



Riko Saiki

Illust.
Baracan

Disowned but Not Disheartened!

*Life Is Good with
Overpowered Magic*



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The trouble
never ends once
a young lady
of the countryside
finds herself at
the noble
academy!

Yuin Sacourt
Fezgahn

Member of the Knights of Obsidian.
Trusted with maintaining the peace
within the royal capital.

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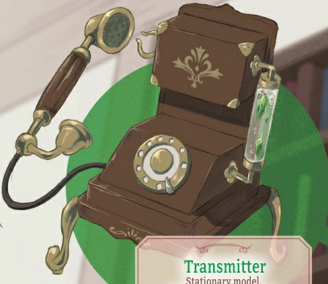
Portal

Though sizes vary, portals can be used to transport almost anything instantly over long distances.



Transmitter

Stationary model. Not easily carried around, but can be used to communicate over long distances.



**Colnesia
Bornir Aspozat**

Affectionately known as "Colny."
Lera's childhood friend, older than her by one year.



Toilet & Bath

Disposes of water and waste via magical dispersal instead of a traditional plumbing system.



Magic Lock

Places a constant barrier over a door. If anyone without permission attempts to open it, a mechanism will trigger, activating a camera and microphone.



Ornithic Magic Tool

A voice recorder that fits in the palm of your hand. Can only replay recorded audio, but can fly to designated recipients. A very popular plaything among certain researchers.



Brooch

Made with a miniature camera installed, in case of emergencies. Records and replays both video and audio.



**Tafelina Lowell
Lera Duval**

Reincarnated from another world. Specialized education in the countryside left her with more muscles than brains. Oldest daughter of House Duval, but was disowned at a young age.

**With knowledge of her previous life,
Lera has no shortage of inspiration!**

Forced to
improvise on a
time limit,
**Lera modifies
her brooch!**



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Prologue

The mansion was abuzz. My daughter, who had turned three years old just two days prior, was bedridden with a fever. According to the physician, her body's mana was destabilizing. They said this was a rare occurrence among children of noble houses.

The servants all looked gloomy, and my wife wept without end. The successor of the house, our eldest son, remained at her side in silence.

"Why? Why did this have to happen to Tafelina?" she moaned.

All she had done was cry since our daughter had fallen ill. Frankly, I found it dreadful.

"Would you quit crying already?"

"How could you?! Don't you care at all that our daughter is suffering?"

I grimaced. My marriage to this woman was a political one, and I had never felt anything resembling affection for her. Naturally, I felt the same about our children; they had been made purely out of obligation. I thought my wife understood this.

"Ohh, Tafelina, Tafelina..."

We had given birth to our daughter at my wife's insistence. I imagine that she really wanted another son. It was common for families to have a second son, just in case something happened to the first. She had been hoping to strengthen the position of our house, probably because being unloved by her husband was too much to bear for a lady of the nobility.

What she gave birth to instead was a daughter, and now that daughter was at risk of dying. My wife had fainted on the spot when we were told to brace for the worst if the girl's fever didn't subside. Destabilized mana could be fatal, and there was no known way to prevent it. Researching a cure in itself was said to be unfeasible because cases were so rare.

Three days had passed since our daughter's fever first broke out. I didn't think someone her age could take much more. It seemed she was a goner. But I had another daughter, from another woman. She was much cuter than this one, and I planned to take her in once she was old enough to attend the academy.

Illegitimate children weren't permitted to attend the noble academy, but there's no obstacle without a work-around. It wasn't anything I couldn't solve with my family's influence.

My train of thought was interrupted by shrieks coming from my daughter's room.

"What?! What happened?!" I asked a servant who had just rushed into our room. However, I didn't get any useful responses. The servant merely trembled and kept repeating, "The young miss, it's the young miss."

I wasn't going to get anywhere with them, so I rushed past the servant as they collapsed and headed to my daughter's room. What could have happened? If my daughter had passed away then the servants were supposed to say so. I had made sure they were prepared for the possibility.

When I reached her room, my small daughter was sitting up in her bed, almost as though she were completely unaffected by the fever that had been ravaging her. But...was it really my daughter? Her previously chestnut hair was now a bluish silver and she looked at me with eyes that had shifted from brown to a deep blue. Who would've thought such a small change in colors would make her look like a completely different person?

I stood in the doorway, at a loss for words when I heard the screams of my wife from behind me.

"Wh-Who is that?! What happened to Tafelina?!"

Apparently she didn't see the girl in the bed as our daughter.

"An abomination..." our eldest son whispered as he peeked in from behind my wife.

In the midst of the panicked clamor, I was the only one capable of deciding what to do about her.

“Get that *thing* as far away from this house as possible!”

Chapter One: The Royal Capital Is Full of Danger

“There we go!” I said as I hopped down from the top of a big tree. Needless to say, I didn’t forget to create a breeze to soften my fall. At my feet was a large primate monster, a Peylon baboon. It was my biggest catch that day.

“Heh heh, now Lord Peylon is definitely going to recognize my talents!”

After all, I had slain a Peylon baboon all by myself. Those monsters usually took a group of people, but I’d killed it *solo*. How could my skills not be acknowledged after this?

“Nope.”

“*Huh?!?*”

In front of me was a large man, crossing his arms and furrowing his brow. He was Lord Kend, Earl of Peylon. He was overall an angular man—even his haircut had a sharp outline. His face was stern too, fitting for the ruler of a unique domain like Peylon.

When I had returned to his residence, Castle Varchudar, to report my successful hunt I was shown directly to his office. I was a hundred percent certain he would’ve already heard what I’d done and would finally see things my way! No luck. But I wasn’t ready to give up just yet!

“C’mon! It’s a Peylon baboon. And I soloed—uh, slew it without any assistance!”

Not many people can take down a monster like that. That’s why there was such a fuss when I dragged it through the plaza. But in spite of my protests, Lord Peylon wouldn’t give in.

“I’ll give you permission to enter Layer Five some time in the near future,” he said. “But not now.”

“Why *not* now?”

I glared at Lord Peylon and he shrank back a little. If that was all it took to intimidate him, I wished he would just hurry up and give me permission. By which I mean, permission to enter Layer Five of the Mystic Forest. *In the near future* was pretty vague.

But the next time Lord Peylon spoke, he changed the subject on me.

“Lera, how old are you?”

“Hm? Twelve? But I’ll be thirteen not long from now.”

“I guessed as much.”

It was May at the time. My birthday would be at the end of July, the month after the next. If he knew the answer, then why’d he bother asking me about it?

Oh, by the way, Lera is my name. My full name is pretty darn long: Tafelina Lowell Lera Duval. But in Peylon, everyone knew me as Lera.

“Lera, you’re a daughter of House Duval.”

“Pretty much.”

I didn’t actually feel like a daughter of House Duval. I was raised out here with Lord Peylon, and his domain made me the person I am.

Peylon was in the northernmost part of the Kingdom of Ozeria. In Peylon’s eastern end was the monster-inhabited Mystic Forest, which was a constant source of danger and what set it apart from the rest of the kingdom. Maybe that was why everyone in the region was so dedicated to getting stronger. This was a land of hot-blooded warriors...or to put it another way, a community of meatheads.

There were many people who put their developed muscles to use and slaughtered monsters. They were known as monster hunters and made a living by killing monsters in the Mystic Forest and selling their parts.

I had been pleading with the earl over a matter related to the Mystic Forest. Around the entrance was Layer One, and as you went farther in you’d pass through Layer Two and Layer Three. I was only allowed to go to Layer Four. To go deeper—that is, to Layer Five—required permission directly from Lord

Peylon.

So I took down a Peylon baboon all by myself. Even killing one as a group was enough to get you permission to enter Layer Five, but Lord Peylon just had to drag his feet...

“As the daughter of an earl, you’ll have to enter the royal capital’s noble academy once you turn thirteen,” he went on.

“What’s that?”

Is it tasty?

“It’s an academy attended by the children of Ozerian nobles. Withdrawal isn’t permitted except under the most extraordinary circumstances. Louie, my successor, went there.”

That doesn’t sound tasty.

That “Louie” that Lord Peylon mentioned was the earl’s adopted son and like an older brother to me. At the moment he was in another domain, studying for the day when he would succeed his father’s position. In Peylon you could learn all sorts of things about monsters, but next to nothing about running a domain.

So Louie went there, huh? Now that you mention it, he was only around during the summer because he was always in the royal capital or wherever. So that was because he was attending the academy. Still, every child of the nobility? Ooh, that doesn’t sound good at all.

“So let’s *make* some extraordinary circumstances,” I suggested. “I’m too busy hunting in the Mystic Forest, so I must withdraw.”

Now it was my turn to get glared at.

“Jokes won’t do you any good here, Lera.”

I wasn’t joking.

“I’ve already got your enrollment certificate. Good thing I changed your address.”

I never asked him to do that.

But if Lord Peylon told me to go, then I guess I had to go.

I was born in the royal capital. My birth parents were from House Duval. Their domain bordered Peylon to the west and was famous for producing wares made with monster materials.

Why was I in Peylon then? See, when I was three years old I came down with a really nasty fever. Once I recovered, I was sent away to be raised in Peylon. They took a young child coming back from a deadly illness and strapped her to the first horse that could take her out of town. They didn't even bother with a carriage.

I can vaguely recall flying along at an absurd speed. I can definitely recall throwing up a few times and generally being miserable. My birth family never said a word to me after that. They didn't even bother to make sure I survived the trip, so I guess I could have died for all they cared.

It wasn't because of my fever that I had been disowned, however. It was because my hair and eyes suddenly changed during it. So the story goes, at least. I've been told that before my fever I had chestnut hair and hazel eyes.

This was called "pigment shift" and was a rare phenomenon among noble children. It involved a sudden increase in mana accompanied by a change in hair and eye color. Apparently my birth parents couldn't accept a daughter like that and cast me off to a place that could handle my buffed mana capacity.

At the time, Peylon had already established a magic research facility in the name of exterminating monsters more efficiently with magic. The facility was the undisputed leader when it came to researching magic and mana. It just so happened that my father and the earl of Peylon were also related, albeit distantly.

If I was just gonna get sent out to Peylon anyway, then I wish I had been born into Lord Peylon's family from the start. The earl was surprised when a toddler suddenly showed up on his doorstep, but he accepted me warmly. Just like he'd said earlier, he did a nice, thorough job changing my address and dealing with all those other formalities. Buuut...it's also because he did all that that I found myself having to go to that academy.

“You don’t look happy.”

“Well of course I’m not!”

The two of us were bouncing down the road in a carriage. We had hit the road the moment Peylon’s annual hunting festival in August had finished up. I tried to protest, but do you know what Lord Peylon did? He *threw* me into the carriage! Can you believe it? He said that, as my guardian, he was going to see me off to the academy *personally*.

Thanks. I appreciate it.

I have a secret I’ve never shared with anyone. I have memories from before I was born. Memories from a past life. I was a woman born in a small island nation known as Japan, where I lived a normal life. I don’t even remember what my name was back then, but I remember what a convenient world it was. But I realized I could use magic to make this world a convenient one.

If nothing else, I was proud of my mana pool. After all, it was enough to have caused the pigment shift in me. Working with the institute, I’ve invented new technologies and unprecedented magic tools!

Oh, magic tools. Those are any sort of tool imbued with magic. I’d say they’re a lot like the electric appliances of my past life, except they’re powered by mana instead of electricity.

Also, it’s in part thanks to my past memories that I was able to grow up happy and healthy even though my parents disowned me. In my past life I had a nice, normal family. Thank you, mom and dad of that world. It’s thanks to the love you showed me back then that I’m here now.

Suddenly, the carriage jolted and I felt the shock directly from my seat.

“Whoa!”

“Ow!”

Ooh, my butt hurts. This is why I hate carriages.

The carriages of this world did nothing to absorb vibrations. Perhaps they had never heard of suspension. It seemed I would have to pay another visit to the

institute.

“The roads are about due for repairs,” Lord Peylon said.

“The roads are just about all managed by the royal palace, right?” I asked.

Local rulers couldn’t just mess with the roads without permission because of that. All they could do was send word requesting that something be done when problems arose. But roads were always in need of repairs, so a priority hierarchy was inevitably formed. Fortunately, it seemed Peylon was high up on that list. We always got our roads fixed pretty quickly.

Still, carriages? I sure wish we had a faster and comfier way to get around.

“You haven’t been to the royal capital in some time, have you, Lera? I bet that’s exciting,” the earl said, interrupting my train of thought.

“Not really. I don’t remember it at all.”

I only lived in the capital until I was three. And I don’t know if the return of my past life’s memories caused this, but I can barely remember those few years I spent in the capital.

From an envelope I removed the thick piece of paper that was my letter of acceptance. Illuminated by the sunlight filtering through the window, I looked it over. It said that the matriculation of me, Tafelina Duval, had been approved. It also had the name of the academy and some people’s names. I assumed those belonged to the headmaster and vice headmaster or something.

“The academy is also attended by the Aspozat siblings. It looks like you’ll be spending the next few years with them.”

“Really?!”

“Of course. Those three are all children of the nobility. Actually, the older brother, Ville...Winville graduated last June.”

Ville wouldn’t be there, but I could still be with the next oldest son, Loksusad (also known as Loks) and the oldest daughter Colnesia (also known as Colny). Loks was two years older than me and Colny one year, which meant I would spend the next five years with her!

Those siblings belong to House Aspozat, which was located to the southeast

of Peylon. Lord Peylon's younger sister, Viltheoshila (or just Sheila), married into House Aspozat and gave birth to all three siblings.

Since I had been disowned, Sheila had done a lot for me. She was more of a mother to me than my actual mother. Her children and I became friends because they always came with her when she visited the Peylon Earldom. Childhood friends, you might call them.

Ville was dauntless and Loks was devious, but neither of them had the will to win an argument against Colny. Like their mother, all three of them were plenty attractive. All three siblings had gotten their black hair and green eyes from their mother, and Colny had also inherited her mother's wavy hair.

Naturally, all three siblings were very strong. Ville excelled in pure melee combat, Loks was skilled at imbuing his blade with magic, and Colny's dual mastery of swordplay and magic was virtually unrivaled. I guess it's only natural when they've got Peylon blood in them.

I, by the way, have never bested Colny in a sword fight, but she has never bested me in a contest of magic.

As we were both girls, I got along with Colny the best. Knowing that she was already attending the academy was super reassuring.

"Now I'm kind of looking forward to reaching the royal capital," I said.

"That's good," Lord Peylon replied cheerfully.

Was he really that excited to send me off to the academy? Of course he was. Only under exceptional circumstances were young nobles exempt from attendance. He probably wanted me to enjoy the life of a normal young lady.

But we all have our limits and living as a normal young lady was beyond mine. Still, I didn't want to cause trouble for Lord Peylon, so I obeyed and agreed to attend the academy. Peylon and Aspozat were both houses to which I owed a lot. It's fair to say that I don't know where I'd be without them. I wanted to pay them back as much as I possibly could. And not just *eventually*, but at every opportunity.

After that, it was my dream to travel the world. Even in my previous life, traveling the world was practically a pipe dream. Going abroad wasn't easy

when you barely spoke any English. But now I had magic! And with my extraordinary supply of mana, I was sure I could make it work. I could make like an automatic translator or something. With magic, even the toughest challenges could be overcome!

But for the time being, the biggest problem facing me was the noble academy. In light novels and whatnot there's always bullying among the young ladies, but I figured I'd be fine. After all, I was from the far northern domain of Peylon. Maybe I'd be called a bumpkin? Would fighting back be frowned upon? By that I mean fighting physically and magically. Maybe as long as I didn't leave any scars.

"Lera, that's a terrifying look on your face," Lord Peylon noted. "What are you thinking about?"

Why did he have to be so intuitive at the worst of times?

Our carriage trip from the Peylon Earldom to the royal capital took about a month. You could usually make the journey in about ten days, but we took three times that. Why? Because we stopped at every domain along the way. Lord Peylon rarely left his own domain, so when he did, he had to go around paying all sorts of social calls.

And we didn't just pop in for visits. We'd stop for luncheons and dinner parties, then it would get late and we'd spend the night here and another there. All in all, we took thirty days for a trip that could be covered in less than a week on horseback. Well, to be fair, that's if you run the horse to death, so nobody makes the journey that quickly unless it's an urgent matter.

Then I remembered something. I went at that pace when I was sent away from the royal capital. So getting rid of me was an urgent matter. Huh. Maybe I was just thinking like that because I was so tired of the carriage shaking.

But the trip wasn't all bad. We made regular stops to rest, and because I knew how to ride a horse I was allowed to borrow a mount from our escorts during isolated stretches of the road.

After our long journey, we finally found ourselves before the royal capital. And I found myself in a very, very bad mood.

“Cheer up already, Lera,” Lord Peylon told me.

“How can I cheer up when I have to wear this?!”

The source of my displeasure was the unfamiliar dress I was in. Back home I was always in the clothes I would wear when going to the Mystic Forest. I couldn't help it if I found the corset and dress to be suffocating.

I had been forced to put it on earlier that morning. It was a dark brown gown meant for traveling and its hem stopped just above my ankles. It was an admittedly practical design, short on lace and frills.

“When did you even get this dress?”

“Oh, that? Sheila had it prepared earlier this summer. She said it would be necessary.”

“Sheila, you backstabber!”

To think, Sheila would go around dressed like a man when she visited the Peylon Earldom. She was a striking beauty, and not even wearing men's clothing was enough to prevent her from turning heads. I was never able to wrap my head around the idea that she and that blocky man were siblings.

And she still went behind my back and prepared a dress for me.

“She knew you'd be upset about it, so that's why we kept it a secret,” Lord Peylon explained. “And it's not going to be easy getting by without it.”

“Mrghm. I get that...”

The first thing on our agenda was to pay a visit to the noble academy. We still had time before the matriculation ceremony, but we had to do things like see the dorm beforehand. Because it was a noble academy in the royal capital, I understood that I couldn't just go in my usual casual outfits, but I still wasn't happy about it.

The carriage continued down the road, and eventually we entered the capital.

“So this is it...” I mumbled as I gazed out the window.

The capital of Ozeria was surrounded by tall, sturdy stone walls. It looked like something out of the background of a video game. The streets were paved with

stone and looked quite nice. The buildings facing the major thoroughfares were all four stories high.

“You don’t remember it?” Lord Peylon asked me.

“Not one bit.”

The first time I left the grounds of my house was the day I was disowned. Considering my age, of course I didn’t remember much. After all, I was only three.

Oh, that’s right.

“Is it true we don’t have to visit House Duval?” I asked.

“It is. I’m your official guardian. Quinevan, your father, grumbled about it, but I put my foot down regarding this matter.”

What a relief that was. I didn’t want to go to a house I had been kicked out of.

The people of House Peylon rarely left their domain, so they didn’t have a residence in the royal capital. When they spent time in the capital, they would sleep over at the residence of House Aspozat or in the royal palace. You see, House Peylon was indispensable to the Kingdom of Ozeria. Not only did they keep the Mystic Forest in check, but the monster material trade was a big source of tax revenue.

This time, House Aspozat was offering their hospitality.

“And it’s not just me staying there, but you as well, Lera.”

“Okaaay.”

Even though I was new to the royal capital, I wasn’t too worried. House Aspozat trained their servants well; I knew they’d be kind to relatives of their lord.

After passing through the city’s main gates, we continued south along the main thoroughfare. When we reached a large four-way intersection, I looked east and saw an enormous building in the distance. That, apparently, was the royal palace.

“Before the royal capital was constructed, that spot was designated in advance as the site of the palace,” Lord Peylon said. “The surrounding areas were divided up and given to the nobility for their manors. The other side of the city was reserved for the common folk.”

So it was planned out from the start? That explains why the streets are so straight.

“The buildings of the royal capital are neatly arranged, but be careful: that actually makes it easier to get lost.”

“Okaaay,” I sang, gracefully brushing him off. Me getting lost? The idea was laughable. Even in the Mystic Forest, I had never gotten lost. I was confident in my sense of direction.

Buildings were packed together closely on both sides of the street. Dozens of other streets intersected with it, all at right angles. It was a grid plan—something I had always thought of as being an eastern thing, but this was another world after all.

Could this mean I’m not the only person reincarnated from that world?! It wouldn’t be that weird. Lord Peylon’s domain is called a “community of meatheads.” No way someone from here came up with that.

Our carriage continued southward for long enough that I began to wonder if we were going to pass through the southern gate. But just before that happened, we turned east. We continued along that road for a bit and then on the right, the side closer to the city walls, there was a tall metal fence.

Could this be the academy?

And then the carriage stopped.

“We’ve reached the academy gates,” Lord Peylon said. “We’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“All right.”

At last, the academy. Before me was the front gate, a splendid piece of metalwork. Except it was closed.

"This way," Lord Peylon said as he opened a service entrance to the side.

Are we really allowed to just go in like this?

Extending from the gate was a well maintained stone path elegantly lined with flowers. We entered the first building we saw, and Lord Peylon began talking to the person at the front desk.

"So the headmaster isn't present?" the earl asked.

"Our deepest apologies," replied the person at the desk. "The headmaster was called to the royal palace on urgent business."

"Hmm. Well, thank you. Sorry, but do you mind if I show her to the girls' dorm?"

"Go right ahead. Shall I show you the way?"

"No need. I know where it is. We're fine as long as we don't go in, right?"

"Indeed."

Lord Peylon walked back over to me.

"I'm afraid it seems the headmaster isn't here right now. I wanted to ask him to look after you during your time here."

"You don't need to worry about me."

I wasn't going to do anything that would require the headmaster to get involved. But Lord Peylon didn't buy it.

"Every time you say that, I find myself with a very good reason to worry."

Can you believe this man?

Our only business at the academy was seeing the dorm. After that, our next stop would be the Aspozat residence. The dorm was made of brick and was rather eye-catching. It must have been pretty old too, because ivy covered its walls.

So I'm gonna spend the next six years in that place? Too bad I couldn't get a glimpse inside, I thought as we returned to the front gate. We got back into our carriage and headed east for a bit before turning northward. We reached the

street that ended at the royal palace and headed east again. House Aspozat's manor was on a street not far from the royal palace.

"Right near the palace. I guess that's only natural for a marquess," I said.

"The Aspozat line goes a long way back," Lord Peylon replied.

He had a point, but you could also say the same about House Peylon. Sheila wouldn't have been able to marry Lord Aspozat otherwise.

The manor's design was similar to every other building in the capital, letting it blend right in. Even though I had only seen them on TV in my past life, I loved buildings like these. At the exact moment our carriage stopped, the front door opened. Had servants come out to greet us?

"Uncle! Lera! Welcome to the royal capital!"

Nope. It was Colny. Behind her were her brothers, Loks and Ville. She ran up to us with a big smile, her wavy black hair fluttering in the breeze. She was just as pretty as the last time I had seen her.

"You didn't visit earlier this summer, so I guess that means it's been a year, huh? It's good to see you, Colny," Lord Peylon said.

"I'll remind you I'm already a young lady attending the academy. I can't make a habit of going to that community of meatheads," Colny replied.

"Th-That so?"

Lord Peylon looked saddened to hear that from his own dear niece. But Colny was doing it on purpose. That little devil.

She smiled and turned to me. "It's been too long! How have you been, Lera?"

"Fantastic. But I'm tired after going around in this dress."

"You better get accustomed to it. If you go around the royal capital dressed like you do back home, you'll quickly find yourself arrested and thrown in jail."

"I will?!"

What a horrible place this must be if I can get arrested for that. I knew I shouldn't have come here.

Then I heard laughter from behind Colny's back.

“Lera, she’s lying to you,” Ville said. “Colny, Lera’s the gullible type; you shouldn’t trick her.”

“Huh? She was lying?”

“Our mean-spirited little sister enjoys teasing the people she likes,” Loks added.

“Oh, I see.”

According to Lord Peylon, Ville had just graduated from the academy. Now eighteen years old, he had long, straight black hair that he kept loosely tied back. I always wondered if his long bangs didn’t get in the way.

He was dressed like a gentleman, but I was certain he was also a sight to behold when not so dressed up. I’m referring to his muscles—his skill with magic was nothing to scoff at, but his ability to mow down monsters with a greatsword earned him respect even in Peylon.

The younger brother, Loks, had moderately long hair as well, wavier than Ville’s but not quite as much as Colny’s. While he used a lighter blade than Ville, he made up for their gap in strength in a few ways—namely, buffing himself and enchanting his weapons with magic.

He hunted by thoroughly researching a monster and targeting weaknesses with pinpoint precision. He’d even stalk them for hours for just the right moment to strike. Loks was devious—the last person you wanted for an enemy. One time, a group was trying to ship monsters they had poached in Peylon, but the fiendish Loks laid a trap and caught them all in one fell swoop.

Just like her brothers, sole sister Colny also enjoyed hunting in the Mystic Forest. She had the skill to attack from any range with magic and blade, and liked to craft accessories with the materials from her prey. Fangs and bones could be used to make something surprisingly pretty. She was also working with the institution to find ways to make cosmetics out of monster materials. She had already produced lipstick and eyeshadow, which were being sold in stores.

Upon being called a liar, Colny puffed her cheeks with indignation.

“Oh, Ville, what fun is there if you give the game away immediately? And you, Loks, how can you call me mean-spirited?”

“Well, it doesn’t change that you’re our dear little sister. Right, Loks?”

“Right. But that doesn’t make it okay to play tricks on Lera.”

These three sure get along well.

Lord and Lady Aspozat were both absent, so it fell to Ville to play host for us. But first, he and Lord Peylon had to deal with a minor hassle. Apparently my guardianship was going to be transferred to House Aspozat for the duration of my stay in the royal capital.

While they talked in the drawing room, Colny, Loks, and I sat a brief distance away. Watching Ville, I could tell he had mellowed out a lot in a very brief period. I almost couldn’t believe that he had been running rampant about the Mystic Forest not too long ago.

I couldn’t help but notice that they said some very interesting things during their conversation.

“Generally speaking, I can’t pull myself away from my domain for too long. I’m counting on you to look after Lera while she’s here in the royal capital,” Lord Peylon said.

“My parents made the same request of me,” Ville responded. “I’ll do everything I can here, and Loks and Colny will both be at the academy. You have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s a relief. Now, have you heard anything about the other daughter?”

“Just that they’ve managed to buy her acceptance into the academy.”

“They paid the headmaster?”

“No. As I understand, the vice headmaster brute-forced it through.”

“How foolish. Well, not much we can do. Once an acceptance letter has been sent out, there’s no taking it back. She’s still thirteen and hasn’t made her societal debut, so I take it you don’t know her face?”

“Supposedly, a girl who fits her description has been appearing at other house’s tea parties and private garden parties. But, unsurprisingly, she hasn’t been brought anywhere near us.”

“They keep us at a distance, even if we are members of the same faction.”

“Most likely because Lera’s been living in your domain.”

Hm? Did I hear my name?

“Never mind them, Lera,” Colny said to grab my attention. “Tell me all about life in Peylon. Have you caught any good monsters?”

Is that really the first thing you want to talk about? Well, it’s very like you, Colny.

What she meant by “good monsters” was anything that had parts that could be turned into an accessory. She was very dedicated to her craft.

“Nothing outside the usual,” I told her. “But I did get some fine threads this year.”

“Really? Do you mean...”

“I had it processed and brought a few bolts of cloth along with me. I’ll give you some later.”

“Oh, thank you, Lera!”

The threads spun by spider-variety monsters made incredible silk and were popular among the nobles in the royal capital. Spiders would form contracts with humans and spin threads in exchange for food. A win-win situation, you might call it.

I had a spider of my own. Its name was Al—short for Albion. It was a super rare variety with a pure white body and icy blue eyes. White spiders had low survival rates and needed human assistance to get by, which made them easy to form contracts with.

Red eyes were normal among these eight-eyed friends of ours. Anything else made them of a rare variety, which were even weaker than the usual white spider. But the threads of rare varieties were said to make the best spider silk. The cloth I had brought with me was some of the finest Al had ever produced. I was certain it would suit the tastes of a girl of the royal capital like Colny.

After that, she asked me all about that summer’s hunting. She wanted to know what was the most common prey, the biggest catch, who killed what, et

cetera.

“Oh, and the pearls this year are really nice,” I said at some point in our conversation.

“Is that so? Did you bring any?”

“Of course. I brought some raw pearls. That way you can use them in necklaces or bracelets or whatever you want.”

At Layer Four of the Mystic Forest, there were pearls. Hard to believe, right? Pearls in a forest. And that year’s pearls were small, but all had a fine shape and color, which proved to be much to Colny’s liking.

For the entire first full day after our arrival, I slept. Even I was exhausted after that long of a journey. But the second day, I put on a hat and a white dress meant for strolls and went for a walk around the royal capital. Thankfully, this outfit didn’t require strangulation by corset.

And so I bounded out of the Aspozat residence, only to quickly find myself totally lost.

Wheeeere am I?!

I wanted to punch the Lera of a few hours prior. Colny had been all worried and asked me “Will you be fine by yourself?” and told her I’d be a-okay! And now I was lost! L-O-S-T! What happened to that sense of direction I was so proud of?

There *were* spells that could be used easily to figure out one’s location. But when I first arrived, Colny warned me that I couldn’t use magic in the royal capital without permission. There were magic sensors placed everywhere and unpermitted magic users were caught immediately. Not only were those sensors developed at the magic research institute in Peylon, they were *my* idea! I never thought I’d see the day where my own tools were used against me.

“What do I do?” I asked myself.

I hadn’t crossed the walls, so I could at least be certain I was still within the royal capital. There were lots of large buildings, so I was probably close to the

royal palace. The Aspozat residence was right by the palace, so I should've been able to find my back once I found the main road. But that was the tricky part.

"I don't get it. Why can't I find the main road?"

I should have been able to just head straight one way, but because the scenery in every direction looked the same. I couldn't tell if I was getting farther from or closer to my goal. And after walking around so much, my feet were killing me.

The shoes I had on were dainty things, completely unlike what I wore back in Peylon. Their soles were thin and did nothing to protect my feet against the stone roads. After all, the shoes of rich young ladies weren't made with walking in mind.

"I don't know who lives here, but I need to rest," I said as I leaned against a wall and sat down. Looking up, I saw an imposing gray building. Its walls ran the length of the entire block, which meant it must have been fairly large. I wondered what it was.

"What are you doing there?" asked a sudden voice.

"Whahuh?!"

I turned my head back down and saw two fine-looking men standing before me. Heartthrobs, you could call them.

One wore a black military uniform with silver embroidery and a mantle. His smooth golden hair shone in the sunlight and his long bangs were oddly alluring. His bright blue eyes didn't escape my notice either. The other had unruly black hair and amber eyes. His uniform was white with gold embroidery.

I was struck by just how *tall* they both were. Though, according to Colny, I was on the tall side for a girl. I hadn't met many girls my age, so I just had to take her word for it, and these guys made me look tiny.

The black-clad one looked at me intently. Or was he just surprised? But why would that be the case? While he stood there, the white-clad one asked me a question.

"Are you perhaps waiting for someone, miss? I'm afraid we might not be able

to look the other way, depending on the circumstances.”

What’s that supposed to mean? They might not be able to look the other way? I don’t get it.

“I got tired, so I decided to rest here,” I said. “Um, where are we?”

“You don’t know?” they responded in unison.

Wasn’t one of them supposed to be frozen with shock? And was it really that surprising that I didn’t know where this was? Maybe it was the sort of place everyone in the royal capital knew about.

My bumpkin upbringing strikes again.

“I only just arrived in the royal capital. Which way is the main thoroughfare?”

“If you go straight down this way, you’ll reach it soon enough,” the white-clad one said, pointing in the direction I had come from. It appeared I was going the wrong way.

This is why I hate towns full of buildings. I’m just fine in the forest.

“That way then. Thank you very much.”

After just a brief rest, I was able to walk again and set to go on my way. Certain that I could make my way back to the Aspozat residence once I found the main road, I began to walk past the two men—but felt a sudden grip around my wrist.

“Hm?”

I didn’t know why, but the black-clad one was grabbing my arm.



“Hey, Yuin, you can’t just grab a girl’s arm like that. Let go of her already.”

The white-clad man lightly hit the black-clad man’s arm, but his grip on my wrist didn’t loosen. Just what was I supposed to make of this situation?

“Umm...”

“Sorry about that! He’s not always like this. Come on, let go already!”

Ah. The white uniform man just whacked the black one upside the head.

“What are you doing?” asked the black-clad man.

“Don’t grumble at me—you’re the one in the wrong!” the white-clad man replied.

“What am I doing that’s wrong?”

“You’re holding on to that girl’s wrist like a vice!”

“... Ah.”

“Ah,” he says as if he just noticed. Wait. Did he just notice? Was he doing it unconsciously?

Really, what was I supposed to make of this situation?

After that, the two apologized and let me use one of their horses. I rode sidesaddle, like a proper lady, but I could’ve ridden normally if I hadn’t been in a dress. I told them I’d be fine by myself, but they insisted on coming along with me. Something about how “making a girl walk home by herself would sully our honor as knights.”

I was put on the same horse as the one in the black uniform, and the one in white rode another horse alongside us. I didn’t understand why they both had to come along.

“I never expected that you might be an acquaintance of *the* Winville Aspozat,” the white-clad one said. I wondered what their relationship was if he was referring to Ville in that way. “Ah, both myself and this brusque fellow were classmates of Winville.” So they were classmates! Then of course they knew Ville. It was all too easy to imagine that man standing out among his peers. “I

knew he had a younger sister, but your hair and eyes don't match. How do you know him?"

Put to it, I wasn't sure how to answer that question. Childhood friends? Distant relatives? At a loss, I ended up simply stating the truth.

"I know him through Lord Peylon."

"Ahh, that uncle on his mother's side."

Oh, thank goodness he recognized the name.

"I was afraid you might be his younger sister. My friend here would be a dead man walking if he had laid his hands on the sister of Winville Aspozat."

Ooh, this white-uniform guy has his sights on Colny? That's a risky endeavor. Unless he's holding back because he's afraid of Ville? Too bad he doesn't see the real danger: Colny herself.

"Have you ever met her?" I asked.

"No, I've only seen her from a distance, but I could tell she's the definition of a beauty! Oh, ah, you're very nice looking as well."

Don't say it like an afterthought.

I realized I was talking with a man of frivolity and decided to mentally refer to him as such.

The journey back sure was taking a long time. I thought for sure we'd be back within minutes. Had I really walked that far?

"Is something up?" Mr. Frivolous asked me. "You're looking around a lot. Oh, are you new to the royal capital? Look Yuin, taking the long way back was worth it after all."

"Excuse me?!" I cried.

Did you just say "long way back?!" I didn't ask for that—just take me back to the manor already!

Perhaps because I put up a fuss, we changed course and took the shortest route back. If only they had done so from the beginning. But I guess beggars

can't be choosers.

Once we reached the Aspozat residence, Mr. Frivolous dismounted and rang the bell. The black-clad man and I stayed atop our horse...for reasons unclear to me.

The door was answered by Yofus, a butler with a charming white beard.

"Hey, I'm from the Knights of the White Summit. We found this young lady had become lost, so we've brought her back to you."

For just a moment, Yofus looked taken aback by Mr. Frivolous's smile.

Yep. That's right, Yofus. A girl my age got lost.

However, Yofus recovered quickly. You couldn't run a noble residence in the royal capital if you let things like that stun you.

"Ah, very good. Thank you for returning her to us safely. Now, the two of you, help the young lady off her horse."

At the butler's directions, two servants came to help me down. But for some reason, the black-clad one turned them down. I watched with confusion as he got off the horse and then helped me off himself.

So he wanted to look out for me until the very end. That was very kind of him, but why wasn't he letting go of my hand? I looked up and saw him staring directly at me. Had I done something strange?

"Ah, a member of the Knights of Obsidian. My lord is not present at the moment, but Master Winville is, so do come inside."

Ooh. Black and white knights, just like their uniforms suggest.

"No need. Well, glad that's taken care of," the black-clad, er, black knight said and turned to me. "Now then, see you again."

"Th-Thank you for helping me," I answered.

Again? Did that man just say "see you again?" I can assure you, I don't plan on getting lost again. There's no way I'll get lost again. Probably.

The black knight got back atop his horse and headed off with Mr. Frivolous.

What an exhausting stroll that had turned out to be. And just when I was

about to put the whole thing behind me, Yofus smiled at me.

“Once again, welcome back young lady,” he said. “We had begun to worry about you. Lord Peylon has been awaiting you for some time.”

Eee! Lecture inbound.

I wanted to run away, but I was even more scared of what might happen if I tried that. In the end, I obediently went along and weathered the storm that was Lord Peylon.

Once I was finally released from the earl’s wrath, Colny and I enjoyed some light afternoon tea before dinner. And by “afternoon tea,” I really mean just tea, no snacks. After all, we wanted to leave room for dinner.

While we had our tea, I told Colny about what had happened, no detail spared.

“... And that’s about it.”

“Did I not tell you not to go out unaccompanied? The royal capital is full of dangers unlike those of the Mystic Forest.”

Too true. I regretted my naive ways. What a scary place the royal capital was if you could get lost so easily. I didn’t see myself taking too many excursions outside. Not that it mattered; for the time being, I had been forbidden from going out on my own.

Cradling her cup in her hands, Colny seemed to remember something.

“Hm, so he was a fine-looking man with blond hair and a black uniform? I imagine that was Yuin from House Fezgahn, the house of a marquess. The man in white with him was most likely Iyale of House Nedon, the house of an earl. Both are from the same class as Ville and graduated earlier this year.”

Oh yeah, Mr. Frivolous was calling him “Yuin.” Wait. Hold on.

“You said he’s related to a marquess. Is someone like that allowed to become a knight? Or is he one of the royal guards?” I asked.

“The royal guards are the Knights of the Golden Lion. You can spot them in an instant because they wear flashy red uniforms with golden embroidery and

ornaments.”

“The royal guards do?”

“It’s said that by being so conspicuous they deter potential criminals. And the royal guards spend most of their time in the palace, around the royal family. They wouldn’t get any respect if they wore simple uniforms.”

