

VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

I May Be the Hidden Boss
But I'm Not the Demon Lord

2

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Prologue

I, Yumiella Dolkness, am the villainess and hidden boss of an otome game. Or at least *now* I am, since I reincarnated into Yumiella's body. When I'd realized who I'd become—a girl destined to be stronger than the final boss, otherwise known as the Demon Lord, and who could use strong dark magic—I might have gotten a little too excited. My gamer instincts had taken over, and I'd level grinded way too hard.

When I'd entered the Academy, it had been revealed during the level assessment portion of the opening ceremony that I was at the unprecedented level of 99, and so people had been very frightened of me. Some of them had even suspected that I was the Demon Lord. The fact that I'd been born with the same black hair as him hadn't exactly helped my case, nor had the Kingdom of Valschein's perception that the color black signified evil.

Alicia—the main character of the game—and her three love interests had also been convinced that I was the Demon Lord, and trying to clear things up with them had been a truly difficult task. In the end, the only one who'd understood that I was just a completely harmless civilian had been Prince Edwin. As for the other three...well, they'd ended up almost murdering me just moments before our battle against the *real* Demon Lord. My parents had actually tried to have me killed as well, which had led to me succeeding my father's title and becoming a countess.

You know, I feel like way too many people have wanted to kill me...

Despite all that, it wasn't as if I hadn't had any good times. I'd gotten to hatch my adorable dragon Ryuu from an egg that I'd incubated myself, and best of all, I'd met someone who liked me for me. Speaking of which, he—Patrick Ashbatten—and I were currently in the middle of fighting a monster.

At this point, roughly a year had passed since all the commotion around the Demon Lord's resurrection had been settled, and Patrick and I had made our way into the depths of a dungeon near the Royal Capital. It was the more

dangerous of the two dungeons located in the area—Patrick was probably the only one who could properly take on the monsters here. Well, Patrick and I both.

After destroying an entire wave of monsters that had come crashing toward us, Patrick turned to me and panted, “Couldn’t you help me out a little?”

I shook my head. “I can’t,” I said simply. “I’ve already reached the maximum level, so the experience would go to waste.”

“Still, it’s a bit tough to take on this many on my own...”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about that,” I admitted. “You need to stop playing it so safe. If you don’t conserve your energy by dodging attacks at the last minute, or exert more power than you need to kill them, your grinding efficiency is going to drop.”

He could even just take the brunt of the attacks to save time, I mused.

“There’s no point in being efficient if I end up getting hurt and can’t go on,” Patrick said, looking decidedly unconvinced.

“That’s why I’m here! Even if you lose an arm or a leg, I can fix you up right away.”

My thoughts flashed back to my childhood, when I’d constantly been covered in fresh wounds. I’d still been weak back then, and it had been part of my daily routine to use my healing magic to regain a lost limb or two. Honestly, I knew that as long as I protected my head, most other injuries could be healed.

Now that I think about it, there’s even a chance I could regenerate my head, I thought. *Patrick should be grateful that he has such a skilled healer with him...*



Patrick, however, didn't seem to agree. "I'm coming alone from now on," he said dispiritedly. "I feel like I'm in more danger when you're around."

"You know that, in the worst-case scenario, you could die in a dungeon, right? I'm only here because I'm worried about you."

"And yet, I can't tell if you're trying to kill me or keep me alive..."

Of course I want you to live! I thought indignantly. *You're my dearest boyfriend! Wait, hold on... Are Patrick and I boyfriend and girlfriend?*

I combed through all my recent memories at the Academy, but I couldn't recall doing a single romantic thing with him. We hadn't splashed water on each other at the beach, or bumped into each other at our agreed-upon meeting spot like eight hours before we were meant to show up there...

We did kiss...right? I feel like we did. But we haven't really gone on any dates... Or, wait, couldn't our current outing be considered a date? I mean, when a guy and a girl go out, just the two of them... I nodded to myself. *Yeah, this is totally a date.*

"Of course I want you to live, Patrick," I told him. "I want you to have a long life, so we can have tons of dates just like this one."

"This thing we're doing right now is *definitely* not a date," Patrick protested.

I sunk back into thought. *Is it wrong to try and go on a date in a dungeon?*



Not too long after that, Patrick and I decided to call it a day and started to head back toward the entrance of the dungeon. As we reached the lower levels, fewer monsters appeared, so we ended up walking side by side and chatting.

"This might be the last time we come here, with graduation being so close," I commented.

Patrick nodded. "Sounds like we'll be graduating from the hidden dungeon of the Royal Capital then as well."

The hidden dungeon of the Roya— Oh, right. I guess this dungeon is called hidden. The moniker doesn't really feel right, though; the other one's just

accessible at a much lower level.

As we continued to walk the dim dungeon path, a moment of silence fell between us. I looked over at Patrick and caught him staring at me, an almost fearful look in his eyes.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, I just thought you might suggest taking down the boss to commemorate our last time, or something like that.”

“Patrick, *do not* fight the boss here.”

“Whatever it is, it must be pretty strong for *you* to say that,” he commented, eyebrows raising.

If I was recalling the game correctly, this dungeon had nothing going for it aside from the fact that it was close to the Royal Capital. On top of that, the boss was a total pain in the ass—I *hated* that golem.

“It’s not that the boss is particularly strong,” I told Patrick. “It’s just got really high defense, so fighting it is really inefficient experiencewise.”

It took forever to take that golem down, since the monster was resistant to both physical and magical attacks. It also dropped an elixir for some reason, which I found strange and completely unnecessary—it wasn’t like I needed any recovery items during the battle.

Patrick sighed. “I got worried for nothing. I forgot that’s the kind of person you are.”

“The kind of person I am”? I thought, perplexed. *What does that mean?*

But before I could ask, I heard something rustling down ahead of us. Patrick and I put our conversation on hold and held up our weapons, preparing for an attack from the front, but then relaxed when we realized the sounds we’d just heard were only the shuffling of footsteps and the low murmuring of several voices.

It looks like other people are here for once, I thought. *I better call out to them first, so we don’t end up in a scuffle.*

“Hello, it’s a fine day for dungeon crawling, isn’t it?”

“Well, well,” a man’s voice responded. “I’m surprised to see other people in here. We’re members of the Royal Knight’s Order; we’re here to train.”

Sounds like there’s two or three of them, I mused.

I decided to continue forward, since I didn’t anticipate having any issues with members of the Knight’s Order. I walked around a corner and was met with the sight of three men dressed in Royal Knight uniforms, each of which were wielding a sword.

I bowed to them, only to be met with a scream.

“Whoa! Something’s here!”

“What?” I looked around, trying to figure out what had appeared, but the only other thing I saw was Patrick, who was looking dubiously at the group of men in front of us.

One of the knights who hadn’t screamed stepped forward and bowed. “I apologize for that, Countess Dolkness. We didn’t expect to actually meet someone here, and it seems he was caught off guard. Are you perhaps returning to the surface?”

“Yes,” I agreed, “we’re just on our way out. Oh, and just so you know, we took down most of the monsters around the fortieth level. I suspect that area won’t have much going on for a while.”

The knight chuckled. “Ha ha, that shouldn’t be a problem. The deepest we’ll be going is around the tenth level.”

“Is that so? Well, good luck then.”

And so, our innocuous conversation ended, and we went our separate ways.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder what that one knight had seen. It was a question that was answered for me only a few moments later. Thanks to my acute sense of hearing, which I’d gained through leveling, I was able to pick up on the three knights’ conversation.

“I didn’t think we’d bump into *her*,” one of them murmured. “I thought I was going to die when she popped out of the dark.”

“She’s the one who made the skies black in the Royal Capital, right? To think

she has the ability to call forth the night... How terrifying.”

“I was pretty scared when we ran into her too,” said the knight who’d spoken to me. “Seems like the stories about her being a black-haired demon and dragon tamer aren’t too far off. But she did seem pretty normal when I spoke to her.”

One of the other knights scoffed. “Would a normal person go all the way to the *fortieth* level of this dungeon? The guy who was with her was the son of a margrave, right? I don’t know how he puts up with her.”

“Yeah...” There was a pause. “You know, after seeing her in person, I think she’s the one who defeated the Demon Lord.”

“The official statement from the kingdom is that His Highness took him down, so don’t say that to others.”

Oh, so they were afraid of me. They even figured out the truth behind the battle against the Demon Lord too...

I couldn’t help but wonder if Patrick, who was walking beside me, had also heard their conversation. It was a bit embarrassing that the elite Royal Knights of this kingdom were afraid of me.

“Just so you know, Yumiella,” Patrick said suddenly, “I don’t feel like I’m ‘putting up’ with you.”

So he did hear everything... I thought. But, hold on, if he’s not putting up with me, that means he’s choosing to spend time with me! So this is a date after all.

I smiled, just slightly. “Thank you, Patrick.”



A few days after our dungeon adventure, the graduation ceremony for the Royal Academy of the Kingdom of Valschein had been held. I’d daydreamed my way through the commencement addresses of both Prince Edwin and the headmaster, and not long after that, the ceremony had ended without anything remarkable happening.

Now it was time for us to attend a buffet party, which was being held in the same venue.

So... I mused. *Is this the kind of event where I can leave whenever I want?*

I had other things to take care of, including packing up my dorm. I was much too busy to have the time to enjoy a party.

Actually, now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever had fun at a party.

I decided to look for Patrick and suggest we leave. As I searched my surroundings for him, a person began to make their way toward me—one who most people avoided. Her eyes welled up as she drew up by my side, as if she could burst into tears at any moment.

"I'm so sad to be saying goodbye to you, Yumiella," she said, sniffing. "We...we *will* see each other again, right?"

"We will, we will," I promised. "Now, can you give me a little more space, Lady Eleanora?"

I gave the girl in front of me a wary look. She was a duke's daughter named Eleanora Hillrose, who for some strange reason was very fond of me. She and her blond ringlets kept inching closer and closer—I felt like she was just seconds from latching on to me.

"When will we see each other again?" she demanded. "Tomorrow? The day after tomorrow?"

"Well, I'll be at my family's mansion in the Royal Capital for a few days, so I think we'll be able to meet up a couple of times."

"Really?!" Eleanora happily exclaimed. "Then I will definitely visit you!"

Oops, I think I may have said a bit too much there. She's definitely going to invite herself over.

Eleanora's expression was suddenly clouded, as if she had realized something. "But...why did you say we'd only be able to meet up 'a couple of times'? Yumiella, are you leaving the Royal Capital?"

"Yes, I'll be returning to my county."

Now that I'd succeeded my father's title, I was now responsible for Dolkness County. Before, I'd left things to our deputy since I was still a student, but from now on I'd need to return home and work from on-site.

I'm surprised Lady Eleanora didn't realize I was leaving before this, I thought. I mean, it's already widely known that I've become the countess of Dolkness...

"No, but that can't— Oh! Does that mean you have to say goodbye to Patrick as well?"

"I'm afraid so..."

I hadn't really allowed myself to dwell on that subject before now, and I began frowning slightly.

She's right, I thought with an inward sigh. Until now, I could see Patrick at the Academy every day, but after this, I won't be able to meet up with him so easily.

Patrick's home, the Mark of Ashbatten, was on the complete opposite side of the kingdom as Dolkness County, with the Royal Capital stationed in between. It was something I'd long been aware of, something I'd known from the day I'd met Patrick, even before he'd confessed his feelings to me. Still...no matter how aware I was of the facts, that didn't make our situation any less sad.

"I can't believe the two of you are going to be apart..." Eleanora said with a gusty sigh. "What are you doing wasting your time talking to me?! You must hurry to Patrick!"

Eleanora ducked behind me, pushing me forward from behind. I didn't budge even an inch—my significantly stronger muscles meant that I could remain effortlessly in place.

It's not like it's guaranteed that Patrick is over in that direction, I thought, exasperated. And, anyway, how am I supposed to handle this situation...?

As I was musing over my next move, I heard a voice call out to me from one side of the room. I craned my neck in that direction, only to see a familiar face.

I knew that was his voice. I knew you were pushing me in the wrong direction, Lady Eleanora.

"Hi, Yumiella and...Lady Eleanora. What exactly are you doing?"

"Oh, we were actually just looking for you," I told him.

"And how wonderful that we've finally found you, right, Yumiella?" Eleanora asked cheerfully. "Don't worry, I'll make myself scarce—I wouldn't want to

meddle in your love affairs.”

That said, she immediately dived into the sea of other Academy students, and...then turned back around and observed us with great interest.

I’m pretty sure that can be called meddling too, Lady Eleanora.

Patrick and I turned to each other and laughed nervously, both very aware of the burning intensity of Eleanora’s gaze.

“This is just a guess,” I said, “but I think she thinks we haven’t noticed her.”

Patrick chuckled. “Looks like Lady Eleanora’s the same as always.”

Now that he was in front of me, I stared at Patrick’s face. The more I looked at him, the more I thought of how we’d have to be apart for a while. Suddenly, I felt like I was beginning to understand how Eleanora had worked herself up to the point of tears. But Patrick...he seemed to be acting no different than he usually did.

“Do you want me to get you a drink?” he asked.

“No, I’m good.”

Concern suddenly filled Patrick’s eyes. “What’s wrong, Yumiella? You look so sad. Are you really that unhappy over leaving the Academy?”

I don’t get how you and Lady Eleanora can read my emotions from my expressionless face, I thought, surprised that he’d noticed my feelings. Patrick...I don’t care about leaving the Academy—I’m overcome with sadness and loneliness just from the thought of being apart from you.

Still, there was no way I could say such an embarrassing thing out loud. I supposed my inability to express that side of me might be one of the reasons why the two of us hadn’t had any particularly romantic moments together.

Maybe I should just tell him how I feel honestly, I mused. Even if I end up embarrassing myself, I’ll have some time to cool off since we’ll be apart for a while. Still, the notion felt a little too daunting. Why is being straightforward so hard...? How do I tell him that he’s the reason for my sadness, and not the Academy? Hmm... Maybe if I say people are more important than places, he’ll get it.

“Well, you know... The strength of one’s position cannot ever prevail over the strength of a strong union, or however it goes.”

Patrick blinked, but then asked, “What military text are you quoting? I’d like to read it too.”

He didn’t get it at all! I moaned internally. Patrick, why can’t you just get it?! And here I thought the graduation ceremony was a good opportunity to express my feelings, a chance given to me by fate...

As I stood there frozen, desperately searching for the right words, Patrick casually continued, “Oh, right, I forgot to mention this, but before you head back to Dolkness County, can you stay in the Royal Capital for a little while?”

“What? Why?”

“I just have a few things to take care of, but I was planning on going to Dolkness County with you.”

Patrick...is coming with me? That means we don’t have to say goodbye! Hell yeah, baby, I’ve got no reason to be sad now! Though, uh, I guess I’ll be holding off on sharing my honest feelings, then...

Regardless, I found it very reassuring that Patrick would be coming with me. I’d been worried over figuring out how to run Dolkness County on my own, but with Patrick by my side, everything was sure to turn out all right. It was all I could do to hold in my excitement and not start dancing around in front of everyone.

Desperately forcing my voice into a neutral tone, I asked, “You’re coming too, huh?”

Patrick smiled slightly. “Yeah, who knows what would happen if I let you go alone.”

“It’s not like I’m going to do anything on purpose...”

“I didn’t think you would,” Patrick agreed. “Still, some kind of accident always happens if you’re around.”

Maybe I shouldn’t be so excited about him coming after all...

And so, my third year at the Academy came to an end. With my time as a

student over, I made my way toward the next phase of my life: stepping into my role as the countess of Dolkness County.

Chapter 1: The Hidden Boss Graduates

After packing up and vacating my dorm, I'd headed to the Dolkness mansion in the Royal Capital. Now, I sat in the carriage that carried my few belongings as it stopped in front of my parents' unnecessarily grand mansion. I'd decided to keep the estate for now, despite wanting to sell it off; if I got rid of it, I'd feel bad for ousting all of the people who worked there, and beyond that, my parents were still living in the mansion.

To tell the truth, I had no obligation to take care of either of my parents, after all the assassination attempts they'd sent my way. It was their fault I'd had no choice but to forcefully succeed my father and take on the title of countess in the first place. I'd proposed that they go live out in the countryside somewhere in our county, supported by an allowance I'd provide to them for that purpose, but they'd refused to leave the Royal Capital. And so, in the mansion they'd remained.

What's so good about the Royal Capital, anyway? I wondered with a sigh as I climbed down from the carriage. *It's not like either of them will ever be able to return to the aristocratic world.*

I'd sent word that I'd be stopping by the estate, so I wasn't surprised to find that there were a few servants waiting outside for my arrival. They were all standing in stiff, upright positions, and had blanched faces. I casually glanced over at one of them, and they immediately started to tremble violently.

It's unfortunate that they're reacting like this, but I guess I am the person who caused all the commotion around the estate. Isn't she a bit too scared of me, though?

Honestly, I was used to people reacting to me this way, so I didn't particularly think much of it. The issue here was Rita, the woman standing behind me.

Rita had been my maid for the past three years, during which time she'd lived with me in the Academy dorms and been responsible for the care of me and my rooms. If that was the extent of our history, she'd be nothing more than a

familiar servant to me, but she'd also just so happened to poison my tea a few times in order to save her sister, whom my parents had taken hostage. I'd later been the one to save that very sister, which had led to Rita's loyalty to me morphing into something terrifying.

"How dare you take such an attitude toward your master?" she demanded, outraged. "Having the chance to serve Lady Yumiella should bring you to the pinnacle of happiness!"

This is just what I feared, I thought with an inward sigh. I didn't step in, though—Rita's gaze was far too intimidating.

"Why, I would even give my life for Lady Yumiella if she ordered me to do so! But my lady doesn't at all desire such a thing; if anything, *I* am the one who wishes to die for *her*! Oh, seeing you treat her like this, it fills me with such a burning, fiery frustration! Do you understand what I'm trying to express to you?!"

The servants slowly shook their heads in denial.

"Y-You...don't understand?" Rita laughed, her expression shifting from rage to an unholy glee. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you do soon enough."

"Rita, calm down!" I finally said, cutting into her rant. "They don't need to understand! Anyway, I don't really care about their attitude. Oh! How about you go see your sister? You haven't seen her for a while, right?"

Rita inclined her head. "I am grateful for your benevolence, Lady Yumiella, but there is no need to spoil Sara. She is working hard every day in order to become your slave, so—"

"Go and see her right away," I said, cutting her off.

Rita fell silent at once, then bowed deeply to me before heading off into the depths of the mansion. Watching her go, I released a relieved breath.

Sara's in trouble—I've got to save her before she falls too deeply into her sister's clutches. I can't have another Rita running around...

My biggest concern, however, was the other servants, who'd witnessed the entirety of what just happened. I didn't want them to be turned off by Rita's

actions.

I haven't brainwashed her, I promise!

Before my parents had assigned Rita to me, she'd been working here at the Dolkness estate in the Royal Capital, but it was becoming clear that I couldn't leave her to her own devices. At this rate, I'd probably have to bring her home with me to Dolkness County. I was scared to think of what she might do if I left her behind...

Now that Rita was gone, the servants nervously tried to show me around the mansion. Unfortunately, I couldn't enter the house just yet.

"Wait a second," I told them. "I'd like to go to the yard first."

"The yard...?" one of the maids asked. She gave me a puzzled look but said nothing more, bringing me over to a large stretch of lawn.

Now that I'd gotten a better look at it, I realized the Dolkness mansion was L-shaped, which meant there was plenty of room for a sprawling field of grass.

All right, I thought, nodding to myself. This should be good enough for a few days.

"Ryuu!" I yelled toward the sky.

Past the clouds, a dark entity appeared, flying straight toward us—it was Ryuu, my absolutely adorable child, who was also my pride and joy. Reaching the skies just above the mansion, Ryuu wildly flapped his wings as he came down. When his feet thumped to the earth, the ground quaked violently under my feet.

"You did such a good job moving here from the Academy, Ryuu!" I praised him, jumping onto his face, which was as long as I was tall. "What a good boy you are!"

Ryuu fawned over me, rumbling purrs resonating through his body. They were so deep the sound almost felt like it came from deep within the earth.

How cute, I thought, my heart full. Even if he is a dragon, he's still a baby.

That's when I realized I'd completely forgotten about the maid. I turned back to apologize, only to find that she'd collapsed to the ground. She seemed

petrified with terror, judging by the loud chattering of her teeth.

Oh, she must not be fond of animals. My bad, miss.



At the longest, I decided I was only going to stay at the Dolkness mansion for a week. After all, I just needed to wait until Patrick finished taking care of the errands he had to run in the Royal Capital, and then we'd be good to go. I'd expected him to arrive a few days after I'd left for the mansion, so I was quite surprised when he showed up much sooner—that is, the same day I arrived.

When I went to the front of the residence to greet him, one of the first things I did was invite him to my room. The chamber itself still felt quite unfamiliar to me, since I'd only just arrived myself, but I figured it was as good a place to talk as any.

"Didn't you have some things to take care of?" I asked as we walked there. "Are you done with everything already?"

"Not yet," Patrick admitted, "but after vacating my dorm at the Academy, I had nowhere to stay."

"But...doesn't your family have a place here in the Royal Capital too?"

"Yeah, they do, but there aren't enough people working there to take care of me. Would you mind if I stayed here instead?"

The Dolkness mansion was plenty large enough for mere provincial aristocrats to be living in, since my parents had neglected Dolkness County and based themselves in the Royal Capital instead. Still, it didn't sound right to me that a margrave's estate didn't have enough spare staff to care for Patrick, especially if he was going to be staying there all by himself.

There must be some other reason he wants to stay here, I mused. *Oh, I've got it!*

Patrick seemed to notice a slight shift in my expression, because he heaved a sigh. "To be honest, I made that up. It was just an excuse so I could spend more time with—"

"I get it!" I cut in. "You're scared, aren't you? I mean, who wouldn't be after

telling their family they weren't going to visit them even once after graduating from the Academy?"

"Oh... Uh, yeah, that's it."

"Are you sure you shouldn't go and show your face at the Mark of Ashbatten? Aren't your parents worried?"

"I'm more scared of letting you go to Dolkness County alone," Patrick said, exasperated. "I'm worried about you."

Am I really that unreliable? I wondered. *I guess it's fine. Regardless, I'm happy he's coming.*



Later that night, as I lay in my unfamiliar bed, I realized that Patrick and I were actually sleeping under the same roof. Now that we weren't in separate dorms anymore, like we'd used to be, something was bound to happen.

Was this what he was after all along? I wondered. *Patrick, you're such a horndog. How should I go about fending him off if he comes in here? Or...maybe I shouldn't? But I don't want to do anything until we're married...*

I stared at the foreign planes of my room's ceiling, my thoughts wandering, as I waited. Until, finally...the time came, and I heard the sound of someone softly knocking on my door.

"You can come in..."

He wouldn't immediately jump on me, right? I should be able to come up with a plan while we talk. Us talk, much important.

The door to my room slowly opened, creaking as it went. A person walked slowly inside, their silhouette growing gradually more apparent as they drifted closer. They were slightly taller than me, and had their hair tied up in the back, and they...wore a standard maid outfit? The person was a *maid*?!

"Good morning, Lady Yumiella; I've come to get you. Breakfast is ready."

"Rita...?" I asked slowly.

I still couldn't quite believe that the person who'd come into my room was my

maid. Confused, I looked over at the window—a sliver of morning sunshine was spilling through a gap in the curtains. It appeared that, contrary to my expectations, it was already morning.

Does time pass differently in this room than others?



Having not slept a wink, I was still unbelievably tired, even after breakfast. Noticing my fatigue, Patrick had considerately offered to spend the day at the mansion.

“You seem really sleepy,” he said idly. “Did you not like your bed?”

“Oh, that was fine; I can sleep anywhere,” I replied. “On the floor, on top of a boulder...even in a dungeon.”

“*Don’t* sleep in a dungeon.”

“So...does that mean floors and boulders are okay?”

“No?”

In the midst of such silly banter, Rita appeared. I’d asked her for some tea a few minutes earlier to wake me up. The tea she prepared was always exquisite, but I couldn’t tell her that—she’d probably collapse from the sheer joy of me praising her.

However...when I looked at Rita closer, I realized she hadn’t brought any of the items she needed to make us tea.

I wonder what’s going on...

“I apologize,” my maid explained, her voice frustrated. “It appears the tea will have to wait a moment. Just now, the second prince arrived at the estate. I’ve taken him into the drawing room for now, but would you rather I send him away?”

“I don’t think we can send His Highness away...”

“Nevertheless, I would chase him away with a broom if you commanded me so, Lady Yumiella,” Rita said, her expression dead serious. “Even if I were to be executed as a result, as long as it was the result of carrying out your orders, I

would be happy.”

Oh my god, she’s terrifying, I thought. Though I made sure it didn’t show on my face, inwardly I was quailing in horror.

To tell the truth, I didn’t even really care if we sent the prince away or not—I was more focused on the disturbing level of seriousness in every word Rita had just said. Even Patrick was scared stiff.

“Um, Rita. We’ll meet with His Highness, so could you bring the tea over there? You know how I *love* your tea.”

“Yes, right away,” she agreed, her face immediately brightening up.

I don’t remember Rita being this bad at the Academy, I thought, breathing a sigh of relief when she left.

To be honest, though, I didn’t really have time to focus on that now—I needed to turn my attention to the prince waiting in my drawing room.

I thought we wouldn’t be seeing each other for a while after graduating, I thought suspiciously. I hope he doesn’t drag me into something annoying.



When Patrick and I arrived at the drawing room, we found Prince Edwin waiting for us, absent his usual escort.

His level was around 40 a year ago, I mused as Patrick and I took our seats on a couch opposite the prince. If you consider the fact that the strongest knight in the king’s forces, the commander of the Knight’s Order, is at level 60, and that most of his soldiers are under level 20, Prince Edwin is actually one of the most powerful people in Valschein. I guess he doesn’t really need bodyguards anymore.

Once we’d all settled in, the three of us began our chat with some rather innocuous small talk, mostly just congratulating one another on our graduations from the Academy.

The conversation took a turn, however, when Prince Edwin grew abruptly serious and said, “I apologize for suddenly stopping by, Lady Yumiella, Patrick. I wanted to sit down and talk with you back at the graduation ceremony, but

there just wasn't enough time."

"If you had let us know ahead of time, we could have properly welcomed you," I commented, watching as the prince took a sip of his tea.

"Unfortunately, that wasn't an option, as I don't really want my whereabouts to be public. If I sent someone, it would have left a trail."

Strange, I thought. I'd only intended to sarcastically take a jab at him, since I would have preferred prior warning before he came over, but the prince actually did seem to feel bad about showing up so unexpectedly. *If he doesn't want it known that he came here...I wonder if he has something else he wants to speak with me about.* The problem was, I didn't want to be involved—I'd be perfectly happy to depart this room without hearing a word of it.

As I sat there, stewing over how I couldn't just ask the prince to cut to the chase, Patrick spoke up and asked, "Did something happen? It hasn't been that long since we graduated..."

"Well, you see..." the prince said slowly. "There's been something that's been happening for a while, but it got worse after graduating."

Stop leaving us hanging and just come out with it already! I screeched internally.

Thankfully, despite the prince's evident discomfort, he continued. "A new faction seems to have developed, one that supports me specifically. They want to make me the next king."

"What? That's not what you want, is it, Your Highness?"

"Of course not," Prince Edwin replied. "I have no intention of going against my brother. Those people are just being cajoled by the aristocrats in the duke's faction."

So there's a dispute going on regarding the king's successor, and only outsiders want it to happen...? Seems like those radicals are at it again.

The radicals, also known as the duke's faction, or the antimainstream faction, were a group of aristocrats who were unsatisfied with the current state of things. They were dangerous people who were calling for Valschein to invade

foreign kingdoms so they could gain power and profit from the infighting. From what I understood of them, most of them weren't actually war aficionados, they just wanted to snatch up the important positions in the kingdom that were mostly held by the king's faction, also known as the moderates. If the king chose to appoint any of them as a minister, they'd probably flip to his faction practically right away.

Prince Edwin was perhaps slightly pitiable, having caught the eyes of such ambitious people.

But wait, wouldn't all of his problems be over if he just declared that he didn't have any intentions of succeeding the throne?

Curious, I asked the prince about it, and ended up receiving a detailed explanation.

"The radicalists are claiming that I'm the rightful heir to the throne, since I'm the one who defeated the Demon Lord," Prince Edwin told me. "I believe their goal is to increase the influence of the duke and his faction by making Lady Eleanora queen, since the saintess is currently 'recuperating.'"

"How annoying..." Patrick mumbled.

I guess the king and queen were right, I thought. They predicted that something like this would happen once the Demon Lord was defeated, and now it's really starting. I really dodged a bullet by not going to the Demon Lord's castle alone. I would've gotten myself wrapped up in all kinds of trouble.

Upon the Demon Lord's death, it had been announced to the public that Prince Edwin had been the one to defeat him. I'd also participated a bit, according to the official story, as had Alicia and the others. It was just that everyone other than Prince Edwin and I had ended up critically wounded.

Regardless, it sounded like the possibility of Prince Edwin and Eleanora getting married had now decreased to near impossible. She might be head over heels for the prince, but she was also the daughter of the head of the radicals, Duke Hillrose. The radicals were already trying to parade Prince Edwin around as their own, and that would only grow more pronounced if he married the daughter of their leader. Plus, Prince Edwin had no interest in marrying Eleanora either.

“Lady Eleanora must be acting quite persistent,” I commented.

“That’s what I’ve been having the most trouble with,” the prince admitted with an exhausted look. “Ever since the graduation ceremony, she keeps showing up uninvited, regardless of where I am.”

Wait, I just came to this mansion yesterday, which means the graduation ceremony was just the day before that, I realized. Eleanora’s kind of incredible for tiring him out this much in such a short period of time, isn’t she?

“She’s probably being encouraged by those around her,” I told the prince. “She’s kind of too pure for her own good...”

“That’s exactly it!” Prince Edwin proclaimed, a pained look on his face. “She has no ill intentions whatsoever, which is why it feels so awful to have to treat her unkindly.”

Hmm, what should I do here? I wondered. Honestly, things will probably only get worse if I get involved, so I should keep my nose out of it.

“What if you were to just disappear?” I asked. “It would be impossible to cajole a second prince who doesn’t exist.”

Prince Edwin sighed. “That would likely have little to no effect. The radicals have been riling people up to take my brother down for my entire final year at the Academy.”

If that was true, it appeared there was little Prince Edwin could do. The crown would either have to make a statement by punishing the radicalist aristocrats, or they’d just have to wait for things to cool off. It shouldn’t be that hard for Prince Edwin, honestly—he’d just have to withstand Eleanora’s heavy flirting for a while.

Actually, I take that back, I thought, wincing internally. Eleanora is...a lot.

“Lady Eleanora is quite the persistent one,” I admitted to the prince. “I’ve also struggled with her.”

“Oh, right, she’s fond of you as well. She might even come here.”

Don’t jinx it, you’re going to set off an event flag! And if she does end up showing up here, you’re the one that’s going to be in the most trouble!

Just as I was about to complain to Prince Edwin over his careless language, all three of us heard a commotion from down the hall. Footsteps came rushing in the direction of the drawing room, and Rita barged in without even a knock.

“The daughter of Duke Hillrose, Lady Eleanora has arrived,” she said, panting. “Currently the other servants are stalling her, but she’ll be here at any moment.”

Didn’t she spawn kind of fast?! I thought, turning toward the prince.

I was a tad surprised by Eleanora’s impromptu invasion of the Dolkness mansion, as was Patrick, but it was clear the person most shocked was Prince Edwin himself.

“Your Highness,” Patrick said hurriedly, “let’s move to a different room for now.” He grasped the panicking prince by the arm, leading him out of the drawing room. That done, he called over his shoulder, “Yumiella, I’ll get some more details from His Highness, so I’ll leave dealing with Lady Eleanora to you!”

What?! But I don’t want to!

Alas, before I could voice my thoughts aloud, I was left alone. Just as I began to consider running myself, the door to the drawing room was thrown open, and Eleanora strode inside. It seemed that the prince had only narrowly escaped bumping into her.

Well, at least that worked out...

“Yumiella, I’ve arrived! It’s been ever so long since I last saw you!”

I blinked. “Lady Eleanora, it’s only been two days since the graduation ceremony. Also, if you had let me know you were visiting ahead of time, I would have been able to properly welcome you.”

Eleanora bounced on her heels and grinned, then gracefully sat down on the couch across from me. “Wow,” she said, “you were *that* excited about me visiting?”

“Yes...” I responded after a pause. The word hissed through my teeth.

Where Prince Edwin always seemed to pick up on such sarcasm from me, it seemed to fly right over Eleanora’s head. Honestly, when I’d said, “It’s only

been two days,” I’d meant it. And yet, Eleanora hadn’t caught on to my meaning at all. By this point, I was sure that she wasn’t purposefully ignoring the things that I was hinting at—she just genuinely didn’t catch on to such things.

In hopes of sending her away as soon as possible, I decided to push Eleanora to say what she’d come here for. “How may I help you?” I asked her. “You must have something important to discuss, since you came by so suddenly.”

A look of confusion flickered over her face. “Something important? Why, I don’t need any reason to visit my friend’s house, do I? Plus, aren’t you going to be leaving for Dolkness County soon?”

“That’s correct,” I agreed.

Internally, I was sighing. The concept of being friends with someone like her sounded nice, but I couldn’t let myself fall for it. Eleanora was the daughter of Duke Hillrose, the head of the radical aristocrats—even if she was a good person who liked me without any ulterior motive, it would be best if I refrained from growing too close with her.

Hmm, maybe I’ll just bring up Prince Edwin, let her talk all she wants, and then have her leave.

That sounded like as good of a plan as any, so I dived in right away. “How are things going with His Highness?” I asked. “You haven’t mentioned him recently.”

Actually, now that I think about it, she hasn’t brought up her love life at all, I realized. She used to talk my ears off about it.

“Oh, would you like to hear?!” Though Eleanora’s eyes glimmered with excitement, she immediately calmed down and corrected herself. “*Ahem*. I mean, I’ll permit you to hear the details.”

It was all I could do not to roll my eyes. *All you did was make your statement condescending...*

Still, her reaction had told me all I’d needed to know—Eleanora had come here fully intending on talking to me about the prince.

“I’d love to hear all about it,” I said without even an ounce of feeling. “Please, tell me.”

Eleanora giggled. “Oh, you! I guess I’ll tell you all about it as a treat!”

I get it already! Can you hurry up and talk so you can leave?

“Hmm, where should I start,” Eleanora mused, her voice a pitch higher than usual. “Perhaps from the very beginning? Sir Edwin and I met—”

“I’ve already heard that part many times,” I interrupted, tone flat. “What about recently? How have things been these past few months?”

I briefly considered just ignoring what she was about to say, just like I’d done back at the Academy in order to get by, but I decided I should press her for a bit of information instead. This conversation would be a win for me if I could gain some insight into the current state of the Royal Capital or what Duke Hillrose was thinking.

Even if I don’t put some pressure on her, I’m sure she’ll still share details with me, I thought ruefully.

However, to my surprise, Eleanora’s expression had clouded over. “Recently...?”

“Yes, what’s been going on recently?” I asked, staring at her questioningly. It was unlike Eleanora to be unwilling to talk, *especially* when it was about her dearest prince.

After a few moments of silence, Eleanora mumbled, “For the past year, everyone’s been telling me that my time to win over Prince Edwin has come, and that if I acted now, I’d be able to make him my boyfriend, or even marry him. But the person that Sir Edwin cares for is still recuperating... I couldn’t bear to think of that as an opportunity for myself...”

Now that I think about it, Lady Eleanora stopped talking about the prince almost right away after the Demon Lord was defeated, I realized.

My heart softened a little. Despite having called Alicia a homewrecker in the past, it was clear that Eleanora was worried about the other girl. And that wasn’t all—it seemed that despite her love for the prince, she’d taken the time

to fully understand his feelings for Alicia, and had chosen to be respectful of them. Likely the only reason that she'd continued to flirt with him at all had been because everyone around her had pushed her to do so, overriding her reservations.

I could easily imagine Eleanora's entourage filling her mind with things that sounded good on the surface, leading her on and encouraging her feelings for the prince. She was a kind, good person by nature, even if she was slightly... Sorry, *quite* condescending at times. In my eyes, Eleanora was the ultimate airhead—the only reason she instructed others to bully Alicia in the past was because her entourage had instigated that behavior. Eleanora was just *that* divorced from malicious intent, and *that* easily swayed by the words of those around her.

"I see," I finally said. "Out of curiosity, who was it that said that now was your chance?"

"Um... I believe it was all of my friends. Oh! I mean, all of my friends aside from you."

That was no surprise; all the girls that had hung around Eleanora at the Academy were daughters of radicals. It was safe to say that Eleanora was just a pawn to be used in their political war. Of course, her father, Duke Hillrose, was one of those using her as well.

"What about your family? What has your father said about the situation?"

"My father has told me that I should stay away from Sir Edwin, and leave him alone for some time."

"What? The duke said that?" Surprise flickered through me.

According to Prince Edwin, the radicals were planning to have him succeed the throne and with Eleanora as his queen—I'd thought for sure that plan had been led by Duke Hillrose.

Why would he do something that would put the plan on hold? I wondered.

I had only met Duke Hillrose once, at the ceremony after defeating the Demon Lord. He'd simply expressed his gratitude and hadn't said anything else. With so little to go off of, I still didn't have a solid grasp on what kind of person

the duke was.

“What do *you* think, Yumiella?” Eleanora asked, jolting me from my thoughts. “Do you think it would be all right for me to go see Sir Edwin?”

“Well... I think it would be good to wait some time before doing so, just as the duke said,” I admitted.

“Then that’s what I shall do! Anyway, it’s been so much work to not look sad in front of Sir Edwin. I haven’t wanted to cause him any trouble by burdening him with my emotions.”

I’m pretty sure you’ve caused him plenty of trouble already, I thought, holding in a laugh. *Although I guess you were being considerate of him in your own way.*

Still, there was one more question on my mind. “Are you sure you want to make your decision so quickly?”

“Well, if you said it, there’s no doubt in my mind that it’s the right thing to do!”

I wanted to sigh, but held it in. *I don’t want you to trust me so much, Lady Eleanora. It’s exactly because you’re so trusting, and willing to believe the words of the people that you’re close to, that you get into troublesome situations like this.*

“I’m not sure you should be trusting what I say so much,” I finally said, hoping that would get through to her.

“You seem to... It feels like you only tell the truth, at least compared to the others. I mean, usually untrustworthy people don’t tell you to not trust them, do they?”

I’m honestly just saying whatever comes to mind, I thought with a sigh. I decided not to push the conversation any further, since it would be beneficial for me as well if she kept some distance between her and the prince.

“Oh, also,” Eleanora continued, “you remind me of my brother! At first glance, it seems like you always are wearing the same expression, but if you look closely enough, you can see a wide range of emotions just hiding under the surface.”

“Is my face really that expressive?” I asked dubiously.

“Yes! Very much so!”

But everyone says that I appear so emotionless, I thought, feeling a little adrift. I’ve always thought so too. But...Patrick told me my face changes a lot. Since Lady Eleanora said the same thing that he did, does that mean she’s watching me as closely as Patrick does...? I shivered. *I think it’s time to put the brakes on this train of thought.*

“So,” I said, focusing back on Eleanora. “I take it your brother is pretty expressionless too.”

She nodded. “He’s always smiling. Even when he’s angry, he has a grin on his face.”

“I see.”

The thought of someone who was constantly smiling made me think of Headmaster Ronald. There was something dubious about him and his plastered smile. *The duke’s heir is like that too, huh? Gross.*

I’d already thought it was a bad idea for Eleanora to trust me so much based solely on the fact that I reminded her of her brother, but now I thought it was a horrible idea. As far as I could tell, he sounded like a questionable type of guy.

Eleanora leaned forward, clasping my hands in hers. “Do you remember when you told me that Sir Edwin and I would get married for sure?” she asked. “That’s why I was so overjoyed back then—because I trusted you to tell me the truth.”

“Oh... I did say that, didn’t I?”

That was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing, something I just said to please her... I didn’t think she was taking it so seriously. Abruptly, I felt extremely guilty. *Shoot.*

Despite the confidence with which Eleanora had declared she could read my expression, though, she didn’t seem to notice my suddenly conflicted emotions. Instead, she dived into an elaborate speech about all the good qualities Prince Edwin had until her need to speak about him was finally satisfied.

After taking a moment, she said in a lowered voice. “So, how are *you*,

Yumiella?”

“Me? What do you mean by that?”

“I’m referring to how things are going with you and Sir Patrick, of course!”

“Oh,” I said, relaxing. “Well, we’re doing just fine. He’s going to be coming with me to Dolkness County.”

Even though I’d have preferred to tell Eleanora that there was nothing new happening between me and Patrick, after what she’d observed of us at the Academy, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d caught onto the fact that there was news. It was just easier to tell her straight out.

Eleanora’s face absolutely lit up at my words. “Oh, that’s absolutely wonderful!” she cried. “I’m so glad to hear that, especially since you two are so standoffish in public.”

Oh, I thought, feeling silly. Looks like she hadn’t caught onto anything after all. Though she might be hiding the fact that she knows a little something...

Seeing how happy Eleanora was for me and Patrick made me feel guilty about all the times I’d avoided her at the Academy, and even worse about the fact that I was still trying to avoid her now. I mean, she was practically as excited over our relationship as she’d be over having one of her own. The truth was, deciding to stop myself from becoming closer friends with her had been an agonizing decision for me to make—there was nothing I hated more than people who based the way they treated someone based on their background.

“So...” Eleanora pressed, “has he already proposed?”

“P-Proposed?!” I stammered. “Not yet, that’s far in the future for us.”

“Is that so...” she said thoughtfully. “Oh! Would you mind if I was there when he proposes to you? I want to watch.”

I gave her my version of a dubious look. *When she says “proposes” she’s referring to when someone asks someone else to marry them, right? I thought. If that’s true, then why on earth is she trying to participate in mine?*

I couldn’t find it in me to understand the reasoning behind Eleanora’s request, but it was clear she was asking in earnest—her ruby-colored eyes were

sparkling bright enough to rival even the jewels she had on. Staring at her, I felt like I could feel energy draining right out of my body.

At this point, I started to feel silly about thinking over whether to accept or reject her friendship so seriously. No matter how much I spurned her advances, Eleanora would still barge into my life without care. Honestly, our relationship had already fallen into that strange push-and-pull, and the level of closeness we had now was perfect for me.

I was wilting onto my couch at this point—the sleep deprivation and general exhaustion were beginning to overtake me. By contrast, Eleanora was as energetic as ever.

“If Patrick hasn’t proposed yet, you must not have an engagement ring either,” she said.

“I don’t, but...is a ring really necessary?”

Engagement rings are the ones with the stones, right? I thought blearily. *Honestly, the difference between one of them and a wedding ring feels kind of ambiguous to me.*

Regardless, I’d be happy with anything Patrick decided to give to me, and if I had a choice between a ring and something else, I’d prefer the something else.

If I had to choose something that also went on my hands like a ring...maybe he could get me some brass knuckles? I nodded to myself.

“Stones are just shiny, but I think I’d like something that was actually useful, like an amulet with magical effects,” I told Eleanora.

“Wha—?!” Eleanora stared at me, appalled.

At the same time, a large thump came from the other side of the drawing room wall. The sound was quite loud, since it came at a lull in Eleanora’s and my conversation, so she got a good listen.

“Oh?” she said, glancing at the wall where the noise had come from. “Is someone in the room next door?”

“It’s probably Patrick,” I said with a shrug.

Prince Edwin was there as well, of course, but I couldn’t dare tell her that, lest

things get messy. With that in mind, I watched Eleanora carefully to see if she fell for it. But...she was acting strange.

“What if Patrick heard our conversation just now...?” she asked, flustered.

Does she mean our conversation about my lack of interest in gems? I thought, confused. *I’ve always been like that, so I don’t think it’s an issue.*

After taking an exaggeratedly deep breath, Eleanora began to passionately speak on all things marriage—every word that came out of her mouth was about the importance of things like engagement rings, wedding dresses, and so on.

Ugh, this is going to be a long one, isn’t it?



What felt like an eternity later, Eleanora went home without a fight. I assumed her willingness to leave had something to do with the overwhelming satisfaction she seemed to feel over the long speech she’d given me about an ideal wedding.

Once I’d confirmed she had truly left, I headed to the next room.

“Eleanora’s gone home,” I said upon opening the door.

The two men in the room were making strange faces. They continued their conversation, disregarding me.

“Don’t be so down on yourself, Patrick,” the prince said, placing his hand gently on Patrick’s shoulder. “Just be glad you found out before you gave it to her. Also, there’s plenty of stores that carry rare magical instruments in the Royal Capital.”

“I thought I knew how Yumiella felt, but I didn’t think her disdain for jewels was this bad...”

That perked my ears up. *Huh? Wait, you guys were talking about me? Hey, hey, what were you guys saying?!*

Before I could interrogate them, Patrick turned to me and said, “Sorry to keep you waiting, you must be tired. What did Lady Eleanora say?”

“She agreed to refrain from intruding on His Highness for a while,” I pronounced.

This was surely good news for the prince, but instead of looking at me with joy, his eyes were wide with shock.

“Lady Eleanora said that?” he said, voice hoarse. “What kind of persuasion methods did you use?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t do anything special. Oh, and what kind of person is her brother? Apparently, he and I are quite similar.”

“Lady Eleanora’s brother?” Prince Edwin asked, brow furrowing. “I thought she was the duke’s only child.”

How could Prince Edwin not know Eleanora’s brother? I thought, perplexed. I mean, that would be impossible. They’re both aristocrats living in the Royal Capital, after all. Plus, there’s no way the royal family and the duke’s family haven’t met before, so Prince Edwin should at least know of his existence...

“Do you know anything about the rest of her family?” I asked the prince, even more curious now.

“I believe the duchess passed away quite a while ago,” he said slowly, “so the only Hillroses left are the duke and Lady Eleanora. I’m sure of it, because I heard people discussing whether or not the duke would have someone marry into the family, or if he would adopt an heir from a distant relative.”

Prince Edwin’s words were highly credible—so, if he wasn’t mistaken, just who was Eleanora’s brother?



It was the day after Prince Edwin and Eleanora’s visit, and Patrick had been out since the morning. He’d told me that something he needed to take care of had suddenly popped up, so our time in the Royal Capital had been extended by a few days. Now that Patrick was gone, however, I had nothing left to do—I’d just been hanging around my room, idling away the time.

Lady Eleanora wouldn’t show up again when she was just here yesterday, right? I wondered.

As if on cue, there was a light tap on my door, and Rita popped in to let me know that I had a guest.

I immediately headed to the drawing room, where I found Headmaster Ronald waiting for me. I'd been quite sure that the one calling upon me was a certain duke's daughter, since that was how things usually went, so to instead see someone entirely unrelated raised my eyebrows a little.

"Oh? What are you doing here, Headmaster?" I asked.

"Congratulations on your graduation, Yumiella. Also, I'm not the headmaster anymore."

Did you blow it so bad that you were terminated? I thought, truly shocked now. I opened my mouth to ask, then stopped myself. *Oh, right—he was the headmaster to supervise me and be my point of contact with the king, not because he just wanted the job.*

"Ah, I see. So it was a temporary position from the start."

"Exactly," he said, giving me a smile I found rather dubious. "All I've done is return to my actual job."

This guy's an advisor to the king...right? I thought. I couldn't honestly be sure, as he was a man of many mysteries—he wouldn't even share his family name.

"Headmaster Ronald... Oh, should I just call you Mr. Ronald now?" I asked, sitting down across from him. "What brings you here today?"

Come on, tell me why you're here...

"Just Ronald is fine... And, honestly, I didn't have any reason in particular for stopping by. I just thought I'd check in."

Internally, I threw up my hands. *If you don't have any reason to stop by, why did you bother to come then?!*

Ronald seemed to read my mind, for he continued, "You'll be heading to Dolkness County soon, right? I just came by to make sure you know that you can rely on His Majesty or me if you run into any trouble there."

I nodded. "Thank you, but just the thought is enough."

“You’re no fun,” he said, sighing.

Oh, well, I thought. I don’t want to get special treatment from the king and then end up getting drawn into the royal family’s web.

If I wasn’t careful, I’d end up becoming the subject of unnecessary hatred from various parties that opposed the king’s faction, and regardless, getting help from so high up felt like cheating.

“Well, now that we’ve gotten that over with,” Ronald said, turning and grabbing a stack of documents before spreading them out across my table, “how much do you know about the state of your county?”

“I regularly receive financial statements,” I replied. “As far as I can tell by looking at them, it doesn’t seem like there are any issues. Though, it does seem like there are a lot of things I won’t know about until I actually go there myself.”

Currently, all the operational tasks related to Dolkness County were handled by a deputy. Despite my parents having neglected the county, on paper it seemed to be doing all right. I’d known it was wrong of me at the time, but when I’d first taken over the Dolkness estate, I’d decided to continue to leave things to the deputy until after I’d finished school.

Ronald nodded, as though this was as he’d expected. “But you’ve only seen the financial statements for the past few years, right? I brought statements from ten years ago.” Ronald pointed to the paperwork he’d just finished arranging on the table. “Have a look.”

I leaned forward, starting with the document farthest to the right. I’d received one just like it recently. *Ah, I realized. These are the documents you submit in order to pay taxes.* There was nothing on it that was particularly remarkable, so I began skimming through the rest of the documents, starting with the document farthest to the left—it had been filed ten years ago, and so was the oldest of the group.

As far as I could tell, everything was going perfectly fine—we’d been in the black every year.

“The deputy must be skilled,” I mumbled without thinking.

“Yes, I think he’s *really skilled*,” Ronald cheerfully said.

Sensing something more to his words, I scanned through the documents in my hands once more. It seemed that Dolkness County's tax revenue was on a very small upward trend, increasing every year just as it would if our county was growing.

I paused, my eyes narrowing. *Wait, is it even possible for our revenue to increase every year? Sure, if you looked at the entire kingdom, that would be the case, but the main industry in Dolkness County is farming. Crop yields depend on the weather—it's not realistic for them to increase at a similar rate every year.*

When I jerked up, staring at Ronald with shock, his smile slowly widened. "I see you've caught on. It seems your deputy is so skilled that our tax officials didn't notice a thing. Even I couldn't find any discrepancies in the statements."

"Am I...looking at tax fraud?" I asked incredulously.

The deputy could have taken advantage of the fact that the county owner hasn't been on-site for so long in order to line his own pockets, but if that was the case, wouldn't he have made it look like our earnings were lower than this? Why would he...?

As he watched me get lost more and more in my thoughts, Ronald's usual grinning expression changed into a serious look. "As you said earlier, there are things you won't know about until you go there yourself."

I nodded, shaking off my confusion. "You're right. Thinking about it here won't help much of anything."

"That said...if you end up firing your deputy can you hand him this referral? I want him to work for me."

I gave Ronald a suspicious look. We didn't even have any evidence yet that my deputy had cooked our books—granted, the documents I'd just looked at seemed pretty strange—and already Ronald was acting as if he was guilty, and trying to recruit him for his skills? Just what was he planning on making him do?

"I guess I can give it to him..." I said reluctantly, taking the paper from Ronald's hand.

"Thanks."

Who on earth are you, Ronald? I wondered. There truly wasn't much to go off of, without access to even his family name. All I knew was that the king's trust in him ran deep.

After that, our discussion of Dolkness County wrapped up, and Ronald went on to share a few tidbits revolving around the current talk of the town—the faction that had formed around Prince Edwin. Ronald's information almost perfectly lined up with what I had heard from the second prince the previous day.

With no new information to inquire after, I decided to ask Ronald about Eleanora's brother instead.

"Are you familiar with the makeup of the Duke of Hillrose's family?" I inquired.

"It's just the duke and Lady Eleanora..." Ronald said quickly. "Why do you ask?"

"Lady Eleanora was telling me about someone who she referred to as her 'older brother.' Though I guess she might just be calling someone she's close with and who she looks up to her brother..."

"I see," Ronald said, not an ounce of suspicion on his face. His trademark smile was firmly stretched across his lips, obfuscating what he was really thinking. "Elea— Lady Eleanora's got an older brother, huh?"



That night, I told Patrick that I wanted to head to Dolkness County as soon as possible. After what Ronald had shown me, it felt disturbingly possible that it wasn't doing as well as I'd thought.

"All right," he agreed. "Let's leave tomorrow or the day after."

"But what about the errands you had to run?"

"They're all taken care of."

I nodded. It seemed that whatever errands Patrick had needed to take care of had been dealt with, although he didn't appear to want to talk about whatever had happened. I decided to refrain from pushing him for details.

I'm just an understanding girlfriend like that, heh heh.

Patrick raised his eyebrows at me, as if to say, "You're thinking about something weird again, aren't you," but I ignored him in favor of starting a discussion on our plans for the next few days.

"Since you've got everything taken care of on your side, we'll head out as soon as we're ready. Although Rita and Sara are coming along, so it might be a lot for Ryuuk to handle..."

