...If I may give our lady a blanket, Master Gerry?”

I loosen my hold on Abigail just a little, enough for Tabitha to spread a blanket over her. She sighs and Rodney snorts, and I ignore them. *It's not my fault there isn't a bed or sofa in here for Abigail to rest on!*

I sniffle and hug Abigail, wrapped in her blanket cocoon, close again. *Damn it!*

Soon, we return to the castle, leaving the mess in the plaza to Father with instructions to throw the Longhurst woman into the dungeons for the time being.

The doctor accompanies us, and I insist that he give Abigail a more thorough examination. Nothing out of the ordinary is found, and I finally allow myself to relax.

He doesn't know how or why Abigail could wield such powerful magic. “It's very rare for the body to conjure and employ magic that goes past its user's limits,” is his vague answer before he excuses himself.

“My lord.” Abigail sounds disgruntled as she lies abed. We all had an early dinner, and Tabitha, after cleaning her and changing her clothes, has decided Abigail will retire early.

“What is it?”

“I don't want this room. I want to be in your room.”

We have been sharing a bed more frequently of late. Abigail seems to have taken a liking to it because “I'm your wife,” and often comes to my room to sleep. *Yes, that's really all we do.*

...Though I often can't fall asleep myself, which is why I don't let her join me every night.

Abigail is my wife, and despite my poor treatment of her at first, she has shown herself to be nothing short of excellent. She is no longer unhealthy and weak and has even grown a little. So there should be no issue in becoming true husband and wife should I so desire. My gut, however, tells me that the time is not yet right for Abigail.

That's why we spend our nights together merely sleeping—but there's more we need to do this evening. Shaking my head clear of other thoughts, I sit on the chair beside the bed and face Abigail. We have to talk.

"Abigail."

"Yes!"

"Did you use magic?" She's mentioned before that she would do so in an emergency. I suppose the day's events could be considered one.

Her face beams with accomplishment. "I did!"

"Didn't you promise me you wouldn't?"

Perhaps she senses my hesitation, for she averts her gaze and stays quiet.

"I heard what happened from Tabitha," I press. "You used magic without an incantation. Is that so?"

"Incantation?" She blinks at me.

"...Did you not have any lessons on magic with your tutor at Longhurst?" Maybe that's why she's unaware that wielders usually vocalize their magic. "Did you use magic the same way the Monster King did?"

"Yes, that's right!"

That makes sense. Monsters don't speak when they cast spells. In fact, they use magic in a completely different way.

"...Do you wish to use magic?"

Abigail pauses, thinking a while before answering. "I...don't know. I only used it because I could."

Magic appears to come naturally to her, then, on impulse, without need for thought or intention.

"You can't use magic the way the Monster King did. That's why you got a nosebleed and your body hurts. But Abigail, how about learning to use magic like a human?"

She looks at me, not understanding, and I clasp her hand tightly, though not enough to hurt her.

“Let’s get you a tutor so you can learn how humans cast spells. I’ll be your first teacher though, so: please don’t wield magic in that way again.”

“...Yes.”

I don’t think she truly grasps my intention, but she nods anyway. I give her a hug. “I couldn’t breathe when I saw you covered in blood. When you are hurt and bleeding, I hurt too.”

“You do? Where?”

I place her hand over my heart. “Here.”

“It’s not good if you’re hurting there.”

“Exactly. You feel happy when I’m happy, and I’m the same way too. So when you hurt, I hurt as well.”

“I didn’t know humans could do that.”

“Haha, that’s right. Tabitha and Ethan too, they get hurt when you get hurt.”

“What about me?” Rodney comments in a whisper from the side of the room. I ignore him.

“I understand,” Abigail replies.

I assume the conversation is over, but there is a strange look on her face.

“You haven’t given me my reward, my lord.”

“Hmm?”

“I did well as your wife, so you must kiss me here, my lord.” She points to her forehead, and I raise an eyebrow. Is she expecting me to reward her for breaking her promise and using magic? Perhaps I should have reprimanded her more firmly. But how could I when she literally saved the day?

Feeling Tabitha’s eyes on me, I reluctantly give Abigail a kiss before carrying her to the bed in my guest suite.

Tabitha smiles, following, then moves to the sideboard. Picking up the glass case in which Abigail’s candy flowers are displayed, she turns to leave the room. Abigail watches her go, eyes wide with shock and disappointment.

Oh well... Tabitha's won this round, I'm afraid...

Chapter Seven: My Lord Husband Smells Nice, So I Can Easily Sniff Out His Whereabouts

I know eggs Benedict. We've eaten it at home. Crispy bacon and poached egg served with thinly sliced toast and hollandaise sauce. It's very tasty, and how the ingredients all layer together is sublime.

"My lord."

"Yes?"

"This eggs Benedict is different from what we have at home. Is this eggs Benedict too?" I ask.

Since our arrival at Drewett Manor, I take breakfast with my lord husband alone in our rooms each morning. But that day, we've been invited to eat in the dining hall with the marquis and his wife, and Lord Stuart and Lady Stella as well.

"Yes, but this is a slightly different version. It's unique to our household and I used to eat it as a kid, so this is nostalgic for me. The food here is great, so do eat up."

"Okay. So this part here is the egg. But where's the Benedict...?"

"The Benedict...? Who knows..."

The bouncy poached egg and rich hollandaise sauce are familiar, but instead of bacon, there's something orangey-red beneath. Is it meat or fish? And under that, *oh, how big is this!* Something as tall as my soup mug at home. Pancakes? *Are they really pancakes?! Wow!*

The plate is also garnished with fresh leaves, and when I push those aside, I spot Tabitha's brow twitch from where she's standing by the wall. *All right, that wasn't the right move...* But I just wanted to get a better view of the majestic stack of pancakes. I'll be sure to eat my greens later.

"...My lord, this is amazing. It's so tall and—"

“Don’t worry, Abigail. It looks tall, but Tabitha has told the kitchens to serve you an appropriate portion.”

“Yes!”

I hear a clatter of cutlery and raise my head to look around the table, and everyone appears calm and collected. How good they are at following etiquette. *They must have learned from Tabitha.*

The marquis inquires, “Abigail, are you feeling better?”

I wonder why he’s asked but answer anyway. “Yes! I’m well!”

I’m well but hungry. Thankfully, my lord husband has said I may finish everything on my plate.

I pour a generous portion of maple syrup on top of the hollandaise sauce, then pick up my knife. It slides into the food without resistance! So smooth and easy! I try a bite of the orange meat and pancake... *Delicious!*

The pancake is so fluffy. We eat eggs Benedict at home with toast, which has a denser texture, but this is yummy too! We’ve also had pancakes at home, and although different, the Drewett iteration is still delightful. *Must be the castle people’s magic...*

The dish is soft, rich, sweet, salty, and... *Oh?* The orange meat isn’t meat. I recognize it because—

“...This smells like salmon jerky! Is this orange meat the tender version of salmon jerky?”

“...Excuse me...” Lady Stella’s shoulders shake for a moment, then she composes herself.

“It is salmon, but smoked salmon,” the marchioness explains with a little cough.

Salmon... The same fish... What an incredible creature...

“Gerald, I hear that you’ve changed your plans to return to the capital tomorrow?” she continues.

“Yes. We’ll be staying for a few more days due to recent events.”

“Let’s leave that talk to after the meal,” the marquis interjects. “Abigail, if you like fish, how about heading to the market to see some? I’m guessing you haven’t had the chance to do that yet?”

“Are there many fish at the market?” I ask.

“Lots from the sea. I can show—”

“I’ll escort her, Father. If you’d be so kind as to handle *that issue*.”

“...I see...”

I’ve learned that fish from the sea are different from river fish. I’ve never seen the sea myself, though I’ve heard that it’s really big. *Does that mean the fish there are big too?* Perhaps there are lots with orange flesh, like the salmon. I cut another piece and savor it. I can detect a faint woody aroma amid the flavor.

My lord husband told me that the meat flower we ate at the ball was pork. Pigs live near the forest, so I understand why their flesh tastes a little woody, *but are there trees in the sea too? I didn’t think there were...*

I crunch into a mouthful of the leaves, which refreshes my mouth. I look to Tabitha, and she nods in approval. I’m doing well. I like eating leaves, even if they aren’t as tasty as meat. *Oh, these tomatoes taste good too.*

“Lady Abigail. The dressmaker is coming to visit today. Would you like to spend the day together?” Lady Stella smiles at me. I glance at her plate of eggs Benedict, and it appears untouched. Why? It’s so delicious and even I have already eaten half of mine, with room for more.

“I’m going to the kitchens today. The lady marchioness says I can,” I reply. She must have agreed because she knows how much I love visiting the Noel kitchen.

Lady Stella tilts her head. “The kitchens?”

“...It is part of her duty as mistress of the house. You went through the same training with me, remember?” the marchioness answers.

“Oh, that’s right. I see. Our kitchens are large, so it’ll be a great experience,” Lady Stella says.

“I go to the kitchen at home every day. There’s even a chair for me to sit on.”

“...A chair?”

“Yes, right in the corner! The cooks are all so amazing! They can make the fires big or small without magic, and they don’t burn the meat, and can even chop onions into tiny bits in no time at all!”

“...Oh, that is...very amazing...” Lady Stella coughs.

I love watching them do magic without actually doing magic. It’s marvelous.



WITH Abigail in the kitchens, Father and I descend the stairs to the dungeon.

“...Stella wanted to choose a dress for Abigail, but she couldn’t beat Katrina’s offer,” Father comments with a chuckle.

“I’m nonetheless grateful for her consideration.” I stoop in a light bow to Father, who strides a few steps ahead of me. His smile relaxes the lines on his cheeks, a marked contrast to his usual strict expression. If only he could have shown such a loving look to Mother, their relationship could have proceeded much smoother.

I suspect that both Lady Stella and Mother are trying to distract Abigail from the person waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs. They have no need to worry though, since Abigail herself is entirely uninterested.

Even if Father isn’t convinced that Abigail was who wielded magic that evening, she still demonstrated her Gift by warning us of the danger, so the marquise is definitely indebted to her. *Whatever the case, my little chick is just too cute...*

The heavy door at the foot of the stairs opens with a metallic screech that makes me wince.

The soldiers have already sent reports on the woman’s condition, yet I want to see it for myself.

“That’s what I’m saying! She’s a monster! Lord Gerald must have been tricked into falling for that disgusting girl. That’s why I need to make him see!”

“Sickening. Don’t let her speak my name again,” I growl.

Nadia screams again as the soldier interrogating her strikes her with his sheathed sword. She still wears the same dirty brown robe in which she was apprehended, her wrists and ankles in chains. Her previously well-manicured nails are cracked and bleeding, though I'm not sure they weren't before her imprisonment.

Nearly two months have passed since we first met at the ball. Her face is haggard, although traces of her wealthy upbringing remain. I recall Abigail when she first arrived, so small and skinny and nothing like the sixteen-year-old she was supposed to be. So the sight of Nadia evokes no pity from me, only rage.

"Has she been like this since her capture?"

"Yes, very feisty since she was brought in," spits the soldier in disgust as he regards the whimpering woman at his feet.

Drewett's foremost apothecary confirmed that the wilted flowers Nadia carried were indeed summoning blooms, and the news has spread throughout the marquis's army. As protectors of the territory, they view her plan to ignite those flowers in the heart of Drewett as an act of terrorism, and consider her a monster.

In fact, I recently discovered that a few days before my household's arrival, Earl Longhurst and his daughter visited Drewett Manor. The two were dressed in worn traveler's cloaks, having made the long journey from Longhurst through the capital and into our territory. That was shocking news, since the earl's family has always been known for its attention to appearance and status.

While the earl seemed humble as he begged for help, Mother felt that Miss Longhurst was insolent and judgmental, and she recounted their call at the castle with slight contempt in her eyes. The earl presented a recovery plan so shoddy and incomplete that it could hardly be classified a plan, which merely reaffirmed his incompetence, and they were politely told to leave.

"Oy, where's your father?" the soldier barks.

"I've told you: I don't know! I'm just here for Lord Gera—aah! That hurts! Stop!"

The soldier pins Nadia's head to the floor with the tip of his sheathed sword

and warns that he'll cut off a finger the next time she speaks my name. Finally, she seems to notice my presence, quickly calming as she throws me a doe-eyed glance.

"...I-I don't know. After we failed to get help, we went our separate ways."

"Why are you still in Drewett? And why did you have those flowers? I heard that they're unique to Longhurst."

"I-I just wanted to help Lord Ger—Viscount Noel see."

"Stop talking in riddles and answer properly!"

Since her capture, our soldiers have repudiated Nadia's pretentious behavior whenever it appears, slowly extracting information about her movements and motives in coming to Drewett. According to her, the earl moved on to the next territory to seek help, while she stayed, citing nonsense about needing to find me. I have no idea what she's up to. Maybe she's already lost her sanity. And because she used to be Abigail's abuser, I find myself unable to empathize with her at all.

I've learned that Nadia's mother grew up somewhere near a forest brimming with monsters—it is also the only place where summoning blooms grow. Along with tales of the Monster King, the children there are raised with the knowledge that those flowers must never be burned. If one is found, it is to be harvested, dried, and buried. Despite the villagers' best efforts, however, the flowers continue to flourish.

"The flowers drive monsters mad, and if you burn them near her, she'll reveal her true nature. Then you'll see, Viscount Noel..."

"Nonsense."

Abigail may still retain the Monster King's memories, but she is a human. A human who can hardly wield magic without hurting herself... And her true nature? How repulsive for someone to speak of her in that manner.

Although we still don't know who gave Nadia those flowers, I conclude that I've heard enough and turn to leave.

"W-Wait! How long are you planning to hold me here...?! " she shrieks after

me.

“Since this is Drewett territory, the marquis will decide that. At any rate, you’re the earl’s daughter, so you must know what’s in store for you after this.”

Maybe Nadia doesn’t understand my meaning or is choosing not to, or perhaps she is too anxious to think much at all. She starts to tremble. “Abigail! Please get Abigail! I-I’m her sister!”

“What? You dare to ask for her help after everything you put her through...? Seems like all this time given to you to repent has been wasted.”

Sensing Father’s gaze upon me, I swivel toward the stairs. I’ve already confirmed Abigail’s stance, so the rest is up to him. “Please feel free to deal with her however you deem fit.”

“Are you certain there’s no need to consult with Abigail?”

“Yes. My wife respects your authority as marquis.”

Similarly to how she rejected the earl’s plea for aid, Abigail will not be concerned with her stepsister’s well-being. I know she has the strength to weather whatever outcome.

Of course, Father can’t imagine how the seemingly innocent Abigail can think so, but after a beat of hesitation, he nods. “...I see. I’ll take your word for it, then.”



“MY lord!”

I’ve just entered the hallway and pulled the door to the stairs shut behind me when Abigail calls out brightly.

Shouldn’t she be hiding away somewhere like she does when she feels unwell? Or maybe she isn’t fully aware of how much her body is hurting? I mean, she’s been limping a little since morning.

When someone wields powerful magic, they become conduit to a huge and intense surge of power, which can exhaust the physical body. Abigail may claim that her muscles are merely sore, but her body must have endured significant strain in using so much magic.

“How did you find me?” I ask.

“Huh? I always know where you are, my lord.”

“Is that so?” I hoist a puzzled Abigail into my arms.

“My lord.”

“Hmm?”

“I’d like to see the fish at the market.”

“The market is liveliest in the early morning, so we’ll go tomorrow.”

“Yes!”

I walk us back to our room, giving my wife a kiss on her forehead as she chirps about the big castle kitchens and its magical cooks.

Abigail no longer has to be strong or face any foolish or ugly-hearted people. She is happy simply to be human, and her primary job is to learn that she can be loved unconditionally.

She’s no longer the Monster King, just my cute little chick.



“**DO** chestnuts taste better soaked in water, my lord?”

“Look closely. Those are sea urchins.”

I peer closer into the tub. “...It moved! My lord! The chestnut is moving!”

“Like I said, those are sea urchins. They’re living creatures, while chestnuts are...fruit, I think. Or vegetables...? No, probably fruit...”

We woke early that morning to visit the market. It’s near dawn, yet there are as many people around as during the festival.

We haven’t had breakfast, so I get to choose a stall to eat at! The air is full of the aroma of grilled fish and meat; everything smells so good. My lord husband holds my hand and walks at my pace so I can examine each store. And that’s how I find the chestnuts, or sea urchins, rather, in a tub at a shopfront.

I stare hard, watch one urchin’s thorns wriggle and creep. It looks like it’s being sloshed around by the water, but it’s actually moving on its own, and

those thorns are its feet. So many feet... Just like the Monster King. My insides suddenly feel itchy.

“...My lord. Are sea urchin thorns inedible like chestnut shells? Do we eat the insides?”

“Yes. It doesn’t look very appetizing, but I do like the taste. Shall we try some?”

I stop him before he can flag the stall’s owner. “I want to eat sea urchins that don’t move. Moving chestnuts are strange.”

“O-Oh? I see? Chestnuts? Huh?”

If chestnuts and sea urchins are the same inside, then I’d prefer to eat one that doesn’t move. I think of the delicious chestnut cream cake...

Wait. There’s something else in the next tub. Bigger than my palm—maybe the size of my lord husband’s?—they resemble fat tubes with random bumps. Some monsters in the forest have a similar form, yet the creatures look like they live permanently in water. *Oh, one of them is crawling.*

...Its mottled pattern is cute. Three or four of them occupy the tub, all sporting different colors.

“Are you sure you’d like to eat those, young lady?” calls the stall’s owner, intrigued, and I nod. *One of the bumps just twitched...!*

“Wow, it’s rare to see a girl looking so intently at sea cucumbers... They usually dislike them.”

“True. Most womenfolk do not like their living form,” concurs my lord husband.

“But many still eat them because they’re said to be good for beauty,” counters the shopkeeper.

So these are edible after all. If humans eat raw fish, maybe sea cucumbers are consumed raw as well?