So knights have their own troubles to deal with.

“And so that black uniform, that’s for the, uh...”

“The Knights of Obsidian. They protect the royal capital and its environs. As for the white knights, those are the Knights of the White Summit. They aren’t in charge of any particular location, but they offer their magic expertise to the three orders.”

“Three orders? Gold, black, and white?”

“No, that wasn’t counting the white knights. The last order is the guards of the royal palace, the Knights of the Silver Flame. These are the four orders of knights in the royal capital, so you’d do well to remember them.”

So they’re all color coded, huh?

At first I thought the Silver Flame and the Golden Lion were overlapping, but I realized guarding the royal family isn’t the exact same thing as guarding the palace they live in. I still felt the job of the Knights of Obsidian, protecting the royal capital, overlapped with the police and military. After all, it wasn’t just the common folk who were capable of causing trouble.

“I hear very few criminal organizations in the capital consist only of commoners,” Colny explained. “Most have lower-ranked, and sometimes even higher-ranked nobles lurking among them. It’s very troublesome.”

She then explained how wayward nobles could only be properly dealt with by knights who answered directly to the kingdom. Just about any crime committed by high-ranking nobles involved large sums of money and needed to be dealt with cautiously. Because of this, the Knights of Obsidian needed both strong members and many people of considerable status in their ranks.

Then there were the Knights of the White Summit, the ones who dispatched

images. The temp agency order.

They were all called knight orders, but the four groups varied quite a bit. Once again, I was reminded what a scary place the royal capital was. I *really* just wanted to go home, back to Peylon.

“If Yuin was there, then I hazard you went all the way to the headquarters of the Knights of Obsidian.”

“Headquarters?”

“Indeed. It’s an intimidating gray building.”

That sounded like the building I ended up in front of. But that knight appeared from behind me.

“Perhaps he was on his way back from somewhere? No child from the royal capital would dare get close to that building.”

“There you go again, calling me a child.”

“You are a minor, aren’t you? Once you’ve entered the academy and turned fifteen you can debut into society and be considered an adult. Until then, you’ll just have to endure being considered a child.”

“Ugh...”

I don’t wanna go to the academy.

“Lera, that’s very improper! You’re going to be a student of the academy, so you need to correct yourself!”

“Okaaay.”

Colny was not pleased to see my lack of enthusiasm. She was pretty even when she was angry, but she’d only get angrier if I told her that. Wish I knew why.

On the side, I made a mental note that fifteen was the age of maturity in this world.

“I can barely remember the last time I spent so long in the royal capital,” Lord Peylon said.

He would be staying at the Aspozat residence until the beginning of the school year. Because he had to manage the Mystic Forest, he rarely left his domain. Any time he did make a trip to the capital, he had to immediately head back once his business was taken care of.

I figured he was sticking around because of the situation with my birth parents. After all, they got rid of a three-year-old; who knows what they might try and pull if they found out that child was back in the royal capital. But maybe they would decide it wasn't any of their business and leave me be? Wouldn't that be fantastic?

"Your letter of acceptance has already been sent out, which means your name is in the registry of new students. They won't be able to prevent you from entering the academy," Lord Peylon told me. And interfering with someone's matriculation at the academy was apparently considered an act of defiance against His Majesty. "That man's too much of a coward to be so daring. But there is one thing bothering me..."

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's something we can worry about when the time comes. For now, just let us know immediately if anything seems off during the matriculation ceremony. We know it's bulky, but take a transmitter with you."

"Roger that!"

If Lord Peylon was to be believed, my birth father was a coward and liked to sneak about behind the scenes.

Chapter Two: The Academy Is Full of Traps

So arrived the day of the matriculation ceremony. I put on my uniform, another garment arranged without my knowledge, and departed for the academy. I had a brown leather bag, and inside of it was a transmitter. I wanted to have it on me at all times, just in case.

The girls' uniform consisted of a white dress worn beneath a navy dress with vertical stripes. A short jacket of a darker shade of blue was worn over that, and long boots were the designated footwear.

The boys' uniform was a white shirt, black vest, striped navy trousers, a jacket the same color as the girls', and leather shoes.

A ribbon adorned the collars of the girls' uniform and a tie did the boys', with different colors given to different grades. For the first-years, it was a cochineal red. Ribbon colors didn't follow us as we moved to new grades; instead we swapped them out for new colors. To hold them in place, we used our own personal brooches, or tie pins in the boys' case. This way we could give our uniforms a personal touch.

My brooch had affixed to it a new invention of Peylon's magical research institute. Its function was—actually, I'll keep that a secret for now.

On the day of the ceremony, I braided a lock of hair, then set and washed the rest with magic. Those curls in my hair sure could be a pain. My hair was dense and had a slight wave to it, but that made it all the harder to set. As much as I wanted to tie it up, Colny had advised me that it was better to let your hair down in the royal capital. Reluctantly, I endured it.

The first day would just be the matriculation ceremony, class assignments, and dorm room assignments. Actual classes wouldn't start until the next day.

All students attending the academy lived in the dorm and were treated equally, whether they were the child of a knight or of a duke. And you couldn't bring maids, footmen, or any other sort of servant with you, so you generally

had to take care of yourself.

And that had me wondering: weren't most young noble ladies incapable of even changing their own clothes? It was then that I learned that there were monasteries that taught this sort of thing. Students there mostly studied religion, but they were also instructed on how to take care of themselves. Normally, young nobles did two or three years of that before they entered the academy.

Once again, I was not normal. Did Peylon have a monastery? I couldn't recall. I did, however, remember a cathedral. There probably wasn't a monastery. I mean, can you imagine meatheads going to a place like that?

I was already educated on how to take care of myself. You see, in Peylon, you never knew what might happen or when, so I was raised to be ready at all times. Hence my confidence in my life skills compared to the average young lady. I might not have been normal, but I didn't foresee any problems living in the dorm.

Once the matriculation ceremony was over and homeroom ended, we were dismissed. All that was left was to head to the dorm and take a look at my new room. I was supposed to have confirmed my room before the start of the year, but no matter how long I waited, I had never received word that my room was ready.

So I gave the receptionist at the dorm my name and asked for my room number, but then a brusque lady came out.

"I'm the dorm manager, Quana Luarz," she said. "You are Tafelina Duval, correct? Honestly, what was that man thinking..."

"Huh?"

"Never mind that. Come with me. Your room is this way."

I have a really bad feeling about this dorm manager.

She led me to the room I would be living in for the next six years of my life. I just wasn't sure it could really be *called* a room.

“Woow.”

I’ve been given an attic. This isn’t a room, it’s a storage space.

“Just be thankful you have a room,” grumbled Ms. Quana Luarz, number one unpleasant dorm manager. “It’s beyond me how an illegitimate child was permitted to attend the noble academy.”

Colny had informed me that she was as touchy as she looked. She told me to follow her, and I did, but I didn’t expect to be taken to an attic. And there wasn’t even a lock on the door, if you can believe it. It was dusty and things were lying everywhere, just like a ratty old attic.

But something she said was bothering me. Something about an illegitimate child.

“Um...what did you mean by that earlier statement?” I asked. Even I could manage a courteous tone.

“Oh, heard me, did you?” she snorted. “My words were quite literal. This is a respectable academy for the nobility; normally an illegitimate child would never find their way in here.”

On what grounds was I an illegitimate child? I could only think of one possibility.

“So, basically, the academy was told that I’m Lord Duval’s illegitimate child?”

“Is there something strange about that? Now, all proper ladies should take joy in cleaning. I’ll lend you the necessary supplies. If you don’t get this room clean, you won’t be able to sleep tonight!”

Oh, what a pain. I thought they might do something, but *this*? It seemed I had been swapped out with the daughter of my father’s mistress.

First things first: contact Lord Peylon!

It was for situations like these that I brought a transmitter along with me. It wasn’t the portable type, so it should’ve been heavy, but a weight reduction spell solved that problem. I set the transmitter atop a crate and tried to get in contact with Lord Peylon. They had a transmitter installed at the Aspozat residence, so that’s the one I dialed.

“Hello, Lord Peylon?”

“Has something happened?”

Good thing he was perceptive.

“A minor something at the dorm.”

“Understood. I’ll take a carriage. Wait by the front gate.”

“Okaaay.”

So glad I had made the transmitter. However, I was under strict orders not to give these devices to outsiders. Tell *that* to the people in charge of it at the institution.

Still in my uniform, I picked up my things and headed for the front gates. One short wait later, a carriage bearing the crest of House Aspozat arrived.

Is that Ville in the driver’s seat?!

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said. “Now hop in.”

“O-Okay.”

Why was he driving? I didn’t get it. I had heard that carriage drivers held a pretty low position in society. Would the legitimate son of a marquess do that? It’s not like it was an automobile or anything.

I really don’t understand why this is happening.

Once we arrived at the Aspozat residence, Ville and I joined Lord Peylon in the drawing room. Colny was there too. As I recalled, the upper grades started classes the next day.

“So, could you tell us what happened?” Lord Peylon asked the moment I sat down.

He sat with his arms crossed, clearly angry even though I hadn’t even said anything yet.

“When the dorm manager showed me to my room, she led me to an attic being used as a storage space. Also, it seems the academy thinks I’m an illegitimate child.”

I didn't spare any details as I told them about what had occurred. That dorm manager clearly called me an illegitimate child and seemed to harbor a fair bit of prejudice toward those sorts of people. I didn't care about that part. I just didn't want her personal feelings making my life more difficult.

Once I was done talking, Lord Peylon made an incredible expression. It was a smile that would give any child nightmares.

"So that's how it is. That scum swapped the daughter of his wife with that of his mistress," he growled.

"Looks like it. I don't know what he told the academy, but at the very least that dorm manager seems to think I'm an illegitimate child."

I honestly wasn't too worked up over it. Being illegitimate might've meant I wouldn't have any of my family's privileges, but it also meant I had no obligations to them. If they wanted to set me free, I wasn't going to argue. But Lord Peylon and the Aspozat siblings saw things differently.

"The problem is that they gave falsified information to the academy," Colny said.

"Indeed. Such an act could even be considered *lèse-majesté*," Ville suggested.

In spite of the ominous conversation they were having, they were smiling from ear to ear. *Yikes*.

"I thought he might try something, but nothing this stupid. It's over for that dullard," Lord Peylon said with a smile that would have been positively pleasant if not for the words coming out of his mouth.

I, listening to it all, felt a chill run down my spine.

After all that, even though it was already evening, Lord Peylon said, "I'm going to swing by the royal palace." Was that really a place you could just swing by?

As for Colny and me, Ville took us to the academy. This time, we had a proper carriage driver.

"For now, should we try and get your room changed?" Ville asked me.

"No. If we're going to something like that, I'd rather have permission to make

adjustments to my current room.”

It was a storage space, but it was a spacious one. If I got rid of all the stuff piled up and put some work in, it could turn out pretty comfy. And if I made a request to the institute, they’d send me tools to help with all that.

“Lera, I imagine you’d make a place more livable than the normal rooms. I might be tempted to move in with you.”

I appreciated Colny’s high opinion of me, but I didn’t like the idea of uninvited roommates, even if she was only joking.

“Who said I was joking?”

For real? Viille, save me.

“The dorm rooms are big enough, but they aren’t the most livable spaces,” Ville added. “I’d like to see what sort of room you might make. Colny, I must admit I envy you.”

Oh, I give up. I’ll just take this as proof of their trust in me.

Shortly after, we arrived once more at the academy. Beyond the front gates was a garden, and behind that was the main building, an installation mainly for the instructors. It had the staff room, meeting rooms, headmaster’s office and more. The students’ buildings included places like the general education building, practical learning building, laboratory building, and music hall.

Standing to the side of the path after we left the carriage, Ville told us where we were headed.

“Since uncle is handling the royal palace, we’ll apply pressure to the academy. Today was the first day, so the headmaster is probably still around.”

Huh? We’re going straight to the top? I guess you can do that when you’re the son of a marquess.

“Loks was chosen as a prefect, and I was one as well. I only just recently graduated, so they should still recognize me at the instructor’s hall.”

I really didn’t like that he was saying that with such an evil grin. And Colny was nodding happily at everything her brother said.



So Ville was a prefect too? No shortage of talent among these brothers, I thought as we entered the main building.

“My name is Winville, oldest son of House Aspozat,” Ville said to the lady at the front desk. “We have urgent business with the headmaster regarding the daughter of House Duval.”

The receptionist stumbled, but quickly responded. “O-One moment, please.”

Even someone in her position was surprised to suddenly find the son of a marquess talking to her. Not to mention our lack of an appointment.

Wait, can we even see the headmaster without an appointment?

“The headmaster will see you. Right this way please.”

So we can. I guess this is the power of House Aspozat?

We were shown to a room not too small, not too large. The furnishings weren’t extravagant, but closer examination showed that they were well made. Quality above all else, I suppose.

“Lera, don’t say anything until I tell you it’s okay. Understood?”

“Yes, Ville.”

I didn’t quite know why, but I could trust Ville to act in my best interests. So I just nodded and went along with it.

We didn’t wait long before the headmaster came in. Seeing him, I thought the same thing I did during the matriculation ceremony: *he sure is young*. He had long blond hair that he kept tied back, and wore an embroidered robe over his suit along with a fancy monocle.

His hairstyle was a bit old-fashioned, but his suit wasn’t half bad. It was the same as Ville’s—one of those three-piece ones.

“Oh, Winville. Haven’t seen you since graduation,” he said as he took his seat.

“My apologies for the sudden visit.”

“Don’t worry about it. I heard from the receptionist that this is about the young lady of House Duval. I’ve heard a thing or two about that whole affair.”

“You’re aware of it?”

Wait. The young lady of House Duval is the other girl, right? Not me? What did she do if even the headmaster is hearing things?

“So. What happened?”

“As I understand, Dorm Manager Luarz assigned this young lady, Miss *Tafelina Lowell Lera Duval*,” he said, really emphasizing my name and letting his anger show on his face, “to an attic space.”

“What’s this?”

“What’s more, Miss Luarz said things such as ‘Just be thankful you have a room,’ and ‘It’s beyond me how an illegitimate child was permitted to attend the noble academy.’”

“Oh?”

The pretty headmaster did not look pleased. After all, what Ville had said could be seen as questioning the headmaster’s ability. Well, the dorm manager said it, not Ville, but whatever.

“I’d like to ask when this lady became the illegitimate child of House Duval,” Ville continued. “Did they specifically send word to the academy saying that Tafelina Lowell Lera Duval is illegitimate?”

“I’ll have someone check posthaste. And I’ll have Miss Luarz brought here immediately.”

I was starting to worry; things were really escalating. I sneaked a glance at Ville and Colny—they both looked very upset. To Ville, I was Colny’s best friend and another younger sister. To Colny, I was an old friend and someone she could share interests with. This was reason enough for them to be livid on my behalf.

The Peylon line sure didn’t throw away their own, and I was part of that. A spring of happiness slowly welled up in me when I realized it.

After a bit of waiting, a clerk came in carrying a large folder of papers.

“These are all the documents regarding new students,” they said.

“Good work,” the headmaster replied, quickly shuffling through the sheets. “It appears there are two daughters from House Duval enrolled, but they’re *both* registered under the name ‘Tafelina.’”

“Huh?”

That man gave both his daughters the same name?! And then he only used the name Tafelina when contacting the academy.

“He clearly had a reason for doing that,” Ville said, brow furrowed.

“Looks like it. This way, the father can stay with his illegitimate daughter but she’ll be presumed legitimate.”

So this way, he could say he wasn’t lying on any of the forms. He just couldn’t specifically say, “This is my legitimate daughter.” It was crafty, but what sort of guy just swapped his daughters out?

Looking at the documents regarding the daughter of House Duval, the headmaster’s expression turned sour. “But if our documents look like this, then it’s possible the same ploy was used in the documents sent to the royal palace.”

“I believe my uncle is currently confirming that,” Ville replied.

“Would that be Lord Peylon? If so, then I’m sure His Majesty will be willing to lend a hand. Will Lord Peylon be joining us?”

“Most likely. I don’t know if he’ll be alone.”

“I see.”

Sir, would you and Ville please stop leaving me out of the loop? And I’ll have you know you both look very scary right now.

Just as I began to feel a shiver run down my spine, Dorm Manager Luarz arrived.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Did she really have to scowl when she saw me? Colny’s anger meter was about to burst.

“Ah, Miss Luarz. Just when did our school form a policy of discrimination?” prompted the headmaster.

“I beg your pardon?”

The dorm manager looked befuddled, so the headmaster reiterated.

“Even if they’re an illegitimate child, once they’re enrolled here, they are one of our students. I’m aware that hierarchies still form within the academy, but I’ve never heard of a faculty member engaging in discrimination. Wouldn’t you say this is something that should be cracked down on?”

“Uh. I, um— Indeed.”

The dorm manager’s complexion was rapidly getting worse. She must have finally realized why she was called here. But who would’ve expected to find that a mere illegitimate child had the backing of the kingdom’s strongest warrior family? Technically, Peylon was the strongest, but Ville and Colny had Peylon blood in them, so it’s fine.

“Now, Miss Luarz, which room did you allot to Tafelina here?”

“Th-The, it was the...”

The headmaster was relentless. Meanwhile, Ville and Colny were casually sipping their tea.

“Enough rooms are prepared so that all students may live in the dorm. And allotting those rooms is your job, is it not?”

“It is...”

The headmaster was swinging with cold, hard logic, and the dorm manager was getting no chance to strike back!

“Now, I’ll ask again. Which room did you allot to Tafelina?”

“The... The attic room.”

“Hm? I don’t recall there being such a room.”

“There is no such room! I understand, I’ll immediately prepare another room! Is that acceptable?”

“How could it be?”

Miss Luarz let out a small shriek.

“Do you think it’s fine to simply assign her a new room without even apologizing?” the headmaster asked. “Do you really understand what you’ve done? Your actions can be interpreted as direct defiance against the royal family.”

“Ho-How could that be?”

“Have you never thought about why the position of headmaster at the noble academy is passed down among members of the royal family? Everything done here is done for the future of the kingdom. This very academy was established per the will of the royal family.”

“I-I only—”

“You’re unfit for the job of dorm manager. From this moment onward, you’re relieved of duty. Don’t ever come here again.”

“O-One moment, sir! I was only doing as Lord Duval ordered me to!”

What’s this? Lord Duval? As in my father?

I couldn’t help but glance at Colny and Ville, and found their eyes on me.

“What were you told?” the headmaster asked.

“I-I was told that the girl was illegitimate and an embarrassment to House Duval. He said that I didn’t need to think of her as a normal student and asked that I give her a poor living space...”

Oh, so he did call me an illegitimate child.

I didn’t have a shred of affection for my birth parents, but it still irked me to see that man distort the facts of my birth. And he called me an embarrassment, like he wasn’t the one who helped make said embarrassment. Honestly, cheaters are beyond help.

“Even so, you did not confirm the situation with us and assigned the girl to the attic,” the headmaster said. “My opinion is unchanged. You are unfit to serve here, and my decision is final. Gather your things, and do not expect a letter of recommendation.”

Wow, no letter of recommendation? That only happens when you get fired for a problem you caused. And, okay, I mean, she did cause a problem.

If she was working at the academy at her current age, she was probably single. If someone new had taken over the house, she might not have been able to return to her family. No wonder the mean dorm manager clung to the headmaster.

“Please, sir! I-I beg you! Have mercy! Have meeeracy!”

As she screamed, some men who looked like knights entered the room and dragged her out. And so I learned that there were armed knights on campus. It only made sense that security would be tight at a school for the children of nobles.

The headmaster watched her go, then turned to us with a smile once her voice faded from earshot.

“Now then,” the headmaster began anew, “it might take some time to find a new dorm manager, but we do have an assistant who can take over in the interim.”

Always good to have a backup plan.

“About your room—”

“Pardon the interruption, sir. Lord Peylon has arrived.”

“Let him in.”

Oh, Lord Peylon’s arrived, and he’s got a big grin on his face. And who’s this sparkly man behind him?

He had blond hair and blue eyes. The black-clad knight from the other day was sparkly, but this guy put him to shame. How would I describe it? Sparkly deluxe? Not much of a vocabulary in me.

His long, soft hair was a tad messy, and he had a rugged face—the type girls couldn’t stay away from. As I glanced at Mr. Sparkly Deluxe, Lord Peylon bowed before the headmaster.

“It’s a pleasure to see you after so long, Your Excellency.”

This wasn’t something I saw very often. In Peylon, a community of meatheads, etiquette was the last thing on anyone’s mind. But more importantly, Lord Peylon had called the headmaster “Your Excellency.” Was he

of a higher social standing than Lord Peylon?

Then I remembered something very unsettling that I had heard earlier. Something about the job of headmaster being passed down through the royal family. My ears weren't playing tricks on me, were they?

"It's been some time, Lord Peylon. Not to mention it's quite rare to see you here, Your Highness."

"Cut that out, uncle."

Right now, he just said "Your Highness." So the sparkly deluxe man is a prince?

"Colny," I whispered, "about that man..."

"That's the crown prince, His Highness Leor. He graduated from the same class as Ville."

So even the crown prince had attended the academy, and he called the headmaster "uncle." This meant the headmaster was the king's brother. If the headmaster was a sibling of the prince's mother, he wouldn't be considered part of the royal family.

But what was the crown prince even doing here? Wasn't this all getting a little out of hand? Both of them sat down and rested for only a short moment before they began their discussion. First was Lord Peylon's report on what he had found at the royal palace.

"I started by looking at the registry submitted to the royal palace. Both the legitimate child and illegitimate child were registered only as 'Tafelina Duval.'"

This elicited another sour look from the headmaster.

"As I suspected. They didn't lie, but they did omit information."

"Indeed. We've decided to inform His Majesty of this but let this continue for the time being."

"What? But then this young lady here—"

"We needn't worry about Lera." Lord Peylon looked at me. "Will we?"

I silently nodded. Remember: Ville had told me not to say anything. And when he realized this, Ville let out a sigh.

“Lera, you can go ahead and talk.”

“I can? Okay then. I’m fine with Lord Peylon handling matters related to my family. I have no problem with being treated as an illegitimate child.”

Both the headmaster and crown prince were surprised to hear this. Perhaps because he felt responsible for the debacle with the dorm manager, the headmaster looked particularly flummoxed.

“Still, you were assigned to an attic, were you not?” he persisted.

“That’s no problem. But if possible, I’d like to receive permission to renovate it.”

The headmaster looked at me dubiously. “Renovate? What in the world do you plan to do?”

Can you blame the man? Most young ladies would be outraged at having to sleep in what was once a storage space. But I was used to hunting in the Mystic Forest. After ten years, I was no longer an earl’s daughter, but instead belonged to a land of hunters. Well, technically, I still was an earl’s daughter.

Oops. I gotta answer his question.

“I need to insulate it. Also, I’d like to make it just a bit more livable.”

The buildings in this world didn’t have insulated roofs. According to Colny, because it was in the southern part of the kingdom, the royal capital wasn’t too bad in the winter. On the other hand, summers were brutal.

With some insulation, I could make a cozy place that wasn’t too hot or too cold. I also wanted to install some magic tools from the institute and reinforce the walls and flooring. I was getting excited and began to plan out my room, and then the headmaster actually acquiesced!

“As long as it doesn’t damage the dormitory building, I suppose it’s fine for you to do as you please.”

“Really?!”

Woo-hoo! Time to contact the institute and have furniture and magic tools sent over. For that I’ll need a portal...

“One more thing. I’d like to request permission to use magic,” I said.

“It’s normally not allowed, but I’ll make a special exception as long as it’s not offensive spells being used.”

“Uncle, are you certain?” asked the crown prince, quite surprised.

“The academy made a grave mistake today. This should at least make up for our error.”

I wasn’t upset over what had happened. The mean dorm manager was fired, and I had no qualms about being considered an illegitimate child. But I was more than happy to get permission to cast spells.

Hehehe, I’ll hold you to your word.

“Also, in regard to their names, I’ve forbidden the use of the name ‘Tafelina,’” the headmaster said.

“Good idea. If not, we’ll have to make notes specifying who’s who,” replied the crown prince.

I wasn’t gonna fuss over my name. Everyone close to me referred to me as Lera, and I would have been fine with my classmates calling me Tafelina. But Lord Peylon and the headmaster thought otherwise.

“You’re still going to have the Duval surname, but if we don’t make it clear that you’re different people, she might try to take credit for anything you accomplish. Your skills with magic are nothing to scoff at.”

“She will?”

She’s that crazy?

“Indeed,” the headmaster added. “I’ve heard tales of the daughter of House Duval. Supposedly she’s quite fine with taking what isn’t hers.”

“She is?”

Hold on. That must be pretty serious if even the headmaster’s heard tales. And why was she even allowed to enter the academy? Oh, right, didn’t Ville say something about her acceptance being bought? By her father, no doubt.

“You don’t want to go by the same name as a person like that, do you?” Lord

Peylon asked me with a grin. “At the academy, you can be Lowell Duval. Lera will just be something used by family and friends.”

I couldn’t help but ask about the other name. “So the Duval part also—”

“That won’t happen.”

Why the heck not?

Once we were done talking to the headmaster, Ville returned to the Aspozat residence, and Colny and I returned to the dorms.

“Hey, can I come see your attic room?”

“You can, but it’s still dusty and full of junk.”

I had only seen it once, when the mean dorm manager showed it to me, but it wasn’t anything interesting. Colny, however, had her own views on the matter.

“That’s fine. If I see it now, then I can compare it to how it looks after your renovations.”

She wanted a before and after. I could understand that.

To get to the attic, we took the staircase. The one far off to the side of the building. The one that just about nobody ever used.

“Am I really gonna have to go up and down this staircase?”

“Just think of it as good exercise,” Colny told me.

“Eh, I’d rather avoid going this way.”

After all, the staircase was gloomy and kind of creepy. It wasn’t quite haunted, but *something* was there. I didn’t want to think what that might be. Doing that would let it take form. So when the time came to purify the attic, I’d do the whole area. According to a priest I once talked to, exorcising a specific target required you to acknowledge it. That gave it form, which caused all sorts of trouble.

I explained all this to Colny and she seemed quite surprised by it.

“Really? Well, when the time comes perhaps you can ask someone at the church to handle the purification.”

If it was haunting something, then a ghost could be killed with magic. The issue was that offensive spells would damage the building itself. I might add that the purifications carried out by priests were super effective against ghosts. Back in Peylon we regularly asked priests to come and purify the Mystic Forest. The forest was teeming with ghosts and a number of people had been killed by them over the years.

For some reason, all the priests—even the trembling weaklings going for the first time—would return absolutely ripped and with incredible smiles. After three days in the forest they'd come back and find everyone complimenting them on their smile and muscles, and take up bodybuilding. This happened with every priest, without exception. The community of meatheads was one to be reckoned with.

I opened the door at the top of the staircase and found myself in a gloomy room with stuff piled up all over the place. It was a storage room—uh, rather, it was an attic room. Maybe they're the same thing?

"So this is the attic room? It's awfully dark and dusty. And there's nothing but junk lying around. No treasures in sight. What a shame."

Colny, were you hoping to do some treasure hunting? I don't think there are any nice accessories hidden here.

"But now that I've got permission to renovate, I can get rid of this junk!"

"You ought to double-check that before you do anything."

"How come?"

I didn't see why I'd need permission when everything in that attic was broken. Or so I thought. From a far corner of the room, I sensed something very ominous. Something I failed to notice the first time I visited the attic room.

"Ah. I found something and I don't like it."

"Oh? What is it? A gem or something?"

"Nope. This. It's haunted."

"Huh?"

It was a doll with a broken face. The crack running down its wooden head and

the fading paint made it clear this doll was bad news. It was evolving into a malign thing capable of absorbing negative emotions from its surroundings, its face warping as it progressed. Hauntings were already troublesome, but they got even worse when they manifested in a doll.

“I think we should hurry and get this thing purified.”

“Lera, can’t you purify it?”

“It wouldn’t be impossible, per se...”

A very buff priest once taught me how to do it, but I wasn’t cut out for it. Being another form of magic, purifications could only be done by those with the right aptitude. And the church kept the techniques a secret, meaning your average mage didn’t know how to do it. So using purification magic was something I shouldn’t really be doing. But what was the harm if the church didn’t find out about it?

“Hmm, maybe it’s fine if it’s just this doll. Colny, could you place a barrier to block light and sound?”

“I can, but I don’t think I’m allowed to use magic.”

“Don’t worry, I got permission from the headmaster.”

“Wasn’t that for your own use?”

“Did I say *whose* spellcasting?”

No I did not. Nor did I specify where.

“Excellent lawyering,” Colny said, with palpable exasperation. “Oh, fine. Here.”

Skilled as ever. Among her siblings, Colny had the best arm when it came to magic.

“All right, here I go. Colny, you should close your eyes, just to be safe.”

“Sure, but what for?”

“It’s gonna get super bright in here.”

Once Colny had both closed her eyes and covered them with her hands, I began the purification. The doll seemed to figure out what was going on and

tried to resist, but I held it down.

“Don’t bother trying to fight it,” I said as I increased the force of magic. A burst of white light filled the room and the purification was done. Because it was magic light, it was only a tad bright in the eyes of the caster.

“That should do it.”

“Oww, my eyes...”

“Ah, sorry.”

For anyone *besides* the caster, the light was pretty intense. I quickly used a healing spell on Colny, regretting that we hadn’t put up another barrier.

“Thanks, that’s much better. Lera, you’re extraordinary as ever.”

“There’s no harm in learning more spells and I’ve got no shortage of mana.”

With my mana, I could use any spell as much as I wanted.

“What happened to the doll?” Colny asked while rubbing her eyes.

“It was purified, only seconds before it could level up.”

“There you go again with your strange turns of phrase.”

Darn, I guess “level up” doesn’t work here. This is one thing I don’t like about reincarnation.

Personally, I didn’t think anyone would want a bunch of broken furniture and ornaments.

“This is better than making someone angry because we threw their stuff away without asking,” Colny argued.

And so we set out to find the assistant dorm manager so we could get permission to clear out the attic. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have also asked for permission to get rid of whatever I wanted.

We went down one floor and saw another girl down the hall.

That...is a uniform she’s wearing, right? It’s just got so many decorations.

Her jacket had ribbons, her skirt had ribbons, there were ribbons in her hair.

Ribbons everywhere. I wasn't sure we were even allowed to alter our uniforms that much. She really went all out on customization; it barely resembled the original design.

Her ringlets of hair swayed as she walked, the fan in her hand making it all the showier.

"Colny, that is one of our uniforms, right?"

"Quite a number of alterations, isn't it? Every year there are people who make some changes to their uniform, but I've never seen or heard of someone going that far."

So we were allowed to modify our uniforms. But did she have to change it that much?

"Apparently, eclectic styles like that have become popular among some girls. But I've never seen someone apply that to their uniform."

Ah, so like a gothic lolita? Okay, maybe not.

Either way, I learned that this world also had people who liked these excessive designs.

"I don't care for it," Colny said. "It's too much. Ribbons aren't something you can use haphazardly like that."

On that, Colny and I were in agreement. Simple is best. Peylon was a place that placed exceptional value on function over form.

The walking ribbon reel noticed us and scanned us up and down. While looking up (at my hair presumably?) a look of surprise formed on her face. But then a creepy grin took shape.

"Oh my, that hair color. Are you perhaps our family's little disgrace?"

Huh, our family?

Colny and I exchanged glances.

"What does she mean by that?" I asked.

"I wish I— Oh! Perhaps she's referring to your birth family? House Duval."

"Ohh."

While we had this exchange, the ribbon reel—actually, it'll be easier to just call her Ribbons—approached us, suddenly glaring intensely.

“How very bold of you to ignore me when I'm right in front of you! A word to my father and you'll be punished for this!” she yelped. Ribbons was noticeably shorter than me up close, and the way she acted reminded me of a small dog.

Her technically blonde hair had a strong red hue to it, and her eyes were light blue. She looked fine enough, but her attitude and choice of clothes were less than ideal.

Is this really my half-sister?

We only shared a father, but I still wondered what I had done to find myself related to someone who turned their uniform into a ribbon barrage. But maybe it was unfair of me to deride someone's personal tastes. She could do what she wanted so long as it didn't get in my way.

But she clearly had been all too eager to confront me. Couldn't she have done any better than “our family's little disgrace”? I know people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, but what a terrible insult that was. And she wanted to go to her father about this, like she was a toddler or something.

“What shall we do about this?” Colny asked me in an exhausted voice.

“There's nothing I *can* do,” I replied.

“Don't think you can ignore me! I'm not the one despised by father!”

Ribbons, the other Tafelina, stomped her feet on the ground. I didn't think that was very ladylike of her.

Once she had it out of her system, Ribbons flashed a mean-spirited smile.

“Ohoho, and I heard from Ms. Luarz that you were assigned to the attic room.”

Oh, that's the dorm manager that just got sacked. Wasn't it our father that put her up to that?

It hadn't even amounted to harassment as far as I was concerned, but Ribbons didn't seem to think of it that way.

“Ha ha ha, pitiful is the girl who isn’t even loved by her own father,” she jeered.

“Lera...”

“Calm down, Colny. If you cause any trouble here, then Sheila will get angry.”

That went for both of us—Colny for causing the trouble, and me for not stopping her. Sheila was very strict on these matters.

Ribbons only seemed to grow angrier when she realized she wasn’t getting the reaction she was hoping for.



“Such insolence! Where’s your anguish?! Your tears?!”

Telling me I was unloved by a father whose face I didn’t even remember wasn’t going to inflict much damage. And who was she to accuse me of insolence?

Someone began to approach from farther down the hall. Maybe they had heard all the noise we were making. She wore a jacket that fit her perfectly and a skirt that went down to her ankles. It wasn’t anything eye-catching, but it was clearly well made. Her ruler-straight black hair and black-rimmed glasses made me think she might be on the strict side.

“Are you the ones causing all that noise?” she asked. “Oh, you’re Colnesia of House Aspozat, correct?”

“Good day, Ms. Shenoa.”

So she’s a teacher. If she’s in the dorm, then maybe she’s the assistant dorm manager?

“Is this clamor being allowed to continue even when one of our older students is present?” she asked.

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Shenoa. This young lady accosted us quite unexpectedly.”

“You’re a new student, aren’t you?” the teacher asked Ribbons. “What is the cause of that appearance? This is an academy. Didn’t anyone tell you to refrain from dressing so excessively?”

Oh, Ms. Shenoa or whoever has Ribbons in a corner.

“It is true that students are permitted a degree of freedom to alter their uniforms as they please, but I’ve never seen someone take it so far. Fix this immediately.”

“I-I’m the daughter of Lord Duval!”

There it is, her secret weapon! She grabs her father’s status and swings!

“And what of it?”

“Huh?”

And a miss! Ms. Shenoa is completely unfazed!

I couldn't help but imagine retro game-style text floating above her. *"Ribbons does not understand the words of the instructor,"* it said. Ribbons's jaw hung slack.

"Did you think bringing your family's name into this would help?" Ms. Shenoa asked, not letting up for a second. "Just where do you think you are? This is the noble academy of the Kingdom of Ozeria. Every student in attendance is from a noble household. Colnesia here is the daughter of a marquess."

"Wh-What of it? My father is an incredible man!"

She's such a child. Well, she is only thirteen. Wait, no. One year ago, Colny wasn't like this in the slightest. Ribbons is just childish.

Some earls did in fact have more clout than a marquess, but that didn't change the hierarchy. I thought that was taught to noble children at a young age. Even I had learned that growing up in Peylon.

"I don't care how incredible your father is," Ms. Shenoa continued, unrelenting. "It might affect your relationships with your fellow students, but it will have no bearing on us instructors. Don't forget that. Now, return to your room."

Completely shut down by Ms. Shenoa and unable to argue back, Ribbons fumed and stomped off.

"Mind your footfalls!" Ms. Shenoa called after her. "It's quite disgraceful for a lady to behave like that!"

Ribbons gave a very disgraceful "hmph" as she disappeared.

"Goodness. By the way, you're Lowell Duval, correct?"

"Yes, that's me."

I was just impressed this instructor had an ear to the ground. We had only just decided my name would be Lowell.

"Allow me to apologize on behalf of my predecessor for such discourtesy," Ms. Shenoa said with a bow.

Hold on, we're in a hallway! Anyone could see us!

“No no! There’s no need to bow. And there’s no reason you should have to apologize to me.”

“But—”

“Before I forget, Ms. Shenoa,” Colny cut in, “we were looking for you.”

The instructor raised a thin eyebrow. “Is something the matter?”

“Actually, we’d like to request permission to dispose of the garba—er, items left in the attic room.”

“Oh, that’s perfectly fine. If you can, please get rid of it all. Yes, including that strange doll.”

Uh-oh.

Veeery surreptitiously, I glanced at Colny. She was looking back at me. Ms. Shenoa, meanwhile, wore what I would describe as a cheeky grin.

“I know a priest or two and I’ve witnessed a few purifications,” she said. “There are specific waves given off by magic, and many people are capable of seeing them. This academy is particularly rife with such people.”

We’ve been caught red-handed.

“I was just thinking it was time to purify the stairs. While you’re at it, could you clean them as well?”

“Are you sure about this?” Colny asked.

“It would be a huge help.”

Again, Colny and I looked at each other. She nodded and patted my shoulder. Yeah, we didn’t have much say in this matter. I’d get the brunt of it if the headmaster or someone found out about this.

After our conversation, Colny put up another barrier for me and I purified the whole staircase. I could feel something disappearing during the process, so some part of it must have been haunted. Whatever was there came off as weak and didn’t give much of a response. Good thing the “cleaning” of the stairs hadn’t been put off any longer. But what was the academy doing, letting it get this far?

Once the staircase was purified, I headed back to the attic, ready to clean—or so I thought. According to Colny, it was time for dinner.

“Work can come after we’ve had a meal,” she said. “I can at least help with barriers.”

“You will? Thanks, Colny, I love you.”

“Sure, sure. Now, let’s head to the cafeteria. I’ll introduce you to my friends; they’re a good bunch.”