"Hold on. Are you planning on *flying* to Dolkness County?"

"Yeah," I said, giving him a confused look. "Why do you ask?"

What other method would there be...? I mean, I personally don't mind running, but that might be rough on Rita and Sara.

"Why don't we go by carriage, just for the first time?" Patrick said, his voice oddly strained. "First impressions are important, you know?"

"I *do* know, but...wouldn't that make Ryuuk the better choice?"

The people of my county might be worrying over what kind of person I am. I could be someone unreliable, or scary...and that's why my darling Ryuuk is the perfect choice! One look at him and they'll cast aside all their worries, their hearts captured by his adorableness!

I could practically see my reputation skyrocketing now. It was the perfect plan.

After a long pause, Patrick said, "I understand that Ryuuk is a good, obedient dragon. Really, I do...but can we *please* take the carriage? We can, uh...inspect the main roads together!"

I nodded, fully on board with that suggestion. "Ah, I see what you were getting at now. All right, let's take the carriage."

I hadn't even thought about how different things look in the sky compared to the ground... Nice job noticing that, Patrick! Oh, but...what does that have to do with first impressions...?

Interlude 1: The Duke of Hillrose

On a certain day in a certain parlor in the Royal Capital, a few dozen men gathered. They were all aristocrats of the duke's faction, otherwise known as radicals. Safe in the knowledge that the parlor was soundproofed, and that none of their voices would leak out, they were discussing how they could make the second prince, Edwin, succeed the throne.

"The second prince still claims to have no interest in the throne," one of them muttered.

Another scoffed. "That can't be true! How could one not want the highest position of power in the kingdom?"

"He must be cautious of those in the king's faction..." a third mused.

"Them, and most likely the king himself too. It appears he still intends to have the first prince be his heir."

These men, who all chased after power to no end, seemed truly unable to fathom that Prince Edwin truly had no interest in claiming the throne—they were sure that the only reason that he didn't participate in their gatherings was because he was wary of his political opponents. They could understand that reasoning, as even they, who claimed to be a part of the second prince's faction, would answer "No," without flinching if they were asked if their loyalty lay with Prince Edwin.

As their talk continued, their discussion shifted to how they could benefit from the plan themselves.

"If we assume control of the kingdom, we can sweep out those in our way," one of the men said with a grin.

"Indeed," another agreed. "Maybe we should go ahead and decide which of us get to become ministers?"

"You must be eyeing the minister of finance position," a third man commented.

The second man leaned back in his chair, laughing. “Oh no, a greenhorn like me wouldn’t dare to become a minister... Though, I do have various things I’d like the new minister of finance to look past.”

The third man grew thoughtful. “Personally, I think I’d like a military position.”

“Well! If *you* were to become a general, uniting the continent might just be in our reach! Please do consider purchasing military provisions from my domain.”

The men grinned at each other, their smiles turned repulsive with greed. It was clear their imaginations were full of a glorious future where their names went down in history, one where they were cozy with the central members of the kingdom and could do whatever they pleased, could exercise as much authority as they desired. Some were even enveloped in visions of themselves as commanders of a massive army, built by the Kingdom of Valschein.

Spurred by the cheerful mood, the men brought out alcohol, ignoring the fact that it was in the middle of the day. One provincial aristocrat went around and served the others—he hadn’t been back to his domain in years, and had left its management entirely in the hands of a deputy.

“Here you go, please drink up,” he said cheerfully. “This wonderful bottle just came in.”

One of the men accepted a glass with a nod of thanks. “How thoughtful of you!” he said appreciatively. “But, going back to our last topic, what sort of position do you want?”

“Well... I would like to move my domain a bit closer to the Royal Capital, if possible...” the provincial aristocrat said, voice thoughtful.

The other man’s brow scrunched together in confusion. “Hmm? But you wouldn’t return to it regardless of its proximity, would you? Why not just increase the size of your domain?”

“Ah,” the man replied. “I could do that, you’re right. My domain is quite small, so I’ve been struggling to get a large enough sum out of it as far as revenue. It’s put me in quite the pickle. Maybe I should raise taxes again...?”

“Are you sure about that? I believe I remember you talking about raising them just a short time ago. You should be careful that a rebellion doesn’t break out.”

The provincial aristocrat waved the other man off. “Ha ha, all I have to do is make an example out of a village or two. Once I make it clear I’m willing to destroy their homes, they’ll fall into line quickly enough.”

Not a single one of the other men reacted to the provincial aristocrat’s statement. They accepted his view of his domain, as a place which existed purely to generate him revenue, without a second thought. And so, they continued making merry as the man gulped down a mouthful of the wine he’d brought—a wine that had been bought with the blood of his citizens.

The topic of their discussion changed once again, this time to the daughter of the man who led their faction, the duke of Hillrose.

“So, is it true that Lady Eleanora isn’t visiting the prince?”

“Yes,” a second man said. “I heard it from my daughter, so there’s no doubt about it.”

“Hm, well a girl like her with a few missing screws should just do as we say,” another man said, distaste in his voice.

“According to my daughter, she’s changed since meeting the Dolkness girl at the Academy,” the second man said with a shrug.

Thinking of the disobedient black-haired girl, the men in the parlor were filled with frustration.

Yumiella’s father, the previous count of Dolkness, had often joined their gatherings, but as he was just another provincial aristocrat with no official position in the Royal Capital, he hadn’t been in very good standing with the rest of the group. That was, until his daughter, Yumiella, was revealed to have a rare level of strength. After that, the men who had once looked down on the count had begun to fervently court his favor, imploring him to marry his daughter into one of their families.

But Yumiella had ended up eschewing her parent’s influence, and had gotten friendly with the king instead. The count’s status had plummeted once again, and as rumors spread that Yumiella would join the king in a war, his influence had decreased even more. With his back against a wall, he’d attempted to assassinate his own daughter, only to fail and lose his title.

“Damn that girl and her black hair,” one of the men spat. “That *thing* is on par with monsters.”

A second man’s lips curled. “I agree, she’s completely sinister. I’ve heard she graduated from the Academy, but I’m not sure what she’s been up to since then.”

“Well... She’s apparently returning to the countryside to work as a county owner.”

The first man blinked. “Just what is she thinking? Did she get on the king’s bad side or something?”

The men of the radicalist faction viewed the Royal Capital as supreme, and thought of nothing as more prestigious than working in an official position in the kingdom’s central government—they couldn’t even imagine that someone would *choose* to move to the countryside. Immediately, they decided to accelerate their plans, fueled by the thought that Yumiella had fallen from the king’s graces. Granted, their plans only truly existed in their imagination.

“This would be a good opportunity to draw her to our side, wouldn’t it?” one of the men said excitedly.

“It absolutely would,” another agreed. “It was only due to the king’s protection that she didn’t want to join us until now.”

A third man chuckled. “I imagine those in the king’s faction will be absolutely horrified if we invite her to join us.”

“What shall we bait her with though? Money? Status? Honor?”

The radical aristocrats’ discussion grew heated in a way it rarely did in their other sessions. As they all began stating their opinions and arguing with one another in the middle of the room, a lone voice called out from outside the circle, sending them all into silence.

“/ shall take care of Yumiella,” the voice had said.

The men in the center of the room whipped around, their eyes darting to a corner which should have been unoccupied, but very much was not. The owner of the voice stood there, watching them all—it was their leader, said to be the

most powerful man beyond the royal family itself: Duke Hillrose.

“I’ve been listening to your conversations for a little while,” the duke commented idly. “Sounds like you’re having fun.”

The men all went pale at the sight of their faction leader. They were all forcefully reminded of how badly they’d talked of his daughter, Eleanora, just a few minutes earlier.

“Wh-Why, hello, sir,” one of the men stammered. “Why didn’t you say something if you were here?”

“Come on, pour him a drink!” another man ordered. “You join us so rarely, sir, that I’d say this warrants a celebration.”

“There’s no need to panic,” the duke said, his true intentions hidden behind a plastered-on smile. “I’m not angered at all.”

And indeed, he truly didn’t seem to care about the rude comments the men had toward his own flesh and blood. Once they realized his apathy, the men let out a collective sigh of relief.

The duke’s eyes danced over the members of his faction, a wicked grin suddenly warping his lips. “As I was saying,” he continued, “leave Yumiella Dolkness to me.”

The men let out a cheer.

“The time for the duke to take action has arrived!”

“Finally, us members of your faction can feel secure!”

The duke watched the men as they courted his favor, his mind lingering over the plan he’d been preparing to execute ever since he was a student. He was determined to use whatever he could to realize it, and destroy anything that he found in his way—whether his obstacle was the aristocrats right in front of him, the royal family, or even Yumiella Dolkness.

Looking over the room once more, almost as if he was sizing up his men, the duke mumbled, “Looks like the time’s finally come.”

Chapter 2: The Hidden Boss Becomes a County Owner

The morning of the second day after Patrick had convinced me to journey home by carriage and had made the subsequent arrangements, the two of us set out for Dolkness County. We were seen off by the mansion's servants and Eleanora, who'd come by for some inexplicable reason.

I'd ridden with Patrick and Rita for the first portion of the journey, while Rita's younger sister, Sara, had ridden in the carriage that had followed behind us, which was packed with our belongings.

We'd taken a break for lunch a few hours into our travels, and had only just started traveling again when a wave of sleepiness washed over me. My consciousness began to fade in and out, but just as I was about to drift away entirely, I was shocked awake by the carriage rocking violently.

What's with this road? I thought, disgruntled. *Is it made out of gravel or something?*

I yawned, turning to Patrick. "Isn't the carriage rocking a bit too much?"

"The roads must be bad," Patrick said, a look of displeasure coming over his face that made me think he wasn't too fond of the rocking either. "This is what happens when the owner slacks off."

Whoever's in charge of maintenance here must really not get it, I thought with an inward sigh. *I don't know if they're just cheap or what, but anyone with a brain knows that if the roads are bad then the transportation of goods will stagnate, which will result in the number of people who visit your domain decreasing. If that happens, your economy can't grow, and tax revenue will decrease.*

I grew more and more irritated as time went on—I could stand the slow speed of the carriage, but I couldn't tolerate the incessant rocking.

I'd like to have a word with whoever's in charge if I ever meet them, I thought

darkly.

“Seriously, what could these people be thinking?” I complained aloud. “Do you know the name of the territory we’re in?”

“I’ve memorized the map, but since it’s my first time actually visiting, I’m not sure,” Patrick admitted.

Guess we’ll just have to ask some locals, I decided.

Just then, Rita, who was sitting across from us, gave us a hesitant look and said, “Um... We entered Dolkness County a few moments ago.”

“I...see...” I said.

Forgive me, it seems my own county is the source of the issue.

I turned toward Patrick, hoping he would save me from the intense urge I was currently feeling to run screaming from the situation, but he just awkwardly looked away.

“Th-There’s good things about Dolkness County too though!” Rita burst out. “Like...thieves don’t really come here!”

“Right. Thanks...” I said numbly.

Even though I’d thanked her, I wasn’t really sure her words had done much for me. I mean, sure, the world of *LMH* was dangerous, but I’d never heard of anyone encountering thieves.

I just don’t think thieving’s really “in” right now, you know?

Still, there was no use in being upset. I needed to get the lay of the land first—and judging by these roads, the state of the county was even worse than I’d thought. And that was before we turned down a new road, which stretched between two barley fields. I’d always associated barley with a golden, yellowish hue, but the stalks in the fields in front of me were completely green. The grains hadn’t even grown in.

“These aren’t growing well at all,” Patrick muttered, eyes gloomily staring out over the lush—but green—barley fields.

You can’t be serious! I moaned internally. *The roads are bumpy, the fields are*

in shambles... I'm scared to even ask how the people are doing.

Honestly, I didn't even have to go and check—people living in such a run-down county definitely wouldn't be bopping around, full of life.

"If only I'd known it was this bad sooner..." I said softly.

But, in the end, I knew I was just feeling sorry for myself. *If I'd visited home even a single time while I was attending the Academy, I would have realized what was going on. Still...* I sighed. *I guess there's no use crying over spilled milk.*

I drooped into my seat, reflecting on how silly I'd been to be satisfied with just seeing a bunch of positive numbers on a balance sheet.

"There's no need to be so down," Patrick said, doing his best to comfort me. "Your studies at the Academy are going to prove vital in managing the county now."

"Thank you," I told him, but my voice was weak.

"Also... I'm not trying to put the blame on you or anything, but how did you not notice how bad things were back when you lived here?"

"Back when...I was living here?" I said slowly.

Oh, right. I was living in a mansion in Dolkness County until three years ago, when I entered the Academy.

The truth was, back then I'd spent most of my days traveling back and forth between my family's mansion and the dungeon that was located nearby. I hadn't had a clue what a horrible situation the county was in.

"I...don't remember going anywhere beyond the dungeon and home," I finally replied. "I didn't talk to anyone here back then either."

"I'm sorry..." Patrick said, a sad look coming over his face. "I shouldn't have asked."

All at once, the atmosphere in the carriage became incredibly awkward. I didn't think I'd been particularly unfortunate—after all, I'd gotten to grind experience as much as I'd wanted—but it was clear from the pitying looks on Patrick and Rita's faces that they didn't agree.



After spending over half a day rocking in a carriage, we finally reached our destination—Dolkness Village. By then the sun was setting and golden light was washing over the town, which had no rampart to cast it into shadow.

Dolkness Village was the largest town in the county, and sat almost exactly in the middle of my family's territory. As such, it was only natural that this was the town in which the county owner's mansion was located.

As I took in the place where I'd spent my childhood, I realized it felt quite slow in comparison to the Royal Capital.

I guess that's just what the countryside is like, even if you are in the most prominent city in the county, I thought.

"Their economy seems to be in pretty bad shape..." Patrick murmured.

He'd told me just moments ago that, compared to other provincial towns of a similar scale, Dolkness Village was seriously lacking in the energy and vigor departments. The main road alone was enough to make one realize how bad off the town was—it was made of cobblestone that seemed to have been put in just for the sake of it, and which hadn't been maintained at all, just like the roads leading into the county. The uneven surface made our carriage wheels jump and clatter loudly with every turn.

As our carriage moved further into town, memories of my old home started trickling into my mind. *Now that I think of it, that mansion I was living in must be quite old by now,* I realized.

I opened a window and stuck my head out just in time for the mansion to come into view. It had only been three years, but I still felt nostalgic seeing it again.

Just moments later, the carriage slid to a stop in front of the old mansion, and the horrific sounds the wheels had been making were cut off completely. Servants came pouring outside in a continuous stream, as if our arrival had been heralded by all the noise. They lined up in front of the mansion by the dozen.

I did send them a letter informing them of the approximate date and time of

our visit, I thought. They certainly seem to have prepared.

Patrick stood up, then turned to face me before stepping out of the carriage. “I said it before, but I’ll say it again: first impressions are important. Please remember to be as gentle as you can.”

I nodded. “Got it! All I need to do is make sure they aren’t scared of me.”

Patrick silently inclined his head to my response, then climbed out of the carriage.

All right, time to get my friendliness on!

It had only been three years since I’d seen the staff that worked at the mansion, but things were completely different now—I was no longer the little girl they hadn’t known how to deal with and had left to her own devices—I was the head of the family. As such, it was completely understandable for them to fear that I would want to get revenge on them for some perceived childhood slight.

I just need to make it clear from the get-go that I have no intention of doing that, I decided.

I exited the carriage after Patrick, and tried to send them all an endearing smile, but...well, that was impossible for me, so I ended up maintaining my usual expressionless look.

“Hello,” I said to all of them. “It’s been a while. I haven’t forgotten the fun days I spent here; I would love to give back to all of you for taking care of me.”

All right, we’re starting off strong! I thought, internally pumping a fist. *All I’ve got to do now is drive home the fact that I’m a peaceful, mature person. I should probably try and give off a dependable vibe too.*

Determined to do it right, I continued, “As you all know, I’m level 99... You understand what that means, yes?”

Ah, it feels good to let them know that I can secure their safety no matter what, I thought with a happy little inward sigh.

Honestly, I was feeling pretty proud of myself with that last line—I’d sounded like a total badass. Everyone else, however...well, they weren’t giving me much

of a reaction. The older men and women were all frozen, public servants and maids alike.

I turned to Patrick to ask him what was wrong, only to find him holding his head in his hands. He let out a deep, weary sigh.

Ah, come on! I thought, disappointed. *Can someone respond to me, at the very least?*

I swept my eyes across the group in front of me, and they all bowed deeply before daring to make eye contact with me.

Are they scared of me after all? I worried. *I really am no good at building interpersonal relationships...*

I hadn't minded being alone back at the Academy, but this was different—I was going to be working with them all from now on! I couldn't run from this. And so, I decided to properly face them.

"Remember, you can't run, even if you want to," I mumbled to myself. I'd meant the words just for me, but my words resonated more than I expected, ricocheting throughout the silent area.

"Eek!" one of the maids screamed, falling to the ground.

Multiple other servants collapsed after her, strewn the ground with limp bodies. I reached out to one of the people that had passed out, intending on helping them since no one had made any other such moves, when Patrick grabbed my arm and pulled me to a halt.

"Hey, why are you stopping me?" I demanded, confused. "My magic would be useful here."

Patrick stared at me blankly for a moment, then understanding settled on his face. "Oh, you mean your recovery magic."

"What else would I be talking about?" I asked.

I should be able to take care of everyone at once...and if I spread my recovery magic over this whole area, I can heal their old wounds as well.

I raised my arms up toward everyone, preparing to cast my spell, but then froze when Patrick bonked me on the head.

“Are you trying to scare them even more?!” he demanded, clearly exasperated with me. “Just stay still and don’t say anything.”

I was a bit intimidated by the force of his words, so I stayed quiet. I *wasn’t* happy about it, though.

Now that he’d gotten me out of the equation, Patrick began to speak, his voice strong and resonant. “I apologize for Yumiella scaring everyone,” he began. “I’m Patrick Ashbatten, and I’ve come here to support her in managing the county. She’s often misunderstood, but Yumiella is a good...” Patrick paused. “A good...”

Don’t hesitate there!

Patrick cleared his throat. “Well, she’s not a bad person, so you can relax.”

Hearing Patrick’s words, the servants looked at each other and then back at us, as if surveying the situation.

Ah, I get it now, I thought to myself, nodding. I just need to tell a totally sick joke and blow away everyone’s concerns!

Just as I was settling in to wait until the perfect moment to attack came along, Patrick turned to face me. “Like I said earlier, *don’t say anything*,” he said firmly.

I silently nodded. *Looks like this isn’t the right time.*

All of a sudden, something came to me. I desperately wanted to tell Patrick, but I wasn’t supposed to talk, so I decided to try and convey my message to him through charades. I pointed to the sky and flapped my arms like wings.

He should totally get that! I thought confidently. *We’re practically telepathically connected as it is.*

“Now what?” Patrick said with a sigh. “You can speak—just tell me.”

He didn’t understand... Well, it doesn’t matter now; he’ll probably notice himself.

Still, I felt like I should tell him. “Ryuu’s here.”

“What?!” Patrick’s face blanched. “Wait, Ryuu should come as slowly as possible—”

I shook my head. Even if Patrick wanted Ryu to take his time before getting here, that just wasn't going to happen. I hadn't used magic to signal our location, but Ryu was already in the sky above us—that meant he'd been following our carriage from the air, which indicated that he'd been worried that we might get separated during the move.

Before Patrick could protest any further, my endlessly clingy dragon came soaring down at us at full speed. There was a thunderous *boom* when he landed, and the ground shook with the force of his impact, sending a dust cloud puffing into the air. Eventually though, it faded, and my jet-black dragon emerged from within the debris. He let out a long growl, as if to say, "Nice to meet you."

"Everyone, this is Ryu, my dragon. He just said it's a pleasure to meet everyone."

A few more people collapsed, and Patrick let out a sigh.

Huh, I thought, weird. I thought the atmosphere around here would soften with the addition of a mascot-like presence.

Among all this commotion, a middle-aged man stepped forward, bowing slightly. "Welcome home, master," he said respectfully. "I am Daemon, the acting deputy of this county."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Daemon," I replied.

I gave the man an appraising look. *So, that tired-looking man is the deputy suspected of cooking our books, huh? I feel like I may or may not have seen him around while I lived here.*

The deputy flushed. "There's no need to be so formal with a servant, master! Please simply refer to me as Daemon."

I knew better, I really did. Speaking so formally was just a reflex from my past life, when I'd had to speak politely with everyone I had a business relationship with, regardless of hierarchy. I thought I'd gotten over that, what with how much of aristocratic society I'd been exposed to while at the Academy, but it seemed I hadn't quite been able to let it go.

I'm just going to cause him trouble, acting this way, I decided. I need to focus

and change my tone of speech with him. Still, even so, him calling me “master” felt like a bit much. I guess “miss,” “mister,” and “mistress,” would all be wrong, so that’s what he landed on.

Finally, I replied, “Thank you, Daemon. But, um...I would like it if you wouldn’t call me master.”

He nodded. “Understood, Lady Yumiella. You must be tired from your long trip; we’ve already prepared your room, so please rest. We’ll begin preparing a room for Sir Patrick right away as well. All that’s left is...” Daemon looked up at Ryu and fell silent.

He must not know how to handle a dragon.

Deciding to help him out, I asked, “As far as Ryu is concerned...do we have some space in the yard?”

A look of relief came over the deputy’s face. “If that is where you’d prefer he stay, there is an open field located at the far end of the mansion. The only problem is that he’ll end up outside of the mansion’s walls.”

Daemon explained that Ryu would be exposed to rain for a while, but I knew my boy would sleep like a log even in an unroofed area in the middle of a downpour, so I figured he’d probably be fine for now.

If it comes to it, I’ll sleep outside with him. I can sleep like a log in the middle of a downpour too!

“I appreciate your help, Daemon,” I told the deputy, turning toward my dragon. “Did you hear that, Ryu? You get the open area behind the house. Mommy’s got to do some work now, so you’re free to do as you like.”

After letting out a growl of affirmation, Ryu flapped his wings and flew up into the sky, his figure soon receding into the distance.

He’s probably curious about his new home’s surroundings and went off to explore, I thought. I just hope he doesn’t bring me home a monster as a gift.

Daemon relaxed a little and released a sigh now that Ryu was gone, but quickly reassumed his dignified air. “My apologies. Well then, let me show you to your room.”

I paused, looking over the servants who'd come to greet me on the lawn. Half of them seemed to be knocked out.

"Um, are you sure these people going to be all right?" I asked. It didn't seem right to just leave them and head inside.

Patrick, however, had no such qualms. He gave me a push from behind, urging me inside the mansion.

"Hey!" I said, narrowing my eyes at him over my shoulder.

"It's better for their health that you're not around," Patrick said bluntly.

I drooped a little, giving into Patrick's strength. *Is my mere presence really that much of a health hazard? Should I...be regulated by law...?*

I couldn't be sure on that, but I *could* be sure that my meeting with the servants of the mansion had been a disastrous event.



After that, Daemon took control, leading us through the halls of the mansion.

I was feeling a bit distracted though, since I was worried over leaving Rita behind. *I hope she's all right*, I thought with an inward sigh.

"Daemon," I called out to the man walking in front of us, "I'm not too tired, so I'd love it if you'd show me the office before anything else."

After a short pause, Daemon responded, "Yes, as you wish."

The time it took for him to answer made Patrick and I give each other silent looks—both of our faces seemed to say, "Yep, he was cooking the books and embezzling funds after all."

I mean, it was obvious that something nefarious was happening.

As we continued to walk, I decided to casually ask Daemon some questions. "So, how long have you been working as the deputy, Daemon?" I inquired.

"I believe it's been around twenty years," he said after a moment's debate.

So he started before I was born, I mused. *That's quite a long time.*

"I see..." I said slowly. "My parents currently reside in the Royal Capital; would

you prefer to serve them?”

The deputy shook his head. “My loyalty lies with the Dolkness family and Dolkness County. I am meant to serve the county owner.”

I didn’t know quite how to take that—I’d asked the question to try and get a gauge on how he felt about the commotion I’d caused in my family, but he’d given me such an innocuous answer that I hadn’t gleaned a thing. Daemon might look like a worn-out old man, but it was clear he was quite the tough cookie.

Before I could continue my interrogation, Daemon paused outside of a door. “This here is the office,” he said.

I peeked inside—it was so organized that it didn’t even feel like a workspace.

They must have hurried and cleaned everything up a week ago when they found out I was coming, I decided.

I went ahead and asked to see the ledgers for the past few years, and was handed the same documents that Ronald had shown me in the Royal Capital. Just like then, the tax revenue was shown to grow slightly every year, which was highly unnatural for a county whose commerce revolved around farming. And now that I’d seen the terrible state the county’s economy seemed to be in, I was absolutely certain something problematic was going on.

“Daemon, has our tax revenue always increased in this manner?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s been that way since I’ve taken this position,” he agreed. It was a nonchalant reply, but I didn’t miss the bead of sweat forming on his forehead.

I turned to Patrick, who had been silently looking through the statements, and he shook his head. It appeared that he had no idea what had been changed, or even how it had been done. I sank into deep thought, which seemed to spur Daemon onward.

“The tax revenue will continue to increase as long as you leave everything to me,” he swore, his voice panicky. “You can just leisurely enjoy your days off, and not worry about the county, Lady Yumiella...”

I gave him a dubious look. “From the look of the various things I saw on my

way here, the county seems to be in a pretty bad state...”

“It’s fine, Lady Yumiella, I assure you! Profits will increase next year, and the year after that, and they’ll go entirely to you.”

He doesn’t sound like he wants me to butt in on the management of the county, I mused. He’s definitely guilty. But if that’s true, why does our tax revenue continually increase? It should be decreasing if he’s been lining his own pockets. I guess it would be an issue for him if his abilities came into question as a result, but farming is heavily dependent on weather, and farming makes up most of our tax revenue. It’s only natural that there would be some decreases. The only people who wouldn’t understand something like that are... Oh.

Now that a proper explanation had come to mind, I turned to Patrick to confirm my suspicions. “Patrick,” I said, “if we take into account the scale of Dolkness County, is our tax revenue high or low?”

“It’s definitely high,” Patrick said as he put away the documents he had finished reading. He was likely thinking the same thing as me.

I turned to my deputy, who had intense dark circles beneath his eyes. *Time to throw some questions at him so we can get a real answer.*

“Hey, Daemon,” I asked casually, “why did your predecessor leave this job?”

“They were fired, due to a decrease in profits...” he said slowly.

Oh god, it’s just as I thought, I realized, barely holding myself back from slapping a hand to my forehead. *My theory was spot on.*

When I’d been thinking Daemon’s actions through, I’d come to the conclusion that Dolkness County had likely just been a mechanism to generate money for my father. The only way a deputy would have been able to keep his job under a man like that was to make sure the county’s revenue increased every year—if he failed and it decreased, my father would just fire them.

Plus, if tax revenue didn’t increase even after changing deputies, my father would have likely been unreasonable and decided to crank up the tax rate. In order to avoid that issue, Daemon had apparently made sure to always present paperwork which stated that tax revenue was increasing at a constant rate.

Fraud was fraud, but if I was right, *this* fraud was a result of Daemon doing what was best for the people of Dolkness County.

Now, what to do. We can't avoid him being punished since he's falsified the documents that are submitted to the kingdom... But, wait, would I also be responsible as his supervisor? I grinned internally. *Then I shall act like a proper aristocrat for once and give self-preservation my best shot!*

"Hey, Patrick, was there anything strange about the documents?" I asked in a contrived tone.

He shook his head. "Nope, there wasn't a single thing wrong. Those documents looked perfect to me."

"Then...it would be fine to say that Daemon is a deputy who worked with integrity, yes?"

"Yeah, you can do as you please," Patrick said with a kind smile, clearly catching on to where I was going with this.

Since there was no evidence, and the fraud hadn't been carried out due to greed, my plan was to act like we hadn't seen or noticed a thing. Still, despite that, I truly did want to thank him for all of his hard work up till now.

"Daemon, I apologize for all the hardship I've caused you this past year," I apologized sincerely. "Thank you for continuing to support Dolkness County." Daemon stood there, frozen in shock, as I continued, "This was work that someone of the Dolkness family should have been doing, so I hope you'll continue to assist us now that I'll be... 'adjusting' your duties."

I bowed to him, and Daemon pressed his fingers against his eyes. "I-I... Um..." he stammered, choking on his words.

Wait, are you crying?

"I falsified documents... I hid the profits from years we had crops and applied it to the years with no yields."

I held up a hand. "Hey, you shouldn't be admitting to this."

The older man let out a snuffle. "The county's problems were beyond my reach, and now its financial state is in shambles. I haven't been able to work on

any of the public works projects in ages.”

“Well, the county’s finances are in shambles because most of the money was being sent to my parents in the Royal Capital, right?” I pointed out.

As far as I saw it, if Daemon hadn’t been here, the county could have ended up being in an even worse state than it was now.

My commendable deputy looked straight into my eyes and said, “Yes, but it’s true that I falsified documents.”

It’s like he’s prepared to be punished, I thought.

“Even so,” I replied, “I would like you to continue to support Dolkness County moving forward. Is that all right with you? Oh, but if you don’t want to be associated with this county anymore, I have an invitation for you from someone in a high position in the Royal Capital...” I pulled out the referral from Ronald and handed it to Daemon, but he immediately refused it.

“I, Daemon, vow to do everything in my power for this county and for you, Lady Yumiella,” he said, bowing to me out of respect.

All of a sudden I felt a bit strange. *Um, isn’t this the same thing that happened with Rita...?*

Still, I felt deeply reassured that Daemon, who had worked hard as the county’s deputy for years, had promised to continue to work along with me.

“I truly apologize for misunderstanding you, Lady Yumiella,” he said, bowing again.

“No, I apologize,” I told him. “I should have come by before now. I’m sure you thought I was just after money, like my parents.”

“Oh, well, that was part of it...”

“Part of it”?! What else could he have thought about me?

Before I could ask, Patrick’s hand gently plopping onto my head stopped me. “It’s good that you were able to clear things up,” he said, smiling gently at me.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Even though people were passing out earlier, after this I think things will be all right.”

Thinking of how I might be able to build good relationships with all of the servants, most of which had been knocked out by the entryway, made me feel deeply moved. At least, until Patrick burst my bubble.

“There’s no way things will be fine just because of this,” Patrick cruelly proclaimed. “Those people are probably more scared of you than people were at the Academy!”

But people were really terrified of me at the Academy... I thought reluctantly. Does Patrick honestly think it’ll be worse than that here? That’s not true, is it...?

I looked over at Daemon to get some reassurance that wasn’t the case, but he evaded addressing my fears by changing the subject.

“I-I meant to ask earlier,” he stammered, “but am I correct to assume that Sir Patrick is your caretak—... I mean, fiancé?”

Did he almost call Patrick my caretaker? And then...call him my fiancé instead? He’s not, at least not yet. Plus, even if he was, I could never introduce Patrick to people as my fiancé. That’s way too embarrassing.

My brain stopped functioning properly due to the embarrassment, so I tried to put things into simple terms. “Patrick is, um, you know... He just kinda tagged along.”

“He ‘kinda tagged along’?” Daemon said, repeating my words with a blank expression.

Hearing it come from someone else’s mouth made me sound heartless. I turned to look at Patrick to apologize, but he looked completely dead inside.

“‘Kinda tagged along...’” he quietly mumbled to himself.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” I said hurriedly. “I’m really grateful that you came with me to Dolkness County, but our relationship isn’t like that of an engaged couple, where it’s natural to be together. If you were to put it into extreme terms, we’re kind of like strangers in some ways.”

I paused, growing more embarrassed by the moment. The more I talked, the worse I seemed to be making things for myself. And for Patrick, judging by the heaviness of the air around him.

“U-Um, but if I had to pick whether I liked you or didn’t like you, I don’t not like you! And, if I had to pick whether I was happy or unhappy you came, I’m not *unhappy*, so...”

Internally, I screamed in agony. *Why can’t I just honestly say, “I’m happy you came because I like you”?!*

As I stood there at my wit’s end, Patrick let out a sigh and gave me a slight smile.

“Oh, I think I understand,” Daemon said to himself.



I wanted to speak more about how we would run the county from now on with Daemon, but the three of us decided to rest for the day and have a proper meeting tomorrow.

The room the staff had prepared for me was the same room I had lived in before; it was on the second floor. It had taken me a bit to realize it was the same room, as there wasn’t a single item inside that was a personal belonging of mine, and the layout of the mansion was unclear to me. But once I looked out the window, I knew exactly where I was. I’d used to jump right out this very window into the tree just outside, and I’d used its branches to climb over the mansion’s protective walls.

“How nostalgic...” I sighed. “Now I could get over the walls in a single jump, so I wouldn’t need that tree anymore.”

“Please don’t leave from the window,” Rita said from behind me, shoving me from my daydreaming.

She was apparently assigned to me once again.

“Do you think you’ll get along with everyone here, Rita?”

She nodded cheerfully. “Yes, they have been treating Sara and I very kindly. They also let me be the one in charge of looking after you.”

You sound like you’re boasting, Rita, but I think they just forced a job they didn’t want onto you... I gave an inward shrug. *As long as she’s happy about it, I guess it’s fine.*

“However,” Rita said, her expression twisting with displeasure, “I cannot accept their attitude toward you, Lady Yumiella. No matter how much I tell them about your benevolence, they won’t believe me.”

I sighed. Rita was probably having the opposite effect on my reputation the more she spoke.

Back when I’d attended the entrance ceremony at the Academy, the same thing had happened—I always seemed to stumble at the first step of building relationships with people. If I could figure out what I was doing wrong, I would have done my best to fix it, but try as I might, I couldn’t think of any aspect of myself that needed improvement.

“I wonder if I just have a terrifying atmosphere to me,” I said with a sigh.

“I don’t think you do,” Rita responded after a moment.

I narrowed my eyes. *What was that pause for?*

“Doing something bizarre and being misunderstood by those around you is just another one of your characteristics, Lady Yumiella,” Rita continued, shooting me a smile to cheer me up. “I revere that part of you as well.”

“Still...I’d like to fix those parts of myself.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Rita said seriously.

Do you have to rain on my parade right away?! I moaned internally. Could you try and encourage me at least a little?

I blew out a breath, trying to reassure myself that everything would be fine.

I’ll just slowly get to know them all over time. We’ll have plenty of chances to get friendly, even if nothing changed during my three years at the Academy... I sighed. I think that’s enough for the day. I’ll start the real work tomorrow.

“I’m going to head to bed now,” I told Rita.

She nodded. “Understood, have a good night.”

“Wait! Don’t leave me alone!”

Rita paused, giving me a strange look over her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Until that moment, I’d completely forgotten that right now, Patrick was also

in this mansion. He hadn't shown his true colors at the mansion in the Royal Capital, but that didn't mean he would continue to be a gentleman here.

There's no doubt about it, he's after me!

"What should I do if Patrick comes here?" I babbled in a panic. "Will I be all right if I lock the door? Can I fight him off if he comes in?"

"Just do whatever you'd like..." Rita said with a curtness that was unlike her.

Before I could say anything else, she'd quickly left my room.

I've...been abandoned.



The next day, Patrick, Daemon, and I gathered in the county owner's office to have our kick-off meeting regarding how we would manage Dolkness County. Unfortunately, even though it was an important meeting, the first between all three of us, I was sleep deprived.

"What's wrong? Were you unable to sleep in a new room?" Patrick asked, concerned.

I shook my head. "I can sleep anywhere... Wait, didn't we just have this conversation?"

Although I'd been braced for something to happen last night, Patrick had never shown up.

Now that I think about it, someone who just tagged along to visit another person's home wouldn't come to their bedroom, I thought with a sigh. Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if Patrick and I are really a couple after all.

But regardless of my nighttime woes, today was about how we would be running the county. We jumped right into the discussion, with Daemon explaining the details about the Dolkness County's current state.

"The main industry in Dolkness County is farming, with a majority of fields growing barley. There are other crops and some livestock farming as well, but those are in the minority..."

After that, Daemon continued to give us a general overview of the county.

There was a lot I was already aware of, but I listened intently to make sure I had the right information. His explanation covered a wide range of topics, from major towns and small villages scattered across the county, geographical information like what rivers flowed through the area, and the age demographics of its residents.

“I think that will cover the basics,” Daemon said when he was done. “I have more detailed information about the county for you if you are interested, so please let me know if you have any questions.”

“Thank you. From what you told us, the county’s...kind of normal?”

Honestly, that was all I had to say after hearing his explanation of the county—it was normal. Whether you counted it as a good thing or not, Dolkness County had no particular features. The only reason it was in such a bad state was because of human interference.

“As for the problems in the county,” Daemon continued, “we are in a great deal of debt, and the maintenance of the roads has fallen by the wayside. In addition, there are some areas that require the construction of flood-control structures.”

Hearing Daemon’s explanation made me feel like there was a whole mountain full of problems to solve. And, as far as I could tell, each and every problem had been caused by the county’s lack of funds. The highest expense on the books was the sum sent to my parents, so our financial problems would surely improve somewhat moving forward, but there were a few other things I was still concerned about.

“Are there any issues like starvation in our county?” I asked Daemon.

“We haven’t had any deaths due to starvation yet, but it’s been a close thing,” he admitted. “Every single one of the villages is in a tough situation.”

I nodded. “All right then. Let’s not collect any taxes this year.”

“P-Pardon?” Daemon stuttered, absolutely shocked.

It wasn’t like I planned to exempt the people from taxes every year—it was just a special treat for this year in particular, to help the people and to show off what a good county owner I was.

Bribing people to gain favor is a basic move, I thought, pleased with my decision.

On top of that, I also decided to move forward on various public works projects.

“First, we’ll fix up the roads, and then we’ll work on the flood control that’s been held off for decades,” I said slowly. “We can take care of the debt last, right?”

“Um, Lady Yumiella, that’s...” The more I spoke, the paler Daemon grew.

Oh, he might be thinking that I’m an idealist who doesn’t understand the reality of the situation we’re in, I realized. *The person in charge butting in on management without understanding how to actually run things is what Daemon’s been avoiding most for all this time.*

It was then that Patrick, who had been listening silently until now with his arms folded, spoke up. “You’re smart at the very least, so you must have some idea for how you’re going to fund all that, right?”

I nodded. *That’s right! I had good grades at the Academy, and I am pretty smart. Though adding on “at the very least,” makes it sound like the rest of me isn’t so great.*

Daemon seemed to be confused by the same phrase and repeated it back to Patrick. ““At the very least...’?”

“Yup, Yumiella’s sharp. She’s just also crazy.”

“I see,” Daemon responded.

I stared at the two of them, mildly offended. *Hey, Patrick, meet me out in the back later! Also, why are you just satisfied with that explanation, Daemon?!*

I cleared my throat, then dived into an explanation of how I was planning on funding the county’s large-scale renovations. “There’s only one place to go if we need money,” I said lightly.

Patrick nodded. “I guess that’s our only option. I’m sure with your reputation it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Well, yeah, with me it should be fine.”

“We’ll just have to find somewhere with low interest rates,” Patrick mused. “You might not like it, but if we ask the royal family, we may be able to get away with no interest at all...”

Well, at least I’ve got Patrick on board! Though, what was he talking about at the end there...?

Daemon seemed to have caught on to what we were talking about as well, but he didn’t seem as into the idea as we were.

I guess it’s only fair he wouldn’t like it, I supposed.

“Are you sure we should do that?” Daemon asked. “It’ll take decades to pay off.”

Patrick shrugged. “It’s an investment we would be making sooner or later. In that case, the sooner we invest the better.”

“Wait, what are you two talking about?” I said, interrupting them as the conversation started to go in a direction I didn’t understand.

They both looked at me, baffled, and I decided to clearly explain my intentions before things got too out of hand.

“I’m going dungeon crawling,” I told them.

“What?!”

“You’re going to a dungeon?”

I gave them both confused looks. *Hold on, did they not get what I was talking about?*

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “You see, the thing with money is...you can earn an infinite amount if you dungeon crawl.”

For someone at max level like me, dungeons were money factories. There were valuable magical instruments lying in the depths of dungeons, and though I didn’t understand how it worked, treasure chests would reappear each time you entered. And, of course, the monsters that appeared would drop magic stones.

Obviously, the amount of capital in Valschein and the world outside was

limited, so there would surely be a limit to how far I could take things—but for now, dungeon crawling could make ends meet for the county.

“I hate that I can’t deny that it’s a good idea...” Patrick said with a sour face.

He could surely understand my thought process, having entered dungeons on numerous occasions to grind levels—dungeons were profitable with no risk and required no seed money.

“I don’t know much about dungeons, but if something were to happen to you, Lady Yumiella, as the head of the family...” Daemon trailed off, his tone worried.

I doubt he’s ever stepped foot in a dungeon before, I thought. But...what does he think could happen to me?

I tilted my head and thought about it, but I couldn’t come up with an answer.

“You don’t have to worry about this one,” Patrick said with the same sour look. “There’s no point in it. It’s a waste of time.”

“Is that so...?”

I wasn’t sure what Patrick meant, but I could tell that he was saying something horrible about me. *Whatever, I thought. As long as everyone’s satisfied with my idea, we’re fine. Though, since I’m going to be digging in the gold mines known as dungeons, maybe they should change my title from county owner to miner...*

As I mused over new monikers, Patrick went on to explain to Daemon how much money could be made in a day of dungeon crawling.

“Dungeons are that profitable?!” Daemon exclaimed, his eyes widening with shock.

Patrick shrugged. “Well, that was an estimate based on Yumiella and my own levels.”

“I see, so the profitability is due to your high levels.” Daemon gave us both looks of respect.

I felt a bit shy, getting a look like that from him—I was used to being praised for my high level, but it was nice to actually be useful for once.

“Maybe I grinded all this time in preparation for this day,” I said, a slight smile coming to my face.

All of a sudden, I felt like I understood the meaning of life, and the meaning behind all the grinding I’d done up till now. *I’ll leave my own mark on history!*

“I thought grinding was just your hobby,” Patrick said coldly. “That, or it’s just in your nature.”

I sighed—he’d ruined my profound moment. I chose to be the bigger person, though, and turned my attention back to Daemon. I had a question on my mind.

“So, Daemon, have there been any issues with monsters attacking? With the current financial state, I’d imagine you couldn’t get around to culling.”

Monsters generally didn’t leave their habitats. Of course, there were exceptions, such as an overpopulation of monsters leading to an invasion of human settlements. Because of that, culling needed to be done to thin out the population of monsters in areas with the possibility of overpopulation. Most places that required this were mountains and forests near villages. Secluded regions which people couldn’t get into were fine to ignore as monsters wouldn’t leave those habitats. With Dolkness County having had to severely cut corners on public works projects like road maintenance, it wouldn’t be surprising for there to be an increase of monster attacks.

“Currently, there aren’t very many monster attacks in Dolkness County,” Daemon answered with a slightly troubled look. “There are some areas that we’d like to focus on and decrease the attacks, but there haven’t been any serious cases.”

“Oh? That’s surprising.”

“The attacks greatly dropped around ten years ago. According to the villagers in that area, there’s some sort of mountain god.”

“A god?” I asked, intrigued.

There were various myths and faiths in the world of *LMH*, but all the stories about gods appearing were pretty unlikely tales. I didn’t really like the sound of my county getting help from such an uncertain entity.

“It’s just a rumor, but there were also some who say they saw a little girl with black hair in the mountains... Oh.” Daemon’s voice squeaked on the last word, as if a realization had surprised his voice into a higher pitch.

I shivered. *A little girl alone in the mountains sounds like a horror story. I don’t like that.*

“I think it sounds pretty suspicious,” I mused. “I used to sneak out and visit the mountains and dungeon when I lived here, but I never saw anything like that.”

“Oh, so, the god truly is...”

“Yup, definitely.” Patrick turned to Daemon, and they nodded in agreement.

They left me in the dark at that moment, but I was destined to soon learn the identity of the god I’d heretofore been unaware of.



It had been almost two weeks now since we’d first come to Dolkness County, and I was spending the majority of my time flying around the territory, exterminating monsters with Ryuu. I’d felt bad leaving the maintenance of the roads to Daemon, but when I’d told him that he’d just laughed and said that everyone had been assigned the jobs that most suited them.

Does that mean he thinks I’m best suited for monster extermination? I wondered. *If so, I can totally get behind that.*

Other than that, we’d been focused on executing expensive charitable policies, one of which was opening our food reserves to areas that were running low on supply. I mean, if they couldn’t eat bread, why not let them eat cake? Okay, we weren’t *actually* feeding them cake, but we could certainly pour out some money to buy them more bread. I figured that if we ran low on funds, I could always just earn more money dungeon crawling.

As a result, I’d decided to take some detours to the Dolkness County dungeon in between exterminating monsters. It was a dark-type dungeon—in fact, it was the very same one I’d used in the past to help Alicia grind experience. It was pretty unpopular, since dark magic put the other four main elements at a disadvantage, but since I used dark magic myself, my spells had always been

just as effective. To put it more simply, the dungeon was close and convenient.

The same cycle went on for so long that I began to think that my job as the countess of Dolkness was just to hunt and defeat monsters—that was, at least, until another job was finally sent my way. Or rather, *shoved* my way by Patrick, who presumably was feeling uneasy over my being assigned monster-hunting duties for so long.

My new assignment turned out to be making courtesy calls. Basically, I was to visit the towns and villages of Dolkness County and introduce myself as the new countess. There was just one problem: I was absolutely terrible at stuff like this.

I thought we were assigning the right people to the right jobs! I thought mournfully.

“I’m telling you, things like this always turn out the same with me,” I told Patrick as I prepared to head out. “Everyone always hates me.”

“Why do you say that?” Patrick asked kindly, noticing how down I was feeling. “It’s not like you to be so pessimistic.”

I sighed. “I just think I’m easily misunderstood. And I’m not the most social person either.”

“You *just* realized that?”

It was the incident with the mansion’s servants the other day that had really driven things home for me. I mean, the only people I could actually manage to have a proper conversation with other than Patrick were Daemon and Rita! I might be able to get along with Rita’s sister, Sara, too, but I still wasn’t quite sure about her.

Even beyond that, I couldn’t even walk around Dolkness Village without people either grimacing at my black hair or running away screaming once they realized who I was. And yet, I’d still have to go around at one time or another and meet them all.

I just need to prepare myself mentally, I decided.

“So, where are we going first?” I asked Patrick.

“We’re heading to a small village nearby,” he said, turning to face me.

“Seriously, you don’t have to look so sour. They’ve already heard about the tax exemption for this year, so I’m sure they won’t give us too much of a hard time.”

“I hope you’re right...”

You know what, I’m calling it, I thought to myself. They’re gonna react to me in some insane, over-the-top way, just like they would if a whole swarm of baby spiders got released.

Both of us absorbed in our own thoughts, we walked quietly together to the entryway of the Dolkness mansion, then headed outside.

“Ryuu, let’s go for a fly!” I loudly called out.

My darling dragon, who was at the far end of the mansion, climbed to his feet and began to make his way toward us.

“You *are* planning on making an effort to not scare everyone, right?” Patrick asked warily.

I nodded. “Yeah, but I can’t put on a cheery smile or anything like that.”

Is there something else I can do to make the people of my county more comfortable? I wondered.

I pet Ryuu, who’d landed in front of Patrick and me not too long ago, as I considered my options.

Part of the reason the townspeople and the villagers are afraid of me is my black hair, so I could try and disguise it somehow, I mused. But honestly, I’d rather not. That would kind of undermine my efforts to eradicate discrimination toward people with my hair color.

I turned to Patrick, who was casually petting Ryuu’s sharp talons, and began explaining my line of thought. Once I was done, he nodded, not seeming surprised at all.

“Just do the best you can,” he told me.



We’d arrived at our destination, but...currently, I was in a bit of a pickle. I

looked at Patrick, who was standing by my side, and discovered he looked just as lost as I felt. Ryu was long gone—he'd left to play in the river. I wished I'd gone with him.

Left with nothing else to do, I looked back at the villagers before me, who were the source of our combined confusion. They were, well...praying to me. On their knees. While, uh, calling me "Mountain God."

"Oh, Mountain God," one villager murmured, bowing his head in worship. "We thank you for fighting the monsters in our stead."

"We cannot provide you with the sort of offerings that would satisfy you, Mountain God," another villager continued. "But we shall give you everything we have, should you ask it of us."



What's going on? I thought, baffled.

It had all started when we'd first arrived at this village, and I'd called out a greeting to an elderly man. He'd immediately begun to make a fuss about the "Mountain God" appearing, which had led the villagers to gather together and begin praying to me, resulting in our current situation.

I'd thought the whole Mountain God thing was just drivel the man had spouted due to his old age, but judging by the villagers' reactions, all of them worshiped the thing regardless of their age or gender.

"Um, who exactly is this 'Mountain God'?" I asked them. "I think you might have the wrong person."

And here I thought they'd be afraid of me, I thought ruefully. *Now I'm having to clear up an entirely different sort of misunderstanding.*

"The Mountain God is you," responded the elderly man who'd started the whole thing. He seemed to be acting as the village's representative. "There can be no doubt. We worried for you over the past few years, as you suddenly stopped appearing to us."

"I'm sorry, but you're mistaken," I told him with polite frankness. "I'm just a regular person. My name is Yumiella Dolkness, and I am the new countess of this territory."

"A regular person?" Patrick teased.

I gave him a cold look. "That's not the point right now! Can't you back me up, and tell them that I'm not a god?"

Patrick shrugged. "Well, I can't say for sure, but I believe the 'Mountain God' they're referring to actually *is* you."

I stared at him in disbelief. *When exactly did I become a god?*

As I stood there, mind whirling, Patrick went on to ask the villagers a number of questions. Thanks to his careful questioning, we learned a lot about this so-called Mountain God. Apparently, she'd first appeared over ten years ago, and was a young girl with black hair. She'd seemed to grow older with every year that passed, and she'd looked around fifteen the last time they'd seen her,

which had been around three years ago. Also, they'd seen the young god manipulate darkness in order to destroy monsters.

That person was...definitely me. They must have noticed me during the time that I'd really buckled down on my grinding, which would have been a handful of years before I entered the Academy. Honestly, I probably should have realized the god was me when I'd heard about them from Daemon, but I'd never imagined anyone would refer to me in such a way.

"Everyone, I am no god," I swore, trying to explain things once more. "However, I will still continue to take down monsters. If you feel you are in any trouble, please let me, your new countess, know."

I fell silent, feeling a little nervous that the villagers would think they'd been duped. Would they be upset with me? Sad?

It turned out the answer was neither, apparently. Cheers suddenly broke out across the camp, with some villagers even pumping their fists.

"So the Mountain God is running this county now?"

"No!" I said, quickly trying to correct them before things got any further out of hand. "I was never a god in the first place, so—"

"That's great! The village is in good hands!"

"Hooray to our god! Hooray to our countess!" the villagers cried, still continuing to cheer for me.

I looked at Patrick, desperately hoping that he'd have a way out of this, but came up with nothing. He just gave me a nervous smile, as if to say, "This whole matter is out of our hands now."

Seriously, why are they reacting like this? I moaned internally. *How did this happen?!*



I was met with similar reactions in all the other villages I visited. It seemed that the entire area was filled with believers of the Mountain God. There was even a village that tried to offer a human sacrifice to me, which caused quite a commotion.

After that, I finally gave in. *Whatever, believe what you want*, I decided.

When we weren't actively fending off worshippers, we tried to strike up a dialogue with the villagers, trying to find out if they had any problems they were facing. Most of them fell silent, hesitating to ask anything of us, but eventually we came across a village that was actually willing to request help.

"That boulder over there has been getting in our way," the head of the village explained to us, pointing at a towering boulder sitting in the middle of a nearby field. "It makes it difficult to split up the field, and it's been blocking off the sunlight to the crops in some areas."

I nodded. "I can handle it."

I walked up to the boulder, looking up toward the top of it. The massive rock was at least double my height and was even wider than I was tall.

I can't believe that my first request is a physical task, I thought, holding in a laugh. *This mayor seems to understand where my true strength lies.*

Examining the boulder, it soon became clear to me that I wouldn't be able to wrap my arms around it in order to carry it away. So instead, I just punched my fingers straight into the side of it.

"Hey, wouldn't it just be easier to use magic?" Patrick called out.

I kind of agreed with him, but if I stopped now it would look like I wasn't strong enough to pick the boulder up. That wouldn't be impressive at all.

Committing to my plan, I hoisted the boulder into the air, clenching tight with my fingers in order to hold on to it.

"Up we go!" I said triumphantly, then blinked when I realized a good deal of earth had come up along with the massive rock. It seemed the boulder had been considerably larger than it'd appeared on the surface—as in, nearly double the size.

So, you hid your true power underground? Heh, not too bad for a boulder.

"Stay back! You'll get hurt!" Patrick warned the villagers.

Those who had stuck around to spectate scattered away as I lifted the boulder high above my head. In the battle of Yumiella versus the large boulder,

I had come out unambiguously victorious.