“Shall we buy some to try? We can bring them ho—” My lord husband stutters to a stop as I grab a sea cucumber from the tub. Swiftly, he covers my hand with his. “You really need to give me some warning next time,” he

mutters, then turns to the stall owner. “Apologies. We’ll take this whole tub. Please send it to the castle.”

“Y-Yes. To the marquis’s castle, of course... I’ll make sure to prepare them well, just for this brave young lady here.”

My lord husband tells me that the sea cucumbers will be marinated before delivery, so I guess I can’t eat them right away. I know what marinating means. It means to make food deliciously sour.

After that, we resume our stroll of the market, buying and eating various dishes. There is fish grilled over a charcoal flame until tender and fluffy, and crab legs that my lord husband pulls smoothly from its shell. When I bite into one, its juices flood my mouth, a sweet, salty, wonderful taste. He also removes the meat from the skewers we purchase, and I eat those too. I have some difficulty prying the meat from the conch shellfish, so I feel slightly envious when he does it for me with ease.



WE left really early for the market, so we manage to return to the castle right around the time when we usually finish breakfast. Tabitha complains that my hair smells of smoke, so I’m whisked off to a bath while my lord husband heads to the training grounds to get some work done before his own rinse. He’s carried me in his arms all morning but still has energy left for drills. He’s really so strong.

The weather is wonderful, the cool breeze of morning warming to a shining sun. The servants set up a small table and chair in the garden, and I’m allowed to have tea outside.

A large parasol shields me from direct sunlight, and the gentle, balmy wind feels good on my skin. Our garden back home is large, but the Drewett’s garden is even bigger and boasts lots of trees. I feel as though I’m in a forest, sitting in a sunny clearing where I can listen to the leaves rustle.

It reminds me of how I used to bask in sunshine as the Monster King, lulled into slumber by the warmth. The Monster King was strong, so it could fall asleep without fear of harm. And even when it was attacked, as it often was, that was no problem.

Nothing will attack me in the garden. I can doze off, and nobody will bother me.

I'm so glad to be human. Ever since I became Abigail, gratitude is never far from my mind. And since marrying my lord husband, I think I've discovered something even more wonderful than becoming human. I may be strong, but he is so much more so, and if someone attacks me, he will surely come to my rescue. *I mean, I probably won't be, but I know he'll protect me.* So even if I'm weaker than the Monster King, I can safely drift off...

Until something other than the wind rattles the bushes behind me.

"Hello!"

It's a tiny human.

It is crawling out of the undergrowth. *Oh, he's so small.* And he's nearing me on unsteady feet. I've never seen a miniature human up close before. *What shall I do? Tabitha! Tabitha, where are you? What shall I do? Tabitha!*

"I am! Samuel Drewed!" declares the toddling tiny human. I suspect he hasn't pronounced it right; I assume he must be trying to say Drewett. *I guess?* Oh, is he Lord Stuart's—my lord husband's brother's—offspring? I think my lord husband mentioned something about a child too young to join us at the dinner or breakfast table.

"I'm sree!"

Huh? Sree...?

And why is he holding his fingers out like that? What does this all mean...?

There were no tiny humans at Longhurst. Or when I was the Monster King. Either they weren't allowed close to the forest, or there simply weren't any at all.

But I know that despite their small size, hurting them can induce great wrath in grown humans. While most monsters in the woods avoided the village, occasionally one attacked the settlement, and if it happened to harm a tiny human, the other humans gathered together and retaliated, venturing into the forest to slay even innocent monsters.

That's why the Monster King fled deep into the forest at the mere sight of tiny humans. The small creatures always wailed in the presence of the Monster King, and it didn't dare to approach for fear of squashing them. *Oh, he's coming even closer! Tabitha! Anyone!* I take a step back as he totters toward me.

"Are you Abby?!"

"Huh, huh? I-I think so."

Abby? Abby...? My lord husband has taken to calling me that lately, so I realize I must be Abby. I glance around to see the guards and maids watching me with strange, twitchy expressions.

"Mother says Abby is Uncle's wife."

Uncle? Uncle...is my lord husband...?

"Yes, I am my lord husband's wife!"

I hear a giggle from the bushes, and soon Lady Stella appears from behind them. She isn't wearing her usual, impassive expression and is instead smiling as she reaches out to hold the tiny human's, Lord Samuel's, hand.

"Sorry for letting him sneak up on you like that, but Samuel has been asking to meet Lady Abigail... I hope you don't mind children."

"Don't mind...? I don't know. I've never seen one up close before," I admit.

His hand in Lady Stella's staying grasp, Lord Samuel is no longer trundling toward me. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

With his advance halted, I can take a good look at him. Although he's small, his hands and feet are fully formed. I suppose I was the same when I was a child, but I never thought to check back then. His hair and eyes are the color of walnuts, like Lady Stella's. He smiles widely at me.

...He's not crying or displaying terror. While no tiny humans lived at Longhurst, the children of neighboring nobles sometimes passed by the fence surrounding the mansion's garden. They always screamed and bolted whenever they spotted me.

"...Are you not afraid of me, Lord Samuel?"

“No!” Then he does scream, though it’s gleeful in tone. I look to Lady Stella, who appears puzzled.

“Afraid...? Of Lady Abigail? Why should he be? Look, Samuel. Isn’t Abby cute?”

“Hee-hee, cute!” he shouts again before burying his face in Lady Stella’s skirts.

Why is he so happy? I wonder if Tabitha knows...



“**WHAT’S** happening there...?”

“Samuel said he wants to show Lady Abigail some flowers the color of her hair.”

After returning from the training grounds and a bath, I spy two little figures crouched together beside a bed of blooms.

“Isn’t that just too cute?” I breathe.

Stella chuckles. Though she is my older brother’s wife, she is younger than me and laughs easily when not constrained by her facade of feminine perfection. Indeed, the talk at breakfast the morning before tickled her so much that she could barely eat.

“I understand, Lord Gerald. Lady Abigail is just too cute, and so different from how she was when she first came to us.”

“...Yes, I’m aware.”

Suddenly, Samuel bursts into joyful laughter as Abigail points to something between the blossoming flowers. A wave of unease washes over me, and I call, “I’m back, Abigail.”

Both turn at my voice, and Samuel rushes to me. Abigail looks on in surprise, her eyes widening, then she seems to freeze as he throws his arms around my legs. *Is something the matter?*

“Uncle! Uncle! Hug, please! Hug!”

“S-Sure.” I lift him as requested, my attention still on Abigail. Her expression is the same as when Tabitha took away her flower candy. *Why is that...?*



LORD Samuel has dragged me by the hand to the flower bed, wanting to show me blossoms the same hue as my hair. I squat beside him to look. Yes, the petals of the nerines are a smooth and shiny scarlet, quite like my hair.

“It’s pretty! And cute!” he crows.

...I suppose I like nerines because of their luster, but I don’t think they’re pretty or cute. I wonder if Lord Samuel equates smoothness and shininess with beauty.

“Oh! A bug!” He has spotted one crawling on the soil between the flowers.

Oh, why is he standing so close to me? I fear I may accidentally step on the tiny human...or not. *No, I won’t. I’m human now.*

As I maintain my frozen crouch, Lord Samuel leans closer, peering attentively at the insect. It seems to curl in on itself, and he stretches out a small hand. *Does he want to touch it?*

“...It’s not tasty,” I inform him.

“Does it bite? Mother and Nursemaid Meg don’t like it, they scream.”

“Oh...? This is a roly-poly, so it won’t bite. Look.” I poke it and it rolls into a ball.

“Ohhh...” Lord Samuel presses into my side again. “Do it again, Abby.”

I prod the bug more, and Lord Samuel erupts in laughter. *Why?* Then I hear my lord husband calling me.

And the tiny human is off! His gait is unsteady but he can run! How wobbly he is! To my shock, he latches onto my lord husband’s legs. *Why?* He stretches his arms upward and demands to be lifted, and my lord husband complies. *Why?*

“...What’s wrong, Abigail?” my lord husband asks curiously, Lord Samuel seated on his left arm.

What’s wrong...? What’s wrong? I can’t look away from his left arm.

Although my lord husband is ambidextrous, he usually holds his sword with his right hand, the sheath positioned on his left hip. He needs to keep his right

arm free for fighting, which means he has no arm to hold me. The Monster King had many arms, but my lord husband has only two.

“What’s wrong, Abigail...? What’s that in your hand?” He walks over to squat beside me. “O-Oh, I see,” he says when I show him the roly-poly. He tells me to put it back, so I do.

Lord Samuel’s legs are touching the ground, yet he still clings to my lord husband’s neck. “Uncle! Uncle! I wanna train with swords!”

...Swords?! He’ll train with swords?! With my lord husband?!

“Yes, maybe later... Abigail?”

Why? Why do I feel so uneasy?

“Where’s Tabitha?” I ask.

“I saw her near the head maid’s quarters just now... Hey, what’s the mat—”

Tabitha is amazing. If I go to her, I’ll surely feel better.



ABIGAIL stands abruptly and heads toward the castle. I hand the resisting Samuel to Stella before following her. I’ve only met him a few times, all when he and his family visited the capital, so I have no idea why he’s so attached to me.

“Master! Master! Hurry! The lady is leaving!” teases Rodney as he falls in after me, a big grin on his face. *What’s so amusing about this? And I know! Aren’t I chasing after her?!*

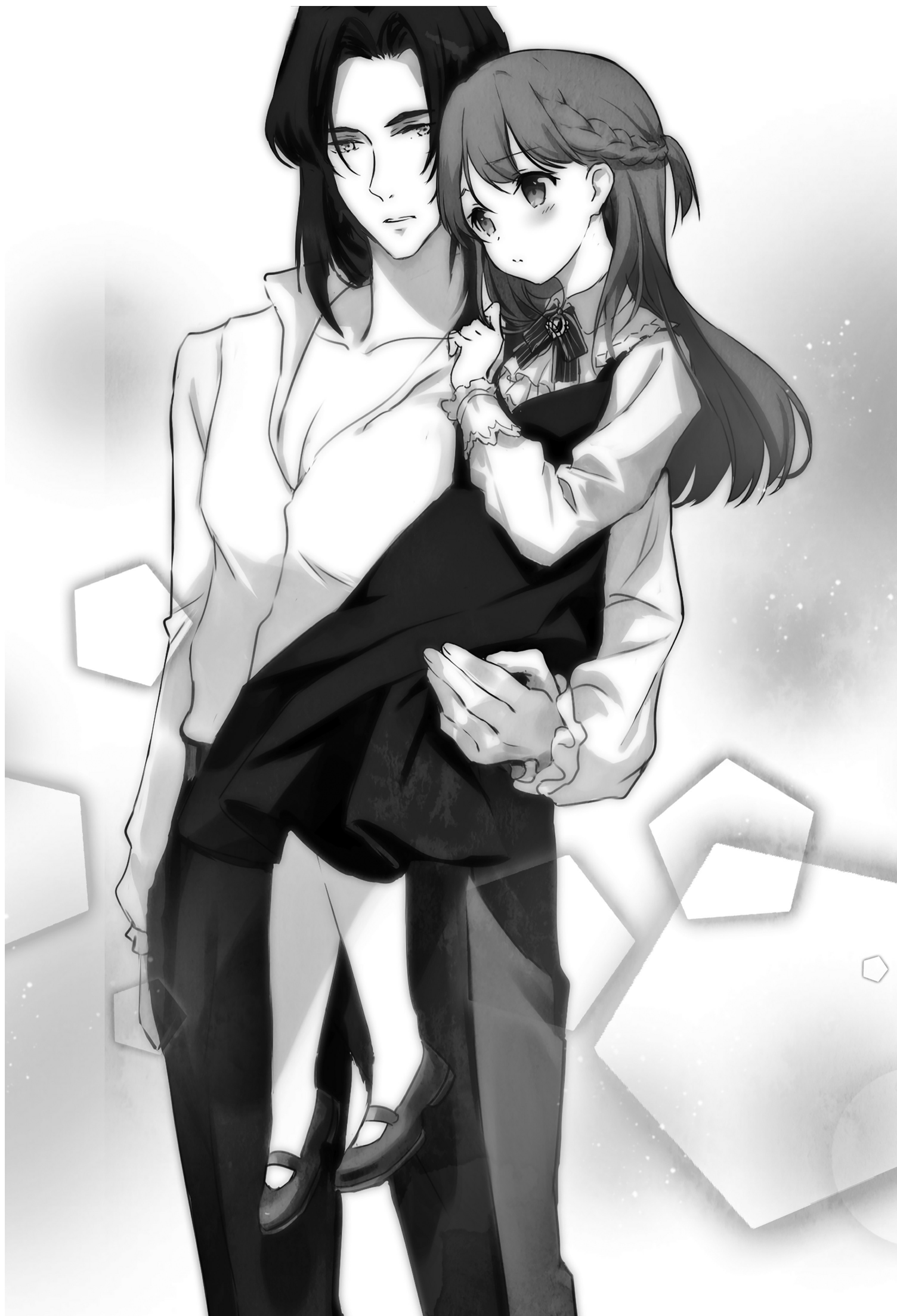
...Why is she so fast?! How does she move so fast just walking?!

I manage to catch up to her by the castle doors. “Abigail?”

“Yes.” Her voice is listless, her stride not faltering. She looks up at me with an expression as stoic as when we first met, though with a vague hint of confusion.

“...Abby? Come here.”

I scoop her up and settle her on my left arm, and her face scrunches just like when she tried lemonade for the first time. Then she presses her forehead into my shoulder. *What’s the matter with her? And why is Rodney smirking like that?*



“Do you need Tabitha?”

“I feel uneasy.”

“Hmm.” I start toward the head maid’s quarters. “Is it Samuel? Do you dislike children?”

“...I don’t know.”

“I see.”

“I don’t understand what he says sometimes, and I worry that I’ll step on him because he’s tiny.”

“I-I see.”

“I can’t tell what he’ll do next, so I’m caught off guard.”

“...I understand.”

I hear Rodney cough from behind us. *Stop it.*

“And he will train with swords with you.”

“Hmm?”

“But you tell me not to train.”

“Y-Yes?”

“And you only have two arms, my lord.”

Rodney remains silent, but I can sense his judgement. I wish he’d shut up.

“If you hold Lord Samuel, you can’t hold me.”

“...Oh!”

Is that what this is? My body feels hot all at once. *Can it be?! Can it really be jealousy?! From Abigail?!* I think I’m about to fall over.

“Get a grip, Master,” Rodney shouts in a stage whisper. *Oh, just shut up already.*

Chapter Eight: I Have New Wifely Duties

MY lord husband lets out what sounds like a growl as he hugs me tight and rubs his cheek against the top of my head. The action somehow calms me, maybe because he smells good.

“Let’s have lunch in our room. I’m sure our morning shopping is ready for consumption.” With that, he starts forward again. I think he means we’ll eat the sea cucumbers! Marinated food is sour but yummy. The cucumbers resemble some of the monsters living in the forest, but those were squishy and not delicious. *I hope they won’t be like that.*

I didn’t have to worry. The sea cucumbers are crunchy and scrumptious, although I suspect they’re only nice due to the marinade; they taste just like the onions they are served with.

We have some tea after the meal, and my lord husband feeds me something that looks like a translucent cube. It sparkles in the light, so I wonder if it’s sugar. *Oh, it tastes like fruit! Like orange!* When I bite down, a soft, sweet, refreshing fragrance fills my mouth.

“My lord! This is orange!”

“The kitchen sends it with regards. It’s fruit jelly. Each color is a different flavor.” He holds out the glass bowl, and I see pink, white, and yellow cubes with more of the orange one I just ate. *How colorful! Are they really all different flavors?!* “Which will you try next?”

He seems to be in a good mood, which makes me feel soft and warm. I no longer feel uneasy. *Which color shall I pick? What flavor will it be?*

“Red! I choose red!” *It’s surely strawberry flavored!* He selects a red cube and feeds it to me. *Huh?*

“It’s grape! It’s grape instead!” But it tastes good too, because grape is yummy. The cube is chewy with a sourness that leaves my cheeks tingling.

“Let’s leave the rest for later.”

“Yes!”

The taste of grape will disappear as soon as I drink my tea, so I abandon the cup for the moment. I think I can eat one more cube, but when my lord husband or Tabitha tells me to stop, I stop because I don’t want to get another stomachache. I decide I’ll eat the yellow one next.

“Oh, Abigail?”

“Yes!”

My lord husband appears hesitant to speak. I wonder what’s wrong. *Does he want some jelly too?* “Well, it’s just that...we didn’t really do it, did we?”

“It?” What does *it* refer to?

He coughs awkwardly. “A wedding. Well, I’m not too familiar with things like that, and it may be too late now anyway... Not that you’d mind, I’m guessing.”

“I don’t mind.”

“...Yes, that’s what I thought.”

I’ve heard of weddings but never seen or been to one. “Do you want to have a wedding, my lord?”

“Y-Yes, sure.”

“I see, then I’ll learn how to do it from Tabitha.”

For some reason, he covers his face with his hands. He doesn’t reply until Rodney prods him in the back.

“You, erm... Well... You do that.”

“Yes!”

I’m my lord husband’s wife! And I’ll help him with anything he wants to do!



“**SO**, when are you planning to hold the wedding, Gerald?”

“...Huh?”

The night before our visit to the market, I was called to Father's study. Abigail was already in bed after repeatedly murmuring to herself all evening that the market was liveliest in the early morning and so we'd have to wake before then. I left her to sleep and made my way to the study alone.

For some reason, Mother was there as well, which surprised me because they don't usually spend much time together. Though they appear a loving couple in public, they've lived separate lives for as long as I can remember, their private chambers located on opposite sides of the castle.

I'd assumed I was summoned to discuss Nadia's situation, but as I watched Father calmly pour liquor into a glass, I realized I'd walked into a trap.

"...We've already been married for over half a year," I protested.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," Mother countered as she straightened, taking a sip of tea. "Many people hold their weddings long after signing the marriage documents, especially in urgent cases of political significance. You still need to publicize your union to the people of Drewett and the capital."

Why was that necessary when I'd already formed my own household outside of Drewett? "You know my wife. I'd rather she stay out of the public eye unless absolutely imperative."