The cafeteria was on the first floor, far from the entrance. It and the staircase to my room were on the exact opposite sides of the building. Unsurprisingly, a cafeteria at an academy for nobles had elaborate furnishings and could pass as one of the royal capital’s top restaurants.

An elegant fresco was painted across the tall ceiling, and landscape paintings were hung on the walls. There were a number of tables, all varying in size and shape. The size of your group determined which table you would be shown to. Yep, in the dorm’s cafeteria, you would be shown to a table.

“Table for two?” we were asked.

“No, I’m meeting friends,” Colny said and led me to a table by a window. It was a table for six, and four people were already seated.

“I’m sorry for making you all wait. Do forgive me.”

“Of course. We haven’t waited that long. We haven’t even had our orders taken,” answered the girl at the head of the table.

They take your order here. It’s not a set menu. I guess this is only to be expected at a noble academy?

Colny and I took the seats in front of us and the girl next to us immediately leaned forward.

“Colnesia, is this her?” she asked.

“Indeed. Allow me to introduce her. This is Lowell Duval, ward of Lord Peyton. Lera, these are friends from my class, Seileen, Eiseya, Anphosa, and Helanda.”

“I’m Lowell Duval, it’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

“Hehe. They’re awfully different even though they’re of the same house,” Anphosa mused.

She must have been referring to Ribbons. I wondered what she had done now.

“Did something happen?” Colny asked, eliciting wry grins from everyone at the table.

“Indeed, just moments ago. Ah, I’m Anphosa Sishirna Narwesa, daughter of Viscount Narwesa. Might I call you Lowell? It appears the girl from your house is yet to learn the unwritten rules of the dormitory.”

Anphosa gave a meaningful glance in the direction of the cafeteria entrance. Every one of us followed along and looked in the same direction.

“It seems nobody told her.”

“Usually an older student tells them before they enter.”

“Well, this was bound to happen. After all, that girl’s...”

“Indeed.”

“I’m sure it’s not easy for you, Lowell.”

I understood how they felt, but I still wasn’t very fond of the suggestive looks I was getting from Colny’s friends.

But never mind that. Had Ribbons herself given away the fact that she was an illegitimate child? That would defeat the purpose of the whole scheme she and our father had concocted. But I was at a table full of people versed in the conversational skills of proper ladies. Nobody was going to say anything outright, but they would say it in a way that could be understood by those meant to understand it.

With a placid expression, Colny talked with the other girls. She seemed quite used to conversations like this, but I felt totally out of place and quickly gave up on trying to be part of the dialogue. Not to mention it was rude in both worlds for an underclassman to barge in on the conversations of their seniors.

“And even from her room, she managed to cause quite a stir. But before that, I’m Seileen Kilia Kirjalos. My father is Earl Kirjalos. That girl’s room is quite close to mine, and she’s been causing an unbearable commotion all day.”

I felt like I should apologize to Seileen. It’s not like I was responsible for what Ribbons did, but I still just felt sort of apologetic.

Colny, meanwhile, seemed quite eager to know what Ribbons had done. “Just what compelled her to kick up such a fuss?”

“That her room was too small, that she didn’t like being on the second floor, that she didn’t like the shape of the window, that she didn’t care for the *position* of the window, that she didn’t like where her furniture was situated. She complained about every little thing a person possibly could.”

“Goodness!”

It couldn’t have been easy to find so many things to complain about; those dorm rooms were quite nice.

“What a thing to do while trying to shove Lera into an attic room,” Colny humphed.

“So she really was put into the attic room? Ah, where are my manners? I’m Helanda Latorl Tachares, daughter of Earl Tachares. Now, there’s truth to the rumors?”

“She was indeed,” Colny answered. “But just wait and see—that room is bound to become more livable than any other room here. Isn’t that right, Lera?”

“Colny, can you please stop hyping up my room?”

“‘Hyping’? Well, either way, I’ve got high expectations for your room, so renovate to your heart’s content. And don’t waste any time having a showing.”

Showing? Who said anything about a showing?

“Um, earlier you mentioned unwritten rules,” I said, changing the subject. “May I ask what those are?”

“Certainly. But let me introduce myself first. I’m Eiseya Siartis Gorsel, from the house of Baron Gorsel. Perhaps you know of us; the Gorsel Trading Company is

quite famous in the capital.”

“‘Gorsel,’” I repeated. “I’m afraid I don’t know of any such company in the royal capital, but I do know of one that operates in Peylon.”

The Gorsel Trading Company was new in the Peylon domain, and had been doing quite well for themselves—especially with the women. At first their introduction to the region seemed like it would cause problems with an older company owned by Lord Nihd. However, the former carried a range of products brought in from the royal capital, while Lord Nihd’s company focused on the trade of monster materials. As a result the two coexisted peacefully.

“Thank you for everything,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Ah, forget I said anything. I was merely thinking aloud. Now, uh, back to those unwritten rules.”

“Right. In this cafeteria, new students aren’t allowed to sit anywhere between that pillar over there and where we are now. The new students sit on the other side of the pillar, in the vicinity of the entrance.”

Eiseya pointed at a very distinct pillar. I could see how something like that could be used to divide the cafeteria. The area on the other side of the pillar had no windows, making it a bit claustrophobic. Similarly, the walls weren’t as thoroughly decorated.

“A long time ago, back when this university had few female students, that area was reserved for servants. Once this room was no longer enough to accommodate all the students, new students began to sit on the other side of the pillar.”

Looking around, I saw that this side, the windowed side, had most of its seats filled, leaving no room for the new students.

But wait. I’m on the far side of the pillar.

Eiseya let out a high-pitched laugh; my expression probably gave away what was on my mind.

“You’re fine. After all, Colnesia brought you here, remember? There’s

naturally an exception for students invited by their seniors.”

That was a relief. I didn’t want to cause a commotion immediately after starting school. Except I already had. The mess with my family had caused the dorm manager to get fired, Ribbons had accosted me for undoubtedly stupid reasons, and the assistant dorm manager had found out about the purification I had done. I wondered just why things had turned out this way.

After a little more conversation, I had a pleasant dinner with my seniors and eventually returned to my room. My attic room.

A room with no running water.

How was I going to get a sink? Or a toilet? Or a bath? I would consult the institute, of course!

“Come in, institute. This is Lera, calling from the royal capital. We have an emergency situation. I repeat, an emergency situation.”

“Is that you, Lera?”

“Huh? Bear?”

The voice that came in over the transmitter was that of the institute’s chief. With his big frame and forest of facial hair, he looked like a bear. On top of that, his hair was a total mess, giving him the unique ability to make just about anyone faint if they ran into him in a dark alley.

It’s just that he didn’t like being called Bear and refused to accept the name. Didn’t change the fact that he was a bear.

“Will ya quit calling me Bear?! I wait and wait on the edge of my seat for you to call and this is what I get!”

“Quit lying.”

He was probably telling the truth about waiting by the transmitter, but there was no way he had been as anxious as he made himself sound. He was definitely just enjoying a drink. That boozehound bear, I could hear the intoxication in his voice.

“So, what’s the matter?” he asked me upon settling down.

“Uhh, well, I got into the noble academy fine enough, but my dorm room is in the attic.”

“They shoved you in an attic?! Ha ha ha! Those guys in the royal capital must not know trouble when they see it!”

Oh shut up.

It was hard to turn violent when my magic was being restricted, and without any spells I was a harmless little girl. Okay, maybe that was a lie. I was trained in the basics of hand-to-hand combat. Taking down a professional soldier in single combat might have been a bit much for me, but I could manage an amateur, even if it were a man.

But I’m digressing.

“About that,” I said, “is there any way to install a bath, sink, and toilet in a place not hooked up to any drains?”

If I had to, I could supply water with magic, and disposing of it wasn’t beyond my talents either. But doing that every time would get tiring.

“Hmm. Maybe we could fiddle some camping equipment?”

Leaving behind as few traces as possible was a rule of camping in the Mystic Forest. Naturally, that included not leaving behind any waste. So how was that done? By erasing the contents of the toilet with magic. It just was another masterpiece of the wild minds of the Peylon Magic Research Institute.

Beyond useful tools and offensive spells, their research extended to anything that could be used to manage the Mystic Forest. They were the ones who established the rule of not leaving anything behind. It was their researchers who figured out that leaving tracks made monsters less afraid of humans and more likely to venture outside the forest.

While brainstorming ways to reduce our imprint, I borrowed the idea of portable toilets from my previous life. This led to the development of one that cleared waste away with magic. What a godsend that thing was in the Mystic Forest.

“If we make a bath and sink that also dispose of their contents on the spot,

you should be fine without a proper drainage system,” Bear suggested.

“Perfect! Thanks a ton! Oh, could I also get a wash basin with the bath? And combine their disposal functions so it can be erased in one go. I drew up a diagram a long time ago that should be lying around, so you can dig that up.”

“You bet! I should have it done by tomorrow afternoon. Are the usual business arrangements fine?”

“Huh? You’re gonna start selling these things?”

“Course we are! If we combine those features into one, then it’ll be a hit among the folk who like to go deeper in the forest. We could rent it out.”

“Ha ha, that makes sense.”

Renting out gear that was handy in the Mystic Forest was also my idea. Many people were happy that they could cheaply rent equipment when the upfront cost to purchase was too high.

“Are we allowed to send the finished product through a portal?”

“Yeah, I got permission.”

“Good, good. I’ll set up the portal tonight, so send me the coordinates. I’ll send it all over once it’s done.”

“Thank you, thank you!”

The institute might have been full of weirdos, but they were quick on the uptake. I figured my room might end up pretty nice if I got them to also send the materials to reinforce the floor and ceiling. In the meantime, I could just impose upon Colny. I just had to survive one night, then I’d be fine.

First on the agenda was clearing out all the garbage and giving the place a good dusting! Then I had to calculate what construction materials I would need. After that would be setting up the portal.

Clearing out the garbage took about an hour. Really, I just used a portal to send off to Peylon. “We can burn this for fuel,” Nielle cheered. Good thing all that old furniture was made of wood.

Talking to me over the transmitter while I cleaned was Nielle, the top

researcher at the institute. She was the daughter of a baron, but, more importantly, she loved magic. Her passion was genuine. When her family tried to force her into a marriage, she ran away and joined the institute. Apparently, she wasn't too fond of the arrangement because the groom wasn't someone who understood magic very well.

Since long ago, she had been a regular presence at the institute. When I took a moment to think about it, I realized Nielle had been coming around every summer since I was little. So she had had her eyes set on the institute for that long?

"So, we're sending you construction materials right? Just enough for the roof, walls, and floor?" Nielle asked while counting something.

"I also want to double-pane the windows. So sixteen of the number three windows and four of the skylights. And then...two sets of processed lizard scales? And a sleeping bag."

"That many? You've got a big project ahead of you."

"Yep."

After clearing out the junk, I had learned something very unfortunate: the roof was rotting and full of leaks. I didn't want to do the backbreaking chore of replacing the whole roof, so I settled on just patching the damage.

And then I decided I could put in skylights where the holes had once been. After all, I had permission to renovate to my heart's content so long as I didn't destroy the building. And I wasn't doing any harm. I was making improvements. If anything, the academy should've been grateful!

"Mmm, there. My calculations are all done," Nielle said over the transmitter. "All right, I'm sending the materials you asked for. Be ready to get them from the portal."

"Thanks Nielle."

"You're very welcome. Do your best out there, Lera."

"Do your best," she says. I can give my best against monsters. Giving my best against nobles just sounds like a headache.

The materials arrived after just a moment of waiting. It wasn't until it was all right in front of me that I realized just how much stuff I had asked for.

“Hmm. I'll cast the spell so the walls and floor are done while I'm at class tomorrow. That should be enough time.”

For the first night, I slept atop the old flooring in a sleeping bag. I had pitched the idea of the sleeping bag with the Mystic Forest in mind. However, I still hadn't obtained permission to spend the night in the forest. I never expected my first use for it would be in the royal capital.

Before going to bed, I stopped by Colny's room and borrowed her bathroom.

Chapter Three: The Start of My New Daily Life

The day after the matriculation ceremony was our first day of classes. The boys' and girls' dorms were separate, but classes were still coed. For those yet to debut into society, the noble academy was a way to get acclimated to being around the opposite sex.

"I'm told that debuting into society without developing a resistance to men can lead to disastrous consequences," Colny explained as we walked from the dorms to the academy.

"Disastrous consequences? Has something happened before?"

"Indeed. It was nearly one hundred years ago, but it's still being talked about."

For real?

Colny then told me about how a very sheltered daughter of a baron was once seduced by the son of a knight. She gave birth to their child before they could wed. The boy ran away, but the girl's father needed to preserve his house's honor, so he crushed the boy's whole family. The boy himself was also crushed. Physically.

"That boy was no less a fool than his paramour. What was he thinking, laying his hands on the daughter of a more powerful house? And he didn't even take responsibility, but instead tried to run. Of course the baron got angry."

"Y-Yeah..."

And because of that an entire house got wiped off the face of the earth? It was just the family of a knight, but still, is that really okay?

"Lera, among the nobility, and especially among women, chastity is incredibly important. I don't imagine there are many who will try to come on to us, but if they do, show no mercy!"

"O-Okay, but if I attack without mercy, they might be killed."

“That’s just fine! Men who use force to have their way with women don’t deserve to live! I, for one, intend to immolate or shred anyone who might try such a thing on me!”

Even with her nostrils flaring, Colny was cute, so I let it pass. But I reminded myself to keep a sharp eye out so I didn’t end up like the girl in her story.

“There was one other incident,” Colny continued. Apparently she wasn’t done just yet. “This one, the situations were reversed. The son of an earl debuted into society without proper acclimatization to women. A widow of questionable morals took advantage of him and they ended up getting married. The boy’s relatives all worked together to make sure the two got divorced, but by that point she had already made off with a chunk of the family’s assets. After that, well, nobody knows what happened to the widow.”

Yiiikes.

“After that, it became necessary that one becomes acclimated to the opposite sex before debuting into society.”

“And so this academy was formed?”

“Correct.”

So even the founding of this academy has a story behind it.

We had been assigned to our classes the previous day, so I headed right to my classroom. I was in class one. It seemed most grades had only two classes. The other class was, of course, class two. Thank goodness they made it something easy to understand. I don’t think I could keep my mouth shut if the classes had weird names.

The moment I entered the classroom, I took a look around. Fortunately, I didn’t see Ribbons anywhere. It was fair to assume someone had made sure we weren’t in the same class. But it still seemed like something was up. What could it be?

I found a seat and sat there absentmindedly until a voice called out from behind me. “Hey, you there. Weren’t you eating dinner with some older girls yesterday?”

I turned around and saw a girl with frizzy hair tied back in a ponytail and another girl with straight black hair.

“Uhh.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m Lanmia Karze Mohd, daughter of Viscount Mohd. This is Luchirs Tuena Fraccani. Her father is Baron Fraccani.”

So the ponytail girl was Lanmia and the straight-haired girl was Luchirs.

“I’m Lowell Duval. Nice to meet you.”

I thought it was a pretty normal introduction, but the two girls froze when they heard my name.

“Huh?”

“As in *that* Duval?”

RIIBBONS! IS THIS YOUR FAULT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

I wanted to drag that girl over and have a brief hour-long chat with her. But she didn’t know how to listen, so that wouldn’t have gotten me anywhere.

“Uh, it is true that I am of House Duval.”

It’s moments like these that make people want to disappear from existence.

The girls whispered a few words to each other before turning back toward me.

“I’m going to trust in what I see,” Lanmia said. “I’m sure you’re different from that Darnir girl! And those girls in the cafeteria seemed to like you, so I’m sure we’ll be able to get along.”

“I agree,” Luchirs chimed in.

Oh, these two are such good kids! I could cry.

More importantly, I learned that that girl’s name was Tafelina Darnir. But she and her father had most likely gotten the message from the headmaster, so she was forced to go by “Darnir Duval.” But I just kept thinking of her as “Ribbons.”

“Thanks, you two,” I said to the girls behind me. I was just so glad they were willing to believe I wasn’t like Ribbons.

“Please, we’ve hardly done anyth—”

Lanmia was cut off by squeals coming from near the entrance. What in the world could have caused that?

“The wait is over,” Luchirs commented.

“What do you mean?” I asked, to which Lanmia looked at me like she couldn’t believe what I had just said.

“You don’t know?!” she said. “The prince, it’s the prince! The third prince, Prince Shenille, is in our grade! And he’s in *our* class! It’s all anyone in the dorm has talked about!”

The prince, huh? I guess I missed that while I was renovating my room. But still, we’ve got a prince in our class. And his arrival must be the cause of all this fuss.

“He’s both stunningly handsome and extraordinarily intelligent, not to mention the only prince yet to be engaged!” Lanmia explained everything in a near whisper. “Both his brothers met their fiancées during their time at the academy, so everyone’s abuzz with certainty that Shenille will too.”

“I-I see. So that’s how it is...”

“Lowell, aren’t you at all interested in matters like this? You should be! The academy’s a good opportunity for girls to find a suitable partner. Drag your feet and you’ll miss out on all the best catches.”

Huh, so that phrase works in this world.

Lanmia had a point. Anyone would want to find a good partner when a girl’s life was said to be heavily influenced by who she married and what family she married into. If that was the case, what better catch was there than a prince?

Me? I had no interest in getting married. I would be able to support myself if I returned to Peylon, and I could manage living on my own.

The squealing voices gradually quieted down and a young man emerged from the throng of people...heading straight toward me. He had chestnut hair and hazel eyes—a description I felt like I had heard somewhere before. So this was the prince. He didn’t look much like one.

With two students following behind him, the prince stopped in front of me. Lanmia and Luchirs stood up from their seats, so I followed suit. Staying seated before a prince probably wasn't a bright idea.

"Are you Lowell, from House Duval?"

"I am."

Does this have something to do with the crown prince visiting the headmaster yesterday?! Is this his way of trying to let everyone know that I'm the real Tafelina Duval? But I thought we were going to let that matter lie? If they were changing the plan on me, I should have been told about it.

"My uncle and elder brother told me all about it. If you're ever in trouble, it would be my honor to offer any advice I can."

"Th-Thank you very much."

When I get back to my room, I'll have to ask Lord Peylon for his advice.

For our first day of class, we were told the gist of what we'd learn over the year and which elective classes were available to us.

"Has everyone received a copy?" the teacher asked. "Then I'll explain the different electives."

Our general education classes—you could think of it like homeroom—teacher was Mr. Funson. He was in his forties and had a very gentle demeanor. Something about him put me at ease.

Elective classes mostly fell into one of four categories: magical, technological, chivalric, and maidenly. Not that any of them were officially called that.

Magical classes were exactly what it says on the tin. You could choose a specialty like offensive, support, or healing magic. There was also a general magic class that covered the lower levels of all of them.

Technological classes were about technology using magic. That mostly meant magic tools, but also included alchemy.

Chivalric classes were for people intending to become knights. These classes focused on swordsmanship, archery, and the use of other weapons, as well as

the riding and maintenance of horses. The archery and horsemanship classes were coed, but only boys could take the other weapon classes.

Strangely enough, there was a riding class not for horses. Instead, they taught the taming of docile mysticstock. Mysticstock, as they were called, were creatures born when monsters wandered out of the Mystic Forest and interbred with wild animals. Monsters couldn't be domesticated, but some species of mysticstock could, so they were used for mounts and livestock.

Maidenly classes were anything proper young ladies should have an inclination for. Embroidery, poetry, painting, music, etiquette, that sort of thing. These classes were only for girls. This world still had a very large gap separating men from women.

Magical classes seemed the obvious choice. But then again, back home we had the leading magical research institute. Maybe technological classes would be the way to go? I could do something novel like take the alchemy class and make magic medicines. Back in the Peylon Earldom, medicine was bought in bulk and sold throughout the domain.

With the future of my home in mind, alchemy crept its way to my top choice.

"Ah, Lowell Duval? The instructor in charge of general magic has requested that that be one of your selections."

"I beg your pardon?"

Why had I been singled out? And was that normal? If the reactions of my classmates were anything to go off, it didn't seem like it. Was it because even the teachers knew about my upbringing in the Peylon Earldom?

So in addition to general magic, I ended up choosing magic tools and alchemy, along with archery and mystic-jockeying, even though those two were from a different category.

"A very masculine selection," Lanmia noted after looking at my selection.

"It is? What are you choosing, Lanmia?"

"I'm going with healing magic, embroidery, poetry, music, and horsemanship. It's becoming more and more important that a lady knows how to ride a horse!

And my father is constantly getting injured at work, so I figured it couldn't hurt to know a bit about healing."

Luchirs added, "I'm quite bad with magic, so I chose embroidery, etiquette, painting, and music."

I then learned something quite interesting: Luchirs's and Lanmia's mothers were friends during their academy years and visited frequently even after graduation. So those two were childhood friends, just like Colny and I were. Our seats were close and they didn't hold my surname against me. I had a good feeling about those two.

One thing about them: their personalities were just what you'd expect from their looks. With bright, frizzy hair in a ponytail, Lanmia was active and sociable. Luchirs, meanwhile, had straight black hair and was fittingly reserved and quiet.

Lanmia seemed to be one of those people who could get along with anyone. Her friend circle extended beyond our grade to also include upperclassmen. Luchirs, meanwhile, had nimble hands; every handkerchief and cloth implement she used was something she had made herself. She said her dream was to one day make a dress that she could wear.

I was cursed with hands allergic to thread and needles, so I sincerely thought she was incredible. If I was going to try and sew something, I'd be better off trying to first invent a machine. But those didn't like me either.

Once we had all submitted our selections, we were done for the day, so I had lunch with Lanmia and Luchirs in the cafeteria. After that, those two wanted to observe some of the clubs, so we parted ways and I returned to the dorm. I didn't have much interest in joining a club, plus my attic room still needed plenty of renovations.

I walked up the now clean staircase and into my room. It barely resembled the dust bin it had once been. Getting rid of the haunted doll probably played a large part in that.

"Nice. It's all finished."

Entering the room, I saw it had changed into a place that was both spacious

and cozy. I knew I had made the right choice when I picked white materials. I had gotten a good idea of the room's size when I cleared out the junk, but now I saw just how large the attic room really was. It was probably the size of five or six individual dorm rooms. My only frame of reference was Colny's room, but she said the other rooms were about the same size.

The ceiling conformed to the same shape as the roof, and there were skylights where there had once been rotting holes. The roofing materials I chose perfectly matched the room itself. The room was rectangular and had windows on the long sides. As part of my insulation plans, those windows were now double-paned! They weren't quite the same size as the original windows, so I just made adjustments to the interior wall.

Already, I was pretty pleased.

But the first thing I had to do was contact Lord Peylon. He should have still been at the Aspozat residence, so I called there. I still hadn't built the special shelf used for a transmitter, so the thing just sat on the floor. Making that shelf was at the top of my list of priorities.

Once I got through, I asked the servant to let me speak to Lord Peylon.

"This is Lera, calling from the academy."

"Hey, Lera. Do you need something?"

"Yeah. Today, at the academy, I met the third prince in my general education class. He's in the same class as me."

"Prince Shenille, right? Did he do something?"

The way he said it made it sound like the prince was a habitual troublemaker.

"Nothing outright. He just called my name and told me that he heard about it from his brother and uncle, and that I could go to him for advice if I needed it."

"Nobody asked him to do that. I'm gonna make sure he knows not to get involved."

"About that. Word of the situation with me and Ribbons—I mean, the other girl, seems to be getting around. Our identities might become common knowledge, because of something she probably did."

“Hmm, well don’t do anything so long as they’re insisting she’s the legitimate daughter. If everyone thinks you’re the real daughter instead, you can leave it at that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but don’t go saying it yourself. The world of adults is a tricky thing.”

“Okaaaay.”

So it was fine if everyone knew. I had worried for nothing. But I learned that the prince wasn’t to be trusted, so calling Lord Peylon still paid off.

“Now, time to get my furniture sent over.”

The portal had closed after the construction materials had arrived, so I had to set up another portal in a corner of the attic and figure out the coordinates. If I didn’t do this, then the furniture would appear on the old floor, which would destroy the new floor that had been built over it.

“Come iin, institute. This is Lera, in the royal capital. Come in, institute.”

“Hellooo.”

“Hm? Is that you again, Nielle?”

“That’s right, but my shift is almost done. What’s up? We’re almost ready to send the bath, sink, and all the other stuff.”

“Really? Could you send those with the furniture?”

“Yeah. Do you mean the furniture in your room at Castle Varchudar?”

“No, I placed an order with a furniture store. It should arrive there soon. Could you send it all my way?”

Before I had left home, Lord Peylon helped me arrange for all the furniture I would need in my dorm room. He said almost nobody used the furnishings the rooms came with, and the sight of furniture arriving at the academy dormitory came as reliably as the seasons. Servants or hired workers usually set the furniture up before the student even arrived.

In my case, we settled on just using a portal once I got assigned to my room, but I never thought I would have to renovate my room before I could even get

the furniture in. Thank goodness I had permission to use magic. If not, I would have had to rely on House Aspozat for help and I didn't want to cause them any unnecessary trouble.

On the other end of the transmitter, I heard Nielle dragging something. I don't think she realized I could hear her.

"You weren't kidding about the furniture. Is this everything?"

"Yep."

"We'll have to divide it up and send a few things at a time. Is that fine?"

"Absolutely!"

I was all set. With the transmitter, I could easily get in contact with the institute. What would I have done without it? The moment the call was over, stuff began appearing from the portal. There was the furniture, wash basin, bathtub, toilet and more. After figuring out how to arrange it all, I put my room in order. The heavy things were no problem; I just used magic to lift it off the ground. Easy-peasy.

"All done!"

I had ordered a few too many materials for my renovations, so I had used those to make curtains and dividers. The curtains went on the windows and the dividers were used to section off different areas. A curtain and a tall divider partitioned off the bath and toilet.

I enchanted the curtains with spells to block sound and not get wet or dirty. They were made of spider silk, which made them very receptive to enchantment. Similarly, the bedding was all made of the same silk. No better way to get a comfy night's rest.

"Ah, this silk is made from Al's threads."

I thought about my spider, all the way back home. He must have produced a lot of thread if there was enough to make bedding out of it.

"Once I get back home, I'll have to treat him to lots and lots of strong monsters."



Spiders' threads were affected by what they ate. Eating stronger monsters produced smoother and more durable thread. Spider silk was a luxury item due to this, and even just a set of curtains made from it would fetch a high price. Al must have worked hard to produce enough thread to make everything for me. It was only fair that I give him a reward once I got home. If I wanted to do that, I needed to keep up my training while I was in the royal capital.

Once I was finished working on my room, I managed to take a quick rest before it was time for dinner.

I've gotta get going, I thought as I headed to the staircase. And at the bottom, I spotted my childhood friend.

"Colny?" I called.

"There you are. I've waited some time."

So she had been waiting for me. Like with everything she did, she was cute when she pouted. But she would have gotten really red in the face if I told her that.

We chatted as we walked to the cafeteria. It seemed talking in the halls was fine as long as you didn't make too much noise.

"How's your room?" Colny asked.

"More or less done."

"Already? You wasted no time."

"The furniture and everything had been prepared in advance."

"Really? Then I'll have to visit soon. I'll bring cookies or something."

"I'll be waiting."

I'll have to contact the institute and get them to send over some coffee beans. I forgot all about basic stuff like that.

The next day, we had our first elective class. Not only that, it was general magic, the class I had been told to take. I could feel my heart pounding as I made my way to the practical learning building hall. The classroom was pretty

wide, and its terraced seating reminded me of a university. I had just taken a seat near the back when I heard a shriek.

“Aah! What are you doing here?!”

It was Ribbons.

Uuugh, she's in this class?

Why hadn't she picked some harmless maidenly classes? Why this class? Was she good with magic?

Completely aggrieved, Ribbons walked up and pointed a finger straight at me. “Get out of here! Just as father drove you from our house!”

A loud silence fell over the room. Ribbons had definitely just made it clear to everyone that we were, technically, sisters. The cat was already out of the bag in the girl's dorm, but now the news had a chance to spread among the boys. Honestly, what sort of lessons was our father giving her if she was airing dirty laundry in a place like this?

I sighed and batted down the finger being pointed at me. “We're all free to choose which electives we take. This is academy policy, yet you think you can order me around?”

“Of course! My wonderful father grants every wish I make!”

That wonderful father has no authority here, moron.

A familiar-looking guy was coming our way, but I held out a hand, telling him to stay out of this.

“So your father has a problem with my choice of electives. Is that correct?” I asked.

“It is! I'll talk with father and have you returned to that backwater where you belong!”

I was on board with that last bit. I only came to the royal capital because not doing so would have caused trouble for Lord Peylon. But that wasn't what this argument was about. Ribbons had just vouched that her father did indeed have a problem with my elective. Very enthusiastically, at that.

“So your father’s opposing the will of His Majesty?” I asked with a grin.

Ribbons looked so dumbfounded it was funny.

“Huh?”

Everyone, including the boy that had tried to get involved, looked surprised.

“Am I wrong? Our headmaster is a member of the royal family. To take issue with the headmaster’s policy is to take issue with the person who picked him for the role. And that would be His Majesty.”

I’ll admit it was pretty forced reasoning. But if you’re going to start finding faults with the academy founded by the royal family, you should be ready to take that risk. The dorm manager was suspected of opposing the royal family just because she changed the room I was assigned to. Wasn’t Ribbons committing a similar act? Probably. I didn’t really know.

“Th-Th-That’s abs—”

“But you agreed with me just a moment ago, didn’t you?”

“E-E-Even still!”

“Perhaps you don’t have any complaints after all?”

Ribbons was silent. She knew she had been driven into a corner. But nuisances had to be dealt with properly. Even in Peylon, we were taught to swat flies out of the air.

“So which is it? Do you have any complaints or not?”

“I...I don’t! This is just fine! *Hmph!*”

She stumped off with thundering footsteps and took a seat near the front. It was sort of funny the way the other students scattered like spiderlings. Nobody wanted anything to do with someone like that.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it in time,” said the prince. Not that he was in any way at fault.

“Hardly. It’d be pathetic of me if I couldn’t handle that much on my own.”

Oh, Ribbons is glaring at us.

Had she joined this class because she had her eyes on the prince? But how did she know he'd be here? As I sighed internally, the door opened and in came the teacher. But hadn't the bell already rang? Was this guy late?

Huuuh?!

"Sorry about the delay. Call me Fulmanson. I'll be teaching general magic. It's a pleasure to meet you all."

Grinning fiercely at the podium was a certain bear I was very used to seeing.

Is that the chief?!

Our first general magic lesson was just a broad summary of what we'd do for the rest of the year.

"And that'll be it for now. Next time we'll start with some basic offensive spells. Oh, and Le—Lowell Duval, could you stay after class?"

Did he almost call me Lera? I guess that is what he's used to calling me.

Ribbons was glaring at me, but once the prince made his exit, so did she. So I was right; she did have her eyes on him. Not that I cared. My concern was Bear, and soon enough we were alone.

"So would you care to explain what's going on here?" I asked.

"Ha ha ha! My plan to surprise you worked perfectly!"

*Why are you looking at me like this is some surprise party or something?
Worked perfectly, my foot!*

"Were you already in the royal capital when we talked over the transmitter?" I asked.

"No? I only arrived yesterday."

"You did?"

"I used a portal."

"Ahh."

That was right. The institute had (almost) exclusive control over the use of

portals. They were my suggestion, but the members of the institute made it a reality. I heard Nielle had worked particularly hard at it. That's why they were free to use portals whenever they wanted. Especially the chief.

Normally, setting up and activating portals was super expensive. But that was only because you had to go through the institute. The commission fee included expenses and labor as well as a usage fee. But there were no expenses or labor fees for institute employees and myself, because we could set up our own portals.

Usage fees weren't applied because we had PINs that we entered every time you established a portal. If someone set up a portal without putting in one of the PINs or commissioning the institute, then the institute would slap them with a massive fine. They even had the technology to figure out just who the offender was.

All income from the portals went to the institute, but twenty percent was then diverted to my account since they were my idea.

"And here I was spending a month being shaken around in a carriage..."

"Well, you were with Kend, so there wasn't much we could do about that."

Right. The tour of social calls. Lords and ladies of domains across the land invited Lord Peylon to dinner parties and luncheons. Even though I was accompanying him, I didn't have to attend those social functions because I was a minor. One of those times where children were left out of the world of adults.

"There hasn't been so much as a hint of it in decades, but it's always possible the Mystic Forest might overflow. If that happens, Peylon will need help from the neighboring domains. Staying on good terms with the other domains is a necessary step to ensuring they'll be willing to assist."

By "overflow," he referred to an event where monsters that usually remain in the forest venture outside in droves like a flood, and the reasons are still unknown. According to the records, the last time it had happened was fifty-seven years ago. But overflowing was a disaster that could strike at any time. I wondered if it might happen in my lifetime. If it did, would I be able to protect my home and Lord Peylon?

“By the way, did you get the bathtub and everything?” Bear asked, suddenly changing the subject.

“Yeah, thanks. That stuff’s a life saver.”

And thank goodness I didn’t have to wait more than a day for it to arrive. If it took longer than that, I would have had to impose on Colny that much longer.

“It’s you who’s saving us,” Bear said with a grin. “After making that, we finished our plans for an all-in-one instalodge.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s our improved design for a portable lodge. With that, camping in the Mystic Forest should become just a bit more comfortable.”

Just what you’d expect from researchers. If something interested them, they’d pursue it as far as they could. Bear was the chief and all, but he, too, started out as a researcher.

“If staying in the forest becomes too comfy, then people might stop coming back out,” I suggested.

I had held off on making a few proposals for this exact reason. Bear, however, just laughed.

“They’ll come back when they get hungry,” he said.

“They’re not going out there to play, after all.”

“Not too far from it though.”

He had a point. Everyone who entered the Mystic Forest was from the community of meatheads. They didn’t think too hard about the small stuff and were more loyal to their instincts and urges. Good thing it was the urges for food and sleep that they were most loyal to. Not that Peylon didn’t have a large pleasure district or anything...

“By the way, Bear—”

“Quit callin’ me Bear! Now what is it?”

“I was specifically directed to take general magic.”

“Of course you were. It was one of my conditions for doing this teaching gig

all the way out here.”

“I knew it!”

Honestly, at least let me pick my own electives.

Once classes were done for the day, we were free to go to our clubs or do other activities. I, for some reason, found myself in a prep room in the practical learning building.

“I didn’t expect to run into Bear out here,” I said to myself.

“I heard that, Lera. Who are you calling a bear? I’m a human like any other.”

“No, no, you’re a bear who speaks as well as any human does.”

“I get this from you. I get it from everyone at the institute. Show at least a *little* deference to your superiors.”

“So do you show deference to Lord Peylon?”

“I don’t need to. We’re old friends, you know!”

“I’ll be sure to tell him you said that.”

“Don’t. Seriously, don’t. When he gets heated, he can shred through my spells like they’re paper!”

I guess that was only natural for the earl in a community of meatheads. But was Lord Peylon really that strong? The earl I knew didn’t enter the Mystic Forest himself, but instead supported the soldiers and hunters who did. He worked behind the scenes. But that was a very important role. Without proper support, entering the Mystic Forest was dangerous. Not many of those muscleheads understood how grateful they should be to him.

But that’s enough of that.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never seen Lord Peylon fight before,” I said.

“Well, he’s got his reasons. After *her* death, he stopped going out on the front line.”

Our conversation in the prep room took a solemn turn. Lord Peylon had vowed to spend the rest of his life single after the death of his fiancée. This

story was famous throughout his domain and even little kids were familiar with the tale.

Their engagement was a political one related to the trade in monster materials. He was engaged to the daughter of an earl, a dainty girl who seemed like a small breeze might be enough to knock her over. At the time, he had been traveling all over, conducting business and trying to expand the trade.

His engagement to the young lady was part of those efforts. At the time, Kend hadn't yet inherited the title of Lord Peylon; he was still just the son of the earl. The two formed a good relationship as the frail girl took a liking to the robust man.

It was on a trip to visit her fiancé that the young lady's carriage was attacked on a mountain road. The brigands were numerous enough to overwhelm the carriage's escorts, and the whole party was killed.

The incident resulted in a large-scale investigation that even involved the royal palace. It was found that it hadn't been a bandit attack, but was made to look like it as part of the plotting of another house.

That house wanted to be involved in the monster material trade. They were angry that they couldn't secure a favorable position for themselves and were hoping to make Kend single again, so they could marry their own daughter to him. And so they ordered the attack.

Once this became known, Kend confronted the guilty house in their own territory, aware that it might cost him his status. I don't know what he did to them, but he received no punishment from the royal family and the house behind the plot and their whole family were destroyed. However, that meant all the branch families, and even the families of spouses, were affected.

Kend then announced he wouldn't inherit the house and would instead go abroad, but his father knocked some sense into him. He told his son he had a responsibility to fulfill and he couldn't just abandon it. Can you believe that man? But I guess it was for the best, since Kend did go on to inherit his father's title.

Because of those events, Lord Peylon never married. He said his wife was the woman he lost, and when he needed an heir he would just adopt a son from a

branch family. In the same vein, he also swore to never again take up the sword.

“I understand he doesn’t want to hurt anyone,” Bear said, “but, if you ask me, I don’t see anything wrong with taking up a sword to fight monsters. But you know how Kend is.”

“Yeah.”

Dedication was a nice way to describe it, but it could also be described as excessive stubbornness. Everyone in Peylon was like that to some extent or another.

“So you shouldn’t bother him about it either.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with it.”

“Wha?! No, you’re supposed to nod and agree!”

“How long have we known each other? You should know I’m not that sort of person.” Honestly, we had known each other for ten years at this point. “So how come one of your conditions was that I take general magic?”

“I thought that if I wanted to do anything interesting out here in the royal capital, then I’d need your help.”

“That’s it?” I had to ask, but the only response I got was his guffaws.

Still, I wasn’t going to join any clubs and had already fixed up my room, so I figured I could help him out from time to time.

“Oh yeah, how’s that attic room of yours?”

“It’s all tidied up now.”