So, where should I dispose of this rock? I mused. *There are barley fields all around, so I can't just get rid of it here. It should be somewhere far... Guess I'll throw it.*

I spun my body a full one hundred and eighty degrees, using the momentum I generated to chuck the massive boulder forward. It went soaring, vanishing into the sky.

I turned around triumphantly, inwardly grinning at the excited, overjoyed looks on the villagers' faces.

Ah, it's nice to be useful.

Patrick, however, didn't seem too happy with me. "Yumiella, you didn't get rid of it with magic, did you?" he demanded.

I shook my head. "I just threw it. Is something wrong...?"

"Listen closely," Patrick said. "Things that go *up* eventually fall *down*."

I know how gravity works, Patrick, I thought, inwardly rolling my eyes. *Oh, but what if they haven't discovered gravity yet in this world? Did Patrick figure it out all on his own?! Is he an Isaac Newton-level genius?!*

Patrick's expression was so full of exasperation at this point that I turned over what he'd said in my head one more time.

Gravity is present in this world, just like in my old one. So, it follows that if I drop a cup it falls to the floor, and if I chuck a boulder it will crash to the ground... Oh.

"That boulder...it's going to land somewhere," I said, the realization sinking in.

I mean, I was strong, but I didn't think my throw had enough force behind it to actually send it into space. Which meant that Dolkness County faced the possibility of being destroyed by a massive meteorite.

I glanced over at Patrick and we nodded in unison, then took off running in the direction I'd sent the boulder flying.

"This is why I said to use magic!" Patrick grumbled.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?!”

We ran through the barley fields at speeds even a wild animal couldn’t reach. I could only hope we would be forgiven for the destruction we were wreaking along our way.

I looked up to the sky as I ran, trying to catch sight of the boulder that was going to come raining down on us at any moment. But, despite the considerable distance we’d run and the amount of time that had passed, the meteorite was nowhere to be found. At this point, we’d gone so far that we couldn’t even see the village anymore.

Patrick suddenly stopped running, freezing in place, so I stopped with him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Yumiella...what angle did you throw that boulder out at?”

“Um... I think it was pretty upward.”

Patrick’s face went pale. “Do you think there’s a chance that we’ve passed the boulder, since you threw it up so high?”

I considered this option. Using an extreme example, if I’d thrown the boulder straight up, it would have fallen down to the exact same location. Because I’d thrown it at such an upward angle, it was possible the boulder hadn’t traveled that far away from the village at all, and would land quite close to its original placement. Just as this realization sank in, a thunderous sound rumbled through the air behind us.

“It was behind after all,” Patrick muttered.

We turned around, preparing to sprint back, then stumbled on our feet as shock waves shot through the earth, caused by the rock’s impact.

That must mean that the boulder is close by, I thought, tension leaking out of me. *So the village is safe, at least.*

As I stood there relieved, Patrick jumped out in front of me. He stood with his back to the area where the meteorite had landed, holding his arms out as if he was going to hug me.

“You’re in the way, Patrick! I want to see the meteorite too!” I grumbled,

pushing him aside so I could stare at the landing site, which was currently covered in a cloud of dust.

There was a large hole in the ground, around thirty...no, fifty meters in diameter.

Just how fast did that boulder come crashing down that it made a hole multiple times as large as its own size?

As I stared at the gaping hole, I realized it was almost a perfect circle.

“Look, look!” I said excitedly, turning to Patrick. “Isn’t it incredible?”

“I know I’m not really a dependable shield for you to hide behind, but come on...” Patrick sighed. His gaze turned a bit irritated as he glanced at the hole.

“I’m sorry,” I said, contrite. “I was just really curious about the boulder.”

“It’s fine, I don’t really mind...” he groaned. “So, what are you going to do about this hole?”

What am I going to do? I wondered. *I mean, it’s pretty far away from the village, so it shouldn’t really be in the way anymore.*

The hole, on the other hand, looked quite deep. If someone were to fall into it, it would be pretty dangerous. If that happened, Daemon and the villagers might get upset with me.

“Patrick, can I hide behind you when we report back on this hole?”

“Oh, so *now* you want to use me as a shield?” Patrick snarked at me. “Yeah, no thanks.”

Oh, I realized, so Patrick’s going to be the first one to get mad at me. Got it. Well, at least no one got hurt. I can withstand a bit of lecturing.

“I’m going to go ground myself and reflect on my actions!” I called out, running toward where I thought Ryu had landed. By my calculations, he was probably pretty close to the village.

“Hey, wait! Stop running, Yumiella!”

Interlude 2: Daemon

As the deputy of Dolkness County, Daemon was fully responsible for the management of the territory. Today, he was working in his office, as he often did, endeavoring to fulfill his duties. As he flipped through various reports from his subordinates, he couldn't help but begin reminiscing about the past.

Daemon's family had served the Dolkness family as civil officials for generations. When he'd been young, he'd worked as a lower-ranking public official in the Royal Capital in order to train to take over as deputy in the future. When he'd returned to the county, prepared to use his skills to help those living within the Dolkness's territory flourish, he'd been surprised to find Dolkness County had begun to show signs of a decline.

At that time, a young new count had just taken over the territory, as his father, the former Count Dolkness, had passed away early in his life. Apparently, almost immediately after he'd received his father's title, the young man had run off to the Royal Capital, never to be seen again. Daemon's superior, who was the deputy at the time, had told him that it was better that their rakish young master wasn't around.

For the first few years after the count's departure for the Royal Capital, things in the county had run relatively smoothly. That had been thanks in part to several continuous years of abundant harvest.

"But things got rough after that..." Daemon mumbled to himself, recalling the man who had once been his superior.

With those initial years of plenty behind them, the decline of Dolkness County had soon become inevitable. Things had come to a head when there had been a record-breaking lean harvest, which had sent those who were running the county scrambling to negotiate a decrease in taxes with a number of Dolkness County's villages. They'd also been busy breaking open their food supply reserves to keep everyone fed. It was then that a notice had arrived from the Royal Capital, reading, "The funds you typically send me seem to have

decreased. Send enough money to match last year's sum. Immediately."

The deputy had been furious with the count's message, especially since the man had been spending all his time fooling around in the Royal Capital, unaware of what was happening in his county. He'd sent him a curt reply, informing the count that it was not possible for the moment for him to send the same amount of money as he had in previous years, as the harvest had fallen short.

What had returned was a letter with only one line, stating that the deputy had been released from his position. It had just been a single sheet of paper, but the weight of the count's signature had been heavy indeed. After that, the deputy had fallen into despair and retired, both from work and from society.

Soon after, Daemon had taken his superior's place. Now that he'd become deputy, he was suddenly responsible for the entirety of the county's management. One after another, he'd watched skilled workers quit, sickened by the count's actions, and eventually he'd sunk to dabbling in forgery in order to alter the county's financial statements. Taking advantage of the count's lack of interest in his county, Daemon had hidden the tax revenue from years of plenty and saved it, then used those savings to make up for the years that the harvest was lean. The result was a pile of statements that made it appear as if the county's profits were increasing with every year.

The reality, however, was more grim. Daemon hadn't been able to spare the money needed to maintain the county's roads or to fund flood-control projects, and no matter how frugal he was, the county's debt seemed to grow with every year.

Recalling the disaster that had been his life for years, Daemon sighed. Now that his mind was so firmly in the past, he couldn't help but remember a young Yumiella.

"Oh, I'll never be able to take back how I treated Lady Yumiella back then..." he mumbled to himself.

It had been several years since Daemon had become the deputy of Dolkness County when a maid arrived from the Royal Capital, escorting the count's daughter. Yumiella had been so young she couldn't even speak yet, but she'd

already been able to stand steady on her two feet.

Once Yumiella had moved into the mansion, she had taken to lingering around the mansion like a doll. Daemon had tried to speak to the black-haired little girl a number of times, but her unsmiling countenance had unsettled him. Eventually, he'd left her alone altogether, trusting that the maids would at least provide her with the bare minimum level of care she needed.

That had perhaps been the reason why he hadn't noticed the changes the young girl had gone through over the following years. He'd received reports that she was sneaking out of the mansion but had ultimately decided to let her do as she pleased, since she always returned without a scratch on her.

"Things were probably tough for her..." Daemon muttered guiltily. "Maybe she wouldn't have gone to such extremes if I had been on her side..."

Now that he knew the truth of what had gone on, he couldn't help but think of all the details he'd learned of Yumiella's style of grinding for experience. Regret flooded him.

"Lady Yumiella said that those days were fun for her, but there's no way that's true..."

He was wrong, of course—Yumiella had enjoyed her time back in those days, indulging in daily trips to grind experience. There was no way someone like Daemon could understand her point of view, however. It was far too aberrant from those of normal people.

When he'd first heard Yumiella was taking over Dolkness County, Daemon had been filled with guilt and fear. In the face of how terribly he'd treated her as a young girl, her eminent return had felt distinctly ominous. It wasn't that he'd been afraid of being punished himself—no, what he'd been afraid of was that the county he'd worked so hard to protect would become a victim of her revenge.

It hadn't helped that the rumors of Yumiella that had reached Dolkness County were all terrifying. They had been incredibly detailed, laying out how she was a cruel girl whose expression remained unchanged no matter how terrible the things were that she did, and how she'd tamed an evil dragon, with whom's help she'd destroyed any domains that she didn't care for. He'd even

heard that she was actually a monster birthed in the depths of a dungeon, which had somehow managed to take on human form.

Faced with this news, Daemon had been deeply apprehensive about meeting Yumiella. He'd known that the person those rumors spoke of could demolish his precious county with ease.

A knock came at the door of Daemon's office, and he jerked in his chair, his thoughts of the past evaporating. Startled, the deputy could only stare as Patrick pulled open the door and stepped inside.

"Oh, hello, Sir Patrick," he finally said. "What brings you here?"

"I was wondering if you had some..." A wrinkle appeared in Patrick's forehead. "Is there something wrong, Daemon? You look paler than usual."

The deputy shook his head. "I apologize, I was just reminiscing on the past a little bit."

"The past?"

"Specifically, I was thinking of all the rumors that reached here from the Royal Capital regarding Lady Yumiella. They were all absolutely appalling."

Patrick let out a bitter laugh, his mind straying to his endlessly misunderstood partner. "Well, with how Yumiella talks and acts..." he muttered, recalling his own history with her. "I mean, remember when she first arrived? It was horrible."

"Well...yes."

From what Yumiella had said that first day, everyone had been under the impression that she'd sworn to never forgive them for any of the trespasses they'd committed in the past, all the while warning them that escape was impossible. Later, Daemon had asked her about it, and found out she'd actually meant to convey that she was looking forward to getting along with everyone. He hadn't been aware of that at the time, however—he'd even prepared to take his own life. It had been a great surprise to him when he'd felt things shift toward the better after he'd shown her to the office that day.

Back when Daemon had taken over the role of deputy from his predecessor,

he'd prepared himself for the negativity that was sure to come. He'd expected to bear the hatred of the county's citizens because of the high taxes he was forced to impose, and he'd expected to be reprimanded by the count for the low tax revenue the county brought in. Still, he'd continued doing his best, driven forward by the overpowering sense of responsibility for the county. Even though he'd known all the while that he'd never be thanked for his work.

That was why it had struck him so deeply when Yumiella had offered him such kind words of gratitude for his service all these years. He'd been overwhelmed with the feeling that she might actually be able to do something to improve the county he cared so much for. And, so far, that feeling had been spot on.

"Even though she scared everyone back then, it is clear to me now that Lady Yumiella is a kind person," Daemon finally said, hoping that Patrick would agree.

"She sure is," Patrick said, smiling at the older man.

"The only thing is..." Daemon trailed off. "No, never mind."

It was just, kind as she was, Yumiella was *definitely* a strange person. Daemon kept the thought to himself though, realizing Patrick was most likely already well aware of that fact.

BOOOOM!

The two men paused, taking in the sudden explosive sound that had just come from outside of the mansion. The deep, ground-shaking noise resonated through the office.

"I'm sorry," Patrick said with a sigh. "I have to go."

"Of course, take care," Daemon replied.

Patrick was gone in moments, hurrying out of the room to catch the culprit behind the explosion.

"I wonder what Lady Yumiella did this time," Daemon said wryly. He didn't stir from his chair to go find out, choosing to go back to the tasks he'd been working on before. He figured it was best to leave the cleanup of his boss's mistakes to her boyfriend.

There were many reasons why Daemon worked as hard as he did. He toiled away for his county, which he was so fond of, for the people who lived there, who were under his care, and to atone to his boss, the countess, for the unkind way he'd treated her in the past. But, while he was tied to his job, unable to leave for a multitude of reasons, Daemon had also begun to enjoy himself recently.

"It's wonderful to see the county truly grow," he murmured, smiling to himself.

For though its progress was slow, Dolkness County was improving.

Chapter 3: The Hidden Boss Visits Her Fiancé's Family

Two months had now passed since I'd first come to Dolkness County. The county-wide renovations led by Daemon were progressing smoothly, and despite thinking I would be of no use, I'd ended up being a big help to the construction efforts by acting as living heavy machinery. Just recently, I'd helped dig out a channel for water. Although, I *had* overdone it a bit... It'd ended up more of a canal than a channel, to be honest. Still, too big was probably better than too small, right...?

The county was also doing well financially now, thanks to Patrick and I's frequent dungeon dives, and we were on the verge of fully paying back the county's preexisting debt. Patrick's level had been increasing from all our dungeon crawling as well, so it was practically like killing two birds with one stone. I had to admit, he'd gotten pretty dang strong.

Aside from that, we'd worked on fixing up some roads and had handled a variety of monster exterminations, but those were things that had to be done no matter what territory you were in. That meant we'd leveled up from a bad county to a normal county, which also meant that it was time to move onto the next step—showing off Dolkness County's local flavor. After all, we couldn't keep relying on dungeons to fund the county forever; we needed to find something else to sustain the county in the future. The problem was, Dolkness County didn't have any particular specialty product, and appeared to have no resources that could be of use. It was just a nondescript area made up of plains and mountains.

Which was why, at the current moment, I was in Daemon's office, discussing what direction we wanted to steer the county in next. "Most of the county grows barley, right?" I asked him. "What about switching to a cash crop like cotton?"

"Well, cotton is the specialty crop of our neighbors in Cottoness Viscounty.

Other crops that could be an option for us would be tea leaves or various types of fruit, but those take time to be a stable source of income.”

“I don’t think it needs to be profitable right away...” I said thoughtfully. “And even if we were to dabble in those kinds of crops, we don’t have any guarantee that we could outsell existing suppliers.”

“That’s true,” Daemon agreed. “I doubt we’d be able to outsell specialty products that have been established in certain areas for many years. Especially when it comes to premium products that have added value based on where they come from.”

So we need branding, I decided. Not that I know a thing about building a brand. It’s going to be extra tough too, since we’ve gotta start from scratch.

I’d come into this thinking that I might be able to use the knowledge I’d gained in my previous life, but it turned out things weren’t that easy. The world of *LMH* was similar to medieval Europe, which meant the standard of living was quite high. Things like sugar and spices were readily available, and food culture was advanced.

“It would be great if we could do something that no other domain was doing...” I mumbled.

“With all the innovative thoughts you have, I believe in your ability to come up with a good idea, Lady Yumiella,” Daemon said, his eyes hopeful.

Still, despite his clear belief in me, I couldn’t think of anything.

Hmm... I mused. What am I good at? What’s something only I can do...? A long moment passed. The only things I can think of are related to combat...

“What about drawing people in with our dungeon, like in Valius?”

“The dungeon, hmm? Well, it’s not my area of expertise, but our dark-type dungeon does give off the impression of being quite dangerous...”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. It’s an element that most people won’t have an advantage against.”

Well, seems like the dungeon is no good. So, what else am I good at...? Grinding experience?

“Maybe we could help soldiers grind experience and start a free company?” I proposed. “No, wait, that wouldn’t work.”

Daemon put a thoughtful hand to his chin. “Would it not? I think that would go well if you were to lead them, Lady Yumiella.”

That’s the exact problem, Daemon! I thought. *People are already scared enough of how powerful I am. That will only get worse if I end up with an army at my disposal.*

“Hmm... I’m going to get Patrick’s input as well,” I told my deputy.



After I left Daemon’s office, I wandered the mansion, looking for Patrick. I found him soon enough—he was standing in the entryway, having just returned.

That’s kind of strange, I thought. *He didn’t mention leaving, and now he’s coming back with a sword...?*

I brushed it off and walked up to him. “Welcome home,” I said. “Where did you go?”

“Oh, I just joined in on the soldiers’ training. They’re a lot more skilled than I expected.”

By “soldiers’ training,” Patrick was referring to the training of the private army retained by the Dolkness family. Though they were supposed to be on hand in order to maintain public order and exterminate monsters, in reality they were terribly weak. The last I’d heard, the majority of our soldiers were around level 10. I had no intention of turning them into an undefeatable army, to be clear. I just thought it was problematic that the people who were supposed to be keeping our people safe were undependable.

“Should I join in and help from now on?” I offered.

Patrick shook his head. “Don’t meddle with them. Under *any* circumstances. Someone could die if things were to go south.”

That’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think? I thought indignantly. *All I would do is take them into a dungeon and use my monster-summoning flute! I*

would prefer they went in one by one, but that might be a little extreme.

Seeing my dissatisfied face, Patrick sighed. “Anyway, you were looking for me, weren’t you? You must have something you wanted to ask me.”

“Oh, right, I almost forgot,” I realized. “I want to get your opinion on some changes we’re making to the county.”

We started heading back to Daemon’s office, continuing our conversation along the way. I explained to him the issue we’d been currently discussing and asked for his advice. I figured that, being the son of a margrave, Patrick surely had some knowledge he’d gained over the years regarding territory management.

“What about the Mark of Ashbatten?” I finally asked. “Do they specialize in anything?”

“Us?” Patrick said thoughtfully. “I don’t think we have anything in particular. We don’t even have something we could call a specialty product.”

“What? And the mark is doing fine?”

Patrick shrugged. “Well, the situation there is pretty different from yours here in the county. Our mark receives funding from the kingdom as repayment for protecting its borders. Plus, the sizes of the Mark of Ashbatten and Dolkness County are on totally different scales.”

I see, I thought. So the function of a mark is fundamentally different from that of a county, since it shares a border with another kingdom.

But that knowledge only left me with the same question I’d had before. If the Ashbattens prioritized defending the kingdom’s border from invaders, what would we prioritize here in Dolkness? Should we just focus on having an overall prosperous county? That would lead to an increase in tax revenue, if nothing else.

As far as the issue of “different scales,” which Patrick had brought up, he was most likely referring to the fact that Dolkness County had a different composition of land from the Mark of Ashbatten. More specifically, he was referring to the amount of arable agricultural land within each territory.

In Dolkness County, where there were no other industries besides agriculture, farm size was directly related to the population of the surrounding area. In other words, if there was fertile land that wasn't being utilized, we could use it to increase food production, which would increase our population, which would increase tax revenue...

Just then, a clever idea popped into my head. It was perfect timing too—we'd just arrived back at Daemon's office. Excited, I decided I'd present my idea to both men as soon as I walked inside.

"I've got it!" I loudly proclaimed, bursting through the door. "We just need to make the county bigger!"

"No invasions," Patrick scolded.

"That's not what I meant!" I shot back.

Jeez, why is his first thought something so violent...?

"I'm saying we should increase the amount of farmland we have! That way our population would increase, and then our tax revenue would increase! Everyone would win!"

"Cultivating farmland, hmm? We haven't done that for the past few decades..." Daemon said slowly.

He didn't seem too interested in the idea, but I didn't mind—I'd expected his reaction to be similar to this.

"Wait, didn't you want to differentiate Dolkness County from other places?" Patrick asked. "I'm pretty sure other places develop their land too."

"*But...*they haven't really seen results, have they?" I asked, inwardly shivering with excitement.

Both men looked thoughtful. "Well...if you look at the entire kingdom, there's a slight increase in population and food production, but there haven't been any significant changes."

Just as I thought!

The Kingdom of Valschein had a history of being used for farming. The land had been farmed for at least the first few hundred years after the kingdom was

established, and if we were talking before that, it had probably been utilized by humans for thousands of years. That being said, all the land that could be used for agriculture had probably already been tilled. That left only barren land, mountain ranges, and areas where monsters appeared as the only places left to develop.

All of those environments were quite uninhabitable, of course. And even if you were to invest great amounts of time and money to develop those lands, there wouldn't likely be much of a return on your investment. But...what if you had the power to change terrain in an instant? You know, like the kind of power I had?

"That's why we're going to flatten the entire county with my Yumiella-strength!" I proclaimed triumphantly. "I'll get rid of mountains, fill in valleys, and eradicate monsters!"

As far as I was concerned, it was completely airtight logic. I was good at leveling terrain—with my physical strength and magic, I wouldn't even need dynamite or a pickaxe.

"Are you serious? You're joking, right?" Patrick said with a pained look.

"I may have exaggerated a bit, but that's the gist of it."

Okay, maybe saying I'd flatten the entire county was a bit too far. Obviously I know that the environment would get all messed up if I did that.

If I truly went that far, rivers would stop flowing because of the lack of difference in elevation, and there was a limit to how much river water was available. Plus, there were some places where monsters would spawn endlessly, no matter how many I took down. Still, that didn't mean that my plan was bad. We just had to pick a place that had been left untouched since it was a hassle, or because there hadn't been the budget to develop it, and I could handle the rest. If we did things right, that place could become an effective breadbasket for the county.

"Just based on if it was possible or not... I *do* think it's possible," Daemon said, seemingly still not quite satisfied.

"Right? It's foolproof!"

“It’s a very...Yumiella-like idea, I guess,” Patrick said, smiling slightly.

Heck yeah, it is! I thought, my lips quirking slightly.

To tell the truth, even though I always considered my options, it seemed I was destined to resolve things with brute force. That was how I had gotten through things until now, at least.

Racking your brain for ideas is for the weak, the strong can get by even without wisdom! Ha ha ha ha ha!

“What will we do when it comes to residents?” Daemon asked, as if he’d just thought of something. “Even if we develop a new village, we will need to recruit villagers to live there.”

“Oh...” I said, wilting slightly.

I could obtain land for us and gather the funds we needed from dungeons easily enough, but people were one thing I couldn’t supply. Suddenly, my plan felt full of holes. Still, I clung to my stubbornness, continuing to try and think of solutions.

“Could we...recruit people from other villages?”

“I doubt it,” Patrick said, immediately bursting my bubble. “I don’t think any of the villages have extra people. I’ve also heard stories of villages splitting up because other villages were gathering up people.”

I sunk back into thought. *I wonder if there are any nomads wandering for a place to settle... Dolkness County could be their promised land!*

Spurred on by this new idea, I asked, “What about bringing in people from other domains? I’m sure there are places without enough land.”

A considering look came over Daemon’s face. “Well, I’m sure we would find some if we looked. The only thing is, whoever runs that domain won’t be too happy with us. Not that anyone would complain to your face.”

“Oh, but I don’t want to cause issues with anyone else... Plus, that sounds almost like I’d be threatening them to comply.”

It wasn’t very polite to compare people to objects, but to someone who ran a domain, I knew that both their land and their residents were their primary

assets. As such, it would only be natural to grow unhappy with someone who took those assets without permission. That being said, it seemed like another of my ideas was a no go. I didn't want to act in a way that would lead to someone's hand being forced because of the looming threat of my strength.

I groaned. "This really is a thorny issue. I guess all we can do right now is expand existing villages."

The men both seemed to agree. "Yeah, I think the current villages aren't fully populated, so with a little work we should yield some good results."

Thus, in the end, we decided to simply focus on expanding existing villages and fixing up the areas surrounding them. It wouldn't really change much of anything, but I guessed it was a start.

I sighed. *Looks like I won't be flattening the world for a while...*



After we finished our initial discussion, we decided to go ahead and hold a mini debriefing, since the three of us were already gathered together. Thus, we went on to share certain information with one another, like how far we'd progressed on particular jobs, and so on.

"The county has been revitalized to a point where it is beyond recognition from its previous state," Daemon said, sharing the good news. "It appears that even our business in the hospitality sector is doing well."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Well, we've invited tradesmen to work on public works projects and hired extra hands from other areas. That has resulted in merchants gathering here as well, hoping to sell to those workers. The temporary increase in people has also led to an increase in consumption in the hospitality sector as well, particularly when it comes to renting lodgings."

I see, I thought. Looks like it was a good idea to throw money at a bunch of industries. With enough capital going around to boost various industries, it feels like we're starting to develop a real economy. Not that I know anything about economics...

“So I guess the next step is getting those people to spend more money then,” I said, not thinking much of it.

Daemon’s eyes went wide. “Have you studied to become a high-ranking official, Lady Yumiella?”

I gave him a confused look. *Why is he so surprised over a simple idea like that? Just how stupid does he think I am...?*

With a huff, I pushed those thoughts away. Thinking of ways to increase spending was more interesting anyway.

Hmm... I’m sure food’s already being sold, but I wonder if we could do something with tourism. It would be nice if people could buy gifts after visiting our county.

I turned to Daemon. “Are there any items sold as gifts in Dolkness County?”

“Let’s see...” he mumbled in reply. “There are some wood crafts, but it’s not that big of an industry. We don’t have many tourists in the first place, to be honest. But I think that will change if we come up with some sort of specialty item that’s only available here.”

Gifts... I mused, thinking back to the trips I went on in my past life. What kind of gifts did I buy...? Maybe...wooden katanas?

“Wooden kata—... I mean, wooden swords might be good.”

“Wooden swords?” Daemon repeated doubtfully.

“They’ll definitely sell,” I insisted. “I would buy one.”

“You sure?” Patrick asked. “I’m pretty sure you’d be the only one who would buy them.”

Now that just plain wasn’t true. Back when I’d gone on a class trip with my elementary school class, half of my classmates had bought wooden katanas. Of course, I’d bought one as well. From what I remembered, that class had been made up of nineteen boys and twenty-one girls, and one of my friends who I’d shared a room with had begged me not to buy the katana since she thought it would be embarrassing. Still, I hadn’t been able to resist. I mean, who wouldn’t buy a sword with a cool name like “The Blade of the White Tiger”?

I'd bought a wooden katana on my middle school class trip as well. Fewer of my classmates had bought them then, but curiously enough, the same friend who'd complained to me before had bought one for herself, as if her warning from before had never even happened. Apparently, she'd longed for one after all. Though, I did think the "Lake Toya" inscribed on the handle was strange.

By the time I'd entered high school, I'd graduated from my wooden-katana-buying days. Instead, I'd used almost all of my allowance to purchase a replica katana. The same friend from before had made fun of me, but by the time we'd entered college she'd seen the light and understood how good Japanese swords were. She'd told me she regretted not buying a replica of Toshizo Hijikata's sword, Izuminokami Kanesada back then, and that that wasn't because she became a Shinsengumi buff.

"Uh, hey, Yumiella? Where'd you go?"

I came back to myself with a little jolt. "Oh sorry, I got a little lost in my thoughts. I was just thinking about the past."

It seemed the thought of wooden katanas had been so nostalgic that I'd ended up reminiscing on unrelated memories. Regardless, there was still absolutely no doubt in my mind that, if we made them, they would sell.

Since Patrick seemed to oppose my idea, I decided to focus on Daemon instead. "Patrick doesn't seem that interested, but you would buy one, right, Daemon?" I asked him.

He whined. "I'm sorry, Lady Yumiella, but I don't think I would buy a wooden sword as a tourist."

He's lying; that's impossible! Or, maybe they're both not the type to buy gifts?

"W-Well, what about a key chain," I proposed. "Maybe one with a dragon that's wrapped around a sword?"

"I'm sorry, what did you say...?"

"A...decoration, with a dragon that's wrapped around a sword!" I said, trying to convey the size of the object I was describing with my hands.

Now that's something everyone would want. There're those ones that have

two blades that combine, or the ones where you can actually sheathe the sword... Some of them are so detailed, it's great! I always loved them, but I just can't remember what they're actually called...

I desperately tried to explain the item, but neither Patrick nor Daemon seemed to understand the greatness of a key chain with a dragon wrapped around the sword.

"Don't you buy any gifts when you visit somewhere?" I finally demanded, feeling fed up.

"I buy things like treats that won't spoil right away, and interesting woven items," Patrick said.

"Oh, I would be interested in those types of items as well," Daemon chimed in.

What's wrong with these two? They have the purchasing habits of old ladies on a guided tour!

"The swords would definitely sell..." I mumbled.

"But it's just a plain old wooden sword, right?" Patrick asked, baffled. "You could get one of those anywhere. You could even make one yourself!"

"You don't get it," I muttered, just barely holding back a pout. "They have inscriptions on the handles...it just feels special!"

"Okay... What kind of inscriptions?" Patrick asked.

"Um, like the name of the area or prominent people from that place?"

Come to think of it, what would you inscribe on a wooden katana made in Dolkness County? I wondered. *I haven't heard of anyone special that's from here...and if it's the name of the area, then it would just be Dolkness. There's plenty of other areas within the county, but they're not famous.*

"You know, I do think a sword would feel pretty strong if it had 'Dolkness' inscribed on it," Daemon said after thinking for a moment.

"Right? Doesn't it?!"

To tell the truth, I felt kind of embarrassed when I thought of selling a sword

with my own name on it, but it was a small sacrifice to pay in order to get what I wanted. And, if all else failed, I could always just pass it off as being the name of the area.

“What about having it written on dinnerwa—”

“No way,” I cut in, stopping Daemon in a hurry.

*Dinnerware with my name on it sounds like some kind of wedding favor.
Totally, definitely not happening.*

In the end, my idea for a wooden sword was selected, finally given the glory it was due. We would be producing the key chain with the dragon wrapped around the sword as well. Patrick and Daemon still didn’t seem too into the idea, but they went ahead and agreed to it. Although they didn’t say it, I knew they expected my plan to fail—they’d probably only gone for it because of the low production costs.



A few weeks later, the day that the wooden swords would go up for sale arrived. In preparation for this day, a few samples had been created under my supervision, and we’d arranged things so they’d be sold in Dolkness Village. I didn’t expect many to sell right away, but I would be happy if even ten sold.

That’s why, late on the night of the first day the swords had been available for purchase, I was up waiting for the sales reports to come in.

Just as I thought I’d burst out of my skin, Daemon came into the office, where I was sitting.

“Were you waiting, Lady Yumiella?” he asked. “I thought I would be sharing the report with you tomorrow morning.”

“I couldn’t wait. How are sales?”

My heart was pounding. *I should have just sold them myself at the store if I was going to be in this much agony!*

“Well, I just received a report from the owner of the store,” Daemon said, smiling happily.

Does that mean there’s good news?!

“Apparently, we were able to sell one sword!”

“O-One...?”

“Yes, and it was the most expensive one, the one that was painted black,” Daemon replied. “I’m surprised that someone would pay such a price for a wooden sword.”

“One of the ones that was painted black...?”

“Yes, apparently the person who purchased it was a suspicious hooded person. Perhaps they were embarrassed to be buying it,” Daemon joked.

My mood instantly crashed after hearing that the sales had greatly underperformed even my minimum expectations. Still, Daemon laughed and said there was nothing to worry about.

“To tell you the truth,” he continued, “I didn’t think even a single sword would sell. It seems that there are some people out there who have the same sort of taste as you, Lady Yumiella. I’ll let Sir Patrick know the results as well.”

“There’s no need for that,” I grumbled. “Thank you, I’m heading to bed now.”

“Very well, good night.”

I dragged my feet to my room, possibly looking even more dead than I usually did. Reluctantly, I looked to the corner of my room, where a single black wooden sword sat.

Suffice to say, I hadn’t received any samples.

“It’s a net zero!” I yelled.

I shoved the wooden sword I’d bought in disguise earlier that day under my bed, then climbed on top.

“I hope they’ll suddenly start flying off the shelves tomorrow...” I mumbled to myself, sighing.

I closed my eyes, sinking away from reality and diving back into the world of my dreams.



Time flew by, and before I knew it, three months had passed since I had

arrived in Dolkness County. Things were finally starting to settle down, which meant that Patrick could finally go and visit his family. Unlike me, Patrick had a good relationship with his parents, so I really wanted him to be able to spend some time with them. Especially since he hadn't seen them even once since he'd graduated from the Academy.

He's keeping in touch with them through letters, at least, I thought. Still, that's not much of a saving grace.

I looked up from the letters I'd been writing, which I planned to send to the landowners of the territories positioned alongside Dolkness County in a bid to show them how much I was looking forward to building a relationship with them as neighbors. Turning so I could see Daemon, I said hesitantly, "We'll be all right without Patrick around...right?"

Daemon stared at me intently, then replied, "To be honest, I have some concerns. But I don't think there will be any issues."

Am...I the concern?

I stared back at Daemon with equal intensity, which made him avert his gaze in a panic.

"Speaking of Sir Patrick," he said hurriedly, "when are you two thinking of having the ceremony?"

"What ceremony?"

"Your wedding ceremony," Daemon said, like it was the most natural thing in the world. "We must have a grand celebration."

"Our *what?!?*" I shrieked, his unexpected pronouncement making my voice come out in an involuntarily high-pitched squeak.

He thinks Patrick and I are having a "wedding"? Like, those ceremonies where people get married? The ones where you "tie the knot"? That type of wedding?! I took a deep, shaking breath. Maybe I just misheard him. He could have just said there was weeding that needed to be done, right? I mean, I haven't even thought about getting married at all! It's too soon—I'd need at least ten years to figure out how to get the timing right. Plus...are Patrick and I even really a couple? I mean, what even is a couple? What's a marriage? What...is love...?

Thinking back over the past three months, Patrick and I hadn't had even a single lovey-dovey moment together. If I took that into account when I examined our relationship...we probably *were* just friends. And if that was true, I seriously needed to set Daemon straight.

"Patrick and I aren't necessarily a couple..." I told my deputy softly. "Nor have I said anything about us being together."

Daemon's brow scrunched in confusion. "And yet, Sir Patrick most definitely told me you were."

"Really?!" I straightened in my chair, a giddy feeling bubbling up inside me. "I'm going to go see Patrick!"

Leaving a baffled Daemon behind, I went tearing out of the office in search of my newly ratified boyfriend. *Yeah, boy! Couple status: confirmed! If Patrick's claiming we're a couple, that must be the case—it's out of my hands now.*



After wandering the halls for a bit, I found Patrick happily chatting with a few of the servants.

"Um, Patrick?" I broke in. "I have something I want to ask you..."

The sound of my voice made the servants abruptly fall silent. They turned and gave me hurried bows, then rushed back to work.

I sighed internally. *There's no need to run from me so openly...* I thought. *It kind of hurts my feelings...*

"D-Don't worry," Patrick stammered, clearly catching on to my gloomy mood. "You can just get to know them over time."

The words weren't much of a comfort, coming as they were from someone who'd been getting along with them so easily.

"This is *my* home, right?" I demanded. "If that's true, then why does it feel like you're more at ease here than me?"

"Regardless, that's not such a bad thing, is it?" Patrick said with a shrug. "I mean, eventually this house will be my home too."

“Y-Yeah...” I said, lips suddenly feeling numb.

How'd he manage to take my dig at him and turn it around into a surprise attack like that? Did he do it on purpose...? Or maybe he just knew saying something like that would placate me...

“Anyway, what did you want to ask me?” Patrick asked, jolting me out of my thoughts. “Do you want to talk about it in the office?”

“Um... No, my room would be better,” I decided.

From my calculations, Daemon would probably still be in the office if we went to talk there, and if we were going to be discussing the nature of our relationship, that was probably best done without anyone else present.

That decided, we headed to my room, a silence falling between us. By the time the door closed with us on the other side, I couldn't wait any longer.

“There's something I want to clear up with you,” I said, jumping right in. “It's been left kind of ambiguous up to this point, but...are you and I...”

Are you and I a couple? The words hung right at the edge of my lips, but I couldn't make them come out for the life of me. *This is so much more embarrassing than I thought it'd be...* I moaned internally. *No wonder we've kept things so vague this whole time.*

Still, I had to do this. I steeled myself, analyzing how I needed to go about the conversation.

Well, first, the term “couple” is too embarrassing to use. I mean, in Japanese the kanji's just a few strokes off from being “weirdo.” Ugh, why does such a dumb word have so much power?!

“Are we what?” Patrick asked, clearly having grown impatient with watching me stand there frozen, unable to finish my sentence.

“That...*thing*,” I mumbled. “You know, it's kinda close to the word ‘weirdo...’”

There was a zero percent chance Patrick was going to understand that. I mean, kanji didn't even exist in the world of *LMH*! Still...I believed in him.

“Are we...weirdos...?” Patrick repeated. “I don't think I'm weird.”

My heart sank. Not a single ounce of what I'd been trying to convey had gotten through to him. Plus... *It's fine for you not to get what I meant, Patrick, but how come you didn't say I wasn't a weirdo either?!*

Anyway, I had more important things to think about. Namely, how I was going to move forward from here.

Is there another word I can use for couple? Like...lovers? I shivered. *No, no, that's even more embarrassing. What is else there...maybe, fiancé? I feel like I could say fiancé. And, since we're aristocrats, technically our relationship's not that far from being a businesslike arrangement that was decided upon by our parents!* Relief filled me—I liked this idea. *Sorry for stealing your word, engaged couples of the world!*

"N-No, I meant... Patrick, you're my fiancé, right? We're engaged?"

"Fiancé?" Patrick asked, eyes widening. "We aren't engaged yet."

"W-We aren't...?"

Abruptly, I felt deeply hurt. *What's happening? Did Patrick just...dump me? Was that his way of telling me he's not interested in marrying me?*

"An engagement is something that's decided between families," Patrick said carefully, eyeing my face. "It needs to be discussed between the heads of the households."

My hurt ebbed away. "Oh, okay. So we just need to go see your family right now."

I nodded to myself, finally understanding. *I totally get it now—an engagement is a contract between aristocrats, so it's only natural we have to talk things over with Patrick's parents. I didn't even think about that. Jeez, why didn't he tell me sooner?*

Meanwhile, Patrick's face had gone blank with shock. "You actually want to go?"

I ignored his question—I had more pressing things on my mind. "Wait, is your father going to be upset at me for taking so long to meet him? How do I fix that...?"

Not to mention, what am I even going to say when I first meet his father? "Sir, I would like your blessing to marry your son?" Ugh, that's just a guess, but I feel like it's probably wrong.

"Oh, I'm sure he won't mind," Patrick assured me. "I've been telling them in my letters how hectic things have been here, since you've only just taken over the county."

This gave me some peace of mind, but our conversation had gone a bit astray from the subject I'd originally wanted to discuss. I'd only brought up the fiancé thing on a whim; what I *really* wanted to ask Patrick about had nothing to do with our families, or about going to meet his parents. I just wanted to know if he really, truly liked me.

"If we got engaged, that means we'd get married someday, right?"

I had to roll my eyes internally at that one—why on earth was I asking something so obvious?

Patrick's expression went a bit strange, almost like he was thinking the exact same thing. "I mean, that's a given, isn't it?"

"Well, I just...I was wondering if you were okay with that..."

I mean, it wasn't like I'd proposed to him, and he certainly hadn't proposed to me either. Suddenly, I started feeling deeply uncomfortable. Continuing the conversation felt terrifying to me—like I'd make a fatal mistake if I said much more.

As I stood there, on the verge of being crushed flat by my fear, Patrick reached out and placed his hand on my shoulder. "You're really something, Yumiella," he said with a nervous laugh. He pulled me closer, slowly closing the distance between our faces.

I looked up into his eyes. His silent, intent gaze washed over me, leaving me feeling like I was drowning inside it.

"Wh-What is that supposed to mean?" I finally managed to mumble. "If you don't say what you're thinking, I'll never understand."

"Even if I don't put it into words," Patrick murmured, "I'm pretty sure you'll

catch on if I do this.”

He shifted closer and closer, to the point that even someone as oblivious as me could understand what he was trying to do. *I mean, come on, the only reason a man and a woman would get this close to one another is to get in position for a perfect upward swing! An...uppercut, I think they're called?*

Patrick's strong jawline was already in the perfect position, so I swung my right hand upward with all my might. He went flying, a choked yell bursting through his lips. Muscle memory had me adjusting my stance for a follow-up attack, but I stopped myself before I got fully settled in.

I've...really gone and done it, haven't I?

I ran over to Patrick, who was now stumbling around, rubbing his chin. “I’m sorry, are you okay?”

“Well, I didn’t think you’d just punch me out of nowhere,” Patrick muttered, shooting me an irritated look. “Did you seriously not want to *that* badly?” All of a sudden, his anger vanished, turning into a deep sadness. “I guess I was only thinking about what I wanted when it came to the engagement—”

“No!” I burst out, stopping him in his tracks. “I didn’t punch you because of that! I only hit you because your face was in the perfect position! I’m not against the engagement at all!”

At this rate, Patrick's going to think I'm insane, I thought, miserable and embarrassed.

Little did I know, he’d already seen right through me.

“So, that was just your way of hiding how embarrassed you were feeling, wasn’t it?”

I winced. “You must be thinking I’m pretty dangerous to be around...”

Patrick chuckled. “Oh, I’ve thought that for quite a while.”

“I see... Well, I’m sorry I suddenly brought up being fiancés and stuff...”

I can't blame him for thinking that—I mean, it's pretty strange to suddenly punch someone, even if it was just to hide my embarrassment. That's a whole separate problem from the engagement, marriage thing.

Suddenly, an unusually serious look came over Patrick's face. "I'm not sure if I've actually gotten through to you or not," he said, still rubbing his chin, "so let me just make this clear. Yumiella, when it comes to my feelings about you, I—"

My face went hot. "I'm gonna go check out the yard!" I shouted.

I turned, possessed with the sudden, overwhelming need to escape, and went diving for my bedroom window. The glass exploded into a deluge of sparkling shards, and I went crashing down into the grass.

"Yumiella!" Patrick shouted from behind me, his voice chiding. "Don't jump from the second floor!"

As I listened to his voice, I came to a decision—for now, I needed to put all my focus into meeting Patrick's family.



Now that Patrick and I had decided to visit his childhood home, the Mark of Ashbatten, there was much preparation to be done.

"We need to write a letter to your parents to let them know the date and time of our visit, we need to make arrangements for a carriage, and...oh, I'll need a proper dress as well."

"Can't you just ride Ryu and go dressed like you usually do?" Patrick asked doubtfully.

"That's preposterous!" I stuttered. "Do you have no common sense?!"

He scoffed. "I can't believe *you're* bringing up common sense..."

Ignoring him, I continued to pace the room, mumbling to myself. Patrick watched, exhausted.

How does he stay so optimistic? I mean— Oh no, what am I supposed to do if his father says, "You have no right to call me dad!" or something...?

"Yumiella," Patrick said insistently, forcing me to look back over at him. "Just so you know, I've already let my father know about the real you by letter."

"Th-The real me?"

"Yes. I've told him all about how you usually act, and the things you tend to

do. So it's a bit late to act differen—"

"Oh, *the real me...*" I repeated, nodding. "Maybe things will turn out all right then."

I mean, I'd done some strange things in the past, but nothing that would destroy my image. I couldn't think of anything that was so bad that his parents would be disgusted with me.

"Okay..." I murmured, nodding to myself. "I think I can do this."



In the end, we decided to head to the Mark of Ashbatten using Ryuu. While I'd been worrying over various things, Patrick had gone ahead and decided when we'd be visiting, and then contacted his parents by letter.

"Hey, couldn't you have at least consulted me on when we would be going?" I asked him once I'd found out.

He snorted. "With how you've been, you probably would've spent years just picking out a gift to bring."

"A gift?!"

I froze. I hadn't even *thought* about bringing a gift for them. And this was my first time visiting my future fiancé's home—a gift was a requirement!

Oh no, what should I get...? People can make a judgment based on a single action—nay, on a single gift. I've gotta give this my all!

"Uh, what's going on with you?" Patrick asked, eyes wary. "What's the sudden yelling all about?"

"I'm going to do my best, Patrick, I swear!"

Upon seeing the depths of my motivation, Patrick's face turned disapproving. "Yumiella, *do not*. I don't know what you're planning over there, but whatever it is, I know for a fact it's misguided. So I'm begging you—*do not* do your best."

Why's he so confident about this? I wondered, pouting in the face of his unwavering conviction.

"I was just going to prepare a gift to bring your family..." I muttered.

“Oh, you were talking about a gift?” Relief burst out over Patrick’s face. “Wait. What are you planning on getting?”

Hmm, I wonder what they’d like? What’s something that I’d be happy to receive, but isn’t so easy to obtain...?

“Maybe...a dragon egg or something?”

It wouldn’t be one from Ryu, to be clear. Dragons that were tamed by people only formed breeding pairs with other domesticated dragons, so his chances of getting a wife were pretty slim. Plus, putting him through something like that wouldn’t be fair to him. That meant that obtaining a dragon egg would probably take my full strength.

“Yeah, definitely don’t do that,” Patrick said firmly. He gave me pleading eyes.

I sighed. *Seems he doesn’t care for that idea.*

“Hmm,” I said thoughtfully. “Then what about...”

I could give them one of the wooden katanas, or one of those key chains with the dragon wrapped around it, I guess.

I wasn’t sure how that would go over though, since we’d only recently started selling them, and only one of them had been sold...to me.

I turned to Patrick, a sudden realization hitting me. “Do I...maybe have different tastes than most people...?”

A full-blown grin spread over Patrick’s face. “Wow! I never thought you’d realize that on your own! I’m so proud of you, Yumiella!” He reached out and patted me on the head.

Heh heh, I giggled internally, feeling abruptly happy. Wait, no—we’re going off topic.

Part of me wanted to continue, so we could have a lengthy discussion about how Patrick saw me, but I put it aside for later. Getting the right gift for his family was more important.

“Thanks, but we’ve got bigger fish to fry!” I proclaimed, trying to swat his hand away from my head.

Patrick pulled back, dodging my blow. My eyebrows rose at the quick movement, though I wasn't overly surprised; Patrick had begun to snub me like this more and more as his level had shot upward.

I suppose him doing stuff like that is better than me accidentally sending him flying, but it's still annoying, I thought, oddly frustrated.

"Focus—right now we need to be thinking about what we're bringing as a gift. I want to sound humble when I give it to them and say, 'Oh, it's nothing special,' not be telling the truth!"

"But wouldn't just a box of treats or something be fine?" Patrick asked.

He really doesn't seem like he cares about this at all, I thought, both shocked and appalled at the discrepancy in our attitudes toward the gift.

"That wouldn't be fine *at all*," I told Patrick sternly. "What if they think I'm some ridiculous girl who lacks common sense, and then decide to oppose our marriage?"

"They already *know* you lack common sense," he responded, lips twitching.

I glared at him. *Perhaps I should switch from Operation "See, I'm a Lovely Noblewoman!" to Operation "See, I'm Not So Bad, Am I?"*



A short time later, Patrick and I took our leave to visit the Mark of Ashbatten. We left the county in the capable hands of Daemon, then climbed on Ryu and were off.

Despite the many times he'd ridden my dragon, Patrick seemed to still be afraid of heights—when I glanced at his face, he looked distinctly unwell. Ryu was even taking care to fly slowly and gently too, but as far as I could tell, it wasn't helping Patrick adjust one bit.

"I think we'll be getting there soon..." I told him, wincing a little. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah..." he replied, voice hoarse. "Just, whatever you do, don't suddenly speed up or start a sudden descent."

Is he being serious, or...? Oh—! He totally just glared at me. All right, all right,

I get it! I won't do either of those things, okay?

“Oh, that must be the town where the margrave’s mansion is,” I said, peering at the land below us. “Huh? Things seem kind of intense down there.”

Even from our current height, I could see many armored people gathered in the center of the primary town of the Mark of Ashbatten. They seemed to be on edge, as if battle was on the horizon...

Patrick leaned forward. “That flag...” he murmured, eyes on the flagpole protruding from the roof of the tallest building in the town. “That’s the one we fly if there’s an emergency—one of the highest class. Could Lemlaesta be advancing on us...?”

My eyebrows rose. Our neighboring kingdom is attacking us?

Abruptly, I felt cranky. “How could they?! Our future is riding on this day...”

I’d been so wound up from thinking about it the previous night that I hadn’t been able to sleep a wink. And if I couldn’t meet Patrick’s parents today, I would have to go through that all over again.

Are they trying to give me an ulcer?! I won't forgive you, Lemlaesta!

“Just try to calm down,” Patrick said soothingly. “I get why you’re upset, but we need to keep our composure for now.”

You know, he seems weirdly relaxed for someone whose home is being attacked, I thought, eyeing him strangely. *I mean, if there was ever a time to embrace your demonic side and become a vicious protector of the kingdom, burning all the inferior fools who would harm it to a crisp, this is it.*

“Ryuu, accelerate to full speed! I’ll give you an additional boost!”

Ryuu flapped his wings with all his might, speeding up while I supported him by blasting magical energy behind us. We ended up going so fast that the drag caused by his wings became an issue, so eventually he just folded them back. From there on out, it was all on me—Ryuu’s body was the fighter jet, and my magic was the fuel that sent him zooming forward.

The earth below us rushed by in a dizzying blur, and the trees of the forest below us vanished in an instant, leaving us over open land. Shock waves burst

out behind us...or wait, were those sonic booms?

We must be going at the speed of sound!

“Patrick! I can see the enemy forces!” I called over my shoulder, but I didn’t receive a response. “Hellooo? Patrick...?”

Is he so moved by our unprecedented speed that he’s been left speechless? I wondered. I didn’t take him for such a speed freak. What if he starts saying he wants to reach the speed of light...?

Casting these worries aside, I focused on the area which seemed to be at the heart of the conflict, which we were rapidly approaching. Two armies were stationed there, and it seemed they were in the midst of some sort of confrontation. Judging by that, they were most likely close to Valschein’s border.

At the moment, neither army seemed to have noticed Ryuuk shooting toward them. It made sense when you thought about it—although he was leaving thunderous sonic booms in his wake, we were moving so fast that the sound was behind us, meaning the soldiers would only hear us once we flew over them.

“What would be the best way to keep damage to a minimum...” I pondered aloud. “Maybe...capturing their general?”

Patrick was the sort who’d know a lot about war tactics like that, but he was still deathly silent behind me. I didn’t have time to wait for him to respond either—we would be above the battlefield soon, and I needed to make my decision.

All right, let’s just dive right into the enemy’s headquarters! I decided.
Wait...where exactly are their headquarters...?

“Ugh, there’s not enough time! Ryuuk, start your descent immediately! We’re aiming for a spot between the two armies!”

Ryuuk roared and dived down toward the thin strip of empty land that stretched between the margrave of Ashbatten’s army and the Kingdom of Lemlaesta’s. Our speed slowly decreased, but we were still going quite fast. As a result, Ryuuk didn’t come to an immediate stop when he landed—he skidded

forward, claws carving out lines in the ground as he cut through the center of both armies. When he finally slid to a stop, he was facing Lemlaesta's soldiers.



The battlefield had fallen completely silent. The two armies stood across from each other, motionless. I put my head in my hands, staring at them from Ryuu's back—I had gotten this far driven by impulse, but was beginning to realize that perhaps I had only made a bad situation worse. If I ended up escalating a situation that would have just been a glorified staring contest into a full-scale war, I'd never forgive myself.

I braced myself, ready to retaliate if someone made a move, but both armies stayed deathly still. Everyone seemed to be watching me.

Well, at the very least, I should let them know which side I'm reinforcing, I decided.

Just as I'd begun to muse over the proper way to do so, Ryuu let out a small sneeze. I found the strange little grunting noise he made absolutely adorable.

You know, it would be nice if Ryuu's cuteness lightened the mood, I thought, hopeful. Maybe we'll even be able to make an immediate truce!

That's when the screaming started.

"A monster from the kingdom of Valschein is here!"

"Run! The darkness will swallow us all! We'll be killed!"

"It's over, we're going to die!"

And so, contrary to my expectations, Ryuu's sneeze began the demise of Lemlaesta's army. Their formation crumbled in a matter of seconds; some of their soldiers fled for the hills, while others just curled up on the spot with their heads in their hands. The rest just remained where they were, staring blankly ahead.

I watched it all, not really understanding what was going on. But, hey, at least it looked like we were going to be able to win! Happiness filled me with the thought that, because of my actions, things might be able to be resolved without anyone dying.

This is another chance for me to help end discrimination against black hair! I realized. I need to seem like an agent of peace. I nodded to myself. *Yes, these soldiers shall all see me as an angel, who hath landed on the battlefield to bring*

an end to this war without shedding a single drop of blood! I dwelled on that for a moment, then snorted. *Yeah, right. Even I'm not that delusional—I know they see me as a Demon Lord and not an angel.*

By this point, the sight of the hellscape before me—from which agonized screams were continuously erupting—had become a bit much. In an attempt to shield my eyes, I turned to look at the Ashbatten army behind me. This, however, did not go over well—the moment I turned around, loud metallic clangs rang out from my heretofore silent allies. It seemed a single glance from me had been enough to give them the shivers; the clanging was coming from their armor, which was vibrating with the force of their terrified shaking. I sighed, then turned around to face Lemlaesta again.