"This is imperative."

"She has no interest in such things," I insisted.

"She just doesn't know about them." At my frown, Mother raised an eyebrow and loosed a sigh. "All you Drewett men are the same... Listen. As noblewomen, to show society that we are accepted and welcomed by our in-laws is of utmost importance."

"But as I said, Abigail is not—"

"She may not care, but you should! Isn't that why you've asked for Drewett's protection?"

"...Yes, that is true."

"And how better to showcase our protection than with a wedding? Since there's no need to consider the Longhursts, you can start looking for bridalwear

as soon as you return to the capital. I've already sent a bird with a message to Madame Polley. Yes, since we'll hold an event both here and in the capital, she'll need six dresses at the very least. I'd love for her to have ten, but I don't think Madame Polley will have time to tailor that many."

Madame Polley is a designer who counts the royal family among her clients. She's so popular and famous that even I know of her. I once heard that the daughter of one of my subordinates begged him to engage the madame for her wedding, and he failed because there was a waiting list three years long.

"But that's impossible," I said.

"Who do you think I am?" Mother scoffed. "I've been the madame's loyal customer since she was a mere apprentice."

"Oh, I see."

"Jewelry too. You have no eye for beauty, so make sure you bring Tabitha and Rodney with you when you go shopping. They'll give you advice on what are the most classy and trendy designs. Oh, how unfortunate that circumstances don't allow me to go to the capital myself to oversee this."

"...Mother? Don't tell me you're—"

"The Longhursts are headed toward ruin, and her sister is a criminal who may face execution! If we don't make a big show of welcoming Abigail into our family, we'll never rid ourselves of the scandal!"

As she prattled on, eyes wide, I began to suspect that she just wants to be a part of the wedding planning...



"THIS is my lord husband's color."

"...Is that so?"

The marchioness had sent for me, and when I arrived, she had a jeweler with her. I'm having a lesson because she says it's a wife's job to have a good eye when selecting pieces. Tabitha is standing by the wall along with the marchioness's maids. I'm sure I'll be fine. I've done a similar exercise before with Tabitha back at home. I nod at her, and she nods back. Yes. I can do the job

well.

A row of cases lines a low table, each filled with gems. They're not jewelry yet; we must choose the gems we want the jeweler to craft into accessories. I pick out a stone from a case full of sapphires.

The jeweler laughs. "That one isn't suitable for a respectable member of the marquis's family. I just brought it here for comparison's sake. Of course, it's of a good grade and decent size, but look, its shine is different compared to this sapphire over here."

With gloved hands, he selects another stone and places it next to mine. He's right that they are different. The one I picked better resembles my lord husband's color.

"...Well, grade aside, I'm not sure whether we can find something that matches Gerald," comments the marchioness. "The color of that boy's eyes is always shifting, so it's hard to pin down the exact shade."

"I see. It's been a long time since I last saw Viscount Noel, but I do remember that his eyes reflect an impressive magical prowess. That ordinary sapphire really will not do."

"But this is his color. Aren't we making jewelry based on his color?" I ask.

"Yes... If you really like that one, we'll take it."

I nod, and the marchioness lays the stone gently before me. "Is this mine now? May I touch it?"

"Yes. We'll decide how we want it set later."

"Yes! I'll restore it first, then."

I wonder why this was placed with the other sapphires. I'll restore it just a bit. I'm not casting magic, merely infusing it with a little power, so I'm certain my lord husband won't mind.

"...Huh?"

"Oh, what's this...? Isn't this a magic sapphire?"

"Its magical power was waning; that's why it was so pale!" I explain. "Look! I

made it my lord husband's color again!"

"That you did," the marchioness laughs.

The gem shimmers between a blue as rich and deep as the moonlit sky and the bright azure of a rippling forest spring. *Yes, this is his color.*



"...**SO** did you buy that sapphire at its original price?"

"Oh, I wouldn't do such a shameless thing," the marchioness answers with a merry laugh. "But magic sapphires of this grade aren't easy to come by at all these days. The trade has dropped in standard since the artisans of my generation retired."

My lord husband is done with training and work for the day, and we're seated next to each other. I hold the stone we bought up to his face to check, and it's indeed the same hue as his eyes. We'll have to bring it to a shop in the capital where they'll fashion it into fine jewelry. I don't know much about jewelry, but I'd like the stone made into a necklace.

He casts a sideways glance at me and chuckles. "Do you like it?"

"Yes! It's your color, my lord!"

"...Yes, I'm glad you found it."

I place the stone back in its case and put it on the table beside a plate of small, rectangular biscuits. How they shine in the light. I saw them in the kitchens the other day and was given a piece to try. They're such a tasty snack.

"And you're to blame, Tabitha. Why didn't you warn me of Abigail's discerning eye?" complains the marchioness.

"Did she surprise you, my lady? Our Lady Abigail is able to detect the slightest difference in color. She isn't as well-versed in pricing however, so it was fortunate that someone as experienced as my lady was there with her." Tabitha smiles.

The marchioness places a hand on her cheek and considers Tabitha's words. *Oh, I dropped a nut.* The biscuits require all my attention to eat properly.

“...By the way, isn’t imbuing a gemstone with power something only magicians or skilled craftsmen specializing in magical tools can do? This isn’t an ordinary gemstone or even a magic stone, it’s a magical gemstone. It’s not every day that you get to see or touch one,” the marchioness muses.

The honey coating the nuts is crunchy, so fragrant and sweet when I bite into it. It sticks to my teeth somewhat, and that just means I can enjoy its delicious taste for longer... I count three more on the plate. One for the marchioness, my lord husband, and myself. *Oh!* My lord husband has broken a piece in half and fed it to me! *How tasty!*

“...Anyway,” says the marchioness, “I was worried that you’re coddling her too much, but now I see that it’s better to keep such a precious one close.”

“As expected, Mother. I knew you were smart enough to come around eventually.”

I study the other half biscuit on the plate. Will my lord husband eat that? And there’s still more, untouched. Am I permitted only one and a half?

“When did you learn to talk like that...?” she sighs. “Anyway, the wedding will be on the one-year anniversary of your marriage, less than half a year away. I’ll take time to visit the capital so I can help out too.”

“Will my lady marchioness teach me more wifely duties?” I inquire.

“Well, there’s lots to learn aside from socializing...but it may not be that interesting or fun.”

“Lots to learn... I’m good at learning, so I memorize things fast. But my marital edu—”

“Let’s have one more piece, Abigail.” My lord husband quickly stuffs the remaining half into my mouth. *I got to eat two whole pieces today!*



I’M in the garden with my lord husband. We’ll be returning to the capital the following day, so Tabitha is overseeing the packing and unable to join us. My lord husband is done with work and training for the afternoon and is there to teach me magic! Human magic, just as he promised.

We sit facing each other, he on the grass and I on a small rug. My dress that day is so long and flowy that the rug isn't visible once I'm seated. The gown is so soft and smooth and comfy to wear. All the dresses Tabitha chooses for me are fluffy and silken and comfortable.

"Hold out your hands."

I offer them to him, and he grasps them in his larger ones. My hands are swallowed up to the wrist when our palms align.

"Don't cast any magic yet, just feel the power move— Wait, wait, a little slower."

Slow. I need to do it slowly. My lord husband's hands are warm, and they heat as his energy reaches out to me, all the way to my elbows.

"I see. The way you move magic is different too... Are you doing it the way you did as Monster King?" he asks.

"I don't know. I never thought about it!"

"Okay. Let's start by thinking about it then."

We practice for a long while. He surrounds me with his power, teaching me to limit mine to the right size. When I ask if that's how he learned, he frowns ever so slightly before nodding. Maybe he was too young then and can't remember. The Monster King could wield magic without a thought, so my lord husband must be the same too. He's strong, after all— *Oh!*

"H-Huh? What is it?" he asks.

I twist and scoot backward into his lap. It is a good spot; the uneasy feeling won't trouble me there.

"Are you tired? Let's take a break...?"

"Uncle! Uncle!"

My lord husband shifts a bit as something jumps onto his back. It must be Lord Samuel. I saw him running unsteadily toward us.

"Oh, is that you, Samuel? Have you had your nap?"

"Yes!"

I listen to them as my lord husband wraps his arms around me.

“You shouldn’t pounce on people like that, Samuel. Didn’t your mother teach you so?” he asks the little human.

“Oh! She did! Sorry!”

“Good. Now come in front and greet us properly.”

“Okay!” answers Lord Samuel happily as he toddles to stand before us. “Uncle! Abby! Good afternoon! How are you?!”

“G-Good afternoon, Lord Samuel! W-We are well!”

I think that’s the right answer, probably. *Oh, he’s so near.* Lord Samuel is so close. I may step on him. I pull up my feet and dress, curling into a ball. Something heavy rests on the top of my head, and I realize it’s my lord husband’s chin.

Lord Samuel bends forward. *Huh? Why is he doing that?* My eyes widen.

“Abby? Are you hugging?”

“Yes! This is a good spot!” I exclaim.

“I wanna hug too.” With that, he plonks down on the rug I vacated and extends his hands. I stare at him quizzically.



“I’m ready! Come here, Abby!” He’s smiling.

Huh? Why?

“Samuel, Abby is my wife. You can’t hug her like that.”

“What?!”

Suddenly, I hear Lady Stella giggling behind me. She walks to stand beside Lord Samuel, her walnut-brown hair golden in the sunshine. Lord Samuel’s hair shines the same way.

“I heard you’ve been practicing magic all afternoon, so I thought you’d like to take a break and have some tea. You’ll be journeying back to the capital tomorrow, right? Samuel has been asking to see Abby one more time, so I hope it’s not too much trouble. He’s usually not so stubborn.” Her expression is part worried, part amused.

Oh, yes, she looks just like Tabitha does. The hair and eye color and facial features are all different, yet it is the exact look Tabitha always gives me.

“Will you spend some time with Samuel today?” she asks.

I nod.

“Lovely! I’m so glad.”

Lord Samuel squeals gleefully, and I watch Lady Stella as she glances at him. Yes, she is exactly like Tabitha.

“Take my hand, Abby!”

A small hand is thrust into my face, so I take hold of a finger.



DESPITE her initial fear and shock, Abigail seems to have gotten used to Samuel as the two walk hand in hand. *Oh, no, seems like she’s still a little hesitant...* But she no longer appears anxious.

I sit with Stella at the tea table, watching the pair while sipping tea prepared by Rodney.

“How did it go?” she asks. “I heard that she’s never studied magic before.”

“No, she hasn’t, but she’s fast once she gets the hang of it. She should be at Level 1 by the time we reach the capital.”

“Wow! She’ll be able to enter magic school then... That’s quite an achievement.”

I nod, acknowledging the concern in Stella’s voice. Students usually start magic school between the ages of thirteen to eighteen, depending on their skill and aptitude. Abigail should be able to qualify quite soon. If only she’d been given proper instruction as a child, who knows how good she would be currently.

Most children born with magical ability naturally intuit how to move the power within their bodies. As babies, they can use magic to sense the boundary between their energy and that of the adults who hold them. Those who can’t do so never become aware of their magical power and thus never learn how to wield magic. Of course, that isn’t a big deal if one is a commoner, especially when not all who possesses magical latency can learn how to wield it. It’s a different story for the children of nobles, who attend a baptismal ceremony to measure their magical prowess.

“...So Lady Abigail will go to magic scho—”

“No.”

Boys around Abigail’s age are sure to be brutes! I won’t let them near her!



WE set out from Drewett Manor early in the morning, heading back to our home in the capital. I’m in a carriage with my lord husband, while Tabitha and Rodney share another.

“...You really like that, huh?”

“Yesh! Lady Katrina gave me lotsh.”

The marchioness, or Lady Katrina as she’s asked me to address her, has gifted me a large case of salmon jerky. It’s stored safely with the rest of our luggage. The jerky is even better than the variety served at the tea party. Lady Katrina said it is Drewett’s best. She must love it too.

The horizon stretches beyond the carriage window. The scenery never seems to alter unless I look closely. Only then do I notice that we are slowly progressing forward as the shapes of the trees past the fields change. The wheat fields are bare, rows of thin brown stalks the only indication of what was just harvested.

I soon acclimate to the uneven shaking of the carriage. The ride from Longhurst to the capital was much rougher—I was almost tossed out of my seat—and the trip home is more comfortable. Besides, the carriage bench is lined with lots of cushions, and my lord husband keeps his arm around me, so the ride to Drewett was good. And on the way back it's even better, because I'm allowed to sit on his lap! What a good spot!

My lord husband has discovered the main issue with my magic. I've been generating magical power that befits the size of the Monster King instead of my current body. That's why my lord husband enveloped me with his magic the day before, to show me the upper limit of how much I should produce. He also said that it will be easier for me to get used to the new size if he holds me close, so that's what we've been doing. Magic makes me warm, and being near to him warms me too.

My lord husband rests his chin on the top of my head as he reads documents or books in one hand, the fingers of the other casually twirling my hair. I reach for my pocket.

"...Please take it out and give it to me. You promised you'd only have one."

How did he know? He's supposed to be reading!

After a while, my tummy begins to feel bloated, just as he warned would happen if I ate too much salmon jerky. *I'm glad I didn't eat the second one.* He and Tabitha have always stopped me before I could finish, so that day is the first time I've torn through a whole piece by myself. It was so tasty.

While I was busy with the jerky, the carriage passed the farmland on the outskirts of Drewett, following the main road around a forest. That is where I fell asleep on our way to Drewett Manor, so I have never seen the woods up close before. They feel different from the Monster King's forest. I sensed it when we were at the castle as well: no strong monsters live there. The

strongest reside deep within the forest, so the creatures inhabiting its edge are very weak or just regular animals. That's why the trees are so well spaced, lots of sunlight shining through to make the area bright.

When I relay my observations to my lord husband, his arms tighten around me for a moment. Then he asks a strange question.

"Have you ever thought about living in the forest?"

"I'm human now, so I can't live in the forest. Humans and monsters shouldn't live in the same space."

"I see."

"You may be strong, my lord, but we still couldn't live in the forest. There's no tasty food there."

"...Haha! You're absolutely right." He nods with a jovial laugh. "If you lived in the forest, I'd have to follow."

I like it when he laughs. Although I don't understand why, it warms me inside. I like when Tabitha smiles too, yet that feels different.

"Oh. Tabitha and Lady Stella look the same when they smile," I remember.

"Oh? That's a sudden change of topic. Is that so?"

"Yes. Lady Stella looks just like Tabitha when she watches Lord Samuel."

"...Oh, I see."

"Lady Katrina too, when she looks at you, my lord."

"Oh... That's surprising; I've never noticed... To be honest, I was a little worried because of Mother. Did you enjoy your time at the castle?" He rubs his cheek against my hair. He seems to enjoy doing that lately.

"There were lots of new experiences and lots of delicious food. I know much about the forests and mountains but little about human homes, so it was very fun."

"Oh... I see. Oh, yes... Would you like to go to school?"

"School?"

“Yes. I was thinking of hiring a tutor to teach you magic, but most nobles attend magic school. What do you think?”

“But I can learn even without going to school.” A diminutive ball of light appears on my palm. “Look! *Shine on, light up!*” It’s small, a spell I learned the night before, so it won’t strain my body too much. And I even said the words!

“Good, but you summoned it before the incantation. That makes the incantation useless. And about school...” He groans and presses his face to my head once more.

I’ve seen Lady Stella rub her cheek against Lord Samuel’s when she holds him. It makes Lord Samuel scream and laugh, even if it isn’t ticklish. Sometimes, it even lulls him to sleep.

I don’t know about school. I’d rather my lord husband be my teacher.



“**MY** lord! I had my size measured today!”

Because we extended our stay in Drewett, I had to return to work immediately upon returning to the capital. Thanks to that, I had to miss the appointment with Mother’s favored designer, yet Abigail looks pleased as she reports her day’s activities.

“Like this! And like this!” she commentates as she stretches her arms every which way.

I sit on the sofa and listen, enjoying my post-dinner liquor and some nuts, wondering if Tabitha enjoyed the session as much as Abigail did. Did she see Abigail’s normally impassive expression morph into a smile, or witness a cute moment? My stomach hurts the more I think about it.

Typically, the bride is in charge of much of the wedding planning, such as determining the guest list and organizing the reception, yet Mother and Tabitha seem to have taken care of everything. Stella will arrange the reception at Drewett too, which means Abigail merely has to continue her daily lessons on how to be a wife with Tabitha. I’ll have to think of a way to repay the ladies for their help.

To be honest, I was initially worried about the wedding. I'd been wanting a do-over to make up for my terrible behavior that first night, yet I knew that Abigail probably doesn't care, nor understands my need to start anew. I suspected I was just being self-serving.

So I was thankful for Mother's offer, though I hadn't anticipated her enthusiasm. The trip somehow pulled us closer together as a family, which has honestly left me somewhat disoriented.

Abigail finally finishes her report and resumes her usual seat between my knees. She grew accustomed to sitting there on our journey home. Once in my lap, she sips from a glass of fruit water and picks carefully at her plate of nuts, eating them one by one.

She's close, so close, and I don't want her to move away, even if her proximity is difficult for me as a man.

Abigail does not recognize or comprehend the concept of personal space. I'm not certain whether she did as the Monster King either, yet she is learning how to behave like a human, slowly but surely. What is unexpected is how she is also changing me and my relationship with my family.

After realizing that I occupy a special place in Abigail's heart, I find myself wishing that the status quo could last forever. I'm reluctant for her to attend school, or go anywhere that I can't be, because I won't know what happens there.

My mind is beginning to go fuzzy from the alcohol as I play with the glossy red hair before me, when suddenly Abigail's shoulders stiffen.

"...Abigail?"

Huh? She's trembling?

"M-My lord."

"O-Oy, what's wrong?! Why are you crying... Oh!"

"Th-This is a bad sausage."

"Didn't I tell you not to eat from my plate?! Tabitha! Oy! Tabitha! Rodney!"

"My tongue hurts! It's a bad sausage!"

Abigail continues to complain about her first taste of spicy sausage as we soothe her with milk.