“Oh, you’ll have to show me sometime.”

“What a shameless attempt to enter the girls’ dorm! I’ll report you to the authorities! I’ll tell on you to Nielle. She’ll look at you with cold eyes and call you disgusting!”

“Stop that! Seriously, stop that! She’s terrifying when she’s angry!”

Not my problem. You’re the one trying to enter the girls’ dorm.

I spent my days at the academy studying and helping the chief with his experiments and research. The prince and Ribbons put a bit of a damper on things, but all around it was a pleasant experience for me. Time flies when you're having fun, and soon enough winter was approaching. Like so many other places, the academy took a break around the end of the year and the beginning of the next.

But before that came the waking nightmare which we call exams! Even in this world, exam hell was inescapable. Had I done something terrible in my previous life? Not that I could recall. Besides, I wasn't the only one who had to suffer through this.

On the weekends, Colny would frequently bring snacks and hang out in my room. Sometimes Lanmia, Luchirs, or Colny's friends would also join us, turning the attic room into a sort of girls' club. One day leading up to winter break, it was Colny, Lanmia, and Luchirs visiting all together. We were talking about what we planned to do with our free time.

"Lera, you'll be spending the break with us, right?" Colny asked.

"Hmm. I guess going all the way back to Peylon is out of the question," I said.

The royal capital and the Peylon Earldom were pretty far apart. I could cover the distance in an instant if I used a portal, but I didn't think Lord Peylon would give me permission.

"Summer break is nearly three months, so I can go home then. But winter break is only six days, right? I'd have to turn around the moment I arrived. It looks like my only choice is to impose on your family."

Colny seemed quite happy about this.

"Ah. Aah! Colnesia's family is House Aspozat, right? The one with the residence on the main road?" Lanmia asked eagerly.

Was there something about House Aspozat worth getting so excited about? Sheila was gorgeous, but she and Lanmia were both women. The marquess himself, Thand, was a real silver fox, but there was a serious age gap there. Ville and Loks looked normal enough, but they were Peylons on the inside. Peylon, by the way, is pronounced "mēt hed."

“Indeed. You’re familiar with it?” Colny asked with a smile.

“That must be so wonderful! So you live with that prefect, Loksusad?!”

“Of course. He’s my brother.”

“A-And you also live with Winville?!”

“Quite so. He, too, is my brother.”

“Ahh, Lowell, I’m so jealous! My grandmother lives outside the royal capital, so we’ll be visiting her. But you’ll be with Loksusad and Winville. Oh, how I envy you.”

Huh. So Lanmia likes the muscles-for-brains type.

It seemed Lanmia was a fan of those two, although that hardly made her unique. Most girls at the academy thought of Colny as “Winville’s little sister” or “Loksusad’s little sister,” but some troublesome individuals were fiercely envious of her. They’d say things like “She gets to be at his side just because she’s his sister!” I didn’t really get it. They were family; wasn’t it perfectly normal that they got along? Wasn’t it good that they got along?

Our conversation was taking an odd turn, but Luchirs got us back on topic.

“Likewise, I’ll be imposing on relatives during the break. But the girl in the room next to me plans to stay in the dorm. I’ve heard a few people are doing that.”

For students whose families lived far away and had a residence in the royal capital, going home wasn’t feasible. It seemed those remaining students grouped together and helped each other out.

However, most of the dorm staff were also on break, so they had to do their own cooking, laundry, and whatnot. As long as you were willing to pay, you could go out to restaurants and hire a launderer, and students were already used to keeping their rooms clean. I, however, could do all those things on my own. Magic was very convenient like that.

“If you stay in the dorm, Lera, your family and that girl might try something,” Colny said, knitting her brow.

That darkened the mood a bit. But, she was right, so I gave up on staying in

the dorm.

“If that happens,” Colny continued, “you’ll be in danger. But my family can get rid of House Duval if it comes to that.”

She really said “get rid of” like it would be easy. And Lanmia and Luchirs were nodding along. And she also very casually said that they’ll be in danger. Was she forgetting that magic was restricted in the royal capital?

As if reading my mind, she added, “Magic isn’t the only way to protect yourself. Remember that, Lera. It might be necessary someday.”

“Really?”

“You can be so empty-headed at the strangest of times. It worries me.”

Really? I don’t...think that’s true.

The upcoming break had everyone excited, but before that, we had exams. I mostly had to worry about my general education subjects. These were your usual academic things like basic reading, writing, and math. They also included history, geography, and literature.

For my electives, I didn’t have anything to worry about when it came to general magic and magic tools. The alchemy exam was mainly a practical test and I had yet to mess up in that class, so I wasn’t worried on that front. The classes that had me worried were mystic-jockeying and archery.

My trouble with mystic-jockeying was the mysticstock themselves. They were afraid of me. Winter was coming and they still wouldn’t let me ride on their backs. For archery, I still wasn’t used to using bows, and I was lucky to hit the broad side of a barn. But I was sure I could get better as long I kept practicing the fundamentals. *You can do it*, I told my inner meathead spirit. With archery as my main focus for study, I gave it my best until it was time for exams.

And the results...

“Woo-hoo!”

I managed to pass mystic-jockeying and archery. Granted, with mystic-jockeying I’m pretty sure I only passed because there was an oral exam. I did

well with my general education, general magic, magic tools, and alchemy, so, overall, I did better than I had expected to.

We were given our results during our general education class. The names and ranks of the top scorers were announced out loud and we got our individual grades on paper. Lanmia, Luchirs, and I all listened closely when my name came up among the top scorers. I did especially well in general magic and magic tools, where I got the highest scores of anyone in our grade.

Among our entire grade, I ranked seven. Rank one went to the prince and most of the top scorers were also from class one. The names of the top ten were also printed on a bulletin board in the hallway.

“Lowell, you’re incredible,” Lanmia said. “You ranked number one for both general magic and magic tools.”

“Y-Yeah, thanks.”

I didn’t exactly feel like it had been a fair competition. Back in Peylon, I fought lots of monsters and made all sorts of stuff at the institute. When it came to experience, I had a huge advantage over everyone else. While I had started from the same baseline as everyone else in alchemy, my familiarity with magic still helped me out. The alchemy exam had required us to make an antidote for a weak poison, which was the easiest magic medicine to craft.

Magic tools had us burning premade magic circuits onto a metal board. We didn’t actually make any magic tools, which was a small letdown. But don’t think magic circuits were like electrical ones. The smallest details could produce wildly varying results. Either way, I was pretty pleased with the results of my first regular exams at the academy.

Once the results had been announced, the teacher gave us some warnings to be careful during the break, and then we were let off the leash. The classroom was abuzz with people headed to their clubs or trying to make for home as soon as they could. Amid the clamor, some dolt burst in and started yelling.

“You there!”

It was Ribbons. She had continued to embellish her uniform and the ribbons began overtaking the clothes. I wished she would figure out that sometimes less

is more. The classroom fell silent as its bizarre intruder stomped toward me.

“What is this?! How did *you* get in the top ten?!” she yelled.

What a rude thing to ask.

“I don’t know how to answer that. I guess because I got good grades?”

“Impossible! I refuse to believe you could be one of the top scorers!”

It’s perfectly possible. I studied hard and got results. Hell, if anything here is hard to believe it’s you, you goddamn ribbon reel.

Oops. My Peyton upbringing was starting to come out again. Colny was always lecturing me about my speech habits, but old habits die hard.

I tried to pretend I was somewhere else, but then I heard something truly unbelievable.

“That’s it. I’ve got it. You stole my exam results!” Ribbons said.

“I beg your pardon?”

*What. The. **HELL.***

“That must be it. A backwater bumpkin like yourself couldn’t possibly rank so high among students at this academy. Hmph! Stooping to theft is reprehensible.”

Are you for real?

I was at a loss. Lord Peyton had warned me this might happen, but I honestly hadn’t taken him seriously at the time. While I was too shocked to move, someone went and fetched Mr. Funson, the advisor for class one.

“What is it? What’s this racket?” he asked.

“Sir, this woman poached my grades!” Ribbons said.

“What’s that? You’re Darnir Duval of class two, correct? That’s utter nonsense. You can’t poach someone’s grades.”

“I disagree!”

“For one thing, general education exams are conducted separately per class. You’re in class two and therefore did not partake in the exams that were held in

this classroom. As for electives, you only share two—general magic and magic tools. It’s my understanding that general magic is a practical exam conducted before the instructor, and magic tools issued a homework assignment. Both were scrutinized carefully by their instructors, so I don’t see how any grades could be stolen.”

“Sh-She must have switched my name out with hers!”

“The instructors all watch their students very closely while exams are taking place. Name-swapping has never once occurred at this academy. Every year there are students who attempt to cheat, but their efforts have never succeeded.”

“Bu-But...”

“And on what grounds are you even making these accusations?”

“We-Well...”

“On the other hand, you’ve repeatedly caused incidents since you started attending this academy. If you continue like this, expulsion is a very real possibility.”

“Expulsion?!”

That was possible? The other students began whispering to each other. The blood drained from Ribbons’s face and she began to tremble. I was certain she was terrified by the possibility of expulsion, but I turned out to be way off.

“This—This can not be allowed!”

It was anger that was causing her to tremble.

“Darnir Duval, calm down,” Mr. Funson coaxed with little effect.

“We’ll settle this with a duel! Accept it if you have even a shred of honor in you!”

Everyone became dead silent.

“You don’t *have* to accept, of course. You can just kneel and apologize for your thievery.”

In Ozeria, kneeling had a similar significance to prostrating in Japan. To tell

someone to kneel was to degrade them. So Ribbons was trying to demean me. How very bold of her.

“Sure, I accept your duel,” I answered. “But if I win, you’ll kneel before me in front of everyone in our grade and apologize for your slander.”

“Very well!”

Good, she’s given me her word. I’ll make her beg for forgiveness in front of everyone.

The teacher had already said poaching grades was impossible, so there was no way I could’ve done anything of the sort. If I had done something like that and House Aspozat found out, I could only imagine what sort of horrors would await me.

Sheila would tell Lord Peylon all about it and then I’d have a triple-combo lecture from her, Lord Aspozat, and Lord Peylon, as well as remedial classes. What sort of person would take such an insane risk?

Mr. Funson let out a sigh, then suggested, “It might not be a *duel* per se, but why not a general magic contest?”

“A contest?” we both said at the same time, much to my displeasure.

Don’t glare at me. I didn’t like that either.

“The handling of weapons and hiring of a scrutineer would both make a duel time-consuming. A magic competition, however, would be much simpler.”

“I have no objections,” I said.

“No-Nor do I! This is just fine!”

I could bat her down, no matter the competition.

“Good. I’ll go receive permission from Mr. Fulmanson for this. Is now a good time for you both?”

“Of course.”

“Certainly!”

No need to act tough, Ribbons.

Going off her performance during our general magic classes, it didn't seem like she was particularly good with magic. That wasn't to say she was exceptionally bad or anything; I'd say she was just normal, I guess? Magic proficiency wasn't expected of nobles or anything, so I thought she should have just taken a different elective. Ah, but that would've shortened the time she could spend around the prince.

"Well then, I'll go speak with Mr. Fulmanson. Everyone besides the two Duvals is to leave the classroom."

Per the teacher's orders, everyone began to leave, gossiping all the while.

"This sounds kind of interesting. Shall we watch?"

"Is it really gonna be much of a competition?"

"I worry for that girl's sanity if she's making claims of poaching grades. As Mr. Funson said, that shouldn't be possible."

"What sort of upbringing has she had if she thinks it's permissible to cause such a fuss in front of strangers?"

"House Duval is the house of an earl, correct? And that's their daughter?"

"It sounds like they're both daughters of House Duval. One's the daughter of the earl's wife, and the other of his mistress."

"Ah, so that one's..."

Meanwhile, Ribbons and I waited in the classroom. Knowing Bear, he'd be all too delighted to permit something like a magic competition. His smug grin floated through my mind...and it sort of ticked me off.

"Are you all right? You seem to have found yourself in an odd spot," said a voice from the hallway.

It was the prince, and Lanmia and Luchirs were behind him. I could feel Ribbons staring daggers into my back. If she wanted to get close to him, she should've just talked to him. I glanced behind me and saw Ribbons blushing. Her whole body was wriggling excitedly. Disgusting.

More importantly, I had gratitude to be expressing. The prince had called Mr. Funson over for me.

“Your Highness, you have my gratitude for calling the teacher over.”

He gave me a wry smile. “If anything, I should be asking for your forgiveness. It appears the situation has only escalated.”

“That’s not your fault, Your Highness. Do not let it bother you,” I said, genuinely meaning it.

“That’s good,” he whispered, then said in a louder voice, “Do you think I’d be allowed to spectate your competition?”

I wanted to ask why, but thought better of it. One wrong word and Ribbons would start another commotion.

“That’s something you should check with the teacher,” I answered.

“I see. Right. Well then, I’ll see you around.” Once he said his piece, he headed off. Following him were his usual two companions, who I guess had been nearby all the while.

After going just a short distance, he suddenly turned around and asked, “Ah, one more thing. Will you be in the royal capital during winter break?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, I will.”

“That’s all I wanted to know. Later.”

He smiled, and this time left for real.

What was that about?

“Are you all right, Lowell?! We couldn’t do anything to help...” Lanmia sputtered.

“This sure has escalated,” Luchirs lamented.

I assured them that I was all right. But the situation had indeed been blown out of proportion, and it seemed we had garnered a lot of interest. With that in mind, I didn’t want to let our spectators walk away disappointed.

Just as I had expected, Bear was positively elated to let us have our magic competition. I could see him grinning as he stood next to Mr. Funson. I really just wanted to go up and punch him.

We were led to an outdoor practice field. This was used for a few of the elective classes—mainly general magic. Complete with bleachers, it reminded me of the running tracks used in my previous life. The seats were dotted with the occasional student.

Hm? Is that Loks? And Colny? Did Bear tell them about this?

Bear, Mr. Funson, Ribbons, and I all stood near the entrance to the field.

“We’ve received special permission to do this from the general magic teacher, Mr. Fulmanson. Be sure to offer him your thanks,” Mr. Funson told us.

I really didn’t want to, but I gave Bear a cursory bow.

“Now then, it’s time for me to explain how we’re going to do this competition,” Bear began. “The winner will be decided by both the scale and precision of their spell. Be careful: I won’t be fooled by simple appearances. Also, there will be no attacking each other with offensive spells. Anyone who casts an offensive spell will be immediately disqualified.”

So I have to cast a huge but intricate spell? And no attacking people. There’s just one thing I want to know.

“Question,” I said.

“What is it?” Bear had his arms crossed, like he was someone important. Well, he was the chief of the institute, so I guess he really was someone important. But he was still a bear.

But enough about that.

“Are offensive spells fine if they’re *not* directed at our opponent?” I asked.

“Hmm. Fine, an amendment to the rules: offensive spells can be used, but only if they’re directed straight into the air. That is all!”

Hmm. So we can cast into the sky, huh? Just perfect.

With Bear’s explanation over, Mr. Funson had a few things to add.

“Mr. Fulmanson will be judging your spells and I will be watching for foul play. Which of you would like to go first?”

Ribbons thrust her hand into the air. “That would be me! I would like to go

first!”

“Then first up is Darnir Duval.”

Ribbons took a step forward.

“Oho ho ho, feel free to copy me,” she said. “Then we can just agree that your accomplishments are actually mine.”

There she goes again. Looking down on people must be second nature for her. Now hurry up and get it over with.

After moving to the center of the field, Ribbons began to concentrate. Was she planning on using that large of a spell? The greater the spell, the harder it was to control, so concentration was necessary.

Exhaling loudly, she cast her spell and produced a flame. Then another and another. In the end, she made six flames in total. She gathered them near her fingertips, twirled her hand, and flung the flames into the air. Up and up they went until they spread out and faded away.

Hmm. Flames, huh?

“What do you think? I’ve hardly seen you partake in our casting practice during general magic and yet you really expect me to believe you got first on the exams?! How about you show me those skills that got you first place?!”

The pieces started falling into place. General magic placed more emphasis on hands-on practice than studying from textbooks. But Bear was worried that the other students might be intimidated if one of their classmates was too far ahead of them, so I wasn’t allowed to participate very much. That sure had unexpected consequences.

“Next up is Lowell Duval.”

“Here I go.”

I didn’t actually have too much experience with fire spells. After all, most of my spellcasting was done in a forest. Open flames were a no-go there, so I mostly hunted monsters with high-pressure blasts of water and blades of wind. But fire spells weren’t completely beyond me.

Just like Ribbons had done, I walked to the center of the field, where I casually

held up my right arm and pointed upward with my index finger. There, I made a flame. It was a small flame, the size of what you'd see burning on a candle wick.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ribbons celebrating her presumed victory. Everyone in the stands seemed pretty let down, but I was just getting started. I created one more flame, and then another. Nobody seemed too surprised by this, but then they started murmuring when the count reached thirteen.



I chuckled to myself and simultaneously cast a little spell to buff my hearing.

“How’s she doing that? How’s she controlling so many? Even if they’re small flames, she’s still got thirteen of them.”

“And she’s keeping the flames held completely still. That’s a lot harder than it seems.”

I felt like it was a bit too early for them to be so surprised—we haven’t even gotten to the fun part yet. The outlines of the flames began to shift, and they took the shape of a butterfly.

“Ah, look! The flames are shaped like butterflies!”

“Unbelievable!”

Calm down, calm down.

Not that I could blame them for being so surprised. Changing a flame’s shape after it had been produced was normally impossible. You could change the size, make it smaller or larger, but changing the shape was considered theoretically impossible. It would be like trying to turn a gas fire into a triangle or a square.

So it should come as no surprise that there was a special trick behind what I had done. First I had put out lines of mana and made tiny flames connected to them. Initially, the lines were shaped like candle flames, so the flames also took that shape. When I moved the lines into the shape of butterflies, the flames followed.

Of course, two layers of concentration were required to control both the flames and the mana lines. Since childhood, this had been one of my favorite ways to entertain myself, so I was pretty good at it.

For the finisher, I sent my swarm of fiery butterflies into the air, where they fluttered about against the backdrop of the blue sky. Slowly, and a bit theatrically, the butterflies faded away.

“That’s a wrap,” I declared.

Applause erupted from the bleachers, including from Loks and Colny. My efforts had paid off beautifully.

When I returned to Bear and Mr. Funson, Ribbons was nowhere to be seen.

“Darnir Duval ran away not too long ago,” Mr. Funson explained. “Given the number of spectators, perhaps you could forgive her without demanding an apology? We’ll make it known that there was no truth to her accusations.”

“Thank you very much.”

Damn. I was looking forward to making her apologize in front of that crowd.

It wasn’t just our grade—some senior students had also gathered to watch. After experiencing total defeat before a crowd like that, I figured she would keep to herself for the time being.

“No, thank you for such an extraordinary display of magic,” Mr. Funson said with a rare smile. He excused himself and departed from the field.

As we watched him go, Bear turned to me and whispered, “So, was that the same spell that nearly burned down the grove behind the institute?”

“I do not recall such an event,” I replied in a robotic voice.

Of course I remembered. Nielle and I had been experimenting together, and Bear had come in and put out the fire before it turned into a total disaster.

“From now on, you’re gonna have to participate in our general magic drills. I don’t want another fuss like this happening.”

I certainly wasn’t going to argue with that.

Now then, time to head to the Aspozat residence.

Winter break was just six days, so I left my things at the dorm. I simply headed off, still in my academy uniform. Some of my belongings back in Peylon had been sent to the Aspozat residence, so I didn’t even need to take spare clothes with me. I met up with Loks and Colny by the gate and our carriage arrived shortly.

“Sorry for the wait,” Ville called from inside the carriage. The son of a marquess had come all this way to pick us up. I guess he was just really light on his feet.

Only certain houses were allowed to bring carriages right up to the academy gates. Aspozat was one such house and, apparently, Duval used to be one until they had that permission revoked. It was a quick ride from the academy to the Aspozat residence, and when I got out a pleasant surprise was waiting for us.

“Loks, Colny, and Lera too! Welcome home!”

“Mother!” Colny yelled.

“It’s good to be home, mother,” Loks said.

“Sheila, it’s so good to see you again!” I cried.

I hadn’t expected to see Marquess Aspozat, Thand Quoal, and his wife, Sheila.

“It’s been too long, Lera. Oh, let me get a good look at you.”

Sheila was as beautiful as ever. She had an irresistible magnetism that only got stronger up close. I never got used to the idea that she had borne three children.

“I’m so glad to see you’re well,” Sheila said. “I know you had no choice but to go, but I worried someone used to Peylon might struggle in the royal capital.”

“Oh, you worry too much, mother. Lera’s a girl who can get by just about anywhere.”

I agreed with Colny, yet I also felt she and I didn’t mean it in quite the same way. It seemed Sheila noticed it too.

“Colny, be a bit more considerate. Even if you two are friends, you still need to mind your choice of words.”

“Yes, mother.”

She isn’t repenting a bit, is she? Well, I guess that’s fine.

There was no point in standing around in the entrance, so we moved to the drawing room, which was much more comfortable. Upon entering, I was greeted by some fragrant tea.

Lord Aspozat and his wife told us about how they had been abroad recently. To the south of Ozeria was a cluster of petty kingdoms, so they must have been

referring to business there. There were other major countries nearby, but the petty kingdoms were the only ones that could easily be reached by land. Getting to the other neighbors required passing through the Mystic Forest or over mountains.

Traveling by sea was an option, but Ozeria was lacking in shipbuilding and seafaring technology. The kingdom could get by without the resources of the ocean, so maybe that was why they hadn't developed in that area.

"Lera! Are you listening?" Colny asked.

"Huh? Sorry, I wasn't."

"Honestly!" She puffed out her cheeks.

What? I said I was sorry.

"I hear your exam scores were among the highest in your grade. Congratulations," Sheila said with a smile.

"Well done, Lera," Thand added.

Something about being praised by Thand made it slowly dawn on me—I really had accomplished something.

"And at the very end, she put on a spectacular show for us!"

Colny, that wasn't... Okay, maybe it was a show.

"What happened?" Sheila asked, somewhat dubious.

"You know of the other Duval girl, right?" Colny gleefully explained. "She accused Lera of stealing her grades."

"Oh my."

"Did she now?"

Sheila and Thand were fixated on Colny.

"So Lera's advisor asked Chief Bear to conduct a magic competition between the two."

"And that was the show you mentioned?"

"It was. The other girl's magic was nothing special. I can't believe she thought

that she would be able to win.”

As Colny said, Ribbons’s magic skills were average, or perhaps even a bit below that. Certainly not the sort of skills that would let you place number one in our grade.

“So what sort of magic did Lera display?” Sheila asked.

“Oh, it was gorgeous,” Colny recounted with joy. “She produced a whole host of flames from her fingertips, then turned those same flames into butterflies and released them into the air! They were beyond beautiful as they dispersed into the sky.”

Her compliments meant a lot to me. Going to all that effort had been worth it in the end.

Our conversation returned to the matter of our grades and how I placed among the overall top ten of my grade.

“Now you have something to look forward to this February. We’ll have to start preparing soon,” Sheila said.

“Hm? Preparing?” I asked, tilting my head.

Everyone in the room chuckled.

“The top scorers of the prewinter exams are invited to a royal ball hosted in February,” Sheila told me.

“Whahuh?”

Royal ball? I take it they’re not talking about some sporting event. They mean those things where men and women dance together, don’t they?

“Even children who have yet to make their debut into society are invited, so the competition for top exam scores is particularly fierce among first-and second-years.”

“It is?!”

I hadn’t known that. I looked at Colny, wondering why she hadn’t said anything, but she stuck her tongue out when our eyes met.

“If I told you, then you wouldn’t have studied as hard,” she said.

“I can see Lera doing that.”

“Smart move, Colny.”

Even Loks and Ville were taking her side! But she was right—I really might have held back if I had known what I was getting myself into.

“Lera,” Sheila said.

“Yes?”

Unconsciously, I sat up straight.

“I won’t be too pleased if I find you holding back next year.”

“I understand.”

Does this mean they’ll assume any bad exam scores are intentional? Good luck, future me.

The next day was the first of my winter break. I hadn’t gone on many outings since arriving in the royal capital, so I still hadn’t seen much of it. I had gone out once, but I got lost and whatnot, so that didn’t count.

“And so you’d like to look around the royal capital?” Ville asked with a smile.

That was exactly it. I had already gotten lost once during a solo outing and I hadn’t been allowed to go out alone ever since.

Colny and I were wearing matching outfits. Cold, wintry weather was upon us, so we wore spider silk blouses, skirts and jackets made with thick wool (mostly from the Mystic Forest), and coats on top of all that. Our boots and hats were the same design, just different colors.

The wool had been spun into yarn, which I had sent over to the Aspozat residence back when I was still in Peylon. It was a very pleasant surprise to be reunited with it again in this manner. The Mystic Forest was full of sheep-variety monsters. Their horns, skin, and meat were all very useful, making them very profitable prey—uh, I mean, very profitable monsters.

Just like our clothes, Colny and I had matching hairstyles—low pigtails. The

only difference was that my hair was longer. Sometimes I got lazy with trimming it and it crept all the way down to my waist.

A carriage took us from the Aspozat residence to the entrance of a business district packed with shops. The same carriage was scheduled to come back and pick us up later.

“Ooh.”

The business district was located on the west side of the city. It was built around a large plaza which had three equally spaced fountains set up in the center.

“The largest shops are in front of the fountains,” Loks told me.

“Hmm.”

“The shops facing the plaza all sell good items. The ones down the alleys can be rather suspicious, but they sell interesting stuff.”

“Stop it, Loks. If you tell Lera that, she’ll get curious and—too late.”

Suspicious shops, you say? Sounds fun.

Ville was saying something to Loks, but I was pretty sure that had nothing to do with me.

“Well then, let’s start by looking for things you might need this February!” Colny said.

Huh? Can’t I just order that stuff? Why do I need to go to a bunch of stores in person?

“Do you have something to say, Lera?”

A simple glare shut me up. There was no winning against Colny.

We began to walk around the plaza. Once we got hungry, we grabbed some light food and ate that as we strolled along some small alleys. It was a wonderful time, made all the better by spending it with my childhood friends.

“Look, the details on this are really pretty.”

“You’re right. Is that silver?”

“Even in the back alleys, you can find some really good artisans.”

“Perhaps this shop is a hidden gem.”

At one point, Colny stopped to commission an accessory using the pearls I had given her. Besides items for the ball, we also browsed everyday items like fabrics, shoes, hats, and accessories. With bags of loot weighing down our arms, we returned to the Aspozat residence to find Sheila looking quite troubled.

“What’s the matter, mother?” Colny asked.

“It’s the third prince—he just showed up without giving any prior notice.”

Colny and I exchanged surprised glances.

“Did any of you arrange to meet him?” Ville asked us.

Loks, Colny, and I all shook our heads. After all, Sheila had specifically said he had shown up without prior notice.

“Lera, he’s in your class, correct?” Colny asked me. “Did he say anything to you?”

“Nothing really. Oh, but I suppose he *did* ask if I was going to be in the capital over the break.”

“Hm? Could this be why?”

Could it really?

“Good day, Lowell. Forgive my intrusion.”

It was the prince. He really had come to visit. Leaving me alone with him didn’t sound like a smart move, so the Aspozat siblings all joined us.

“Welcome, Your Highness,” Ville said. He was greeting the prince on behalf of all of us. “Please accept our humble apologies. It was not our intention to make you wait, nor to offer hospitality insufficient for one of the royal family.”

On the surface, that sounded like an apology, but deep down, he was more so saying, “Don’t show up out of the blue, you jerk.” Unless the two parties were exceptionally close, nobles usually required some form of advance contact so they knew when they could expect company. If someone just waltzed up

unannounced, they could find their whole family banned from wherever they had intruded.

It's just, things are different when you're dealing with the royal family.

Or so I thought.

"I'll be sure to send my profound apologies to your family. Do forgive us just this once," Ville went on.

Translation, courtesy of me: "I'm gonna tell your brothers about the shit you just pulled." Way to go Ville! The crown prince and Ville had become friends during their time at the academy, and the same went for the second prince and Loks. It could've been my imagination, but I thought I saw the third prince's cheek twitch when his family was brought into the conversation.

"Th-That's hardly necessary. I'm the one who showed up without saying anything in advance," he said.

"No, no. Whatever the reasons, we failed to properly welcome a member of the royal family, and that will sully our family's honor."

"No, really..."

Their exchange continued for a little longer, and by the end the prince looked ready to cry.

"Next time you intend to visit, please let us know in advance," Ville said, delivering his final blow as he showed the prince to the door. "We would be all too happy to receive a chance to do everything we can to make up for today's failure."

"Indeed. I-I'll make sure that happens," the teary prince replied.

I later learned that after that, Ville sent an "apology letter." It could be summed up as, "Teach that brother of yours some manners." He showed me the reply, a letter from the two older princes. "We certainly will!" it said.

The Aspozat siblings really didn't play around.

Chapter Four: We Have an Incident on Our Hands!

Our short winter break was over before we knew it and, a few days into the new year, we returned to the academy.

“Well, this doesn’t happen very often,” Colny said as we enjoyed lunch together in the cafeteria. “Both my friends *and* yours are all off at private repasts.”

“You can say that again.”

In the dorm’s cafeteria, there were separate rooms that could be used for eating in private. They required reservations and didn’t come cheap, but you did get to enjoy a meal in a secluded space.

The system was first put in place to placate fancy young boys and girls who didn’t like eating in crowded areas, but nowadays the private rooms were used a bit differently. The rooms were largely used for students to socialize with the children of their parents’ acquaintances. And these little gatherings were called private repasts.

And on this day, all of my friends, and all of Colny’s friends had been invited to various private repasts. In the end, it was just the three of us in the cafeteria.

“And...why are you with us, Loks?” I asked.

We had bumped into him just outside the cafeteria, and he followed along and sat with us like it was a perfectly natural thing to do.

“Should I not have joined you?” he responded innocently.

“No, that’s not the issue...”

“With you accompanying us, we receive a veritable bombardment of glares from the other girls,” Colny explained.

Ah, she just said it.

Gentle features, divine black hair, and beautiful green eyes. Loks drew plenty of looks, but in a different manner than Ville did. I knew he was popular, but I

hadn't expected the other girls' stares could hold such *bloodlust*. Lanmia was one of his many admirers as well, wasn't she?

Loks just gave a wry smile, but didn't show any intentions of leaving us. And that was fine. Honestly, it was fine. It was just, those jealous eyes were a real nuisance.

"Right, Lera," Loks said to change the topic. "Has His Highness bothered you anymore after his visit?"

"No, he hasn't." He had been awfully quiet since winter break. "Now if our eyes meet, he awkwardly looks away."

Loks laughed quite hard when he heard that. "Sounds like his brothers disciplined him well."

"So it would seem."

Before winter break, he had been awfully eager to stick his nose in my business. Not having that happen anymore was a weight off my chest. Because he was a member of the royal family, even politely refusing him would have been no simple task. So this meant I should be grateful to the two elder princes. But, more than that, I was grateful to Ville, who had made it happen.

And then, just as our peaceful lunch break was about to end, there was an incident.

"Would you stop this already?!" I heard a girl shout. What a surprise that was. If this were a restaurant that anyone could enter, it might not have been that strange, but this was the academy's cafeteria. I might sound like a broken record at this point, but this was a school only attended by children of the nobility. Seriously, how was it that someone who should have been raised to be a proper lady was yelling in public?

I turned toward the center of the cafeteria, not too far from our table. The cafeteria had the shape of a circle, and in the center was an open space without any tables. It seemed the commotion was coming from there. I glanced at Colny and Loks, who both responded with small nods. We were all done eating, so we quietly left our seats and moved to a spot where we could see through the wall

of people.

At the center of the crowd stood five people—a cluster of three girls standing opposite a boy and girl. In the latter group, the boy stood protectively in front of the girl. Meanwhile, in the former group, there was the girl who seemed to have done the yelling; and to her back was a tearful girl, as well as someone comforting her.

“The blonde girl in the back is the crown prince’s betrothed, Shenavaroa, daughter of Duke Rolatawer,” Colny told me. “She’s also a prefect.”

Loks then added, “And the one who shouted earlier is Besheallina, daughter of Marquess Ropuid. She’s engaged to the second prince, Prince Lumers.”

Oh man, what did those two do to make an enemy of the royal family’s betrothed?

“Alli, calm down,” Shenavaroa said soothingly to the pissed off girl—that is, Besheallina.

“Roa, how can you expect me to do anything of the sort?!” she replied. “Can’t you see how aggrieved our dear Eyna is?! That harlot over there certainly doesn’t!”

What an incredible word to hear from a noble girl’s mouth.

I had a vague notion of what happened, but I wanted more information. I heard the crowd break out with whispered gossip and figured I might as well cast a spell to buff my hearing. I did, technically, have permission from the headmaster, after all. Sure, I got permission after that mess with the dorm manager, so it was probably only permission to use magic to renovate my room, but nobody ever specified that.

In other words, I could use magic to buff my hearing and nobody would scold me for it. (I know I’m forcing the reasoning a bit here, but nobody said I couldn’t do that either.)

And what did I hear?

“That crying girl is Earl Annille’s daughter, Denelz, right? And look, covering that other girl is her fiancé, the oldest son of House Milnegahn.”

“And the girl he’s covering is Lineka Hogultar, I believe? She’s the daughter of Baron Hogultar?”

“You’re right. They say she’s actually an illegitimate child taken in by the baron. Some people suspect she might not even be his daughter.”

“Hasn’t anyone tried to verify that? But either way, she’s still a bastard child...”

“I hear her mother is helping her manipulate that boy for their own benefit.”

“Oh how horrifying. But if it’s *that* girl you’re talking about, then maybe—”

“Don’t say anymore. We’re just sons of poor barons. She doesn’t have any interest in the likes of us. It’s gotta be someone with wealth or status.”

“Ah, our mortal foes once more: wealth and status.”

Hmm. So basically, the girl being comforted by that Shenavaroa lass is being cheated on. And the one her beau is having an affair with is that Lineka Hogultar girl. Hence the commotion. Chaos! Festering in the academy!

“Lera, care to explain those peculiar faces you’ve been making?”

No hiding from Loks, it seemed.

“You used a spell to figure something out, didn’t you?” Colny asked. “Well, don’t leave us out of the loop. Oh, don’t forget to put up a soundproofing barrier.”

Colny was deft as ever. Or maybe she was just too familiar with what sort of person I was. Either way, I quickly put up a barrier and explained to them what I had just heard.

“I see, so that’s the infamous Lineka,” Loks said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“There are rumors of all sorts about her. Now, someone should stop this before—ah.”

I followed Loks’s gaze and saw a group entering the cafeteria.

“What’s going on here?” asked Sparkly Deluxe himself, the crown prince. Behind him were the two who had helped me when I’d gotten lost, the black

knight and Mr. Frivolous in white, as well as a few knights in red uniforms—they must have been from the royal guard. For some reason, Ville was also part of the retinue.

“Oh my!” someone gasped.

“His Highness is here...” whispered another.

The five at the center of the crowd also seemed quite surprised. And who can blame 'em? This might have been an academy for nobles, but the crown prince was supposed to have already graduated. The prince entered the cafeteria and headed straight to his fiancée.

“Roa, is that young lady all right?” he asked.

“Yes. Are you feeling better, Denelz?”

“Y-Yes,” Denelz answered. “Please, forgive me for my sorry state, Your Highness.”

“No need to apologize. I heard bits and pieces on my way here and I believe this matter concerns both our families. I believe with all possible haste we should call the families of the concerned parties and arrange a meeting.”

Everyone involved in the commotion seemed okay with this idea, save for one exception.

“Hm? Huh? I don't see the need to get anyone's parents involved.” Lineka was flustered. “It's nothing that serious—just a simple romantic entanglement.”

If Denelz and that boy were engaged, then Denelz's family (and maybe the boy's family as well) were likely going to see that arrangement annulled. That would be trouble for both families, so it was natural that parents become involved. If this was an “entanglement,” it was one of lust, not romance.

The only person panicking or showing any resistance was Lineka. The boy merely hung his head and let himself be taken away by the knights in red.

“Huh? *Huuuh*? Why?” Lineka protested. “We haven't done anything wrong!”

Having a fling with an engaged man was pretty wrong. Even in Ozeria, there were rudimentary laws against that sort of thing. If found liable, you could be subjected to fines at least. Didn't she know that?

Kicking up a fuss until the very end, Lineka Hogultar disappeared from the cafeteria and peace was at last restored. But the place was still very alive with fresh gossip.

Ville, however, took us to a corner of the cafeteria and began a lecture. “Would someone care to explain why even you three turned into onlookers?”

“What can I say...” I began.

“If there’s a commotion, it’s up to a prefect to put a stop to it,” Loks said. “I was just struggling to find the right opportunity to step in.”

“Anyone would be surprised by a sudden yell in the cafeteria. All the more so if it was a girl’s,” Colny argued. “I think it’s only natural that one would try and find the source of it.”

Ville let out a deep sigh. So did the crown prince, who wasn’t far away.

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Aspozat, might I have a word?” said a voice, cutting off Ville.

Ah, the black knight from earlier.

“Mm, what is it?”

Oh? That was a cold response, especially for Ville.

As I began to wonder if Ville had something against him, the black knight took a step closer to us.

“I’d appreciate it if you could formally introduce me to this young lady,” he said.

This young lady? As in Colny? Ville, Loks, and I all looked at her.

“To my sister?” Ville asked.

“Not her.”

Hm? He couldn’t really...

Now, to my confusion, the three siblings all looked at me. Did this have something to do with the fact that he had helped me when I got lost in the royal capital? I realized I had said a word of thanks, but never sent him a card or

anything. But was that actually cause for offense? I shrank back, and Ville stood in front of me protectively.

“That reminds me,” he said, “when Lera got lost, it was you and that fellow from House Nedon who escorted her back to us. I don’t believe I ever thanked you for that.”

“Never mind that.”