“How did this happen?” I mumbled to myself.

I mean, all I'd done was fly over to visit my boyfriend's family. We might have put a little too much pep in our step, but that was because we'd been alerted that there was an emergency!

I let out another sigh. *Maybe I should go and capture Lemlaesta's general, just in case...*

I focused back on the opposing army, who seemed to be falling back at full speed, but I couldn't tell where their general was stationed. Their formation was in such a shamble at this point that I couldn't even guess where to begin my search.

“Patrick, wake up. *Come on, wake up,*” I said, turning around and giving him a strong shake of the shoulders.

If he would just open his eyes, Patrick would most likely be able to help me, given his knowledge of the battlefield, but alas, he only let out a groan and didn't otherwise stir.

“Um, excuse me?” A voice called out from behind me. “It appears my son is on the verge of dying.”

I turned to find a horse standing beside Ryu. On its back was a man who appeared to be in the late stages of middle age, and whose face resembled Patrick's. His gray hair was a similar shade as well, but the strange man's was a

lighter color, closer to white. The man's appearance made his identity obvious enough, but the Ashbatten family crest that was painted onto his armor eradicated any lingering doubts. He was Patrick's father.

Margrave Ashbatten urged his horse forward a few more steps, leaving his escorts behind. They watched him nervously, worry in their eyes. It seemed they had no choice but to remain where they were, as their horses refused to draw any closer.

Okay, Yumiella, calm down. I know you didn't think you'd be meeting Patrick's father in a place like this, but making a good first impression is crucial to building a positive interpersonal relationship. Whether he approves of your marriage or not is riding on the things you do or say from this moment on.

Keeping that in mind, I jumped down from Ryuu's back and took a knee. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Margrave Ashbatten," I said respectfully. "I'm Yumiella Dolkness, and I've come to offer you my aid."

"Um...does that mean you're going to annihilate Lemlaesta?"

"What?" I thought for a moment. "If that's what you wish, sir."

"I don't wish for anything of the sort..."

Then why did you mention something so violent as me annihilating a neighboring kingdom? I wondered.

I gave the margrave a puzzled look, which he returned in the same fashion. We were probably thinking the same thing at that moment: *Patrick, please wake up.*



"I see! So you just came to visit us!"

"Yes," I told the margrave, my tension easing. "I thought it was about time for me to introduce myself."

It had been a few minutes since Patrick had woken up and brought the silent staring contest between his father and me to an end. One of the first things the margrave had told me was that he was not at all inclined to start a fight with Lemlaesta, a sentiment which had been of great relief to me. Now, he

continued to speak, filling Patrick and me in on the situation that we'd come flying into.

"After that, they just suddenly declared war on us," the margrave concluded. "I'm quite glad you came, Countess Dolkness—with your help, we were able to resolve the situation without any casualties on our side."

It was a bit odd to hear Patrick's father refer to me in such a manner, but I knew that using someone's family name and title to address them was the proper way of things in the aristocratic world. I'd been referring to him as "Margrave Ashbatten" as well, but I couldn't help but feel as if the titles put up a wall between us.

Casting aside my discomfort, I inclined my head in thanks. "It sounds like it was a pretty turbulent situation."

"Indeed. Although, as long as we can protect the border, we're happy. I do wish we could ask their general about the situation, though..."

"Then I shall go capture him for you, Margrave Ashbatten!"

I straightened, preparing to go running off toward the Lemlaesta army. *There's nothing like cleaning up trouble together to bring two people closer!*

Alas, just as I launched forward, I was brought to an abrupt halt by a hand firmly clenched around the collar of my shirt.

"*Hold on*, Yumiella!" Patrick scolded. "Wait here, and don't do anything else!"

I turned my head, blinking up at him in confusion. "Oh, do you want to come too? We've gotta do *something* to impress your father."

Patrick sighed. "I'm more worried about how many Lemlaestan soldiers you're going to get killed if you do anything else. If you so much as take a step out there, some of them will die from the shock."

"What?!" I scoffed. "That's impossible."

Disregarding Patrick's advice, I pulled free from his hold and began walking toward Lemlaesta's army. I made eye contact with one of their soldiers, then froze when he fell backwards, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Oh, come on! Doesn't Lemlaesta have anyone with some actual mental

fortitude?!

Gloomily, I made my way back to where Patrick and the margrave stood.

“Ah, so *that’s* the type of girl she is,” Margrave Ashbatten muttered to his son. “She’s just as you described.”

I watched Patrick with narrowed eyes. *Just what did you say about me...?*



After receiving notice that I was unqualified for battle—or rather, *overqualified*—I ended up standing by the headquarters of the Ashbatten army with Ryu, while Patrick and his father took care of the rest. I’d only been there for a short while when they returned, leading a man dressed in a Lemlaestan army uniform. He looked...oddly familiar to me.

“Oh, are you that secret agent?!”

“Indeed. Thank you for your assistance back then, Countess Dolkness. I am Linus, and I currently serve as the assistant to the lieutenant of the Kingdom of Lemlaesta’s Central Army.”

Linus had reached out to me in the past, trying to recruit me to the side of one of Valschein’s neighboring kingdoms. The fact that he was in the military surprised me, but I was more confused over why someone of his position had been brought to speak with us instead of someone of higher rank.

It seemed that my confusion got through to him, for he clarified, “The commander and the lieutenant were among the army’s first deserters.”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh...my condolences.”

This guy seems to have some real bad luck when it comes to his superiors, I thought pityingly. I mean, wasn’t the whole reason he tried to recruit me back then because his bosses forced him to? Oh, I wonder if he got demoted because of that... A demotion would explain how he ended up being transferred from the intelligence department to the military.

Regardless, it seemed Linus was currently the highest-ranking officer available, which meant it was now his job to negotiate a truce. Naturally, Margrave Ashbatten would be representing the Kingdom of Valschein.

As for me, I'd just be watching the whole thing quietly—I had no intention of interfering in a political matter like this, especially since I was an outsider to the situation.

That's right, so stop looking at me like that, Patrick! I thought crankily as we entered one of the tents pitched within the Ashbatten army's headquarters. *I won't do anything.*

"Um, where should I start..." Linus began nervously. "Currently, our kingdom is split into two..."

This was something I'd already known. From what I'd heard, Lemlaesta's king had fallen ill around a year ago. Their first prince had been named as heir to the throne, but he couldn't actually succeed his father's title until the king died. The second prince and his faction had seen this as an opportunity to seize control, and they had enough power that the resulting struggle had split the kingdom in two.

When I'd first heard of the matter, I honestly hadn't thought much of it. In my mind, all it had meant was that our neighbors were having a hard time—I hadn't considered that it might affect me in the future. Little had I known that I'd end up getting involved.

"I know all that," the margrave said. As the lord of a territory near the border, it only made sense he'd know of Lemlaesta's affairs. "What I'm more interested in is which side led this advance."

"It was the second prince," Linus admitted. "His faction is sorely outnumbered, so he thought his only remaining choice was to gain prestige by distinguishing himself in a war."

"So, your general is...?"

"Yes, it is His Highness..." Linus responded, his voice trailing off.

"Well, with how fast he ran away, I'm sure he won't try to start anything anymore," the margrave said with a heavy sigh. "And since there were no casualties, it looks like we can avoid a war breaking out."

From what I could tell, it was only natural Margrave Ashbatten didn't wish to escalate the conflict into a war—his mark would end up becoming the

battlefield. I didn't want war either, so I decided to do the best I could to back him up.

"Linus, please tell your prince that the next time he does something like this, he'll have to deal with me. It doesn't matter how far he runs—I'll chase him to the end of the earth if I have to."

"Understood," Linus said, his exhausted expression lightening up a bit. "I will make sure to let him know."

Poor guy, I thought. He must have been through a lot.

After that, Margrave Ashbatten and Linus discussed a few more things before the meeting concluded. Linus got up from his seat, preparing to head back to his army and give them the instructions to pull out, but before he left he turned back to say one last thing.

"I've heard that the Kingdom of Valschein has a faction pushing for the second prince's ascension to the throne as well," he said casually. "I've also heard that they've begun making some moves toward achieving that goal. It seems Lemlaesta isn't the only kingdom having a difficult time."

It seems our two kingdoms aren't so different, I thought. Thanks, I hate it.



In the end, I didn't really do much of anything, but a war between the Kingdom of Valschein and the Kingdom of Lemlaesta was averted. Honestly, it seemed a little ridiculous to me for us to get involved in a war just because of another kingdom's inner struggles over the throne, so the fact that the situation had been resolved was a relief.

Well, looks like my work's done here. Time to go home!

So I thought, but I knew that what Patrick and I had come here for was just beginning. We hadn't journeyed here to stop a war, but so I could meet the margrave of Ashbatten, or, in other words, my possible future father-in-law. I needed to keep myself reined in—I couldn't make any faux pas, or demonstrate a lack of common sense.

All I've done so far is nosedive out of the sky while riding Ryuu, so I'm probably

still in the clear... I thought.

Now that Linus had left, it was just me, Patrick, and Margrave Ashbatten left in the tent. Deciding to seize the moment, I cleared my throat, grabbed the edges of my skirt, and took a bow. One of the few things I felt confident of was that my form was impeccable—after all, my physical abilities were unnecessarily robust.

“Margrave Ashbatten, head of the Ashbatten family, I would like to formally introduce myself to you. My name is Yumiella Dolkness. ’Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

I couldn’t help but feel a flicker of nervousness; I could feel the burning heat of Patrick’s gaze. His expression was oddly protective, like a parent who was watching their child do something dangerous but who was holding themselves back in hopes that it would provide them some life experience.

A long, still moment passed, and then the margrave turned to Patrick. “Um...what she’s doing right now...” He trailed off with a troubled look.

“She’s just saying hello,” Patrick said with a sigh. “She’s still planning to act like she’s a regular noble girl.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Hey, Patrick! Don’t go spilling the details of my plan to him! It was going perfectly until now—I’m the epitome of being ladylike! Even crashing down from the sky is incredibly feminine and good!*

“Ahhh, I see,” the margrave said, nodding. “I think I finally understand what you’ve been talking about. She’s really an unfortu— Ahem, I mean, wonderful girl.” That said, he turned back to me. “Welcome to the Mark of Ashbatten, Countess Dolkness...or shall I call you Lady Yumiella?”

I grinned internally. *Yes, it looks like my plan worked!*

Patrick’s father was even giving me a gentle smile—honestly, it felt refreshing, since I’d never really seen Patrick smiling like that. It made me wonder if Patrick would be like that when he got to his father’s age.

“Just Yumiella is fine, sir.”

Patrick sighed. “You know you can just act like you usually do,” he told me.

I gave him a ladylike glare. “Whatever do you mean, Sir Patrick? I have no clue what you are referring to.”

“Stop that, Yumiella. I’m getting chills. Plus, I don’t want you deceiving my father anymore.”

My plan’s a failure after all, I thought, wilting. And now Patrick’s making me sound nefarious, saying I’m “deceiving” his father. He could at least say I’m “maintaining a façade” or something. Wait, that doesn’t sound much better, does it...?

By this point, the margrave must have known I’d been acting from the very beginning. The realization made me feel awkward, and my eyes started darting nervously around the tent.

“Patrick, I’d like you to prepare for withdrawal,” the margrave said. “I’m temporarily transferring command of the army to you.”

Patrick immediately accepted his father’s orders and left the tent.

Wait, don’t leave me alone with your dad! I thought desperately. This is too awkward!

And yet, I seemed to be the only one who thought so—when I nervously looked at him, the margrave shot me another soft smile. He’d given off the impression that he was a strong commander back when he’d been on the battlefield, but now he seemed much softer, like he was just a kind father.

“Lady Yumiella—if I may address you as such—I wanted to thank you for being there for my son.”

“N-No, no!” I said hurriedly, my back straightening into a perfect line. “If anything, Patrick is the one who has been there for me.”

I knew that Patrick had been sending letters that detailed my actions to his family—the margrave must have known all about the time Patrick had nearly died, and that other thing that Patrick had gotten really mad at me for. I had no choice but to apologize to the margrave profusely.

“You don’t have to be so tense,” Margrave Ashbatten said with a chuckle. “I must offer you an apology myself, for having to stay here for a while even after

you've come all this way to visit. There's a chance that Lemlaesta's army could come back."

"Should I annihilate them after all?" I asked thoughtfully.

"Lady Yumiella, please," the margrave pleaded. "That doesn't sound like a joke coming from you."

You know, he sounds just like Patrick when he scolds me, I realized. He even has the same kind of expression on his face. This conversation feels so familiar... Honestly, I've probably had a similar one with Patrick, not once but multiple times.

Casting these thoughts aside, I asked, "Has Lemlaesta ever made an advance on you like this before?"

The margrave shook his head. "We frequently have squabbles, but I don't think they've made an advance of such a scale in over ten years... Your presence was of great help to us, Lady Yumiella."

Hmm, I thought, does that mean Lemlaesta attempted to attack Valschein ten years ago...? It's surprising, but it seems like the Mark of Ashbatten is a more tumultuous land than I expected.

Now that I knew the margrave would be stationed at the fortress at the border for a while, I felt a little disappointed. On one hand, it seemed like we'd visited at a good time, since I'd been able to help them out with the fight at the border. On the other hand, it was a shame I wouldn't be able to spend more time with Patrick's father. "Perhaps we should come back another time?" I asked the margrave. "Um, you see, we actually came to discuss something..."

Patrick's father nodded, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Oh, yes, you must be referring to the engagement."

"I... Well, yes."

An engagement. In other words, a promise between two people to get married. It still didn't feel real to me, but Patrick and I were definitely a couple. At least, I *thought* we were... *Please, someone! Can you define what a couple is for me?*

“To tell the truth, it feels a bit late to discuss an engagement between you two,” Margrave Ashbatten admitted. “After all, you’re already living together.”

“Oh, but nothing has really happened! Patrick just...kinda tagged along...”

I trailed off, a shocking fact coming into focus due to the margrave’s statement. Patrick and I had been living together! From the research I’d done in my old life, I remembered that many couples broke up after moving in together. They became aware of parts of their partner they disliked but had never gotten the chance to glimpse before they were in such close proximity.

I mean, it’s not like we’re sharing a one-bedroom apartment or something, I reassured myself. He probably has no idea how much of a slob I am in private. At least...I hope he doesn’t... And uh, it’s not like he’s seen me using wind pressure from running really fast to dry my hair or anything like that... Yeah, of course he hasn’t...

The more I thought about it, the more embarrassment boiled up inside of me.

Oh no, I feel like my head’s going to burst into flames! And my face is hot enough it’ll have its own fire... This may be it—the birth of Yumiella, the Explosive Flame!

I groaned, fighting the urge to plop my face into my hands. And all because of the bomb that the man before me, Patrick’s father, had dropped.

“Don’t worry, I know that Patrick invited himself,” the margrave told me, as if trying to be considerate of my feelings. “And regardless, I approve of your engagement. If anything, I welcome it.”

“I’m sure you can’t make a decision on such short notice... Wait, what?!”

Are you really going to make an important decision like that so easily?

“Are you sure?” I demanded. “Is it all right for you to come to a conclusion like that so quickly?”

“Well, I’ve already been hearing all about you from Patrick for a while now,” the margrave pointed out.

I fell silent, processing this. It seemed Patrick had been pushing things forward from behind the scenes.

Are you trying to use your family to convince me to be with you? I thought distrustfully. *Seriously, I wasn't planning on running in the first place.*

As a matter of fact, the time for running was over—now that his father had given us his blessing, we were officially engaged. It didn't feel real; it had gone down too smoothly.

The margrave sent me another kind smile. "I can't do much for you myself," he admitted, "but I would be pleased if you'd take some time to rest at our home before beginning the journey back to your county."

"We will," I said, instantly taking him up on that offer. "Thank you very much."

"Uh, just one more thing," the margrave said suddenly. His tone of voice was odd, and the sense of relief I'd been feeling turned into fear. "Be...careful, of my wife."

Is Patrick's mom dangerous?!



Once Patrick returned to the tent, we said goodbye to his father and left the border of the Mark of Ashbatten, riding on Ryu to a town surrounded by castle walls that was located in the territory's center. Looking down into it, I couldn't help but think of how it was the place Patrick had grown up in.

"Hey," I said suddenly. "Is your mother scary? Your father told me to be careful."

"Oh..." Patrick said hesitantly. "She's, uh... Well, she's usually normal. I think it'll be fine."

Well, that's helpful, I thought with a sigh. *I still have no idea what kind of person she is.*

What I *could* imagine was a conflict brewing between the two of us—after all, since ancient times, mothers had thrown aside both morals and social etiquette to meet their daughters-in-law on the battlefield. Such wars were to be expected, although I had never personally witnessed anything of the sort.

Oh, right, I remembered. *Patrick has an older brother too. I want to meet him*

as well.

“Patrick? What’s your brother like?”

“Uh, well... I mean, I’m not sure if you’ll get the chance to meet my brother. I feel like he won’t want to be introduced to you.”

What?! Does he hate me already? He hasn’t even met me yet! All of a sudden, a pulse of pain radiated out from my stomach; I felt like it was in knots.

After that, I sent Ryuu wish after wish for him to fly slower, but alas, he didn’t pick up on them. I was thankful when the town finally grew close enough for us to land.

“Um...where should we land?” I asked Patrick.

From what I could see from our current height, the town still seemed a bit on edge from the earlier emergency at the border. They people didn’t seem to be disorderly in any way, though.

“That building over there is the margrave’s mansion,” Patrick replied. “Ryuu, can you land on the yard, about there?”

Noting where Patrick was pointing, Ryuu slowly began to descend to the ground outside a large mansion. Thankfully, he had no trouble landing—there was a large swathe of earth available for him to touch down upon, most likely because the yard was also used as a training ground.

So, this is Patrick’s home, I thought, taking it all in.

Just as Ryuu got settled, a woman came running out of the mansion. She waved her arms widely in our direction, her long silver locks sparkling as her movements sent them bouncing. She didn’t seem much older than I was, but as far as I knew Patrick didn’t have an older sister.

Wait...is that his older brother?! I didn’t hear anything about my brother-in-law being so cute.

“Is that your...”

“Yeah, it’s my mother.”

Oh. I sat for a second, reining my silly thoughts back in and sending them off

in a more normal direction. *I guess between a cross-dressing older brother and a young-looking mother, the latter seems more realistic, huh?*

There was a soft thump, and I shook myself from my musing. Ryu had just gently settled to the ground.

All right! I declared internally, bracing myself for a fight. *This is the first battle in the mother-daughter war! Using my level 99 power, I shall take the first strike!*

Buoyed by my thoughts, I leaped from Ryu's back and ran over to Patrick's mother.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," I said with a deep bow. "I'm Yumiella Dolkness."

"Oh, there's no need to be so formal," she replied. She sounded a bit surprised.

Still bowing, I replied, "Thank you for being so considerate!"

Alas, due to the decision of a high-level politician, my first strike has been canceled.

When I finally straightened, I found that Patrick's mother was staring intently at my face. I started to wonder what was so strange, but then she suddenly reached out and grabbed my cheeks, squishing them up and down.

"Oh, you're so cute! Your expression really doesn't change, just like Patrick said!"

"Mother, you're making her uncomfortable," Patrick said with a sigh.

"Actually, I don't mind," I corrected him. "Please, touch me as much as you'd like."

I mean, if all it takes to build a good relationship with Patrick's mother is to let her touch my cheeks, I thought, that's a pretty amazing payoff.

Patrick's mother seemed to take me at my word, since she continued to play with my cheeks to her heart's content. As she did so, I examined her more closely—she looked incredibly young, as if she was only in her midtwenties.

A short while later, she let out a sigh and relinquished my cheeks, as if having had her fun. “Come, come, you two,” she said. “Let us go inside. I’m afraid Ryuun won’t fit inside—is that all right?”

“Yeah, that’s no problem,” I told her.

I turned to check on Ryuun, only to find that he was falling asleep, his head resting on his tail as if it was a pillow. It seemed that, like me, he could fall asleep anywhere.

I guess it’s true what they say, that children take after their parents, I thought. But more importantly, how adorable! He must be tired after flying such a long distance today.

Confident that Ryuun was comfortable, I turned and followed Patrick and his mother into the mansion. The whole way, I couldn’t help but think of how considerate she’d been of my darling dragon. It was a little awe-inspiring, but I had to be careful—I couldn’t take the first impressions she’d made on me at face value.

After a short walk, the three of us stopped in front of a door, which Patrick’s mother opened. It appeared to lead to a drawing-room-like chamber. Patrick took a step forward, as if to enter, but his mother held up a hand.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “*You* go somewhere else. I’m sure you have people you want to see, since it’s been so long since you’ve been home.”

“Well...I do have a report for you regarding the advance from *that* kingdo—”

“It’s fine, I’ll hear about it from Yumiella.”

All of a sudden, I felt as if danger was afoot. *How could I forget—we’re still in the middle of our mother and future wife war! That’s foul play, getting rid of Patrick...*

“Mother, please don’t say anything strange to Yumiella,” Patrick said with a sigh. “And *you*,” he pointed at me, “don’t you do anything weird either.”

Hold up, you’re actually leaving me here with her?! Also, I totally wouldn’t ever do anything weird.

With nothing left to do, I turned to enter the room in front of me, but Patrick

snatched me up, pulling me close. “No matter what, don’t say ‘Lemlaesta’ in front of my mother,” he whispered in my ear. His breath grazed my earlobe, sending a shiver down my spine.

Hey! I’m not into you for your good voice, so cut that out! I command you to never do something like that again! I mean, if you really wanted to, I guess I could allow it one more time... Maybe two or three more times, depending on the situation? Or, uh...as many times as you want to...? I’m definitely not into it though!

I shook myself, forcing my thoughts back on track.

Wait, what did Patrick even say to me just now? All that ear breathing distracted me—I can’t remember a word! Heh, that means we’ll have to do it again, won’t we? I mean, I just need to make sure I accurately absorb all the intel he’s trying to get to me. It can’t be helped...

I looked over my shoulder, fully prepared to tell Patrick he’d need to try whispering whatever he’d said to me *at least* three more times since I hadn’t really been able to hear him, but...he’d vanished.

I started trembling with fear. *Oh no, I know this situation! I’ve seen something like this in daytime soaps before; she’s going to totally switch personalities now that Patrick’s gone!*

“Yumiella? Don’t just stand there—come in and sit down! I’m so happy you’ve come by. I’ve been wanting to meet you.”

“All right, thank you,” I said, giving in.

Is “I’ve been wanting to meet you” code for “I’ve been looking forward to torturing my future daughter-in-law”? I wondered as I sat down across from her. If so, I better get mentally prepared.

“So...” Patrick’s mother began. “How far have you gone with my son?”

I blinked at her, my mind going utterly blank. “I... I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Oh, just look at you! You’ve got a little blush on those cheeks. How adorable.”

Wait, what's going on? I thought, bewildered. Is she genuinely just a nice person? Did I delude myself into thinking I'd be the victim of bullying when nothing bad was going to happen at all? How embarrassing... I've totally lost control...

Honestly, now that I thought about it, I wasn't exactly going to be Patrick's mother's daughter-in-law in the traditional sense, anyway. Patrick would be marrying into *my* family, not the other way around. From the very beginning, there had never been a reason for a mother and future-wife battle to occur.

Besides, Patrick's mother has been so kind to me so far! There's no way she could suddenly change into some scary person.

"Oh, but could you tell me about what happened on the battlefield first, Yumiella?" Patrick's mother said, casting me from my thoughts. "We can talk about all the other things on my list after."

"Certainly," I agreed. "Regarding Lemlaesta's advance, it seems their entire army has pulled out. The margrave will be staying in the fortress by the border for... Uh, ma'am?"

Something about Patrick's mother's smile had shifted, sending shivers down my spine. She still looked as happy as ever, but the air around her boiled with something dark.

"Lemlaesta, huh...?" she said slowly. "A kingdom like that should just hurry up and perish. Don't you think so too, Yumiella?"

S-So I guess I was wrong, I thought. People actually can change at the drop of a hat. I must say, people who smile when they're angry are really terrifying...

"U-Um..." I stammered weakly. "Well, there were no casualties, so..."

"Why, I wouldn't say that," Patrick's mother said, voice cloyingly sweet. "Here you are, having come all this way to visit us, and we can't even properly welcome you. Would you not say that is a casualty of sorts? We may just have to eradicate Lemlaesta after all. They've left us no other choice."

Y-Yay, she likes me. I'm so glad you care for me, mother-in-law. But...I'd be even happier if you'd calm down...

I had a feeling that the warning Patrick had whispered into my ear earlier had something to do with this—I should have ignored how good his voice sounded and paid better attention!

All right, I've got to get her to calm down, I thought. I need to say something sensible here, so I can defuse this mess...

"I-If you decide to annihilate Lemlaesta, I'll help you," I offered.

Nooo, I wailed internally. I just added more fuel to the fire! How could I say something so impulsive?! I just...thought it would end up all right if the result was her liking me... I-It'll be fine, I'm sure in the worst-case scenario Patrick and his father will stop us. I mean, girls keep their feet on the gas pedal and their hands on the gas! Brakes and coolant are best left to men!

I looked over at Patrick's mother, terrified my heated statement would only inflame her hatred of Lemlaesta even further, but instead found that her face had gone blank, all emotion drained away.

Okay, that's even more terrifying than the smile! N-Not that I'm one to talk... But anyway, why does she detest Lemlaesta so much?!

I could hear my heart thumping in my chest. Silence stretched over the room as second after second passed by, both of us staring at each other's expressionless faces. Then, suddenly Patrick's mother's expression changed, and the smile returned to her face.

I shivered. *She's seriously terrifying.*

"I'm sorry," Patrick's mother said. "I'm afraid I got a bit too heated. It wouldn't be right for me to get you involved."

"O-Oh, I don't mind at all, it's fine! Anyway, I think things with *that* kingdom will be fine for a while. It appears that they're split internally, and probably don't have the time to be sending an army again."

"I see, I'm glad to hear that," she replied. "Well then, I'd like to hear how you met my son. He's always vague about the important details when he tells me things."

"Um, we first spoke to each other during an outdoor training session..."

That's right, just keep speaking normally. Act as though nothing is wrong, like you aren't terrified she'll snap again...



By the time Patrick got back, his mother and I must have been speaking for at least a few dozen minutes.

You're late! I screeched internally.

"Mother, I have a feeling Yumiella is probably tired from our long trip today. I'd like to let her rest now, if you don't mind."

A slightly guilty look flickered over Patrick's mother's face. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Yumiella! I was just having so much fun."

"I had fun as well," I lied.

The reality was, I was terrified. I was more than happy to follow Patrick out of the drawing room and into a guest chamber.

"Do you think you'll get along with my mother?" Patrick asked suddenly. "I have a feeling you brought up that kingdom, didn't you?"

"I did..."

He winced. "Sorry, I knew I should've stayed there with you."

That would've been nice, but it wasn't what was on my mind at the moment—I wanted to know why she hated Lemlaesta so much, especially when Patrick and his father didn't at all seem to feel the same. I opened my mouth to ask, but Patrick began to explain before I got the chance.

"To be honest, people around here don't generally like Lemlaesta much. Although, my mother's hate is especially extreme. There aren't many people aside from her who hate them that much."

"Yeah, I could tell."

"Basically, the whole thing started when they... Well, when they destroyed her wedding," Patrick said.

Like a wedding wedding? The kind where you wear a wedding dress, cut a cake, exchange vows, and get married...?

“Mother was originally the daughter of a central marquess,” Patrick continued, “so her family was completely against her marrying my father, who was going to succeed the more rural title of margrave. Despite those issues, my parents pushed through and were finally able to get married, only for a squabble with Lemlaesta to occur the day before their wedding. The situation was serious enough that it was no time to be holding a wedding, and my father ended up having to go to the border to help out.”

Well, I can see why she'd be upset, having such an important, once-in-a-lifetime event ruined... I thought. If someone were to get in the way of our wedding... Wait. That wouldn't be that bad, would it? Then I wouldn't have to wear a dress and behave myself, right? That would actually be great! I mean, seriously, why is it even tradition to hold an event like that? I'd prefer to go without one if I could. Although, then I wouldn't be able to eat a giant cake...

“Hey,” I burst out. “Are we going to have a wedding? J-Just hypothetically speaking, I promise! Hypothetically, in the far, far future!”

Patrick gave me a weird look. “Of course. And I won't let anyone get in the way, no matter what. We're going to have a grand celebration.”

“W-Wouldn't it be all right to, I don't know...*not* have one though? I mean, you don't like things like that, anyway...”

“I don't really like elaborate festivities, but I think it's different when it comes to a wedding.”

Patrick, you've got to be kidding me! Why are you so on board with this?!

I sank into thought. “A wedding, huh...?”

Such a happiness-filled event doesn't really feel like my scene, but...ah, well. It's gonna be a long time before it happens, anyway.



We ended up staying at the Mark of Ashbatten for three days in total. Most of our time was spent with Patrick's mother, who acted entirely normal as long as the land mine that was the Kingdom of Lemlaesta wasn't brought up. Although, there had been an instance where her reaction to me saying the word “lemon” had caused me to fear for my life.

Other than that, I'd chatted with Patrick's mother quite a bit about my level grinding methodology—turns out, she was a huge fan. Patrick had tried to stop me from saying too much, but I couldn't help it! Not when his mother had enjoyed our talks so much.

It hadn't been just Patrick's mother who had welcomed me with open arms—turns out, the people working in their mansion were just as friendly. I'd never felt so pampered in all my life.

You know, maybe I should get Patrick's parents to adopt me... I thought, feeling a bit sad that the time had come for us to leave the mark. The three days had passed so swiftly, and we weren't even able to say goodbye to Patrick's father, as it seemed he'd be stuck at the border for a while longer.

"Thank you for everything!" I called to Patrick's mother from my place on Ryuu's back.

"Swing by whenever you'd like," she said with a smile. "Just come alone next time, all right? Patrick doesn't need to come."

I giggled. "That sounds lovely!" To my dragon, I added, "Okay, Ryuu. Time to go."

Ryuu began to flap his wings with great force. Once he'd built up enough momentum, he launched from the ground and soared into the sky, Patrick and I on his back. Below us, Patrick's mother was waving us goodbye; she continued until she vanished from sight.

All right, I thought. I finally got to meet Patrick's parents, and now we're officially engaged. I managed to accomplish everything I came t— Wait.

"I didn't get to meet your brother!" I cried, turning to Patrick in dismay. "Was he not home?"

"No, he was home," Patrick shouted back.

That's pretty strange, isn't it? I wondered. *We were in the same house for three whole days! Shouldn't I have run into him at least once? Unless...he was hiding from me. But there's no way that could be it.*

I raised my voice even further—we had no choice but to yell at each other so

our words wouldn't be lost in the rushing of the wind. "Do you think he was avoiding me?"

"Yeah!"

So, that was it...

Abruptly, I felt kind of sad. I'd gotten used to being avoided at the Academy, but for Patrick's brother to do it? It was a bit hurtful.

Sensing my depressive mood, Patrick yelled in a panic, "It's just, my brother's not really good with women! Don't worry, if he hides next time, I'll force him to come say hi!"

I relaxed a little, not feeling so hurt anymore. *Ohhh, so he's just afraid of women. You know, I kinda forgot I was one before this. If I'm remembering right, I think I heard that guys who are afraid of women are especially bad at communicating with people their age that they can't help but perceive as the opposite sex. Having his little brother bring home a beautiful woman like me must have been mortifying. I mean, I'm so lovely it could almost be a crime.*

As I was basking in these thoughts, Patrick rudely interrupted by speaking again. "My brother is especially not good with strong-willed women, particularly aggressive ones with bad tempers. I think it's because of mother..."

"You think...I'm aggressive and bad-tempered?" I asked haltingly.

Me, beautiful?! Ha! Patrick didn't mention my beauty once! I hope all the so-called beautiful girls vanish from this earth!

"Well, I don't think you have a bad temper..." Patrick said reluctantly. "But, about the 'aggressive' thing..."

That's it! I'm living like Buddha from tomorrow on! I'll leave my aggressiveness behind and work hard for my county!

Interlude 3: Patrick

Now that Patrick had completed a short visit to his home—a trip the likes of which he hadn't been able to do for quite a while—he was back in Dolkness County, spending his day no differently than he'd done in the several months that had come before. His main job was to assist Yumiella in her duties as countess, but as she could handle paperwork and such with no issue, he focused his efforts primarily on going around and clearing up the misconceptions hovering about the county's new, easily misunderstood owner. In fact, he was doing just that at the current moment. Today's audience was made up of three maids and two clerks, the latter of whom worked directly under Daemon.

"Despite how she comes off, Yumiella's pretty mild-mannered," Patrick casually told the group of servants. "Think about it—you've never seen her angry, have you?"

One maid appeared to recall something. "The other day, I accidentally dropped some dinnerware," she began. "While I was preparing to clean up the mess, Lady Yumiella stepped on a broken piece of a plate...barefoot."

All the servants went pale, imagining Yumiella's bleeding foot. Patrick, meanwhile, had to hold back a sigh at the new addition to Yumiella's strange behaviors.

"But she didn't reprimand me at all," the maid continued. "In fact, she worried for my safety before her own."

At least one of the servants was able to see how kind Yumiella was through this incident, Patrick thought, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"Sorry about that," he told the maid. "I'll tell her to quit walking around the estate barefoot."

"No, no!" the maid cried, her eyes going wide. "You don't have to do that. And there's no need for you to apologize, Sir Patrick."

I suppose being barefoot inside her own mansion isn't so horrible a habit, Patrick mused, accepting the maid's advice with a nod. *Even Yumiella probably has enough common sense not to forgo footwear when outdoors.*

"Anyway, as I was saying, Yumiella doesn't get upset very often. And even if she does, she would never do anything to hurt anyone. She even let the previous Count Dolkness remain in residence at the Dolkness mansion in the Royal Capital."

"What?!" one of the servants gasped. "When I heard Lady Yumiella was taking over, I was sure he'd been killed..."

Patrick's sigh broke loose, coming out long, deep, and aggrieved. *So, on top of everything else, her succession of her father's title is misunderstood as well. Maybe if I tell them a story from our time at the Academy, I can help them understand her a bit better.*

"Look," Patrick said, "I admit she's a little...okay, *quite* strange, but if you look past that, there's really nothing else to see. Just because she tends to remain expressionless, that doesn't mean she's angry. If you look closely, you'll find that her expression actually changes a lot."

"Does that mean you can tell what sort of emotion Lady Yumiella is feeling from her face?" one of the other servants asked.

Patrick nodded. "Yeah. I admit that sometimes I'm at a loss as to what's going on inside her head, but it's pretty easy for me to tell if she's happy or upset."

A glimmer filled the three maids' eyes. "Do you think...that's because you two are a couple?"

Patrick hid a sudden rush of exasperation. As it turned out, the maids adored sweet stories of romance—such tales were their favorite treat, especially if they concerned Patrick. From what he'd heard around the estate, it seemed he'd gained himself a reputation for having a certain "charming calmness" about him, even though he was still young. In addition, the servants of the mansion seemed to have grown fond of him, due to the consideration and lack of prejudice he showed toward them.

"I don't know if I'd say that," Patrick responded. "I'd say the real reason I can

tell her expressions apart is...well, because I like her.”

The three maids let out shrieks of excitement. Patrick remained calm, but internally he'd begun to grow irritated at the conversation's romantic turn.

Part of the issue was that, while he could go on forever about Yumiella's escapades, Patrick found himself running out of conversation topics when asked for romantic stories about the two of them. Alas, the servants were all looking at him expectantly now, so Patrick began desperately combing through his recent memories for an occasion that would work. He finally decided to rest on something that had happened just before he and Yumiella had left for the Mark of Ashbatten.

“Do you all remember how Yumiella broke a window before we took our trip?” Patrick asked. “The truth is, she did that because she got too embarrassed and overwhelmed at the romantic ambience between us. She's cute like that.”

Patrick knew the situation could appear different to others, depending on how they looked at it. They could take Yumiella's abrupt departure as her running away from him. Thankfully, the five servants he was speaking to had all taken the story as Patrick had presented it—Patrick could tell by the shy grins that had taken over all their faces.

Yumiella truly is adorable, but shattering a pane of glass just to get away from me was a bit much, Patrick mused, his thoughts driving him to glance through a nearby window, whereupon...he made eye contact with an upside-down girl whose black hair was hanging upended around her face.

He froze for a moment, taking this sight in, then calmly turned back to face the three maids and two clerks who stood before him. They seemed to have somehow failed to notice the horrifying sight on the other side of the glass, so he casually encouraged them to be on their way.

“L-Let's call it a day here,” he said, voice coming out a bit rough. “That story was a little embarrassing for me too.”

“Oh! I apologize for taking up your time,” one of the maids said in a rush. “Still, if you don't mind, I'd love to hear stories about Lady Yumiella again.”

“And I would be delighted to tell them,” Patrick said, nodding.

To his relief, the servants then left the room, one after another. After confirming that the door was fully shut behind them, Patrick opened the window.

“Hey, Yumiella,” he said. “You mind telling me what you’re up to now?”

Still dangling upside down, she replied, “I was just observing. Since, you know, I happened to see someone who fit in better than *me* in my *own home*.”

Eyeing his fiancée, Patrick couldn’t help but shiver slightly. He had to admit it was quite unsettling to look out a window and see a curtain of black hair, accompanied only by an upside-down human shown from the neck up.

Bumping into her like this is nearly as scary as bumping into Ryu in the middle of the night, Patrick thought, a tad horrified.

By this point, it seemed Yumiella had grown tired of her perch. She swung her upper body, which Patrick was relatively sure was dangling off the side of the mansion’s roof, and threw herself through the second-story window into the room.

Patrick choked at the move, then sighed. “You know, if you stop acting so strangely, you’ll be able to fit in better.”

Yumiella’s head tilted slightly to the side. “What qualifies as acting strange? Climbing onto the roof, peeking into this room, or entering from the window?”

“All of the above.”

This triggered a Yumiella rant, of which Patrick heard little beyond several ridiculous declarations, one of them being that roof climbing should not be considered weird. It wasn’t that he was disinterested—it was just that certain thoughts had risen to the forefront of his mind in a way that he couldn’t ignore.

I know I told the servants Yumiella ran away from me out of embarrassment, but...is that really true? Is it possible that she’s just not interested in romance? Or that she might consider me only as a friend?

While Patrick usually acted calm and composed, these thoughts sent him into a whirlwind of anxiety. It didn’t help that he hadn’t done anything romantic

with Yumiella even after they'd gotten engaged. He *needed* some kind of confirmation of her feelings—just one word would be enough.

Driven by a rush of feeling, Patrick asked urgently, “Hey, we’re a couple, right?”

“What?!” Yumiella gasped, stiffening. “I-I mean, wh-why are you asking *m-me* that...?”

Patrick’s shoulders drooped. *All I wanted was confirmation, but I couldn’t even get that!* he thought in despair. *And that answer...it sounds like she’s putting it all on me, like she doesn’t even realize that relationships are mutual agreements made between individuals.*

Seeing the disappointment exuding from every pore of Patrick’s body, Yumiella burst out, “U-Umm! Well, uh, that’s... We’re engaged, you know?! Th- That means you’re my fiancé, right? And that means we’re getting married in the near future, so...”

“You *do* want to marry me, right?”

There was a short pause. Then, the sound of shattering glass.

“Farewell!”

Yumiella had escaped out of the window once again.

“Hey, Yumiella!” Patrick yelled, aggrieved. “Not the window...*again*...”

But she was already gone. Still...Patrick recalled Yumiella’s flustered face before she’d thrown herself through the glass. Her cheeks had been tinted a light pink, which was scarlet by her standards.

Patrick let out a loud cackle of a laugh, which eased into a sigh. “She really *is* something...”

Chapter 4: The Hidden Boss Reforms Her County

Now that I'd returned to Dolkness from the Mark of Ashbatten, I'd returned to handling my county owner's work as usual. My relationship with Patrick hadn't changed—after a year of stagnancy, it was a bit much to expect things to change over a few days. Although...if I swapped the word “stagnant” with the words “stable and constant,” things sounded like they were going pretty darn well.

At the moment, I was riding in a carriage that was to bring me from the center of Dolkness County to the border, and back. The main purpose of the trip was to inspect the county's roads and confirm that they were actually being maintained, as they had been in a terrible state when I first arrived.

Soon, the first leg of our journey came to an end, and Patrick and I decided to step out of the carriage briefly for a breath of fresh air.

“It wasn't as bumpy as last time,” I commented.

Patrick nodded. “Yeah, it's impressive how much the roads have improved in just a few months.”

“Apparently the people responsible for the maintenance hired some workers who could use earth magic,” I explained.

Of the various roadways in the county, Daemon, Patrick, and I had decided to focus on the ones which needed maintenance most urgently first. As it turned out, the roads that led to the Royal Capital got the most traffic, and so we'd centered our attention on them. Feeling the night and day change in the smoothness of our carriage ride made all the money we'd spent feel truly worth it.

We still haven't gotten around to arranging maintenance for the other roads, though, I thought worriedly. We need to take care of them as quickly as possible. But without additional magic users, our progress will likely plateau...

“If only we had more people on staff that could use earth magic...” I

mumbled.

“Was that comment directed at me?” Patrick asked, smiling slightly.

I felt like smacking myself on the forehead. Patrick was right; there was a candidate standing right in front of me. And, now that he was at level 80, he should be able to use large-scale spells in both his elements—wind and earth.

“Would you be able to maintain all the roads in the county at once?” I asked.

Patrick scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. Unlike you, my magic is a normal level of potency.”

“I’m careful to try and keep the potency of my magic regulated too,” I pointed out. “You’ve probably just gotten too used to using magic in a way that conserves mana—I’m sure you could do something big if you gave it your all.”

“That’s true...” Patrick said, abruptly thoughtful. “I don’t think I’ve used my magic at full force in a while.”

“Let’s try it together sometime!” I said cheerfully. “We can both use our full strength!”

“Nope, never happening.”

I pouted internally at the immediate rejection. *But my idea would have been totally fun! Shooting it down so fast isn’t fair at all...*

Feeling thoroughly dejected, I glanced back at our carriage. As I observed it, pondering over whether I could in some way improve it with my modern-day knowledge, I couldn’t help but take notice of the horses. There were two of them drawing our carriage, both chestnut-colored and adorable. They’d been left some water to drink during their break, and both were happily gulping it down.

Aw, how cute!

The cool thing about horses was that they weren’t just adorable—they were intelligent too. That meant that, unlike the dogs and cats who growled at me on sight and eventually ran away, they’d probably treat me like a totally normal person!

The era of common pets hath come to an end! Behold, the age of horses!

I wandered over to stand beside the horses, then chose a particular one to lavish my affection onto. “Thanks for pulling the carriage,” I told it, mesmerized by its kind face and big, round black eyes. “Can I pet you?”

I of course didn’t receive a reply.

I wonder if it’s a girl, I thought, reaching my arm out to caress the horse’s neck. But, just before my fingers grazed its skin, the horse suddenly began to thrash, letting out distress neighs.

Oh no, I tried to touch a no-pet zone! I thought in horror. *I should’ve known better—of course horses have spots they don’t like to be touched, just like dogs don’t like their tails being pet.*

Meanwhile, the carriage driver had run over in a panic. “Excuse me, but would you please step back? You’re frightening the horse, my lady.”

I took a few steps back, watching as he ran his hand over the horse’s neck in an attempt to calm it down.

Wait, that’s the same area I tried to pet it! Which means... I let my shoulders sag. *It seems I am fated to be feared by dogs, cats, and horses. The effect may even apply to all other animals as well. Wait, it applies to most humans too, doesn’t it?* I sighed. *Whatever, I at least have Ryuu.*



After that, we began our journey home. There was only one problem—I was going stir-crazy, and there was absolutely nothing to do inside the carriage.

“Is there any point to going back on the carriage?” I whined. “We already checked the roads.”

Patrick gave me a look. “Come on, it’s not that often that we do this. Besides, things might look different on the way back.”

You sure about that, Patrick? I thought sarcastically. *Ugh, I should’ve run home, it would’ve been so much faster.*

“Patrick, I’m so boooored!” I moaned. “Can’t some thieves show up or something?”

“Hey, don’t jinx us,” Patrick shot back. “I haven’t heard anything about thieves

these days, but that doesn't mean they don't still appear in some places."

I rolled my eyes internally, turning to stare blankly out the carriage window. *Oh, come on. I just said that out of boredom—no way thieves are actually going to show up. I mean, imagine how incompetent the owner of a territory would have to be to let stuff like that go on in their domain...*

All of a sudden, the carriage screeched to a stop.

"Thieves! We're surrounded by thieves!" the carriage driver yelled in a panic from outside.

I blinked. *It appears I've learned a lot today*, I thought absently. *First, thieves do exist. Second, that Dolkness woman is a completely incompetent countess. Guess it's time for her to take a break from running her county into the ground to fight as a guard.*

Patrick jumped out of the carriage first, while I took the time to lean out and observe our surroundings. Our carriage had been completely encircled by thieves. At a glance, there were around thirty of them; they ranged in age from young to old, and each one of them appeared to be male. Only a few of them were wielding actual weapons—the rest were armed with farming tools.

"Yumiella, hurry up and get out of the carriage," Patrick ordered, leading our frightened coachman to the door. "I want to hide him inside."

"All right," I agreed, jumping down to the ground and then assisting the driver into the carriage. "Stay hidden, okay?"

He nodded. "I wish you two the best of luck!"

Do we really need luck? I wondered. *I mean, it's a nice sentiment, but it feels a bit like overkill. Defeating thirty men is nothing, especially if they're inexperienced fighters like these guys.*

Patrick drew the sword on his waist. I followed suit...or at least tried to, before realizing that I had left my sword at home. Bereft of a weapon, I just stood next to Patrick as I was.

"You protect the carriage, I'll capture the thieves," Patrick said, his gaze fixed on the men in front of him.

I nodded. "Got it."

Honestly, it probably would have made more sense if our roles were swapped, but if Patrick wanted to snatch up the thieves himself, who was I to stop him? I took a spot in front of the carriage, then settled in to watch the show.

Just as I had expected, the thieves were no competition for Patrick. He casually tore through the battlefield, smacking men with the flat of his sword, tripping them with his feet, and occasionally using wind magic to blow them backwards and send them tumbling to the ground.

It seemed Patrick wasn't the only one who was going to get the chance to fight, though—I could feel a presence creeping up on me from behind as I watched the one-sided battle unfold in front of me. Unlike the bevy of thieves surrounding Patrick, this particular soul seemed to have set his sights on taking me down.

How foolish.

I pretended not to notice him at first, mostly because I wanted to try dodging an attack from behind with the least amount of movement possible. I thought it'd be pretty cool; it felt like something a longtime warrior would do with ease.

I'm gonna pull off this move so well he'll wonder if I have eyes in the back of my head!

At last, the man drew up behind me. He moved silently over the ground, not making a single sound. I braced myself for him to swing his sword down upon me from above, but...the blow never came. For some reason, he wrapped his arm around me instead, bringing his blade up in front of my eyes.

"Don't move!" the man yelled. "Drop that sword, or the lady gets hurt!"

What's going on? I wondered, flabbergasted.

I exchanged glances with Patrick, but he seemed similarly at a loss. We both just stood there, frozen, looking at each other in confusion.

"Get a move on, lad!" yelled the man who was showing me his sword. "If you care about this little lady, you better hurry up and get rid of that weapon! I'll be

kind enough to spare your lives if you give up your valuables.”

I still don't get what's happening here, I thought.

Patrick, however, seemed to have caught on. “Just to be clear...you're taking her hostage?” he asked, doubt in his voice.

“Of course!” the man exclaimed, bringing his dull-looking blade up to my cheek. “Looky here, I'm gonna put a scratch on your girlfriend's pretty face!”

Ah, I see, I thought, nodding internally. So I'm a hostage. I've gotten mixed up in all kinds of violent shenanigans until now, but it's my first time being in a situation like this. I've gotta take advantage of this opportunity and do all the hostage-like things! This is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence!

“H-Help me!” I cried out, mustering up all the acting skills I had. Unfortunately, I was rather lacking in the theatrical department, and the words came out flat and monotone.

Patrick seemed to shrivel before my eyes, the vigor draining out of him and leaving him looking exhausted.

Hey, your fiancée is in danger, Patrick! You should be taking this more seriously!

Leaning into my captive-lady act, I called to Patrick, “Don't worry about me! Drive your blade home, even if you have to go through me to do it! I'll drag him right down to hell!”

“Yikes!” the thief yelped, seemingly horrified at my resolve.

Patrick, on the other hand, looked as if he truly couldn't care less about the whole situation. He didn't even attempt to move forward to save me.

I guess that's what I get for flubbing my lines, I thought. I ended up sounding like the protagonist's rival in some action comic, instead of a beautiful girl calling out for her star-crossed lover. Still...his reaction feels a bit heartless.

It seemed the thieves were in agreement with me, as all of a sudden the men surrounding Patrick stepped forward and tried to persuade him to drop his sword.

“Come on, man!” one of them pleaded. “We promise we won't kill you, so

just drop the sword already.”

“Have a heart!” one of the other thieves exclaimed. “How can you still not care even after your girlfriend made such an intense speech?!”

“Don’t listen to them, Patrick!” I cried, deciding to join in on the fun. “I’ll be just fine!”

Patrick let out a long, deep sigh, then appeared to finally make up his mind. He threw the sword in his hand to the ground, then raised his arms above his head.

“How dare you take my fiancée hostage!” he yelled, giving all the thieves a piercing glare. “Hurry up and release her!”

The thieves stepped back, a bit unnerved by his intensity. I, meanwhile, was filled with glee.

Patrick’s playing along!

His performance was so unbelievably realistic that I couldn’t help but start giggling. “Heh heh, you’re so cool, Patrick! How come you’re so good at acting?”

Patrick immediately flushed, dropping character. “You’re the one who started it,” he muttered, averting his gaze in embarrassment. “Anyway, playtime’s over. Let’s finish this.”

As Patrick picked up the sword he’d dropped, I let out a sigh. *You know, being a hostage isn’t that much fun. Patrick’s right, it’s time to get this over with.*

I casually reached out, grabbing the sword that the man who was holding me captive was holding in front of my face. The weapon had no chance of withstanding the strength of my grip, and within seconds shattered in my hands. Behind me, my “captor” froze.

“You know, I didn’t think I’d ever get the chance to be a hostage,” I said lightly, still looking ahead. “I have to thank you for that.”

“What...? Wait, how are you so strong?!”

“All you thieves! Gather together into one spot, please!”

I reached out and grabbed the arm of the thief behind me, then catapulted

him over my shoulder and toward Patrick and the other thieves. He soared through the air for a short moment before crashing straight into another thief. They both fell flat to the ground.

In the brief few seconds my would-be captor had been airborne, Patrick had finished taking care of the rest of the thieves. All thirty were now either collapsed on the ground or had lost their will to fight.

“Good work,” I commented, walking up to Patrick’s side. “They weren’t that strong...right?”

“No, they weren’t,” Patrick agreed. “It seemed like they were all pretty green, and their armor looked shabby. They’re probably just farmers from somewhere.”

Wait, what if they’re citizens of Dolkness County? I suddenly thought. *I’m sure they have a reason for stooping all the way down to becoming thieves. What if...it’s all my fault...?*

Trying not to appear too frightening, I proclaimed, “I am Countess Yumiella Dolkness, the lord of this area. Where did you all come from?”

“Wait, the countess of Dolkness County,” one of the thieves whispered. “Isn’t that the girl who took down the Demon Lord?!”

“I heard she feeds the subordinates she doesn’t like to her dragon,” another whispered back.

“This is bad!” another wailed. “We attacked the carriage of the most dangerous person in the kingdom!”

“Hey, you better keep your mouth shut, even if you’re tortured. Remember your family!”

As I watched them go from calm to quivering with fear, a wave of depression went through me. *Seems like things are going to turn out like they always do, with everyone afraid of me.*

Patrick must have come to the same conclusion, because he stepped forward and signaled that I should move back with his hand. “Before we listen to what you guys have to say, I’d like you to tell us where you came from. Did you travel

here to make money? Why did you target this location?”

The thieves maintained their silence despite Patrick’s questioning.

Ugh, Patrick, you’re being too overbearing. You’ve gotta use both a carrot and a stick to be a good interrogator. You need to appear at least a little more kind.

I tried to switch places with him so I could take back over, but Patrick held me back. It seemed he’d come to a similar conclusion. Except, his idea of kindness... Well...

“If you stay quiet, I’m switching places with the girl behind me.”

“We’ll tell you everything!”

Can you not use me as the stick?

After that, Patrick’s interrogation truly began. He asked all the thieves where they’d come from, and they told him that they were villagers who’d traveled to Dolkness from one of our neighboring territories. Apparently, their village had grown poor due to a large mountain that loomed over the southern side of their settlement, which blocked the sun for a period of time every day. As a result, their crop yields were chronically low, leaving them bereft of a product to sell as well as of food. As they drew close to the verge of starving to death, the men had planned to attack a carriage that looked like it would be full of valuables so they could steal them, which had led to our current situation.