THE evening was a failure. I didn't know sausages can be bad. I thought it would taste of strawberries since it was red. The next morning, I make sure to ask Tabitha if the sausage on my plate is safe. I won't make the same mistake again.

My task for the day is to decide how to utilize the lord husband-colored gemstone we purchased in Drewett. The jeweler is good friends with dress designer Madame Polley, who came the day before. He's told me to choose a setting. I don't know what's appropriate, but Tabitha nods at me, so I'll be fine. Also, I need to be careful not to address Madame Polley as "roly-poly."

"...What a fine gem," marvels the jeweler as he examines the magic sapphire. I know—my lord husband's color is great because it's strong. "I have several sample pieces, so please pick the one most to your liking. After that, we can discuss details before I start crafting. Or if you already have a design in mind, our artisan here can sketch it out."

I ask Tabitha to tell the jeweler to show me what he's brought, and one by one, he lifts the lids from long square cases and places them on a table. There are lots of mounts in different shades of gold and silver.

...Everything looks the same to me. *Do they differ in anything other than color...?*

My stepmother and stepsister often swept their hands over arrays of jewelry and pronounced, "I'll take everything from here to here." *Maybe that's how it's supposed to go...? Today's job isn't easy at all...*

"I..."

"Yes?"

"I'll take—"

"Shall we test out the pieces first, my lady? Let's see which color best suits your skin tone."

Tabitha saves the day again.

I remain still while she instructs the jeweler to hold the sample jewelry up to my neck, chest, and hair in a very similar fashion to how fabrics were draped over my body during the dress selection the previous day. *But wait...*

“Tabitha? Won’t it fall if it’s on my hair?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll make sure it’s pinned securely in place.”

I pinch a bit of hair between my fingers. It’s become very smooth recently, and my hand easily glides through it. Won’t the accessory slip as well?

I voice my concern, and Tabitha just tilts her head and informs me that my hair will be up.

“...Will my hair be up all day? My lord husband likes to play with my hair.”

“...My lady? Are you planning to wear this stone daily?” inquires the jeweler.

Wear it daily? Huh...? Does he mean use it...?

“I want to keep it safe, so I’d like it made into a necklace...” I reply. “Besides, it’s my lord husband’s color.”

“Of course,” Tabitha laughs. “Shall we decide on the details, then?”

The jeweler is smiling too. I must be performing my wifely duties well.

Chapter Nine: This! Then Like This! Then Here, Freeze!

I am en route to my lord husband's workplace. As we approach, the carriage driver calls to the guard station next to a cast-iron gate adorned with vines. I glimpse what appears to be a guard stealing a glance at me before flinching and looking away. I turn to look for the cause, but only Tabitha sits beside me.

"Our carriage bears the crest of Viscount Noel, so we'll be able to pass through quickly. Come, please sit," she says as she reaches up to straighten my bangs. I grab the basket on the seat opposite us to hold in my lap, and Tabitha takes it away, puts it back on the seat. "I'll carry this when we alight. You just focus on holding onto the footman, my lady, so you don't slip."

"I can do it on my own."

"No, you cannot jump down. It's bad etiquette."

Bad etiquette? I won't do it, then. I nod and Tabitha nods in return. I'll be fine.

The carriage halts by the gate and the footman swiftly unfolds a small flight of steps. As instructed, I take his hand and dismount. Once on the ground, I turn and hold out my own to Tabitha.

She stares for a second. "I'll be fine," she says with a smile, then accepts the footman's help. Afterward, she gives my hand a pat and adjusts the basket hanging from her arm. I like when she pats my hand.

The facility where my lord husband works is apparently command headquarters. He is really strong, which is how he became a viscount purely through military accomplishments. Supposedly, humans don't have to be strong to be great, but Ethan says my lord husband is great *because* he is strong.

Although it is a huge building, it is a simple square and lacks any wings to embellish its shape. We near what seems to be the main entrance, a door so high I have to crane my neck to see the top.

"My lady, look ahead and keep your mouth closed," whispers Tabitha.

Oh, I displayed bad etiquette again.

Someone in full military dress, albeit in a uniform different from what my lord husband usually wears, shows us the way. We're there with lunch and snacks for my lord husband. I reach for the basket again, and Tabitha tells me to focus, before pulling back to walk behind me.



MY marriage to Abigail is political yet provides no real benefit to me.

I have no interest in climbing the career ladder or involving myself in faction conflicts, nor do I pledge loyalty to the royal family as the knights do. Nevertheless, in an organization as strictly hierarchical as the military, I had no reason to refuse an opportunity to solidify the position of the general who recognizes my abilities and supports my endeavors. That I'm not popular with the ladies of noble society nor know how to court them doesn't help. Thus, I was resigned to my destiny of political marriage.

The general is probably aware of all that, which may explain why he didn't ask that I bring my wife to meet him after we married. In truth, I opted not to introduce Abigail to him, partly because her physical condition was poor back then, and also because I struggle to predict what she might say in his presence.

That day, the general visits me in my office, his face somber. "I've received word of the Longhursts' downfall. It was a surprise to me, but I must still apologize. You've always been devoted to your duties, Gerald; I shouldn't have created such trouble for you..."

For a moment, I am lost for words. I feel Rodney's gaze burning my skin, chiding me for not heeding his advice to seek out the general first.

The general must be referring to the report that Nadia Longhurst faced trial in Marquis Drewett's court and is awaiting execution. The Longhurst territory and family are facing financial ruin, and Earl Longhurst is nowhere to be found. While the general himself didn't order me to marry Abigail, the people closest to him highly recommended the match. For that reason, he may feel responsible for tying me to the family and that I am therefore owed an apology.

“If you wish, we can arrange to annul the mar—”

“There’s no need.”

The general frowns at my hurried interruption. At first glance, my mentor appears to be a nice and friendly old man, an assumption he uses to his advantage with anyone who underestimates him. And because he rarely resorts to drastic measures, his suggestion is all the more serious. I have to change his mind quickly.

“I apologize if I have caused any concern regarding my marriage. I should have brought my wife to greet you, but circumstances haven’t allowed for that. Even so, I shouldn’t have put it off for so long.”

“Do you mean to say that you’re satisfied with your marriage...? Once I learned of the scandals, I looked into the Longhursts, and I must say, they are not a good family to associate yourself with.”

“While it’s true that I wasn’t enthusiastic about the match at first, it has become something for which the Drewett family, myself included, is most grateful. I am thankful to you for that, Your Excellency.”

“Is that so? Well, I guess those rumors about your infatuation with your wife at the royal ball are true after all.”

“Infatuated...? W-Well, I guess...”

That’s fine. That was the impression we were aiming for anyway, so it’s fine. *Stop it, Rodney.* I can see him trembling from the corner of my eye.

“I heard that you attended to your wife diligently, like a devoted servant...gazed at her with soft expressions without any of your typical sternness...”

I remain silent.

“...Intimidated any man who dared behold her...clung to each other passionately as you danced, making any onlooker blush—”

“That’s definitely an exaggeration!”

How can anyone bear to listen to a superior talk about such things with a straight face! *Stop it, Rodney!*

“But it isn’t far from the truth?”

“...W-Well, I guess it isn’t.” I feel myself start to sweat.

Just then, Rodney receives a message from someone in the hallway through the slightly open door. He steps further into the room.

“Apologies for interrupting your pleasant chat, Your Excellency! I just received news that Viscountess Noel is here on a visit!”

What?! Now?! Wait, why is Rodney grinning? Did he know about this all along?!



“ABIGAIL? What is it?”

So this is my lord husband’s office. I am seated next to him on a sofa. His Excellency the general sits across from us, a large and heavy-looking low table in between. My lord husband has introduced the general as Marvin Whittington. Tabitha and Rodney stand by the wall, quietly preparing lunch, transferring the food in the basket onto plates. Since there’s a lot, my lord husband invited His Excellency to dine with us. I helped pack the basket, so I know there’s enough, yet food is the furthest thing from my mind.

His Excellency is smiling softly. I wonder how old he is. Since he is a general, he must be mightier than my lord husband. Probably.

“...This is my first time meeting someone stronger than my lord!” I exclaim.

“A-Abigail?!”

“Oh?” Although His Excellency’s eyes crinkle in a smile, an intense light ignites deep within them. *Wow, he’s so strong. Amazing.* “Why do you think so? I’m getting on in years and not as muscular as Gerald.”

He’s right. My lord husband has greater magical prowess and is larger in size. But humans sometimes possess a different strength that has nothing to do with magical or physical power. It is how they can defeat monsters that have magic or are bigger than themselves. His Excellency has that type of strength.

Therefore, I don’t understand his question; he should already know the answer. I glance up at my lord husband, and he is frowning. *Oh, can it be...?*

“Was I not supposed to say that out loud, my lord? It’s okay—I’ll aid you in battle,” I say.

“No, we’re not going to fight. His Excellency is not an enemy.”

“Gerald... You have a very interesting wife.”

I hear a chuckle, yet when I turn toward the wall, Rodney is calmly pouring tea. I can smell its herbal fragrance from across the room.

“Is he safe?” I ask in confirmation.

“Yes. He is my benefactor... Oh, I apologize for my wife’s ignorance of worldly matters, Your Excellency. I understand that she is your distant relative, although it seems you’ve never met.”

“Oh, no need for apologies. And yes, that reminds me, the viscountess is related to my maternal grandmother.”

“...I see.”

My lord husband is sweating. I pull out my handkerchief. Tabitha makes me carry it in a pocket because to do so is ladylike, and at last I understand why. *Tabitha is incredible.* I press the cloth to my lord husband’s temple. He grunts and takes it from me. That’s okay; I have another, which I used to wrap a small piece of salmon jerky.

A large platter bearing our beautifully arranged lunch is placed upon the low table. *Oh!*

“There is a saying that eighty percent of rumors are false, but I think this here is a rare exception,” chuckles His Excellency.

“Sausage flowers!” I cry.

“They’re not... Well, I guess they are,” my lord husband concedes with a sigh.

Lunch is various vegetables and meats rolled in crepes. And sausages! *I didn’t know Tabitha added these as well!* The sausages are smaller than the ones we eat for breakfast and are sliced on one end to resemble petals. They’re already skewered on picks for easy eating.

I am served a separate plate with three small crepes and two sausage flowers.

The crepes are bundled tightly, so I don't know what's inside. The head cook said it'll be a fun surprise once I bite into them, though I think he's the one having fun. *Anyway, I'll eat the sausage flowers first.* I turn to Tabitha, but her back to is me as she tidies the dishes.

"Yes, I apologize if I have caused you concern, Your Excell—hm? Oh..." My lord husband takes a bite of the sausage flower I am offering to him. "It is safe," he concludes.

Yes! These are safe sausages!

"Hmm, what's safe?" asks His Excellency.

The sausage is delicious, lighter in flavor and more tender than breakfast sausage.

"Oh, w-well, my wife can't handle spicy food."

"Well, spice is nature's poison, after all."

"...Please don't tease me, Your Excellency."

"Haha! It is as you said, Rodney! How very interesting!"

"I knew it! Rodney, stop nodding!"

The first of my crepes is stuffed with boiled egg, sliced cucumbers, and ham! Sandwiches are yummy, but crepes allow me a taste of all the ingredients in one bite. Our chef is marvelous. Some of the egg is diced so finely that it blends into a paste, while the rest is chopped in bigger bits and mixed with the cucumbers, which taste as though they've been pickled. The ham is thinly sliced and tender and helps contain the other ingredients. How sturdy! How tasty! *Oh, there's only half a crepe left on their platter.* His Excellency is strong, so his appetite must be as large as my lord husband's.

"Oh, you've publicly announced a wedding, right? You're not the best when it comes to the intricacies of socialization with people outside the military, so it's fortunate that you have such a capable and talented man for a butler. I tried to recruit him to join us, but he refused."

"I appreciate Your Excellency's kind words, but my family has served as butlers for generations," answers Rodney with a smile.

The second crepe is cream cheese, leafy vegetables, and...smoked chicken! The chicken is specially made by our chef. He always gives me a sliver to munch on when I watch him remove the meat from the smoke box for slicing. It's always so delicious.

His Excellency is eating a crepe of the same flavor. He appears surprised as he peeks at the filling, then nods. *Yes, isn't it tasty?* He dabs at his lips with a crumpled napkin.

I devour the side dish of roasted potatoes as well. I promised Tabitha I'd eat my greens, and she prepared my plate such that I can consume everything on it without getting a stomachache... *Oh, grapes!* Rodney has served me a small plate with three grapes on it! I swivel toward Tabitha and she nods: I can eat them too without feeling sick!

"Gerald."

"Yes?"

"I had my doubts about your decision to keep the viscountess from the public eye, but yes, I see now that it may be the best decision. The lady is certainly very...interesting. So don't worry, you have my full support."

"Y-Yes, thank you for your consideration..."

I reach for the grapes, but my lord husband pushes the plate away. *Oh!* I'm supposed to finish my third crepe first. I made a mistake.

His Excellency sips the coffee brewed by Rodney and lets out a contented sigh. "By the way, Viscountess Noel, you mentioned that I'm strong the moment we met. Are you by any chance interested or skilled in the art of fighting?" His smile is mischievous.

My cup is refilled. The tea is still too hot to drink, so I wait.

"Lucky for you, Gerald is scheduled to lead his subordinates in drills today," he continues. "Would you like to watch?"

"Yes! I would! Thank you!"

His Excellency bursts into laughter. I look at my lord husband, and he nods as he nurses his coffee, although he appears somewhat troubled. But Rodney was

right! He said that I'd be able to watch my lord husband without needing to ask for permission!

I've witnessed my lord husband's swordsmanship and physical exercise at home and at Drewett Manor, but never his magic training, since that can be done only in a special military facility.

"...Oh, is the master leading practice today? Not just training on his own?" asks Rodney with a grin.

"Well... I guess I am."

"Hahaha! It's been a while, but I'll join in too!" declares His Excellency. He looks excited. Training must be fun when you're strong. My lord husband always seems so serious when drilling at home, but if he does it every day, it must be fun.



WE'RE in a special arena designed for both physical and magic training. A magic barrier separates the circular grounds from the spectator seats, where Abigail and Tabitha sit.

His Excellency cackles as he systematically mows down my troops. I turn to instruct a subordinate, taking the chance to warm up, and the general beckons me with a finger. I accept a sip of water from Rodney, who stands a distance away, before I head over.

"You must be pumped, Master. The lady can actually tell who's strong and who's weak," he comments.

I wish he'd shut up already!

I pick up a practice sword, its blunted edge meaningless the moment I magically temper it. The dulled swords are good practice for physical fights only; augmented with magic, they cut sharper than a real blade.

Regular magic wielders are often positioned at the back of a formation, where they can safely chant and cast. But those like me who utilize both sword and spell must combine our skills, enhancing our physical attacks and speed with shortened incantations. That is especially important in one-on-one battles.

“...Hah!”

The general’s smile doesn’t waver as he casually dodges my thrust. The next instant, he charges into me, grappling my torso to throw me into the dirt, and I counter with a front kick.

“No mercy for the elderly, eh?” He jumps back in time, avoiding my attack and the sand I’ve kicked up, his training uniform spotless and unrumpled. In contrast, I’m covered in dust from rolling around on the ground.

“I’m not arrogant enough to show mercy to you, Your Excellency.”

Although he rarely participates in our practice sessions due to his age, the general is still a shrewd, beast-like combatant, and I’ve never won against him. While I’m surprised that Abigail was able to recognize his strength at a glance, she is right in the sense that the general is one person I’ve yet to best. The only challenge I pose is that I last slightly longer in a fight than my subordinates.

“That’s cute.” A spray of dirt follows his words, aimed at where my face had been a moment before.

I cluck my tongue in annoyance. The general possesses overwhelming body fortification magic yet still enjoys employing such dirty tactics in battle.

“*Freeze!*” I bark, aiming several thin icicles at the general’s foot planted on the ground, and—

They dissolve almost instantly. “...Whoa,” he mutters.

Curse his Gift of Neutralization! It’s unfair that he’s able to cancel any magical offensive at will!

I attack with my sword several more times, and each strike is easily parried. Every time I attempt a combo, I’m knocked down like a ragdoll. I swat aside a downward slice with my spell-strengthened left arm, grab his sleeve with my right, then—

“Oh, the viscountess!”

“...?!” For a moment, I lose my focus. Then the world flips upside down as I land on my back. A bell rings to signify a break in the exercise.

“Well, I’m surprised you actually fell for that... You’ve become much more

human.”

“Damn...” The general extends a scarred, wrinkled hand and I take it, climbing back to my feet. I bow. “Th-Thank you.”

Instead of lecturing me on getting distracted during a fight, he flashes me a genuine smile, which makes me slightly uncomfortable. “The lady herself is garnering lots of attention too. Look.”

“...Huh?” I turn to spot Abigail on the other side of the invisible magic barrier. She is jumping up and down, waving her arms and legs. Though the barrier dampens all sound, I can see her lips moving as she yells something.

Is she actually trying to copy me?! Tabitha! Where’s Tabitha?! There, she’s standing clear of the agitated Abigail.

“What clean movements. She looks like she’s...” The general tries to stifle his laughter, but *stop, stop, stop, stop, wait!* If she’s attempting to copy me, then...

I take off with all my might, yet there’s no way I can round the magic barrier and reach her in time. Rodney, who is situated closer, seems to sense my intent and starts to sprint too.

An instant before Abigail’s lips form the word “freeze,” a thin bolt of lightning shoots upward from the railing dividing the stands and training ground, disappearing almost instantly.

Fighting a sudden feeling of weakness, I quickly glance around the arena. Everyone is still smiling, so no one saw her lips move... Only the general’s friendly demeanor is gone as he pivots to me.

In a soft but stern voice, he says, “Gerald, please bring your wife to see me in my office.”

I turn back just in time to see Abigail mouth, “I did it!”

Argh...! Abigail, now isn’t the time to celebrate!



“NOW, where do we even begin?”

When my lord husband reached the spectator seats, he picked me up and

whispered in my ear. "Sorry, Abigail. Could you not answer any of His Excellency's questions unless I give the okay?"