The black knight didn’t even flinch as he stared at Ville, almost as though he was impatient for that introduction. Behind him, the crown prince was watching us with rapt attention. I don’t know if he was wavering under the knight’s pressure or if perhaps he simply couldn’t deny an acquaintance of the crown prince without clear reason, but Ville gave in.

“This is Lera Duval; she’s currently a ward of my father. Lera, this is Sir Yuin, son of Marquess Fezgahn.”

“I’m Yuin Sacourt Fezgahn. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said, then swiftly grasped my hand and brought it to his lips.

I heard a number of squeals and screeches. We were, after all, in a crowded cafeteria. But did this really warrant all the screeching? I thought this was normal for introductions among the nobility.

Goodness, though, those were some *scary* gazes being leveled at me.

Looking at him up close again, I realized he was awfully handsome. It only stood to reason that he had no shortage of admirers. And considering his status as the son of a marquess, he made for a real catch. Small wonder I was receiving so many dirty looks.



I wanted to pull my hand back out of fear that the concentrated gazes might burn an actual hole in me, but Yuin kept an iron grip. It looked like I wasn't getting away that easily. He really seemed to be dragging it out too—a full three seconds had passed and his lips hadn't budged. Unfortunately, pulling my hand back with force would be very bad manners and whatnot.

I hadn't yet made my debut into society, which should've meant I was effectively a child. However, I was also a student at the royal capital's noble academy, which made me an adult, in a sense. Hence both the kiss on the hand and the damage my reputation would suffer if I pulled my hand away. Just as I was wondering if something was the matter with him, he finally loosened up.

Umm, I'd appreciate it if you let go of my hand. You're still holding it, you know?

I was looking down at my hand, but I could still feel the burning glares directed at me.

"How long do you plan to hold on to her hand?" Ville asked.

"Forgive me."

Finally, my hand was free. I then noticed just how quiet the cafeteria had become. The shrieks hadn't been pleasant, but this instilled a terror of its own.

After that, the cafeteria became abuzz with chatter, so the crown prince led us to a private room. Already there were two of the girls from the earlier commotion—Besheallina and Shenavaroa.

"Sorry, Roa, but can I hide this bunch in here with you?" he asked.

"Certainly. Has something happened?"

"Yuin did something stupid."

"Oh, how unusual."

Shenavaroa and the crown prince seemed to get along very well. The way she covered her mouth when she laughed made her the very image of a sheltered young lady.

“Now then, we have matters to attend to,” the crown prince said. “Ville, Yuin, Iyale, with me.”

“Yes sir!” they promptly answered and followed the prince.

With the prince’s retinue gone, only five of us remained in the room.

“Take a seat, all of you,” Shenavaroa prompted. “Colnesia, we hardly get enough opportunities to chat.”

“Indeed, a result of our differing grades.”

“As a fellow prefect, I, for one, get plenty of chances to see Shenavaroa,” Loks said.

“That you do.”

So Loks and Colny both knew this young lady. It wasn’t that unlikely; she and Colny lived in the same dormitory and, as he just pointed out, she and Loks were both prefects.

“So this is...Lowell, if I’m not mistaken? I’m Shenavaroa Seyusawer Rolatawer. I’m the daughter of Duke Rolatawer and engaged to His Highness Prince Leor.”

“I’m Lera Duval; it’s an honor to meet you.”

“And I’m Besheallina Vehellea Ropuid, daughter of Marquess Ropuid. Forgive me for my behavior earlier.”

“Oh, you don’t need to apologize.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. I noticed that the girl hiding behind Besheallina wasn’t with us. She was probably one of the crown prince’s “matters to attend to.”

So why were these two helping that girl? My best guess was that she and Besheallina were friends, and Besheallina lost her cool when she saw her friend crying. Then Shenavaroa tried to calm her down and got mixed up in the dispute. She was perfectly calm now, but Besheallina had been fearsome in the cafeteria.

The situation must have also piqued Colny’s interest, because she asked quite bluntly, “Pardon me, Shenavaroa, but might I ask about what happened

earlier?”

Shenavaroa seemed to consider this a very reasonable thing to ask. “Mmm, I’m sure it’s already being talked about out there, but I’ll tell you three as well. However, there’s much to tell that wasn’t said in the cafeteria.”

Apparently Besheallina had said a thing or two to Shorg Rablot, the son of Earl Milnegahn. I must have missed it all because I had been listening to all the gossip. But according to Shenavaroa, that brittle boy was the son of some earl.

“Through an arrangement made by their parents, Shorg and Denelz were to be married. Being nobles, maintaining relations between families is often a priority when arranging marriages,” Shenavaroa said with a sigh. “I hear they got along well enough when they first entered the academy, but—”

“It’s all because of that girl!” Besheallina shouted over her. Apparently, she was still upset. “Ever since she came to the academy—”

“Alli, I implore you to calm yourself. Your excitement might affect not just yourself, but Prince Lumers as well.”

Shenavaroa’s voice was placid, but had an undeniable force behind it that brought Besheallina back to her senses.

“Oh. I’m so sorry, Roa. Forgive me.”

“You don’t need to apologize. You did it because Denelz is that important to you, correct? This is hardly the first problem Lineka has caused.”

The rumors I had picked up while eavesdropping—I mean, while listening closely, in the cafeteria certainly agreed with that statement.

“Lineka Hogultar’s father is a baron, right?” Loks said. “I’ve heard she’s a misfit who transferred in at the end of her third year.”

So even he knew about her. I guess it only made sense that a transfer student would be noted by a prefect. Given the nature of the noble academy, transfer students were almost unheard of.

“You’re quite right,” Shenavaroa said. “It’s to my understanding that she’s the illegitimate child of Lord Hogultar, and she was living among commoners as recently as two years ago. It seems she’s unfamiliar with noble etiquette and

customs, which creates trouble on occasion.”

“Roa, there’s no need for you to mince words,” Besheallina said. “She’s seduced boys left and right since she got here! Her house is lacking in wealth and status alike, so she seeks out and entices boys from rich and prestigious families!”

“Alli, you shouldn’t talk like that.”

“But it’s the truth.”

I don’t recall the rumors mentioning that.

“As you know, our student body consists entirely of children from noble families,” Shenavaroa explained. “And when many of these students enter society, they find that differences in status prevents them from easily approaching each other. And so, every year there are students who have illicit little trysts.”

“And Lineka’s an exceptionally bad case of this?” Loks confirmed.

“I’m afraid so.”

WAIT. Kerfuffles like this happen every year? Uuugh. Chaos! At the academy!

“Though if they had been raised properly, I don’t imagine anyone with a betrothed would be letting their eyes wander,” Loks suggested.

“Meaning it’s not all gentlemen here,” Shenavaroa retorted. She looked like an elegant and dainty young lady, but there was more than meets the eye. I guess that’s what it takes to be a future princess.

Loks, why are your eyes darting about? Don’t tell me you had someone specific in mind when you said that. Colny’s got a very cold look in her eyes.

As I listened, I got the impression Lineka Hogultar’s prey mostly came from the houses ranked no higher than earls. That was where you found most of the boys of loose morals, apparently. She had at one point tried to pick up the son of a marquess, but that didn’t work when the target had such a prestigious name to uphold. Even the sons of earls rarely took the bait, so this Shorg boy was really making his family look bad.

“What do you think will come of this?” Loks asked.

Shenavaroa thought for a moment, then said, “Denelz’s family will most likely cut off the engagement.”

“Of course they will!”

“Alli... Also, this is just my supposition, but Shorg might be disinherited.”

“He was the oldest son of his family, right?”

“Indeed. He’s got a brother not much younger than him, so that brother will likely become the new successor. I should hardly be saying this, but there are rumors that the younger brother is much more suited to the honor anyway. I understand he’s already departed from the academy because he graduated early.”

Shenavaroa then winked, a gesture both cute but also devilish. There was definitely more to this future princess than meets the eye.

“Perhaps Denelz will become engaged to this younger brother,” Loks proposed, much to everyone’s surprise.

If the older brother fails, then try the younger one. Would it work?

Loks noticed the shocked looks from all girls and gave a chagrined grin. “Remember, it was a political marriage. Does it really matter whether it’s the older or younger brother that she marries? If Denelz had any affection for Shorg, it’s probably long gone by now. She probably despises him. I think her marrying the next heir is a perfectly sound idea.”

“That would indeed be better for the family,” Shenavaroa agreed, “but we don’t know what sort of person the younger brother is...”

“Well, this is nothing more than speculation on my part.”

“Indeed. Mere speculation.”

Loks and Shenavaroa shared a laugh, leaving the remaining three of us unsure just what to think. Even if their speculation proved correct, I hoped Denelz would be given time to let her heart heal.

Then there was a knock at the door. It was the crown prince and his retinue.

“Oh, enjoying yourselves?” he asked.

Your Highness, if that's what you made of this bizarre silence then we need to have a word outside. Don't take me up on that.

The crown prince strode into the room and sat down next to Shenavaroa like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Did you attend to the matter, Your Highness?" she asked with a smile.

"We listened to everyone's stories individually and then dismissed them. We then contacted the three concerned families and asked that they be at the academy at a later date. I guess that's when the real battle will happen."

Your Highness, please stop grinning. Your devious nature is showing and you're making yourself look like a villain.

Even Ville was grimacing. Mr. Frivolous and the black knight both looked entirely disinterested.

But the crown prince was right—the real battle would happen when the parents arrived. Plans for a political marriage were going up in flames, so contracts and whatnot were going to be involved. And what about Lineka Hogultar, the girl at the center of it all?

The crown prince turned to Besheallina, who was sitting diagonally to Shenavaroa. "Alli, I hate to impose on you, but could you look after Denelz? You're in the same grade and your rooms are nearby, so I can't think of anyone better for the job."

"Of course!"

The crown prince nodded and turned back to Shenavaroa. "Roa, I'd like you to make sure Alli doesn't turn violent."

"Certainly."

"Roa?!" Besheallina cried.

"Alli, I understand you care about your friends, but try to not forget there are people watching."

"Understood."

Not even Besheallina could oppose Shenavaroa and the crown prince.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me,” the crown prince said and stood, ready to leave as quickly as he arrived.

“Before I forget, Your Highness, what brought you to the academy today?”

“Oh, just checking in on my uncle. He’s had one headache-inducing incident after another, so I decided to lend an ear to his griping. I brought these three along to join in.”

“Oh my.”

Huh. So Ville was indeed accompanying the crown prince.

“Thank you for your hard work, Ville.”

“Thanks, Lera. Oh, that’s right, about your afternoon classes...”

“We’re late,” Colny reminded us.

Oh crap, that totally slipped my mind.

Electives were on the schedule for the day. I could already imagine Bear’s angry face. Or maybe he’d have a cheeky grin, given my reason for being late and all.

“I’ve got horsemanship today,” Colny said. “I can do makeup work later, so I have no reason to fret.”

“I’ve got swordsmanship. I can make something work,” Loks shrugged.

And so Ville’s gaze naturally fell on me. “And you, Lera?”

I hesitated. “General...magic.”

“Ahh. Bear’s class. Well, good luck with that.”

“Uuugh.”

Of all the possible times, why did this have to have happened during Bear’s class?! I considered just not going. No point when it was already more than halfway over. But then Bear would laugh at me next time I showed up. Goddammit.

“Hm? Lowell, I was under the impression you had exemplary grades in general magic?” Shenavaroa asked, shocked.

“Indeed,” attested the crown prince, equally surprised. “You had among the best grades in your class and were number one for general magic, weren’t you? My little brother was quite frustrated by his loss.”

Wait, Shenille was frustrated by that?

Magic was indeed one of my strong suits, but that didn’t have anything to do with it. I wondered just how I could explain it, when the Aspozat siblings did just that.

“It’s not a matter of magic proficiency,” Colny began.

“The teacher currently in charge of general magic is from Peylon’s magic research institute,” Loks continued. “He’s a longtime acquaintance of both us and Lera.”

“And he takes every chance he gets to poke fun at Lera,” Ville finished.

Thanks.

Both the crown prince and Shenavaroa were making peculiar expressions. On closer inspection, so was Besheallina.

Aah! I don’t like this! Even if I don’t quite know why!

Three days after the kerfuffle in the cafeteria, the heads of the three concerned houses all arrived at the academy. Earl Annille, Earl Milnegahn, and Baron Hogultar all talked things over. The next day, Lord Milnegahn’s son and Lineka Hogultar disappeared from the academy.

And the day after that, Colny and I found ourselves invited to a private repast. Our hosts were the crown prince, Shenavaroa, and Ville. For some reason, those black and white knights were also present. Not as guards, but as fellow diners. Loks joined us too, but Besheallina was absent.

“Shall we start with our meal?” the crown prince suggested.

The food served in the private rooms was different from what was on the menu in the cafeteria; it more closely resembled the meals served in a noble residence. We had hors d’oeuvres, soup, cooked fish, sorbet, and a meat entrée. Dessert followed, which came with coffee and petit fours. The normal

fare in the cafeteria was simply soup, meat or fish, bread, and then coffee with petit fours. Even that was incredibly lavish for an academy cafeteria.

Once the main courses were over, we had our coffee and dessert. The day's dessert was chocolate cake! That chocolate, I'll have you know, was from the Mystic Forest. Unlike Earth's cacao, this variety didn't need to ferment. It had its own song and dance necessary to make it edible, but as far as taste and scent went, it was chocolate, and it was delicious. The cake had the splendor of an opera and, taking small bites, I dug in.

"Now then, shall we move onto the details of the recent commotion?" the crown prince said.

It was then that I remembered that was what I was here for, not to enjoy a scrumptious lunch. While it wasn't any deep involvement, we had been wrapped up in the commotion, so it seemed the crown prince wanted to keep us up to date.

"I'll start with the center of it all: Lineka Hogultar. She's been expelled from the academy and her family banished from high society."

Well, this was interesting. But could you really be banished from high society?

Noticing my confusion, Colny whispered to me, "Essentially, they won't be receiving any invitations to social gatherings, not even from the royal family. Anyone foolish enough to send them an invitation will receive the same punishment. Without an invitation, nobody will talk to them or respond if talked to. And under those conditions, you can't partake in high society, can you?"

So banishment was more about what *wasn't* done, but that made it even scarier. What a terrifying thing high society was!

"They made their dissatisfaction clear," the crown prince continued, "but disrupting school morals is reason enough for expulsion. After all, that girl was involved in more than three incidents that resulted in the dissolution of marriage arrangements."

More than three?!

Did that mean there were at least three that they were aware of? Or did it

mean they were certain there were upwards of three? Either way, that girl really knew her business.

“By the way,” Ville added, perhaps picking up on my odd sense of admiration, “the fangs of Lineka Hogultar have even sunk into House Nihd. They have relations with Peylon, don’t they?”

“Huh?” Colny, Loks, and I all said at the same time.

House Nihd was a family that dealt in the trade of monster materials, and was the house of Colny’s friend Eiseya. Baron Gorsel also had a large trading company, but they dealt in different wares.

House Nihd had trade routes established throughout Ozeria and abroad, and also owned a trading company exclusively for monster materials. That was the reason for their long and close relationship with House Peylon. If something happened to House Nihd, it would be a big hit to the whole Peylon domain.

“For now, House Nihd has managed to overcome their setback. Or rather, we took steps to ensure that they would. So don’t worry about them,” Ville told me.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“The arrangements between Rach of House Nihd and Paleshina of House Lihla have been dissolved. Rach has been disinherited, and his younger sister, Rusina, will become the new heir. Rusina Nihd will marry the oldest son of House Lihla, Theulow. Rach’s former betrothed, Paleshina, will inherit her family’s title and have a fiancé chosen for her next month by His Highness.”

My head was spinning. So the original couple’s marriage was called off. The boy was disinherited. Instead of marrying into another family, the girl would instead take a husband and inherit her family’s title. The little sister of the disinherited boy would marry the younger brother of the girl inheriting her family’s title. And then it would all be settled.

Wasn’t House Lihla benefiting massively from this? They might begrudge sending their successor off to be married into another family, but he could have a large influence on House Nihd. Meanwhile, their daughter would be getting a groom selected by the royal family. But maybe that was only to be expected

when the boy from House Nihd was to blame for all this.

“House Lihla certainly did well for themselves here,” Mr. Frivolous said with a laugh and held up his glass. Nobody was going to disagree with him.

“House Lihla and their daughter suffered damages they didn’t need to take in the first place,” the crown prince added flatly. “It’s only reasonable that they get something out of it.”

“Oh, Your Highness,” Shenavaroa chided. She seemed quite worried. “Paleshina is in her third year at the academy, and her social debut will be at a ball next month. I can’t imagine what a nightmare it must be for all this to happen right before such a major event. I just hope she isn’t too depressed about it all.”

“That’s true. But what I wonder is, is Lineka Hogultar really just the daughter of a baron? I wouldn’t be surprised if you told me she was an intelligence agent from another land.”

Ah, a honey trap expert? She definitely was skilled at deceiving men. It just didn’t work on the sons of the higher-ranked nobles.

“Should we introduce her to the intelligence agencies of our own kingdom?” Mr. Frivolous suggested out of the blue.

“Quit it,” the crown prince responded with disgust. “I’ve heard a bit about her and she doesn’t sound like she’d work. There’s no controlling someone as stubborn as her. She tried to endear herself to me, even when her expulsion was about to be declared. And she did it while saying some utter nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” Shenavaroa asked.

“Something to the effect of ‘*koryaku*.’”

Coffee spewed from my mouth like lava from a volcano.

“Are you all right, Lera? What’s the matter?” Colny asked.

“No-Nothing, I’m fine,” I answered.

My heart was pounding.

He said koryaku! That’s Japanese! It means conquest! Am I in a romantic

visual novel?!

Not that I could tell—I only ever played RPGs. I never tried those dating sims and what have you. But what a pathetic conquest! Most people would go for the crown prince or the son of a duke, or a member of the clergy, or the son of a knight captain! Okay, I mean, the priests weren't allowed to marry and there were only four knight orders to begin with. But she did try her moves on the crown prince. It's just that she failed miserably.

But there was something more important: was Lineka Hogultar also reincarnated from another world? Not that I could share these concerns with anyone else.

“On the surface House Annille and House Milnegahn have both dissolved their arrangement. For being seduced by Lineka Hogultar, the boy from House Milnegahn has been disinherited and will be leaving the academy. Denelz of House Annille will be taking a brief reprieve from the academy. She is currently resting back in her family's domain.”

The crown prince explained how Denelz might not return until next year. She would earn the necessary credits through a private tutor and materials sent from the academy. If she stayed at the academy, she would just be subjected to endless rumors. While the young lady from House Lihla was in a similar situation, she would stay at the academy because she hadn't been involved in any public commotion.

But did this mean Besheallina's efforts to look after Denelz were completely unnecessary? However, if she hadn't caused a commotion, Lineka might have been allowed to stay at the academy, which would have led to more victims. Maybe all that yelling in the cafeteria was necessary after all? I felt like it was.

“Your Highness, you said ‘on the surface.’ Does that mean the two houses aren't actually breaking off the engagement?” Loks asked.

He received his answer from Shenavaroa.

“What His Highness meant was that beneath the surface, there are discussions being made for Denelz to marry the second son of House Milnegahn. However, one condition of this arrangement is that Denelz herself has to approve it.”

So Loks was right. After all, most marriages among nobles were made with political benefits in mind. And Shenavaroa *had* mentioned that the second son was far more suited to the honor. By skipping grades, he had already graduated the academy, but, under normal circumstances, he would be a fourth year, making him the same age as Denelz. According to Shenavaroa, the boy himself was very open to the idea.

“According to Alli,” she said, “this boy, Gilan, has special feelings for Denelz. When the idea of their marriage was broached, Alli urged Denelz to agree to it.”

I got that Besheallina was concerned for Denelz, but wasn’t she getting just a bit too involved? Shenavaroa and Colny seemed to agree, and the three of us shared some very understanding smiles.

“And that’s the extent of everything that relates to you all,” the crown prince said. “With the other soured relations needing mediation, the royal palace is going to be a busy place for the time being.”

His exasperation was apparent, so I offered a silent word of thanks.

Our private repast ended in short order, and we headed off to class.

“Sir Yuin joined us once again,” Loks muttered as we walked.

Yuin? Oh, the black knight.

Colny, for some reason, was side-eyeing me with a cheeky grin.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothiiiiing,” she sang. “That reminds me. Yuin’s quite popular among high society.”

I knew it. I knew it. No wonder I got all those death glares back in the cafeteria. He’s certainly a real heartthrob.

“According to Ville, Iyale from House Nedon is more popular,” Loks juttled in.

“Oh, but isn’t he rather shallow?” Colny bristled.

She, apparently, was no fan of Mr. Frivolous.

“Isn’t that what girls like about him?”

“I’ll never understand the tastes of high society.”

Colny began to pout, to which Loks just shrugged. After all, Colny's ideal man was someone like Ville. That's what a brother complex does to you.

Let's rewind back to the day of the incident.

After saying goodbye to my siblings and Lera, I walked with Prince Leor through the halls of the academy.

"Something on your mind, Ville?" the crown prince suddenly asked me. "Paying my uncle a visit is actually a more casual affair than it might sound."

"It's nothing," I replied.

"Yuin and Iyale, you two return to the royal palace and report today's events to my father. Ville and I can take care of the rest."

Fezgahn complied without any objections. "Yes sir."

"Your Highness," Nedon replied in a courteous voice, "it may be past the point of saying this, but I should remind you that this isn't our job."

"You two only just became knights, which means you're still greenhorns, correct?" Prince Leor said. "Just consider yourselves gofers being lent to me."

The crown prince was most likely just getting rid of the two, but even still, Nedon pretended to accept his explanation and bowed. This sort of affability was probably what made him so popular among the girls. Fezgahn had the superior looks, but he was far too impersonal.

"Now then, let's get going, Ville."

"Lead the way," I responded and followed after him.

At the time, I was a temporary aide to Prince Leor. Or maybe it'd be closer to say we were just pretending I was. As the son of a marquess, I should have been more focused on the affairs of my own family. But we were loyal to the crown, and I couldn't turn down a personal request from the crown prince himself.

The royalist faction was a gathering of houses that supported and exalted the royal family, and at its head was House Aspozat. As the eldest son of that house, I was obliged to do whatever the crown prince asked of me. And I think

part of me enjoyed being by his side.

Since our days as students, we often ended up doing things together and the crown prince was something of a likable guy. However, this also meant I did all sorts of errands for him. Still, those errands came with the long-term benefit of helping me make all sorts of interesting connections. I would inherit a number of them when I took over House Aspozat, but I wanted to develop my own social circle, and my parents agreed with this notion.

However, I never expected that to bring me back to the academy, where I'd find my siblings and Lera one wrong move from being at the center of trouble.

Fezgahn was the most concerning to me though. What was he doing back there? He was usually so cold and discourteous to women, yet he played the part of gentleman in front of Lera. Requesting introductions to a girl was something I'd never expect from him.

"That's one intense crease in your brow," Prince Leor noted to me.

Apparently, I had begun to scowl at some point—something you should never do in front of royalty.

"Forgive me, Your Highness."

"Are you thinking about your cousin?"

"Lera isn't quite my cousin, if that's who you're referring to. She's a more distant relative."

To be precise, she was a distant relative on our mother's side of the family. It was something like, our mother's great-grandmother was the sister of Lord Duval's great-grandmother. And so both House Aspozat and House Peylon maintained the bare minimum of relations with House Duval.

However, since she was three, Lera was raised under House Peylon, and that made her one of ours. If something happened to her, she would have both Peylon and us at her back. The relationship between our two families went beyond the fact that we were both royalist families. Our mother being from House Peylon contributed to this, but our bond went further back than that.

Some people belittled the Peylon Earldom as nothing more than a hick

domain, but they were nearsighted fools. Why would someone like my uncle, Earl Peylon, be allowed audiences with the king on short notice? For the same reason His Majesty always invited Lord Peylon to important balls and banquets. Anyone with a brain could see that House Peylon was deeply trusted by the royal family.

The head of House Duval—the poster child for half-wits—still continued to look down on House Peylon as noble bumpkins, and that was only one example of their idiocy. It was probably for the best that they disowned Lera. Growing up with Lord Peylon made her much happier than she would have been if she had stayed with Duval.

However, showing disdain upon her return to the royal capital and switching her out for an illegitimate child was something I couldn't accept. It wasn't something that any sane person would do. Did they really think nobody would figure it out? If they did, then they had a very low opinion of the royal palace.

And speaking of Lera, I just remembered that she was being bothered by the younger brother of the man before me.

"Oh, Your Highness," I said, "I'd like to thank you for your swift response regarding the situation with your younger brother."

"Hm? Oh, don't bother. You could say our own carelessness was at fault."

Now this won't do. I'm sure he adores his younger brother, but it must be a real headache now that the royals are getting dragged into this matter with Lera's birth family.

But his speedy resolution seemed to have nipped Prince Shenille's interest in Lera in the bud, so I was satisfied with the matter.

"Honestly, what was Shenille thinking, getting close to her?" Prince Leor wondered aloud.

In response I mused, "Listening to your brother and uncle, I got the impression he wanted to save her."

What a childish thing to do. Did he think he was some sort of hero? For us, it was nothing but a bother. After all, Lera was much better at navigating trouble than that young prince was. She had learned a thing or two during those years

spent hunting monsters in the Mystic Forest. Prince Shenille had made a serious misjudgment regarding her character.

My idea must have struck a nerve, because the crown prince gave me a spiteful glare. But he wasn't actually going to start an argument. We'd had exchanges like this since our student days.

My first priority wasn't Prince Shenille, of course, nor did I have any particular concern for him. My job was to support the royal family and protect both my house and the people of my domain. I considered it important to aid the crown prince, but his brother was honestly beyond my purview. Disciplining Prince Shenille was a job for his own brothers.

For a brief stretch, we walked in silence, but then the crown prince suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

"Do you think Yuin's serious?" he asked.

That wasn't something I was eager to discuss. I had just been trying to forget all about it.

"Just to be certain, what are you referring to?" I asked.

"I'm referring to that matter with Lowell."

"Ah. For once in his life, he chose to act like a gentleman. Yet then he held on to Lera's hand for an eternity."

I had considered prying open his grip myself.

"You should be happy. Spring has finally come for one of our classmates."

"I would if it were any other girl. But Lera is a different matter."

"You've always disliked Yuin."

I didn't dislike him. Our personalities were just completely incompatible. That unreadable masklike face of his unnerved me.

"Your Highness, I believe you're aware of Lera's circumstances. Lera wouldn't be a suitable partner for the heir to House Fezgahn."

"Maybe something can be done about that? Marquess Fezgahn is still rather young."

“No, it can’t. Anyone who wants to court Lera has to at least make it through the fourth layer of the Mystic Forest.”

“Ville, that’s just absurd.”

The crown prince looked at me with exasperation, but I wasn’t going to budge. After all, Lera herself had gone to the fourth layer. How could someone be her partner if they couldn’t keep up with her? Even I could manage that, meaning I could evaluate suitors with my own eyes. If Fezgahn wanted to be a fool, Loks and I could put him to the test. Colny cherished Lera no less than us, so we could count on her too.

I’ll have you know, Fezgahn, that the Mystic Forest is no place for a Sunday stroll.

When we reached the headmaster’s office, we found the man in question clutching his head. He must have heard about the incident in the cafeteria.

“Your hard work doesn’t go unappreciated, uncle,” Prince Leor told him.

“Ah, Your Highness. What a year it’s been so far...”

I could understand where he was coming from. When you gathered so many noble girls in one spot, things like this were bound to happen. But this year had gone beyond the norm.

“Lineka Hogultar sure has made a mess of things,” the crown prince said.

The headmaster confirmed, “Three marriage arrangements have already been wiped from the books because of her.”

“That’s certainly something.”

If one girl had done all that, I was inclined to suspect she was an intelligence agent from another country. And a good one at that.

“The worst of them is the situation with House Nihd.”

“Huh?”

I began to panic. *Hold on, that’s a name I recognize. Aren’t they associates of House Peylon?*

“As you’re aware,” the headmaster continued, “House Nihd manages a

trading company that has wide connections and deals in monster materials harvested in the Mystic Forest. They were forming a partnership with House Lihla, and were going to cement that bond with a marriage.”

“So the fault was on House Nihd’s side?”

“Lineka Hogultar sunk her fangs into the boy from House Nihd of all people. Now it’s all but certain that this will stall their partnership’s formation. Baron Nihd might be wealthy, but Viscount Lihla is still higher in the pecking order. This might be the end of House Nihd.”

This looked really bad. Even though he was only a baron, Lord Nihd ran a vast trading company that sold more monster materials than any other company in the kingdom. Peylon produced monster materials, which were processed by Duval, then sold by Nihd.

With trade routes that extended beyond the borders of Ozeria, no other house could compete with them in the field. A number of other houses had recently become involved in the business, but those newcomers couldn’t match the quality or quantity provided by House Nihd.

The buying and selling of monster materials was taxed at a higher rate than other commodities. If House Nihd were to collapse, it would be a hit not just to Peylon and Aspozat, but to the entire kingdom.

But letting that happen in order to preserve one’s honor was just how matters worked in the world of the nobility. As far as House Lihla was concerned, the only thing that mattered was that their daughter had been disgraced. With their reputation at stake, they had to regain their daughter’s honor.

The result was the likely destruction of House Nihd. An angry viscount was something to be feared, all the more so for a house of lower rank.

“Does either house have any alternative pawns they can marry off?” I asked.

“Ville, you shouldn’t say it like that,” Prince Leor chided me with a dour look.

But that was the simplest way to say it. The children of nobles were, ultimately, pawns. That’s how I saw it, and it was how my siblings saw it. But those pawns had feelings, and I still thought they deserved happy marriages

when it was possible.

The headmaster gave a hearty laugh. “I don’t mind, it’s just us here. But as far as pawns go, I believe House Lihla’s daughter has a younger brother. And the foolish boy from House Nihd has a younger sister. I think they’re both the right age for each other...”

So there was a good pawn.

“So why not have the younger brother marry into House Nihd?” I offered.

“But he’s supposed to be the successor of House Lihla, isn’t he?”

I had thought about that, of course.

“The eldest daughter of House Lihla, the one who was set to marry into House Nihd, can be the one to inherit her family’s title. And His Highness can find her a fine suitor. Perhaps the second or third son of a higher-ranked house?”

The headmaster seemed to take a liking to my suggestion, adding, “And if the royal family does House Lihla a favor, we can cash in on that debt in an emergency.”

And if that allowed for the preservation of House Nihd, both they and House Peylon would be indebted to the royal family. Even Aspozat would be, albeit to a lesser degree.

The crown prince was making a sour face, but I couldn’t blame him; normally, he was supposed to take the lead in these sorts of conversations. But people close to me were at risk here, so I couldn’t help myself cutting in front of him.

Unless he was unhappy about choosing someone’s marriage partner like his parents had for him? It didn’t seem likely. He and Shenavaroa got along very well. Really, it had been love at first sight despite his marriage being political. For this reason, he turned out to be something of a romantic. It’s why he had brought up Fezgahn earlier, as much as it irritated me.

The headmaster got his thoughts in order and gave me a beaming smile. “The dispute between Houses Nihd and Lihla hasn’t been settled yet. I’ll recommend your idea to His Majesty.”

“I would appreciate it.”

If he thought it would work, then I probably didn't have anything to worry about. If someone young as me were the only one to propose the idea, I'd be laughed at and told to know my place. With the headmaster bringing it up those smug old bastards at the palace would have to hold their tongues. Either way, I was glad to be receiving the help of the king's younger brother. Without him, this would be the end of House Nihd, and that would be a nightmare for both us and House Peylon.

"So, uncle, what's to become of the earlier trouble in the cafeteria?" the crown prince asked, now that the matter of House Nihd had been settled.

"According to the messengers, Lord Annille was red with anger when he heard what had happened. The marriage between their daughter and the boy from House Milnegahn will be called off."

My curiosity got the better of me. "Does Milnegahn not have any other pawns?"

Milnegahn. That name seemed familiar. Then it hit me—someone by that name had skipped a couple grades and graduated with my class!

And then the headmaster himself mentioned the name. "Don't you remember him, Ville? He skipped ahead and graduated the same year as you. He's Shorg's younger brother, Gilan."

"Huh? He graduated before his older brother?"

Yes, Your Highness. That's possible at our academy.

Given that he, too, was an older brother, maybe the crown prince just sympathized with Shorg. That said, I could relate to a degree. I had a genius for a younger brother myself. If Loks wanted to, he could have graduated right alongside us. However, he could be lazy at the oddest times, so it had never been a real possibility.

Still, wasn't that genius something to celebrate? You could brag and say things like "I've got such a smart younger brother." Maybe it was different in their families?

"The younger son of House Milnegahn is reputed to be the smarter one," the headmaster replied with a wry grin. "I remember there were discussions of

Gilan returning home and managing the domain once he graduated. This incident might have him called back to the royal capital.”

Pawns are meant to be put to use. Milnegahn and Annille were from a different faction than our family, so, frankly, whether their relations continued or not wasn't of any consequence to me. But it was hard to feel that way after what I had seen. I wanted to do something for the troubled young lady. If that had been Colny or Lera, then I wasn't sure if even taking the cheating fiancé's throat would be enough to satisfy me.

Whatever the case, having someone to grumble at seemed to have put the headmaster in a slightly better mood. But was this really part of the crown prince's *job*? Granted, I was just pretending to be his aide, so maybe I shouldn't complain.

Chapter Five: A Troublesome Problem

Time flew by in the blink of an eye. And here I thought I would be used to it by now.

“Colny, do I *really* have to go?”

“Of course you do. Do I need to remind you that His Majesty is hosting this?”

I groaned. We weren’t at the dorm, but instead at the Aspozat residence. Once our preparations were complete, I would be headed off to the royal opera house. It was the day of the event I had been so eagerly putting out of my mind—the royal ball held in honor of the top scorers on the exams. The only invitees were students who had received excellent marks.

And yes...I was one of those students. Loks and Colny had also earned top marks, which shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone. According to them, Ville, too, had been among the best in his grade for all six of his years at the academy. Of the three of us students, Loks was the only one who hadn’t yet made any appearances in high society. However, there was still a limit to which events a student could attend.

Once we were finished, we found Loks already waiting for us in the entrance hall.

“Ville and I will be your escorts for the evening,” he told us. “I’ll be escorting Colny, and Ville will look after Lera.”

“I appreciate it,” I said.

“You can tell that to Ville. Speaking of which, he sure is late.”

We *had* been told that his work at the royal palace was dragging on and he would be arriving late. Was he really going to make it in time?

The dress I had on was a deep blue with silver embroidery. Colny, meanwhile, had a green dress with black accents. Both were made to match our hair and eye colors. The colors and embroidery patterns were different, but the general

design was the same. We also had matching ribbons and hairstyles.

There was just one *decisive* difference. Colny, much like Sheila, had a very high armor rating, you could say. In the chest. As for me, my defenses were woefully lacking. Come to think of it, I'd had no better luck there in my previous life either. That was a trait I wouldn't have minded leaving behind.

However, I was ahead in the height department. "Slender" would be a nice way to describe me. And my dress wasn't some childish gown of fluff and frills; the design was really sleek. The royal ball was a pain in my neck, but I was still a girl, so I enjoyed getting to wear a gorgeous dress.

Once we were all ready and waiting in the hall, Ville finally arrived. "Sorry! I'll be ready in a moment!" he said, and promptly disappeared into his room.

I was only a bit concerned.

The Aspozat residence was furnished with showers, water heaters, and other inventions from the Peylon research institute, so they didn't have to call on their servants for every little thing. In a normal residence, even a bath required the intense labor of moving buckets of water and heating it with firewood.

At first I was worried that we might have put some servants out of a job, but they were fine. They were able to work on other jobs with their newfound free time. In fact, they were glad to be saddled with less manual labor. Scooping water and doing laundry weren't easy tasks.

Just as we were about to lose any chance of making it on time, Ville was ready. Excellent job.

"I really thought we might not make it," Ville mumbled the moment we got in the carriage.

Hearing that, my own thoughts just slipped out. "I think I would've preferred it that way..."

"You're still saying that, Lera?" Loks chided me.

"I'd suggest you accept your fate already," Colny added.

I'll never give up! I spent my childhood in the Mystic Forest. I'm not cut out for fancy gatherings. I'll probably be derided as a provincial.

“Lera, just where in the world do you get these ideas?” Colny asked me.

“Is that some sort of fairy tale?” Loks offered.

“Do they tell stories like that in Peylon?” Ville puzzled.

No mercy from the siblings! The source of those worries, by the way, was vague memories of light novels from my previous life.

The royal opera house was a bit north of the center of the capital. It was a gorgeous building, facing a wide street that was just off the main thoroughfare. Its line of statues and thick pillars reminded me of an ancient temple. From inside our carriage, I watched finely dressed ladies and gentlemen enter the building.

And I was to be one of those people. What a nerve-racking idea.

“Lera, stand up straight,” Ville told me. “This may seem like something fancy, but in reality it’s a den of monsters worse than anything you’ll find in the Mystic Forest.”

“He’s right,” Loks chimed in. “Some of these people can be scarier than monsters.”

“So do be careful,” Colny warned me.

It’s that bad?!

But when they put it like that, I realized I could just think of these people as being wild beasts. That made it a bit easier.

Entering the opera house, we were first shown to a waiting room. The only students here were those who had excellent exam scores. Even the students who made their social debut weren’t allowed if their grades didn’t meet the criteria.

Our order of entry into the ballroom was based on our grade, starting with the older students, so we all had to form a line. This ball was the only time entry was determined in this manner. Also, because this was a small gathering, minor mistakes would be graciously overlooked.

Even though Ville had already graduated, he went to the waiting room with

me because he was my escort. And the moment we entered, he found himself flocked by the other students.

“Ville’s really something,” I whispered to Colny.

“Indeed,” she happily replied.

She sure adored her brother, so of course she was glad that he was so popular. And naturally, Loks was swarmed as well. Being a prefect and having good grades gave them excellent reputations, so the other attendees practically jumped on them.