Listening to this story from a distance, a certain question popped into my mind. “Wait, did you only start thieving recently, then? You were all right before now?”

“Eek!” one man shrieked.

“I won’t do anything to you...” I said with a sigh.

I get it, world, they’re scared of me like usual! Jeez...

Patrick gestured for me to step even further back, and I did so before asking my question again. “Did something happen to your village recently?”

“We’ve got a monster problem now. Up until recently, none ever appeared around the village, but now they’re destroying our fields.”

Hmm... I thought. It's rare for monsters to appear near human settlements. Typically, they make their homes in areas that don't have any people around. The fact that that's no longer the case for these guys is worrying.

"Have you guys been safe?" I asked, the words slipping out without me thinking.

"Eek!"

"Patrick, can you...?"

You know, it'd be nice if they could just get used to me already, I whined internally. Seriously, what kind of information is floating around about me in these rural villages? Even the people of my own county weren't this scared of me when we first met. In fact, they prayed to me. Not that I want them to do that... I massaged my forehead. Is there a single normal group of people around here?

Giving a resigned sigh, Patrick asked, "Did the monsters injure anyone?"

The thieves shook their heads.

"None of us were harmed," one of the men explained, "but the destruction of our fields is its own death sentence. Our viscount won't help us either."

So their already poor village was devastated by monsters, and they don't even have a lord they can count on to assist them, I thought with a frown.

Hearing their situation, an idea popped into my head. The idea I'd had for reforming Dolkness County with my own strength, which had been turned down due to a lack of villagers.

"Hey," I called out.

"Eek!"

"Am I *that* scary...? Whatever, that's not important. If you hate living next door so much, why don't you come live with us?"



And so, despite being attacked by thieves, Patrick and I were able to finish inspecting the country roads with no real problems. I immediately wanted to

start working on providing aid to the village the thieves had come from, but it took time to build an entirely new settlement, so Patrick and I settled on sending them enough food to keep them from starving.

To tell the truth, we were breaking the landowner code doing something like that for a village in another territory, but as I was planning to take them all in anyway... Long story short, I'd decided to err toward the aggressive.

The villagers had even agreed to relocate to Dolkness land after I'd had a calm, peaceful discussion with them, though they still seemed frightened that something else was going on behind the scenes. Patrick had told me I'd essentially threatened them into the whole thing, but I couldn't see how—I'd spoken in an entirely normal fashion! If they'd taken my words some other way...well, that was outside of my control.

It had been a week since our thief encounter now, and Patrick and I had taken a short ride on Ryu to the land where we intended to build the new village. The plan for today was for me to go ahead and prepare the land for construction. There was only one problem—I wasn't quite sure we'd come to the right location.

I ran my eyes again over the grassy field where we stood, which was speckled with trees but lacking any discernible landmarks. "Are you sure this is the right place?" I asked Patrick, who was standing right next to me. "Like, *really* sure?"

"We already confirmed this was it several times from the air, remember? Judging from the position of the mountains and rivers around us, this is definitely the place we were looking for."

Feeling relieved, I ran my eyes over our surroundings once more. Upon closer inspection, flaws began to make themselves known. I could see several places where the ground raised slightly into hills, and a scattering of large boulders that looked like they'd get in the way of farmers or construction workers.

This is the right place! Without my magic, getting everything cleaned up looks like it would be a real pain.

"Okay then," I said, raising up my secret weapon—a wand. "Let's get started."

Patrick's eyes narrowed on the wand, puzzlement flickering over his face.

“Why do you have a wand?” he demanded.

The question was valid—typically I had no use for magical items like wands, which increased the potency of one’s spells. I had more than enough firepower just on my own. The same went for Patrick, who only carried a sword with him. That knowledge made the elaborate wand I now held, which was topped with a massive, glistening magic stone and had intricate designs carved into the handle, stand out considerably.

“I just thought it might be nice to use in order to conserve my mana,” I explained. “Also, this wand is incredible! It works for all elements!”

Wands normally only worked with one element, although sometimes you could find one that worked with two. When it came to wands that worked with all the elements though? I’d never even heard of one dropping in-game. That just went to show how incredibly precious they were.

Patrick’s expression only grew more confused. “Isn’t using a wand like that a waste when you can only use dark magic?”

“Oh, I must’ve forgotten to tell you! I can actually use any type of magic, aside from light.”

Sure, my level of skill with the four main elements was weak compared to how well I could wield dark magic, but I was still able to use them.

Honestly, it kinda seems like it should be against the rules to be as OP as I am. Ah well, it can’t be helped—I’m a genius, after all.

Riding the high of my own talent, I considered the area before me, trying to figure out where to begin. Eventually, I settled on using earth magic in order to flatten the ground. I imagined a towering wall of dirt, then swung my wand forward.

Let’s make this thing taller than the Royal Capital’s castle walls!!!

Alarm burst across Patrick’s features—he’d realized I was about to exert the full breadth of my strength. He lurched forward to stop me, but it was already too late.

“O’ great earth, rise and pierce the threshold of heaven!”

“H-Hey, stop! If you use your full strength to cast a spell, then... Huh?”

I stared proudly down at the successful result of my earth magic spell—a round bump that rose from the ground in front of us. As for its height...well, it was perhaps tall enough to trip someone who wasn't paying attention to where they were going.

A queer look on his face, Patrick poked at the small mound of earth with his foot. The little knoll crumbled with no effort at all.

“This is all you've got?” Patrick asked, raising a brow at me.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

Shock rang through me like a bell. *He just did it. He just said the phrase I ranked third on my “Things Patrick Will Never Say to Me” list!*

(As a side note, Yumiella's number one phrase was “I'm going to stop liking you if you don't cut it out!”)

Unable to stand Patrick thinking of me as someone with weak magic, I mustered up every inkling of power within me. Filled with determination, I cast a fire spell, sending out a plume of blazing flame pulled straight from the depths of hell. The plume being...well, the approximate size of a lighter flame.

There was a moment of ringing silence, and then Patrick said mildly, “At least we won't have any trouble starting a fire.”

Ugh, don't look at me so kindly! Your gaze, it burns!

I couldn't let things end here—not like this.

I'll just have to finish things off with a dark magic spell at full power!!!

“Dar—”

“Nope, that's not happening.”



I glared at Patrick in pure affront, unable to believe he'd snatched my wand away from me.

You were preparing for that this whole time, weren't you? I thought, irritation bubbling away inside me.

"Yumiella," Patrick said firmly. "I'm well aware of your strength. After all this time, I really don't need another demonstration."

"What about *your* full strength?" I asked moodily. "You should go ahead and try using it now that your level is higher."

As it was, I still didn't have a solid grasp on Patrick's magical aptitude. He definitely didn't specialize in magic—I was sure of that. He wasn't someone whose fighting style encompassed a combination of magical and melee attacks either. In fact, he rarely used attack spells at all. And since analyzing that kind of magic was the easiest way to gauge a person's aptitude, I'd been left thoroughly in the dark.

There was a moment of silence as Patrick contemplated my idea. Then, he shrugged. "I guess you're right," he admitted. "There aren't many opportunities to fully let loose like this. I suppose I can go ahead and give it a shot."

Holding out my wand with both hands, Patrick closed his eyes. I could feel the magical energy gathering inside of him even from my position at his side. There was something soft to the feeling, unlike the sharp prickling that came with my dark magic. I'd just started to grow used to it when Patrick opened his eyes.

"Earth," he whispered.

A deep roar resonated through the air as the ground ahead of us began to rise higher and higher. When the sound finally receded a few seconds later, a massive wall of dirt was left behind, so tall it hurt my neck to look up at it. To tell the truth, the wall was quite wide as well—when I looked to my left and right, it continued on as far as my eyes could see.

Patrick gaped at his own creation, as if at a loss for words.

I guess I can't blame him. I mean, he did summon a wall that seems to divide the entire world in two...

“Well, look who’s strong now,” I drawled. “I think it’s time you quit telling me my magic is ‘too much’ from now on.”

Silence was my only reply. Feeling a bit odd, I kept waiting for Patrick to jab back at me like he normally would. Still, he said nothing.

What’s going on...?

I’d just leaned forward, trying to get a better look at his face, when Patrick looked up at the wall of dirt and summarily collapsed to his knees.

“I’m sorry,” I grumbled. “I took things too far. Are you all right?”

Patrick nodded, though he seemed genuinely upset. “Yeah... I just—I knew I’d be able to exert more force after leveling up, but I didn’t realize it would be to this extent.”

Why does he look so distressed over this? I wondered. Isn’t being this strong something to be happy about...?



It took some time for Patrick to recover. When he finally stood up, he handed me the wand. “This thing is incredible,” he said. “My magical energy feels like it meshes well with it.”

“Right?” I replied excitedly. “And since it works well with all elements, it can strengthen both your wind magic and my dark magic! Isn’t that incredible?”

“Yeah. But since when do you own something like this?”

I paused for a moment before responding. “So, around a month ago, this merchant came by the mansion...”

Yes, it was true! I’d bought my wand, which was now destined to be a precious Dolkness family heirloom, from a door-to-door salesman. I didn’t think I’d done anything wrong in that—it was normal for merchants to stop by the homes of aristocrats, and I’d thought the wand was fairly priced considering its quality. That fair price, though...let’s just say it was a tad high.

To be fair, once the merchant had told me that the wand originated from a dungeon, I’d briefly considered going dungeon diving for something similar myself. But even though I’d been going on frequent excursions these days, I

hadn't so much as glimpsed a wand that worked with three elements, let alone six. On top of that, I'd always had terrible luck with the gacha RNG that was dungeon drops in the past—it was never smart to roll a gacha when there was only one item you truly wanted.

"You sure you even need that?" Patrick asked with a sigh, pointing at my treasure. "I'm getting the feeling you were just sweet-talked into buying it."

"No way!" I snapped in reply. "I'd have bought this even if I saw it in a store."

"How much was it?"

"Probably somewhere around...fifty times the cost of a regular wand?"

To be clear, by "regular wand," I was referring to a wand that was of the highest quality, but only worked with one element.

Patrick's face had shriveled in horror at my words. "Yumiella, you should keep in my mind all the things we're going to need now that we're developing a village," he said bitterly. "Not that we didn't need things before. It's just... I'm not telling you not to buy things for yourself, but it wouldn't hurt for you to be a bit more frugal."

"This really isn't that big a deal," I insisted. "I don't buy things like dresses and gemstones, so in the end, I'm not spending that much."

"And how many dresses do you think could be made using funding from that wand?" Patrick asked dryly.

I'm only guessing... I thought hesitantly, but probably around a hundred? Hold on—am I a spendthrift or something?

It was important to remember that, in *LMH*, an aristocrat's money wasn't split between personal and business use. Part of the budget for county operations came from my pocket money, and if I decided to live it up, there was every possibility that I could do so using another character's tax money.

I need to keep that in mind when I spend money on unnecessary expenses, I reminded myself. I've gotta keep things to a minimum from now on. But the wand...I had to get it.

"You're right that it's wrong to spend money on unnecessary things," I

admitted to Patrick. “But some things are necessary purchases, right?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “The whole reason I brought this up is because that wand *wasn’t* necessary.”

I pouted internally. *Patrick, how could you say something so horrible? Don’t you feel sorry, even a little, for this poor wand? Just picture it, gathering dust in the corner of my room alongside my wooden sword! Sure, I couldn’t think of a single use for it before today, but I totally, definitely needed to have it!*

Anyway, Patrick and I had done enough chatting—it was time to get to work. First, we needed to clean up the wall that *somebody* had put up.

Heh heh, so today the tables turn, I thought, grinning internally. *Here I am, having to put in sooo much work to clean up someone else’s mess.*

Just as I was debating on whether to use my physical or magical strength to destroy the earthen wall my fiancé had summoned from the ground, Patrick placed his hand against it.

“Return,” he called out.

All of a sudden, the massive dirt wall sunk back into the earth. It was like I was watching the moment of its creation play out in reverse.

That’s...more impressive than making that wall in the first place, isn’t it? I mused. *I mean, how does that even follow the laws of physics...?*

I decided not to bring it up. After all, the way my dark magic worked was plenty questionable as well.

“All right, then,” I told Patrick, “let’s begin. I’m going to roughly flatten things out, so I’ll leave the fine-tuning to you.”

“Got it.”

The way I saw it, it would be a waste of time for us to remove the boulders one by one or haul away dirt. Instead, we could just get rid of all the things we needed to all at once.

It’s been a while since I used a strong dark magic spell like this, but now’s the perfect time!

“Black Hole,” I pronounced.

Darkness swelled from all around, swallowing trees, boulders, and hills alike. I’d cast the spell with the ground at its center, so although it appeared to curve over the earth like a miniature hemisphere from where we stood, I knew in actuality it was a full sphere. Which meant that the part that wasn’t visible was swallowing up all the earth below...

Oops.

Patrick, meanwhile, was looking pretty impressed with my dome of darkness. “I didn’t know you could do other shapes besides spheres,” he commented. “Looks like the ground’s going to be nicely flattened once you’re done. There might not even be anything for me to do.”

“So, here’s the thing...” I said slowly. “That dome is, uh...actually a sphere. I’m sorry.”

“Wait, you didn’t...?!”

I gave Patrick a miserable look. Once a spell was cast, there was no going back. In a few moments, the black orb I’d summoned would disappear, taking all the ground it had swallowed with it.

Wind whooshed forward from behind us, drawn forth by the air consumed by my black hole. At last, it vanished, leaving the view before us starkly changed. A gaping hole had been cleanly carved out of the ground. The bottom was dark, as if even sunlight was unable to reach it.

You know, I’ve altered plenty of terrain in my time, but this is pretty exceptional, I thought, a tad hysterically.

“Maybe we could use this area as a reservoir for farming?” I asked Patrick after a short pause.

Despite having been the one to suggest it, it felt like a stretch. If a hole that big were filled with water, it would become a pond or a lake—to be honest, I didn’t know the difference between the two.

What should I do...? I thought miserably. *At this rate, I’m going to sink this village before it even gets to swim! I mean, what even is this? A dam?*

I couldn't even use my magic to fill the hole—I specialized in destruction, not fixing things. The only reason I'd thought I could even out terrain in the first place was because I was good at breaking things and making them vanish.

After staring at the hole with dead eyes, Patrick stuck out a hand in my direction. "Give me the wand," he said. His voice was so monotone I couldn't gauge how he was feeling. "I'll fix it."

"Sorry..." I muttered, handing it over.

I should've thought more about what I was doing before I acted... I feel so bad.

Within a few hours, Patrick had managed to clean up the mess I made. He'd used earth magic strengthened by my wand to slowly fill up the hole.

So my decision to buy that wand wasn't a mistake after all! I cheered internally. Not when it was that big a help. Still...I better not say that aloud.

Feeling down, I let my shoulders droop. Now that Patrick had finished working, my presence was no longer needed at the build site.

"Yumiella," Patrick said, his voice exhausted. "I'd just like to remind you that I like *all* of you, even the side that does things like this. Don't worry yourself over it too much."

"Patrick..." I murmured, touched.

I'm so lucky to have such a kind fiancé! I get it now—he likes when I make a mess out of things!

"I'll do my best to make more messes from now on!" I swore to him.

Patrick pressed a hand to his forehead, *hard*. "I'm going to stop liking you if you don't cut it out."



The day after we worked on preparing land for the village we were developing, Patrick and I visited a certain village. It was the same one I'd removed the boulder from only a few months before, leaving a crater in one of the fields.

Admittedly, we were a bit late, but we'd come to clean up my mess now that we knew Patrick could use his magic to fill in holes.

"Huh? Was this place always so lively?" I wondered aloud.

From what I remembered, this village was just a generic farming village, and wasn't very large at all. There were more people around than I'd expected, though—and they were dressed nicely at that.

Are they visiting from somewhere...? I thought, completely baffled.

The row of homes we were currently standing in front of had signs advertising room and board, so it seemed likely. But how had the area become a popular tourist destination in such a short time?

"God! A-Ahem, Lady Countess!" A villager called to me as we roamed the village. "I must offer you my thanks. It's all because of you that our village has become this bustling."

"But I didn't do anything..."

"Oh, really? We thought for sure that you expected this to happen, and that's exactly why you made *that* for us."

"Where is...*'that'*?" I asked.

The villager then pointed to a road that led outside of the village, and Patrick and I headed straight there. As we walked, we passed an endless stream of people, some of whom were leaving the village and some of whom were making their way back. It made me curious.

What on earth could be at the end of this road...?

As I pondered the answer to this question, Patrick gasped, as if he'd realized something.

"Yumiella, isn't this the direction that you threw the boulder in?"

"I mean, yeah," I admitted. "I don't think that has anything to do with this, though."

Come on, why would all these people gather up at some massive crater? There's no way that's what's going on.

And so we continued on, until we reached the new “tourist attraction.”

“Wh-What is this?”

“It’s a...lake?”

Patrick and I both stared blankly at the body of water in front of us, which was shaped in a perfect circle. It appeared to be less than fifty meters in diameter, and there were several boats in the water, carrying groups of two who were likely couples.

“This is the big hole that I accidentally made, right?” I asked Patrick hoarsely.

Patrick nodded. “Yeah. I guess it collected water and this happened.”

Even faced with that explanation, though, I had a hard time understanding why this particular place had become a popular tourist attraction.

Perhaps it’s because the lake is in a perfect circle? I guess that is a bit irregular...

I was still staring at the lake, wondering what to do now, when the voice of a barker from a rental boat shop rang out, trickling into my ears.

“Come rent a boat!” he cried. “If you can manage to ride across this lake together, you and your partner are destined to not part ways for the rest of your lives!”

Well, that certainly sounds fishy, I thought skeptically. Where would they even get the basis for those claims? Ah, well, I guess if it brings people to Dolkness County, all’s well that ends well.

I continued to examine the area, and soon noticed that there was even a gift shop along the shore of the lake. Business appeared to be booming, so I walked over and peeked inside out of curiosity.

They probably sell weird things like a charm that assists in helping your love work out, I mused.

So, imagine my surprise when I saw, placed in the most eye-catching spot in the store, a wooden sword.

Wait, but isn’t that spot usually reserved for things that are selling well? I

thought excitedly.

“I can’t believe there’s wooden swords!” I cried out, running over and picking one up. I was intimately familiar with the design—this lame sword with “Dolkness” written on the handle was one that had been made under my supervision.

“Those wooden swords have gotten really popular with young boys,” a worker at the shop chimed in, clearly trying to pitch it to me. “Apparently if you buy one, it’s said you can become strong like the count...ess... Hold on.”

The shop worker froze, her eyes intently locked on my black hair.

I see, so they’re selling well, and to young boys, at that. Wait, does that mean I have the taste of a grade school boy...?

“I’d like to buy one of these,” I decided.

“S-Sure...” the shop worker stuttered. “Um, you’re the countess, right?”

I waved a dismissive hand. “I’m only a noblewoman passing through the area. Feel free to use my example to begin advertising this product as being popular with young women.”

I mean, look—I didn’t want to change my taste in things, but comparing my likes and dislikes to those of a boy in grade school was a bit much. Therefore, it was best that the swords were treated as an item geared toward aristocratic young ladies. In theory, that would make me the perfect lady, and indicate I had the correct sensibilities for an aristocrat as well!

Patrick, who’d arrived at the scene late, let out a sigh. “Yumiella, don’t be ridiculous. You’re only causing her trouble.”

After that, we walked around the entire lake area, then decided to cap off our visit by riding across the lake in one of the boats. As I stared at the surface of the water, which was currently gleaming with the light of the sunset, I could see Patrick rowing the boat from the corner of my eye. Gentle waves lapped at our boat’s hull, stirred to life by the rowing of the other boats around us. The surface of the water rippled.

I wish I was the one who got to row the boat, I thought wistfully.

“You know,” I suddenly told Patrick in a quiet voice, eyes still on the swaying water. “I don’t really like activities like this, that draw people in using romance. It’s almost like...people are being tricked.”

“Everyone knows the romantic effects aren’t real, though,” Patrick pointed out. “People are choosing to be tricked.”

“Are they really?” I asked, having a hard time comprehending this.

“Yeah,” Patrick said softly. “So, Yumiella...what do you think about getting tricked ourselves?”

Wait, does he mean...that he wants us to pray for our love to work out?

This was terrible—I’d totally hopped aboard the wrong ship. I’d been fooled by its relative normalcy, but it seemed if I let things unfold much further I might be catapulted through romantic space-time and straight into a shojo manga.

Maybe that’s okay, though... Maybe I can say some of the things I normally can’t, now that we’re in a different environment. I’ve never properly put my feelings about Patrick to words, or shared them with him, but now, just possibly...

“Um, Patrick?”

Now that it was just the two of us in this boat, floating atop a lake that reflected the sun’s light like an orange mirror, I felt like I could finally tell Patrick that I liked him.

Bracing myself, I began, “I lik— *Bleeergh!*”

Gagging loudly, I stuck my head over the side of the boat. Something acidic almost flooded my mouth, but no liquid came shooting out from between my lips.

I...feel sick.

“Whoa, are you all right?” Patrick gasped.

“I...I think I’m...seasick, Patrick,” I moaned.

So this is the cursed disease of the sea. Would I stop feeling like this if I just let go, and let it all out?

Patrick leaned closer to me, trying to rub my back, but his movement jolted the ship, making it sway from side to side.

“Nope, uh-uh. I’m gonna hurl.”

Despite my intense seasickness, Patrick and I somehow managed to get me off the boat without me throwing up. The man working at the rental shop was visibly impressed—it seemed he’d never witnessed someone get as seasick as me on a lake that had barely any waves.

“I’m not riding in boats anymore,” I muttered to Patrick.

“Okay,” he said, a slight smile quirking his lips. “Anyway, what was it you were trying to say earlier?”

“It’s nothing.”

And so, while Dolkness County made magnificent strides forward, adding a new tourist destination to its accomplishments as well as a popular souvenir, the relationship between Patrick and me stayed as stagnant as ever.



Ever since I’d started living in Dolkness County, an endless stream of guests had begun visiting the mansion. Many of them were landowners or big shots from neighboring territories, though even shady merchants came by wanting to meet with me.

I did my best to meet everyone, but it often ended up being a waste of my time, especially when it came to the merchants. The ones who tried to sell me expensive furniture or paintings weren’t so bad to deal with, but I despised the ones who came to tout around their fishy schemes, trying to convince me they were guaranteed to succeed. As a result, I would sometimes come up with one reason or another to shoo them away.

“Do shady people like that always visit the lords of a territory?” I asked Patrick.

He shrugged. “Usually those kinds of people come by more when the new generation takes over. They’re looking for aristocrats they can easily trick.”

I would hate for people to think that I'm the type of person who can be easily fooled, I thought. Anyway, I'm probably the worst kind of customer for those guys, since I don't have an interest in buying expensive things.

"Hey, Patrick," I said suddenly. "Do I seem like someone who could be easily tricked? I feel like I'm pretty levelheaded..."

There was a short pause. "You think so?" Patrick finally asked.

"Well, I'm not the kind of person who they could persuade to buy expensive things or something of that sort, at least."

"Uh, you forgetting about the wand?"

I fell silent, unable to contradict him on that one. It might have been useful in filling up that large hole, but I was the one who'd caused the hole in the first place.

At that moment, I was informed that one of the merchants I'd heard was visiting that day had arrived. He'd sent word that he'd brought something that I'd definitely be interested in, but that was what they all said. In the past, another merchant had proclaimed that only to present me with a perfume.

I mean, come on, who would pay for scented water? I just don't get the logic.

"Should I just send the merchant away?" Patrick asked. "There's no need for you to go out of your way to meet with him."

"It's all right... Oh! But you should stay here and watch; I'll give him a stern no."

He's probably just going to try and sell me something I don't need, anyway. All I have to do is hear him out a bit and then staunchly refuse!

Our group composition decided, we entered the room where the merchant was waiting. He was a suspicious-looking man with a distinctive beard. As we eyed him, he stood up and grinned at us, then bowed his head.

"Thank you for your continued support," he said, staring directly at Patrick. "I'm from the Arrei Trading Company."

It didn't surprise me to be overlooked—honestly, it happened pretty often. It was rare to find a female aristocrat who serves as head of her family in

Valschein, let alone a countess like me. As a result, merchants often addressed men over women, and would focus their attention on Patrick when it came to initial greetings or topics of political nature. Some would refuse to speak to me at all at first, only changing their tune when it came to the topic of selling clothes and accessories.

Still, shouldn't these people know that I'm the one in charge here...?

"I, Yumiella Dolkness, countess of this land, welcome you," I said grandly, trying to drive through the fact that I was the one in charge here. "But, I must ask, isn't it a bit strange to mention continued support when this is our first time meeting?"

"To be honest, Lady Countess," he responded without flinching, "I said that because I have come to deliver something to Sir Patrick." He then turned to my fiancé and bowed his head. "I apologize for the finishing touches taking some time."

O-Oh, I thought, thoroughly embarrassed. So this guy actually came here to talk to Patrick. I can't believe I just jumped all over him when he was only trying to introduce himself. I'm so paranoid...

"I'm sorry," I said, wincing at the memory of my aggressive tone. "I didn't realize you were here to see Patrick."

"It is no problem; I actually think you both will be interested in what I brought with me today. Our company specializes in rare items taken from dungeons."

I felt my heartstrings being tugged—I had never been so charmed by any of the other merchants that had stopped by. It made me a bit sad that I'd just declared that I wouldn't be buying anything. Truly, that had been terrible timing.

I cast those feelings aside, though, and turned to Patrick. I couldn't help but be curious over what he'd purchased when he'd done so from a shop that seemed practically made for me.

"Hey, Patrick," I said, calling his attention to me. "What did you buy?"

There was a short pause. "You know, I don't know," he finally said.

Yeah, that's a lie if I've ever heard one, I thought. He probably secretly bought some dungeon-made magical instrument or something. That merchant's grin is proof... No, wait. He's been smiling like that from the beginning...

"Shall I bring out the item later on then?" the man asked, his grin widening.

"Yes, thank you."

And so that portion of the conversation ended, with no input from me.

I wonder what Patrick bought, I mused. It's clear he's trying to hide it from me. Could he have meant to surprise me with it? If that's true, I hope it's a set of brass knuckles. Feeling myself getting excited, I did the best to rein my emotions in. No, no, I can't let myself get too worked up. My assumptions are usually way off. Plus, nothing has happened recently that's worth celebrating, and we don't have anything coming up either. Maybe I shouldn't ask too many questions...it's not like Patrick would buy anything dangerous. Heh heh, look at me, being a great girlfriend who understands her man's hobbies.

Before my thoughts could derail any further, the merchant began to speak once more.

"I have to say, I'm surprised to see that Dolkness County has grown so incredibly that it's become unrecognizable in such a short period. Especially when the Royal Capital has been slightly wild these days, and with all the areas nearby in a recession. All that to say, if I could get your permission to conduct business here for a bit, I would be extremely grateful."

I took a moment to take all this information in. The merchant had spoken in such a rapid-fire pace that it felt like he'd hardly paused to breathe. Finally, I replied, "If you'd like to do business here, you'll need to follow the official procedures like everyone else."

"That is fine, of course," the merchant said obediently. "I wouldn't do anything to trouble you, Lady Countess."

His hands had been moving as he spoke, lining up his wares on the table in front of him. Once they were all in place, he began explaining what they were, starting with the first item, which was a jar filled with white powder.

Oooh, this is getting fun! I thought. That's gotta be something crazy!

“This is a sugar that won’t be absorbed by the body.”

I sighed, disappointed. “Oh, so it’s just sugar.”

“Not quite,” the merchant said brightly. “It’s just as sweet as regular sugar, but it has no nutritional value.”

“So...what’s the point of it?”

Glucose’s greatest value is that it allows the person who eats it to get energy quickly, I thought. If it can’t be absorbed by the body and has no calories, isn’t it just worthless?

It sounded like a rare item that no one would want, including me. For some reason, though, Patrick seemed to be interested.

“Wow, that must sell pretty well,” he commented.

“Indeed it does! It’s most often used by the daughters or wives of aristocrats. Of course, this purchase is kept confidential.”

I frowned. *I don’t get it. Why is zero-calorie sugar selling well? Is it trendy to die from starvation while eating sweets? Yeah, you can count me out of a twisted trend like that.*

“I’m not interested,” I said.

“You wouldn’t need it,” Patrick said lightly.

That’s when it hit me. *Oh, I see! It’s diet sugar! No wonder Patrick was looking at my body like that—my hitbox is pretty tiny. Wasn’t diet sugar a thing in my past life? I feel like there were products that were made of amino acids and stuff that were supposed to sweeten things...and didn’t they have zero calories too?*

This sugar was growing less appealing to me by the minute. I didn’t want to lose weight—if anything, I wanted to gain it. If I could retain my current body shape but adjust my weight to about a ton, that would mean I could put more power behind my physical attacks *and* I wouldn’t be able to be thrown backwards—it would be nothing but positives.

Sensing he wasn’t going to make a sale here, the merchant quickly gave up on the sugar and moved on to introducing his next product.

“This is an age-reversing potion,” he said, showing us a jar filled with a green liquid.

Now that’s gotta be something wild! Let the fun times begin!

Eternal youth and eternal life were both things that people in power had time and time again sought after. It wouldn’t be surprising if people around the world went to war to possess an item like the one before us.

I leaned forward to look at the jar, and the merchant began to explain its contents in the same rapid-fire speech as he had the first.

“This potion is actually an antidote for poison, but if you apply it onto your skin, your skin will reverse in age. Any wrinkles or sagging will completely disappear. Oh, but the efficacy differs between those who use it, so please keep that in mind.”

My excitement immediately plummeted. *It’s just some shady-sounding cosmetic item!*

My expectations, which had risen upon hearing this guy carried rare items from dungeons, evaporated. From what I could tell, they all seemed to be duds. I mean, sugar wasn’t even something you could get from a dungeon, and antidote potions weren’t rare at all!

“I’ll pass,” I said flatly. “I’m not really interested in these sorts of items. I think I’ve seen enou—”

“Wait! I have some weapons with me as well...”

This briefly recaptured my attention. “If you have something like a dark-type sword or a wand that works with all elements, I’ll buy that.”

The merchant, who had been pulling out a dagger as I spoke, returned it to his luggage after hearing my words.

Unfortunately for him, I don’t really need a dagger for protection. I mean, it’s more effective for me to just punch people with my bare fists.

“This isn’t really what I was expecting,” I admitted. “I thought you would carry things like accessories with effects that were good for battle.”

“Oh, well, there’s certain circumstances we’re dealing with regarding

accessories,” the merchant said, looking over at Patrick.

Well, I don't know why your accessories aren't selling, mister merchant, I thought, but it's time for you to go.

I opened my mouth to ask him to leave, but then froze when one of his items caught my eye. It looked like a triton shell, and was sticking out of a case full of wares.

“What’s that?”

The merchant inclined his head. “Apologies, I brought this with me as a mistake. It is an item called a monster-summoning flute. Have you heard of them before?”

“Yes, I’ve had tons of help from one in the past,” I told him.

Just as the name suggested, a monster-summoning flute was a magical instrument that called all the monsters in the surrounding area to a single location. I’d often used one when I went out to grind experience.

But, could that item truly be—?!

“A monster-summoning flute...*helped* you...? Never mind. Anyway, this item here is a large monster-summoning flute. I purchased it because it was rare, but it turns out that there’s no use for it. It requires a large magic stone to work, so it can’t even be tested.”

“I’ll buy it at asking price!”

I have to have it, even if it costs me my life savings! I cannot let this moment go, brought to me as it was by the whims of fate!

Alas, my unwavering resolve was interrupted by my fiancé’s voice.

“Yumiella,” Patrick said firmly. “No.”

“But, Patrick! It’s so big!!! It must be really loud too!”

“And? You don’t need that thing—I can say that with full confidence.”

Ugh, why did I have to say I wouldn't be buying anything today?! I don't want to break my promise... Wait. I only promised not to for today, right? So wouldn't I be able to get it tomorrow?

I calmed down, comforted by my perfect plan. All I had to do was continue to maintain my stance of not purchasing anything today, and then tomorrow I would just visit the merchant's trading company to scoop up the flute I so desperately wanted.

"Fine..." I said with a mock sigh. "You're right—I don't need that flute. I think we're done here for today."

The merchant bowed respectfully. "If we ever come across good weapons or anything, I'll come to you first. I hope for your support in the future as well."

After that, the merchant promised to visit us again, then left with a slightly disappointed look on his face.

The moment the door closed, Patrick turned to me. "You can't go buy it later either," he shot out.

H-How in the world?! He saw right through my perfect plan! Shaken, I stared at him. I'm not going to get anywhere by just trying to sneak around him. I've got to keep my head high and fight him head-on if I want to convince him!

That still left one major question: how was I going to get Patrick to allow me to buy the large monster-summoning flute?

It's probably best if I start off by thinking about things from his perspective, I decided. For example, what would I do if Ryu was staring intently at a shiny gemstone and was refusing to move? And even when I told him he didn't need it, he looked at me with watery, pleading eyes... How could I possibly deny him?! I'd have to buy the gemstone for him after that!

Newly resolved, I nodded to myself. My path to victory was clear—it was time to break out my pleading eyes! I screwed up my resolve and refused to let myself blink until my eyes grew teary, then gave Patrick my best puppy-dog look.

"I really can't have it?" I whined.

"You can't, even if you *do* glare at me."

Patrick, I wasn't glaring at all! I was giving you a cute, pleading look!!!

I let out a depressed sigh. My plan had utterly failed.

I suppose Ryu is a pretty reasonable child, so he's not a very good reference, I mused.

Still, using his example had made my current situation a bit more clear—I was a child begging for treats, and Patrick was my stern parent. All I had to do to succeed in my goal was act like a spoiled child.

I stood up and moved the sofa across from us to the corner of the room, then came back and retrieved the table as well.

“Hey, what are you trying to do now?” Patrick asked, still sitting.

Yes, just stay right there, Patrick. Stay in your VIP seat and fall right into my trap!

Now that the center of the room was clear of furniture, I walked into the empty space and lay on the ground. Facing upward, I began to thrash my arms and legs around.

“No, no, no!” I shrieked. “I want it, I want it, I want it!”

I looked over to Patrick, continuing to flap my limbs around, and found his face completely frozen. All signs of life had left his eyes, and he'd cringed deeply into his seat.

“Y-Yumiella...”

“No, no, no!” I screamed again.

My behavior may be shameful, but I'm making progress! Surely he will allow me to buy the flute in order to get me to stop behaving in such a disgraceful manner! I grinned internally. *As long as I continue to destroy my own dignity, I'll achieve my goal!*

Thus, I continued my attack upon Patrick's resolve for several minutes at extreme intensity. Patrick had maintained his silence the entire time, but now he leaned forward and began to speak.

“Yumiella...”

Has the moment finally arrived?! Is he giving in at last?!

“They're watching, you know. Are you okay with that?”

“I want it, I want it, I want it!”

“And when I say they, I mean *everyone*.” Wearily, Patrick pointed to somewhere beyond my current ability to see.

Who cares about being watched! But, um...who’s “they”? And what does Patrick mean by “everyone”?

I rolled to the side, glancing where Patrick was pointing at. It ended up being the door to the room we were in, which had been opened without me realizing. The servants of the mansion were all crowded around the threshold, peering in from the hallway. Rita and Sara were there, as were Daemon and his fleet of clerks. I even saw the chef!

They probably heard me making a fuss and came to see what was going on, I thought, taking in their expressions. I couldn’t even come up with an adjective to describe the looks on all the servants’ faces.

Faced with such a large crowd, I stopped swinging my arms and legs around and stood right up as if nothing had happened. “Thank you for your hard work,” I said respectfully. “Please leave this to me and return to your stations.”

As they all gaped at me, frozen, I shut the door to the room in their faces. I left them not a moment to respond.

Turning back to Patrick, I moaned, “I wanna die...”

“You know, you *could* just go ahead and buy something just this once? You’d be using your own money, anyway...”

“I don’t want the flute anymore,” I said, pouting.

Humoring me, Patrick placed his hand on my shoulder and did his best to comfort away my shame.

Who needs an extra large monster-summoning flute! Instead, I need a time machine! If need be, I shall fight to return to the past! Although, I guess I’d accept a device that erases people’s memories as well...



Following my tantrum incident, the slightly reserved attitude the servants had toward me changed. Their new level of kindness was pleasant, but I did wish

they wouldn't look at me like I was some pitiful, unfortunate child. It had gotten to the point that they were watching me play with Ryu as if it was a heartwarming scene, and even sneaking me candy and telling me to keep it a secret from Patrick.

I'm a bit old for handouts like this, aren't I? I thought to myself, popping yet another piece of candy into my mouth.

Honestly, I didn't really get why the servants were acting the way they were. I decided to go ask Rita about it, since she'd stayed exactly the same after *the incident*, for better or worse. I'd actually hoped her intense loyalty to me would have dissipated a little after seeing me act so shamefully, but it didn't seem to have affected her at all.

"What's going on with the servants?" I asked her, taking a big bite out of bread filled with sweet cream as I spoke. "Giving me treats isn't actually very helpful, to be honest."

"Please swallow before you speak."

"Hold on, I have five more to get through— Oh, do you want one?"

Rita sighed. "No, thank you. I shall wait as long as you wish, however."

Taking her at her word, I returned to my food. I scarfed it all down within a minute of her declaration that she was willing to wait, then came back at her with the same question I'd started off with.

"So, why is everyone being so kind to me?"

"It started after that *thing* that happened the other day. It seems watching you thrash around while lying on the floor was the final push they needed."

"So *that* isn't the only reason their attitudes changed?"

Rita shook her head. "It's Sir Patrick's doing. Whenever he has some time, he tells everyone stories about you. He's been doing it ever since the two of you arrived here."

I'd known Patrick had been having friendly chats with the servants, but I'd had no idea that they'd been talking about me. Patrick had done something similar before, back when we were still in school and others had suspected me of being

the Demon Lord. He'd told Prince Edwin stories about me to try and change his mind.

I could understand Patrick's intentions—he'd been going around and trying to clear up the various misunderstandings people had about me. I was truly grateful to him, but at the same time I felt pathetic being unable to communicate what kind of person I was to those around me on my own.

Still...if this current situation is Patrick's doing, I guess I'm okay with it.

Just as I came to that conclusion, two maids passed through the hallway in front of the room Rita and I were in. I couldn't stop their conversation from reaching my ears.

"What?" one of them said, clearly aghast. "She broke a window and jumped out of it because she was *embarrassed*?"

"Apparently," confirmed the second maid. "Things must be tough for Sir Patrick."

"But, I don't get it—is there even something more embarrassing than what she did the other day? I feel like she could do anything if she could do *that*."

The second maid chuckled. "Well, I guess that's just how Lady Yumiella is."

All my shameful memories flashed by—the times I'd gone crashing through the window, the time I'd thrown a tantrum on the floor...

I'm not okay with this at all!!!

Subsumed in my despair, my mind searched for anything that could help me continue on.

Come to think of it, I haven't ever had alcohol before, I thought. Perhaps it's time to try something new.

Suddenly desperate to try this mysterious liquid, I went off searching for Patrick.

Once I found him, I asked, "Have you ever had alcohol before?"

"Yeah, I hav—" His eyes narrowed. "Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

“I wanted to try some.”

A sharpness came over Patrick’s expression. “Okay, I’ll make preparations. We’ll have it tonight.”

And with that, he bustled away.

What does he need to prepare? All he has to do is buy the alcohol, right...?



That night, Patrick led me out of the Dolkness mansion and into the streets of Dolkness Village. At first, I’d thought we were strolling around town since Patrick had made a reservation for us somewhere, but now it seemed we were headed to another location entirely.

“Hey, where are we headed?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Patrick replied, his tone more stern than usual. “Just follow me.”

Glancing over at me, Patrick held out his hand. I stared at it in confusion.

“I don’t have anything dangerous on me to give you,” I finally said.

I didn’t hear the entirety of Patrick’s response, as it was mumbled, but I did hear: “She *would* think...”

Despite our rather cryptic conversation, I gave in to Patrick’s lead. And so, we continued to walk under the night sky until we left Dolkness Village behind. Eventually, we ended up in a field lush with verdure; leagues of grassy blades grew from the earth, swaying in the wind. And there, in the midst of that field, was where Patrick was taking me.

“It’s so beautiful...” I murmured.

A round table and two chairs had been set up in the otherwise empty field. Atop the table sat a bottle being chilled with ice and some glasses, as well as several plates of hors d’oeuvres. Everything was shrouded in the light of the perfectly round moon and the multitude of stars which filled the sky around it. Everything looked dreamy, as if the rest of the world had been tucked behind a veil.

“It’s your first time drinking, so you must let me do at least this much for you,” Patrick told me.

It seemed my fiancé was a romantic through and through. I didn’t have a single romantic bone in my body, but I couldn’t help but feel...

My gaze, which had been fixed on the dreamy, ethereal table, shifted to Patrick.

He smiled at me—the kind smile that I loved—and said, “This way you don’t have to worry about breaking things even if you get drunk and go crazy.”

I’m sorry, what did you say...?

It took me a moment, but I pushed my slight feeling of affront aside in favor of continuing to enjoy the party Patrick had so lovingly prepared for us. He seemed a bit worried that I would be a bad drunk, but I didn’t think he needed to worry. Alcohol might be a drug, but I was someone who had a high resistance to such things. Honestly, I probably wouldn’t even be able to get drunk.

I sat down in one of the chairs at the table, then shrank back when Patrick handed me the thinnest of the various glassware on the table.

But I wanted to pretend I was an adventurer and use a pint glass that looks like a tiny wood barrel... I complained internally. *Although, this is probably for the best. I heard beers and ales are bitter.*

Pulling the chilled bottle from the ice it was sitting in, Patrick held it in one hand while he began uncorking it with the other.

“What kind of alcohol is that?” I asked curiously.

“This is champagne,” he replied. “I thought we should go with it, since it’s easy to drink and it’s your first tim—”

Patrick’s voice cut off as I dived under the table. *That was a close one! You should’ve warned me we were drinking champagne—I heard that when you uncork it, the cork flies out like a bullet and the contents burst out like a fountain!*

“What are you doing now, Yumiella?” Patrick asked in a long-suffering voice.

“Well, champagne is the one that explodes, right? Didn’t you learn in school

to hide under your desk during earthquakes and when opening champagne?”

“I have to admit I did not,” he replied.

I heard a small pop go off above my head, and, feeling more sure of my safety, I cautiously crawled out from under the table. Patrick was just finishing pouring a liquid I assumed to be champagne into our glasses.

“I got too freaked out, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” Patrick agreed. “I’m used to it by now, though.”

Oh, so there are other people who are scared of champagne too? The knowledge made me feel relieved—I’d had a relatively normal reaction after all.

I climbed back into my chair and observed the contents of the glass in front of me. The liquid inside was golden and glittered in the moonlight.

What a refined experience this is, I thought. *Here I am, in this lovely, elegant spot, drinking a fancy drink with the man I like... Is this level of happiness allowed?*

“All right then,” Patrick said, reaching out and grabbing his own glass.

“Cheers, Yumiella.”

“Cheers,” I replied.

We brought our glasses together softly, as if for a gentle kiss, and their collision created a satisfying clinking sound.

Now, all that’s left to do is lift my glass to my lips, and pour the sweet liquid into my mout—

“O-Ough! Ough, eugh...”

I curled into myself, choking, trying to hold back the heaving coughs that left me gasping for air.

Patrick got up in a hurry and rushed to my side, rubbing my back to comfort me. When I’d gotten my breath back, he handed me his handkerchief.

Right, I can’t drink carbonated things, I thought, wiping my mouth. *I forgot.*

“Are you all right?” Patrick asked worriedly. “If the alcohol is making you feel bad—”

“It’s not that,” I explained. “I just can’t drink bubbly things.”

Alas, my first memory of alcohol has been ruined by carbon dioxide. So...maybe I should get rid of it.

Putting the coughing fit past me, I told Patrick I wanted to try a different kind of alcohol. He didn’t seem entirely sold on the idea.

“It’ll be all right!” I assured him. “Why don’t we do wine? It doesn’t have carbonation, right?!”

“Did you want to drink white wine, then?”

I shook my head. “I’d prefer red, please.”

I mean, how could I possibly go for a white wine for my first taste? It has to be red.

Patrick poured red wine into my glass, and the beautiful crimson liquid swished, sending a decadent floral scent wafting out.

All right, time to tip my glass and gulp down the enticing blood of the gods! It shall fill my body, and...

“Eugh.” My face completely scrunched up.

What even is this stuff?! It’s gotta have gone bad, right? There’s no way it’s supposed to taste so bitter and sour... I gazed at my glass, disappointed. Unfortunately, I am not rotten, nor do I have a taste for rotten things.

“Are you sure this hasn’t gone bad?” I asked Patrick.

He gave me a slight smile. “Yeah, that’s just how it tastes. You should try drinking it while picking at some of the food.”

Patrick himself seemed to be leading me by example—he ate a bite of cheese as he finished off the wine in his glass. Obediently, I followed suit, but the taste didn’t change. Cheese and grape juice would have definitely tasted better.

Wine tastes better than potions, at least, I thought. Too bad it doesn’t refill your stamina or mana.

I sighed. “Well, I guess I’ll go ahead and drink it if you want me to...”

Patrick’s brows scrunched together in disquiet. “I tried to pick brands that

were easy to drink, but I guess they aren't to your taste, huh? You should try the white wine—it's smoother."

I guess I should've chosen white after all, I lamented. I should've known not to trust the red when I realized it was room temperature...

Observing the white wine, I saw that it had a golden hue that was more muted than the champagne and smelled of fresh fruit.

I probably shouldn't... I'm probably just not going to like it. But...I might as well give it a try! White wine is all about how it feels going down!

I grabbed my glass, then took a big gulp of the white wine. "Huh...?" I said, shocked. "I can actually drink this one."

On top of that, it even tasted...good? Just to make sure, I slowly sipped on the remaining half of the pour. When I didn't find that flavor objectionable, I threw a cracker with ham on it into my mouth, then took another sip.

"This might actually be good."

Patrick grinned at me. "I'm glad to hear that."

We said cheers once more, then settled into a comfortable silence as we emptied our glasses and nibbled on some more food.

I still wasn't sure about what it felt like to be drunk—as best as I could tell, it seemed like my poison resistance was winning against the alcohol.

So much for my goal to get rid of some memories, I thought with a sigh. I guess I'll just have to be satisfied with having an amazing time.

Time passed pleasantly after that. I was soon asking Patrick for a third glass of wine, a proposition that seemed to give him some discomfort.

"It's your first time, so why don't we stop here?" he cajoled. "I brought some juice along as well."

I shook my head. "It's fine, I'm not drunk," I insisted.

Patrick gave in and poured me another glass, though he seemed concerned. I couldn't help but smile, watching him.

He's such a worrywart, but I like that part of him too, I thought fondly. You

know...this is kinda really fun. I'm getting excited!

"Heh heh heh..." I giggled. "Heyyy, Patrick."

"What's up?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say your name."

Maaan, I can't believe I'm having such a good time! I feel all floaty, and uplifted...

I could feel the corners of my mouth turning up on their own. It appeared that my facial muscles had come back to life. I stared intently at Patrick, my lips curving into a full-on grin. His green eyes, when they met mine, seemed to ever so slightly reflect the light of the moon.

"It's been...some time, since we've met," Patrick said halting, averting his gaze from mine as if he was growing embarrassed.

"Yeah," I agreed. "You know, I'm really happy I met you, Patrick."

"I see... So, um, well."

Patrick took out a small black box from his pocket. I stared fixedly at the palm-sized container, completely at a loss as to what could be inside. Patrick himself seemed unusually flustered—his gaze was shifting all over the place. Then, all of a sudden, he looked directly into my eyes, as if he'd resolved himself to do something.

He's so cute when he's nervous, I thought, little butterflies lighting in my stomach. Just looking into each other's eyes like this is enough to make me happy.

Something came over me then, and I blurted out the feelings I was normally too embarrassed to voice.

"Patrick, I love you."

"Wha..." Clearly flustered, Patrick averted his eyes again.

Meanwhile, I was feeling euphoric. All I'd done was put my feelings into words, but it felt incredible. I started giggling madly, unable to hold my laughter back anymore. I even suggested Patrick join in.

Why not?! It's fun!

"Are you drunk?" Patrick asked me, his face going serious.

"Not at all! I'm not drunk in the slightest! I'm just having some *fun*."

"That's what every drunk person says..."

"I know, right?" I giggled again. "It's sooo disgraceful when people do that."

I'd had plenty of experiences with drunks who couldn't admit they were drunk.

Like, why can't they look at themselves objectively? If their decision-making skills aren't as good because of the alcohol, why can't they just stop themselves before they get that trashed? They should at least know how much they've had to drink. I leaned forward, pouring myself another glass of wine. *Huh, I wonder what number I'm on...*



“So, what’s in that box?” I asked Patrick. “Is it snacks? A box of treats?”

“This is...”

“That’s so unfair! You were going to eat it by yourself, weren’t you?”

“Ugh, I’m just going to give up on this for today...”

Patrick pulled his arm back, as if to put the box away.

It only makes me more curious when you try and hide it like that! I reached out, trying to snatch the box out of Patrick’s hand, but found that my arm had gone in a different direction that I’d originally anticipated. *Since when can Patrick create an afterimage of himself...?* I wondered.

“Hey, where did—?”

“That’s enough alcohol, I think. Do you need water?”

My whole face scrunched up in resentment. “How dare you! You’re even going to take alcohol away from me?! Do you really hate me that much?!”

“Of course I don’t hate you,” Patrick said with a sigh, seeming deeply weary. “In fact, I like you.”

Heh heh heh, he said he likes me. I like you too, Patrick.

“How much do you like me then?” I demanded. “How big is your love?”

Patrick scrubbed his hand over his face. “You’ve gone past being cute and are just annoying now.”

H-He thinks I’m annoying? My eyes went watery out of nowhere, tear droplets spilling down into my wine glass.

“Do you...hate me?”

“I like you, Yumiella,” Patrick said, sighing again. “I like you, so *please* stop crying.”

“I-I’m such a troublesome woman, though... And the ones who say that are the worst of all, aren’t they?”

“I think your questions are more troublesome than you,” Patrick said softly, reaching out to caress my hand with his.

I turned my hand over and held his back, wanting to feel more of his warmth.

“You know,” Patrick continued, “it doesn’t need to be at this level of intensity, but it would be nice if you were more honest with your feelings on a regular basis.”

“But I’m acting the same as usual, though,” I said, confused. “Is something off?”

There was a short pause. Instead of answering my question, Patrick asked, “How do you feel about me?”

“I love you,” I said plainly.

Why would he ask me something so obvious? It’s not like I feel any different about him tonight than I normally do.

Patrick raised his empty hand to his face, shielding it from me. “I’d like it if you could tell me that when you’re sober.”

“Sure...” I said with a shrug. “Anyway, isn’t it kind of painfully self-conscious of you to ask how I feel about you? How embarrassing... I like you, though, so it’s fine.”

“You sure did a one-eighty there...”

I went to pour myself another glass of wine, but Patrick had already caught the one hand I’d had free in his. I briefly considered insisting on drinking more, but quickly decided against it—holding hands with Patrick was much better. There was no doubt in my mind that it wasn’t the alcohol making me have an unbelievably fun time—it was the fact that I was with Patrick.

And so, we gazed at each other as time passed us by. Although neither of us spoke, the silence felt comfortable. The full moon continued to rise in the night sky, and when it finally reached its peak Patrick stood up.

“We should get going.”

I got up from my chair as well, and...

Huh? Why’s the ground shaking...?

I stumbled forward, almost falling, but Patrick caught me before I could hit

the ground. It appeared that walking was going to be a problem.

“Carry me,” I demanded.

Seemingly unfazed, Patrick silently scooped me into his arms. I held on to him, my arms tight around his neck. Our faces were the closest they had been the entire night—there was only one thing left to do.

“Hey,” I said softly, bringing Patrick’s attention to me.

“What is it?” he asked. He shifted, bringing his face close to mine.

I tilted my head up, my eyes meeting Patrick. I leaned toward him, and...you know.

I couldn’t tell you how Patrick reacted after that—the second it was over, I fell asleep in his arms.



My eyes flew open, revealing a familiar ceiling. I sat up, cradling my pounding head, and quickly realized I was in my bedroom.

“So, was all that a dream...?” I muttered to myself.

If it had been, it’d been quite an intense one. I’d shared my feelings about Patrick directly to his face, and then in the end I’d even gone in for a—

Something so unrealistic would never have happened.

Even so, I thought my dream self was incredible. I knew that, no matter how intensely I thought something and directed it at someone else, it wouldn’t get through to them if I didn’t actually say it out loud.

I hope I can tell Patrick directly that I like him, just like I said I would in my dream.

Just then, a knock came on my door.

“Are you awake, Yumiella?” asked the man I’d just been thinking of. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah! Come in.”