That's why I'm chewing a piece of salmon jerky as we sit in His Excellency's office. I offered half to His Excellency, and he declined, so I have the whole piece to myself. It's small though, and since I just exercised, I'll be fine. I won't get a stomachache.

"I knew the viscountess probably wouldn't answer any of my questions, but this is my first time seeing someone keep their silence by eating," His Excellency observes.

I nod to let him know he's right. I can't speak if I'm eating my salmon jerky.

He hums and looks up at the ceiling. My lord husband averts his eyes, clenches his fists in his lap. Then His Excellency seems to notice Tabitha and Rodney standing quietly by the wall. "Rodney, and Tabitha, yes? Am I right in saying that they're aware of what's happening as well?"

"...Yes."

"I see. So you're hiding the viscountess not just because of her interesting personality, but for a truly valid reason as well. I'd guessed as much."

Am I being hidden? I didn't know that. I glance at Tabitha and her face is resigned. *Yes, that's right.* I seem to recall hearing them discuss hiding something, but I never realized they were talking about me.

"Gerald, can I correctly assume that the viscountess's Gift is the reason she can wield magic without an incantation...?" His Excellency closes his eyes. "Dear lord, do I even want to know the answer? Not everyone is cut out for using their Gifts in battle." The last words are mumbled so softly that nobody but me seems to hear them.

"Either way," he continues, louder, "there is still much about the viscountess that I don't know. Gerald, you may be an excellent soldier, but I know you hold no ambition. That's why you don't understand the ambition of others... Fortunately, I'm sure Rodney can aid you in that regard, yet if you truly wish to keep your wife's power a secret, you'll need someone with more experience and status on your side. Tell me, do you plan to take her and flee the country

should knowledge of her Gift become public?”

“W-Well, I...” My lord husband’s eyes dart toward me, then quickly return to meet His Excellency’s gaze. He looks a little uncomfortable... I have only the one piece of salmon jerky; maybe he’ll feel better if I offer it to him? I look to Tabitha, and she shakes her head slightly. *I guess not, then.*

“Oh, no need to answer. You’ve really become so much more human. I’ve seen enough to understand how devoted you are to her. And as you know, your father, Marquis Drewett, is an old friend of mine. I trust you already have him on your side?”

“Yes. Father knows... Not every single detail, but he knows.”

“Oh... I didn’t think he’d be fine not knowing all the details, but that’s not important. I’m just glad you’ve found a partner you truly love. You returned from the last war having proven your abilities through great feats. Now your main motivation to fight will come from your attachment to the family waiting for you at home. That’s something you didn’t have before. And while nobody wishes for conflict, it’s our job to prepare for the next war or monster subjugation mission even during times of peace like this. Now that you have someone to protect, you’ll become stronger on the battlefield. In that case, I have no choice but to support you. Besides, I don’t want to lose such an excellent soldier.”

“...Your Excellency.” The tension is gone from my lord husband’s shoulders, and I give him a reassuring pat on the leg.

His Excellency’s eyes narrow. “That said, the viscountess is extremely unpredictable. None of you expected her to wield magic just now, did you?”

“Erm, well, Abigail’s only just started to learn how...”

“Huh? But she used lightning magic, didn’t she? That’s not an easy type to cast as a beginner.”

“Yes, but I started teaching her less than two weeks ago. She may possess magical prowess, but as Your Excellency probably knows, my wife was treated like a prisoner when she lived at Longhurst. Though she received a basic education as the earl’s daughter, she never attended the baptismal ceremony,

so the Longhursts were totally in the dark regarding her ability. Therefore, she doesn't understand that she's different, nor does she know how to handle that difference... That's why she didn't know that an incantation is required to cast magic. She did try her best to chant one just now..."

"I did," I chirp.

"Did you now?" asks His Excellency.

I stop munching on the salmon jerky to answer him, but my lord husband gently pushes the jerky back into my mouth.

"I've asked her not to wield magic in front of others, yet it seems as though she wants to imitate me..."

"Yes... She did."

"Yes..."

Belatedly, I remember that he did tell me not to use magic. I merely want to be like him, however, and I think I succeeded. But I know it's not a good time to say that, so I stay silent.

"Is that why she yelled out 'freeze'? But how did she hear your incantation through the barrier?"

"She has very good hearing..."

"I do." That's how I heard it, loud and clear.

"...Can you answer just one question, my lady?" His Excellency turns to me. "Why did you summon lightning? If you wanted to imitate your husband, shouldn't you have created ice?"

I look up at my lord husband and he nods. I swallow my salmon jerky. "Because Your Excellency cannot neutralize it. Lightning forms much quicker than ice. Your Excellency cannot neutralize magic you can't see."

His eyes widen. They're a light brown color. My lord husband's eyes are wide too. I like his shade better.

"Gerald."

"I had no idea."

“Me neither... Thankfully, not many people can summon lightning at that speed. Goodness. Your wife is much more talented than I thought. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked...”

Oh, His Excellency praised me! I’m strong! Because I’m my lord husband’s wife!



OUR training over for the day, I ask Rodney to escort Abigail and Tabitha home. I remain in the general’s office, waiting as he sips his coffee.

Finally, he sighs and leans back into the sofa. “Gerald.”

“...Yes.”

“Right now, our country isn’t at war, yet we aren’t completely at peace either. As with all countries, there is always tension brewing under the surface somewhere, and the appearance of a powerful and precious asset can trigger conflict the moment people start to covet it... I’m sure you understand that your wife is one such asset.”

I nod. I know I have to disguise the truth that she possesses the powers of the Monster King. Thus far, I’ve explained her abilities as part of her Gift, though her talents don’t resemble any known Gift. At Drewett, I claimed that her Gift is something akin to disaster prediction, and that has worked so far.

To the general, I was hoping to pass off her powers as merely the capacity for wordless casting. That would have been a sufficient cover story, *but why?! Why did she have to point out his Gift’s weakness?!*

Since Gifts are rare, those blessed with one usually choose not to divulge the details of their power. That’s why Abigail’s instant assessment of the general’s strength and weakness was so damning. Thankfully, I’m unable to summon lightning as quickly, so I pose no threat to the general despite my new insight into his Neutralization.

“You do understand, right? If not, I’m afraid I may have thought too highly of you.”

“Yes, I understand...”

“So, will you sequester your wife? It’s a simple solution, and no one will come after her if they don’t know of her existence. That is my advice to you.”

I acknowledge the general’s kindness. In his position, he’d likely rather commit Abigail without delay to special quarantined care, yet he’s giving me the option to do so on my own terms.

And I’ll be glad to, and not just for the necessary reason to conceal her powers. That said...

“Due to her upbringing, my wife isn’t the type who wishes to explore the world.”

“Hmm.”

“She doesn’t truly comprehend her own ignorance, and she is always happy to discover new things, and that makes me happy as well.”

She’d told me she enjoyed our time in Drewett because she learned so much and tried so many tasty new foods. Even trivialities, such as the scenery outside the carriage window, the crowded festival, the lively market, and a sweets stall that wouldn’t impress a village child, made Abigail’s eyes sparkle with delight.

“Of course, I’ll keep her away from aristocratic society as much as possible. But if there comes a day—and it very well may never happen—if there comes a day when Abigail wants to venture out into the world, I want to ensure that she can do so freely. That is her right as a person and as my wife.”

If I could, I’d love to redo that horrendous first night of our marriage, but that’s not my only motivation. I refuse to rob Abigail of what makes her happy. I want to give her everything that she should have had at Longhurst.

The general presses his fingers against his temple and heaves a deep sigh. “I won’t go back on my word. I’ll support you, so long as the viscountess lies low. And you should request more aid from your father as well. As for today, we’ll pretend that nothing out of the ordinary happened.”

Yes! The growing tension within me eases a little, until the general looses another exasperated sigh.

“Also, your subordinates need more training. I can forgive them for not

noticing that the viscountess cast magic without an incantation, but to not even realize that she summoned lightning with such ease and speed—that's a plain vulnerability."

"Understood!" To be honest, that has been dogging me too. The troops really do need more training.

"As for the viscountess herself, I'd love to see her again, after she's learned not to blurt her thoughts without warning, that is."

I nod eagerly, though I know in my heart that such a day may never come.

Chapter Ten: I've Grown Bigger but Can Grow Bigger Still

“WELCOME home, my lord!”

My lord husband picks me up the moment I rush to the entrance, then presses his cheek against the top of my head. We remain that way for a long while because Rodney told me to please stay still when it happens, so I do. I'd like to bounce a little, but I hold back. *Oh, he smells nice.*

“Abigail.”

“Yes!”

“Did you have fun today?”

“Yes! I think I did well today, my lord!”

“Yes, but what a shame.”

“Huh?”

He merely huffs a quiet laugh that ruffles my hair, which he smooths back into place. He kisses me on the forehead. “It doesn't matter. Things will work out.” He gives me another kiss on the cheek, then tilts his head as he catches sight of what's on my chest.

Oh, he sees it! He's noticed! Yes! I'm wearing the lord husband-colored gem around my neck!

“My lord, my lord! The jeweler said this is my eye color and made it in a hurry for me! He came over just now! Just as we got back home!” The sapphire is set in detailed gold crafted to look like vines and suspended on a thin golden chain. The jeweler says my lord husband's color works well with mine. He also promised to make a grander piece for our wedding, and until then, I can wear the simpler necklace every day. I wonder why he created the first in that case, and when I ask my lord husband, he merely squeezes me tight again. That really makes me want to wiggle, but I refrain.

“...Will she wear that every day then?”

My lord husband jumps at the sound of the marquis's voice, then swiftly gathers himself, standing at attention to greet his father.

The marquis traveled to the capital that day and has just arrived at our home. He returns my lord husband's hello, and I spot his lips slanting upward.

“Apologies for not noticing your presence, Father. I would have left work sooner had I known you were coming.”

“I see you're much more affectionate here compared to in Drewett...”

“Well... Anyway, what brings you here, Father? You don't usually visit the capital during harvest season.”

“No need to feel embarrassed... It's good for a husband and wife to be loving,” chuckles the marquis in lieu of answering. Noticing my lord husband's skeptical look, he says, “I'm here to make a report to the palace. I'm not expected until tomorrow though, which is why I dropped by here first. Abigail did a good job entertaining me.”

I hosted both the jeweler and the marquis, because such is my wifely duty.

“I received a letter from Lord Samuel, my lord! The lord marquis brought it with him! It's my very first letter!”

“From Samuel?”

Oh! I think I must have left it in the reception room—and then Ethan quietly hands me the pale pink envelope. A drawing of a small brown chick ornaments its corner. *Amazing.* Ethan always provides the right thing at the right time no matter where we are.

I remove the white paper inside and unfold it to show my lord husband. “It says ‘To Abby’ here. I'm sure this is Lady Stella's writing. And Lord Samuel has drawn a picture of me!”

“That's you?”

“Yes!”

The paper is adorned with numerous lines in “crayon,” or so the marquis said.

There are black and red and yellow lines. The number of hands and legs doesn't match mine; it looks much more like that of the Monster King. Lord Samuel is only three and has never met the Monster King, yet he managed to draw it so well.

"I'm trying to draw a reply with the lord marquis, but it's not going well."

"You...with Father?"

"Yes... But I can't draw well with black pencil."

The marquis snorts.

"Father!"

"...Apologies."

The marquis smiled when I drafted my response to Lord Samuel, yet he couldn't identify the subjects of my illustration: I drew a roly-poly and salmon jerky, and he couldn't tell at all.

"All right, I'll buy crayons for you tomorrow," my lord husband says.

"Will you?! Thank you!"

"In exchange, you'll have to let me see the new drawings."

"Yes! I will draw better pictures tomorrow, my lord marquis!"

The corners of his lips are quirking upward again, and he presses them down with his hand. "...I'll look forward to them," he murmurs.

"You can show me the drawings you made later," my lord husband requests.

Yes! I'm quite certain he'll be able to identify the roly-poly.



FATHER informs Abigail that he's brought some freshly harvested apples from Drewett and encourages her to go to the kitchen to see them. With her busy, the two of us head to my office. Father will be dining with us that night, and there are matters to discuss before then.

Father regards me with a strange expression as I loosen my tie. I've seen that look before, just not directed at me. Although Father has always been strict, he

does gaze at Mother and Brother sometimes when they're unaware. Perhaps he's even watched me in such a way too, and I've never noticed it.

But that's not the point! Why is he looking at me, a grown man, like that?!

"Abigail's drawings are very...original in style," he remarks. "I could at least tell what you and Stuart were trying to draw when you were children, but Abigail has me stumped..."

"You saw my drawings?"

"Of course... The territory suffered a series of bad harvests when you boys were young, so I didn't have a lot of spare time to spend with you, but I still saw them. ...Well, I suppose your mother Katrina and I were raised a certain way," he muses, "because I was shocked when I saw how much time Stella spends with Samuel."

Noble families have a very different dynamic compared to commoners. Dinners and evenings are often spent hosting and entertaining guests, so time with one's children is infrequent and short. I also registered Stella's many hours with Samuel while we were at Drewett Manor.

"When I watched Abigail drawing so happily, I suddenly understood why Katrina doesn't object to how Stella is raising her child."

"But Abigail is my wife."

"So?" Father looks at me in surprise, but the whole topic feels too weird, so I drop it.

"Why are you headed to the palace?" I ask instead.

The familiar stern expression returns to his face. "We discovered Earl Longhurst's corpse."

Abigail's missing biological father was found near the forest along the main road linking Drewett to a neighboring territory, Father recounts. The earl was likely attacked by an animal or monster, for he was unrecognizable when a hunter living nearby stumbled upon his body. He was only identified once his belongings were recovered.

"He must have been on his way to another demesne to seek help, but

unfortunately his death occurred on our land. That, plus the fact that his stepdaughter Nadia was tried and executed in Drewett, and his only surviving daughter and heir is Abigail, your wife. This whole scandal is tied too closely to Drewett, so I should be the one to make the report. It's also the least I can do... Longhurst may have suffered a calamity this year, but it's still a sizable and rich estate, so there's a high chance that the royal family will try to annex it. I thought it best to discuss how we should handle this before I visit the palace tomorrow."

"We don't want Longhurst."

"Shouldn't you talk to your wife first...?"

"His Excellency General Whittington gave me some advice today."

"Oh? I haven't seen him in a while. Is he doing well?"

"I think he'll be doing well even in thirty years' time... Anyway, too much ill fortune is associated with Longhurst, so we don't want it."

Father nods, yet he can't help but advise me to reconsider before we leave the room.

"I'll talk to Abigail, but I don't think she'll be interested," I say.

Longhurst is where Abigail was abused and where the Monster King was betrayed. Needless to say, I want nothing more to do with it.



THE marquis brought two crates of apples, and a sweet and sour fragrance wafts out when the wooden lids are cracked open. The apples sit in a bed of straw, probably to prevent bruising. Their perfect skins sparkle and shine, wholly unmarred by birds or insects.

The head cook cuts a thin slice for me to sample. I watch as clear yellow juice trails down the fresh white fruit, then bite into the flesh with a crunch. A refreshing tartness prickles the inside of my cheeks. Apples cultivated by humans taste so different from the wild variety in the forest. They're so yummy.

That evening, we dine with the marquis. Although he doesn't consume as much as my lord husband, he still eats a lot. When he glimpses my plate, he

comments on the small portion in surprise. *That's right.* I was surprised when we came home from Drewett too. I had thought my portions identical to my lord husband's, yet the chef somehow, nigh magically, serves me less food.

We have tarte tatin, such a funny name, for dessert. I watched the cooks make it with the apples from the marquis. I especially liked how the apples turned translucent when sautéed in sizzling butter.

"Abigail, I'm going to tell you something, so please listen while you eat."

The marquis frowns. "...Oy, Gerald—".

"Yes! The apples are delicious even when eaten raw."

"I-Is that so? I'm glad you like them."

"Earl Longhurst is dead," my lord husband says.

The apple makes a crunching sound as I pierce it with my fork. I thought cooking them would soften them, but they're still a little crisp inside. I stab my fork a little deeper, spearing through the apple to reach the pastry base. *Oh, it's hard too.* I take a bite and taste the sweet and sour apples melding with the crusty, crumbly dough and rich caramel. *How delicious!*

"My lord marquis!"

"...Yes, Abigail?"

"The fresh apples were tasty, but the chef has made them into a different kind of tasty here!"

"R-Right..."

"Abigail, you're the rightful heir of Longhurst. Do you want the territory?" asks my lord husband.

"No. My lord, the chef calls this dish tarte tatin."

"Yes. I used to have it as a kid. It's been a while now."

I have another bite, that time topped with the fresh cream served on the side. *Yum!*

"Stop, stop, stop, wait, Abigail. Are you even listening?" The marquis appears agitated for some reason. I've been listening. I can listen even as I eat

delectable food... That said, he sounds just like my lord husband. They're truly so alike.

"Yes. Earl Longhurst is dead, and I'm to inherit Longhurst, but I don't want to," I say plainly.

"Oh... So you were listening."

"Yes!"

My lord husband feeds me a mouthful of tarte tatin from his plate. How tasty! I feed him some of mine as well.

"I'm headed to the palace tomorrow to report on this. Abigail, shall I inform them that you don't desire the estate or earldom, and ask them to proceed accordingly?"

"...Do I have to do anything?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Longhurst will probably be annexed by the royal family once I make the report. If you don't wish to inherit, then no action is required from you. You may be summoned to sign some documents, or a messenger will bring them here, but that's all you'll have to do."

"Yes! Thank you!"

I'm good at signing documents. I can do it with a flourish. *Like this*. I'm good at enacting procedures too, yet my lord husband is nodding, which means I won't need to do that.

"I heard that you were involved in the management of Longhurst. Are you really fine with letting it go?"

"I managed Longhurst because the earl told me to, but he doesn't give me food for it, so I don't want to do it anymore."

"I see... You refer to him as the earl...? I guess he doesn't deserve to be called Father."