I took a look around the room and didn’t see any other familiar faces besides the people from my grade. I also spotted the occasional escort who didn’t seem to be a student at all. Some were relatives, others were engagement partners, and there were some pairs of students.

“I thought Shenavaroa might be here...” I muttered.

“She and Besheallina are accompanying members of the royal family, so they’re in a separate room,” Colny informed me.

That explained that.

Looking around, I realized class one’s prince wasn’t with us either. That was fine by me; he couldn’t bother me this way. I didn’t know what exactly it was about that guy. He wasn’t a bad person, but I just couldn’t take a liking to him. I don’t know. I just felt he always had his head in the clouds. Chasing ideals is fine and all, but you can’t look for them in people that aren’t okay with it.

After chatting with Colny in the waiting room for a bit, the time arrived for the students to make their entrance. One after another, our names were called by someone near the exit. Each time, the room’s population thinned. Colny and Loks were both attending as students, but Loks was called first, so she went with him.

“Well then, I’ll see you soon enough,” she said.

“Lera, pay close attention to Ville’s instructions,” Loks told me.

I wanted to remind them I wasn’t a child, but, then again, I had sulked all the

way here. I couldn't really protest.

Not long after Loks was called, they began calling the first-years.

"Lowell Duval," a voice called.

"Coming," I responded.

"Shall we go?" Ville asked.

"After you."

I felt like a calf being hauled off to the markets. A very famous song looped in the back of my mind.

The ballroom took up the entirety of the opera hall's seating area. They had removed all the audience seats to accommodate us. After entering the ballroom, the students all got in a line. First we had to say a word to our host, the king of Ozeria, then we would move to a designated spot.



“I’ve done this plenty of times,” Ville assured me. “Just leave it all to me.”

“I’m in your care.”

Having Ville for an escort was a huge boon to my sanity. It was probably why Colny and Loks had left him in charge of me. Unless I was mistaken, I thought I saw them both giving a thumbs-up.

Thank you so very much.

We moved up the line, and I finally got my chance to pay my respects to the king. I called it “paying respects” but I didn’t have to actually say anything; I just had to go up and curtsy when my name was called.

“Lowell Duval, and Winville Aspozat.”

I followed Ville up and gave a brief curtsy.

Woo. Obligation fulfilled.

Or so I thought.

“Hm. So you’re the daughter of House Duval?” the king asked.

“Huh?” I said, dumbfounded. Nobody had mentioned anything about him possibly talking to me.

The man before me seemed to be in his forties or so. I’d say he was a slightly grizzled silver fox. Thand, the head of House Aspozat, was also a silver fox, but the king was a different breed.

“I understand you’ve had your share of difficulties, but I hope you can hold your head high and continue undeterred,” he said with a sorrowful look in his eyes.

“A-Ah. Thank you very much.”

I really didn’t know how to respond. The woman next to him, who I assumed to be the queen, also looked at me like I was some pitiful child. I glanced at Ville, who skillfully avoided eye contact. He then escorted me from the front of the line to our designated spot.

“What was that all about?” I asked him.

“Ah...I suppose His Majesty also wanted to offer you a word of encouragement.”

That didn't make me any more fond of his unexpected behavior. I had nearly panicked.

But with that out of the way, all that was left was the first dance and I would be done. And goodness was I ready to go home.

And here we are. The royal ball is underway.

To tell you the truth, I didn't know much about dancing beyond the bits I had learned at the academy. The dances were mostly waltzes, and I *really* wanted to know which reincarnated soul introduced those to this world. Because of them, I found myself dancing face-to-face with Ville!

Naturally, the students had their first dance with their escorts. It was a pleasant experience, but, considering who I had for a dance partner, I hadn't expected anything else.

As we swayed around the floor, a hail of jealous gazes battered us.

“I certainly hadn't expected you to be such a fine dancer, Lera,” Ville admitted.

“Colny spent the past three days beating it into me.”

When classes finished, she and Loks would immediately come to abduct me. According to Loks, around this time, the academy dance rooms were reserved for the students preparing for the ball. So, with Loks as my partner, I got my dance lessons in. Colny didn't need any lessons, so it had been just me learning the ropes.

“Not stepping on Loks's feet was very hard.”

“You should've just stomped as hard as you could.”

“I'll let him know you said that.”

He snickered. “Do it when I'm around. I'd like to see his reaction.”

Ville cared a lot for his younger siblings, but he liked to tease them in equal

measure. Every time he pulled some prank, Colny would get furious. When that happened, she would get violent and thus let Ville build his collection of scars. Loks would shrug with resignation, then plan his revenge for when Ville least expected it.

Once the first dance was over, I let out a sigh of relief. Mission complete, as they say. As my eyes wandered, I caught sight of the crown prince and the second prince, each dancing with their partners. I didn't actually know what the second prince looked like, but I figured that man was most likely him because he was dancing with Besheallina.

"Now I don't have to do anything else, right?" I confirmed.

"You don't want to enjoy yourself a bit more?"

"This is not the kind of place where I can enjoy myself."

I was from the community of meatheads and Ville knew that very well. Was he teasing me or something? I wanted to say something, but a voice cut me off.

"Pardon me."

I turned and saw the black knight. Or at least, I was pretty sure it was him. He wasn't in his uniform, which suggested he wasn't here on work. The black knights didn't cover things like this; this was the jurisdiction of the Knights of the Golden Lion. Throughout the ballroom were dozens of knights wearing uniforms of flashy crimson with golden embroidery. Those were the Knights of the Golden Lion—the royal guards. Apparently, who was hosting and where determined which order would provide security at a ball.

The black knight was dressed in a nice suit. His training gave him a nice figure, which made the outfit look all the better on him.

"Fezgahn? Can I help you?" Ville asked, still cold toward the knight.

"I'm not here for you."

"What was that?"

Ville, you can't lose your cool so quickly! But if the knight isn't here for Ville, then...

"Miss Duval, would you do me the honor of just one song?"

Ahh. Of course it's me.

"Uh. Uhh."

Without realizing it, I turned toward Ville. Could I refuse? Or did I have to accept every dance proposal? I didn't even know basic things like that.

"I'm sorry, but Lera's not accustomed to these venues," Ville said. "Therefore, she'll only be dancing with me, her esco—"

"All the better. Think of this as a chance to practice."

"Really now?"

"I insist."

Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! If I turn him down, then won't I be humiliating him or something? Would it be poor etiquette to hide behind Ville's back?

"I'd consider this a perfect opportunity. Take the man up on his offer, Lera," Colny told me.

Where did she come from?!

"Does this amuse you, Colny?" Ville asked.

"Unlike you, Ville, I have more than amusement on my mind," she retorted. "Just as Sir Yuin said, she should get used to dancing, seeing as she'll be entering high society and all. If someone is willing to help you practice, there's no reason to turn them down. Right?"

It's over. I can't oppose Colny.

"I'm not planning on entering high society or anything," I said.

"As with anything else, it's all about accumulating experience," Colny continued. "Now then, Sir Yuin, Lera's in your hands."

"As you wish."

She's just gonna hand me off?!

Once again, I headed for the center of the dance floor. This didn't bode well. I had never danced with anyone besides the Aspozat siblings, including Colny. We had danced together just to be silly. We both tried taking the male and

female roles, cackling all the while.

I was pulled from reminiscing back to reality by the black knight clenching my hand with an iron grip. Had I done something to offend him? I had, hadn't I? When I got lost in the streets of the royal capital, I had stopped by a building I wasn't supposed to get near. Maybe he considered me suspicious?

Once we were on the floor, I took another volley of dagger-glances. I'm fairly certain I wasn't just imagining things. If looks could kill, I'd be dead many times over. And this time they were even sharper than when I had danced with Ville. I felt like I'd be covered in wounds by the time our dance ended. I glanced upward and saw the black knight was completely calm. There was no way he hadn't noticed the looks we were getting, so he must not have been bothered by them.

The song was a different one from earlier, but it was, of course, another waltz. A very strong arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me closer. He looked slender, but he *was* still a knight. From what I could tell, he was about the same height as Ville, but had narrower shoulders and an overall slimmer outline.

He was also really good at dancing. Despite my clumsiness, we were able to gracefully twirl about. Or at least, that's how it felt. The onlooking gazes became not just envious, but covetous. It was sort of incredible.

"Please, forgive my rudeness," the knight suddenly whispered to me, "but are you currently engaged?"

"Huh?"

Engaged? Engaged in what? Oh. Like a marriage arrangement.

It was hardly part of my everyday vocabulary, so it took my brain a moment to process the word.

"No, I'm not..."

I had been led to believe that was something usually decided by parents. But my parents were, well, what they were. Actually, it was possible they might bring along some absurd suitors. It occurred to me then that I really ought to cut ties with my birth parents entirely. I had heard bits and pieces about how it

was possible to do just that.

However, in the case of nobles, that almost never happened because it would mean becoming a commoner. I, however, didn't have any problem with living the life of a commoner, and I already had a respectable income.

I'll have to talk to Lord Peylon about this once I get home this summer.

"I've heard you're estranged from your father. Is that true?"

What a well-timed question that was. Had I been muttering under my breath? Surely not.

"It is," I replied.

"And House Aspozat is serving as your guardian?"

"Indeed."

Lord Peylon had been my guardian, but we had transferred that title to Lord Aspozat. We had filled out all the official paperwork, so even my father couldn't interfere. But why was he asking about this? Was this a form of interrogation? Had I done something to make him interested in my family situation?

I was about to ask what all the questions were for, but then the song came to an end. The black knight pulled off even the final bow with perfection and then escorted me off the floor. We headed back to my friends, and *boy* did Ville look upset. Colny and Loks, however, seemed to be having a good time.

Once we were back with Aspozat siblings, I began to internally beg Ville to hold back his evil eye. I felt like I was taking splash damage.

"You're finally back," he said.

"Goodness, Ville, you sound like a doting father."

"Colny!"

Ville's shout earned us a few surprised looks from the other attendees. Colny and Loks both laughed it off. Ville wasn't as docile as people liked to think he was.

"Well then, Ms. Duval, I look forward to our next meeting," the black knight said. He then took my hand, kissed it (right in front of Ville), and left. Once

again, he had incited a series of shrieks. And just like the first time, he had kissed my hand for an awfully long time. A full three seconds, ending just moments before Ville might remove him by force.

“Lera, he didn’t do anything to you, did he?!”

I couldn’t help but smile at the way Ville was acting like an overly anxious father.

“You mean during our dance? No, he just...”

“Just?” all three siblings asked in unison.

“He asked me a few questions. I didn’t really understand why.”

“What did he ask about?” Ville pressed.

So I recounted our conversation on the dance floor. “Um, he asked whether I was engaged, if it was true I was estranged from my father, if Lord Aspozat really is my guardian... I think that’s about it.”

“Wait, does he—”

“Oh my!” Colny said, cutting Loks off. “Perhaps he intends to propose?!”

My eyes went wide.

Propose? Propose what? Does she mean a marriage proposal?!

“But, this was only our third—or fourth?—meeting.”

“That has nothing to do with it! Love isn’t something you carry out—it’s something you fall into! This is wonderful!”

“Colny, cut that out,” Ville interjected, raining on her parade. “This is a serious matter.”

“I see no reason for you to get so upset, Ville. Lera’s marriage has nothing to do with you.”

“Even still!”

Wow. Ville really is acting like a father.

The first dance was over and I had ended up dancing with someone besides

Ville. But I had survived the royal ball mission and saw no reason I couldn't go home.

"Of course you can't go home," Colny told me. "This ball is made to start early so it can also end early. So you have to stay until the end."

My thread of hope was cut short. But I had done everything I was obliged to do, so it looked like I could spend the rest of the ball sitting in a chair against the wall. I made for a seat and the three siblings came with me. Ville was my escort, so of course he stayed with me, but Loks and Colny followed on account of needing rest. I wasn't sure I believed them.

"Unless I'm going crazy, people are glancing at us," Ville whispered the moment I sat down.

"Is that what I think it means?" Loks asked.

"Nah, it's not Duval," Ville replied. "I don't think I've even seen that old bastard around."

Ville, your speech is getting very loose.

I wasn't sure if it was okay for someone of his status to talk like that, but Loks didn't seem to mind, so I figured it must be fine.

But I was more interested in my father. I figured he'd be thrilled to bring Darnir to an event like this. Even without an invitation, she could come as his partner. But maybe that wasn't allowed at a unique event like this. On the other hand, her father was the type of person who would try and force his way. Maybe he planned to attend by himself and harass me. I really couldn't be sure.

"So here's where you four are hiding," someone said.

It was the crown prince, and Shenavaroa was with him.

Before me was a member of the royal family and his fiancée, an upperclassman from the academy, so I had to get out of my seat as I said hello. "It's wonderful to see you. And on such a fine evening," I said.

For some reason, our two new arrivals sat down with us.

"Is it really fine that some of our most notable guests are off in a corner?" the crown prince asked. I wanted to remind him that he was also a "notable guest."

“There’s nothing wrong with it. This way, we don’t have any obnoxious solicitors,” Ville bristled.

“Are you referring to Fezgahn?” the crown prince asked with a grin.

“Where were you watching from?”

“From one of the seats of honor. There weren’t many people near you at the time, so it was quite obvious.”

“Damn him...”

Ville sure didn’t hold back around the crown prince. It made me think that perhaps they were good friends, rather than merely old classmates.

And so the crown prince had watched the dance affair. I seriously believed the black knight had done that so he could get an opportunity to interrogate me. Surely Colny was wrong. I barely even knew the guy. Not to mention there were several years between us; he was the same age as Ville, whereas I was younger than Colny, albeit only by a year.

“So what did he say to you, Lowell?” the crown prince asked.

So he had seen that as well. He was not a man to be underestimated.

“Some questions about my guardian and father,” I answered, reluctant to say anything more on the subject.

“Lera, he also asked if you’re engaged.”

Colny, pleeease keep your mouth shut.

There was a flicker in the crown prince’s eye. “Oh? Yuin asked you that?”

I hesitated before answering. “He did.”

“Is that so?”

What was he so happy about?

“Your Highness,” Shenavaroa said with a deep sigh, “I’ll say it now. Please don’t involve yourself in business that isn’t yours.”

“Ah! You don’t need to tell me that.”

Oh, the crown prince is falling back. Does Shenavaroa already have an iron

grip on him?

“Truly? Do you promise to stay out?”

“I do.”

If Shenavaroa was that determined, did that mean the crown prince was really interested in this affair? I noticed Ville didn't seem entirely convinced.

The crown prince seemed to realize the attention he was getting and cleared his throat. “Either way, what's important is how both individuals feel about it.”

“Rather, isn't it about how their houses feel?” Ville quickly retorted.

Most marriages among nobles were political marriages after all.

“Not necessarily,” the crown prince argued back. “Before you is a man who loves his fiancée.”

He really said it without a hint of shame. Shenavaroa's face was growing quite red, but I noticed the hints of joy on her face. To be young and in love, what a wonderful thing.

I sort of sounded like an old lady there. I'm really sorry.

The ball had been held during the weekend, so I spent the night at the Aspozat residence and returned to the dorm the next day. When I arrived at my room, I noticed some slight marks had been left on my door.

“Hm? Did someone try to force their way in?”

There was no lock installed on the attic room door, so I'd been keeping it locked with magic. I had also put up a constant barrier that would both record and spring a trap on anyone who tried to open or destroy the door.

I gave the barrier a once-over and found it intact, in addition to a successful recording. Watching the footage, I saw someone try to open the door like they would any other. The attic room door looked perfectly normal, so it wouldn't have been wrong if it were anyone else's room. But when that didn't work, they seemed to get angry and tried to break it down.

The intruder in the video was wearing an academy uniform, and I got a clear view of a white ribbon. White meant they were a third-year which put them in

the same grade as Loks. On weekends, not many people stuck around the dorm during the day. Everyone either went off into the city or was busy with club activities. This intruder probably thought that was why they could get away with making a bit of noise.

“But I don’t remember this person at all.”

Through the dorm and the cafeteria, I had learned the faces of many of the other students, even the ones from different grades. I thought about it for a moment. An unknown person came to the attic room. The trap appeared to have been sprung properly, so they should be feeling the effects of it right about now, and there was a good chance I’d find out the culprit soon enough.

The effect of the trap was that the target would be cursed with diarrhea for about ten days. Well, it wasn’t a curse, per se—just a little spell. Either way, the enchantment was a strong one, so I don’t think it could’ve been deflected. People with strong magic resilience could deflect weak spells, so I made sure to use a pretty strong one to prevent that. I couldn’t think of anyone besides Bear or Nielle who would be able to open the door unharmed.

But since the intruder had been fended off and my room door was unharmed, I decided to leave it at that.

The next day, as I was heading to my room after classes, someone called out to me.

“You’re Duval from class one, right?”

I turned around and saw a girl I didn’t recognize. Her ribbon was white, meaning she was third-year.

“Yes, I am,” I answered.

“We need to talk. I’d appreciate it if you came with me.”

She wants me to follow her? Or, no, she’d appreciate it if I followed her. What’s this about?

I wondered if it had anything to do with the attempted break in at the attic room? And I had been so willing to just leave it alone.

She led me out behind the practical learning building. We were far from the club building and the sports field, so nobody came this way once classes were out. Just in case, I activated the magic tool embedded in my brooch. This was a magic camera, like what I had installed in the door of my room, but just like with the door, it looked to be nothing more than a brooch. Well, it still was a brooch, just one with a camera in it.

The institute had done a fine job with this piece. When I sent them the brooch they had it modified and returned the very next day. Lots of researchers there enjoyed making these kinds of toys—I mean, magic tools. They even thanked me for the idea.

I wasn't surprised to see a number of girls behind the building. Going off their ribbons, they were all third and fourth year students.

"You sure kept me waiting!" said an angry, fan-wielding girl at the center of the crowd.

Including the one who brought me here, there were a total of five girls. And the girl at the center caught me by surprise, drawing my eyes in whether I liked it or not.

Oh my melons. What incredible size. Her uniform is practically begging for mercy.

"Are you listening to me?" someone said.

*Colny's big, but not this big. I mean, **wow**. Did you enchant your chest with magnetism? Because I can't pull my eyes away!*

"Why aren't you listening?! And *where* do you think you're looking?!"

At your melons.

I couldn't say that out loud, obviously.

I dragged my vision up to her face and...saw someone I didn't recognize in the slightest. I had never seen her in my life. According to Lanmia (she was always sharing useful info with me), in the royal capital there were tea parties meant for children, as well as ones where they were permitted to accompany their parents. This meant most kids who grew up in the royal capital were familiar

with each other.

However, I hadn't grown up in the royal capital and thus had next to no social network here. I barely knew any of the people in my own age group, much less anyone older than me. And so, there wasn't a familiar face before me. I didn't know the name of the ringleader, so internally I went with "Miss Cucumis." I, for one, thought it was a very apt nickname.

"Honestly, this is why you should avoid interacting with bumpkins! Isn't that right, everyone?"

Miss Cucumis received a round of agreement from the other girls. A normal young lady might have run away crying, but nobody, including me, would consider me a normal young lady. On closer examination, I realized that the would-be intruder was part of this gaggle.

She's awfully pale. I hope she's not holding it in. Ah, she just clutched her stomach. See, what did I say? Oh, wait. I only said it in my head.

Even though this girl had tried to get into my room, I couldn't just scare her and her friends off with magic like they were just some monsters. And why were they being so antagonistic?

"Excuse me," I said.

"What is it?"

"Why was I brought here?"

They all paused for a moment.

"I-I can't believe it! You came here without knowing why?!"

"That I did."

An older student told me to accompany them, so I obediently did just that. Miss Cucumis began to quiver. If I could see auras, I'm sure there would've been flames behind her.

"*You!* You got cozy with Sir Yuin without even considering what consequences it might have for him! Do you understand what you've done?!"

I had no idea who she was talking about. She said I had gotten cozy with this

person, but that wasn't ringing any bells. I tried to remember, but my evident obliviousness only further enraged Miss Cucumis. She raised her fan in the air and swung it down.

It was heading right for me, so I grabbed her wrist and said flatly, "Watch where you're swinging that."

"H-H-How?"

A fan swung by the weak arm of a young lady was something I could handle even without using magic—just another product of my Peylon upbringing. Everyone there loved a good surprise attack. I could recall getting knocked around a lot at first.

To be clear, they just used a soft rod meant for children, and nobody got serious when they swung it. After a few years of enduring that, dodging surprise attacks became second nature. Then I also learned to block and counterattack. Humans can do anything if they put their minds to it.

Miss Cucumis tried to free her wrist from my grasp, and the blood drained from her face when her efforts failed.

"Even a fan can cause someone to lose their eye if they get hit in the wrong place. I'd suggest you don't swing it around like that," I told her. "And you, the one in the back. You don't look well. You probably shouldn't hold it in too much. Medicine won't do you any good with that."

After all, it was a spell of my own creation, so I knew exactly how it worked. It could be undone with magic, but it would also go away on its own after ten days. I wasn't too eager to undo the spell when it was there because of her attempted break-in.

I went ahead and explained the stuff about the spell and the gaggle of girls all became pale as ghosts.

"Hel..." Miss Cucumis mumbled.

"Hel?" I asked.

"Help meee!" she cried.

"Huh?"

All the other young ladies made a break for it.

“What’s going on?”

Miss Cucumis fell to the ground, tears streaming down her face.

I probably shouldn’t just leave her here, should I?

In the end, Loks happened to come across us and he took care of it for me. I had to wonder, was it really a coincidence that he ran into us?

“Of course not. I’m a prefect, remember?” he said. “A teacher foist—asked me to patrol the school.”

It wasn’t a very good lie, but I decided to just be happy he found us before we drew any more attention. After finding us, he had brought us to an empty room near the staff office. From there, Miss Cucumis was taken to the academy nurse.

“So, what were you and that girl doing back there?” Loks asked me.

“Actually, there were a few of us,” I said. “Here.”

From my pocket I removed a portable projector and displayed the footage recorded by my brooch.

“Now this is certainly something,” Loks said with some chagrin.

Oh, right. Loks might know.

“Loks, who’s that ‘Yuin’ fellow Miss Cucumis was talking about?”

“Before that, what do you mean by ‘Miss Cucumis?’”

Damn. That doesn’t work in this world. Umm.

“As in cucumis melos. Melons.”

“Melons? Lera, don’t tell me— Did you come up with that name after looking at her chest?”

The jig was up. But anyone would do the same thing after seeing that girl. Loks just sighed when he heard me laughing.

“Well, I guess I understand the sentiment,” he admitted. “That girl is

Chetasokia, she's from House Nallison. Were you violent?"

"You saw the recording for yourself. She tried to hit me with her fan, but I grabbed her wrist and stopped her. You wouldn't call that being violent, would you?"

If anyone had been acting violent, it was the other girl. Loks seemed to agree.

"She didn't know what she was doing if she tried to hit a girl from Peylon," he said with a shake of his head.

He was right. But that girl probably didn't even know what sort of place Peylon was.

"She called me a bumpkin. I don't think she knows anything about Peylon."

A look of displeasure flitted across his face. He was very fond of Peylon and enjoyed visiting the forest during the summers, so I understood his distaste for the region being belittled.

"House Nallison doesn't have any connections with House Peylon, so maybe we can't blame her for her ignorance. Oh, and one other thing."

"What is it?"

"You really don't have any interest in Yuin, do you?"

Okay, so I had to have met him at some point, or else Loks wouldn't have said that.

"Who are you talking about?"

"He asked you to dance at the ball not too long ago, remember? Sir Yuin Sacourt Fezgahn."

"Ohh."

So they were talking about the black knight. They could've just said that. Unless he *had* given his name and I was the only one who didn't remember it... My bad.

"Back to the other matter. Can I take this recording? I'll have to report this."

"Sure, but what will happen to Miss Cucumis?"

“At best, expulsion. At worst, perhaps she might be sent off to a convent.”

Wow. She really screwed up.

Loks then informed me that this wasn't her first bad deed, hence why expulsion was even on the table.

“What she did was beyond excessive,” Loks said. “You might not have minded it, but a normal young lady could have easily been injured.”

That was true. I sure hoped she realized how lucky she was that I had been raised in a place like Peylon.

Miss Cucumis's punishment was decided relatively quickly: expulsion. Maybe that wasn't particularly surprising when she was already on thin ice. At lunch, Loks told Colny and me all the details he had learned through his position as a prefect.

“Her father, Earl Nallison, protested fiercely. Apparently he refused to accept that his daughter had been expelled.”

“It's a perfectly reasonable punishment, given all the trouble she's caused,” Colny said. “It's clear she hasn't been disciplined properly at home. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as they say. Since it went that far, you should've just challenged her to a duel. Then you could've decimated her in front of a crowd of spectators.”

Calm down, Colny.

I didn't want to decimate Miss Cucumis or anything. She had been taken care of (if you can call it that) and I would probably never see her again. Getting expelled from the noble academy was terribly humiliating—enough to instantly ruin one's marriage prospects. She really screwed up.

Naturally, she also wouldn't be appearing in high society because she wouldn't be receiving invitations of any kind. Balls, tea parties, and other fancy gatherings were vital to the growth of noble houses, so for them, this was almost a sort of death sentence.

Out of fear that Colny might snap the table in two, I decided to change the

subject. Physically and magically, Colny was a very strong girl.

“So do you two never get invited to private repasts?” I asked.

“If anything, we’re usually the ones doing the inviting,” Loks answered.

“Our parents have told us we don’t need to do anything,” Colny added. “We have plenty of connections beyond the academy, so we needn’t worry.”

Private repasts were social events, like miniature luncheons. They were meant to help children continue the social bonds set up by their parents. But House Aspozat let their children choose their own friends. They were free to continue the relations formed by the previous generation or prioritize their own.

However, because they were at the top of the royalists, they had to stay friendly with houses of the same faction. Technically, that included House Duval, who apparently weren’t very well liked by the other members. It wasn’t just my father; my grandfather had also done something dumb. Dark days ahead for the house that has two consecutive fools in charge.

Chapter Six: The Academy Festival Is Lots of Trouble

February was the season of social events, a time when about half the student body was too busy to care about anything else. But that season had finally ended and April had soon enough arrived, bringing with it a major event that many were awaiting with bated breath.

“So what’s the event?” I asked.

“The academy festival,” Colny answered with a smile.

Oh? So we have a festival?

The sunny season was used as a time for both festivals and to see off the graduating students. The festival was the academy’s most elaborate, partly because it was many students’ last. It was held near the end of April. The moment socialite season wrapped up, all the academy’s clubs began preparing for this. But that didn’t mean the students without clubs were allowed to sit on the sidelines—there were events for everyone.

Classes were out for the day, and everyone who was part of a club was busy. Meanwhile, Colny, Loks, and I were enjoying tea in the cafeteria. The cafeteria was open until evening and offered light meals and drinks, just like a café. This was set up for the students who built up an appetite during their club activities. For those who did sports, it was hard to wait until dinner.

“It’s always the graduating students who get the most worked up,” Loks said with a wry grin.

They must have wanted to make the most of their final days at the academy. I wondered if Ville had let loose last year. It wasn’t hard to imagine, but it turned out the festival wasn’t quite what I expected.

“It’s really all about letting our parents see how we spend our time at the academy, and showing off what we’ve learned,” Loks explained before taking a sip of tea.

Entry to the festival required an invitation, and the bulk of those went to

parents or relatives of students. Apparently, through less legitimate channels, those tickets could be bought for high prices. Enterprising individuals really could be found just about anywhere.

Much to my disappointment, there wouldn't be student-run cafés. I guess it made sense, considering the purpose of the festival and all. But it wasn't all bad; popular stalls from the rest of the royal capital would be setting up on the academy grounds. Students would, however, get to participate in swordsmanship demonstrations and jousting, among other things to show their skills. What students participated in was based more on their electives than which club they were in.

"I think they're about to start picking students for the archery demonstrations," Loks told me.

"Ah. I've got archery class tomorrow."

"You'll probably hear about it then."

As the swordsmanship and jousting classes would be having mock battles, archery would be having a target shooting competition. My grades in archery weren't anything exceptional, so I didn't see myself getting picked for it.

"So what about those people who picked the maidenly classes?" I asked.

"Students of painting and embroidery will be putting together a gallery. The music students will be putting on a small performance."

That made sense. I didn't think many people would want to watch a live display of embroidery techniques. Setting up something like a classroom where you could try a hands-on experience might have been possible, but I didn't think many people would go for it. When most of the visitors would be nobles, most of the women would already have experienced painting and embroidery.

Even though it was called the academy festival, it sounded more like a big event for parents to observe their children's academics, even more so than a cultural festival.

The plays, however, would be run by clubs, instead of by elective classes. The academy's drama club was the most popular club among female students, and all its members were girls. Every year there was a flood of new applicants,

making auditions a very competitive affair. Only the best could get in, so the sight of tearful failed applicants was a regular occurrence every year. I was reminded of a certain all female revue from my previous life.

“The plays are popular, but the biggest attraction are the mystic-jockey races.”

“What are those?”

“They’re races held among the students of mystic-jockeying. A special track is built on the academy grounds and they see who can clear it the fastest. There are some fans who come back to see it year after year.”

Uh-oh. I’m in that class.

But I still hadn’t even properly ridden any mysticstock. That was because they all ran away in fear or stood frozen...with fear. It was pretty weird, but there wasn’t much we could do about it. I just had to focus on the academic side of it until the academy received something that I could ride.

While I reflected on this misfortune, the two siblings chatted away.

“Aren’t those races mostly run by the older students?” Colny asked.

“Not at all,” Loks answered. “They have races for students of each grade.”

“Is it now? Lera, you take mystic-jockeying, don’t you?”

Did you have to bring that up?

“There aren’t any mysticstock I can ride,” I sighed, “so I probably won’t participate in any races.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m guessing they get scared and won’t let you ride them,” Loks said. “I guess it’s a side effect of your time in the Mystic Forest.”

Aha, that must be it. It’s because I’ve hunted a whole menagerie’s worth of monsters. All those mysticstock are just docile monsters that have been raised among humans.

“I’d recommend participating and doing your best in the races and demonstrations,” Loks advised me. “It’ll affect your final exam scores.”

“It will?” Colny asked, just as surprised as me.

It seemed contributing to the academy festival could improve our grades.

“It’s tradition for students who have trouble with tests to do their best during the festival,” Loks explained.

What kind of tradition is that? But does this mean I won’t have to participate in the festival if I go all out on the exams? No? Oh, crud.

Instead, I prayed that I would just be able to escape the archery and mystic-jockeying demonstrations.

And so I did. I somehow managed to get out of being part of the archery demonstrations, and mystic-jockeying hadn’t really been a possibility to begin with. But there was one *little* pitfall.

A certain someone came up to me before our general magic class began.

“Tell me, why are *you* participating in the festival?!”

It was Ribbons. Behind her were three girls, each giving me a nasty stink eye. She had formed a little gang at some point, which seemed to have been a real confidence booster for her.

“Are you listening to me?!”

“No?”

“Huh?!”

Of course I wasn’t listening to her. What was she even talking about? I was under the impression everyone would be participating in the academy festival. Was she planning to get me expelled or something?

“Listen you!” she yelled.

“I don’t think you should make so much noise. This is a classroom,” a voice to our side interjected.

I looked and saw that it was Prince Shenille. Ribbons and her backup all let out shrill squeals. Did they not get that he was telling them off? Did they understand that this was no time to be squealing? I got my answer when I

noticed the hearts in their eyes. There was no hope for them.

“Class is about to start, so why not take your seats?” he suggested.

“Ce-Certainly!” Ribbons said.

Well, if their enamoration meant they could be pacified, I guess it was fine. The prince gave me a smile, which I returned with a small bow. No denying that he’d actually helped me out there.

But what had Ribbons been making such a ruckus about? As I let out a deep sigh, Bear entered and class began.

“All right, let’s get started,” he said. “But before that, you all know that the academy festival isn’t far off, right?”

Hm? Oh. Don’t tell me.

“General magic—that means us—will be holding a magic exhibition,” Bear continued. “I’ve already picked out the participants, so don’t think you can worm your way out of it.”

Wipe that grin off your face and stop looking at me. I feel like I’m about to be swallowed whole.

One student was brave enough to ask the grinning bear a question. It was Ribbons.

“I have a question, sir!”

“Oh, what is it, Miss Duval?”

“Why was *she* chosen?!”

The three girls of Ribbon’s gang all let out a chorus of agreement. Everyone else was simply confused. After all, Ribbons was pointing at me. Even Bear was confused.

“And by ‘she’ you mean Lowell Duval, correct?”

“Correct!”

“Hmm. Well, let me ask you this, can you name the ten people with the best scores in the class?”

“Uh.”

“The exhibition participants will be decided based on their grades. That’ll be based on both their mid-year exam scores and the other minor tests. The top scores are all published, so you might know it. C’mon, give it a go.”

Ribbons fell silent.

She didn’t seem the sort of person to be interested in anyone but herself, so she likely didn’t know any of the names.

“If you can’t, then let’s move on. By the way, you are not among those ten. Remember, you lost to *her* in the magic competition.”

Some students began to giggle. Sometimes, it pays to keep your mouth shut.

“Anyone else got any questions?” Bear asked. “No? Well then, I’ll announce who’ll be participating. First, Lowell Duval.”

Ah, I knew it.

The prince, his attendants, and some marquess’s daughter were also selected. Ribbons was attempting to glare a hole in me, but I wanted to tell her it wouldn’t do her any good. But where had she heard in advance that I was going to be part of the exhibition?

Both our general education and elective classes were shifted to help prepare for the upcoming festival. Even in archery and mystic-jockeying, the teachers put more focus on the students who would be part of the exhibitions. That was fine. I could study archery on my own and, well, I’ve already talked about mystic-jockeying enough. I just had to wait and wait for a mysticstock that wasn’t afraid of me. I began to think that once the academic year ended, I would just go out and find one myself.

The issue was general magic.

“It’s been decided,” Bear declared with a groan, “that we’ll be performing synchronized magic.”

We were in the prep room by the general magic classroom. Synchronized magic referred to multiple people pooling together to cast a single spell. They

had once been used on the battlefield, but these days there weren't any wars in Ozeria. Occasionally, some of the petty kingdoms would harass our southern border, but that was about it.

"So what sort of spell is it going to be?" I asked.

"That's for you all to decide."

"You're just gonna shove it off on us?!"

I wanted to punch him. But it'd probably hurt my fist more than Bear. At least the man did the bare minimum and made us a list of spells we could cast. If he hadn't done that much, I really would've socked him, strength buffing spell and all.

I glanced over the list of spell names and effects.

"Mmm, I don't think we can use many of these at the festival."

"They were meant for the battlefield, so most of them were made to harm."

Casting a big offensive spell definitely wasn't in the cards for us. With that sort of firepower, we might accidentally turn the academy into a crater.

"Something like that actually happened, about fifteen years ago," Bear told me. "Back then, participants weren't decided by their elective, but could apply to any event."

"What'd they do?"

"They tried to make a dragon of fire fly through the air."

"What happened?"

"A massive explosion. But the teachers had put up a defensive barrier and kept everyone at a safe distance, so the damage was kept to a minimum."

"Holy crap."

Who the hell okayed that?

Once a flame had been started, controlling it was incredibly difficult. Trying to make a dragon was simply reckless.

"Well, most of the spells are meant for fighting," Bear shrugged.

“I can hear Nielle groaning.”

Nielle really loved magic, and spent most of her time at the magic research institute in Peylon gleefully working on some spell of dubious practicality. Her motto was that magic was something to be used for peace.

Besides, we didn’t need a group to make a flaming dragon appear.

“Hm?”

“Found something good?” Bear asked.

“This one.”

It was an illusory spell near the bottom of the list. It was a spell used in tactics such as making a force look larger than they actually were, or making an illusion appear to the right while an actual army attacks from the left. However, it seemed it often failed to successfully fool adversaries, so it quickly fell out of use. I thought that sounded like user error more than anything else.

Bear made a face when he saw the spell I was pointing at. “Illusory magic, huh? What’s the point of doing that as a group?”

“I don’t want to hear that from the person who forced this on us,” I shot back. “We’re going to be a group of ten, right? It wouldn’t necessarily have to be a dragon, but we could paint an image in the sky that everyone could see, right?”

“There’s an idea. So what sort of image is it gonna be?”

Hmm. I guess that’s pretty important. Uhh. Ahh.

“What sort of plays are popular in the royal capital right now?” I asked.

“How should I know?”

“Right, I shouldn’t have expected a bear to know that.”

“Quit calling me that!”

Unable to rely on Bear, I headed to the faculty office and flagged down a number of female instructors for their opinion.

“Wouldn’t that be *Dawn’s Blaze*?”

“Oh, I’m certain it’s *My Heart Rests in the Distant Lake*.”

“Really? I’d hazard that it’s *The Reaper and Me*.”

My simple question got me much more than I had bargained for.

“Hmm. Well then, is there a classic that everyone’s familiar with?” I tried.

“*Gossamer Manor*,” they all answered in perfect unison.

Ooh, they’re all in agreement.

I asked them about the contents, and it sounded like a tale appropriate for people of all ages.

A noble boy from a high-ranking house becomes smitten with a noble girl from a low-ranking house. They get engaged, but the girl gets bullied by the other young ladies who have feelings for the rich boy. The girl’s spirit comes close to breaking, but then her betrothed steps in, saying he’ll stand by her side no matter what. Moved, the girl proudly gets back on her feet, marries him, and brings prosperity to his house.

I thought it sounded like a story about a woman’s rise to success.

“What are you talking about?” said one of the teachers. “It’s a tale of pure love.”

“No it’s not,” said another. “It’s about a woman’s independence.”

“Huh? It’s not a noble love story?” said a third.

What’s this? They all see it in different ways? Is it that complicated of a story?

My confidence was quickly waning. Because the tale had been adapted for the stage so many times across so many places, there were a number of versions out there. Even the same story could be seen from a number of perspectives, all the more so when there had been so many performances of it.

But if the story had so many alterations, maybe nobody would complain if I put my own spin on it? So I settled on *Gossamer Manor*. I planned to use the notes I had received from the teachers and arrange the story into something resembling a fairy tale. Now I needed someone who could add illustrations.