Having received my permission, Patrick went ahead and entered my

bedroom, carrying a tray with a pitcher of water and a cup. Just the sight of him made me remember what had happened in my dream, which brought a flush to my cheeks.

“Do you remember what happened yesterday?” Patrick asked as he poured me some water.

“‘What happened yesterday?’” I asked, confused. “What are you talking about?”

Patrick waved a hand. “Never mind, it’s fine if you don’t remember.”

Huh...? So does that mean that my dream...wasn’t a dream?

If my dream *had* been real, then I’d already made the mistake of saying I didn’t remember. Unwilling to contradict myself right away, I casually began trying to get some more details out of Patrick.

“Could you remind me of what we did yesterday?”

“We had some drinks together, then...” Patrick trailed off. “You *really* don’t remember?”

You’ve got to be kidding me! Everything that happened in my dream is totally real! Unconsciously, I glanced down at the clothes I was wearing, which turned out to be the same as the ones I’d worn the day before. *Patrick, you didn’t even take the opportunity to get me undressed!*

But now wasn’t the time to think of such things—I had to get everything else under control.

Without thinking, I started to lie and act like I didn’t remember. “Hmm... You know, I *do* feel like I’ve got a vague memory of that happening, but that’s all. Did I end up getting drunk and going crazy or anything?”

Patrick shook his head. “You just had one sip and fell asleep like you were passing out. You should probably avoid drinking from now on.”

It was everything I could do not to narrow my eyes at him. *Patrick, you liar! Although, he’s lying out of kindness, isn’t he? So...why am I lying? Am I trying to run away and avoid telling him how I feel again? I just decided I wasn’t going to do that anymore!*

Still, I wasn't strong enough to tell him the truth. I just said, "All right, then. I won't drink alcohol anymore."

"Sounds good to me," Patrick replied. I couldn't quite tell if he'd actually believed my lies, or just chosen to take what I said at face value. "Anyway, you should get some more rest; you might not be fully recovered yet."

After that, Patrick turned and headed for my bedroom door, evidently trying to leave. I got out of bed and followed him, which he only noticed once he was already halfway through the doorway. Turning fully back around, he tried to push the almost-shut door all the way open again, but I shoved it closed.

"Don't go yet!" I yelled.

"You say that, but you certainly aren't acting like you want me to stay!"

Now that we were talking through the closed door, I relaxed a little. Even if I couldn't directly tell him how I felt while looking at him, having this one slab of wood between us made me feel like I could.

"Um... I..." My hand clenched tightly on the doorknob, ensuring the door wouldn't open.

All I have to do now is say I like him. Looking back on it now, it feels like it took me an age to get here. But it's time! Time to break through the door to my heart!

Just then, there was a loud snap.

"What was that...?" Patrick asked, confused.

"Oh, the doorknob just came off," I said with forced casualness.

I looked down at my hands, staring at the broken doorknob still tucked in my grip, as the door slowly inched open.

You know, this isn't what I meant when I said I was going to break through a door...

I wilted in despair. Now that I'd destroyed yet another part of the mansion, I was sure to be scolded by Patrick again. The atmosphere for telling him my feelings had been completely destroyed.

Patrick, who could now see the damage I'd done to the door, let out a long sigh. "How hard did you twist the doorknob to make it turn out like this? This is the kind of stuff that piles up and leads to all the people around you being afraid of—"

"I know, I'm sorry," I said, staring penitently down at the floor.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see some servants staring at us as they passed by in the hall. I could practically hear them thinking, *Looks like she's gone and done it again...* In the past, that would have hurt me, but by this point I'd grown used to it.

I let my gaze wander, as silence spooled out between us, and my eyes eventually fell on Patrick's shirt pocket. There was a square lump in it.

Is that...the small box he took out and immediately put away yesterday? I wondered. *Well, now I'm curious. And that means no holding back!*

"That," I said abruptly, pointing at Patrick's chest.

"What? I'm not done talkin—"

"That's the box from yesterday, right?"

"W-Well..."

Whoa, I thought, staring at Patrick's visibly flustered face. *I'm not sure what triggered that reaction, but I bet if I keep pushing, I'll be able to figure out what's in the box and he'll forget to finish lecturing me!*

It was an excellent chance for me to kill two birds with one stone, and there was no way I was going to let it pass me by. I decided to just go for it.

"I might be dense, Patrick," I said in my version of a condescending tone, "but did you *really* think I wouldn't figure out what's in there?" I jabbed a finger in his direction, indicating his shirt pocket. "Enough already—take out the box."

"So you already knew, huh?" Patrick said, letting out a weary laugh. "I guess you're right; there's no point in trying to prolong things."

With a long, crestfallen sigh, he began pulling the small black box out of his pocket. Even down to the last second, I was wondering what was in it. My last guess was brass knuckles, because of its size. But then, Patrick at last revealed

the box's contents—a ring. It was silver, with a clear gemstone set in the top.

Why a ring? I thought to myself, confused.

As I stared at Patrick in bafflement, he pulled it out of the box and slid it on one of my fingers.

Wow, it's so pretty, I thought. The gemstone on the ring was even clearer than a glass bead—if I didn't look closely, it almost blended into the background. *Oh, I know what this is! It's a diamond!*

Just to make sure, I turned to Patrick and asked, "This is a diamond...right?"

But he shook his head. "Nope. You said you didn't need a gemstone, so I immediately had something else prepared."

"Did I really say that?" I asked after thinking for a moment.

"Yumiella..." Patrick groaned. "You really are something..." Chuckling, he brushed my reaction off with an, "Oh, well," and moved on to explaining what his gift was. "This is a specialized ring that can store magical energy. Remember that shady merchant? The one who tried to sell you the monster-summoning flute? I bought it from him."

So he bought it from that merchant, I thought. *I see. If it can store magical energy, I could use it in an emergency and cast spells. That's very—*

"I can't imagine a situation where you'd run out of mana," Patrick said, cutting into my thoughts, "but it's not like it's totally useless. So, um...I hope you like it."

"Thank you, Patrick!"

Elated at the best present ever, I leapt forward, hugging him without thinking. As I latched on to his side, he turned his face away in embarrassment. It seemed at the end of the day, Patrick was a bit shy as well.

A few moments later, I put some distance between us and declared, "I'll try putting some magical energy into it."

Once I got started, I went slowly and only put in a little at a time, being careful not to break the ring. After I'd filtered a good deal of my dark magical energy into it, the clear gem began to shine in an ominous black hue. It looked like a

cursed item that would destroy the world.

Patrick and I stared in shock at the shining stone, which had taken on the appearance of an agent of chaos that would awaken a person to their deep, dark desires. Both of us had been left completely speechless.

If this is what my magical energy is like, what sort of monster am I?!

“Maybe it would be better to put your magical energy in this, Patrick,” I suggested after a pause. “You know, since it’s a gift from you.”

“Yeah...” he agreed.

He went ahead and filled the ring with his wind magical energy, which made the gemstone shine green like an emerald. It was reminiscent of his eyes and absolutely lovely.

I let out a sigh of relief. It had ended up looking pretty, thankfully. *All’s well that ends well, I guess!*

“Thank you, Patrick! It’s so nice to get a gift for no reason at all. I’ll eventually surprise you with something too!”

Although, I guess it won’t be a surprise if I’m telling him I’m doing it...

“For...no reason?” Patrick mumbled.

“Huh? Well, it’s not my birthday, and it’s not an anniversary or anything, right?”

“Ah, shoot! Yumiella, will you marry— Actually, saying it now is probably...”

“Mar” I wondered. “Mar” what?

The answer didn’t seem like it would be coming to me anytime soon, so I happily then turned my attention to the stone on my left ring finger instead. Patrick, meanwhile, was groaning and shaking, almost as if he were in pain.

You good, Patrick...?



The rest of the day, I was buoyed up by the happiness of receiving Patrick’s surprise gift. The fact that he’d given me something was nice on its own, but he’d given me something useful on top of that! The fact that it was ring-shaped

was yet another boon, as I could carry my new magical instrument around easily in case I needed to use it as a source of magical energy in an emergency.

Happily ensconced in my office, I stared at the ring where it glistened on my left ring finger.

Hmm...I feel like there's a meaning behind wearing a ring on that finger... I thought, but I didn't dwell on it for too long. I doubt Patrick thought that deeply over which finger he put the ring on, anyway. Men don't seem like they really get interested in that sort of stuff.

Focusing back on the paperwork in front of me, I let my mind wander over what I should do to thank Patrick for his thoughtfulness. Since his gift was a surprise, I wanted to surprise him as well.

What would he want...? I wondered. Maybe it would be better to throw him an event instead of getting him something. Like...a surprise party? Is there even something for us to celebrate? Wait, there totally is! All right, it's decided then!

After that, I turned my attention fully to my work, and completed all my tasks for the day within a few hours. Daemon was still in the office with me, so I decided to go ahead and get his advice on the event I'd decided to throw for Patrick.

"Um, Daemon? I have something important I wanted to ask you about..."

My deputy turned to look more closely at me. "Should I call Sir Patrick over as well?"

I shook my head violently. That was the opposite of what I wanted, since I was trying to keep this whole thing a secret.

Basically, I wanted to use this party as a venue to congratulate Patrick on reaching level 99. I wasn't sure of his exact level since we hadn't done an assessment in a while, but I was pretty sure he'd get there in the next few months. I figured a surprise party would be a pretty good way to thank him for my ring, and since I wanted him to be as shocked as I'd been, I really wanted it to be kept secret until the very last moment.

"Patrick can't know," I stressed. "I'll tell him myself."

“Okay...” Daemon said slowly, sighing in confusion. “So, what is it you wanted to ask me about?”

“Um, it’s about a party, or like, an event to celebrate something...” I said in a quiet voice. I had to be careful—I didn’t know where Patrick would possibly be listening in from.

Daemon still seemed baffled by what I was saying, at least until he saw my left hand. “Oh! I see,” he said, eyes brightening with understanding and his tone taking on a tinge of excitement. “Celebrations are in order, indeed! Please tell Sir Patrick yourself, Lady Yumiella.”

“Right?” I said, leaning forward in my chair. “Don’t you think it’ll be happening soon?”

“I was on the edge of my seat wondering when it would happen!”

Internally, I was beaming. Daemon was a skilled worker, so he’d understood what I was going for without me hardly saying a thing. It was absolutely incredible how he could figure out that I was throwing a surprise party just by looking at the ring Patrick had given me! And for him to be so excited over Patrick reaching level 99 as well... It was clear I’d been right in thinking that reaching the maximum level was something that should be celebrated.

In order to both organize my thoughts and confirm what we needed, I decided to bounce my thoughts off of Daemon. “First, we’ll need to prepare a venue, right?”

My deputy nodded. “Would you like to do it in the county, or in the Royal Capital?”

“Here is fine.”

“Understood. I’m sure the people of the county will be happy as well.”

Would they? I wondered. I found the sentiment a bit strange, but decided to just continue on with my questions.

“Is there anything else that needs to be prepared?”

“If it’s something that you might be particular about...” Daemon said thoughtfully. “Perhaps the cake?”

“Yeah, we’ll definitely need a cake,” I agreed.

Daemon nodded. “Then I shall prepare one as large and extravagant as possible.”

Excellent! I thought. *After all, no celebration would be complete without cake! Oh, I never should have doubted Daemon—it’s obvious we’re on totally the same page.*

Now all that was left to decide was who to invite. The people working at the Dolkness mansion were definitely invited, so all I had to do was figure out who else should come.

“Who do you think we should invite?” I asked Daemon.

“Well, Sir Patrick’s parents of course, as well as His and Her Majesty.”

“What?! Even the king?”

Daemon nodded with the utmost seriousness. “Of course, this is a ceremony that has to do with the future of the kingdom.”

Calling it a ceremony makes it sound like a big deal, but I guess it’s true that there isn’t really anyone else around that’s reached level 99 other than me. The king can’t exactly disregard Patrick once he’s as strong as I am... It appears this event is going to become quite the production.

To tell the truth, things didn’t sound like they were going to turn out exactly like I’d had in mind, but I wasn’t too bothered by that.

“We’ll need outfits as well,” Daemon suddenly said. “We’ll have a wonderful dress prepared for you, Lady Yumiella. I’m sure you’ll look lovely.”

“You want *me* to wear a *dress*?”

Daemon nodded. “You’re the star of the event, so it’s only natural.”

“But...isn’t Patrick the star here?”

“You are too, Lady Yumiella,” Daemon explained. “This will be an event for the both of you.”

Right, I guess I am level 99 as well... Daemon must be thinking of celebrating with Patrick. That must have been where that strange feeling I got came from

earlier. Do I really have to wear a dress, though? I don't wanna...

"Is the dress necessary?" I asked Daemon, giving him my best pleading look.

"Of course it is!" he chided me, dashing my hopes. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime event! You don't want to think back in the future and have any regrets."

I mean, reaching level 99 is a once-in-a-lifetime event, I thought, but I got there ages ago! Why do I have to wear a dress now...?

After mopping internally, I finally said, "I don't want anything too flashy."

"I think we should go with a pure white dress that uses an abundance of lace," Daemon said, an odd level of intensity on his face. "It might be a *bit* flashy, but I believe its angelic purity will outweigh that."

White?! Did Daemon just say a white dress?! If I wear white, then...I'm going to have to be super careful not to spill any food! I won't even be able to properly eat because I'll be too worried about staining the dress. Well, maybe the cake will be the same white as the dress. I could probably spill some crumbs then and still be fine. I'll just have to be careful of stain-inducing foods like spaghetti or curry udon. Oh, and wait—I wonder if we'll need sashes that say we're the stars of the event! Patrick might not like that, though, so maybe we should hold off...

As my thoughts continued to wander, Daemon began to tear up. "I was worried about when it would happen," he said, voice choking up. "But now I'm truly overjoyed."

I gave him a sideways look. "Is it really something to be that happy about?"

"Yes!" he insisted. "Now the Dolkness family will become more stable, and continue to prosper. That ring also looks very good on you."

It made sense that things would become more stable with two people who were level 99, but two was too little. It would be great if more people would awaken to the wonders of level grinding. Since he was here in front of me, I might as well start with Daemon. He was a bit older, but age didn't matter when it came to leveling.

"Maybe you'll be next after Patrick and I," I said thoughtfully.

Daemon reared back. "What? Mine was not so grand, but it happened long

ago...”

Wait, Daemon is level 99?!

“What?! Really?!” I shouted back, shocked.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “I have a wife who supports me from behind the scenes, so I am quite happy with what I’ve already got.”

Ah, I see, I thought. He just meant that he was happy at his current level. I guess if you consider his work, he doesn’t really need to level up that high. On a separate note, though, why is he suddenly boasting about his wife...?

I wanted to get back to filling out the details of the plan, but Daemon refused to let me help any further. He told me quite firmly to leave the rest to him.

“I’ll let all the servants know right away and we’ll start preparations,” he finished.

“Thank you. I’d like to let Patrick know myself, so—”

“We’ll impose a gag order. I’m sure if we explain the situation everyone will cooperate.”

I nodded in appreciation. “For the timing then...I think in about six months would be good?”

“That would be around winter then,” Daemon said thoughtfully. “I think the period after the Foundation Festival would be perfect.”

I bowed my head one more time to thank him, and our discussion of the party to celebrate Patrick reaching level 99 was over. That day, Daemon and I had both thought we were on the same page, discussing the same event—there could be no doubt about that, at the very least.

Interlude 4: Cliff

In the viscounty of Cottoness, there was a village that was especially poor. As the viscounty was already considerably impoverished, the village was quite badly off, and their situation had only worsened when they'd been attacked by monsters six months before. While they'd suffered no human casualties, their fields had been damaged by the onslaught, and the villagers' food supply had been left in a precarious position.

Desperate, the villagers had begged their viscount to lend them aid, and to exempt them from taxes for one year. The response they'd received had been simple and utterly merciless—taxes would be collected that year, just as they had been every year before.

Pressed for options, the villagers had turned to crime. They traveled into the neighboring territory so they wouldn't be caught, and then planned to attack a carriage that appeared to be carrying valuable cargo. They decided their preferred target would be a vehicle belonging to aristocrats, which they now deeply abhorred, and which had as few guards traveling alongside it as possible.

Fate had been in the villagers' favor—or had been, perhaps, against them—for they'd soon found a carriage that fit their requirements. It had been traveling alone, and had borne the crest of some aristocratic family on its side. In addition, no mounted guard had accompanied it, and it had only had a single driver to direct the horses. Add this to the fact that it had been a small carriage, which could only carry around four passengers, and the villagers believed they'd found the perfect prey. They surrounded the carriage at once.

Until then, everything had gone according to their plan. Alas, as soon as they'd chosen that particular carriage as their target, their failure had been predetermined.

Several months had passed since that day, and the villagers of the aforementioned village in Cottoness Viscounty were currently gathered around their village head, having a meeting.

“A messenger arrived from Dolkness County yesterday,” the village head declared. “They’re ready for us now, so they’re finally going to ask for Viscount Cottoness’s approval.”

“Are we really going to move?” one villager called out. “Like, all of us?”

After all, the carriage the villagers had attacked had ended up belonging to the infamous Yumiella Dolkness. She’d taken no retribution at the time, and had invited them all to move to Dolkness land, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t face punishment later on. It was possible she’d use her power to do something as drastic as wiping out their entire village, leaving it a vacant field.

Even if they *were* at fault, the villagers weren’t willing to just sit there and watch as their home was destroyed. Although they’d ended up agreeing to Lady Yumiella’s plan to move to Dolkness County on the spot, they’d also discussed fleeing the situation entirely depending on how things panned out.

“I think we’re actually getting quite a good deal,” the village head assured his people. “From what I’ve been told, we’ll be moving to an area that is already equipped with housing, and has fertile land that gets plenty of sun.”

“You can’t be serious,” one of the villagers exclaimed. “This is *Dolkness County* we’re talking about! It’s the county ruled by a black-haired Demon Lord!”

“Plus, doesn’t it sound too good to be true?” another villager pointed out. “And what about those rumors that she feeds people to her dragon?”

It seems that no matter how optimistic I am, they’re all determined to be quite critical, the elderly village head thought. He raised a hand slightly and waited for the murmurs to quiet down.

“I think we can trust the people of Dolkness,” the village head declared. “Did the food supply they promised not arrive just when they said it would? They even sent us quite a bit of financial aid.”

“That’s true, the things they sent over *did* help us...” one of the villagers admitted.

“In the end, we no longer have a choice,” the village head said firmly. “We must move to Dolkness County.”

The villagers fell silent, pondering their leader's words. The viscount of Cottoness had already forsaken them, so it was clear they could no longer remain where they were. And, even if they fled somewhere else, it was highly unlikely that they'd be able to find a territory other than Dolkness County that would agree to take in a community of over one hundred villagers. Still...they were talking about moving to *that* Dolkness County, the one governed by Yumiella Dolkness, who was famed for feeding any subordinates she wasn't fond of to her dragon.

Seeing that the villagers were struggling to come to a decision, the village head spoke up, explaining the plan he had in mind.

"That said, I think it would be a good idea if we scouted out Dolkness County to see what living there is like. I've decided to hand the responsibility for that mission over to Cliff."

Out of all the other villagers, Cliff was in the best shape, and was in general quite popular. At times he would even act as a leader in place of their elderly village head. When they'd been planning out how to rob a carriage, he'd served as their commander.

"So, all I have to do is go check out Dolkness County?" Cliff asked. He seemed entirely unafraid of completing the dangerous task he'd been given.

Murmurs rose from within the crowd of gathered villagers. All of them seemed sure that they could trust Cliff with the responsibility the village head had bestowed upon him.

"If I don't return...I want you all to run," Cliff told the rest of the villagers, voice serious. "Even if we all get separated, I'm sure we'll be able to live and laugh together again one day."

These determined words brought tears to the other villagers' eyes. They held them back as Cliff headed out of the village, brushing off all those who tried to stop him. It was time for him to take a trip to the exceedingly perilous territory of Dolkness County.



"So, where are you visiting from, Cliff?"

“Um...from way up north.”

“Wow, you’ve made quite the journey from such a cold place.”

It had been roughly half a day since Cliff had left his village. He’d walked north for the majority of that time, and had soon crossed the border into Dolkness County. At the moment, he was wandering around, gathering what information he could while pretending to be a traveler from a faraway land.

The place he’d arrived at was a small village that was around the same size as his home. He’d called out to a villager that happened to be working in the fields, and they’d begun chatting with him with a gentle smile.

To tell the truth, Cliff was stunned—the area he’d traveled through so far seemed far too idyllic and peaceful to belong to a territory supposedly reigned over by a Demon Lord, let alone one that let her dragon run wild.

Is...Dolkness County not a dangerous place after all? Is this all my responsibility, that I built up such determination to do, is going to come to?

Concealing his shock, Cliff tried to get the middle-aged male villager he’d been speaking with to chat some more. “This place is in...Dolkness County, is that right? How’s the economy out here?”

“Things were pretty awful until recently,” the villager admitted. “Then we got our new countess, and our lives improved by leaps and bounds practically in an instant. The roads got cleaned up, so now there’s more merchants, and on top of that, she reduced the tax rate to zero this year to celebrate!”

He sounds so happy and excited, Cliff thought. It certainly seems like he’s telling the truth.

“I see,” Cliff said. He decided to act as if he’d suddenly developed an interest in the countess, to see how the villager responded. “Seems like your new countess must be a good person.”

“Oh, yes!” the villager burst out. “She’s a god, after all!”

Cliff wasn’t sure how to take that. He could tell the villager was deeply grateful toward the countess, but calling her a god seemed a bit much.

Then, all of a sudden, the villager began to walk away. “Hey, mister, follow

me. This way.”

Cliff did as he was told to and was led to a shrine made out of stone. “What’s this?”

“It’s a shrine for the mountain god, otherwise known as our countess!”

“What...?” Cliff’s stomach dropped. “The countess is claiming that she’s a god?”

There’s no way an aristocrat who refers to themselves as a god is anything but a lousy person, Cliff thought dispiritedly. But...this guy seems so proud of that shrine. Maybe I’m not fully grasping the situation.

This was confirmed when the villager hurriedly shook his head. “Oh no, no. It’s just that, sometime before I got married—around ten years ago, I believe—a mountain god appeared. They went around defeating all the monsters that appeared around here. And recently, all these years later, we found out that the mountain god was actually Lady Yumiella. Isn’t that incredible?”

“It sure is...” Cliff said obligingly.

Truth be told, he had no idea what the man was talking about. Ten years ago, Lady Yumiella would have been a little girl under ten years old. Was the guy seriously saying that she’d been taking down monsters at such a young age, and had ended up being mistaken for a god?

After that, Cliff stuck around for a while and listened to various other stories about Dolkness County. The whole time, not a single negative word was said about Lady Yumiella.



Cliff knew visiting only one village wouldn’t be enough to see the full picture of how Dolkness County was faring, so he continued to travel further into the territory on foot. He next arrived at a village full of people who’d come from outside Dolkness County.

Is this...a tourist destination? he wondered. *Well, at least no one should find me suspicious here.*

Looking around the village, Cliff found that there were a variety of different

lodging options. There was everything from renovated housing to entirely new construction. It was obvious that until a little while ago, this area had been just another regular farming village.

It's so calm and tranquil here, even with all the people, Cliff thought. *I quite like it.*

After a while, he decided to follow the crowd, and ended up arriving at a lake a few minutes later. It was a perfect circle, and there were several small boats floating upon its waters. Standing among a large group of people, Cliff gazed at the surface of the lake, mesmerized by how it glimmered and reflected the light. His attention only flickered away when he heard a man, who was carrying a *nobori* banner from a rental boat shop nearby, sharing information meant for tourists. Cliff followed those around him as they drew closer, and listened in.

The first thing he heard was, “This lake was made by the owner of this territory, Countess Yumiella Dolkness!”

Cliff's brows scrunched together in confusion. *What does he mean, she made the lake?*

“The countess launched an enormous boulder high into the sky, which landed here and created a round hole! Rainwater then collected in that hole, which created this beautiful lake,” the man continued.

Cliff's brows scrunched even further. *Why would Lady Yumiella launch a boulder into the sky...?*

As if the man had heard Cliff's thoughts, he went on, “The countess knew this all along, which is why she threw the boulder in the first place.”

At this point, Cliff's face couldn't get any more baffled. *I mean, did she really think that far ahead when she threw this boulder?*

“This lake is also known to bring success to romantic relationships. There's no doubt that you and your partner will have a great relationship if you get on a boat together!”

Wait, and where did these supposed relationship powers come from?!

Cliff felt completely and utterly lost. There were just so many things he didn't

understand about this strange, Yumiella-made lake. But before he could give in to despair, the man from the boat rental shop switched out with a woman from a gift shop. She held a plain wooden sword up high, so that everyone could see. Cliff noted that the handle had “Dolkness County” engraved on it.

“This is our most popular souvenir—a wooden sword! These are the real thing, made under the supervision of Lady Yumiella Dolkness, and only available here! Even the countess herself trains with a wooden sword like this, so if you get one for yourself there’s no doubt you’ll be able to grow strong! Keep in mind though, you can’t buy them in bulk!”

I don’t get it, Cliff moaned internally. How does a simple wooden sword have that intense of an effect on a person?

Despite his doubts, Cliff himself later fell victim to the gift shop woman’s intense persuasion, and bought a wooden sword with what little travel fare he had left.



After that, Cliff visited several other locations in Dolkness County, then returned home to his own village safe and sound. Once everyone had gathered, he reported the results of his scouting to them all at once. His trip through Dolkness County had been filled with strange things that he hadn’t understood, he told them, but there was one thing he was certain of.

“Dolkness County is not a bad place like we’ve heard it was. It’s actually a pretty good place. But...”

“But?”

“But...it’s weird.”

Chapter 5: The Hidden Boss Heads to the Royal Capital

It had been less than two months since we had started working on developing the new village, but preparations were already nearly finished. The fields were still untilled, but that would be left for the villagers to handle. As the land was to be theirs, they shouldn't have any qualms taking on that particular job.

There was still one problem left for us to solve regarding the villagers from the devastated village that would be moving here, though—I needed to convince my neighbor, Viscount Cottoness, to agree to my plan. I wanted to settle things as amicably as possible.

I figured if I prodded the viscount on his lack of management, he probably wouldn't be able to say much to contradict me—after all, the reason his villagers had turned to theft was because he'd decided to refuse them aid even though they'd informed him that they were leading a life of hardship after being attacked by monsters. He'd left them pretty much entirely to their own devices before that too, which meant that the village couldn't have been located in that important of an area for the viscounty. Lastly, it was likely that the village had been in the red for several years, perhaps even a few decades if things were really bad—technically, my taking them off his hands should be a good deal for both of our territories. Or at least, *I* thought so.

The plan was for me to travel to speak with the viscount along with Patrick. He seemed to want to travel with me whenever I went anywhere for work.

Aw, Patrick, you silly! This isn't a date, you know!

Regardless, he'd insisted, "I can't let you out of my sight."

In return, I'd asked him, "Does that mean you're completely smitten with me?"

But he'd only rolled his eyes. "It means I don't know what sort of trouble you might cause on your own," he'd clarified.

Here I was, thinking our tale was one of a charming girl and a passionate boy, but it was actually about a delinquent girl and her guardian supervisor all along! I pouted internally. *Come on, Patrick, our relationship should be more loving than a prisoner and her guard!*

Anyway, we were going to visit the Viscount Cottoness, who was just another provincial aristocrat...or at least, I'd *thought* he was. According to the preliminary research I'd done recently, he leaned toward the radical side of the political spectrum, and had actually ended up quite wealthy despite his provincial territory due to the cotton his family had begun cultivating several generations before. It appeared that cash crops like cotton were worth quite a lot of money.

The current viscount of Cottoness had used this wealth to get as close to Duke Hillrose and his merry band of friends as possible, in what was clearly a bid for power. As always, that specific brand of thinking was a complete mystery to me.

He's not quite as bad as my parents, who left their territory for the Royal Capital and never looked back, but the viscount is clearly quite an ambitious man, I mused. I can see him asking for something from me in return for taking the village off his hands—I'm going to have to approach these negotiations with a clear mind.

Just then, we arrived at the viscount's mansion, which was located in the central town of his territory, and was a bit smaller than my own property in Dolkness County. We were quickly led to the drawing room, where the viscount was waiting for us.

"It's been a while, Viscount Cottoness," I greeted the man.

The viscount, who was a slender man in his forties who looked so unsubstantial that he might be blown away by a strong wind, nodded. "We've been awaiting your visit."

I had actually met the viscount once before, back when I'd first become countess and had been traveling around to greet my neighbors. That had just been a courtesy visit, though, so this was basically our first real meeting. The viscount himself seemed somewhat pleased by my visit, which was a bit odd since I'd mentioned I was coming to discuss something important.

I glanced around the room we were in, whose walls were decorated with various paintings and pieces of armor. *It's a bit over the top in here*, I thought, taking a sip of the tea that had been brought out to us.

"I came here today to—"

"Yes, I know," the viscount cut in. "It appears the rumors are true."

I paused, eyeing the man in confusion. It would have been only natural for him to find out we'd been sending food to one of his village's without permission, but there was a strange giddiness to his tone that made me think the viscount was referring to something else altogether.

"If you're going to be affiliated with the duke," the viscount continued with a cocky smile, "then the plan will become even more solid."

I blinked, slowly taking these words in. *But I would never switch alliances to join the duke...and also, what's this plan you're talking about?*

I opened my mouth to ask this question, but Patrick jabbed me in my side, stopping me in my tracks. *You almost made me let out a weird sound!* I thought in his direction, giving him a glare that declared my intent to never forgive him. Alas, he took no notice.

"We've actually come to ask about the plan," Patrick declared. "We haven't been able to visit the Royal Capital in a while due to certain circumstances, and letters have the possibility of being compromised. That's why we wanted to ask you to share the details of the plan with us."

"Wait, you don't know anything about the plan at all...?" the viscount asked.

Our lack of information seemed to make him a bit suspicious, so Patrick continued his bluffing.

"We know the gist of it," my fiancé explained, "but we went through a lot of trouble in the Royal Capital to even get that information."

"Oh, right, your family is..."

"Yes, my father is a margrave. I understand why they would be cautious around me."

"Why, of course they would be; the margrave's distaste for Lemlaesta is well-

known.”

Whoa, this guy’s even bringing up one of our neighboring kingdoms? I thought. This is definitely something bad... I wanna just pretend I didn’t hear anything and go home. Also, get your facts straight, viscount! It’s the margrave’s wife who hates Lemlaesta, not the margrave himself. But I guess that doesn’t really matter right now.

“The truth is, I don’t know many details either,” the viscount went on. “I’ve heard that we’re going to get reinforcements from Lemlaesta in order to get rid of the king’s faction, but I have no idea what exactly those reinforcements will entail.”

Jeez, he’s totally spilling his guts, I thought. Looks like Patrick did a good job of convincing him.

“I see,” Patrick responded thoughtfully. “So we’re not the only ones who weren’t told much.”

“Yes,” the viscount agreed. “It appears to be that way since the duke is actually making moves himself for a change.”

I had been listening to their discussion under the assumption that some people hadn’t thought things through and were just getting ahead of themselves, but hearing this I was shocked. “The duke of Hillrose himself?” I asked without thinking.

“Yes, the duke himself negotiated with Lemlaesta.”

It seemed Eleanora’s father was finally making some big moves. And here I’d been, thinking he didn’t want to stir the pot since he’d told Eleanora to stay away from Prince Edwin. I hadn’t even thought the request that strange, since the royal family had always been at odds with the duke’s. But it seemed that, contrary to my assumptions, Duke Hillrose was quite ambitious indeed.

Suppose I believed what Viscount Cottoness had told us so far. That would mean that the duke was doing something as extreme as inviting an enemy country to assume control of his homeland. There was no sugarcoating it, this was a coup d’état—it was an irreversible act of treason.

Regardless, it’s best if we leave while the viscount still thinks we’re on the

duke's side, I decided. It doesn't seem like he has any useful information for us anyway, and things will get complicated if he figures out Patrick is bluffing. Firm in this decision, I took my own jab at Patrick's side, hoping to signal to him to change the topic. *Raaaaawr, feel the wrath of my pointer finger! This is payback for earlier!*

"Ugh!" Patrick grunted.

The viscount's eyebrows rose. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing," Patrick said, glaring at me resentfully. "We actually came here to discuss one other thing."

Forgive me, Patrick, I thought. *I didn't mean to use that much force...*

Then, I seized my chance to take control of the conversation. "I'll be the one to speak on this portion," I declared. Then, focusing on the viscount, I began, "A few months ago, we were attacked by a band of thieves in Dolkness County."

"Oh my, I hope you were..." The viscount paused, almost laughing at himself. "Well, I'm sure you were all right, Countess Dolkness."

"Yes, we were completely unscathed," I agreed. "There's only one problem: the thieves were from your viscounty."

"Oh my..." the viscount murmured, his face going rigid. "I-I'm terribly sorry, I don't know how to make it up to you."

As I watched, the man before me began to tremble in fear, likely thinking about what I'd demand of him to make up for being attacked by people from his own territory.

Negotiations will go smoothly if he remains in this state, I thought cheerfully. *All I need him to do is agree that the villagers can move.*

"I spoke to the thieves, and according to them, their village was desolate to the point that they weren't able to make ends meet. Do you know of a village in your territory that's located in the shadow of a mountain, with low crop yields?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, I know that village. They don't even pay their taxes and keep bothering us, asking for aid. They have proved quite troublesome for me as

well. How would you like me to deal with them?”

“To...‘deal’ with them...?” A low, simmering anger began to build in me.

While a territory owner of course had to look at their people as numbers at times, due to their position, the way Viscount Cottoness spoke of these villagers seemed unnecessarily cruel. To treat them with such disdain when their only problem was being housed in a bad location... To act as if they were just baggage to be cast aside...

“Oh, but if you’ve taken your revenge already, there must be considerably less of them now,” the viscount continued, rambling in his panic. “Thank you, I’m so gratefu—”

The viscount cut himself off with a shiver as I stood up without thinking, thoroughly mad now. Patrick didn’t even move to stop me, which was completely unexpected and actually calmed me down.

If I let my emotions take the reins and lose my temper, nothing is going to get resolved, I told myself firmly, taking a deep breath. *Right now, the most important thing is to get him to agree to our terms.*

Newly composed, I said disdainfully, “It is clear you think nothing of losing your citizens if they aren’t already proving productive for you. That being so, I would like you to let the residents of the village we spoke of move to my county.”

“Y-You want them to *move*?” the viscount asked, visibly shocked and flustered.

At this point, I just wanted to get the man’s approval and go back to my county. I decided to drive my words home.

“It is obvious you are at a loss for how to handle that village,” I said firmly. “And I need more workers. Our interests appear to be aligned in this matter. So, you’ll agree to my proposal, right? You’ll let the villagers move?”

Viscount Cottoness just nodded in agreement to my question. It was an immediate yes—he didn’t even ask how his people would be treated in my county.



Now that we were in possession of the information that Duke Hillrose was collaborating with Lemlaesta to work against Valschein, I decided I needed to pass that intel on to the appropriate parties. It was clear the situation was far too big for us to handle.

Thus, we departed Dolkness County first thing in the morning and flew to the Royal Capital. First, we headed to the Dolkness estate, from which I had a letter I'd prepared for the king delivered to the Royal Palace. Despite being a countess, it wasn't like I could just bust into the palace and visit the king whenever I wanted—his schedule was surely packed. It would likely take over a week to see him in person...or so I thought.

It turned out, the response from His Majesty was quite rapid. No less than an hour after we arrived in the Royal Capital, a messenger from the palace arrived at our door. Patrick and I immediately headed for the estate's drawing room, where we found our old headmast...*ahem*, Ronald, the king's close confidant, waiting for us. He stood up and bowed his head slightly in greeting.

"It's been a while," I said.

"Indeed, it has. It is nice to see you, Yumiella, and you as well, Patrick. Quick question, is the kingdom going to be destroyed today?"

"What?" I stared at the man, baffled. "How would I know?"

Is a meteor going to crash into us or something?

"No," Patrick chimed in, saving me from working up another response. "Our matter is not quite that urgent."

"I see, that's good to hear." Ronald let out a sigh of relief and then practically fell onto the couch, like all the energy had drained from his body at once. "I noticed you were in the Royal Capital because I saw your dragon," he continued in a casual tone, his usual smile still plastered on. "Right after that, there was a letter addressed to His Majesty saying there was an emergency, so I thought something terrible must have happened."

"It's still bad news," Patrick said flatly.

“But you don’t look too panicked, so everything’s probably going to be fine, right?”

I suppose that Duke Hillrose’s coup d’état isn’t something to worry too much over, compared to another Demon Lord-esque being appearing or a giant meteor coming to annihilate us. Still, it’s certainly significant enough to shake up the kingdom.

“You can relax,” I told Ronald as I sat down across from him. Given how he kept imagining a worst-case scenario, I felt he needed the reassurance. “It’s not something that will lead to anyone incurring any immediate harm.”

“Coming from you, that’s not very reassuring,” Ronald replied, laughing lightly.

Am I really that untrustworthy? I looked to Patrick, who was sitting next to me, and found him silently nodding in agreement.

My trustworthiness aside, I wasn’t sure if we could just jump right into the details in our current location. I’d been planning to tell His Majesty what I’d found out directly, so as to avoid being overheard by someone who was on the duke’s side. Although, Ronald didn’t seem like a traitor—the king appeared to trust him quite a bit...

Seeing my indecision, Ronald said, “Here, make a decision after reading this,” and handed me an envelope stamped with the royal family’s wax seal. I proceeded to open the missive, and inside I found a letter written by the king himself.

He must have written this in a rush, I thought idly, scanning it. *There are no formal greetings, like there usually are in letters, and it’s basically scribbled.*

The letter’s content essentially requested that we trust Ronald, who was likely sitting directly before us. The king asked us to tell Ronald what we wished to discuss with him first, and then a decision would be made on how we would move forward from there. Once I finished the letter, I handed it to Patrick to read as well.

“That’s why I’d like for you to tell me what happened,” Ronald said, nodding toward the letter. “Though if you must insist on speaking to His Majesty

directly, I can get you in to see him today.”

“That’s fine, we can discuss it here,” I said. I turned to Patrick, who was inspecting the wax seal on the letter’s envelope. “That would be all right, wouldn’t it?”

Patrick nodded in agreement.

I should go ahead and tell Ronald what is going on then, I decided. After all, if the king trusts him this much, it’s highly likely Ronald is not in cahoots with the duke.

“The reason we came to the Royal Capital is because we got some information that has to do with Duke Hillrose,” I explained. “He’s getting reinforcements from Lemlaesta and planning to clear out those in the king’s faction. We got this information from the viscount of Cottoness.”

“I see; it looks like he’s finally making some moves,” Ronald said, nodding.

I watched him closely to see if his expression would shift even slightly, but it stayed exactly the same. I couldn’t discern a single ounce of surprise in the man, and his smile was as unflinching as ever.

“Did you...perhaps already know of this news?”

Ronald shook his head. “Nope, this is the first time I’m hearing of our neighbors being involved. I don’t think the king knows either.”

“Um... Shouldn’t you be a bit more alarmed...?”

The Ronald I knew had always spoken quite casually and taken things lightly, but he’d always approached serious topics with the appropriate attitude. But right now, I couldn’t discern any seriousness in his demeanor at all.

“Anyway, how’s the county doing? It looks like the deputy’s still working hard.”

“We’ve been doing well,” I replied, then shook myself. “Is this really something we should be discussing right now?”

Ronald shrugged. “I’m just kind of over it, to be honest. The thing with the duke will be fine, and I don’t think you’ll get caught up in it.”

Something...doesn't seem quite right, I thought.

This was a massive issue—the aristocratic households who held the most power beyond the king were planning to revolt against the kingdom! So why would Ronald be reacting like this...?

I turned to Patrick, staring at him as I racked my brain on what to do.

“Do you want to go ahead and tell the king directly anyway?” Ronald asked. “His schedule was pretty packed today, so the meeting would have to be scheduled for the day after tomorrow.”

“No...it's fine,” I said weakly. “If you could tell His Majesty for us, that would be great.”

“Ha ha, you sure?” Ronald asked, his voice strangely joyful. “Not just anyone can see the king in two days.”

Patrick gave me a look as if to make sure that I was fine with the way things were playing out, but honestly I didn't care.

Look, I just want to avoid going to the Royal Palace. I've shared what I needed to, so Ronald can take care of the rest along with the other centralists.

As far as I was concerned, if Ronald said things were fine, then it was likely the king would give us the same answer. After all, the king put quite a lot of trust in the man. Still...I couldn't help but wonder who Ronald truly was. He was so adamant about not sharing his family name that it was unlikely that he came from a commoner family.

As if reading my thoughts, Ronald smiled widely at me. “I don't think you'll get anywhere trying to figure out who I am,” he informed me. “There are even people with high positions in the kingdom who don't know.”



That only makes me more curious! I thought, pouting internally. *To be so young, and yet be a close confidant to the king... Could Ronald perhaps be the king's bastard child? That would make sense as to why he didn't have a family name, and would explain why the king has such trust in him that he's willing to assign him this kind of work...*

"I'm not a bastard or anything, okay?" Ronald said, chuckling. "I'm used to people thinking that though."

I didn't even say anything, and he already contradicted my line of thought!

I tried letting my imagination run wild, hoping that would give me another explanation for the king's trust in Ronald, but found I couldn't come up with a single thing. Sighing, I gave up—it seemed, just like Ronald had told me, I wasn't going to get anywhere trying to figure things out.

Just then, a commotion kicked up in the hallway—it sounded like someone was trying to force their way in while the servants tried to stop them.

There was only one person I knew who would invite themselves to my estate in the Royal Capital. Patrick and I quickly turned to look at each other. Ronald, meanwhile, seemed lost as to what was currently happening. He looked quizzically toward the door.

"Sounds kind of loud over there. Is something wrong?"

I sighed. "The last time this happened was when His Highness came to visit," I said wearily. "She'll find a way in momentarily."

The noise drew closer and closer, just as I'd expected it would, and then the drawing room door was thrown open with vigor. In burst the daughter of the man at the center of our most recent conversation—Lady Eleanora Hillrose.

"I have come to grace you with my presence!" she announced grandly, bursting into the room with all the intensity of a summer storm.

Watching her, I couldn't help but think, *How can she make such aggressive movements in a dress?*

I glanced over to check on Ronald, only to find he'd frozen solid upon seeing Eleanora. I could understand *his* surprise, but Eleanora was similarly wide-eyed

upon seeing him.

“Why are you visiting Yumiella’s home, brother?”

Brother?! Ronald is Eleanora’s brother? So he’s Duke Hillrose’s son?

“Well, hello there, Lady Eleanora,” said the man whose identity was currently in question. He forced a smile. “I haven’t seen you since your graduation.”

Eleanora gave him a baffled look. “What are you talking about? We just met up the other day.”

“I’m sure I don’t understand what you mean. An educator and a former student would never meet up outside the Academy.”

“Oh!” Eleanora suddenly exclaimed, slapping a hand to her forehead. “I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone about you being my brother, was I?!” There was a brief silence while she composed herself, and then she greeted Ronald anew. “Headmaster, how do you do?”

“I can’t believe you mistook me for your brother, ha ha.”

You guys know you’re not fooling me, right...?

There was a long silence, and then Eleanora asked, “So, why are you here, bro — I mean...Headmaster?”

Is she even seriously trying to hide his identity?!

I gave the two siblings a look of deep suspicion, to which Ronald threw his hands in the air.

“Ugh, fine! I was able to hide it until now, but whatever...” A look of deep displeasure came over Ronald’s face, which was quite an unusual look for him. “You got me, I’m Ronald Hillrose. I’ve been hiding my family name and working as the king’s confidant.”

I was truly shocked, and not only at Ronald’s true identity—how had he and Eleanora been able to hide their relationship to one another for so long? I was specifically quite curious about why Eleanora had kept things a secret, but the more important question to ask at the moment was why Ronald had hidden his name in the first place.

He must have left the duke of Hillrose's home at quite a young age, if no one else is aware that they're related, I realized. But what would the duke have to gain by going to all that trouble?

"Why?" I asked Ronald simply.

"It was my father, Duke Hillrose's, idea. According to him, I should live my entire life as someone unrelated to the Hillrose family."

"There must be a reason," I said.

Ronald nodded. "Of course, there is. When father first told me, I couldn't believe it, but now I'm thankful for his foresight. I guess I can't make fun of his predictions after all..."

Well, it seems my vague question has been met with an obscure answer, I thought. It didn't seem right to prod him any more about the reason he hid his background though, so I let it go.

It must have been excruciating for Ronald to grow up in Valschein without his family name—in the aristocratic society of Valschein, your background was considered incredibly important. There had to be a much deeper, complex reason behind why he'd been living this way for so long.

"I understand," I said finally. "Since the matter has nothing to do with me, I won't ask for more information. I won't tell anyone else either."

"Nothing to do with you, huh?" Ronald muttered. "Well, that's helpful, thank you."

Wh-Why is he talking like that? It was probably something that happened before I was born, so how could it involve me...?

Anyway, that wasn't important right now—we should be concentrating on the matter of Duke Hillrose. Now that we knew that Ronald was secretly connected to the duke, there was a chance he'd decide not to pass on my information about the coup d'état to the king.

"I think I'd like to see the king after all," I decided.

"I guess I lost your trust," Ronald said lightly. "Sorry about that. If you want, I can set the meeting up right away."

“It’s just a formality, so the day after tomorrow is fine,” I said with a shrug.

After all, His Majesty likely already knew Ronald’s identity, and had reason to still trust him. I was not privy to that reason, and so didn’t feel as secure. I just wanted to go about this situation in the safest way possible.

Ugh, but I really don’t want to go to the Royal Palace...

My internal whining was interrupted by the sound of the drawing room door opening once again. I turned to look in the direction of the sound, and found Eleanora was trying to sneak out of the room.

“Eleanora,” Ronald said, stopping her in her tracks. “I’d love to chat with my adorable younger sister—it’s been a while.”

“You’re not mad at me, brother...?”

“Of course not, I never get mad.”

“You’re lying!” she said fiercely. “You totally do, but you just keep smiling! It’s terrifying!”

This brought to mind the conversation I’d had with Eleanora in the past, about how she had a brother whose expression never changed. I could see what she meant now—though Ronald was smiling just the same as he always did, there was an intensity behind the expression that felt a little frightening.

Cornered by her smiling, angry brother, Eleanora turned to me for help. “I have plans with Yumiella right now!” she cried, twitching her eye at me several times in what appeared to be an attempt at winking. “I don’t have time for you!”

Is she trying to signal something to me? I wondered, watching Eleanora’s antics.

“Lady Eleanora, I only just arrived at the Royal Capital today.”

“Y-Yes, but we made some plans a while ago through our letters! Remember?”

My mind had already strayed from the conversation. *Now that I think about it, how did she get here so quickly? We’ve only been at the estate for a few hours.*

The answer to this idle thought was delivered to me by Ronald. “Ah, you came here because you saw the dragon, right?” he asked his sister. “You’re so smart, Eleanora.”

Eleanora giggled, thoroughly pleased. “He he, I got a compliment from Ronald. Turns out you’re exactly right! I saw Ryu and knew that Yumiella had come to the Royal Capital!”

“So...you didn’t have any plans with her, did you?”

“O-Oops.”

I gotta remember to not trust Eleanora with the task of relaying any important information, I thought, watching the scene unfold. She’s such a goof, it’s a little worrying.

“Might I borrow this room for a moment?” Ronald asked. “There’s something I’d like to discuss alone with my dear sister.”

“Of course, the room is all yours,” I replied, abandoning Eleanora instantly. “We’ll be waiting elsewhere.”

Heh heh, Patrick’s followed right behind me, I thought. He’s totally my abandonment accomplice now.

Freed from the drawing room, we walked down the hall for a bit. I only stopped when I could no longer hear Eleanora’s loud voice.

“So, Patrick, what do you think?”

“He seems to be telling the truth,” he said slowly. “I don’t think it’s likely that he’d be involved in the rebellion, and honestly it isn’t that dangerous.”

“Seriously? You think that too?”

Patrick shrugged. “Even if Ronald was lying, he’d be outed the moment we had an audience with the king.”

After that, Patrick laid out all that he’d been thinking while he’d observed the conversation earlier. He mentioned how Ronald still appeared to have the trust of the king, even though the radicals were attempting to cajole the second prince into trying to succeed the throne. According to him, that meant we had no reason to be cautious of Ronald, at least for now. That didn’t mean we

should trust him, however.

It seemed we were both on the same page.

“I guess I don’t have to visit the palace after all,” I said, relieved.

Patrick swiftly popped that bubble. “No, I think you should still go. I’ll come with you.”

And so, it was decided that I would be visiting the palace in two days’ time.

I hope I don’t run into any troublesome people...



After I saw off a grinning Ronald and teary-eyed Eleanora, I was left with nothing to do. My schedule was wide open for the rest of the day and tomorrow, but there wasn’t anything in particular I wanted to do now that we were in the Royal Capital.

“What should we do?” I asked Patrick. “We have so much time on our hands now.”

“What about going out for lunch?” he suggested. “It’s a nice day for a walk too.”

What an excellent set of ideas! I thought.

I’d forgotten until now, but during my time at the Academy, I’d enjoyed taking walks around the Royal Capital in my free time. Exploring areas of the city I didn’t know for the first time in quite a while sounded like the perfect way to spend the day. I started getting excited.

The biggest smile I was capable of stretched across my lips. To others it would barely look like a grin—they may not even be able to perceive the slight turn of my lips. “Thank you for the idea, Patrick! That sounds wonderful!”

He smiled back at me. “We’ve been working a lot these days, so it’s important to take a day off once in a while.”

“Well then, I’m off!”

“Uh...what?” Patrick stared blankly after me as I headed straight out of the mansion.

Why wouldn't I go now, since I don't have any preparations to make? I thought cheerfully. *I wonder what Patrick's going to do with his free time.*

I loved the Royal Capital's big main streets, with all the various stores lined up right next to each other, but if I was telling the truth, my favorite places in the city were its empty back alleys. Whenever I found a suspicious-looking store selling strange things down one, I'd get super excited.

At the moment, I was observing one such store from the outside. I could see that the dimly lit space was filled with shelves, but they all appeared to be empty. The only employee seemed to be an elderly woman in the back of the store. In fact, without the sign outside, there was no way to tell that the space was a store at all! The sign was actually the only normal thing about the whole place.

What an unsettling, suspicious place... I thought. *I have no choice but to go in!*

I skipped to the door and put my hand on the handle...but stopped there. To tell the truth, I wasn't actually having much fun. I'd been trying to force myself into being excited, but it just wasn't working for me for some reason. With a sigh, I decided not to enter the store and headed back to the main streets.

"I should've brought Patrick with me..." I mumbled, the words unconsciously spilling out.

I hadn't even considered it earlier, since walking around the Royal Capital had always been something I did alone. But now, I couldn't help but think that if I'd brought him with me, the activity could've turned into a date.

We would've had a ton of fun for sure... I thought, pouting. *I should try again tomorrow, and invite Patrick this time. Wooow, I think I had a good idea for once! I can't believe I came up with a date idea that he didn't already think of! Could I...be the more knowledgeable one when it comes to romance...?*

After a few minutes of being lost in such thoughts while wandering my way back to the main streets, I walked out onto a more public path that felt familiar to me. I wasn't particularly fond of areas like this in the capital, but I decided to walk along the road and peek into the stores lining both sides of it for a little bit. I'd neglected to bring a hat today, so I stood out quite a bit.

Just as I'd suspected, my black hair alone was enough to make people stare at me strangely, and some even gave me looks of disgust. Back in Dolkness Village, reactions like this had grown much more mild, perhaps due to the townspeople having gotten used to me, but the same couldn't be said for the people of the Royal Capital.

Suddenly, I wasn't in the mood for a walk anymore. I decided to have some lunch instead.

In the end, I purchased bread from a random store. I would've been more than happy to just eat it as I walked around, but I *was* an aristocrat, whether I liked it or not. I had to be ladylike.

After strolling around for a bit, I finally found the perfect place for me to sit down and eat. It was a large plaza located at the intersection of several main roads, which had benches located in various places. I chose one in the corner of the plaza and sat down.

A bard had set himself up in the center of the area, and I listened to his song as I slowly ate my lunch. It was a story about a prince and his friends that had fought against a Demon Lord.

Wait, shouldn't one of his friends be a black-haired girl with a dragon? I wondered as the song suddenly came to a close. *She never even got brought up!*

Glancing over to the center of the plaza, I saw that the crowd that had gathered to listen to the bard's song was pretty sparse. And even though his song had ended, few of them tossed him change in thanks for his performance.

Feeling a bit annoyed, I stood up right away and marched myself over to the bard. The people that had still been lingering around quickly ran away when they noticed my presence, but the bard didn't even notice, as he was staring down sadly at his meager earnings.

I tossed in some gold coins, hoping to catch the man's attention.

"What?!" he shouted. "Gold coins?!"