Strangely, the marquis looks pained. Earl Longhurst had been my father since I became Abigail, but does what I call him make a difference? *Why doesn't he deserve it?*

“I call him the earl because they got mad when I called him Father.”

“...Huh? The earl got mad?” asks my lord husband with a frown. The marquis is scowling too, and they look identical.

“No. My stepmother and stepsister did. My stepsister called him Father, so I thought I could do the same, but I wasn’t supposed to. I didn’t see the earl often anyway, and when I did, he responded when I called him Earl Longhurst, so it all worked out.”

“I see... That’s how it is. I’ll keep that in mind when I go tomorrow, then. Leave it to me.”

“Father—”

“I said, leave it to me.”

“...Thank you.”

After dinner, the marquis prepares to depart for the Drewett’s residence in the capital to spend the night. My lord husband and I see him off at the door, and before he leaves, the marquis looks me in the eye.

“I may not be the best person to say this, but Abigail...you are my son Gerald’s wife, which makes you my daughter. If you’d like, you may address me as Father. It would make me very happy were you to do so.”

“...Daddy!”

“H-Huh?”

“Oh, my mistake. Erm, Father-in-Law!”

“Y-Yes, that’s...very proper... But thank you, my daughter Abigail.” The marquis—Father-in-Law—smiles as he kisses the top of my head. “Good night and sweet dreams.”

Once he’s gone, my lord husband pats my head aggressively, a sour look on his face.

After readying for sleep, I climb into bed in my lord husband’s room. He is already there, perusing documents as he lies propped up with many large pillows against the headboard. I search for a cozy spot beside him, and once I

settle into it, he pats me on the back.

“My lord.”

“Hmm?”

“I have a father-in-law now.”

“...Yes, you do.” He places the papers on the side table, then reclines with me in his arms. His embrace feels nice and comfortable.

When I was the Monster King, larger humans always scooped up the smaller humans before fleeing. Others crouched over the small ones, so they must have been parent and child. Some monsters also carry more diminutive monsters on their backs to protect them. They are parent and child too.

There weren't any monsters that looked like the Monster King. It was always alone for as long as it could remember.

“I'm like you now, my lord. I have a father too.”

“...Yes.”

I'm just like my lord husband. The thought warms me.

He twirls a strand of my hair around his finger, then kisses me on the eyelids. He always makes me feel all warm and ticklish and fidgety, and I have the urge to jump even though I'm sleepy.

“Good night, Abigail, my little chick.”

Maybe I'll surprise him tomorrow with another birdcall. Which bird shall I imitate next?



THE cold wind stings my nose the moment I alight from the carriage.

Four months have passed since we started readying for our wedding, and one month remains before the date. The marchioness, or Mother-in-Law, has arrived with Father-in-Law to help us prepare. Mother-in-Law has lots of maidservants, so all of my dresses for the ceremony and banquet were sent to the Drewetts' residence in the capital. I am there to try them on.

“Good morning, Mother-in-Law! Thank you for inviting me here today!”

“Good morning. I’m glad you’ve come... I see you’re well.”

“Yes!”

Mother-in-Law has come all the way to the carriage to meet me. Acknowledging my bow of greeting, she asks, “Aren’t you cold, Abigail?”

“I’m fine! Tabitha made me put on several layers of underwe—”

“No need to show me!”

“Yes!”

“It’s going to get colder in the coming days. Make sure you listen to Tabitha so you don’t catch a cold. Now let’s get inside where it’s warm.” She hurries ahead of me into the house. Tabitha has taught me how to walk briskly in a dress, so I do so. Mother-in-Law’s steps quicken, and I work to match her pace.

“...Abigail?”

“Yes!”

“This isn’t a race.”

“Okay!”



THE last time Father-in-Law visited the capital, he stayed for a mere few days before returning to Drewett. I heard later that he doesn’t really like to linger even during the social season and that the trip was a unique circumstance due to the Longhurst scandal. Their current visit is special too, for our wedding. He said they’ll remain in the capital to entertain guests until it and the banquet are over.

When they first arrived, I asked Mother-in-Law, “Are you jealous, Lady Katrina?”

“...What is this about?”

“I heard that you were upset with Father-in-Law after I called him that, and that you had a fight!”

A letter came for my lord husband a while after Father-in-Law went back to Drewett. Lady Katrina had been angry with Father-in-Law, thinking he’d forced

me to address him as such. I read the letter too but didn't understand it. I mean, I understood the words, but I couldn't comprehend their quarrel.

"What is up with those two?" was my lord husband's comment, meaning he couldn't either.

Nonetheless, I followed Tabitha and Ethan's advice to reply and wrote that I hadn't been coerced into calling him Father-in-Law.

But the exchange got me thinking: I suspect I experienced jealousy when my lord husband held Lord Samuel, or that's what my lord husband called the feeling. We didn't argue about it though.

"...Lady Katrina is Father-in-Law's wife, so I thought we'd think the same way."

"Has that been on your mind this whole time?" she asked.

"Sometimes!"

She shielded her red face with her fan, then laughed. "And here I was worrying that you'd despise the thought of having parents again," she whispered to herself with a sigh.

I didn't understand. Was she referring to my stepmother at Longhurst? But Lady Katrina is different because she gives me food like salmon jerky.

"Well, yes," she finally answers, "maybe I was jealous. And if you don't mind... I mean, I'd be happy if you called me Mother as well, Abigail."

And that was how Lady Katrina became Mother-in-Law. I have two parents, just like my lord husband.



"HMM, when were your measurements taken again?"

"Right after we arrived home from Drewett!"

I'm trying on my fourth dress, which bares both shoulders. The designer calls the cut a princess line. The chest is a sky blue that gradually darkens down the sleeves to the hue of night, and the entire gown is embroidered with gold lace. Mother-in-Law observes that my shoulders may grow cold, so I outstretch my

arms, and the designer drapes them with a shawl.

“It fits very snugly... Have you been listening to Tabitha and eating well?”

“I always finish my meals.”

Sometimes I assume I can eat just a little more, and I always end up with a stomachache, so I’ve learned to heed Tabitha.

The designer and seamstress tell Mother-in-Law that Tabitha instructed them to size up the dresses, and she nods.

“Well, even so, it already looks tight around the chest. But that’s fine. I can fix that easily,” says the designer.

“I see. That’s good.” Mother-in-Law nods again in satisfaction. Then she glances at a maid, who quickly pulls out a round ceramic jar. *Wow. Where did she get that from? She’s just like our steward Ethan.*

“Let’s work a little more, shall we? Here!” Mother-in-Law removes a circular red pastry from the jar and pops it into my mouth.

Oh! What a strange feeling! The surface is crunchy and the inside moist, and it feels like it might stick to my teeth, but it doesn’t. And the filling is sweet and sour... “Strawberry! It tastes like strawberry! Because it’s red!”

“It’s a macaron, and it’s becoming quite trendy these days, or so the ladies at yesterday’s tea party tell me.”

“It’s tasty!”

“Please hold your head higher, my lady!” chides the designer.

“Yes!”

Tea parties sound amazing. You can encounter all sorts of new pastries.



ABIGAIL dashes to the door just as I enter the house, and I lift her into my arms.

“Welcome home, my lord! My chest has gotten bigger!”

I choke.

“Are you okay, my lord?”

“...Y-Yes. Was it fitting day today?”

“Yes! Madame Roly-Poly said my chest has gotten bigger!”

“Ah, I see... Abigail... Abby, please let go of that.”

“Yes!”

Her hand drops from her bosom as I settle her on my arm. I spot my parents as well, Father with a stoic expression and eyes averted, and Mother trembling behind her fan.

“Good evening. I’m home,” I say.

“Yes, welcome home, and sorry for intruding... You picked Abigail up very smoothly,” Father remarks.

“There’s something we’d like to discuss with you, and since we escorted Abigail home, we decided to wait for you... The wedding wardrobe is coming along nicely, so go get changed. Abigail? Shall we finish your drawing while we wait?”

“Yes!”

Abigail slides off my arm and follows Father and Mother back to the reception room. *Wait, aren’t those two supposed to be fighting? Why are they so close? And why do they look so eager to spend time with Abigail?*

“Come, Master!” calls Rodney. “Please stop spacing out. Let’s get you changed!”

“I wasn’t spacing out!”



“**A** tea party?”

We are eating dinner when Mother mentions that she’d like Abigail to accompany her to a tea party. “Oh, don’t worry. She’s been scrubbed clean,” she assures me.

“Are you good at cleaning, Mother-in-Law? I’m good at it too. But wait, Tabitha said housework isn’t part of our wifely duties...”

Mother means that she's scoured Abigail's bad reputation—by either discounting the gossipmongers or convincing them to join her camp. Briefly, a sly smile crosses her face, then her expression regains its usual impassivity. “Oh, I cleaned in a different way,” she replies. “Come, Abigail, eat before your food gets cold.”

I spoon some broccoli and bacon *ajillo* bubbling in a small pot atop a baking stone onto a small plate for Abigail. It will take a while to cool down.

“I'm inviting only my closest friends. We must let Abigail at least meet the ladies who will be attending her wedding.”

“When is the party?”

“You don't have to be there, Gerald.”

“There'll be lots of pastries at the tea party, my lord.”

“O-Oh, yes. But Mother—”

“You don't have to be there. Abigail knows how to behave like a proper lady, don't you, Abigail?”

“...Yes!”

Wait, that wasn't convincing at all... I add some mushrooms and cauliflower to Abigail's plate. Is it really necessary...?

“Why are you worried...? She comported herself well during the ball at the royal palace, didn't she? You're too soft with her; I'm sure she can do it if we tell her not to voice her thoughts without warning.”

True. Abigail has never said anything about her Gift or the Monster King to anyone. *But she also tried to eat the decorative flowers!*

“Oh, my lord! Mother-in-Law showed me around the kitchen at the Drewett residence today!”

“Oh? O-Oh.”

“I saw a mirror bird egg in the egg carton. Do the people of Drewett eat those even though they're not tasty?”

“...Mirror what?”

“Abigail... What’s a mirror bird?”

“It’s a monster that stealthily lays its eggs in birds’ nests. When the egg hatches, the hatchling eats everything in sight. Oh, the green one tastes different from the white one. How yummy.”

I study the ceiling to avoid my parents’ confused stares. Yes, Abigail kept quiet while we were in Drewett, but at home, she’s speaking her mind freely.

“Erm, Abigail, about the mirror bird egg. When will it hatch?”

She pierces the cauliflower with her fork and pops it into her mouth. “The day after tomorrow, maybe. Will you have it for breakfast tomorrow then?”

“Will you come back with us after dinner? We must deal with this egg, so you’ll have to help us identify it.”

“Yes! ...So it can’t be made delicious after all?”

“I guess not...”

Abigail looks disappointed. *I guess I still have some explaining to do...*



“**IS** this all part of Abigail’s Gift too...?”

After safely disposing of the egg, we decide to spend the night at the Drewett residence. Abigail is already asleep in the guest room. Father and I are in his study, and he nurses a glass of spirits while relaxing on the sofa. Mother is present too, which is a rare occurrence.

Upon questioning Abigail a little more, we learned that the mirror bird isn’t truly a bird but a monster that imitates—mirrors—the appearance of the chicks in the nest in order to evade detection before devouring everything. Because the monster lays eggs, it often assumes the form of a bird, yet it can also morph to look human... That disturbing ability is why we don’t know much about it.

Whenever I sent warning missives to Drewett, I focused mostly on countermeasures to the predicted disasters and avoided mention of Abigail’s method of obtaining such information. Most people with Gifts don’t reveal the particulars of its function, so we’ve managed to skirt discovery so far. Yet I am beginning to wonder, especially in light of the general’s advice, whether

revealing more of the truth to my parents would be better. But what if it's too shocking a revelation or too unbelievable...?

Of course, I won't reference the Monster King, yet Abigail's vast knowledge of monsters and their ecology, and her foresight of events calamitous and benign, would be highly sought by anyone, and Drewett the first territory to benefit from it.

"...She doesn't blurt things like that in public, does she?"

"No. That's why she was so quiet during our trip to Drewett. She knows not to talk about monsters but doesn't realize that she understands and knows things normal humans do not."

"So it's hard to know what she'll say... That's how she's always been, I guess... Anyway, let's shelve the idea of the tea party for now. Perhaps a small dinner party where you can be present will be better."

"...We'll need to work harder so word about her doesn't get out."

Father squeezes Mother's right hand and she places her left atop their intertwined fingers. *Seriously, what's wrong with these two...? They're acting like a married couple.*

I'm glad they've accepted Abigail, *but this... This is a little creepy...*



"**THEY** all look the same..."

"Agreed..."

Upon returning to the Drewett residence's kitchen, the servants bring us the egg carton. Father-in-Law and my lord husband peek inside, then tilt their heads in confusion. Mother-in-Law is holding my hand as we stand a small distance away until my lord husband beckons me over unwillingly.

I go to him and examine the carton too. "It's this one." I point at an egg amid the neat row.

My lord husband and Father-in-Law blanch in shock. *They must see it now.*



“...Is this some sort of trick?”

“Mirror bird eggs look like the other eggs unless you know they’re there,” I explain. After I’ve indicated the egg, they should be able to discern its green and purple swirly pattern.

My lord husband puts a hand to his chin in thought, then calls over the head cook and gestures at the monster egg. The chef blinks and stares, then starts to tremble.

“Guess you don’t need magic to see it,” my lord husband concludes.

“...M-Master Gerry, what is this?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Remember this pattern, chef,” Father-in-Law says. “So you can find and identify it next time.”

“Y-Yes! Of course! H-How did the lady know?”

“Abigail has good eyes.”

“Good eyes...”

“Yes!”

All the cooks in the kitchen are summoned to look at the egg. Afterward, my lord husband freezes it with ice magic. I had figured they would smash the egg, but instead they asked me the best way to ensure it doesn’t hatch.

“I’ll bring this to our military research lab for analysis.”

I hesitate.

“What’s wrong?”

I know laboratories do research... *If I don’t say it, maybe they won’t know...*

“Abigail?”

“When you freeze it...”

“Yes?”

“The inside turns to dust.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll still take it, just in case...”



WE are invited to spend the night and are shown the guest room. My lord husband stays with them sometimes, so he has his own room and has gone there to change into his sleepwear. The maids help me undress, and Mother-in-Law sends a nightgown for me. It’s soft and thin and light, but the room is warm, so I’ll be fine.

“Abiga...?”

My lord husband has returned, and he stands frozen by the door.

“What is it, my lord?”

“O-Oh, it’s nothing. Are you cold?”

“Not re—”

“You must be. Here!”

Before I can blink, I’m wrapped in a blanket he has pulled from the bed. It is also soft, and comfortable. My lord husband picks me up and settles us on the mattress, and I lie in his arms as I do at home. *So warm...* Maybe a little hot. But he is holding me tight, so I remain still.

“Thank you for today. Everyone will be safe now.”

I receive a kiss on my forehead as a reward, and it tickles as usual. *But today... Hmm? Is everyone...* “Safe...?”

“Yes. Everyone is safe now, right? If we hadn’t killed it, the monster would have hatched in a couple days and run amok. Father, Mother, or the servants could have gotten hurt.”

“...Mother-and Father-in-Law. My lord?”

“Hmm?”

“Mirror birds are weak, and their hatchlings even weaker. That’s why they mirror. They disguise themselves as the other chicks so the birds will let their guard down. But that only works on creatures that aren’t so smart. Intelligent monsters, and probably humans too, can recognize them right away. They can

mimic the appearance of human children but can only make sounds like *kyup-kyup*.”

That’s why mirror birds don’t leave their eggs in the presence of intelligent creatures. The egg must have gotten mixed in with the others by mistake.

“Kyup-kyup...? I-I see. So they can take the form of children?”

“After they hatch, yes.”

“Then I’m glad we found it. It would have been hard for us to attack something that looks like a human child.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

If that’s true, then everyone probably would have ended up eaten. Mother-in-Law, and Father-in-Law too.

Weak creatures are consumed by strong creatures. That’s just how things are.

It’s natural that humans who enter the forest are devoured.

It’s natural that monsters that encroach on villages are defeated by humans.

In that case, it should be natural that weak humans get eaten by monsters. And yet...

“My lord!”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want Mother-and Father-in-Law to get hurt.”

“Yes.”

“My chest somehow feels itchy. I don’t want them to die.”

“I know. That’s because they’re your family now, Abigail. I’ve told you before. When someone you love gets hurt, you hurt too.”

“...Here!” I clasp his hand to my chest, but he pulls away. Then he hugs me and the blanket tight again and presses his forehead to mine.

“Go to sleep. The chef is making pancakes for breakfast.”

“Yes! Good night!”

Pancakes like those we had at Drewett Manor! Those special, thick, fluffy ones! I can’t wait!

Chapter Eleven: I Never Stop and Am Always Healthy

OUR wedding is tomorrow.

Everything is almost ready. I've even memorized the guest list that Mother-in-Law showed me.

Following Tabitha's instructions, I've checked my dress sizing, chosen my accessories, and sampled all the dishes to be served at the banquet. They were all so tasty. Our chef is already amazing, and with the help of the marquis's chef, we'll eat castle food although we won't be in a castle.

Mother-in-Law said many of the dishes will feature Drewett's local specialties, so I thought salmon jerky would be on the menu, but it isn't. When I asked why, Mother-in-Law said it's a delicacy only I can have. I suppose that can't be helped, then, especially when I learn that fresh salmon jerky has been prepared just for me.

We are presently rehearsing the ceremony: Father-in-Law will escort me to the altar where my lord husband is waiting. Since I'm no longer a Longhurst, Father-in-Law has assumed the role of father of the bride.

"...Abigail, please don't leave me behind," he calls from somewhere behind me.

"Yes!" I've been so busy handling my dress, which is as long as my wedding gown so I can practice walking with a train, that I didn't realize I'd outstripped him. I return to the chapel's entrance.

"Remember to match my pace," he reminds me.

"Yes!"

He extends his right elbow, then pats my hand when I place it there. Father-in-Law is shorter than my lord husband yet still much taller than me. And when he looks at me and nods, he exactly resembles my lord husband.