“Is there anyone here who could draw specific scenes for this?” I asked.

“Perhaps Miss Derod could do it?” one of the teachers suggested. “I don’t think she’ll say no if you tell them it’s for the academy festival.”

I wasn’t excited about doing what I felt like would be pushing my work onto someone else. But since I couldn’t draw, someone else would have to do it. Just a bunch of letters in the sky wouldn’t be very impressive.

Miss Derod was a mellow woman with large glasses and frizzy hair. As I talked to her, she struck me as someone gentle and attentive to her students.

“And that’s what led me here,” I said, finishing my explanation. “I understand it’s a significant number of illustrations, but would you be willing to draw them for us?”

“This is for the academy festival?” she said. “Very well. I’d be delighted to help out.”

“Thank you so much!”

Having somehow gotten over that obstacle, I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders. But I still had a lot of work ahead of me!

Preparing for the festival caused the days to slip by, and the event was upon us before I knew it.

I stood with Colny outside the front gates. We were waiting for Ville, Thand, and Sheila to arrive. Loks couldn’t join us because he was preoccupied with his prefect duties. Trouble could break out at any time during an event like the academy festival, so the prefects had their hands full. Their efforts did not go unappreciated.

“Ah, there they are,” Colny said.

A carriage that I knew very well was rolling toward us. It stopped in front of the gates, and the first to get out was Ville.

“Come to welcome us?” he asked.

“That’s right!” I answered.

“It’s good to see you again, Ville,” Colny said.

“And I’m glad you two are in such good spirits,” he replied as he helped Sheila out of the carriage.

As was usual for her, Sheila was beautifully dressed. It was an outfit meant to be worn during the day, so it showed little to no skin. And yet it was still heart-stoppingly sexy. It was a deep purple dress accented with black lace and a hat to match. Conforming to the contours of her figure, the dress curved in an S-shape. That was Sheila for you. I noticed a number of students looking at her and growing red in the face.

“Colny, Lera, it’s so good to see you two,” she said to us with a beaming smile. “Have you been well?”

“Yes, mother, we have.”

“And you two?” I asked.

Sheila nodded. Behind her, Thand disembarked from the carriage. Unless I was mistaken, he seemed a bit tired.

“Thand looks rather exhausted,” I whispered to Sheila.

“Yes, there was some trouble at the royal palace,” she whispered back. “Some of us were asked to mediate.”

What a drag that must have been. My heart went out to Lord Aspozat. Since their house led the royalist faction, they probably didn’t have any choice but to play the role of mediator. Internal disputes were already trouble, and I probably don’t need to spell out how much worse it got when it was between members of different factions. No rest for the nobility.

At the festival, it was tradition for students to show their parents and relatives around. Except for the few that had their own special circumstances, most every house followed this tradition.

“We’ve been coming here since Ville’s first festival,” Sheila said. “It feels like an annual tradition at this point.”

“Indeed. It saddens me to think that will end when Lera graduates,” Thand mumbled.

Sheila gave him a vexed grin. “Oh, dear, that’s still a long way off.”

Hearing them naturally include me in their family was very touching to me.

Thanks, you two.

“Where shall we start?” Colny asked as we looked through the program together.

“If we can start with any grade, why not go see the swordsmanship exhibitions?”

We were determined to make the most of our limited time. Thanks to the program we had received, we had already planned out our schedule to a degree by picking out what seemed worth seeing. I tried to be sneaky and make sure they didn’t end up at the event I was set to appear in, but Colny put a stop to that. Damn her.

“So what will you two be participating in?” Sheila asked us.

“I’ll be taking part in horsemanship,” Colny said.

Colny would be performing something similar to what they called “show jumping” in my previous life. They had a course set up and everything.

“And you, Lera?”

“I’ll be performing synchronized magic with members of my general magic class.”

“A magic performance?”

“If you want to know more, you’ll just have to wait and see.”

We would be casting an illusory spell, after all. If I told them what we’d be doing, half the fun would already be spoiled. Miss Derod and I had gotten together repeatedly to discuss the project and determine the direction of the illustrations. Thanks to her, I was plenty satisfied with the final products. I couldn’t thank her enough.

While I thought back on all the work she had done for us, we reached the swordsmanship exhibition.

Whoa. There’s so many people here.

“Will we be able to get seats?” Sheila wondered.

“Don’t worry. I heard they made sure there was ample seating,” I assured her as I looked around. I could see a fair amount of empty seats. At this time, they were also holding the jousting matches, so maybe everyone was watching those.

They were called exhibitions, but they were still breathtaking to watch. After all, two students were competing to show off their skills with a blade. Most students who enrolled in swordsmanship classes became knights after graduation. They were passionate about the art, and good results here could land them a recommendation to a knight order later down the line.

“Doesn’t Loks take swordsmanship classes?” I asked.

“Last I checked, he does,” Ville replied. “But he’s a clever one. He probably made sure his grades were *just* low enough that he wouldn’t get picked for something like this.”

I thought that was pretty impressive. I remembered Ville saying something about how Loks could get the best grades in his class if he really tried. But he held back so he wouldn’t rank among the best in his class, and thereby evaded the exhibition. But prefects were selected by the teachers, so he wasn’t able to slip out of that duty.

Colny could barely stay in her seat as we watched the exhibition. I wondered if perhaps she had wanted to be part of it. Unfortunately, girls weren’t allowed to take swordsmanship or spearmanship classes. She would just have to wait until she could take a trip to Peylon, where she could swing a sword to her heart’s content.

We then saw some other exhibitions and galleries, although Colny separated from us at one point so she could prepare for her own event. Just before lunch, we went to see her show jumping.

“The arena’s over here,” I said. “Right now they’re performing classic equestrian arts.”

“Why don’t we watch that until Colny comes out,” Thand suggested.

And so we did. In a building about the size of a gym there was a circular arena surrounded by seats for spectators. The classic performance had already begun when we entered. I watched riders steer their horses in a straight, orderly line.

Ah, I saw this on TV in my past life. I think it was a foreign program. There's something captivating about synchronized horse riders.

After that, it was finally Colny's turn to take the stage.

"Oh, this sure is a popular one," Thand said, noticing most of the seats had already been filled.

"Apparently this happens every year," I replied. "I hear the girls' riding uniforms are very popular."

"Oh are they?"

Thand had a very frightening look in his eyes. You see, the uniforms were popular because they showed the outline of the wearer's legs, which were usually hidden beneath a skirt. But I didn't explain any of that to Thand.

Both the boys' and girls' uniforms had pants made with flexible material to provide ease of movement. As you might have guessed, they were made with monster materials. Once again, spider silk came in handy. Spider silk and fur from goat-variety monsters could be combined with fibers from plant-variety monsters to make a thread both flexible and absorbent.

Still, I felt a cold and terrifying chill from behind me, where Thand was sitting.

"Ah, it's starting," someone said.

There were five boys and five girls from Colny's grade. Unlike general magic, which picked the top ten out of everyone, the horsemanship teacher made sure there were five boys and five girls. Though I was pretty sure general magic didn't do that simply because Bear would've thought it too much work.

The show jumping had a different appeal from the previous exhibit. Watching the horses glide over one hurdle after another was clean and stylish. Colny's elegant riding was my favorite part. A few riders failed the jumps and knocked down the bars. Some horses seemed to get scared at the last moment and ran around the hurdles, but those little mistakes just enhanced the entertainment.

After changing back into her uniform, Colny rejoined us. “I’m back!”

“Welcome back, Colny. You did great,” I said.

“Oh you were wonderful,” Sheila gushed.

“I can tell you take your classes very seriously,” Thand praised.

Colny smiled bashfully, pleased by her parents’ compliments. I had been the same way in my previous life. But then I got to middle school and tried to act like I was totally above that sort of thing. I had been in a rebellious phase, you see. Then I had another change of heart when I entered high school. In my next life, I truly appreciated how great my parents had been to me.

But then reminiscing was cut off by a question from Colny.

“Lera, is your exhibition coming up?”

“No, that’ll happen at the end of the festival.”

We picked the evening because the images would be more visible against a slightly dark sky than they would during the day. This meant that we still had plenty of time to walk around before I had to get ready.

The time flew by in an instant, and with it we grew peckish. The academy festival was the one time the cafeteria was opened to outsiders, so the five of us enjoyed a lunch together.

“I know it hasn’t even been a year since I graduated, but this food sure brings back memories,” Ville said wistfully.

If this was an academy for nobles, it seemed fair to assume that both Thand and Sheila had graduated from here. I wondered what it had been like back then.

“When we attended, the cafeteria was in an old building,” Thand told me. “It was bigger and darker than this place, and it was full of long tables.”

“Indeed,” Sheila chimed in. “The menu wasn’t this elaborate—you could only have what was set for that day. It wasn’t very popular among the students. I

recall it getting renovated right after we graduated.”

R-Really? Good thing I’m attending now instead of then.

We had a pleasant lunch in the packed cafeteria, but just as we were about to leave, there was a commotion from near the entrance.

What’s going on?

“Has something happened?” Colny wondered.

Ville, the tallest member of our group, stood up and looked in the direction of the noise. “I see a cafeteria employee and what I presume to be someone’s guardian having an argument.”

A guardian and an employee arguing? It seemed strange when the guardian was most likely a noble. The argument didn’t seem to be getting any closer to a resolution, so Thand had to get up and intervene. He said it was his job because he didn’t see anyone higher-ranked than him nearby.

After the three had a talk, Thand returned to the table with the guardian from the argument.

“Lera, could I ask for your help?” Thand said, looking rather perplexed.

“Me?”

What could this be?

We decided to change locations and borrowed the general magic prep room from Bear.

“I’m normally not supposed to be letting outsiders in here,” Bear said.

“Never mind that, Jian. This is an emergency,” Thand replied.

“Sure, but I want to be present for this conversation.”

“I suppose I can’t say no. Just don’t speak of this to anybody else.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice.”

Bear sure didn’t stand on ceremony around Thand. It wasn’t surprising, since he acted the same way around Lord Peylon.

“Well then, Marquess Eyinos, would you be so kind as to tell us the full

story?”

So someone as highly ranked as a marquess had been arguing with one of the cafeteria staff? Color me surprised. Someone like him should know better than to start a disturbance in such a public location.

Does this mean there really is an emergency? And they want my help? Oh, don't tell me.

After some hesitation, Lord Eyinos finally began to speak. “I’ll cut straight to the heart of the matter. Our youngest daughter has gone missing.”

“Hm? Your youngest is about four, isn’t she?” Sheila asked.

“She just had her fourth birthday,” Lord Eyinos answered with a nod. “She was very excited to see the academy festival. Her elder sister is a student here.”

According to Lord Eyinos, they had been attending the festival together as a family, when the elder daughter had to leave them so she could prepare for her event. Lady Eyinos went with her, leaving Lord Eyinos alone with the younger daughter. Not long after, the girl suddenly disappeared.

“Not too long ago, she had been within arm’s reach,” Lord Eyinos recounted. “Someone called to me from behind, so I looked away for just a moment. And when I looked back...”

Children are just like that sometimes. You can’t take your eyes off them for even a moment. But something about his story still bothered me.

“Lera, we’d like to request your aid in finding Lord Eyinos’s daughter,” Thand told me.

“Among all these people?”

“We understand it’ll be difficult, but perhaps you could at least find some clues? And as fast as you possibly can.”

I had to think. While there were spells that could be used to search for people, those were meant for use in the forest or other places where people were scarce. Those spells would be no use at a crowded event. But there were spells for searching for lifesigns. And that’s when the pieces fell into place.

“Thand,” I started, “this is more serious than just a lost child, isn’t it?”

Lord Eyinos's cheek twitched and Thand made a sour face.

A kidnapping then, right? We better hurry.

If someone knowingly kidnapped a noble's child, then they were most likely looking to hold the child for ransom. Sometimes noble children were abducted because of a grudge against their house, but when that happened, the child wasn't likely to come back alive.

"In all honesty, there was a kidnapping incident during last year's festival as well," Thand told me.

"Really?"

"The culprits were never caught. However, the four abducted children were returned in exchange for a sizable ransom."

So these people made a business of kidnapping children. In that case, there was a good chance the children were still alive.

"If something like that happened last year, why wasn't security tightened?" I asked.

"The truth is that it was. Still, there are bound to be slipups when so many people are coming and going."

They probably couldn't just cancel the festival and ban outsiders on account of the kidnappings. The pride of the nobility prevented them from caving to criminals.

But there's so many people. How am I supposed to find one child among—ah. Ah!

"Thand! You said there were four last year, right?"

"I did. Do you think there might be other children who have been kidnapped?!"

"It's possible."

Nobles valued appearances. If someone was kidnapped, that would make the house and the victim look bad, even when that victim was just a child. So most nobles didn't want word of the kidnappings getting out; even Lord Eyinos had

been hesitant to confide in us.

This made it all the harder to interrupt the festival. If that happened, the kidnappers would be more than happy to let everyone know why the festival was being brought to a halt and who had been abducted. I wasn't going to let that happen. So at the top of the to-do list was to figure out how to find the children.

"Are the victims and culprits still on the grounds of the academy?" I asked Thand.

"They should be. Security is closely monitoring who comes and goes, and the gates are all closed. They might try to scale the walls, but I'm sure you know of the spells used to prevent that."

I did indeed know. It was impossible to enter the academy through any way other than the gates. Atop the high walls were magical barriers that made climbing over impossible. Breaking the barriers would set off an alarm that would ring throughout the whole campus.

You would be correct if you guessed that this was another invention of the institute. And the idea was proposed, of course, by me! I wanted to ask my past self what she was thinking when she made the suggestion.

However, this time the device was working in our favor. Until the festival was over, the kidnappers couldn't leave, meaning we didn't have to search anywhere beyond the grounds of the academy. I told myself I should just be glad we didn't have to search the entire royal capital.

"Foe-finding spells are for rooting out enemies, and detection spells are used for finding hidden targets," I mumbled to myself, up until an idea struck me. "Ah."

But to pull it off, we had to narrow our search area.

"Do you think you can do it, Lera?" Thand asked.

"Um, well, I don't think I can do it alone."

"If it's a spell we can use, we'll help."

"Are any of you proficient with detection spells?"

Thand and Sheila both looked away. Ville made an X with his hands. But Colny, she raised her hand.

“I’ll help,” she said. “And we can ask Loks for his aid. He’s skilled with detection magic.”

Loks was better than me with detection magic, and *very* good at being surreptitious. It’s why he never lost at hide-and-seek.

So it was settled. The three of us would split up, and then maybe we would find something. But where was Loks?

“Should I call him over?” Bear offered.

I tilted my head. “Isn’t he busy with his prefect duties during the festival?”

“This should take priority. Give me just a minute.”

And with that, Bear left the room.

Overwhelmed with relief at the glimmer of hope before him, Lord Eyinos fell to his knees. Thand caught him in his arms.

“Keep it together, Lord Eyinos!”

“Oh, right. My apologies.”

Lord Eyinos’s face was deathly pale.

“Take a seat. I fear you might collapse again,” Sheila said and offered him a chair, which the marquess accepted.

“Lord Eyinos, where is your wife?”

“She should be with our other daughter. We made arrangements to reconvene in the evening.”

So I should probably find the missing girl before then. Goodness gracious.

Once Loks had been brought over, he, Colny, and I discussed how we’d split up.

“Let’s divide the academy into three,” Loks began. “I’ll search the general education building, the practical learning building, the specialties building, and

the boys' dorm."

"Then I'll take the courtyard, the girls' dorm, and...oh—the music hall as well," Colny said.

"Well then, I guess I'll take what's left. Whatever that is."

I didn't see the search taking too long with the three of us working together. Once we had our areas picked, we wasted no time starting.

My areas were crowded, even compared to the rest of the campus. That's because I had to investigate the arenas for the mock battles and the races.

I was using a simple spell that searched for lifesigns, a method chosen because all of the victims were children. Even among humans, lifesigns of children varied greatly from those of adults. Generally, children gave off smaller signals, so those were what I had to search for. However, these spells lost their efficacy after some distance, forcing me to walk around the campus repeating the spell.

"This is one wild scavenger hunt," I said to myself.

The treasure at the end was captured children. If a ransom was being demanded, then it was unlikely they would be killed, but it remained a possibility. And this was probably a traumatic experience for the children, so I wanted to find them as soon as I could.

I started with the archery range, the field where arrows flew. Students were lined up and firing arrows at targets. As for lifesigns, I found nothing that could be a child's.

Next was the jousting arena. Even though it was just a mock battle, falling off one's horse was still a very dangerous thing. The rules were extremely simple: use your lance to knock your opponent off their mount. But that didn't deprive the sport of any depth. Or so I was told.

Then I saw it! A small lifesign! Or so I thought. When I ran to the origin of the signal, I just found a small horse about the size of a midsized dog. It was in a sort of petting zoo, and being fawned over by students and parents.

But I now knew that using the lifesigns method was the right decision. I just

had to repeat the process along with Colny and Loks!

I had been naive. I wanted to punch my past self. This was the academy festival. There was no shortage of younger siblings attending with their parents. So of course there were *plenty* of small lifesigns that didn't belong to the victims! I had found a number of them and not a single one was what I was looking for! Even I was ready to give up.

"This is Lera," I groaned. "I've checked all the sporting events, but I haven't found anything."

I was talking to a magic tool made to look like a small bird. Once I was done, I sent it flying off. It occurred to me that I hadn't yet made a portable transmitter yet. It didn't have to be fancy like a smartphone, I just wanted a transmitter with the size and weight of a cell phone. I told myself I would make that happen next time I returned home.

As I continued my search, the bird returned to me.

"We've got nothing over here either," said a recorded voice. "Could you make your way to the forecourt?"

The voice belonged to Bear. He was in the prep room, keeping track of the reports sent in by the three of us. These were the sort of management skills that let him be the chief of the institute. It just so happened that he was also a bear.



Lots of food stalls were set up in the forecourt. I had been told the stalls were a fairly recent addition to the festival. As the number of visiting family members increased, the cafeteria had become insufficient to serve all the guests.

Hearing their complaints, the academy decided to start bringing in stalls. They spun it as a chance to try something different—the tastes enjoyed by commoners. I heard the very interesting justification that it was so nobles could better understand the common folk or something like that.

I arrived at the forecourt, a sort of square paved with stone, and the vibe reminded me of the festivals of my previous life. Two rows of stalls were set out before the main building. Guests and students walked down the small path between the rows, gleefully checking out what was on offer. I saw peddlers roasting meats, cutting fruits, and filling cups of soup. There were even the occasional stalls selling vegetables or fish. Apparently you were meant to use those to balance out the heartier food from the stalls next to them.

But I was getting distracted. I was here to search, and search I would. While pretending to idly look around, I investigated both rows of stalls. But I didn't really believe I'd find the children here. Not in a place like this.

"Ah, there's one," I muttered before I could stop myself.

There was a small lifesign beneath a stall—one of the fruit sellers'. They were selling fruits cut up into bite-size portions. In other words, this wasn't the sort of stall that should be giving off small lifesigns. But I told myself not to jump to any conclusions. It was still possible there was a dog or some other small animal at the peddler's feet.

Hmm. Hmm. How to handle this? I've got it!

I just had to make the readings more precise! The spell I was using at the time was pretty vague. It shouldn't have been too hard to modify its parameters, or so I wanted to believe. Either way, I needed to return to Bear to consult with him!

"This is Lera," I said to the bird. "I've come across a signal that's likely to be what we're looking for. I have something I'd like to discuss. I'll be returning shortly."

Once I set the magic tool free, I headed to the prep room. I just hoped I could make it in time!

In the prep room, a ghostly pale Lord Eyinos was being consoled by Thand and Sheila.

“You can be certain your daughter will be found,” Thand assured, “so don’t give up.”

“You have nothing to fear. Our children are very capable.” Sheila looked up and noticed I had come back. “Oh, Lera! You’re back?”

“Yes, I had something I wanted to discuss with Bear. Where’s Ville?”

“He went out with Loks. The chief is over there.”

With her eyes, Sheila indicated a desk that a Bear was sitting at. The prep room was a small room, so there were no partitions, which meant I had to use a sound-proofing barrier. I didn’t think Lord Eyinos should hear what I had to say.

“Bear, I want your advice.”

“Quit calling me that! Now what is it?”

“I want this camera to make images based on the detected lifesigns. And I want more precise results. Not just simple lifesigns, but also a target’s outline!”

“Hold on, hold on. Where’s all this coming from?”

I couldn’t blame him for not following my abrupt demands.

“I want to change the lifesign detection spell so I can see outlines of people and animals even through walls! And then I want that data turned into images that can be displayed by this camera.”

“Does this mean that children are hidden inside something?”

What a smart bear he was. Maybe those were his natural instincts at work.

“I had a lifesign beneath a stall. I want to get a better idea of what that signal is coming from, while making it look like I’m just taking a photo.”

“Hmm. I see. And you want to alter the spell to do that? Then before we do anything else, we need to figure out how exactly we need to change it.”

“Got it.”

I borrowed a corner of Bear’s desk and wrote down the basic outline on a fresh sheet of paper. There was a whole lot of information collected by magic that detected lifesigns. The spell we were currently using would sift out and extract only the most necessary bits. So I just had to change what got extracted.

Essentially, I had to rewrite the sieve so I could tell whether a target was alive or dead, and get their general shape. But altering the spell in that manner was easier said than done.

“I’ve got it!” I yelled.

“This won’t work,” Bear said. “This is too big for the camera.”

“Really?”

The camera we were using was the one I kept in the brooch on my uniform’s ribbon. According to Bear, my spell was too complex for the camera to store. It was, after all, a pretty small thing. Generally speaking, the physical size of something was directly proportional to the size of the formulas it could take in. If the catalyst for the magic circuits is small, then your spell has to be as well.

“You have to eliminate more redundancies,” Bear told me.

“But I’m terrible at that,” I groaned.

“Yeah. You’ve never been good when it comes to the details.”

Oh shut up.

Still, Bear had a point. And if I didn’t complete the spell, then the children would be in serious danger. I checked the clock on the wall—I had only a few hours until the general magic exhibition!

“Bear, about the exhibition. I think I might have to—”

“Not a chance. Now work like hell and save those brats. Move like your life depends on it.”

“You monster!”

Never trust a bear.

After trying this, that, and many other things, and with some help from Bear, I somehow managed to put together a spell that could fit in my camera. Thank goodness.

“All right, this should work. Hand me the brooch.”

I did as Bear said and removed it from my uniform. Bear placed it on the desk and sent a flow of special mana into it. Then I saw the magic circuits appear. These were the most important part of any magic tool.

After briefly gazing at the rectangular circuitry, Bear began to use his finger to break certain connections.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked.

“It’s fine. It’s set so anyone with permission can overwrite it,” he said.

The “permission” he was talking about didn’t refer to any specific qualifications or anything. Permission could be given to an institute member, or anyone really. It was sort of like administrator access.

Now it was time for mana to enter the newly complete magic circuits. And by that, I mean it was time for me to do it.

“Focus your mana more,” Bear hounded. “Don’t get distracted. Be careful—make sure there aren’t any lapses.”

“You’re asking too much.”

“No I’m not. Anyone can do this.”

I wanted to call him a liar, but looking at the circuits in front of me, I could tell he had a point. Those thin circuits were indeed the work of a person. *Someone* had done this before.

While being badgered by Bear, I managed to connect the circuits.

“Would you look at that,” Bear said. “It just barely fits.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”

I wanted to call it a good experience, but the looming deadline had made the pressure just a bit too much. I was exhausted. Mentally, not physically. Bear, meanwhile, fiddled with the brooch as he put the finishing touches on.

“And with these final adjustments, it’ll be complete!” he announced. “Here, it should be finished now. Give it a try.”

I reattached the brooch to my ribbon and activated the camera. It photographed the room, then displayed the images on a makeshift screen I had produced.

“Woo! It works!” I cheered. “I can see the people walking on the other side of the wall! All right, I’m going to do another loop around the school.”

“Ah, hold on a minute. It looks like Ville and his siblings are coming back. Take them with you.”

Apparently they had come up empty-handed and turned back. It wasn’t long before they reached the prep room, and they silently came over to us when they noticed the sound-proofing barrier.

“You came back too, Lera?” Ville asked when he was sure he was inside the barrier. “How did your search fare?”

“I found a likely hiding spot. It was under one of the food stalls.”

“A food stall?” all three siblings asked in unison.

I would’ve been just as surprised if I had been in their shoes. All the stalls that entered the festival were thoroughly investigated beforehand.

Ville looked dubious. “Lera, are you certain?”

I nodded and explained, “I detected a lifesign that fits the bill. Now I’m going to use a different means to confirm that it’s a child’s lifesign.”

“A different means?”

All three of them looked at me curiously.

“This!” I said and pointed at my brooch.

Loks and Ville didn’t seem any less confused than before, but Colny seemed to get it.

“That’s a magic tool for recording images, isn’t it?” she asked.

“That’s right,” I said. “I just got it from Bear. It can take photos of things we can’t see.”

“Things we can’t see?”

Once again, all three siblings were confused, but we didn’t have much time for explanations.

“I’ll tell you about it on the way. Ah.” I turned to Bear. “Do you have something we can use to quickly check the images?”

It would be a waste of time to produce a magic screen every time we wanted to check the results. Bear pulled a small, thin box from a drawer in his desk.

“This is a small display,” he said, handing it to me. “Does this work?”

“I’ll take it!”

“Be careful out there,” he advised us as we left the room. Loks replied to him, but I was in a rush and didn’t catch it all.

“I’m pretty sure it’s the kidnappers who need to be careful...”

The four of us headed to the forecourt. I noticed Ville and Loks both had swords at their sides.

“I notice you two are armed.”

“Don’t worry. These aren’t our practice swords,” Loks said with a brilliant smile.

So they’re real? Isn’t that all the more reason to worry?

“We’re dealing with criminals, remember?” Loks told me when he noticed my concern. “Of course, I hope we don’t have to use them, but if a fight does break out, then we should be armed.”

He was right. I was used to fighting monsters, but hurting people still wasn’t something I was comfortable with. I guess that was proof that I was still carrying the values of my previous life.

“Where did you even get those swords?” I asked.

“They’re stored on our family’s carriage, in case of emergencies,” Ville told me. “We made sure to grab them before setting out on our investigation.”

That was enough of an explanation for me. I didn’t know if the other houses

did this, but House Aspozat was always ready to respond to potential threats, and kept weapons stowed in all their carriages.

Both the brothers were adept swordsmen, especially Ville, who could solo large monsters with just his steel. But if they had swords, then why was Colny unarmed? She knew her way around a blade.

“Colny, you didn’t take a sword?” I asked.

“I have something else,” she said and patted her thigh.

Hold on. She has something under her skirt? Now I have to know.

But before I could ask, we reached the forecourt. The stalls were no less popular than when I left earlier and the area was filled with customers.

“Which stall was it?” Ville asked.

“The far one on the left.”

“I see. This means their carriage is also worth investigating.”

At the end of the row of stalls was a temporary carriage house meant for the stall owners.

“Could they have already moved some of the children off campus?” I wondered.

“No. Once they’ve entered the academy, stalls and carriages aren’t allowed out until the festival is over. If they need to restock or something, then it has to be handed to them at the front gate. And packages can only come in, not out.”

So until the festival was over, those children would be kept near the peddlers. That was a relief. As long as they were still within the academy, there was hope. Or so I hoped. But first, we had to make sure the children were actually there.

We walked in front of the fruit stall where I had earlier detected a small lifesign. I held the small display in front of me, almost like I was taking a video with a smartphone, and it showed what was picked up by the camera in my brooch.

And there it was—the outline of a child. They were curled up, like they were in a box or something.

“Ville,” I called and showed him the display. Loks and Colny peeked over my shoulders.

“So this is it? Lera, check the other stalls. I’ll contact Bear and get backup.”

“Understood.”

I began to walk away, but then I realized Colny was coming with me.

“I imagine sticking with you will be the far more interesting of the two options,” she reasoned.

Should that really be your biggest concern?

Anyway, with Colny at my side I walked around and investigated the other stalls. I would check the entire thing, but focused mostly on the lower portions. Maybe it was just because I wasn’t staying in one place for long, but nobody seemed to notice me holding a weird device and doing weird things. The customers were enchanted by the stalls and the peddlers were doing everything they could to keep up with them.

During our search, I found another four children in addition to the one we had already discovered.

Colny quietly kept her anger from boiling over. “*Five* children. How despicable.”

She was the daughter of a marquess, so it was possible she had been targeted by kidnappers before.

“They should pick someone they can fight head-on, not some helpless children!”

Colny, I’m not sure that’s what you should be hung up on. What’s the point in fighting someone you plan to kidnap? I think that sort of defeats the point.

I put the matter aside and used the little birdy to inform Bear of the number of children and where they were hidden. The prep room had become the effective headquarters of this operation, so I figured he could make use of the information.

I should mention that I placed barriers around the children. Setting up

barriers at a distance wasn't easy, but I could manage when I was only covering the rows of stalls. While I was at it, I also marked, or pinged you might say, all the suspects. It was just a matter of marking someone with a tiny amount of mana, so it was useful for keeping track of someone's position. These guys didn't come off as expert mages, so I didn't worry about them detecting the pings.

Worried that there still might be more children, I walked to the center of the middle of the rows, when I heard a scream. Colny and I exchanged glances before rushing toward the source.

"Eek!"

"A box fell out of that stall!"

"There's a child in it!"

The child must have begun to struggle and rolled out from under the stall. I looked for the stall owner and saw them making a break for it!

"Lera, you handle the child!" Colny said.

"Got it!" I responded out of reflex.

With that, Colny dashed off.

Wow! Is she using a buffing spell? Ooh, and an antigravity spell.

Colny was off like the wind, leaving me to take care of the child. Having a well-dressed child lying on the ground would draw attention, so first I had to hide him. Luckily the culprit had just abandoned their stall, and it was covered with swaths of decorative cloth.

I ripped off one of the swaths and covered the boy with it. Maybe it wasn't too late to hide the fact that the child had been abducted. He was a boy, but getting kidnapped was still going to invite unscrupulous rumors. This couldn't be easy on anyone in his family, but the boy himself had it the worst; I wanted to prevent any trauma if I could. He seemed to be too young to understand what was happening, but it would agonize him once he figured it out.

I couldn't stand the onlooking gazes any longer. I used a buffing spell and picked the boy up in my arms before following after Colny. Although when I

caught up to her, the battle had already been settled. Not that I had ever expected Colny to lose to mere kidnappers.

Colny, what is that you're holding? Unless my eyes are playing tricks, it looks like a riding crop.

"Lera? What of the child?" she asked me.

"Right here," I said. "But Colny, about what you're holding..."

"This? It's my favorite one."

No. That's...that's not at all what I'm getting at.

Two men had collapsed at her feet, both groaning and holding their hands over their eyes. She must have blinded the pair with the whip and then subdued them with hits to the body.

I glanced at the marks I had placed on the other peddlers and saw that they were on the move. My best guess was that they were headed for the temporary carriage house, so they could regroup and escape.

"Colny, you look after the boy."

"Huh? And what about you?"

"I'm going to take care of one last thing!"

Without waiting another moment, I ran off to the carriage house. Naturally, I buffed myself, so I got there in no time.

The peddlers were in a full sprint for the carriage house.

"What happened? What about the packages?" one of them asked.

"We've got bigger problems! There was a commotion and now the plan's gone to hell! We're getting out of here!"

They were trying to talk in low voices, but I could hear them clear as day. I wasn't sure what they were hoping to accomplish when the school gates weren't going to reopen until the festival was over. But my confidence was swept away by the sight of another gate, one that I didn't recall being there. And it was wide open! I didn't know why there was a gate there, but I assumed

the criminals were going to use it to escape.

Once the kidnappers were all loaded in, I locked down the carriage with a barrier. But I didn't extend it over the horse. It hadn't done anything wrong.

"What's going on?! Why aren't we moving?!" one of them shouted.

"I'm trying to move it, but the horse isn't doing anything!" cried another.

Now the peddlers had been dealt with, but I didn't want to let them get off that easily. I sent a small electric shock through the carriage, making sure the carriage driver didn't get left out. I thought I heard some wretched shrieks, but it must have been my imagination.

Now I just had to deal with whoever had opened the gate. I turned that way and noticed someone furtively holding the gate open. I felt like I had seen them before.

Isn't that the mystic-jockeying instructor? Is one of my own teachers part of this?!

I couldn't hold back my anger and zapped them before I could stop myself. They let out a brief yelp and hit the ground. Good thing I hadn't accidentally scorched them. At last, Ville arrived with a band of knights in tow.

Are those the black knights? Oh, and there's the black knight himself. The one who's always with Mr. Frivolous.

"Lera! What happened?" Ville asked.

"The kidnappers are in this carriage," I told him. "And that teacher over there is the one who opened the gates for them. I've recorded it all, so you can watch it later."

"A teacher? I see. We'll take care of the rest, so could you drop the barrier?"

"Can do."

The black knights had already surrounded the carriage. Not even an ant could have slipped past them. But I didn't think the people inside would be regaining consciousness anytime soon.

The black knight approached me. "Miss Lowell, you've done an excellent job."

But before he could get any closer, Ville cut him off. “You stay away.”

“I don’t see what right you have to tell me that.”

“I’m her guardian, in a sense.”

“I thought she was a ward of your parents.”

Uh, shouldn’t the kidnapping case take priority over this?

After that, the abducted children were all safely retrieved.

“Solseya!” Lord Eyinos cried. Tears poured from his face as he wrapped his daughter up in his arms. What a relief.

After that, the black knights apprehended the kidnappers, including the teacher, and took them away.

So what are we gonna do for mystic-jockeying class next week? Study hall?

Using barriers that worked like one-way mirrors, the children were retrieved with complete discretion. Just another example of the usefulness of barriers. They were brought to the prep room, but would anyone here actually know which child belonged to whom? Well, we knew that Solseya belonged to Lord Eyinos.

“We’ll take care of that, so you don’t need to worry,” Sheila told me.

“Thank you so much,” I replied.

I could always count on Sheila.

The kidnappers were going to be questioned. Was this perhaps a chance for the institute’s confessional magic? Those spells could make anyone admit the truth. As always, the idea had first been proposed by me. The people at the institute truly were incredible. I would say things off the cuff such as “I sure wish we had a spell like this” and they would make it happen.

I was beyond happy to see that all the children were unharmed. But goodness was I tired.

“Oh, you made it in time,” Bear said to me. “The general magic exhibition is about to start!”

“Huh?!”

I'm ready to pass out and I still have to do that?!

It had been a fine day without a cloud in the sky, and now the evening lent a beautiful gradient to the sky. There were shades of orange and white, light blue and dark blue. My heart was also a tad blue. Don't get me wrong, I was glad that the children were safe and everything. But after all that running around, I still had to put on an elaborate display of illusory magic.

I had made sure the illusions weren't on transparent backgrounds, so they were easy to see if you were surrounded by lights.

“The general magic class will now be conducting an exhibition in the arena,” said an announcer.

Like so much of this world, voices were broadcast with magic. Our speakers were something I had just thrown together with what I could, but they were a big success. They were paired with mics and set up at all the events. The institute likely had a surge of orders coming their way.

As we waited in the anteroom for our time to go onstage, we went over the routine one last time. We had already been over it plenty of times, but human beings were creatures that could still make mistakes in spite of that. And that would be a real tragedy.

I could see the entire Aspozat family sitting among the audience. There was something strange about seeing them there when we had just been chasing kidnappers.

“All right, are you all ready?” Bear asked.

We all nodded.

“Well then, go show them what you can do!”

“Yes sir!”

The arena was wide and circular, like a colosseum. It was really impressive, considering it had been put up in a hurry just for the sake of the festival. According to Bear, the institute had lent the academy their skills. I could only

assume they had been properly compensated for their assistance.

We formed a line and walked to the center of the arena. There we all bowed, then got into our designated positions. This was another thing we had practiced; moving as a group like this wasn't normal at our school. I had plenty of memories from my previous life in Japan of walking in lines and bowing in unison. Now that felt like ages ago.

The third prince was the one to give the signal to begin. Originally, Bear had ordered me to do it, but at least I wriggled my way out of that annoying duty. So Bear figured the prince might as well be the one to do it. When we told him of this decision, he accepted with a bright smile, just like you'd expect from the royal family.

I wondered if maybe a senior student should take the role, but then I learned that general magic was a newly introduced class, so none of the older students had selected it. That was news to me. That also explained why Bear had made me join; so he could be certain he'd have at least one student. Damn you, Bear. But at least now I knew why it was only first-years partaking in the exhibition.

I put the matter aside and focused back on reality.

"Begin!" Prince Shenille said, his voice echoing throughout the arena.

There were two approaches to synchronized magic. One involved a group combining their mana for a single spell. The other was for everyone to cast individual spells which worked together to achieve one effect. Our exhibition required us to do the latter. This method allowed for more precision, but also required a mountain's worth of calculations.

First, our background manager cast their spell, projecting the image's backdrop. Already, the audience began to murmur, but we were just getting started. Next, the character manager started up their projections, inviting some awe from the crowd.

I heard a few squeals, most likely from fans of Miss Derod. I hadn't known this, but Miss Derod had some very ardent fans among the girls. This was more info courtesy of Lanmia.

Last were my projections. They were the least striking, but also the most

difficult part of the process. I was in charge of the text. I had to put words beneath the images, where they wouldn't block the pretty pictures. They were like subtitles in a way, but we didn't yet have movies in this world so nobody knew what subtitles were. I heard some baffled and surprised voices when I cast my spell. They must not have ever heard of illusory magic being used to project text.

The overall effect was akin to the kamishibai paper plays from my past life, or maybe old still image films. The only things moving were the subtitles.

We had been generously lent the score for one of *Gossamer Manor's* stage adaptations and the school band had performed it for us, which we recorded. Playing it in the background greatly added to the immersion. Meanwhile, the school band had been greatly interested in our recording device, so Bear repaid them for their help by lending the device to them for a time.