"Yes," I said happily. "I'd like for you to perform that song at my home."

The bard finally looked up at me, beaming. He was clearly under the impression that I was a noble woman looking to hire some musical entertainment.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were an aristocrat,” he said in delight. “I’d love to...”

The bard froze. It seemed the sight of my face had left him speechless.

“Your song was about a prince, a saintess, and two of their friends...four people, right?” I asked in a kind voice. “I haven’t heard that story before, so I’d like to hear about it in more detail.”

“E-Eek!” The bard squealed. His face blanched, and his teeth started chattering.

Aren’t you a bit too scared? I thought, feeling a bit annoyed. *I just tried to surprise you a little.*

“I won’t do anything to you,” I promised. “I really just wanted to hear the story from you.”

“You’re real...right?” the bard asked hoarsely.

I gave him a confused look. *What do you mean, am I real?*

The bard didn’t calm down for a good while after that. By then, people had started to gather again at the empty plaza.

“I’m not sure what you mean by ‘real,’” I told the man, “but I *am* Yumiella Dolkness, in the flesh.”

“Of course, I apologize,” he said, voice subservient.

“I didn’t need you to apologize...” I sighed. “I just wanted to know why I didn’t show up in your song.”

It’s not like I have any intention of publicizing my accomplishments in the battle against the Demon Lord, but it seems a bit problematic that others are acting like I wasn’t even there, I thought.

After all, I was still working toward one of my major goals—decreasing the amount of hatred directed at people with black hair. I was doubtful I’d ever be

able to fully eradicate negative feelings toward people like me, but I wanted to make a positive change, even if it was only a little one. Spreading the news that I, a black-haired person, had helped in the fight against the Demon Lord, had always been my plan. It should prove helpful in turning public sentiment in the right direction.

I didn't need the people to know that I'd been stronger than the Demon Lord either. I just needed them to know that I'd been there at all. After all, if they knew the level of my strength, people would only grow more scared of me instead of less. It was a difficult line to tread.

"Um, w-w-well..." the bard began fearfully, struggling to get the words out. "I d-didn't know how to have you appear in the song, Lady Countess. Other bards have struggled with that as well..."

"It's difficult to include me?" I asked, both curious and confused. "How so?"

"Well, your appearance and the element you use, is, um..." The bard trailed off.

It was fine—I'd already gotten the gist of what he'd wanted to say. Basically, I came across like a villain.

In this world, it was very common for villains to appear as black-haired people in creative works. These dark-haired devils and witches would stand in the way of the protagonist, using dark magic to prevent them from progressing. It meant that if a bard described me in one of their renditions of the Demon Lord tale, it'd sound like Red Riding Hood had visited her grandmother hand in hand with the Big Bad Wolf.

In addition, I didn't have the most affable personality, which probably made discarding that stereotype even more difficult. However, there was one saving grace—the endearing, adorable mascot-like presence that lingered by my side!

"I understand why it's hard for me to appear in your story," I told the bard, "but what if you add Ry— I mean, a dragon?"

"Um, dragons tend to be on the villain's side as well..." the bard said reluctantly. "I've seen the black dragon myself, and he was truly..."

Truly what?! I thought. You can't tell me that a dragon that cute can come

across as anything but a hero's ally!

Reining myself in, I set the issue of Ryuu's inclusion to the side. More importantly, I needed to think of some way to dispel the notion that dark magic was only used by villains. It wasn't like the element was dangerous in and of itself—it didn't spread flames like fire magic sometimes did, or flood areas like water magic could. No, the dark element could restrain, melt, pierce through things, and just disappear your target, no question asked. It caused so few detrimental effects to the environment where it was used that I'd say it was even eco-friendly.

But, no matter how much I spoke on those points, it was unlikely that they would have any effect on the ingrained feelings of others. The only people that would think that the dark element was cool would be...well, someone like I had been when I was young. My past life self, rather.

My entire middle and high school career, I had been plagued with the moniker of "edgelord." Looking back on it now, it had been quite a cringeworthy period of my life. Remembering how I'd attended high school with an eye patch over one eye made me want to die.

I'd only managed to come to my senses once I'd begun attending college. But of course, then I'd died in an accident, and here I was.

Hmm... I thought. I don't really like the idea of sharing the dark parts of my past, but maybe he'll surprise me by being accepting.

I decided to go ahead and give opening up with the man a shot, even though I was pretty firm in my belief it wouldn't work.

"Okay, take this with a grain of salt, but...what if you thought of black hair and dark magic as something cool?"

"Something cool'...?"

"Mm-hm. Like, imagine someone turned to this taboo, hated source of power so they could get strong enough to defeat their archnemesis, but they have to struggle not to be swallowed up by the dark magic they've come to wield..."

I trailed off, cringing at myself. *Here I am, suggesting it, and even I'm embarrassed!*

But just as I was about to suggest the bard forget everything I'd just said, I saw a glimmer appear in his eyes.

"That's good! That's *really* good! So the dragon-user is almost taken over by her power when standing before the Demon Lord, but...she's saved by the power of friendship! And her dark magic is so powerful even the Demon Lord can't withstand it... Oh, how interesting!"

W-Wait, isn't this straying a bit far from the true story? I thought.

But the bard ignored my cringing self. "There could be an evil power sealed away in her right arm," he mused, "but she unleashes that power in order to save her friends during a crisis... My god, what an intense plot development! I need to write this out from the beginning!"

"Th-That sounds great..." I said weakly.

I didn't realize being an edgelord could be contagious... I hope everyone who hears his song has a strong immune system.

After that, I went home and found Patrick right away. His mood seemed a bit down—apparently he'd stayed home the entire time I was gone.

"I'm home, Patrick," I greeted him. "Would you like to go somewhere and have lunch tomorrow?"

"Welcome back..." he said gloomily. "Should I take that as a suggestion I go out for a meal alone?"

I gave him a confused look. *Obviously I'm not sending you out alone, silly. I planned on us going together from the beginning!*

"Uh, no," I told him. "We would be going out together, of course. Honestly, we should've gone out together today too."

Now, come on! Bow before my incredible date idea!

"Took you a bit long to realize that, but I guess that's fine," Patrick said with a sigh. His murky eyes seemed to regain their color, shining at me like emeralds.

I looked back at the ring on my left hand and couldn't help but smile, comparing it to the gaze of the man before me.

I won't let anyone get in the way of our outing tomorrow!

Interlude 5: Phil

Outside the walls surrounding the Royal Capital, there was a large expanse of grassy fields with a wonderful view. Monsters rarely showed up in these fields, so they were almost exclusively a play area for children when the army wasn't training there.

One child who regularly came to the fields was known for particularly having the respect of his peers—he was a young boy with dark-brown hair named Phil.

Phil was friends with a black dragon that would visit the fields from time to time, and if the other children were lucky, the ones who happened to be around during these visits were able to ride on the dragon's back and fly through the sky. The children of the Royal Capital considered such play great fun, and were blissfully unaware of the fact that their parents would likely faint just hearing about it.

In the past, Phil had actually been bullied for his hair color, since it was close to black, but at this rate not a single child in his age group cared about that anymore. The change had started to occur roughly a month prior, thanks to a certain incident. But that was a tale for another day.

At the current moment, Phil and his group of friends weren't outside the city's walls, as they so often were. Instead, they were gathered in one of the plazas in the Royal Capital. They'd come to listen to the performance of a bard who'd begun to work in the plaza around a month before. Phil, along with his friends, had been hooked on the stories that the bard brought to life with his music.

"Yay!" one boy exclaimed. "We made it on time today!"

"Wait for me, Collin," another called out.

"Now's the moment we've been waiting for...so let's go!" a third boy chimed in.

The group of boys—which numbered five in total—took advantage of their

small frames and wove their way through the crowd, working themselves all the way up to the front. Just as they scored themselves premium spots, the infamous bard began to play his stringed instrument.

He sang a tale that followed one girl's adventures: a girl who lived in fear of the dark power she held within her right arm. Afraid of the untrustworthy power, the girl avoided making use of it, but was left with no other choice but to release it in order to take down her archnemesis.

The girl won the battle, but that was not the story's climax—no, the core of the story's dramatic action was when the power of darkness the girl had unleashed turned on her, threatening to swallow her whole. It was her beloved partner who saved her from destruction.

"Whoa," the group of boys mumbled, eyes wide as they listened.

The story the bard was telling was completely different from the fairy tales they'd read, and the uniqueness of the tale utterly engrossed them. Phil was listening intently as well, of course, immersing himself in the story.

There was something about Phil that was different from the other boys, however—his field of vision was smaller than theirs. In fact, due to certain circumstances, the young boy's ability to see had been halved. And so, even as Phil devoured the bard's story, he was also recalling an incident that had happened a month before.



Phil had been bullied by his peers up until two years ago. Back then, he'd hated his dark-brown hair, which had been the reason he'd been targeted so relentlessly.

That had all changed when Phil had met a girl with hair so black it felt like a void that could swallow the world. This girl was older, and confident, and she didn't care about how others perceived her. Phil had quickly come to admire her.

Nearly two years after that meeting, Phil had wistfully thought to himself, *I want to be just like Yumiella one day, but that'll never happen. She only comes to check on me every once in a while because I'm pathetic. Although, at least I'm*

friends with a dragon now since she introduced us. And he still comes to see me pretty often, even though Yumiella doesn't live in the Royal Capital anymore. I'm not alone now...but that's only because of their help. I didn't fix anything on my own.

At that particular point in time, the other kids had stopped bullying Phil out of fear for the terrifying dragon that he was often seen with, but they hadn't become friendly with him. Instead, they'd kept their distance.

But this particular day had been different. A boy had called out to Phil, "Your hair is cool!"

"What?" Phil had replied, baffled.

The boy, who'd been staring at Phil's dark-brown hair with excitement, ran up to him and grabbed his hand. "Come on," he urged him. "Let me show you something."

Giving in, Phil had let the other boy drag him along as he ran down one of the main roads of the Royal Capital. Soon, they'd arrived at a plaza where a bard was about to perform, and the boy had settled in with him to listen.

During the performance, somehow the two boys had become five. Once the bard had completed his tale, the whole lot of them had gathered around to play make-believe. To Phil's surprise, they'd ended up fighting over who would get to play the role of the dark mage, which was usually quite an unpopular role. After all, characters who wielded dark magic were usually villains, and would wind up getting killed off in these kinds of games. But that day, due to the bard's tale, the dark mage had actually been the story's main character.

Being a relatively shy boy, Phil had stood a distance away from the bickering, watching the other four boys argue among themselves. To his surprise, however, the conversation had soon turned to himself.

"Phil's hair...it's kind of like the color of a dark magic user," one boy had said, pointing at Phil.

"What?" Phil had said nervously, the abrupt call out making him flinch.

"Yeah, that's why I brought him here!" the boy from earlier had exclaimed. "Isn't his hair cool?"

In the face of such compliments, Phil had been flummoxed. His dark-brown hair had only ever been the target of ridicule, so such things had never been said to him before.

How should I respond... he'd wondered. *Oh! I could copy the main character from that story.*

"Guh...my right arm, it's aching. This is... It must be resonating with a demon's magical energy!"

Phil had always been self-conscious about his shy personality, but in that moment he'd felt like he was able to change into someone else—no, that he had become his *true* self. The shyness that had so defined him before had only been a disguise for him to wear so he could sneak around.

"Whoa!" one of the boys had shouted jubilantly. "It's just like the story!"

"I wanna be the demon then!" yelled one of the others. "The demon is a dark magic user too, right?"

"Hey, no fair!"

As the boys' parts had fallen into place, they'd urged Phil to continue. And together, they'd immersed themselves fully into their make-believe play.



Ever since that day, Phil had changed. Or, more accurately, he'd *been* changed by the play. He began to strike strange poses over the most random things, and would go around chuckling like a stereotypical villain. To top it all off, he'd begun to wear an eye patch over one eye. As was only natural, his ability to see had been deeply affected.

The new version of Phil watched the bard's performance with a grin on his face. "I'm so excited to see the other dark magic user again one day..." he mumbled to himself.

Yumiella, the dark magic user who had given the bard his story in the first place, would run across Phil several months later. The site of his...new state...would trouble her, especially since she herself was the root cause of the entire situation.

Chapter 6: The Hidden Boss Gains a Friend

As we ate breakfast, Patrick and I discussed our plans for the day. We still hadn't decided the destination of our date-like outing, so it quickly became a centerpiece of our conversation.

"I'll take you to a hidden gem of mine," I pronounced. "It's similar to one of those pubs that don't have any sign on the outside, but it's actually a magic instrument store that sells its stock under the table."

"Why don't we go somewhere a bit safer," Patrick suggested, shooting down my recommendation right away.

Well, if it's somewhere with a low crime rate he wants...the aristocratic quarter sounds like a good option, I mused. It's in the center of the Royal Capital, and the Dolkness estate is actually not that far away from it. We're situated right on the outer edges.

If you judged it by name alone, the aristocratic quarter sounded like an area full of noblemen's residences, but there were actually quite a few shops there as well. Naturally, those stores were made up of restaurants catering to aristocrats, or retailers that carried expensive items.

"I'm not too familiar with the aristocratic quarter..." I said slowly.

"That's expected of you," Patrick responded.

To tell the truth, I actually avoided the aristocratic quarter as much as I could during my walks around the Royal Capital. I couldn't quite describe why, but something about the atmosphere in the area turned me off—I didn't feel like I fit in there.

The only people who could have fun in a place like that are true noble ladies, like Eleanora, I thought.

Perhaps we would have discussed the topic further, but at that moment the door to the room came flying open, and Rita ran inside. She was in such a panicked hurry she'd even forgotten to knock.

“You have a visitor,” she said in a rush. “She will be here at any moment!”

There’s only one person who would appear uninvited at the Dolkness mansion, I thought with an inward sigh. She’s the only noble lady I know who’s willing to do things so unbecoming of her status.

I was proven right when the doors were thrown open once more, and the very person on my mind barged into our dining room.

“I’ve come to visit!” she exclaimed, her voice overflowing with vigor. “I thought you would be here if I came early! It looks like I was correct, as expected!”

I assumed she’d be quiet for a bit after being chewed out by Ronald yesterday, I thought, eyeing the cheerful face of Eleanora Hillrose. Guess this is what I get for letting her existence slip from my mind.

I turned to Patrick for help.

All right, shoo her away, I instructed him internally, giving him my best pleading look.

With a sigh, Patrick gave in. “Lady Eleanora,” he said gently, “Yumiella and I have plans to go out together today. I’d appreciate it if you wen—”

“*What?! You have a date, Yumiella?! Why then, you should have just told me!*”

When would I have had time to tell you, Lady Eleanora? Please, I beg of you, inform me. I released an internal sigh. *Whatever, at least we were able to fend her off. I knew I could count on Patrick. Also...she called our outing a date. Heh heh.*

“Consider this me telling you now, Lady Eleanora,” I informed the troublesome lady standing before me. “Why don’t we get together another time?”

“Of course! I could never get in the way of love! But, uh...where are you two headed? I’m just...a bit curious...”

She’s...blushing, I thought incredulously. *How can she get red over a simple date, when she’s constantly bringing up how she’s going to marry the prince*

without a moment's hesitation? And now she's got me feeling all embarrassed too...

"Um... We were just going to take a stroll around the Royal Capital," I said, making an answer up on the spot. After all, Patrick and I still hadn't decided where we were actually headed.

"You're going on a walk?" Eleanora asked consideringly. "I quite enjoy carriage rides, but I suppose taking a stroll together sounds great too. The area around the church is tranquil and lovely."

"The church?" I asked. "I've never been to a church."

"What?!" Eleanora exclaimed, genuinely shocked.

I mean, I guess I just didn't ever bother to visit one, I thought. I'm pretty sure there's a small one in Dolkness Village too, but I've never stopped by.

The most active religion in Valschein revolved around the worship of a god of light, and was known as Sanonism. There were other established religions as well, which were based in worship of the gods of the four main elements—fire, water, *etc.* None of them were strictly monotheistic, so my lack of faith was probably fine.

"I just... I can't believe you've never been to a church even once!" Eleanora burst out. "That's unbelievable!" Staring at me, she covered her gaping mouth with one hand.

Is it really that shocking? I wondered, giving her a dubious look.

I turned to Patrick. As far as I knew, he was just as undevout as I was, so my lack of church visits shouldn't be that big a deal to him. *Shouldn't* was the operative word—I quickly discovered he was looking at me with just as much shock as Eleanora was.

"Have you really not gone to a church, not even once?" he asked unbelievably.

I nodded. "N-Nope, I haven't," I said haltingly. "Is that bad?"

"It's not bad, it's just..."

Oh, come on! I erupted internally. *When was I supposed to go to a church?*

What would I even do there?!

“I mean, I didn’t have any opportunities to go to places like that when I was younger, and I didn’t have anyone to go with me,” I added on, seeing how weirded out they were.

That sounds pretty depressing now that I’ve said it out loud, huh?

Before I knew it, Patrick had grabbed my right hand, and Eleanora had grabbed my left.

“I’ll go with you!” Eleanora exclaimed.

“Yeah, let’s all go together,” Patrick agreed.

Wow, I’m so blessed to have everyone be so considerate toward me, I thought. But, uh...I don’t really want to go to a church dedicated to the god of light. Also...I’m not going on a date with Patrick anymore, am I...?



A short time later, the three of us left the Dolkness mansion in the carriage Eleanora had come in, headed in the direction of the church.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this, I thought, suppressing the sigh that rose to my lips so that the other two wouldn’t notice my lack of enthusiasm. For me to go somewhere so steeped in Sanonism, and the power of the god of light...

The majority of my concern lay in my certainty of the fact that the element of light wasn’t fond of me—it was my weakness, in fact, and an enemy I preferred to avoid.

“Do you think I’ll be okay?” I asked my carriage companions worriedly. “I’m scared I might get purified and disappear.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about,” Lady Eleanora said, trying to reassure me. “Because when there is light, darkness can... Um... Well, the grand priest said something like that.”

You’re losing me, Lady Eleanora. Also...did you just say “grand priest”? I didn’t realize that you knew someone like that. They sound pretty important.

“Do you visit the church often, Lady Eleanora?” I asked.

She nodded. "I've never missed a week! I'm familiar with everyone there."

I never would have imagined Lady Eleanora was that religious, I thought, surprised.

I turned to Patrick, wondering about him next.

"I've only been to the church in the Royal Capital once," he admitted. "I did go pretty often back at the Mark of Ashbatten, though."

"Why didn't you continue going?"

"Well, the church in the Royal Capital is the principal location for the Sanonist religion, so it's really glitzy," Patrick told me. "There's this air about the place that makes it uncomfortable for nonaristocrats to visit, which I don't like."

And we're headed there now? I thought uncomfortably. *I think I'm getting a stomachache...*

Just then, Eleanora excitedly pointed outside one of the carriage windows and said, "We're almost there. Also, despite what Patrick says, anyone is welcome to enter the church."

I peeked out a window myself and took in the buildings passing by. The one we seemed to be approaching was stately and enormous, to the point that it was too massive to view wholly through the small window frame of the carriage.

Oh, I've seen this building from afar before, I realized, examining it more closely. *So that's the church. Patrick was right—that place doesn't look like it would be easy for a commoner to enter.*

To be honest, I didn't want to go inside either, but Eleanora left me no other choice. Once the carriage had rolled to a stop and we'd exited the carriage, she took the lead, heading toward the church's entrance.

"Come on, we're going!" she called out.

In an attempt at some form of resistance, I walked slowly after her. I contemplated letting the two of them enter the building before me, then promptly turning around and heading straight home, but Patrick foiled that plan by choosing to walk alongside me.

Stop that! I hissed internally. *It's not very gentlemanlike of you to go slow and match the pace of a girl, is it?! A considerate man would catch on and go ahead.*

This was of course the moment Patrick decided to open his mouth and ask, "What's wrong, Yumiella? Do you not want to go in that badly?"

"It's nothing..." I said weakly. "You're probably going to open the door for me too, aren't you?"

Giving me a confused look, he replied, "I can open doors for you whenever you want..."

Jeez, Patrick, I grumbled internally. You just don't understand women at all. I mean, you're always pulling out my chair for me, and draping your jacket over my shoulders when it gets a bit chilly... It's not enough to just be kind, you know! Ugh...I like him so much...

As my mind raced, we continued on, my endlessly chivalrous fiancé escorting me at a snail's pace toward the church.

W-Wait! I realized. *Isn't this one of those things you do at a wedding?! But, the bride's supposed to come in after the groom... I've gotta get in there and show him how unwedding-like what we're doing is!*

I quickened my pace, stepping hastily into the church before Patrick. Then, all of a sudden...

"Ouch!" I yelped.

"Yumiella? What's wrong?"

My forehead throbbed—I'd slammed it into something. Usually, when I wasn't paying attention and bumped into something like that, the thing I bumped into would break and there wouldn't be a scratch on me. For whatever reason, though, this collision had hurt quite a bit.

I reached out in front of me, only to find an invisible wall stopping me from proceeding any further. Copying my movement, Patrick went to touch the wall himself, but his hand just kept on going. He continued to wave his arm around in the air, clearly perplexed.

Eleanora, meanwhile, had apparently grown tired of waiting for us inside. She

appeared at the entrance, grumbling to herself. “How long are you two going to keep me waiting?” she asked crankily, then gave me an impressed look when she saw my hand pressed up against the invisible wall. “Wow, you’re so good at miming, Yumiella!”

“I’m not miming,” I corrected her.

Dubiously, Eleanora reached out to touch the space where the wall should have been, but her hand passed through easily; there didn’t seem to be anything there.

So it’s a wall that only I can’t pass through, I mused. I wonder if the god of light is rejecting me... Well, if he is, so be it! Challenge accepted!

“This appears to be a wall that only Yumiella can’t go through,” Patrick said, thinking aloud. “I wonder if there’s a magical instrument that’s putting up a barrier, or... Hey, what are you trying to do?”

“I’m just going to punch it lightly,” I said with a shrug.

After all, even though I didn’t know what was behind the wall, it had enough of a physical form that I could touch it. That meant I could punch it—or, in other words, destroy it.

There’s no way that I, Yumiella Dolkness, would lose to some invisible wall! My pride will not allow it!

Curling one hand into a tight fist, I took on a fighting stance. But, just then, a young priest ran out of the church.

“P-Please wait!” he screamed. “They’re shutting off the barrier right now!”

Unfortunately for him, it was already too late—I’d already swung my fist at the barrier at full force. It crashed into the sturdy barrier protecting the church in the Royal Capital, the principal church of Sanonist faith, and then...

“Ouch!”

I stared aghast at my hand, brought to a complete stop by the barrier. The wall seemed to creak a bit in protest when my blow landed, but it hadn’t moved an inch.

No way... Did I lose?!

The priest who had run out of the church made his way toward me in a hurry. “They’re shutting off the magical instrument that controls this barrier right now,” he said hurriedly. “After that, you’ll be able to enter as well, Countess Dolkness.”

Yeah, fine, whatever. It’s not like I really gave that punch my all just now. I mean, if I was actually trying, I could have easily broken through a barrier of this level... You know what, it’s time for round two.

I closed my eyes and gathered myself, focusing all my strength into my right fist.

“It looks like the time to unleash the Yumiella Punch has come,” I muttered.

To explain, the Yumiella Punch was a punch that I, Yumiella, delivered. Since it was a simple straight punch, I could abandon my usual conscious and unconscious focus on holding back my strength out of consideration for the effect that it would have on my surroundings, in favor of using all that power to the fullest.

I can feel the current of mana flowing within me, I thought giddily. The circle of power is so large, I can even feel the mana of nature itself responding! Even the magical energy generated from the world’s rotation is flowing into my body... If there was ever a moment for me to strike, it is now!

Or so I thought. But before I could launch my fist at the barrier, I felt a hand settle on my shoulder. I turned around, catching sight of Patrick’s exasperated face.

“The barrier’s gone now, Yumiella,” he told me.

“What, really?” I reached my arm out, but still felt the same wall from earlier. “It’s still here,” I complained to Patrick as I continued to poke at the wall. “Wait...it’s gone?”

Patrick heaved a massive sigh of relief. “That was close,” he muttered. “Looks like they managed to shut it off in time...”

Hey, fleeing the scene after a win is foul play! I thought huffily. How dare that barrier disappear on me after withstanding one of my punches!

“Rematch! I would like the opportunity for a rematch!”

“You’re a surprisingly bad...” Patrick paused, then chuckled. “No, I should have expected you’d be a sore loser.”

Hey, I’m not a sore loser, you jerk, I thought, narrowing my eyes at him. I just hate the idea of people thinking I lost! And because you got in the way of my serious battle with that barrier... I’m gonna give you a Yumiella Punch!

I stood there glaring at Patrick, gritting my teeth in frustration, but after a few moments passed I was able to calm down. The realization slowly began to hit me that I’d probably made a bit of a bad impression on the church by trying to destroy their barrier. Worse than that was the fact that it had stopped me at all.

Are they...going to put me on trial? There’s no way, right? I mean, it’s only human to want to destroy a strong barrier when you come into contact with one... I hope they’ll forgive me...

Interrupting my gloomy thoughts, the young priest inclined his head to me. “You must be Countess Dolkness,” he said. “The cardinal is waiting for you, so please come in.”

Are you sure it’s okay for me to enter the church, mister priest? I thought. That seemed like it might be an anti-Yumiella barrier...

The priest seemed unafraid of this possibility, however, and led us fully inside the building. Panels of stained glass greeted us, glistening in the sun’s light. Despite knowing it was man-made, there was something sacred about the space.

So this is a cathedral, huh...? I thought, wonder filling me.

The priest guiding us didn’t pause, walking right through the space. He led us to a room at the back of the cathedral, where a man who looked to be roughly in his sixties awaited us.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the man said. “Welcome to the Valschein Central Church, the principal church of Sanonism. I am Gerald, the cardinal.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well,” I replied, inclining my head. “I’m Yumiella Dolkness.”

Internally, my mind had descended into disarray. *He's obviously important, but how important?! How high up the ladder is a cardinal? Is it the highest position you can hold in the church? I feel like there are supposed to be several of them, so it can't be, right?*

"I was under the impression you weren't very fond of churches, Countess Dolkness," the cardinal continued, interrupting my frantic thoughts. "I'm grateful that you even came."

"Oh no, not at all. I just...haven't had the opportunity to visit..."

"Well, that's good to hear. I confess I was a bit worried after you turned down our invitations to visit while you were still attending the Academy."

"E-Excuse me?" I stared at the cardinal in confusion.

I don't recall the church ever contacting me when I was in school... Could I have turned them down with the invitations I received from other students? That would be pretty bad.

The cardinal turned to Eleanora, who was standing next to me, and said, "If I recall correctly, you told me that Countess Dolkness turned you down, yes?"

Eleanora nodded. "That's right, Grand Priest. Even though I invited her on many occasions..."

"What?!" I turned and stared at Eleanora with narrowed eyes. "I'll have you know this is the first I'm hearing of the matter."

Although, Eleanora was constantly bugging me to hang out with her back then... Was she trying to invite me to the church the entire time, and I just kept dodging her?

"I asked you multiple times if you wanted to go somewhere with me on our days off!" Eleanora replied, indignant.

Looks...like I was correct...

The cardinal and I both stood there and stared at her, frozen, while Patrick desperately held back his laughter.

"I never knew that was what you meant," I finally admitted.

The cardinal sighed. "Perhaps I chose the wrong person to pass on my message," he muttered.

Eleanora, meanwhile, looked completely confused as to what we were talking about.

I can't help but think this is all the cardinal's fault, I thought. I mean, I would never trust Eleanora to deliver an important message of mine.

"There actually is a reason I chose you, Eleanora," the cardinal said with a nervous smile. He gave Eleanora a kind look. "Sanonists aren't completely removed from aristocratic politics, so I couldn't forcibly summon the countess here. If the countess tagged along on a visit with her friend from school, however... That would be much more natural."

"My friend...?" I repeated in confusion.

"Oh... I see." My short statement seemed to convey much about our relationship to the cardinal. His smile twisted, becoming so wry and full of melancholy it was hard to look at. "Eleanora, friends are—"

"Yes, I know! If I think of a person as a friend, then they'll become mine in return! You taught me this before, Grand Priest!"

"I apologize," the cardinal said, turning to me. "It appears that this is my fault."

"It's all right," I told him. "I think it's a wonderful way to view friendship. Very full of love."

Now that I think about it, I can't blame him for everything. After all, Lady Eleanora's tenacity is likely just a part of her nature. At least, that's what I'm going to continue to tell myself. If I was convinced otherwise, I just might go insane...

"Yumiella likes me as well," declared the girl at the center of our discussion. "That's why we're the spitting image of good friends!"

"I-I'm sure that's how we seem to you, Lady Eleanora..." I began, but then gave up.

I glanced at the cardinal, who seemed as if he wanted to speak to me, but

Eleanora's noisiness made it impossible for me to concentrate enough to focus on whatever he was going to say.

What should I—

"You know, I'd really love to take a look at this cathedral..." Patrick said idly. "Lady Eleanora, would you mind showing me around?"

"Of course! You should come too, Yumiella!"

Patrick smiled at her kindly. "It looks like Yumiella has something to discuss with His Eminence. If you don't mind, I'd like for it to be just the two of us."

A blush burst across Eleanora's face. "O-Oh my! I think you're wonderful, Sir Patrick, but I have Sir Edwin... Also, what about Yumiella...?"

Lady Eleanora, you've, uh, got it all wrong. Patrick doesn't have any interest in you, it's a misunderstanding...

Anyone could tell how annoyed Patrick was; it was written all over his face. Although, perhaps "anyone" was an exaggeration—it was more like anyone besides Eleanora could tell.

Watching as Patrick left the room, I thought at him, *I'm so sorry! I won't let your sacrifice be for nothing!*

Eleanora made her way to the door to follow, looking back at me repeatedly over her shoulder. Finally, she gave up and ran outside to catch up to Patrick.

"They're gone..." I moaned in relief.

"Yes."

The cardinal and I nodded to each other in agreement; I could see the exhaustion in his face, and no doubt he could see it in mine as well.

At least I know the Sanonists aren't going to start treating me like a heretic, I thought happily. They should probably lower their level of security, though.

After a moment's silence stretched between us, the cardinal spoke once more. "Well," he said. "Where were we?"

I gave him a slightly perplexed look. "We haven't even started yet."

"Ah yes, that's right. I really must figure out what to do with Eleanora. She is a

good person, no doubt, but... Ahem. I shouldn't be discussing that. There was just one thing I've been wanting to tell you, countess."

Seems it's finally time for the main topic, I thought, steeling myself. I nervously focused on the cardinal's words.

"As a representative of the Sanonist faith, I wish to deliver a message from our church unto you, Countess Dolkness. The church would like you to know it has no intention of opposing you, or of attempting to compel you to join our faith."

I nodded solemnly, but on the inside I was doing a jig. *Is this man a god or something?! This is way better than I could have ever hoped for! And here I was, thinking I'd have to cross swords with the god of light one day.*

But, no matter how good a deal I thought it was that the church was fine with me keeping my distance from them, as I had until now, I still had a few questions I needed answered.

"I'm a dark magic user through and through," I told the cardinal. "That's really all right with you?"

"That is no problem to us at all. You see, while some elements are more compatible with each other than the rest, there is no defined hierarchy between them. Aside from Sanon, the god of light, there are also..." The cardinal shook himself, as if he was getting off track. "Are you familiar with the City of Water?"

"Yes," I agreed. "I've heard that they have a temple dedicated to the god of water."

"That is correct. Just as we have no issue with you, we have no issue with them as well. The Church of Sanonism does not believe in persecuting other faiths. Though the name of the god of darkness has been lost, we continue to respect him as well."

I wasn't particularly a believer of the god of darkness—in fact, I'd never heard a thing about him. Where I'd run across stories of the beliefs of the followers of the gods of water, wind, earth, and fire, the god of darkness was only a void.

"Because there is light, there is darkness. Because there is darkness, there is

light,” the cardinal recited with a graceful smile. “We believe that darkness is a necessity for the existence of our god, Sanon. And so, as a rare wielder of the dark element, I respect you. Which I told Eleanora, back when I asked her to bring you here...”

“She didn’t tell me a thing.”

“That’s what I thought.”

The cardinal and I both sighed.

Eleanora tried to tell me all this on the carriage ride here, didn’t she? I mused. It would have been nice if she’d managed it. It’s actually quite a lovely message; I wouldn’t have been so guarded if I’d heard it.

Feeling reassured, I decided to move on to my second and final concern—the barrier that had prevented me from entering the church earlier.

“I wanted to discuss one more thing with you,” I told the cardinal. “I want to know more about the barrier at the entrance of the church that barred me from the premises.”

“Ah yes, I *was* told of that occurring. My apologies, Countess Dolkness. That barrier is produced by a magical instrument passed down among the church; it is said to prevent monsters from invading our grounds. It was only today I realized it blocked the dark element.”

“It was a truly sturdy barrier,” I informed him. “I don’t think even a high-class dark-type monster could break through it.”

“That’s great to hear,” the cardinal said with a smile. “Before now, some were doubtful it even existed, as everyone was able to pass through it with no issues. Your endorsement will surely bring it some prestige.”

That barrier deserves it, I thought. Man, I still really want a rematch... I never got to deliver my Yumiella Punch! Although, if I risk my credibility and challenge the barrier again, it’s possible it’ll lose its prestige after I win. I hope the cardinal will forgive me if that happens.

My mind strayed slightly, and I began to muse over how I could get permission to go up against the barrier again. But before I could get too far,

though, the cardinal began to speak once again.

“Moving forward, we would appreciate it if you could let us know when you’ll be visiting ahead of time,” he told me. “We were able to disable the barrier today because I was here, but that isn’t always the case.”

Hmm, I thought. From how he’s speaking of it, that barrier is likely produced by one particular instrument that can be turned on and off. If I could only borrow it for a bit...but no, he’d turn me down if I asked. I’ll just have to nudge him in the direction of a rematch as casually as possible, in a way that hides my desire for it and makes the battle seem beneficial to the church.

Plan decided, I gave the cardinal my best smile. “Understood. Oh, and what do you think about taking this opportunity to test the barrier’s durability?”



A short while later, I was sitting in the carriage once again, feeling slightly depressed. “I can’t believe it just ran away after winning like that...” I grumbled.

“Yumiella,” Patrick said, clearly exasperated. “What would you do if you ended up destroying the magical instrument along with the barrier? How would you possibly make that up to the church?”

As was probably obvious by now, my plan to get the cardinal to set up a rematch between me and the barrier had failed. He’d been worried about the magical instrument breaking, just like Patrick had just said.

That thing’s supposed to be legendary, I thought, pouting internally. It’s apparently been passed down through the church for generations! Shouldn’t the cardinal have a bit more faith in it...? I sighed. Oh well. I guess I’ll have to give up on it. For now.

I was jolted from these no-good thoughts by a hysterical shriek.

“Aah! Aaah!” Eleanora wailed.

“What is it now?”

“Th-That ring!” Hand shaking, Eleanora pointed at my left hand.

Jeez, I thought. She must be really surprised that I’m accessorizing.

“This is a surprise gift I received from Patrick,” I began to explain, slightly boastfully. “My fiancé is a kind person who gives me presents even when they aren’t for any occasion in particular.”

“What? It was a surprise gift?”

“It was! Right?”

I turned to Patrick for confirmation, but he had a look of deep displeasure on his face.

Oh. Maybe he doesn’t like it when I talk about our love life...?

“She’s right, it *was* a surprise gift,” Patrick said in an irritated voice, then turned away from me in a huff.

What is he, a child?!

But Eleanora seemed to think there was more to his reaction. Her expression froze, and said slowly, “Yumiella, may I ask you one question? Why do you wear your ring on *that* finger?”

I gave her a confused look. “Um...there’s no reason in particular. Patrick just put it on this finger.”

“Oh...oh my *goodness*...” Eleanora pressed her hands against her mouth, her eyes welling with pitying tears.

Wait, I thought. Now that I think about it, doesn’t a ring mean different things depending on what finger you wear it on? Like, an engagement ring goes on...which finger was it? I never bothered to learn that kind of stuff. I bet Lady Eleanora knows, though. Maybe I should ask her.

“Is there a specific meaning behind the fourth finger on your left hand?”

“Um...well...” Eleanora trailed off, her expression going strange.

Weird. Normally she loves talking about these kinds of things. Why is she being so vague this time? And why does she keep glancing over at Patrick, giving him those weird concerned looks?

Patrick gave an irritated sigh, his eyes still locked on something outside of his window. “Lady Eleanora, I’ll tell her, so I’d prefer it if you didn’t say anything.

It's my fault for not putting it in clear terms for her."

"Understood."

The atmosphere of the carriage took a turn, suddenly becoming reminiscent of a wake. I decided it was best if I kept quiet, and silently admired the finger bearing Patrick's ring.

I guess I don't have to figure it out if Patrick's going to tell me, I thought. To be completely honest, I don't really care about the meaning behind the ring anyway.



It was the day after our outing to the church, and Patrick and I were currently waiting to meet the king in a room in the Royal Palace. The palace was not only the king's home, but also the place that housed Valschein's most central institutions.

"Do I have bedhead?" I asked Patrick, brushing my hair through my fingers.

It was a necessary question—the two of us were in the middle of our final check of our appearances. It would be disrespectful to His Majesty if we met him while looking too sloppy.

"We're about to meet His Majesty, the king of Valschein, and *that's* what you're most concerned over?" Patrick asked, rolling his eyes.

He was dressed differently today, I'd noticed, his clothing a bit more tailored to him than his usual clothing. I, however, was just wearing my typical casual day dress.

"Should I have worn a gown?" I asked slowly.

"I mean, our audience with His Majesty won't be in the public eye, so..."

I relaxed a bit. Patrick was right; our meeting would only consist of the two of us and the king himself. Things would've been a bit different if we'd had to speak in front of several other aristocrats as well, but His Majesty was a man of greatness. He likely didn't care about small details like whether I was dressed in a formal gown or not. To tell the truth, though, those were all just excuses—I *really* didn't want to wear a formal gown.

With my appearance now properly arranged, I turned my focus to finishing the cake they'd served us as we waited. I didn't get very far, however, before there was a knock on the door.

I was a bit busy munching on cake, so Patrick was the one who went to answer. He pulled the door open, and Prince Edwin walked inside.

"It's been a while, Lady Yumiella, Patrick."

After an intense swallow, I replied, "It's nice to see you, Your Highness."

"I ran over after I heard that you two were visiting the palace. It looks like your county's doing well."

I inclined my head. "Yes, thank you."

I guess the news that Dolkness County is on the rise spread far enough that even the prince has heard about it, I thought. It's hard to remember he's in the midst of being pushed to the top himself. Being in the countryside for so long, it feels like all that political stuff isn't even happening.

"How have you been these days?" I asked the prince. "Are the radicals the same as usual?"

Prince Edwin grimaced. "They've actually gotten worse. They're now saying that I'd easily be able to succeed the throne with the duke's assistance. Not only do they want to steal my brother's position as the heir, but they think they can steal the throne itself from my father. They talk about it as if it isn't a big deal at all. It's exhausting."

None of the prince's news was very shocking to me—in fact, it was all within my expectations. With the leader of the radicals now having ties to another country, it was only a matter of course that things would take a more extreme turn.

At this point, we may not be able to settle things peacefully, I thought sadly. We should leave the Royal Capital as soon as we're done with our errands.

Patrick acknowledged how difficult the situation must be, then asked, "Has Duke Hillrose shown any signs of making a move?"

Prince Edwin shook his head. "Nothing has happened that can be attributed

directly to him. Lady Eleanora has been making herself scarce as well, so at least there's *something* beneficial about this whole mess."

Prince Edwin bowed his head slightly to me, as if to thank me for her behavior, but I knew it wasn't just my persuasive abilities that had calmed Eleanora's flirting down. According to her, even her father, the duke, had told her that she should stay away from the prince.

I still don't get why Duke Hillrose made that suggestion, I thought, feeling uneasy. But before I could dwell on the topic, the sound of several people running came from the other side of the door.

I braced myself, wondering what the commotion was about, but the sound passed our room and slowly seemed to recede into the distance.

"Things have been hectic since this morning," Prince Edwin said with a sigh. "It's all because the magical instrument that creates the barrier for the church was stolen."

Patrick turned to look at me so quickly he left a whooshing sound in his wake.

"N-No, it wasn't me! I haven't done anything wrong!" I cried, cringing at his expression.

Ugh, that only made it sound more like I was the culprit! I promise, Patrick, I didn't do it! Sure, I might have mentioned I wanted to borrow it, but I'd never do something sneaky like steal something!

Patrick squinted at me, his eyes turning accusatory upon the sight of my suspicious reaction.

"I mean, I can't get into the church anyway," I said in a rush. "I don't even know where they store the instrument! All I wanted was to settle things with the barrier, I would've just destroyed it rather than steal it..."

Patrick relaxed, seeming to decide I was innocent, and I sunk back in my chair. *Anyone else would have definitely determined that I was the culprit,* I moaned internally. *Rambling like that just made me look even more guilty...*

Turning to the prince, who was staring at the two of us with an abjectly lost look on his face, Patrick said, "Please, tell us more. We actually just visited the

Church of Sanonism yesterday.”

“Truly?” Prince Edwin asked, a bit surprised. “The gist of it is that the cardinal confirms the magical instrument is safe twice a day, once in the morning and once at night. They found that it was missing during yesterday’s nightly confirmation.”

“Well, the barrier was definitely there around midday,” Patrick assured him. “Yumiella wasn’t able to enter the church because of it.”

“Wasn’t that barrier supposed to block monsters...? Oh, it must react to the dark element.”

The prince turned to me with a look of pity, but my mind was already churning.

If the instrument that created the barrier was stolen sometime between midday and nighttime, and I learned about its existence yesterday around noon... The circumstantial evidence is coming together too well! Am I actually the culprit?! Maybe my subconscious did something bad...

“Rest assured, Lady Yumiella,” Prince Edwin said with a smile. “I wouldn’t suspect you of doing such a thing. You aren’t the kind of person who would do something like that, and I don’t believe you would have any motive to steal it.”

“Exactly! I mean, I did think about destroying it, but never once did I think of stealing it.”

The prince’s mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. “So you *did* consider destroying it?”

“Yes,” I said simply. “I’ll definitely destroy it one day.”

Look, I know it’s wrong to destroy the magical instrument, all right? I get it, really I do. It’s just...a need separate from the qualifiers of right and wrong. There are times when you just have to do something no matter what, regardless of how society will judge you for doing it. Whether I’m looked upon with contempt, or the entire world turns against me, my conviction will never fade!

At least Prince Edwin believed in my innocence, regardless of how suspicious I was coming across. The guy sitting next to me, however... I shot Patrick’s

carefree face a resentful glare.

“Just so you know, I never once said that you were suspicious,” he said calmly.

I harrumphed. “But you *thought* it, didn’t you? Whatever, I’m more worried about the magical instrument. I need to be able to destroy it.”

“Patrick, are you sure that Lady Yumiella didn’t do it?” the prince asked.

I let out a full-on gasp. *Prince Edwin, how could you betray me like this?! The church’s hidden treasure being stolen is a matter accompanied by grave consequences. Maybe...I should join the search in order to prove my innocence. And, if I just so happen to find it, perhaps there’ll be a bit of a miscommunication, and out of sheer coincidence, I’ll be able to have my rematch with the barrier. It’s definitely possible; I’m completely sure of it!*

“I would like to pursue the magical instrument as well,” I declared, allowing the full brunt of overflowing enthusiasm to be on display. “What kind of shape is the instrument itself? Please share any other leads you may have with me. Also, if you have a list of who visited the church yesterday, I’d like that as well.”

Prince Edwin eyed me suspiciously, then sighed. “You’re definitely planning on destroying it. I’d prefer if you didn’t help out.”

As if I’ll take that rejection lying down! I thought, as stubborn as ever.

Prince Edwin’s expression began to freeze over, as if he’d realized just how determined I really was.

“Your Highness,” Patrick said, his tone exasperated now, “Yumiella has likely not done anything. Despite how she may seem, she’s not great at lying.”

My hand drifted to my chest. “Patrick...” I said, touched.

Is this the trust a couple builds with one another...?

“As you can clearly see, the only thing on Yumiella’s mind is destroying the barrier. If she knew where it was located, she’d already be acting on that desire.”

The prince nodded. “Ah, I see.”

Jeez, Patrick, I’m not some fighting junkie. And it’s totally lame that you didn’t

trust me at all. All I want to do is make it clear who's stronger!

At this point, none of the conversation was sitting right with me, but it wasn't worth it to fight back now that Patrick had convinced the prince of my innocence. I let out a sigh and gave up.

That thief sure did arrive at the worst time for me... I'm gonna make them pay one day.

After that, the topic shifted back to Dolkness County, and we continued to chat for several dozen more minutes. Then, muttering something about how it was about time, the prince stood up.

"Regarding the barrier, it's not public yet, so don't discuss it with others."

"Understood."

"It's not like it can really be used for evil, so it's not really that big of an issue."

That's true, I realized. All the barrier can really do is prevent monsters and people like me, who are dark magic users, from entering the church. I wonder why the thief decided to go after it? There were a plethora of other expensive-looking things in the church, so I don't think they're after money...

But alas, I couldn't dwell on the theft of my archnemesis for long. The time to meet the king had finally come.



After seeing Prince Edwin off, the king's secretary came to the room where we were waiting and escorted us out. He led us to the top floor of the Royal Palace, where the king's office was located. The room was filled to the brim with organized documents and didn't seem to have any decorations. It seemed to be a place exclusively designated for handling tasks.

Among the carefully arranged chaos, the king sat by himself, in the midst of a staring contest with the documents in his hand. When he heard us enter, however, he set them aside and turned his serious gaze to us. "Greetings, Lady Yumiella, Patrick. I apologize, there's been a lot of things piled up."

"We've heard about the church's barrier from His Highness," I explained.

“I see,” the king said, sighing. He waved a hand, urging us to take a seat.

We obliged, then briefly exchanged pleasantries before jumping right into the main reason for our visit.

“Your Majesty,” I said respectfully, “we’re here today to report on something the duke of Hillrose is planning.”

The king nodded. “Yes, I’ve gotten an overview of the situation from Ronald. I’d like to hear about it again from you as well, Lady Yumiella.”

I went on to explain the duke’s plans as we had heard them from the viscount—I told him all about how the radicals planned to act as a cabal and remove those in the king’s faction from power, and how our neighboring kingdom of Lemlaesta was involved in all of it.

The topic seemed quite fraught to me, but the king never batted an eye. Seeing his lack of reaction, it seemed clear to me that Ronald had not stopped our information from reaching the king. If he hadn’t heard it all prior to this, I thought that would surely have been indicated by his expression.

After I finished explaining the situation, the king closed his eyes and thought silently for a while, as if he was chasing some lost memory. He then let out a sigh, and slowly opened his eyes.

“Only Hillrose knows how exactly Lemlaesta is going to get involved in all of this, is that correct?”

“That is what we heard from the viscount of Cottoness. He mentioned that the duke himself was taking action for once.”

“I see...there shouldn’t be any problems then.”

Um, there still seems to be a lot of problems to me! I thought.

But the king, similar to Ronald, didn’t seem worried by our information at all. To me, the situation seemed quite serious, as the entire kingdom could end up being roped into the struggling factions, but I didn’t sense an ounce of urgency from the king. I had no intentions of defying whatever decision he made, but I still found myself overcome with concern. Before I knew it, all my worries had slipped right out of my mouth.

“Is Ronald all right? I know that he’s the duke’s son, and he’s currently working as your confidant, so I can’t help but think that there is a possibility he might join the duke’s side during all this commotion...”

“That’s not an issue.”

“But why would the duke let go of his own son then?”

“It was all for Ronald’s sake. Hillrose saw the future.”

My brow wrinkled. This was the second time that the duke’s ability to predict the future had been brought up. Now that both the king *and* Ronald had mentioned it, I found myself ravenous for the details.

As if the king could sense my dissatisfaction with his previous answer, he continued in a mumble, “Hillrose was once my closest friend. He foresaw that even if we took care of the issue with the Demon Lord, the kingdom would continue to see unrest.”

“But if that was the duke’s prediction, I still don’t get why he’d decide his son should be raised apart from him,” I interjected.

“We...ended up on different paths,” the king admitted. “We have no choice but to be on opposite sides now. He wanted to keep his son out of it all, and so he left him to me.”

My head began to hurt. *But that sounds like the duke is going into battle with the king knowing full well that he’s going to lose! Why would he do that? After getting another kingdom involved, there’s no way he’s going to be able to avoid getting sentenced with capital punishment.*

I turned back to the king, but he shook his head, ending our talk there. It seemed he had more to say, but was unwilling to voice it.

“I can’t speak on the topic any further,” he told me. “I apologize, but I can’t break my promise to my closest friend.”

“But could you at least tell me what the duke is trying to do? What he’s trying to accomplish?”

“The duke of Hillrose is...” the king sighed. “He will lead his faction and even borrow the strength of another kingdom in order to gain power over Valschein.

That's all there is to it. And I will stop his plans, no matter what."

After that, I couldn't bear to ask the king anything else. A look of abject pain had come over his face as he spoke of the evils his once closest friend was about to bring to bear against him. That was not the end of our talks, however. Once the king had taken a moment to recover, he redirected the conversation to territorial management.

"How has working as a lord of a territory been?" he asked me. "I can give you some advice if you're having any problems."

"I appreciate the offer, but luckily pretty much everything has been going smoothly."

"Well, I'm sorry that I can't be of more help."

I know the king's assistance could instantly solve pretty much any of the issues we're facing in Dolkness County right now, I thought. But I just don't want to get myself any more involved with the royal family.

I expressed this to the king, and a wry smile came over his face. He even scratched at his head and gave a light chuckle.

His actions don't seem very dignified, I mused, watching him. Maybe he's only being this way since we aren't in public.

"Ah," the king said, shifting forward slightly. "I've also heard that you went to the Mark of Ashbatten. The margrave's a good person, isn't he?"

I nodded happily. "Yes, and Patrick and I were able to get his approval to become officially engaged."

"That's wonderful, congratulations..." the king said happily, beaming at us. His eyes flickered belatedly to my left hand. "Oh, I didn't even notice..."

He must gather our relationship is going well, seeing Patrick's surprise gift! I surmised.

Patrick groaned. He had only spoken to exchange polite greetings with the king before this, but now he said, "Your Majesty, the thing is, she doesn't seem to understand what it..."

The king paused for a moment before turning to me. "Lady Yumiella, what is

that ring on your finger?”

“Huh? Oh, this is a surprise gift I received from Patrick.”

The king’s expression twisted into something indescribable after hearing my answer.

Maybe he didn’t like what I said... I thought nervously. Oh, I see! He didn’t want to know who gave me this ring, he wanted to know its magical instrument-like abilities!

“This ring is a rare magical instrument that can store a person’s magical energy and works as insurance in case the wearer runs out of mana,” I said, the words pouring from me like water from a fountain. “Magic stones are full of magical energy as well, but they can’t be converted into a usable form for humans. You might think that mana recovery potions are enough, but the benefit of being able to use magical energy without doing something else is immense. If you’re in a situation that leaves your mana depleted, the need to drink a potion could cost you your life. Also, there’s a bit of a wait between drinking a potion and your mana recovering. In addition, what I think is really incredible about this ring is that it can store elements that I can’t use—”

“Yumiella, that’s enough,” Patrick said, interrupting my high-speed explanation by grabbing my shoulder. “You’re troubling His Majesty.”

Coming back to myself, I focused back on the king. He seemed completely put off by me, as if the words “My god” lurked behind his lips, ready to be spoken at any moment.

“I think your endlessly thorough considerations for battle are incredible,” the king said finally, snapping back to reality. He spoke hurriedly, as if worried he wouldn’t be able to get the words out. “It’s not a bad thing to have something you are passionate about, you know. I was just a bit surprised to see the usually quiet Lady Yumiella suddenly become loquacious.”

He totally thinks I’m one of those nerds that speaks really quickly when they talk about their interests! Your Majesty, I’m not like that at all!

The king looked back and forth between Patrick and me a few times, then finally said, “Hmm. Well, good luck.”

“Thank you,” Patrick said, bowing his head. “I’ll find an opportunity and set things straight.”

Wait, what’s he wishing us good luck for? Patrick at least seems to get it. I guess I can check with him later, but...maybe he’s just wishing me luck with my battle planning?

After that, we briefly discussed the new tourist destination in Dolkness County, along with a few other minor topics, and then our meeting with the king came to its conclusion.



After leaving the king’s office, Patrick and I took a walk around the Royal Palace. Personally, I was of the opinion that we should leave as soon as possible—there was a high chance of us having a random encounter with some annoying aristocrats here, and I wanted no part in that.

Maybe I should have had them send someone to guide us home to ward off any bad luck, I mused. That would mean I have to ride a carriage home though, and I’d rather not. I didn’t really have a choice on the way here, since they sent one to pick us up, but carriages suck. They’re uncomfortable, and running home is so much faster! I glanced absently at the wall of the corridor we were walking down. *I wonder if I can leave without running into anyone if I escape through one of those windows. It would be a pretty bold shortcut, since this is the top floor of the palace...*

“Patrick, I’m going to leave this way,” I said, turning toward the wall.