At the altar, my lord husband and I listen to the priest, then recite our vows.

I've memorized the words perfectly, and the priest praises me for saying my lines with enthusiasm, though the feat is nothing special. I can commit all I see to memory with a single glance.

Lord Samuel, my lord husband's nephew, is our ring bearer, so he's also traveled all the way from Drewett. Because he is small, he must practice with us too. His face is serious as he reverently offers the tray upon which lie our two rings. "It's my turn next, Abby!"

"Huh? No! My lord has only one wife, and it's me!"

Everyone, including my lord husband and Father-in-Law, quakes, before Lady Stella sweeps up Lord Samuel and carries him to the far side of the pews for a chat with the priest. *I hope he knows that this isn't a game! We're not supposed to take turns!*



I retire early that night in preparation for the following day, crawling into the bed in my lord husband's room. We sleep together daily, more or less. I hear that Mother-and Father-in-Law are sharing a room as well, so we're the same.

Yet my lord husband doesn't join me. He keeps opening his mouth as if to say something, then closing it.

I sit up in bed. "I can do it, my lord. I've memorized everything, so it'll be fine. Please leave it to me!"

"O-Oh...? A-Ah, well, that's not what I'm worried about." He grunts, scratches his head, before sitting on the other side of the mattress. His legs are crossed, forming a nice spot. I try to crawl into his lap but am pushed back.

"Abigail."

"Yes!" His face is solemn, so I adopt a serious expression too.

"Tomorrow is our wedding."

"Yes! Everything is ready! I just need to put on my dress!"

"Yes... Erm, I should have talked to you about this much sooner..."

"Yes?"

“I said something horrible to you on our first night.”

...Something horrible on our first night?

“...I said that I’ll never love you.”

“...Yes...?”

“I knew it! I knew you wouldn’t remember! Well, I guess that’s for the best.”

My lord husband is wrong. I do remember. I never forget anything. But...
“You’re not horrible, my lord.”

I don’t understand what was so horrible about his declaration. I remember he apologized the very next day. And while I can’t comprehend the need for his apology, I can guess it was probably for what he said. Besides, that was the only time he seemed angry with me. Since then, he’s always been so gentle and kind. And he smells nice. There’s nothing horrible about him at all.

“Yes. Though you told me not to worry about it, I’ve never stopped blaming myself.”

“Blame?”

He clasps my hands. The light from the lamp on the side table is reflected in his eyes, flickering like flames as the blue shifts between light and dark. “So please let me revoke those words. I can’t make them disappear, yet I’m hoping that we can start over at tomorrow’s ceremony.”

My lord husband had mentioned he wanted to have a wedding. That must be the reason why. I understand, and I’ll help him, so I nod eagerly.

“You probably won’t understand this now, but I’m sure you will eventually. And until then, I want you to remember these words instead... I love you.”

He frowns as he squeezes my hands in his large ones. They’re so large that I can’t see my own wrapped within them. “This marriage began as a political one, both for you and for me. I accepted it because I thought it normal practice among the nobility and that we would eventually start to see each other as family.”

Family. My lord husband says Father-and Mother-in-Law are my family too.

“But that’s not what I want now. Abigail, I want to love you as my wife and for you to love me as your husband. And I’m not talking about the kind of love Father and Mother feel for you.”

“...So, like Tabitha’s love?”

“No... It’s this kind.” He pulls on my hands until our foreheads touch, then he kisses me on the lips.

“There’s no hurry, and I won’t rush you in any way,” he says afterward in a slightly hoarse voice. “We’ll go at your pace, slowly, but I want to show you how my love is different.” He kisses me again, then a third time, as though he’s trying to bite my mouth. It somehow makes me feel fluffy inside.

What a lovely sensation.



“...**YOU’RE** very beautiful, my lady,” Tabitha says, her eyes filled with tears.

Turns out I had to do more than put on my dress. I also had to bathe, have my hair braided and my makeup done, and so much more. It’s just like the day we attended the ball. And because there’s so much to do before the ceremony, I had to wake up even earlier. *I made the right choice in going to bed early.* My lord husband made me feel all fluffy, so I enjoyed a great night’s sleep. *He’s amazing.*

Pristine white lace covers me from neck to shoulder, then down my arms all the way to my middle fingers. Since it’s thin and Mother-in-Law is worried I’ll catch a cold, a large shawl of embroidered lace is draped over my shoulders. The shawl is hemmed with soft white fur and embellished with sparkly crystal beads. My gown perfectly hugs my body from chest to waist, the shiny fabric decorated with intricate needlework in gold thread. The train that drags on the floor is so rife with lace that it looks like tangled ivy, and the maids are constantly rearranging it so I don’t step on it. From my head drifts a veil, which is even longer than the dress.

My hair is in a bun, and the maids have somehow turned my straight locks all curly and fluffy. I watched them at work yet still don’t understand how they achieved it. Many tiny star-shaped flowers are woven among the strands, but

they're all fake, so I can't eat them.

Tabitha escorts me to the chapel's entrance where Father-in-Law will take over. The veil makes it hard to see where I'm going, and I finally realize why he advised me to slow my pace to his the previous day.

My lord husband and I exchange our vows and rings, just as we rehearsed the day before. Lord Samuel does well too and says only "congratulations."

Then my lord husband lifts my veil—and freezes.

The priest coughs quietly, but he remains motionless, so the man gives him a gentle poke. My lord husband flinches, his face immediately reddening.

"...Apologies. Your beauty stunned me," he whispers before softly kissing me. A joyous smile breaks across his face.

"Only once? I'd like more," I complain.

My lord husband squeezes my shoulders, then gives me two more kisses. Just like the night before. It's lovely.



THE public banquet is held at the Drewett mansion in the capital. While it's not a castle, it's really big and spacious. I've heard that few families own such large residences in the city.

The event moves from the chapel to there, and I quickly change into my next dress. Half my hair is let down to hang loose, still fluffy and curly. My makeup is redone, and my hair accessories are switched out for fresh, colorful flowers. They are real flowers but bitter and not good for eating.

My new gown is dark blue and bares my shoulders, with bright red nerine flowers blooming on vines embroidered all along the chest and hem. The nerines are the same as those at Drewett Manor that Lord Samuel says are the color of my hair.

I don my lord husband-colored magic sapphire. The gold necklace is more elaborate than the one I usually wear. Tabitha was the one who came up with the design. She's incredible.

"...Yes, yes." My lord husband nods but says nothing more, and Rodney prods

him with an elbow. My lord husband pushes him away, but he's insistent. Finally, my lord husband coughs and looks at me nervously. "Abigail, you're... very beautiful."

"Yes!"

"Make sure you don't leave my side."

"Yes!"

I hear lots of noise from behind the double doors leading to the great hall. I tightly hold onto his right arm and adopt a serene expression. Mother-in-Law said it'll be good if I can stay calm and smile nicely.

We enter the hall to applause and cheers. The guests are mostly close friends of the Drewetts and good friends and comrades of my lord husband in the military. Every time my lord husband glances down at me and smiles, the men cheer in loud voices. *Oh, some of them are the soldiers from the training ground that day.*

I am quiet during the speeches and toasts. A sumptuous feast lines the table, but I remain with my lord husband as he greets various people. I'm fine because I've already tried all the dishes. *Oh, His Excellency.* I watch placidly as he laughs out loud and claps my lord husband on the shoulder. I don't need to look at the feast. The chef let me sample all the food beforehand. It was all so tas— *Huh?*

"Ah, I see. So that's the surprise you've prepared, Gerald?"

"...Has Rodney been talking to Your Excellency again?"

His Excellency grins at my lord husband and gestures with his chin. I can't. I need to stay calm; I can't look over there, *but oh, they're placing it right in the middle of the hall!* All the guests are exclaiming too.

Oh, oh, I can't see it anymore. Too many stand in the way.

"No, it was the marquis, when I greeted him just now. You've even managed to procure some out-of-season fruit for the viscountess, I hear?"

It's so big that I can just glimpse the top. *Oh, wow. It's so tall I can still see it!*

"Hahahaha, the viscountess is vibrating. I'll be fine, so you should get over there."

My lord husband and I thank His Excellency again, then my lord husband gives me a gentle push in the back. Yes! We're heading over!

...Wow! It's a huge cake!

Even without casters, it would tower over my husband, its numerous tiers coated in fresh, white cream. *How did they bake such a big cake?!* There aren't any ovens big enough at the Drewett residence. Mother-in-Law showed me the kitchen, so I know. Pink and yellow-green flowers made of cream dot the sides, *and what's that brown stuff linking them together?* Oh, those are the curly things I saw on the chestnut cream cake! That must be it! And the flowers aren't just cream.

"My lord my lord my lord!"

"Yes?"

"There are candy flowers!"

"Yes."

Lots of candy flowers blooming from the cake!

"How do we cut this, my lord? It's so tall; will it topple if we cut it? Oh, we don't have plates big enough to catch it..."

"It'll be fine. We'll cut it from the side, but first..." He scoops a spoonful of cake. *He just took a scoop without cutting it first!*

I study the spoonful. It's light-yellow sponge cake coated with cream and interspersed with colorful chopped fruit. And crowned with a small candy flower. I take a bite. *How scrumptious!* It's moist and light with sweet and sour juicy fruit and crunchy candy!

"Is it good?"

"Yes!"

My lord husband looks happy as though he's just eaten something super tasty, then he pecks my lips and smiles. "It's sweet."

How sweet, fluffy, and lovely this is!

Side Story: I'm Certain This Is Who They Call Little Piyo

“IT’S rude to peep, Master Gerry.”

“Stop calling me that.”

His large body is crouched near the floor as he peeks into the neighboring master bedroom. Why does he need to creep about so when he owns the whole mansion? ...*Oh yes, must be because he's angered Mother, mother hen that she is.*

Master Gerald and I are the same age, the two of us raised at Mother's breast. He is quite the dashing young man when he isn't frowning. His features are the perfect combination of the marquis's handsomeness and the marchioness's grace. With sparkling blue eyes that shift between shades—an indication of his considerable magical prowess—and smooth, flowing black hair, he could have been the most eligible bachelor among the nobility were it not for his dour nature. In fact, he *was* one of the most popular young nobles when he debuted in high society at sixteen.

But that didn't last long. His innate seriousness prompted him to easily tire of the ladies vying for his attention, and he was disgusted by the ugly way they fought over him.

He graduated early and with perfect marks from magic school at seventeen, then enrolled in the military academy, where his height and physique steadily grew. In no way helped by his grumpy affect, he became an imposing serviceman too daunting for most noblewomen, though they still admired him from a distance. And despite his sensitivity to malice, he didn't notice their positive regard at all.

So when the wife forced upon him was accompanied by a horrible reputation of promiscuity, I can understand his desire to remain vigilant and in control. Mother was furious that he forwent a thorough background check before agreeing to the match, but Master had such low expectations regarding

marriage and women that he hadn't bothered.

"But if that does happen, the lady will be hurt. That's the consequence of your careless treatment of her. Are you really a man who can do that to a woman you don't even hate?"

Nonetheless, he is still a man of deep compassion, someone able to reflect on past foolishness and become filled with self-loathing because he hurt his wife needlessly. *How adorable.*

So how do I feel?

Bad or not, her reputation doesn't really matter so long as she doesn't drag Master down with her. To share such an opinion, however, is not my place. As a Kofi, I intend to uphold my honor and treat my new mistress with respect. That's the least a servant can do.

Father and Mother aren't as bound by the master-servant relationship; they see Master as a second son and thus naturally wish for his marriage to be a happy one.

But my Master is very pure. He's never played around with women, likely wanting to save himself for his future wife. To be honest, that can't be said for most noblewomen, or at least the ones around him. Many seem the type to surround themselves with young men even after wedding.

That's why I decided to treat the marriage as what it was: an inevitable political match. Better for Master to view the union as a career move rather than attempt to insert emotion into it. And if the lady is as evil as rumored and comports herself unfaithfully? *I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.*



SHE arrived from Longhurst without warning, right before bedtime. Thankfully, the marriage contract had already been submitted to the relevant officials by the Noel and Longhurst families, so our household was prepared to welcome its new mistress.

She came to our door alone, without even a servant to help her ring the bell. Her expressionless face appeared young but horribly thin, her hair and skin so

weathered that I struggled to believe she was nobility. I wondered why the daughter of wealthy Earl Longhurst was dressed in a baggy, ill-fitting old dress. That she was by herself was already strange enough.

The fact that she'd appeared unannounced so late in the evening annoyed Master, who retired to his room without sparing even a glance at his new bride. But I think that was the moment when all of us, especially Mother, sensed that all wasn't as it seemed. As unexpected as she was, we couldn't turn her away upon realizing that she was unaccompanied save for an old man driving the carriage. Her safe arrival was a miracle given her lack of escort or guards. The whole affair was insanity, not on the lady's part, but the Longhursts'. Even I, a mere servant, understood that.

As a servant, I'm unquestionably expected to serve my master. If he were to go somewhere, we would accompany him, no explicit instruction needed. So why did the lady arrive alone? While we puzzled over the circumstances, Master's mood soured. He went to her room and said what he said.

I never expected things to turn out the way they did after that.

In the end, the lady's behavior was so childlike that it activated all of Mother's maternal instincts. She'd been treated so poorly that mere mouthfuls of food rendered her sick and immobile, and she didn't understand the malicious comments uttered by some of the maids. She listens to and obeys Mother without question and follows Mother around like a chick. That was probably why Master bonded so quickly with her.

Pudding is a delicacy even the wealthiest families do not indulge in daily, yet there he is, feeding it to the lady diligently. Although her face is stoic, her eyes sparkle.

"...Little Piyo!" he blurts.

Little Piyo?! Now that's a name I haven't heard in a while!



MOTHER was one of the maids hired to serve the newly wedded Lady Katrina, and that was when she met Father, who worked for the marquis, and they soon married. Master was born about six months after my birth, so Mother was

naturally picked to become his nursemaid.

Though we lived in the same castle, the servants' quarters were situated far from the Drewett family's rooms, so I was already five years old by the time I met Master. I remember feeling surprised that he was the boy my parents sometimes mentioned over the dinner table. *I mean, he's a boy, right?* I recall thinking. Even a child like me understood that he was beautiful, and his smaller size back then didn't help.

I was introduced to him as a playmate, but since Master had already begun his nobleman's education, he didn't really know how other children played. I felt like a big brother. And though he started out well-mannered, Master was soon right beside me as we climbed trees and were yelled at by the gardener.

Despite his appearance, Master was strong-willed and stubborn and never once complained about the crazy schedule his tutor imposed on him.

"Rodney, does Tabitha read to you before bedtime? Can't you read on your own?" he once asked me, a strange expression on his face, after I made an offhand remark about the interesting adventure tales Mother told me every night.

I was slightly upset that the person I'd come to view as a little brother seemed to be looking down on me. "I can! It's Mother who insists on reading to me!"

Master merely laughed. "I see!" he exclaimed. "I remember Tabitha reading to me before naptime, back when I was still nursing. It was so much fun; I loved it."

It was years later when I learned that Lady Katrina never spent bedtime with Master, not even once.

As children, I viewed him mostly as friend and brother. He and I did everything together: playing, studying, pranking, quarreling, getting scolded by Mother, seeking comfort from Father. At ten, I became my parents' apprentice and started to learn how to be a butler. Possessing some magical prowess, I later followed Master to magic school.

One day in our twelfth summer, a year before he enrolled in magic school, we rode our horses to the forest near Drewett's border as we often did when we

wanted to relax. The woodland was bright with sunlight filtering through the trees, and locals frequently harvested nuts and mushrooms there. For that reason, only three guards accompanied us, and we were allowed to roam and play freely while they watched from a distance.

We selected a couple of choice branches and did what boys do best. We engaged in mock battle, half in earnest and half in fun, until Master knocked my weapon from my hands.

“Ah!”

“Yes! ...Huh?”

Arcing through the air, the stick had fallen into the bush where we picked raspberries just the week before, and I dived after it. Master looked at me, confused.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I thought I heard a sound.”

From the raspberry bush? I scoffed as I pushed aside the thorny branches yet quickly spotted a tiny baby bird with bald patches all over its body.

“...Can chicks walk?”

Master could be so clueless sometimes, even if he didn’t think so. I glanced up at the sky and our surroundings. “I don’t see its parents. Does it live nearby?”

“*Piyo!*”

“No?” *Whoa, did I just answer it? What?!*

We asked the guards to search for nests and adult birds nearby, and they couldn’t find trace of either. So Master gathered some large leaves, and we wrapped the chick in them, careful not to touch it.

“I heard parent birds abandon their chicks if they smell humans on them,” he explained.

“I see...”

We brought the chick back to the castle. Back then, I was utterly convinced we were doing the right thing, and I guess the matter is moot since we took it

home regardless.



AS a nobleman's son, Master was busy with his studies, swordsmanship lessons, and magic curriculum. Despite that, he did his best to help care for Little Piyo, even during classes.

"...In conclusion, what happened in this land 320 years ago was—"

"Piyo!"

"Here."

"Pyo pyo!"

"I see. Is it tasty? Please continue, sir."

We lined a little basket with linen for Little Piyo, and whenever the chick chirped, Master slid a wooden box from his pocket, picked a piece of meat, and fed it to the creature.

"The meat you requested has arrived, Young Master Gerald."

"Thanks. Little Piyo seems to like it—"

"Piyo."

"Yes, I know... I'll order more."

Master used magic to keep the meat cool so it wouldn't rot. Perhaps he is naturally talented, yet I secretly believe that the frequent enchantment was how he became so good at delicate spell work.

Little Piyo, balding and quite ugly when we found it, soon grew into a soft, fluffy ball that begged caressing.

"It's hard to say, but maybe it's pointless now to refrain from touching it?" I asked one day.

Master had remained adamant about not touching Little Piyo and answered reluctantly, "We may have brought it home, but Little Piyo is a wild animal, and we must return it to the forest once it matures—"

"Piyo!"

“Right? If we touch it, maybe it won’t want to go back.”

“I see... I see.”