As the images rolled by, the crowd became emotionally invested in the tale. They lamented when the heroine encountered hardship, and shrieked when she faced mortal peril. Miss Derod's illustrations were astounding. She had a dramatic style that made a fantastic match for the story. Asking for her help had been the right choice.

The story was reaching the climax, and the accompanying music approached its crescendo. The heroine had been captured by the hero's enemies and was in grave danger! I could hear cries from the audience.

But one of the enemy henchmen was someone the heroine had aided near the start of the story. *He sees this as his chance to repay his debt to her, and sneaks her away from her captors and back to the hero! Seeing the captors in hot pursuit, the hero fights them in a vicious battle!* The audience was veritably entranced by the performance!

In the ultimate confrontation, the hero and his nemesis engage in a fierce duel! Back and forth they trade blows, until the hero just barely manages to drive his blade through the villain's heart!

A tense moment later, the villain collapses.

Once he's sure that it's all over, the hero embraces the heroine! Cries of elation came from the seats. The final scene was set at an extravagant ball held

at the royal palace. With the danger passed, the hero and heroine enjoyed a dance together, and the words “The End” came up in big letters.

Once the performance was over, the projections faded one after another, then at the prince’s signal, we gave another bow. A feeling of satisfaction burned in my chest. And yet the arena was dead silent.

Huh? No reaction?

I began to worry, but after a few moments an applause slowly rippled through the audience and turned into a full on ovation. That was a relief. Our performance was a success. We stood beneath a dark sky and bathed in the continuing chorus of cheers.

When I met up with the Aspozats later, Colny and Sheila were beyond thrilled.

“What was that?! It was incredible!” Colny gushed.

“That was splendid,” Sheila complimented me. “I had no idea synchronized magic could be used for such a thing!”

I remembered that this world didn’t yet have visual entertainment like this. The closest they had were plays and operas.

“Who came up with such an idea?” Thand asked.

“Could it have been Bear?” Ville suggested. But he seemed torn on the idea. “However, I find it hard to imagine he has the mind for something refined like that.”

Not a very nice thing to say, but he might’ve had a point. And using illusory magic had been my idea. Bear hadn’t done anything more than hand me a list. The decision to have each part projected separately had also been mine.

I decided to come clean.

“We used illusory magic,” I said. “But not without a few adjustments of our own.”

An unnerving air fell over us, making me instantly regret what I had said.

“So it was your idea, Lera?” Ville asked with a scary look in his eyes.

“Who’s aware of this?” Thand asked, his voice dropping to a low-toned

whisper.

“Bear’s the only one who knows it for certain. I think most people would assume the two of us made it.”

“I see. I need to have a word with Jian,” Thand said. “Lera, if anyone asks you about synchronized magic, tell them to talk to the chief.”

“Yes sir.”

Had we used a spell we shouldn’t have? I mean, sure, it was a spell made for military use, but it wasn’t remotely hazardous. On the other hand, I could recall people being tricked with illusions was a common feature in games and manga. Was this spell still being used on the battlefield?

“Ville. Dear. You two can save this for another day, can’t you?” Sheila cut in. “Let’s enjoy the festival while it’s still here.”

“Y-You’re right.”

“Sorry, Lera. It’s a habit of mine.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I knew those two were just trying to keep me safe. Since my birth father was no use, Lord Peylon and the Aspozat family all protected me. I didn’t consider their efforts a nuisance—I was deeply grateful for them.

And so the festival came to a peaceful close. I had spent nearly half of it dealing with the kidnapping incident, and the cleanup was something of a pain, but I didn’t worry about that. I just made it Bear’s problem instead.

A few days later, a poll for the most popular event at the festival. After holding the number one spot for ten straight years, the mystic-jockeying race was soundly defeated by general magic’s synchronized illusory magic performance. All our hard work had paid off.

Bear was pumped beyond belief, because this meant there would probably be a flood of applicants for general magic next year. I wasn’t surprised to learn that, apparently, the number of students in an elective affected a teacher’s reputation.

“And you know what?” Bear said. “We’ve got people from the royal palace and various theaters wanting to buy those spells.”

“You guys at the institute can take care of that, won’t you?”

“Am I getting no help at all?!”

Of course I wasn’t gonna help. It’s so he could deal with these problems that he had the title of chief. Now that Bear’s reputation was through the roof, taking on this work was the least he could do. Not to mention there were also the warnings I had received from Ville and Thand.

I sure am glad those two told me I could direct everyone to Bear.

Chapter Seven: The First Year Comes to an End

Days of rest and relaxation followed the academy festival, and I was soaking up every second of it when Loks, Colny, and I were called to the Aspozat residence. When we arrived, Sheila greeted us with a smile, then led us to the house's cozy drawing room like she always did.

On the way she noted to me, "Your face tells me you don't know why we're having you over."

"I'm just as confused as she is," Loks admitted once we had all sat down.

Sheila looked exasperated. "Dear me, you three still have so much to learn." As if on cue, someone then entered the drawing room.

"Good, you're all here."

And then someone else followed after him.

"Hello, Ville," I said. "And hello to you as well, Thand."

Was there something going on?

"They called you too?" Loks asked his older brother.

"No, I'm here to offer an explanation."

"Explanation?" Loks, Colny, and I all asked in unison. The exasperation in Ville's face at that moment was worth a thousand words.

"Don't you all want to know about the kidnapping case?"

Oh, that!

I was just glad we'd caught the culprits. I stayed out of everything that had happened afterward, so I hadn't given it another thought.

"They were questioned in the palace dungeon," Ville continued. "What we learned took us by surprise."

He looked exhausted. I had to wonder what sort of information could possibly cause him to make such an expression.

Thand took over for Ville from this point. “Let’s start with their objective. As you might expect, they were hoping to profit from the ransom. They had even formed an organization for this purpose.”

So they were indeed in the business of kidnapping. Honestly, if they were capable of that, they should’ve just found proper jobs.

“We also found that they had multiple conspirators within the academy.”

“So there were more than just the mystic-jockeying instructor?” I asked.

“Indeed. It’s quite disheartening. The kidnappers managed to get into the festival because they had an accomplice interfering with the peddlers’ background checks.”

Thand explained how the complicit teachers were regulars at a gambling den run by the kidnappers, and had racked up considerable debts.

“Apparently, those debts were the result of foul play by the house. In other words, this had all been laid out from the start. Their plans were thorough, and they’ve succeeded more than twice before now.”

What a serious operation they were running. Even rumors of involvement in gambling could end a teacher’s career.

It was here that Thand finished his piece and Ville began to speak again.

“I’ve been looking into that gambling den. It was far worse than the organization’s source of funds—it was also a place you could go if you needed an accomplice or wanted someone silenced.”

“Does that mean...” I couldn’t finish my question.

“It means the dungeons are much fuller than anticipated. The Knights of Obsidian should be prying info out of them right about now.”

Oof. Hang in there, black knights.

According to Ville, the kidnappers themselves and their helpers had all been caught, but the person behind the whole plan—the mastermind if you will—managed to escape.

“It’s believed that this person is a member of the nobility. The investigations

aren't over yet, so I'd like to believe they'll be apprehended in due time."

The interrogators learned that there were a number of children from previous incidents who had never been returned. Publicly, the children had been reported to have died of illness, but the knights suspected that they actually remained captive. The royal palace was planning to conduct further investigations into those cases.

"Whatever the case, the royal palace is now involved," Ville concluded. "Even if you come across anything, don't make any moves without involving us. *Especially you two, Colny and Lera.*"

"Huh? Why are we being singled out?"

"Your concern regarding Lera may be justified, but I—"

"Excuse me, Colny. How exactly might his concern be justified? I'm the better fighter here!"

"Of all the nerve. If I topple or capture anyone, it won't be through barbaric methods!"

"I am not barbaric!"

I preferred to put my target to sleep, deprive them of oxygen, or zap them until they've lost consciousness! That's far less brutal than cutting someone to shreds!

Though it might've devolved into an argument at the end, we still learned of the incident's aftermath. The gambling-addicted, kidnapping-abetting teachers involved were all promptly fired, which was sure to be a boon to the academy. Apparently, the headmaster was furious when he'd heard what they had done, but that was someone else's problem.

After the academy festival, no trouble of note occurred and peace reigned. Even the pesky Ribbons was unusually quiet. Likewise, the third prince didn't try to stick his nose in my business when he didn't need to. At times, I noticed him looking at me wistfully, but I ignored that.

According to Bear, the theater club wanted to use our materials from the

synchronized magic display, but that was on hold until they could work out a deal with the institute. There were similar requests coming in from the royal family and professional theaters. But I didn't care to know much about that—I was letting Bear handle it all. I was sure these requests were only a good thing. As long as they didn't bother me, they could do what they pleased.

“So, without further ado,” Bear announced, “there's lots of experiments to run.”

“We've finally got the time for it,” I replied.

We were in the prep room for the general magic classroom. *Prep room* was the proper name for it, but at this point it was just Bear's personal laboratory. I wasn't sure he was really supposed to be using it like that.

“It's fine, I've got permission,” he said when I questioned him on the matter.

“You never miss a beat, Bear. I guess this is why they made you the chief.”

“Quit calling me ‘Bear’!”

I didn't see why he was getting tired of the nickname after all this time. Even the other students had started calling him Bear.

But enough about his name. We had experiments to be conducting.

“Behold!” I said. “Large-scale storage magic!”

“Oh, you've finally made it a reality?”

“And *boy* did it take me a long time.”

Truthfully, the theory for subspace storage had already been outlined, but all the spells involving it were hard to use. So I had been experimenting by patching together different aspects of different spells until I got something more practical.

“I set an initial cap on the amount of potential storage space,” I explained. “That solves the issue of the spell becoming a mana drain once it becomes too big.”

By doing that, I could limit the amount of mana the spell expended. This also solved this issue of items getting lost in subspace storage. However, this

eliminated the ability to infinitely store whatever you want. But now the spell was much more wieldy, depending on what you were storing.

“I’m thinking about having three grades of storage space,” I continued.

“Oh?”

“‘Small’ will be about the size of one of the institute’s storage rooms. ‘Medium’ will be about ten rooms worth, and ‘Large’ will be one hundred rooms.”

“‘So many rooms worth.’” Bear parroted. “How come you’re using storage rooms as your metric?”

“It’s easy to understand.”

And that’s a very important thing. Speaking of things easy to understand, I also made a table that shows what’s being stored. I had heard a number of tales of people forgetting what they had stowed away in their subspace storage. I had an idea to make it so that when you put something in the storage, it would be registered and put in a database that could be browsed. But I decided that was too much work, so instead users had to register and make their own lists.

I had prepared a cloth bag, one made of spider silk. Luchirs made it for me. In exchange, I gave her some miscellaneous scraps of spider silk, which caused her to shriek. Whatever the case, I planned to imbue the bag with magic circuits. Doing this should—keyword: *should*—give us a magic bag.

Without further delay, I got to work. I chose spider silk because it was highly receptive to magic circuits. Mana harmonized very well with the threads spun by spiders.

There we go, that should do it.

“Hm. It worked,” I declared. “Now, let’s try putting an apple in it.”

I grabbed an apple and inserted it into the bag’s mouth. Just as I hoped, the registration window popped up. I entered the word “Apple” on the window’s keyboard.

“What’s this?” Bear asked.

“This way you can label what you’re putting in the bag. You can use a proper

name, a nickname, an ID number, anything.”

However, I thought using ID numbers would get confusing as you put in more items. But some people seemed to like numbers.

I tried storing things besides apples in the bag. Even desks and other furniture fit just fine, and extracting them went just as smoothly. Large furniture going in and out of the mouth of a small bag was pretty surreal. But this meant the experiments were a rousing success. My large-scale storage magic was complete.

“Now we don’t need portals to transport monsters,” I said.

“Is that what you made this for?”

“Of course it is! When people fight in front of the forest, it’s over monsters!”

Most hunters used portals to transport their catches from the forest to the plaza just outside it. Sometimes, it became hard to certify which kills belonged to who, which resulted in arguments over ownership. And sometimes, people would insist something was theirs when they knew perfectly well that it wasn’t. So I was very eager to eliminate that issue by making storage magic more practical.

“Even I get people starting stuff with me,” I told Bear.

“Some people just don’t know trouble when they see it.”

Piss off.

But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t hang them by their feet and urge them to reconsider their behavior.

I continued to enjoy a pleasant life experimenting and making things while attending the academy. Unfortunately, my fun came to an end when the year’s final exams were upon us.

“Why’s this place so fond of exams?” I grumbled.

“Because their results are easy to understand,” Loks politely informed me. “You can’t tell how well someone is doing academically just by their behavior in class.”

Lately, I had been eating lunch with him and Colny. They told me that private repasts tended to increase as the extended vacation approached, even though finals were closing in.

“That’s exactly why,” Loks told me. “They want to make sure they’re on good terms before the break.”

That made sense. Among noble families, the relationships of parents affected who their children could be friends with. Sort of like the inverse of the moms’ groups of my previous life.

“But our entire family is preoccupied during the summer.”

“Ah, with the Peylon hunting festival?”

“Correct. It’s also a good chance to show off to both our friends and to strangers.”

The Peylon hunting festival was, as the name suggested, a festival filled with hunting and celebrating good hunts. It was the largest of any event held by a member of the royalist faction, the faction led by House Aspozat.

However, it wasn’t monsters that were hunted—just normal wild animals. This was because your average noble wasn’t cut out for taking down monsters. But the Aspozat siblings were anything but normal, and would spend large portions of their extended breaks in Peylon.

The festival had more than just hunting, however. Lasting one week in total, the festival included acrobats, vendors, traveling carnivals, and theater troupes. It was a family friendly event for all sorts!

Nobles and commoners both had their own ways of enjoying the festival, but some nobles liked to disguise themselves and enjoy the festival as one of the common folk. Nobody was fooled by this, but they all just looked the other way. The people of Peylon weren’t prone to telling people how to enjoy themselves.

I didn’t participate in the hunting. Much to my irritation, while the festival was underway, the Mystic Forest was closed off, so I would normally spend my time at whatever traveling carnival was in town for the festival. I figured I would be spending another festival the same way, but then Loks told me something interesting.

“And now that you’re a student at the academy, you’ll take part in the hunting, Lera.”

“Huh? I will?”

“Our mother didn’t tell you?” Colny asked.

I shook my head. I hadn’t heard a thing.

“Once you enter the academy, even minors will be handed some adult duties, and that means you’ll be part of the hunting festival.”

“But I’ve never heard of my father participating in it.”

Yep, my birth family, House Duval, belonged to the same faction as House Aspozat. On the books, anyway. But even though they were allied, I had never heard of my father participating in the hunting festival. At the very least, I didn’t think he had participated since disowning me. Maybe he wanted to avoid meeting the daughter he abandoned.

“Listening to my parents, it sounds like your father has rarely participated since he took over House Duval,” Loks said. “Some people have begun to suspect he dislikes hunting.”

Oh, so he was just neglecting his fellow faction members? C’mon, father, show some team spirit.

“Whatever the case, even if it’s just you participating, House Duval will become a little more respected among the royalists. Be sure to take part.”

“But what does the reputation of House Duval matter to Lera?” Colny argued. “I’ll remind you, they tossed her out. I see no reason she should intervene, even if House Duval’s reputation hits rock bottom.”

“All the more reason,” Loks told her.

Both Colny and I cocked our heads at this mysterious statement.

Finals were rapidly approaching. Classrooms were full of textbooks and people studying with their friends. When Lanmia and Luchirs came up to my attic room, it was with notebooks in hand.

“You two are taking this really seriously,” I commented.

“Well, I certainly don’t want to fail,” Lanmia said.

“If that happens, you can’t enjoy the long break,” Luchirs added.

Ah, so there are remedial courses. No matter the world, final exams are the final barrier between students and a long vacation.

Of course, that applied to me too. I had to be careful, or I’d be inundated with makeup work during the break, even if I returned to Peylon. Both Sheila and Lord Peylon took these things very seriously.

The final exams covered a much wider range of material than the prewinter exams. After all, these were meant to test what we had learned over the entire year. Failing these tests would result in being held back a year.

The academy, however, wanted to avoid that happening, so they made students take remedial courses over the summer in hopes that they could advance that way. Likewise, teachers didn’t want to be running remedial courses, so they also wanted to give their students passing grades in any way they could. For the sake of everyone’s summer break, all courses offered makeup exams.

“Remember, this is the noble academy,” Lanmia said. “Being held back and taking makeup exams are considered disgraceful. Some parents simply withdraw their children if that happens. Oh, and I heard this from some of the older girls, so you can be certain it’s true.”

She had already integrated herself into the social circles of some of our seniors. She had started with clubmates, then became acquainted with their friends, then with the friends of those friends. Her social skills astounded me, and I was incredibly grateful for the intel.

“Not only that,” she continued, “they graciously gave me tips on how they approached last year’s exams!”

“Lanmia, you’re incredible!”

“Hehe, hardly, hardly.”

“The bulk of today’s snacks go to Lanmia.”

“Now, I won’t say no to that! Thank you!”

These treats were sold in the school cafeteria and popular among both students and teachers. Everything the cafeteria put out was good because the head chef used to work in the kitchens of the royal palace. Even in the cafeteria, you could feel the influence the royal family had on the academy.

The advice we received extended not just to general education subjects, but also to electives. Unfortunately, this was the very first year of general magic, so I received no help on that front. Still, I figured I’d be fine.

And so the attic room became a sort of study hall for the time being.

I entered my final exams as prepared as anyone could be, and they went smoother than I could have ever hoped. All I had left was general magic. General education was no problem thanks to the tips received from Lanmia. Thank you, my friend.

The mystic-jockeying instructor had been quickly replaced after the academy festival. Nothing surprising about that, I suppose. Every teacher involved in that incident had been fired for their misdeeds.

As for classes themselves, I was still without a mount. The new teacher told me that one way or another, they’d find a mysticstock that I could ride. I wasn’t sure I really wanted to take mystic-jockeying again. Just like the prewinter exams, mystic-jockeying was a paper test, for me and me alone. Sure, it was better than failing because I couldn’t ride a mount, but it still felt weird.

As for archery, I had gotten much better since the last exams. I was sure the teacher was to thank for this—all the students new to the bow had improved just as I had. Either way, I had passed the final.

Alchemy’s final exam had us crafting a specific magic medicine. This time we had to make a mana attenuator. I was wondering what something like this was to be used for, and then I learned it was used to treat children with mana rampancy.

This made me wonder: could I have been treated if this had been around when my hair changed colors? I thought about it, but decided it was unlikely.

My pigment shift had occurred in the span of just an evening, and that wasn't even rampancy, just a sudden increase in mana. In the end, I decided an attenuator wouldn't have done me any good.

Creating the attenuator ended up being a sullen affair, but I turned it in and passed the exam.

For magic tools, we had to create magic circuits. Specifically, I had to create them from scratch and give a tool a designated effect. We made magic circuits before, but that was following along a diagram prepared for us. Now we had to figure out a layout ourselves.

Our assignment was to create something that could ring a bell from a distance. Bells were set out and everyone was assigned a number. They went by the alphabetical order of our surname, so I was given bell number two. You had to use the circuits on a switch and test it until the switch rang the bell. At least this meant you could easily test if your tool worked.

I had no trouble ringing the bell, but not everyone succeeded. I noticed a vein bulging on the teacher's forehead. Eek.

And last was general magic.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"I said it's fine, so it's fine!" Bear yelled. "Now hurry up!"

"Don't blame me for whatever happens."

It's your funeral.

Bear's idea of an exam was to have each student blast him with the strongest magic they could. I might add that I went last. So far, he had taken each hit without a problem. He even gave the students pointers on where they could improve. So did this mean I really *could* let loose? I mean, the man himself said it was fine.

The strongest offensive spell I could use was a high-pressure jet of water. A waterjet, if you will. Mine was capable of cutting through steel. I was used to hunting in the Mystic Forest, so I generally refrained from fire and air spells. The Mystic Forest wasn't a good place to be starting fires, and strong air magic did

too much damage to the trees otherwise.

Without air or fire available, my best options were water or pure magic attacks. There were still other spells I could've used, but water was best for leaving monster corpses intact.

Here I go. One high pressure waterjet attack, coming right up.

"Hah!"

For about a minute, I pummeled Bear with waterjet after waterjet—like a shower from a souped up fire hose. And damn him, he tanked every hit like a pro.

"Tsk."

"I HEARD THAT! YOU CLICKED YOUR TONGUE!"

I chose to play dumb. "I did nothing of the sort."

"Liar!"

The point was, I passed general magic with flying colors. Go me.

For overall scores, I ranked sixth in my grade. Luckily, these results were roughly the same as I got on the prewinter exams, so I didn't think Sheila would have any reason to complain.

Now it's time for the long vacation. I can finally go back to Peylon.

Once finals were over, the entire academy shifted into a prevacation mood. Everyone enjoys a vacation, especially when it's a long one that they can spend goofing off.

A few days after the exams, we had a year end ceremony. That evening, I had dinner in the dorm cafeteria with the usual duo: Lanmia and Luchirs.

"What are you two doing for the break?" Lanmia asked us.

Apparently, Luchirs was returning to her family's domain.

"I'm looking forward to seeing my mother and younger brother," she said. "I'll need to buy lots of souvenirs in the capital before I head home."

What about your father?

I wondered if she had deliberately not mentioned her father, but it didn't seem like a good idea to pry.

"So about the same as me then," Lanmia said. "What about you, Lowell?"

"I'm headed home to Peylon."

It wasn't my family's domain per se, but it was where I was raised, so I considered "heading home" to be the appropriate phrase.

"Speaking of which, I think I heard something about Peylon having a big festival every summer. One of the older girls mentioned it."

Lanmia was very well informed. But the festival was famous beyond the boundaries of the Peylon Earldom, so perhaps lots of people knew of it.

"It's called the hunting festival," I said. "It's a very busy week for the men."

After all, it was a festival centered around hunting, just like the name suggested. One week of hunting by day and feasting by night.

"So do only men enjoy it?" Luchirs asked.

An astute observation.

"Not necessarily," I told her. "But hunting is the main attraction and women aren't allowed to participate in that part of it."

"Whaaat? Aren't there plenty of girls who would like to take part?"

Quite right, Lanmia. In fact, right in front of you is a girl who would very much like to participate. So would Colny, for that matter.

"Granted, there's other entertainment for the women," I told them.

"There is?" they said at the same time.

"There are wandering minstrels, and stages are set up for theater troupes and musicians—even ones from the royal capital. Traveling carnivals come through too."

Their eyes sparkled.

"That sounds great!" Lanmia exclaimed.

“I’ve never seen a wandering minstrel,” Lanmia noted.

Despite being in the royal capital, students didn’t get many chances to see plays and operas. Even after they had made their social debuts, it was hard to attend late-night events when you had classes the next day. And like Luchirs had said, most nobles didn’t have many opportunities to see something like a minstrel.

“Lowell, are the Aspozat siblings going to be part of the hunting festival?” Lanmia asked.

Huh? What’s going on?

A silence had fallen over the cafeteria.

“Of course. All three of them will be there,” I said.

Colny wouldn’t be part of the hunting, but she would still find ways to enjoy herself.

More than just Lanmia, most everyone in earshot became very interested in our conversation.

“Really?! Then would it be fine if I came to the festival?!”

She could barely contain herself. Not to mention I was getting some very intense looks from the other tables. I even heard Colny saying something from another table.

“Um, I’m not really in a position to say,” I answered. “Perhaps you should discuss it with your family?”

The Peylon hunting festival was an important event for the royalist faction, so only certain houses were invited. That was a matter decided by Thand, Lord Peylon, and some of the other prominent members. I wasn’t even an adult yet, so I didn’t have any right to tell someone they could come to the festival.

“I figured as much,” Lanmia sighed with diminished excitement. “We’re a small house without any affiliations. I probably shouldn’t hope for an invitation.”

“Likewise,” Luchirs added.

Hmm. I really don't think there's anything I can do.

I didn't have access to the guest list, but I didn't think their houses were on it. If they were, they'd probably already be getting requests for assistance with the event. If that was the case, the daughters of those houses would most likely know about it. If that wasn't happening, then there was only one reasonable conclusion.

However, even if they couldn't participate in the festival, there were still plenty of things to do in Peylon during the summer.

"Why not come to watch?" I suggested. "You can even tour around Peylon."

"We can do that?"

"Yep. The hunting festival has lots of spectators. And as I said, there are plenty of other things to enjoy."

Many people came less to participate and more to sightsee and spectate. There was even paid seating. Every year, Peylon saw a big spike in tourists around the time of the festival. There were all sorts of visitors too, not just nobles.

Because of the increased traffic, the whole domain was on high alert before, during, and after the festival. This meant successful arrests spiked during the festival, much to the joy of the common folk. Similarly, all the tourists provided good business opportunities, meaning everyone in the hospitality industry was waiting with bated breath.

With the year end ceremony finished, the extended break had officially begun. Everyone in the dorms was leaving, so the building's entrance was total chaos. The entire academy would be shutting down for the duration of the break, and that naturally included the dorm. There weren't any students staying for the summer. Remedial classes were held in a church on the edges of the royal capital, and that didn't come cheap.

For those who couldn't return home for one reason or another, the academy ran a camp during the summer. Anyone could participate and they would help take care of your food and shelter for the better part of the break. That didn't

come cheap either.

As Colny and I waited by the gates for Loks, we found ourselves talking about the summer camp.

“I hear family circumstances are the main reason students can’t go home,” Colny said in a hushed voice.

“Family circumstances, huh?” I echoed. It could’ve just been me, but that sounded complicated.

“For instance, there are students who have lost their birth mother and don’t want to go back to a home run by their stepmother.”

“Ah. They might have arrogant stepsiblings or something.”

“There’s also those who don’t return home because it’s simply too far away. When it comes to nobles, there’s all sorts of potential circumstances.”

I sure felt bad for some of those kids.

Loks seemed to have been snagged by a teacher (probably something related to his duties as a prefect), and still hadn’t arrived. We learned this thanks to Besheallina, who happened to be passing by. Ever since the incident in the cafeteria, we would say hi if we ran into each other.

I got the impression she and Shenavaroa were worried about me. Those two had recently learned that I was living in the attic room. My understanding was that the crown prince was the source of the leak. Wasn’t that personal information? Although, I guess there weren’t laws about that sort of thing yet.

But what a fuss they had caused when they found out. They wanted to get me moved to a normal room, saying they’d bring my case straight to the dorm manager. Eventually I got them to understand that I was in the attic room because I *wanted* to be there. With my renovations that room was comfortable and, most of all, spacious. I could even make changes I couldn’t in a normal room, so I was actually grateful to the old dorm manager who put me there.

Near the front gates were a few other students who also seemed to be awaiting a pickup. If they were here, then it meant they were from a house

well-respected enough to be allowed to bring their carriages all the way to the gates.

“Hm?”

I saw Ribbons. Last I checked, House Duval didn’t have permission to bring their carriages this far into the academy grounds.

“Colny, look.”

“Oh my, the academy problem child. House Duval lost those privileges long ago.”

Their permission had been revoked because my older brother didn’t enter the academy on account of illness. According to Sheila, he wasn’t actually ill. He had just become reclusive after being pampered and spoiled rotten by our mother. That mother of ours had passed away three years prior, by the way. Whatever their reasons, they had shirked their obligations, so of course they lost their special privileges.

I began to wonder about my shut-in brother. Was he ever going to reintegrate into society? But then I told myself it wasn’t my problem. That was something for my father or whoever to deal with.

“Sorry for the wait,” Loks greeted us, pulling me from my ruminations.

“They finally let you go?” I said.

“Are you all finished, Loks?” Colny asked.

“Yeah, it was just some errands.” He said this like it was no big deal.

The carriage made it to us not long after Loks’s arrival. For once, Ville wasn’t inside. As we got in, I caught sight of Ribbons again. How long did she plan on waiting there? Well, it didn’t matter to me.

When we arrived at the Aspozat residence, it seemed awfully busy.

“Welcome back, you three,” Sheila said to us.

“Hello, mother,” Loks responded. “It’s awfully lively around here.”

So I wasn’t the only one who thought that. Looking at the servants running

around, I think anyone would have come to the same conclusion. This wasn't normal around here.

"Our preparations for the trip to Peylon have fallen far behind," Sheila explained. "We'll have to ship some of our luggage later."

"I see. Did something happen at the royal palace?"

I failed to see the connection between the luggage preparations and the royal palace. But Sheila smiled at Loks's question.

"You're starting to learn," she said. "Were you aware that there's trouble in the southern petty kingdoms again?"

"Again? Where is it this time?"

"Resnund, at the very southern edge."

"Ah, that one facing the ocean. Even Ozeria imports sugar and salt from them. And there's trouble going on there?"

"Indeed. And it's given us lots of work at the royal palace."

The south of Ozeria was vast dry land occupied by around twenty petty kingdoms. In Ozeria, they were referred to collectively, but each one was a distinct entity. And something bad was going on in the southernmost one. It was far enough away that conflict wasn't likely to spill over into Ozeria, but we would be in trouble if the imports stopped. We could manage without their salt, but losing their sugar would be devastating. Among sweet-lovers, Resnund sugar was appreciated for its low cost and high quality.

Thand worked in foreign relations, so the troubles of one of Ozeria's trading partners wasn't some distant problem for House Aspozat. That's why Lord and Lady Aspozat had spent so much time holed up in the royal palace, and had to delay their trip to Peylon. I began to worry. Should they be going to Peylon at all under these circumstances?

"Resnund, huh?" Loks groaned. "Who started it this time?"

"They're saying it's the military," Sheila told him.

"So it's related to Flotmarow?"

“Indeed. It just keeps happening, again and again.”

Huh. Isn't this an emergency? Why are they so calm about it?

Resnund and Flotmarow were both countries that traded with Ozeria. Flotmarow had become independent from Resnund around one hundred and fifty years prior. Their main exports were spices. Oh, and flowers. Ozerian nobles enjoyed importing and decorating their houses with flowers that were out of season in our kingdom.

Within Resnund, there were factions that advocated for the reabsorption of Flotmarow. The source of this round of strife, the military, were considered to be hard-liners, even among those who shared their beliefs.

“Mother, Loks, aren't you worried about this?” Colny asked, apparently thinking the same thing I had.

“We probably should be,” Loks said.

“But you see, Marquess Zokbahr and his army are stationed out there,” Sheila elaborated.

House Zokbahr was arguably the second or third most prominent house of the royalist faction. Their domain was on the southern borders of Ozeria and often feuded with the neighboring petty kingdoms.

I was under the impression their role was to protect the kingdom's borders, but their domain was still a ways away from the far-southern kingdom of Resnund. Perhaps this was just a sign of how important Resnund was to Ozeria. Surely, they didn't have a military presence there just because they thought Resnund could be used in their favor. I sure hoped they weren't thinking they could do what they wanted if they clamped down on Resnund's military.

“The current Lord Zokbahr heavily favors physical prowess, but his army boasts a number of skilled mages. And only his best are deployed to the petty kingdoms. They would have no trouble overwhelming Resnund's army, seeing as they lack any magical ability.”

So the attempted coup d'état had been stopped well before this conversation. But that made me ask why Sheila was so busy at the royal palace.

“A coup is still a coup. Cleaning up the mess required our involvement. There were also lots of conferences. It was terrible.”

But now it was all taken care of, so they were free to head to Peylon. It all made sense now.

For some reason, Sheila smiled at me. “And before I forget, Sir Yuin of the Knights of Obsidian had a request.”

Does she mean the black knights? And why is she telling me this?

“He wants to test his mettle in the Mystic Forest.”

“Huh?”

As I recalled, the black knights’ duty was patrolling the royal capital. In other words, if they were ever in combat, it was against other humans. The Mystic Forest, of course, only had monsters. Sometimes people fought over prey, sure, but that usually ended after a few punches. But this guy wanted to “test his mettle” in the forest? I was fairly certain fighting people and fighting monsters were very different things.

“Sir Yuin still isn’t over that?” Loks said. He, too, was smiling. He was also looking at me with some unfathomable deep meaning behind his eyes, for reasons entirely beyond me, but then explained further. “You see, the last time he tried to apprehend someone, his quarry could command mysticstock. You’ve probably heard that ornithic monsters are easy to control, right? They were using those.”

“So...because he might encounter someone capable of commanding mysticstock, he wants to gain experience fighting stronger monsters?”

“Apparently.”

And something about this elicited even wider smiles from Sheila and Loks.

“Colny, why are they smiling?”

“Who can say?”

So I was left out of the loop. Very mysterious. But unless I was imagining it, something told me not to look into the matter too much.

Epilogue

Our extended break was what you might also call a summer vacation. It was a long break that started in early June and ended in early September. The academy students spent their break in a number of different places, such as the summer camp, in the royal capital, or at home. Naturally, I headed back to Peylon. I was going to hunt in the Mystic Forest and earn myself a tidy sum while I was at it.

At first I had been uneasy about attending the academy, but it ended up being pretty fun. Just one year and I had already had a wealth of experiences. I think the best benefit was becoming friends with Lanmia and Luchirs. Back in Peylon, there weren't many other girls nearby.

Apparently, girls were somewhat rare in Peylon families. Even Colny was treated like a princess because she was Sheila's daughter. But she wasn't the type of person to let herself be spoiled.

"Lera, what's the matter?" she asked me.

"Oh, nothing," I said. "Is it time to go?"

"It is. Mother says we should make our way to the portal."

So the portal was ready. The Aspozat residence had a portal constantly open. These were expensive to set up and required lots of mana to maintain, which made them rare. But House Aspozat was the house of a marquess, top of their faction, and friends with House Peylon, so they had all the resources and then some to keep one ready on demand.

We headed to the room where it had been set up. Servants were busily coming in and out of rooms with luggage. Everything in those trunks was necessary for our stay in Peylon. I could pack my own bags, but that wasn't allowed in this house. They said I couldn't take work from the servants.

But I do appreciate the convenience. Thanks for all your hard work.

"There you are," Sheila said when she saw us.

“We were told it’s ready,” I replied. “Where’s Thand?”

“He’s being detained by his work. He’ll come after us.”

“All right then.”

What a busy man he was.

There were two types of portals. There were those that could hold a charge and only required an activation key, and there were those that needed to be recharged every time you used them. The Aspozat residence used the latter.

I heard the royal palace had one of the former. Supposedly, it was for emergencies. I didn’t know what sort of lock system it employed, but it no doubt had one. You never know when someone might try and kill a royal.

“Well then, Lera, if you would do the honors.”

“Can do.”

Supplying the mana was my job because I had the largest mana pool of anyone in the room. Without me, it usually required both Loks and Ville to charge it. I stood over the portal and directed mana into it.

Good, it’s working just fine.

“It should be ready in just a bit,” I told Sheila.

“Wonderful. Activate it whenever you think it’s ready.”

“Understood.”

Looks like it’s time to go. It won’t be much longer, Peylon. I can’t wait for another summer of hunting! I’m going to enjoy these next few months!

Afterword

Hello, I'm Riko Saiki. I'd like to extend my thanks to everyone who bought this book. That goes for my new readers and those who know me from previous works.

However, this is actually my first time writing an afterword. So I'm wondering just what I should write about. Ah, maybe I should write about the book itself.

If you're reading this, then you're probably acquainted with the main text and already know this, but this is a story light on romance. It's so light that I sometimes forget about the male lead. He barely even appears in this volume. Sorry, it's not your fault, it's just that the author struggles with writing romance.

When the web novel was adapted into a printed work, there weren't just additions, but also alterations, or you might call them adjustments. The web novel is currently being updated almost daily, so much of it was written as things popped into my head. And when that happens, you get things like contradictions in the setting. Those sorts of errors and anything that makes you say "Hey, this is off" was removed. Or rather, corrected. It's probably all fixed now.

For those of you who read the web novel, you might have been surprised to see the first volume end this early. Even I was surprised. I thought they'd want to cram a bit more in, but the editor kindly said that it was a waste to throw away what I had taken the effort to write. So I suggested we add more incidents and increase the word count!

I'm good at increasing it, but bad at cutting it down. I'm someone who sometimes passes one hundred thousand characters without realizing it. What's special about that number? Most women's book labels cap their submissions at one hundred thousand characters. Sadly, I often can't even submit my works because they're too long.

But whatever the case, this series has made it to publishing, and I hope that can continue for a long while. And it's even receiving a manga adaptation! I'll be

sure to tell you more, in some manner or another, once the details are settled.
I'd be honored if you all waited for that day.

Until then, I hope we can meet again in the next volume.



Riko Saiki

Illust.
Baracan

Disowned but Not Disheartened!

*Life Is Good with
Overpowered Magic*



The trouble
never ends once
a young lady
of the countryside
finds herself at
the noble
academy!

Yuin Sacourt
Fezgahn

Member of the Knights of Obsidian.
Trusted with maintaining the peace
within the royal capital.

Riko Saiki

Illust.
Baracan

Disowned but
Not Disheartened!

Life Is Good with
Overpowered Magic



Portal

Though sizes vary, portals can be used to transport almost anything instantly over long distances.

Transmitter

Stationary model. Not easily carried around, but can be used to communicate over long distances.

Toilet & Bath

Disposes of water and waste via magical dispersal instead of a traditional plumbing system.

Brooch

Made with a miniature camera installed, in case of emergencies. Records and replays both video and audio.

Magic Lock

Places a constant barrier over a door. If anyone without permission attempts to open it, a mechanism will trigger, activating a camera and microphone.

Ornithic Magic Tool

A voice recorder that fits in the palm of your hand. Can only replay recorded audio, but can fly to designated recipients. A very popular plaything among certain researchers.

Colnesia Bornir Aspozat

Affectionately known as "Colny." Lera's childhood friend, older than her by one year.

Tafelina Lowell Lera Duval

Reincarnated from another world. Specialized education in the countryside left her with more muscles than brains. Oldest daughter of House Duval, but was disowned at a young age.

**With knowledge of her previous life,
Lera has no shortage of inspiration!**

Forced to
improvise on a
time limit,
**Lera modifies
her brooch!**





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Volume 1

by Riko Saiki

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