By the following spring, Little Piyo had grown too big, and Master and I took it back to the forest as he said we would. I wondered whether it could even fly and was thus surprised when it did so quickly after some encouragement from Master, who demonstrated by jumping up and down. I struggled to hold back my laughter at the sight.

Master had held out till the end—he had never voluntarily touched Little Piyo—so I couldn’t bear to tell him that the chick had curled up in his hair each night to sleep. Every morning, before I woke him, I had quietly picked up Little Piyo and placed it back in its basket.



I recall that period with nostalgia as we pause near the forest on our return from Drewett to our manse in the capital. The place hasn’t changed much in the decade since we released Little Piyo.

The carriage driver and guards tend to the horses while we servants reconvene with Master and the lady.

“Has it been ten years already? I remember we enrolled in magic school in the capital soon after that,” Master comments.

“That’s right. It’s been a while since we spent time here.”

Master is accustomed to traveling long distances on military marches, so the break is mainly for the lady; she grew thirsty after ingesting salmon jerky. *Does she really like it that much?* Anyway, she’s just praised my herbal tea, saying it tastes better than what they serve at the royal palace, so I’m in high spirits. I set up a simple table and chairs, then brew a blend of tea that I know the lady likes. As she snacks on pastries, I recount Little Piyo’s story.

Although the lady generally bears a neutral expression, her thoughts are extremely easy to guess. For example, she bounces a little in her seat when happy, and her emotions often reflect in her eyes. In fact, her eyes speak more clearly than her words. A skilled servant can read their master’s unspoken cues, but zero skill is required to understand our lady. Usually.

But there are times when no one can predict what she will say or do.

Like that afternoon. Her gaze has glazed into a faraway look, her demeanor abruptly blank. Then she points in a certain direction and announces that an irrigation canal has dried up.

She tells us that thunderbirds sometimes build nests upstream of the river supplying the canal, thereby blocking its flow. To solve the issue, she says, we merely have to lure the creature elsewhere with five-needle pine leaves, thunderbirds' favored nesting material.

Master dispatches some people to the river in question, and they report a situation just as the lady described. A thunderbird the size of a house has been sighted in the river, apparently enjoying a bath and stoppering the waterway completely. Since five-needle pines don't naturally grow in Drewett, we'll likely have a tough time procuring its needles. And while thunderbirds are gentle monsters, they can do major damage with their giant bodies upon becoming agitated.

The lady still has a strange look on her face, and she alternates between staring deep into the woods and at Master's face. She occasionally turns to study me too.

This is something new... I give her a slight nod and am preparing to pour the tea when Master suddenly blurts, "Stop, stop, stop, what? What is it?"

"...I hear a voice."

"A voice?"

"It says it wants to come here... Oh!" Without warning, she stands and clambers onto Master's lap, then stares into the forest again. "My lord."

"Y-Yes?"

"What kind of bird is Little Piyo?"

"Huh? I don't think we ever found out. I always assumed it was some sort of starling."

"Master, I've told you that's not true," I interject. "Little Piyo was fierce looking! And remember how big it got in the end? It was definitely a bird of

prey.”

“That’s not true. Little Piyo was adorable.”

“Little Piyo is coming,” the lady murmurs.

“You’re being very biased, Master!”

We had the exact same argument in the library ten years before, when we checked all the field guides and found no bird that resembled Little Piyo—*wait, what did the lady just say?*

“Abigail?”

“What color is Little Piyo, my lord?”

“O-Oh. Erm, it was black all over with brown spots, and there were some bright green feathers growing from the top of its head like a comb... Huh?” His eyes trace the trajectory of the lady’s gaze and he goes still.

I can see it too, something like a sesame seed floating on the horizon separating forest and sky. I sneak a glance at the lady in Master’s arms and am confused to see her brows knitted in slight unhappiness and her lips in a pout.

“Rust beryl thrushes only come out to feed and throw out anything they don’t like,” she says. “That’s why Little Piyo was thrown out. Most monsters despise weak offspring.”

“Huh? Rust what? Monsters? Stop, stop, stop, stop, wait! If it’s that big while still so far away, then...!”

The black shadow in the sky swells from the size of a sesame seed to a bean, then a fist.

Master kicks his chair over as he stands, pushing the lady behind him in one smooth motion. I step forward to stand in front of them both, and the guards are dashing toward us as well. I rest my hand on the hilt on my left hip but refrain from drawing my sword. The creature is still too far away for us to gauge its intent, and some monsters are drawn by the reflection of light on steel. I sense Master waiting behind me.



Though distant, the creature is flying with purpose, definitely heading in our direction. It's so big that it seems to cast our surrounds in shadow, and eventually, the pattern on its body is visible: black feathers spotted with glossy, vibrant brown scales, the bright white fur on its belly slightly dirtied by twigs and branches. Its wings flap in an unnatural way to keep its huge body afloat, each one longer than twice the arm span of an adult man. With the autumn sun behind it, we can't see its eyes.

Strangely, I don't discern any murderous intent from the creature, though its size is intimidating enough.

"My lord! My lord! Hold me, hold me!"

"W-Wait, shh! Keep quiet! Shh!"

What are they doing back there? Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mother on her knees and slowly crawling from the carriage toward the lady. She must be trying to spirit the lady to safety and risks breaking her back to do so. Just then, the guards who have positioned themselves in front of us tense.

"Piyo!"

A surprisingly cute and goofy high-pitched cry rings in our ears.

Master clears his throat. "It's gotten big..." he murmurs under his breath, his voice hoarse as though he'd been running.

He's right. It has gotten very big. He orders us to stand down, so I retreat to his side. Once again, the lady confirms that the creature is Little Piyo, even as she continues to hop behind Master, waiting for him to pick her up.

Despite her assurance, I have to will my hand to move from the hilt of my sword.

The monster lands on a grassy clearing some distance from us, then cocks its head and cries out again. *"Piyo!"*

I can't help but remain vigilant. *So that's really Little Piyo... Probably... I guess...?*

The scraggly green feathers that crested its head have morphed into a magnificent crown of shining jade. Its large, curved beak, although still bright

yellow, has grown imposing in size. Its continuous cries of “*piyo*,” however, are as adorable as I remember, and wholly contrast with its menacing visage.

“Erm, is that you, Little Pi—”

“*Pyo! Pyo piyo!*”

“...Oh, yeah. I guess it is.”

“Wait, Master! You shouldn’t let down your guard yet!”

“My lord! Hold me!”

“What? Since when did you...?”

Master finally lifts the lady up, and she schools her features and straightens in his arms. Then she puffs out her chest and looks down her nose at Little Piyo, which I know sounds strange because Master is much smaller than the creature. Nonetheless, it crouches and lowers its head.

“Is that really Little Piyo?” mutters one of the guards in a low voice. He has long served the family and is right to be suspicious. We should remain doubtful. *How are we going to verify its identity?*

“My lady,” I decide to ask, “you mentioned rust beryl thrushes. Are those really small as chicks? Little Piyo was tiny, so we never imagined it was a monster.”

“Rust beryl thrushes don’t normally grow this big or strong, but monsters gain strength by eating the flesh of monsters stronger than themselves.”

“The flesh of stronger monsters...? Master?”

“...Abigail, are rust beryl thrushes weaker than rock bears?”

“Rock bears love to eat rust beryl thrushes.”

“Master.”

Red rock bears are a common monster in the mountains of Drewett. They typically descend the mountains around the present time of year and are killed on sight, their meat sold as a delicacy in the territory. Master averts his eyes. *Is that it? Is that the meat he said Little Piyo likes...?*

“*Piyo! Piyo piyo!*”

“Y-Yes...?”

Little Piyo lowers its head further to Master, who steps back with a puzzled expression, the lady still in his arms. *Why does it look like Little Piyo is about to headbutt him?*

“Maybe it wants a pat...?” I venture.

“What? But I’ve never touched Little Piyo...?”

Master does not know that Little Piyo often nestled in his hair while he slept. It must be wondering why it can’t do the same while he is awake.

Hesitantly, he stretches a hand toward Little Piyo’s chest, and before he can make contact, the lady grabs his hand and places it on her head instead.

“...Abigail?”

“Me first!”

“S-Sure.”

The lady appears very displeased but rapidly calms as Master strokes her hair.

“Is that all right?” he inquires after a few moments, and she nods.

He reaches out once more, his fingers finally brushing against Little Piyo. “You’re softer than I imagined.”

“*Piyo!*”

Master chuckles softly as his hand sinks wrist-deep into feathers. Little Piyo has curled up as if incubating an egg, its tail feathers swishing from side to side. *Whoa, those are so sharp they’re cutting the grass...* The guards turn to me for guidance, and I ignore them, as does Master. His excitement at the reunion is somewhat contagious...

“I see. So you remember us?”

“*Pyo pyo pyo.*”

Master moves his hand to massage Little Piyo. The creature seems happy and extremely relaxed, and Master looks obsessed himself. After touching Little Piyo, he probably won’t ever want to let go. “I suppose we can’t bring monsters back to the capital.”

“What are you suggesting, Master?! Please stop!”

He’s grown so soft lately! Where is all that self-restraint from his youth?!

Master has buried his face in Little Piyo’s feathers. “I mean, weren’t messenger birds originally wild monsters that we domesticated over time?”

“Piyo.”

“But Little Piyo is big! Huge!”

“Little Piyo is the boss of this forest, so he can’t leave,” the lady adds.

Master looks up at Little Piyo, and the creature nuzzles him with the tip of its beak. “...Is that so?”

The lady pouts again and tries to shoo it away. “But I can take Little Piyo’s place! I can even imitate its call!” she insists, upset. And she lets out a deafening cry that perfectly matches Little Piyo’s formidable size.

Master freezes for a moment, then doubles over with laughter. Everyone follows suit.



AFTER returning Little Piyo to the forest those many years before, Master mounted his horse and rode away without even a backward glance, seemingly unaffected. To see him, someone I considered my little brother, acting so mature was weird. We were both thirteen then, and he had prioritized Little Piyo’s life over his own wants and desires.

The Drewetts weren’t known for being close or comforting, and though that might be normal for nobility, their dynamic was totally unlike that of my own family. If Master noticed the difference, he never mentioned it, yet he always broke into a childish smile whenever Mother or Father praised him, a smile he never showed his real parents.

And while he maintained that cool and noble appearance that he felt was expected of him, he also somehow seemed very helpless. I think that day in the forest was the first time I felt the strong desire to aid and support him.



“WE’LL come again in spring.”

“Piyo!”

With a final pat from Master, Little Piyo departs toward the heart of the wood. As it takes flight once more, Master doesn’t look guarded or tense. Instead, he seems relaxed as he rubs his face against the lady’s, who is chirping happily in a manner identical to Little Piyo.

My once serious and stubborn master smiles gently at his unusual wife. Perhaps he’s no longer as manly, but who can blame him when he has a little chick that he doesn’t have to relinquish to the forest? As for me, I get to watch over the pair as they slowly learn to become husband and wife.

“All right, let’s move on already. We need to get to our next stop before nightfall!”

And that may be the most interesting of all.

Side Story: This Place Is Nice and Warm

MY lord husband has the day off, so we're taking a stroll together.

In his company, I'm allowed to venture farther into the garden than when by myself. Usually, I'm to remain within seeing distance of the house.

"Looks like things have improved a lot since our last walk," he observes.

Our household employs an old man as the gardener, and he maintains only the front garden and the sections visible to visitors because my lord husband isn't otherwise interested in the appearance of the grounds.

There's a forestlike area at the very back of the property, and I asked my lord husband if we can explore it, but he had said no. But then my lord husband hired the man's grandson to start taking care of it, so we can explore it. I watched them work every day, and the grandfather gives me candy sometimes. Besides, I know forests well, so I can guide my lord husband now that it's okay!

"Yes! My lord! That's retic grass."

"Yes, I remember seeing it last time as well. I didn't know it had a name..."

"It does. Retic grass is bitter. And that's a gagi-gagi flower over there. It's salty."

"O-Oh?"

When the old man asked why I wanted to enter the area, I said that it rather resembles the woods, which I like, so he's made it look even more like a forest. Aside from carving out a small walking path, he's left all the leaves and branches untouched.

My lord husband holds my hand as I show him various plants.

"That's nigirary ivy. It has thorns so it hurts when you bite into it, and it also has a stinging taste—"

"Stop, stop, stop, what?! Isn't that poisonous?! How do you know what these

weeds taste like?!”

The Monster King tried all types of plants in the forest, but I’ve not tried as many since becoming Abigail. “Because I was the Monster King!” I answer.

There are still so many flowers and plants cultivated by the old man that I don’t know.

“O-Oh, I see. Erm... I guess you’ve not eaten any since you became Abigail, right?”

“I do sometimes!”

“No, you’re not allowed to anymore! Understand?!”

Why does he look so agitated?

Oh! “Tabitha is calling!” I hear Tabitha’s voice! She’s calling me! My hearing is good! I need to go now!

“O-Oy, wait up! Your legs! I can see your legs! Don’t hike up your skirt like that!”



TABITHA was calling us to teatime. Tea and snacks are waiting on the terrace overlooking the beautiful flowerbeds tended by the old grandfather. *I wonder what’s for tea today. Cookies are yummy, wobbly milk jellies too, but oh! Perhaps it’ll be pudding... But what’s this?!*

“Tabitha, Tabitha! Is this yellow thing pudding? And what’s this white part, and that red one? Strawberry? Are there strawberries in this?”

“My lady.”

“Oh!”

I’m bouncing in my chair, which won’t do. That’s bad etiquette. My lord husband, seated next to me, is hiding his face in his hands. I sit up straight and adjust my posture. Tabitha tells me the dish is called trifle. Trifle!

The dish is served in round glass bowls small enough to fit in my palm. Two neat rows of strawberries line the glass, the fruit cut to reveal white flesh edged in red. And there are additional layers of white, light yellow, and yellow. The

yellow part...is cake! I am certain it's sponge cake!

I scoop the large whole strawberry on the very top into my mouth. How tasty!

Textures fluffy and moist mix on my tongue. The cake is so soft that it melts into the cream. And the strawberries are juicy and sweet and sour! *Maybe I'll melt into cream too...*

"Is this her first time trying fresh cream...? It's milk, isn't it?" my lord husband asks Tabitha, and she nods.

Milk! Milk comes from cows. I know that. It can be used to make butter too. I had butter for the first time when I came to the Noel manse. Butter is so yummy, so cows are just amazing.

"Fresh cream is a little rich, so you shouldn't have too much, my lady. But I'm glad you like it," says Tabitha.

I peer at the bottom of the glass bowl to ensure no trifle has collapsed. It's not rich at all.

"Abigail, you like strawberries, right? Here." My lord husband spoons the large strawberry atop his trifle and holds it out to me. How nice of him to let me have his whole strawberry! And how tasty!

He must be very kind.



ON my way home from work, I stop by a popular candy store a subordinate told me about. I don't enjoy sweets, so the occasion is probably my first time ever setting foot in a confectionery.

"Master, why do you seem more tired now than when you left work?" Rodney's grin from where he sits opposite me in the carriage is too loud.

I can't help it; I never knew sweetshops were such overwhelming places.

"You were all excited too!"

"That's because..."

I don't tell him that I thought it would please Abigail, yet his smile widens anyway.

I've purchased an ornate gold tin filled with colorful syrup-filled candies. Abigail probably won't be impressed by the packaging, but I can just imagine her expression when she opens it.

Although my wife is usually stoic and doesn't smile much, when she sights delicious food, her eyes alight with a glow. And when she tastes it, the corner of her lips twitch slightly. And that's—

The mansion is strangely noisy as we arrive home.

"...Huh? Is she missing again?"

Abigail has apparently fallen ill and gone into hiding, much like when she first came to us. The first time, if I recall correctly, she hid in a corner of the room, then moved into the bathroom attached to the master suite.

The servants inform me that she was last seen thirty minutes prior, so I join the search party immediately, not even bothering to change out of my work attire. I check the gardener's small toolshed at the back of the property and the storeroom next to the kitchen, then finally find her in the closet in my room. She's squeezed herself into a nook, her thin body curled in a ball. *Why is she here in my room, anyway?*

"What's wrong, Abigail?"

"...My stomach hurts," she replies in a frail voice. She makes no move to emerge. "I just need to be here a little while. I'm fine."

"You should rest in bed, Abigail." I glimpse her golden eyes within the dimness.

"But..."

"I bought candies for you, rainbow candies filled with sweet syrup. You can eat them once you feel better, all right? Now come here, Abigail."

"Rainbow candies." She reaches out timidly and I grab her hand, dragging her into my arms. She nuzzles into my shoulder, and I feel the tension seep from her body.

"I'll call a doctor. Do you know why your stomach hurts?"

Rodney opens the door to Abigail's bedroom, and I carry her inside. I feel her

shaking her head against my neck.

“What did you eat today?”

“Breakfast, then lunch, and...”

Rodney lifts the bed covers and I gently set her down.

“The old grandfather’s cookies, and...”

“Yes?”

“Snacks, and...”

“H-Huh?” *The cookies weren’t part of the snacks...?*

“Smoked chicken from the chef... Then, there’s a silverberry tree in the back garden, so...”

Is she a cat begging for food from everyone?!

Strands of hair have fallen across her cheek, so I tuck them behind her ear. As my fingers brush her face, I can’t help but caress it... She rubs her cheek against my hand in return, and suddenly, I see the corners of her lips twitch, just a little.

“...Rodney.”

“Yes?”

“Isn’t my wife too cute?”

“You’re truly a fool, Master.”

That’s because my hand is enough to soothe her and make her smile.

How can I not love someone like this?

“Abigail, you’re not allowed to eat from the silverberry tree.”

“Huh?!”

Her gorgeous golden eyes widen as she stares at me, and my own stomach hurts from trying to quash my laughter. I see Rodney doing the same, his knees shaking.

My wife is really too cute!



Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illustration Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

By Kiri Komori Illustration Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



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● AUTHOR
Suzume Kirisaki
● ARTIST
Cosmic

I Guess This
DRAGON
Who Lost Her
EGG to Disaster
Is My Mom Now



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