“There’re only windows that way...” His eyes sharpened. “Hey, *don’t*.”

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t break someone else’s windows,” I chided him.

“That’s no—”

There’s no need to worry, Patrick! I’ll open the window before I jump out!

Ignoring Patrick’s frantic attempt to stop me, I heaved one of the windows open and leapt out. There was a garden right below, and I ended up falling into an area where beautiful flowers bloomed magnificently in every direction. I managed a pretty sweet landing too—I did the whole three-point thing, where

you ended up with one leg pointed out with your foot flat on the ground, the other leg bent at the knee, and one hand stretched out in front of you.

This is probably bad for my knees, huh? I thought. *Still, it's worth it if my likelihood of running into someone I don't want to see significantly decreases.*

There was a noise from in front of me, and I tilted my head up from its downward-facing position to behold someone standing only a few feet away.

So much for avoiding people I don't want to see...

"Excuse me," I told Duke Hillrose, who was still staring at me in shock after watching me fall from the sky. "I'll be taking my leave now, so don't mind me."

"Wait," the duke called out. "Lady Yumiella? I haven't seen you since that ceremony a year ago."

Alas, my plan of escaping while he was still confused has failed. Ignoring him now would be rude.

I looked back without fully turning toward him. "Yes, it's me. Thank you for everything."

"I didn't do anything," he countered. "*You* were the one who took down the Demon Lord, countess. I believe it was a ceremony to congratulate you, no?"

I eyed the duke carefully. He showed no signs of aging since the last time I'd seen him, but there was something dark about the air around him. He had this condescending expression, like he was looking down at all the people around him. He certainly didn't give me the impression that he was at all a good person. I decided to keep my distance from him—there was no harm in it, even if I'd been told there was no need to be wary.

"From what I remember, His Highness was the guest of honor at that ceremony," I said slyly.

It was perhaps not the best move to poke and prod at the duke for a little information on the second prince's faction, but I couldn't help myself. I was curious, and immediately taking my leave wouldn't satisfy the feeling currently eating away at me.

"Come now," the duke responded with a chuckle. "Anyone with proper

sensibilities and minimal intelligence wouldn't be fooled into thinking *that* prince was a key player in taking down the Demon Lord."

"His Highness is one of the most skilled fighters in this kingdom," I pointed out.

The duke smiled, as if he was truly amused. "Heh, it must be nice for the prince to be acknowledged by the most skilled fighter in the world."

I sighed internally. *I think it's probably best I go now.*

It wasn't like I'd learned anything new—I'd expected Duke Hillrose to figure out the reality behind our battle against the Demon Lord. Just as he'd said, anyone who was well-informed would catch on pretty quick. It was just...I was getting the feeling I should make myself scarce.

"I'm sure that's true," I told the duke neutrally. "But it's about time I head out."

I tried to slip past him, but he wasn't having it.

"Hold on," the duke said. "I have a question for you. Just the one."

I could have just continued on, but I decided to give in and stopped in my tracks. "What is it? I don't have any intentions of joining your faction."

The duke scoffed. "There's no need for you to hang around those fools. What I want to know is, do you like this country, or not?"

I gave him a dubious look. *It's a bit much for him to just throw the people of his own faction under the bus like that and call them fools, right? And what's up with his oh-so-important question? All he asked was if I liked this kingdom! I can't believe someone who seems so unpatriotic asked me if I'm patriotic.*

If I was to tell the truth, I'd have to admit to the fact that I held no feelings of patriotism to any kingdom, Valschein included, but I decided to give the duke a safe answer.

"I'm a member of the aristocracy in the Kingdom of Valschein," I said simply. "Naturally, I pledge loyalty to the kingdom's royal family."

Duke Hillrose sighed. "No, no," he said, voice rife with irritation. "Regardless of the truthfulness of your statement, that's not what I was asking. What I want

to know is if you love this kingdom as in your portion of it. Do you love your territory, or your people? I couldn't care less about the royal family and that feeble king."

Oh, I thought, a tad shell-shocked. He's actually crazy. How else would he have the gall to call the king feeble in his very own palace, where the kingdom's monarchy was established?!

Afraid that someone had heard the duke's words, I looked around, checking our surroundings. There were no traces of people about; it was just the duke and me, plus the gorgeous roses so brilliantly blooming in the garden.

Wait, why am I the one getting scared and not the duke? I realized. *He's the one who said it.*

Shaking off my discomfort, I focused back on Duke Hillrose's question.

As an aristocrat, I was probably supposed to like this kingdom and the people living here. But when it came to patriotism...I just couldn't really grasp what kind of feeling it was.

Come on, hurry up and think of an answer so you can leave, I chided myself, but I just couldn't seem to find the words.

Could I say that I truly liked this kingdom? No. But I wasn't living as an aristocrat for my own benefit either.

Seeing me struggle for an answer, the duke said, "Let me rephrase that. Say there's a starving village before you. What would you do?"

"I can't create food from nothing, so—"

"No, I'm asking what your course of action would be. What would you work toward?"

"I would think of ways to solve their lack of food supply, of course."

I gave the duke a confused look. *Why would you ask me something so obvious? Even I have enough of a conscience that I would do that much. In fact, I'm currently in the middle of helping out a village just like that, which turned to theft when they were neglected by the lord of a neighboring territory!*

"I see..." The duke continued, his face twisting into a nasty smile. "But, tell

me, what about all the other people in the world who are suffering from starvation, just like that village? Are you not going to take action to help them as well?"

I shook my head. "It would be impossible to help the entire world. I can only help those who are within my power to assist."

I was under no impression that I was a god; I was well aware that I couldn't save all the unfortunate people in the world. Nevertheless, I could still focus on helping those near me, and on using my power to help my county and this kingdom. But...

Why would the duke ask me these questions in the first place?

My eyes flickered reluctantly to the man's face, only to see that his nasty grin had deepened even further. "Wonderful, I see that you understand your limitations at such a young age," he said, chuckling. "You're completely different from that spoiled child. Keep being as diligent as you are now."

"I will..." I said, feeling oddly uncomfortable. "I'll be leaving then."

With a shiver, I turned away, the image of the smug grin on Duke Hillrose's face burned into my mind. I couldn't help but compare that creepy, utterly pleased smile to Ronald's friendly grin and Eleanora's straightforward, open nature.

How can the members of one family all act so incredibly differently? I wondered.

Regardless, nothing the duke said made sense, and I'd had enough. I began to walk away, but was stopped once again after only a few steps.

"Wait," the duke commanded.

I twisted my head around to look at him. "What is it this time?"

"I hope you'll be a friend to Eleanora."

He smiled at me once more, but it was nothing like the expression that had made me so uncomfortable just moments before. It was a kind expression, like that of a doting father.

Before I could work up an answer, the duke turned around and strode off. I

was left alone in the garden, the scent of roses turning more cloying with every breath.



The next night, I was snatched away from the Dolkness estate and taken to the Hillrose household. To my utmost displeasure, I was currently being forced into a gown by an exuberant Eleanora.

“See! It’s perfect, just as I thought!”

I grimaced, if only internally. “But why do I need to wear a gown? I thought we were having dinner together.”

“It’s normal to wear a gown when going to a party!” Eleanora replied.

A party? I thought Lady Eleanora just invited me over for dinner! When did we decide on going to a party?!

I shifted uncomfortably, bothered by how difficult it was to move in the black gown I’d been forced into. It had a more daring cut than I was used to, and exposed one of my shoulders. To tell the truth, I wanted to take the thing off right that instant. Still, despite how I acted most of the time, I was more civilized than a cave dweller who tore off their clothes just because they were in the way.

So, I just said crankily, “Lady Eleanora, you never mentioned we were going to a party.”

“Hmm, really?” She grinned at me. “Well, you’ll be able to eat there too, so it’s practically the same!”

I sighed. Honestly, this is my fault. This is the same girl who simplified an invitation to visit the cardinal of Valschein’s biggest church to “Let’s hang out!” I should have expected something more than a simple dinner and asked her for more details, instead of getting distracted by thinking how nice it would be if I was able to gather some more information on Duke Hillrose.

Gloomily, I decided to give into my fate. I couldn’t even work up the energy to be excited about eating dinner at whatever venue we were headed to—whether it was served in banquet or buffet style, there was no way the food

would be able to satisfy me.

A good meal requires one to be free in all aspects, after all.

Eleanora inspected me in my gown from top to bottom multiple times, then smiled at me so wide I felt like there was no way her lips could stretch any further. “You look wonderful! Black looks great on you, Yumiella!”

“I see...thanks.”

My heart softened a little, knowing how genuine Eleanora’s words were. She’d never been one to pay any attention to Valschein’s long-standing discrimination against black hair, and I could tell she seriously thought the black gown looked good with my dark coloring.

If it makes a pure girl like Lady Eleanora this happy, maybe I can attend a party this once, I thought with a sigh. *Even if I do deeply dislike such events.*

“Where’s this party going to be held?” I asked.

“Right here! My father is hosting the party. The members of my father’s faction will all be gathered here.”

All the warmth in my chest turned to ice. *Lady Eleanora, are you bringing me to a gathering of radicals?! I take my statement from earlier back; I don’t want to go after all!*

A few minutes later, Eleanora led me to the entrance to the Hillrose estate ballroom. It was smaller than I expected it to be, especially since I’d heard it was the third largest ballroom in Valschein, following the ones at Royal Palace and the Academy. To be fair though, it was only smaller than my expectations—the space was still massive, and it was unlikely any other aristocrat in the kingdom possessed a ballroom that was even close to being as impressive as this one.

From the tables down to the doorknobs, you could tell that the furniture and hardware were all expensive just by looking at them. They’d all been well polished, and they gave off an elegant shimmer that pleased the eye.

“There’s no need to be nervous,” Eleanora whispered loudly from beside me. “I’ll be with you!”

I'm not nervous, Lady Eleanora, I thought in exasperation. *I'm exhausted.*

My torture hadn't ended once Eleanora had forced me into the dress. I'd also had to endure getting my hair braided, and having makeup applied to my face. On top of that, I'd been coerced into wearing a pair of heels which I found unbelievably difficult to walk in. The entire process had been incredibly draining.

How can Lady Eleanora still be so energetic? I wondered. *She went through all the same things I did! Although, maybe she's used to it—she almost always wears nice dresses when I see her.*

"Will the duke be coming to this party as well?" I asked Eleanora. "I was invited, if only technically. I should at least go and say hello."

"My father won't be there," Eleanora replied, her voice puzzled.

"What? Wasn't it the duke who invited me?"

"I invited you! My father said I could bring as many friends as I wanted."

Ah, so it's unlikely the duke knows she invited me, I realized. *I wonder if this is all right...*

Focusing back on Eleanora, I pressed her for details. Apparently, it was rare for the duke himself to make an appearance at gatherings like this, that the radicals held on a regular basis.

"I will be acting as the host," Eleanora boasted, having clearly dressed for the part judging by the fact that she'd dressed up more than usual. "As Sir Edwin's future wife, making arrangements like this is nothing."

I nodded. "Fair enough. So, what did you do when it comes to this event?"

"I approved the deputy's ideas!"

That means you didn't do anything! I thought, my head beginning to throb. *The deputy here must really have it rough... Although, leaving the planning to Lady Eleanora and having her attempt to clean up her own messes might be even worse than just doing it all by yourself.*

Gazing into the venue, I was able to count roughly fifty people—all of them radical heads of aristocratic households or members of their families. Having no

prior notice about my attendance, the other partygoers were shocked to see me there. They all stared at Eleanora and me from afar, unsure of how to react. One man, however, broke the mold by making his way toward us.

Inwardly, I groaned. *Come on, man, I'm just here for the colorful array of dishes over on that table! I don't have any interest in friendly conversation with some guy I don't know.*

"Thank you very much for inviting me to today's soiree, Lady Eleanora. I believe this is my first time meeting the young lady next to you."

I gave the man across from us a dubious look, even as Eleanora responded with a cheerful, "Oh, this is my friend, Yumiella!"

Oh, come on, Lady Eleanora, I thought, rolling my eyes. *It's obvious that man figured out who I am the second he saw my hair. What a blatant liar. And ugh, what's going on with that smile of his? He probably thinks he looks nice, but there's something disturbing about his expression.*

Eleanora was about to continue speaking, but the man cut her off and focused on me. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Countess Dolkness," he said. "I am Arkleton, I hold the title of count as well."

"It's nice to meet you," I replied stiffly.

"Since you're attending our gathering today, would I be correct to assume that means you are joining the duke's side?"

"You would not be."

I should've expected this the moment Lady Eleanora said this was a party of radicals, I thought with a sinking stomach. *Of course the man's grinning so much, thinking that I chose to support their cause. If I did so, their plan to make Prince Edwin the next king would be rock-solid.* The man's question made my mind flicker back to my meeting with the viscount of Cottoness. *The viscount was of the impression I joined the radicals' cause as well. Where is that rumor even coming from?*

Meanwhile, Count Arkleton's face had turned suspicious. "Why are you here, then?"

“Because...my friend invited me,” I replied with an inward grimace. “I have no other reason.”

“Yes, I see,” the count said, his face smoothing. “Yes, you just came by today to see Lady Eleanora. Let’s leave it at that.”

Eyeing the pleased look on Count Arkleton’s face, I could tell he thought he’d caught on to some nonexistent hidden true meaning behind my words.

Misunderstandings like this are nothing but trouble, I thought, holding myself back from running an irritated hand through my hair. *I can already feel that some other annoyance is going to come from this.*

Just as I’d had that thought, Eleanora seized one of my hands in hers. “Yumiella! Just now! You called me your friend! That’s the first time you’ve ever said it!”

“Yes, I know,” I said tiredly. “So please, go ahead and let me go. Come on, you need to greet everyone, right, Lady Eleanora? It’s the Hillroses’ party after all.”

“That’s right!” she agreed. “I’ll be off then!”

And with that, Eleanora scurried off toward the other partygoers, a cheerful smile still spread across her face.

All right, that’s one thing taken care of, I thought, relaxing a little. *Next, I have to make it clear that I have no intention of joining the duke’s faction.*

I was immediately distracted from this goal, however, by Count Arkleton, who was still standing before me. He’d turned to look condescendingly after Eleanora as she walked away.

“You seem to be having a rough time as well,” he said, voice sickeningly sweet. “I mean, that young lady doesn’t seem to be the sharpest knife in the drawer. Although, it *is* good for us, since she’s easy to manipulate.”

Listening to him so comfortably putting Eleanora down lit a fire in me. I grew irritated all at once, to the point I almost snapped back at him. But...wasn’t I guilty of talking about her the same way? Even now, I’d just manipulated her into getting her to leave me alone. Was that really much different than what these men did, getting her all stirred up about Prince Edwin and sending her

charging to his side?

I let out a long sigh. *Until now, I've been avoiding getting too close with Lady Eleanora because she's the duke's daughter, but...perhaps I need to begin building a proper friendship with her.*

Still, before I acted on that thought, I needed to deal with the man in front of me. He'd continued to blabber on even after I'd grown distracted, completely disregarding my lack of response.

"At the end of the day, the second prince is the most fit to be our next king," he was saying. "I'm glad to see that you've come to that realization as well, Countess Dolkness."

"Even if that *was* true, I believe His Highness has made it clear he has no interest, no? I believe he's said himself that he has no intention of succeeding the throne."

Count Arkleton waved that off. "He only said that out of concern for his reputation—I know in his heart he wants the throne. I wouldn't be much of a loyal subject if I couldn't understand his feelings."

Dude, I don't think you're being nearly as considerate as you think you are, I thought. Although, this guy's so smarmy I can't tell if he genuinely believes what he's spouting, or if he's personally decided to target the second prince precisely because of his lack of ambition.

Regardless of what the man really thought, it was beyond obvious that he didn't have a single ounce of loyalty in him. The fact that he was already thinking about his future position was proof of that. His goal was clearly to take advantage of the fact that, once they took over, all the members of the king's faction who currently held important positions would be cleaned out and replaced with members of the duke's faction. He wanted to be a minister of some such.

At this point, my neutral expression had turned into a cold glare. The count didn't notice though, and continued to speak in a bland, sonorous tone.

"On top of that, His Highness *defeated* the *Demon Lord*. All true aristocrats must take up their swords when the kingdom is in crisis, and in the end, the

more strength you have on your side in battle, the easier the win. I'm sure you understand that principle quite well, Countess Dolkness."

"You may be right about that," I conceded.

I couldn't exactly contradict the man with full confidence, as I'd solved most of my issues before now using brute force. Still, I didn't think he was completely right. Sure, I was incredibly strong, but I also wasn't a very good aristocrat or a good lord to my county. Strength in battle wasn't all that was important in this world—I was proof of that. So, I decided to drive the point home.

"You say that strength is everything," I said consideringly to the count, "but if that's the case, wouldn't someone's level determine who is the most important? Shall we compare? What level are you, sir?"

Count Arkleton's face flushed slightly. "I-I'm not very good when it comes to fighting..."

"Ah, I see," I said, nodding. "I guess that means you'll just continue to be a trifling aristocrat from now on."

The count's pink cheeks deepened to bright red. "H-How dare you?! I'm speaking of who deserves the throne! Are you saying there's an aristocrat who could actually defeat His Highness, the second prince, the man who defeated the Demon Lord?!"

Yes, I'm right here, I declared internally. Oh, I also just so happen to be the actual person who took down the Demon Lord. I really thought you already knew that, but I guess you're not even that smart.

At this point, I knew there was no point in continuing to converse with the count. I decided to wrap things up.

"Well, there's me, for one. You should probably keep me in mind if you're planning on governing the kingdom using strength to back you up. I won't stop you from getting ahead, but if you're going to pose a threat to those around me, I'll give you everything I've got."

The count's red face went white. "Th-There is no need... I would never do something to ruffle your feathers, countess."

“Is that so? Well then, I’ll be looking on from a distance. Please feel free to do whatever you like.”

With that, I turned my back on Count Arkleton and began walking across the ballroom. The other aristocrats around us, who’d been watching our exchange, stepped away from me, creating a path.

Part of me hoped that the radicals would calm down a bit after my veiled threat, but the rest of me could already tell I hadn’t made much of a dent in their resolve. Those rooting for the second prince were going to rebel against the king and the first prince regardless—making my position clear wouldn’t be enough to turn the tides on the current situation.

Whatever, I just came here to have dinner, I thought. I need to eat while I can; it’s free, after all. If nothing else, I should at least get myself something to drink.

Just then, Eleanora came into view. She was speaking to some girls around our age, who looked familiar.

Oh, those are the girls from the Academy who used to throw their weight around since they were a part of Lady Eleanora’s entourage, I realized.

“Now’s your chance,” one of them said. “His Highness will become the king, and you will be his queen, Lady Eleanora... How lovely is that?”

Eleanora shifted her feet uncomfortably. “But both my father and Yumiella have suggested that I back down...”

“I’m sure they’re just sad to see you marry into the royal family! They’ll definitely be happy for you if you and the prince get together.”

“Will they?” she asked reluctantly. “But, I...”

She looks like she’s on the verge of changing her mind, I thought. It’s not that surprising, with all those noble ladies cajoling her at once.

The group of girls seemed to notice this as well, as their mouths began curving upward. They seemed to think they’d already succeeded.

“You’re just one step away from marrying the second prince, Lady Eleanora,” one of the girls said, giggling.

“Really? If I can end up with Sir Edwin, I...” Eleanora trailed off.

A sick feeling began to fill my stomach. Eleanora was always surrounded by people in the Academy—even now, she was at the center of a group of girls her age. But...just how many of those girls were actually on her side? As much as I'd been thinking of Eleanora as my polar opposite, maybe she was just as alone as I'd been in the past...

All of a sudden, I thought of the expression on the duke of Hillrose's face the day before. Not the unpleasant one, but the kind smile he'd given me just before he left, when he'd asked me to take care of Eleanora.

I shook my head, trying to cast off the rush of feelings that'd taken over me. *No, you're not a part of this whole radical thing*, I reminded myself. *I made my choice without any of their influence. It's my decision to grow closer to Lady Eleanora.*

Secure in this thought, I called out, "Lady Eleanora! Don't you think I should be the one shouting *your* name once in a while?"

"Huh?" Eleanora turned around and gave me a puzzled look. "Yumiella?"

Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd stepped forward and taken Eleanora's hand. I pulled her from the crowd of noblewomen and led her away. Behind us, her entourage watched on blankly, as if they were still processing what had just occurred.

Tugging Eleanora after me, I accelerated into a run. She didn't even resist as I pulled her from the ballroom and hurried down a hallway.

"Hold on!" she huffed behind me. "Where are we going?"

"I'm not sure," I called back. "I haven't decided. I think anywhere is fine, as long as we can eat."

Jeez, Lady Eleanora, why're you so slow? You're going to trip trying to keep up with me. That's what you get for wearing those heightening shoes.

My course of action was clear. Without giving her a moment to object, I scooped Eleanora up into my arms.



A blush colored Eleanora's cheeks. "Wah! Y-You can't do this, Yumiella! My heart belongs to Sir Edwin..."

I gave the girl in my arms a dubious look. *Just what kind of misunderstanding are you having, Lady Eleanora? Surely you're not this embarrassed over being carried bridal style. Perhaps I really should have given her a piggyback ride instead...*

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I ran out of the duke's estate and sped through the streets of the Royal Capital.

These shoes are making it hard for me to walk too... So, time to take them off!

Pausing for a brief moment, I shucked the heels from my feet and threw them off to the side of the street. Then, I immediately returned to running, this time barefoot.

If there's rock that can hurt my foot, I dare it to come try!

"I never knew you were such an assertive person, Yumiella," I heard Eleanora comment.

I snorted. "I think you're quite up there when it comes to assertiveness as well, Lady Eleanora. Well then—let's find somewhere to eat!"

Before long, my run through the night had taken us from the center of the aristocratic quarter to the commoner's quarter. The townscape was dim, only illuminated by the sparse light coming from the shops along the street. Even on the street we were currently on, which was full of restaurants, I wouldn't have said things were fully lit up.

When I finally stopped and let Eleanora down, it was in front of a fancy-looking restaurant that I'd normally never choose to enter. It would be a miracle if I was even able to get myself inside.

"Is this...a kidnapping?" Eleanora asked consideringly.

I shook my head. "Of course not. We're just having a meal together as friends."

"I see, so this is what friends normally do. I had no idea."

Wait, is this what friends usually do? I wondered.

I didn't have many friends of my own, so I wasn't really sure. In the end, I decided it was best I refrained from speaking on the matter.

Enough dillydallying—let's go in! I thought, grabbing the door handle and pulling the door open.

Upon entering, we were greeted politely by a server. They seemed a bit thrown off by us, but didn't let it show too much.

We were quickly led to a table by a window, and as we settled in I took in our surroundings. Now that I could see the inside of the restaurant properly, I could tell it was far more extravagant than I'd thought it was. I didn't think there would be anything strange about seeing aristocrats like me and Eleanora here, but then again, none of the other customers was wearing a gown. Of course, no one else was barefoot either.

"This place is wonderful!" Eleanora said once she'd taken her own look around, her tone deeply pleased. "I've always thought simple establishments like this one have something charming about them."

Simple? I thought, looking around the space once again. *If this is simple, what would that make my favorite shops in the Royal Capital?*

"That was delicious!" Eleanora said heartily as we enjoyed a cup of tea after our meal. "I wouldn't say that the ingredients were good, but there was a lot of creativity in the meal, and it was fun to eat!"

"I agree..." I replied.

Come on, I need to say something that makes it sound like I have a good palate as well! Um...it was...super yummy! I sighed. *Whatever, we don't need to discuss the food.*

I took another slow sip of my tea, stalling our eventual departure. My mind was on a certain problem—namely, how we were going to manage to pay for our meal.

Usually, I carried enough money around that I didn't have to worry about

paying for food, even from a restaurant this fancy. At this moment, however, I was completely broke. I'd left my money behind at the duke's estate, along with my regular clothes.

This is why gowns are no good! I decided. Any garments that don't have pockets are defective! Turning to Eleanora, I mused, *She probably doesn't have any money on her either...*

She *did*, however, have a necklace with a large gemstone hanging around her neck.

Maybe we can pay with that...?

Catching on to my worries, Eleanora asked, "Yumiella? What's wrong?"

Even if we did pay with the necklace, that might only cause trouble for the restaurant, I mused, still staring at Eleanora's chest. *But...I still don't have any other way to pay.*

Suddenly, a familiar voice called out from my side. "What are you doing?"

"Patrick!"

Yay, my wallet's here! I see; he must have seen us through the window. So he just happened to be passing by this restaurant and ended up finding me. How lucky am I?

"I'm so happy you're here," I told him sincerely.

"Why are you barefoot?" he asked, exasperated. "What happened to your shoes?"

"I took them off because they were in the way."

"Are you a child?! I guess I have no choice..."

Patrick let out a deep sigh, then suddenly picked me up.

Wait, this is embarrassing! A piggyback ride might be better... Wait no, that was a lie. I'm sorry.

"Lady Eleanora," Patrick said calmly, "you're coming as well. A carriage from the duke's estate is waiting outside."

"Oh, you two are so lovely! I also want Sir Edwin to... Oh no! Sir Edwin turned

into Yumiella! Please get out of my head!”

I giggled—it appeared that I’d crashed Eleanora’s bridal-style carry daydream. Patrick gave me a look as if to say, “What did you do this time?”

We all headed outside, and Eleanora climbed into the carriage. I bowed my head to her, but it didn’t look quite right, as Patrick was still carrying me. I didn’t mind, though—I was still puzzling over who had arranged a carriage in the first place.

“Thank you very much,” Eleanora called through the carriage window. “I had fun today!”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I called back.

“Will you take me out again another time, Yumiella?”

I paused for a moment. “If the opportunity arises,” I agreed.

Going out with her every once in a while won’t be so bad, right? We can go out...maybe once every four years?

A few moments after seeing Eleanora off, Patrick and I headed home. He still hadn’t put me down, so I ended up being carried through town. The night sky still hovered above us, but it wasn’t until we got to a less populated part of town that I finally felt comfortable enough to raise my head from where I’d buried it in Patrick’s chest and gaze up at the stars.

“Hey, Patrick.”

“What’s up?”

“I...think I made a friend.”

Patrick’s eyes, which were just as beautiful as the stars in the sky, gazed into mine. I pressed my nose back into his chest.

“I see,” he said gently, his soft voice trickling into my ears.



The day after sneaking out of the party with Eleanora, I decided to head home to Dolkness County, just as I’d said I would. Just when I was about to set out,

however, Eleanora had stopped by the mansion. She latched on to me, practically on the verge of tears.

This...it's happened before, hasn't it?

"I can't believe we won't be able to see each other again!" Eleanora wailed. "I'm soooo sad! Wait—I can just go visit Dolkness County and see you, right?"

Come on, don't stick your nose into my county as well, I groaned internally. *Although...I guess we are friends now. It should be fine if she only comes every once in a while.*

"Sure, but just wait a little bit, okay?" I asked her. "I promise, I'll invite you to Dolkness County soon enough."

"Really?!" Eleanora shrieked, bouncing on her heels. "Promise—you have to promise!"

"Sure. Oh, and also...if it ever gets dangerous for you here in the capital, please come to me. At the very least, I'll be able to provide shelter for you."

"If it gets dangerous...?" Eleanora asked, tilting her head in puzzlement.

Judging by that reaction, none of the information regarding the rebellion is being shared with her at all, I mused. *I hope if anything happens, she really will come to me. I've got at least enough resources to shelter one other person.*

All of a sudden, I realized this would be my last chance to learn more about Eleanora's father. *Maybe I can learn something today, since I didn't get to ask her about anything yesterday.*

"There's a lot of danger out in the world," I said casually, trying to redirect the conversation in his direction. "Doesn't the duke say anything about you going out so often?"

Eleanora nodded. "He does caution me often," she agreed. "My father's a bit too overprotective."

"He must really love you."

A pleased grin surfaced on Eleanora's face. "Oh, but my father loves this kingdom as well, you know?" she said, swaying happily as she spoke.

“He...loves the Kingdom of Valschein...?”

“Yes, and he also loves to clean! He said he was going to gather everything he didn’t need in one spot and get rid of it all at once!”

To tell the truth, I didn’t really care about the duke’s interests in minimalism, and I didn’t take him as a big fan of the kingdom. Perhaps he was just lying to his daughter, but something just felt off to me. Still, there wasn’t really anything for me to gain from learning about the surprising side the duke had to him when it came to his family.

If I remember correctly, Eleanora lost her mother when she was young, and her brother had already left their home by the time she was old enough to remember things. That means her father has pretty much been her only close family member.

“You must love your father as well, Lady Eleanora.”

She nodded vigorously. “Yes! I love my father and my brother dearly!”

“I see...” I said weakly.

I wonder what will happen to her if Duke Hillrose really leads a coup d’état... Unlike Ronald, everyone knows that Eleanora is a Hillrose.

The image of the duke’s expression as he asked me to take care of his daughter flashed through my mind. *Is Duke Hillrose actually a patriot, or a traitor to this kingdom?*

Interlude 6: Eleanora

A week after Yumiella and Patrick left the Royal Capital, Eleanora Hillrose was scurrying down a hallway in her beloved father's estate. Her urgency could be laid at the feet of the duke, who had summoned her with the message that there was something important they needed to discuss.

Eleanora reached her father's room, then burst in without so much as a knock. "Father!" she exclaimed. "I have! Arrived!"

The duke pressed a hand to his forehead. "Eleanora, you need to knock when you enter a room. Also, you need to be quieter."

"Understood!" she energetically responded.

The duke sighed and instructed her to sit, and Eleanora grinned with excitement as she plopped herself down on a chair. Once she was settled, the duke then handed her a large envelope, which she accepted with both hands. She gave the letter a bewildered look, and had just begun to open it when her father spoke up and stopped her.

"Hold on, that's not for you," he said, voice exasperated. "I'd like you to go and deliver it to Ronald."

"So...it's a letter for my brother?"

Duke Hillrose nodded. "Yes, that's correct. You should know that after you deliver it to Ronald, you will henceforth be in his care."

"O-Okay...?"

Seeing the confusion on Eleanora's face, the duke sighed again and decided to explain to her what he'd meant in clearer terms. "By that, I mean that you shall be living with Ronald for a while. You should take anything of importance to you along with you when you go."

"Ronald and I are going to have a sleepover?!"

Eleanora's eyes glimmered as her heart filled with joy, and she happily began

to muse aloud about the many items she supposed she should bring with her. The duke interrupted her, giving her a stern warning.

“Remember, you should only be taking the things that are *truly* valuable to you. Pick your items with care, as you would if you knew you weren’t going to be able to return.”

Eleanora’s face wrinkled in dismay. “What? But I don’t want that! If I can’t return, I wouldn’t be able to see you, father!”

“I didn’t say you *weren’t* going to be able to return; I just said you should pack as if you couldn’t. Don’t fret—we’ll see each other again. I love you, Eleanora.”

“I love you too!” Eleanora called back cheerfully, exiting the room without looking back.

Sadness and pain washed over her father’s face, but with her back turned, Eleanora didn’t notice a thing. Little did she know that meeting had been her last chance to see her beloved father.

Duke Hillrose, now alone in his room, closed his eyes and desperately held back tears. There was no time for him to cry—he had a mission to accomplish. Taking a deep breath, then releasing it, the duke managed to bring himself back to a calm place. He forced the corners of his lips to curve.

“The time has finally come to carry out this household’s mission—to lead a rebellion against the royal family. We’re ready to go, and all we have left to accomplish is to find someone who will continue to work toward our goals.”

The duke was completely certain his plan would succeed. He believed that his son would handle things properly upon receiving the documents he’d just sent with Eleanora, which explained the details of his plan.

“It seems it is time for me to head to Dolkness County, then,” the duke muttered to himself, finally climbing to his feet.

His reasoning for traveling to Yumiella’s county was simple—it was the territory that housed the person the duke had his eye on to become his successor. His plan had actually been perfect up until this point...though in one aspect, it seemed to have fallen short.



After meeting with the duke, Eleanora had headed to her own room, as she'd been told, and was now going through her belongings, picking out what she needed for her sleepover. As she worked, a knock came at her door, followed by the voice of one of the servants who worked at the duke's estate.

"There's a letter for you, my lady."

Eleanora paused. "A letter? Who is it from?"

"It's from the countess of Dolkness."

"From Yumiella?!"

Eleanora ran over to the door and practically snatched the letter from the servant's hands, overjoyed to receive a missive from her best friend. It was a rare thing for Yumiella to reach out first—typically, Eleanora was the one who did the reaching.

Jubilantly tearing open the letter, Eleanora ran her eyes over the words scribbled onto the stationary within.

"It's happening!" she exclaimed, suddenly pumping her fist into the air.

"Please calm down, my lady," the servant said tiredly.

But Eleanora could do no such thing—the letter had contained an announcement of Yumiella and Patrick's upcoming marriage, which would be held in six months. Overcome with joy, Eleanora gleefully evaded her servant's attempts to restrain her, bouncing happily about her room.

"Oh, what a happy occasion this is! I absolutely *must* visit Yumiella and congratulate her right away! Please prepare a carriage—I'm heading to Dolkness County!"

And so, Eleanora departed the duke's estate at a run, with little more than the clothes on her back in tow. Carrying the large envelope her father had given to her under one arm, Eleanora rushed to the place where her friend lay in wait, in desperate need of congratulations.

This was how Dolkness County became the grounds for the commotion about to sweep the country of Valschein, which had originally been meant to begin

and end in the Royal Capital.

Chapter 7: The Hidden Boss Faces Off Against the Duke

I was still worried over what was going on with Duke Hillrose the day after we returned to Dolkness County, but I had no choice but to put such thoughts aside—my work as the lord of the county had piled up.

The villagers from Cottoness Viscounty had finished moving into their newly developed village, and we were continuing to send them aid as they tilled the fields. I'd considered lending them a hand personally as well, but both Patrick and the villagers themselves had put a quick stop to that. I hadn't been offended by their decision—after all, they'd only denied my help because they were determined to take care of themselves on their own, not because they were afraid that something terrible would happen if they left things to me.

With the villagers settled, I had started my day in my office, endlessly addressing and signing envelopes. I was still there, in fact, and was honestly getting a bit exasperated over the mountain of envelopes Daemon had pushed over to me to sign, for reasons that remained unknown to me.

Turning toward the older man, I said, "Hey, what are these envelopes for?"

"Well..." Daemon's eyes flickered over to Patrick, who was in another corner of the office looking over some paperwork, then back to me. "Have you told him yet?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Oh, they must be invitations for Patrick's level 99 celebration party! That explains the envelopes addressed to the margrave and the king.

I had, in fact, *not* told Patrick about the party—I wanted to keep it a secret to the very last second possible, so it came as a surprise. I was determined not to let Patrick find out, even though he typically had a good ability to sense these kinds of things.

I shook my head slightly at Daemon, indicating a negative response to his question, and then said, "Oh right, the invitations!" as if nothing was going on.

“But where are the letters that are supposed to go in them?”

“I’ll be preparing those,” Daemon replied. “These aren’t official invitations, just a notice that there will be a ceremony around winter. All you have to do is address them and sign them; that should be fine.”

I nodded. *Giving six months prior notice seems a bit much, but I guess most of the people on our guest list are pretty busy. Still, addressing all of these envelopes is tiresome.*

I thought of the hellishly large pile of letters that I’d eventually have to face, and shivered in preconceived dread.

“Oh, and your dress will be ready soon,” Daemon said suddenly, as if the information had just leapt to the forefront of his mind. “You’ll need to try it on once, and then they will have to make some alterations.”

“You’re talking about the white one, right?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

I sighed inwardly. *Do I really have to wear a gown? And a white one, at that? I know it’s a celebration and all, but wearing such a fancy dress is the one thing I’m not looking forward to. Also...what if we go to all the effort to plan this huge affair, and Patrick doesn’t even reach level 99 in time for the party? Even if we’re celebrating the both of us, he might be humiliated. I’m going to need him to keep working hard until winter hits.*



One afternoon roughly a week after Patrick and I returned from the Royal Capital, when just enough time had elapsed for me to have almost entirely forgotten all the envelopes I’d been forced to address, a letter arrived at the Dolkness mansion. According to the gardener whom the letter had been passed to, a mysterious man had appeared and given it to him.

I gave the missive, which was now in my hands, a suspicious look—judging by the wax seal that decorated the front, it was unmistakably from the duke of Hillrose. Still, there was no ignoring it, so Patrick and I gave in and carefully opened the letter together.

“It’s addressed to you,” I said, turning to Patrick. “It says to come to the palace *today*.”

“He must be trying to split us up.”

I nodded. While Duke Hillrose’s end goal was still a mystery to me, the letter’s objective was clear. For some reason, the duke wanted Patrick and I separated, and he had likely instructed one of his people to deliver this message to us at a specific time in order to achieve that goal.

“Well, there’s no need for us to listen to Duke Hillrose, of all people,” Patrick hissed, grimacing. “We should ignore him, and both stay here.”

“But...it says the Royal Capital’s going to be in trouble if you don’t go. The duke himself is probably in the Royal Capital, right?”

“Yeah, but I can’t just leave...”

If you considered things logically, between the Royal Capital and Dolkness County, one location had to be a diversion and the other had to be where the true danger was. It seemed obvious that the Royal Capital would be the latter, which meant...

Is the duke trying to keep me from going to the Royal Capital? That would make sense if he was planning on doing something that Patrick couldn’t handle by himself. Although, they could be trying to lead Patrick away so they can attempt to overwhelm me here in Dolkness as well...but the chances of that actually being his goal seem pretty low. I groaned inwardly in frustration. *Who or what is Duke Hillrose really targeting?*

“Where do you think the real danger is, Patrick?” I finally asked.

“The Royal Capital, more than likely.”

“That’s what I think too,” I agreed. “So...maybe I should be the one who goes to the Royal Capital, instead of you?”

In that case, I’d be handling everything that occurred within the central area of the kingdom, while Patrick would remain here in Dolkness County just in case something went wrong. It felt like a good plan to me—it was the best one I had.

Patrick went silent for a while, considering. Then, he lifted his gaze, his eyes

fixing on me. “You can’t just ignore a crisis in the Royal Capital, can you?”

“Definitely not.”

“And you can’t help worrying over what might happen in Dolkness County either, can you?”

“Nope.”

I could hear in his words an acknowledgment of my fears. I had two places I was concerned about, but there was only one of me. By reminding me of that, Patrick was probably trying to show me that I had to make a choice.

“Whether it’s the kingdom or the county, you’ll need to do everything you can to save one while being prepared to abandon the other,” Patrick said, his face uncharacteristically serious. “You choose, Yumiella—which is more important to you, the Royal Capital, or Dolkness County? You go to the one that calls you the most, and I’ll go to the other.”

“Heh heh.” I winced—the laugh had just unconsciously slipped out.

Does Patrick think he’s having me make a difficult decision right now? I mean, sure, we could have both picked one and just gone there together, but I knew from the beginning he had no intention of abandoning one location. I’m not even worried that whichever place I don’t choose won’t be okay—Patrick will be there to help.

“I’ll protect Dolkness County, then,” I decided. “I am the lord of this territory after all, and it is my home. I’ll leave the Royal Capital to you.”

Patrick nodded. “Got it. I’ll come back right away if anything happens.”

“What’s ‘anything’?”

“Anything. Like, if you cause some kind of trouble.”

My eyebrows rose. *Wait, I’m the one who’s going to cause trouble?*

“Am I really that untrustworthy?”

Patrick laughed. “Ever since you played that monster-summoning flute during our first year of the Academy, I’ve never been dumb enough to trust you again.”

“Well then, you better come home if I play the flute,” I said, narrowing my

eyes at him.

“I will,” he promised, turning toward the window. “Let’s go, Ryuu.”

I trusted Patrick and left the Royal Capital to him. Patrick trusted me, who was completely untrustworthy, and left the county to me.

Ryuu had been peeking into the mansion through a window after picking up on the unsettling atmosphere and roared in response to Patrick. Patrick jumped onto Ryuu’s back and took off, headed toward the Royal Capital.



Mere minutes after Patrick left, it got quite noisy outside the mansion.

Puzzling over the sounds that were drifting to my ears, I frowned. *Was the duke truly after my county all along? I wonder if he was watching to see if Patrick would leave.*

I ran outside in a hurry, quickly catching sight of a single carriage pulled up in front of the mansion. It was decorated with the duke’s family crest. My eyes narrowed as the door swung open, and out jumped...

Eleanora? Why are you here?!

“Yumiella! I have! Arrived!”

Eleanora tore off in my direction; she’d nearly crashed into me before I came to my senses enough to catch her and hold her back.

“Um...what are you doing here?”

“Congratulations on your betrothal!”

I gave the overexcited girl a dubious look. *What is she talking about...?* I wondered, beginning to guide her toward the mansion.

“What is this you’re saying about me being betrothed?” I asked Eleanora as we walked.

“You announced it in this letter, silly! Anyway, what was the proposal like?”

Ignoring Eleanora, who was getting herself riled up all over again, I turned my focus to reading the letter she’d handed over to me. To my surprise, written in it was an announcement that Patrick and I were getting married, and that our

wedding would be held in Dolkness County soon.

I have no recollection of sending out something like this, I thought, inspecting the envelope only to find that my signature was on it. *That's my handwriting, all right. Could this be one of the invitations for Patrick's level 99 party? But how did this mix-up even happen?* There was really only one person who could be the culprit. *Wow, Daemon can be surprisingly inept.*

But I had gotten distracted by the letter, and the carefree lady gallivanting in front of me.

More importantly, what exactly is going on here? Is this a part of the duke's coup d'état? I can't believe he would leave his daughter to do something so outrageous... Maybe there's a big misunderstanding here, like there was with the wedding invitation.

As I stared consideringly at Eleanora, my attention was caught and held by a large envelope under her arm.

I didn't send her that, did I...?

"Lady Eleanora, what's in *that* envelope?"

"What envelope?" Eleanora said, giving me a confused look. "Oh, *that* envelope! This is a letter I need to deliver to my brother!"

"To Ronald? I see."

Guess it has nothing to do with me, I thought.

But just as I dismissed the envelope's contents from my mind, Eleanora suddenly ripped the letter open, revealing several documents that had been tucked inside.

"Um, was it all right for you to open that?"

Eleanora waved me off, unfazed. "It's a letter between family; there should be no problem with me looking at it."

I'm not so sure about that, I thought dubiously. *Even if someone's related to you, they still want their privacy, don't they...?* My idle thoughts came to a screeching halt as a realization hit me. *Wait, if that's a letter to Ronald from between family members, and it isn't from Eleanora, wouldn't that mean it's*

from the duke?

Eleanora nudged me, stretching the documents out in my direction; she must have just finished reading them. “I don’t understand,” she said with a frown. “Do you?”

I hesitated before taking the documents from her hands. “Uh...” I said weakly, “wouldn’t it be bad for me to read this?”

Eleanora just stared at me silently in expectation, and I soon lost out to my curiosity, skimming quickly through the papers I now held.

I quickly realized that I was looking at the plans for a coup d’état. The documents detailed the rebels’ strategy, which was apparently to draw monsters into attacking the Royal Capital and then capture the king and the first prince during the chaos. With them in hand, they would have seized those necessary to gain true power over Valschein. If that wasn’t enough already, it seemed the duke’s forces would be aided by a number of skilled fighters sent from Lemlaesta.

Oh, and they’re holding a rally for the radical aristocrats tonight who support the duke, as well, I noticed. Looks like it’s happening tonight.

Overall, the contents of the envelope were universally terrible. I pressed a hand to my forehead. “I shouldn’t have read this...” I moaned, even as my mind spun into gear.

Why would the duke have sent this to Ronald? Is Ronald planning on betraying the king and joining the duke...?

Just then, a small note that had been placed between two of the documents fell out. Eleanora leaned over and picked it up, then began to read it aloud.

“‘Dear Ronald, please take care of Eleanora.’” A dotting smile appeared on Eleanora’s face. “Oh, father, I’m perfectly fine on my own.”

I winced. While I couldn’t have any idea what action Ronald would have taken upon receiving this letter, one thing was clear—Duke Hillrose was guilty. He was absolutely planning on carrying out a coup d’état.

How am I going to tell Eleanora...? A sick feeling weighed down my stomach.

This was, of course, the exact moment Eleanora decided to ask the number one question I wanted to avoid.

“So...what did all that stuff mean?”

She’s going to find out eventually, I thought. The only thing in question is whether that’ll be sooner or later. I...might as well tell her now.

“The duke of Hillrose is... Your father is plotting a coup d’état.”

“A coup d’état?”

“An insurrection.” Met with another look of incomprehension, I rephrased, “He’s, uh, trying to down His Majesty, in a sense. He’s planning on turning the entire kingdom upside down.”

“Wh-What...?”

“You should probably stay with me for a while; the Royal Capital will most likely get quite turbulent. Providing you shelter until things calm back down is the least I can do.”

Eleanora must have been quite shocked, for she didn’t reply. She just stared down at the ground, trembling. Eventually she got a hold of herself and looked up, her eyes narrowing into a glare at me.

“That’s impossible!” she declared.

“I mean, the duke’s plans are right here...”

“But there’s no way... If that’s true, I might not be able to marry Sir Edwin...”

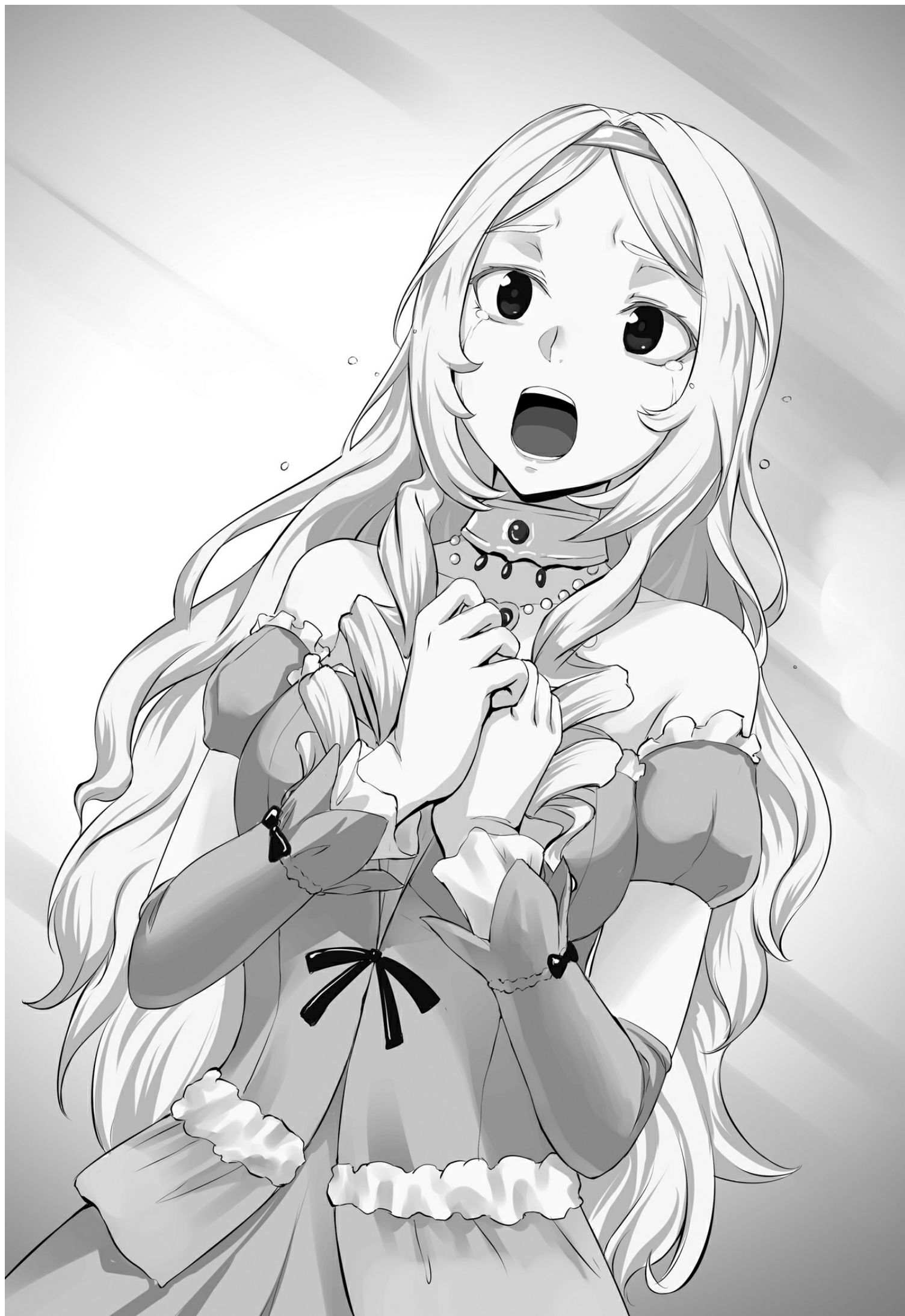
Is that really what you should be worried over at a time like this, Lady Eleanora...? I thought, a bit exasperated. But that’s when Eleanora proved that it wasn’t just the prince that was on her mind.

“Yumiella...you probably hate me, don’t you?”

“What?! What are you talking about?”

“My brother probably hates me too...” Eleanora said, her voice quiet and depressed. She looked down once more, tears forming in her eyes. “Maybe, just maybe, there isn’t a single person out there who actually likes me.”

“Lady Eleanora?” Worried, I got closer to her.



“But!” she shouted, tears rolling down her face. “But, my father... I know for sure that he loves the Kingdom of Valschein! There are many things in this world that I don’t understand, and it’s hard for me to tell what others are thinking, but one thing I know for sure is that my father loves this kingdom dearly!”

Sobbing, Eleanora buried her face in my chest and began wailing like a child. Within seconds she was out like a light.

The crying probably tired her out, I mused as I picked her up, then carried her to a bed.

Once I got Eleanora settled, I paused and watched her briefly as she slept. As I stood there, Rita cautiously came up to me and handed me a sheet of paper, which was wrinkled as if it had been crumpled up only moments before.

“This was tossed into the entryway,” Rita explained.

“This is...”

The wrinkled paper had the duke’s family crest on it, and what was written on it was brutally to the point: “I’ll be waiting outside of town.”

There was no need for me to wonder who would be waiting. It seemed the time had come for me to settle things with a certain terrible father, who had made his only daughter cry.



The only place that had come to mind where the duke could be waiting “outside of town” had been the grassy fields located right on the border of Dolkness Village. They were the same place I’d had that special night with Patrick, when I’d tried alcohol for the first time. I hadn’t been displeased with using them as a meeting place either—I hadn’t wanted to go too far away from Dolkness Village, and the fields more than fulfilled that wish.

Once I’d set out, it wasn’t long before I found Duke Hillrose, who was awaiting me in a location where he could keep an eye on the entirety of Dolkness Village. I walked up to him, but he didn’t spare me so much as a glance.

“Hm...” he rumbled, staring at the town behind me. “This town doesn’t really

have anything redeeming about it. It's not particularly big, and it doesn't seem to have ties to any particular industry. It's just an ordinary, nondescript town."

"Think what you want," I replied. "Regardless, I like it quite a bit."

The duke gave me his trademark nasty smile. "Of course you do. You're a good person by nature; there's no way you wouldn't be attached to a town you manage."

My eyes narrowed. *You've sure caused me a lot of trouble, Duke Hillrose. I'm starting to get pissed. Keep it up and I might just go ahead and capture you—after all, the first person to make a move wins. And, if I punch him a little too hard in the process, well...that's just me being friendly.*

The more I thought about it, the better the plan seemed to me. I could listen to what the duke had to say later, and it would give me plenty of time to decide what to do with him.

Firm in my decision, I threw my sword and wand to the ground and began running, headed straight for the duke.

Should I punch him with my right hand or my left? Or...both? Watching the duke, who was so slow he'd never be able to react to my movements, I decided, *No, let's just go with the right for now.*

But the moment I prepared to swing, something collided with my forehead.

"Ow!"

"Well, well. I didn't think you would suddenly attack me."

For a moment I was at a loss for words; I pressed my hand to my forehead, where the pain was at its worst, and crouched downward, almost in a fetal position. It felt as if I'd crashed into a wall, but that I for some reason had been the one to take damage, not it.

"Wait! The barrier from the church!"

"You're correct; this barrier was indeed produced by the magical instrument passed down within the principal church of Sanonism. By producing a smaller barrier than they do at the church, I've increased its strength by a few—no, a few *dozen* time—"

My lips began to turn up at the corners, ever so slightly. “I can’t believe we finally meet again here...”

“*Ahem*. And that’s not all! Along with its strong resistance against the element of darkness, it also resists physical... Hey! Are you listening?”

Indeed, I was not. Every word the duke said was going in one ear and right out the other—all I knew was that he was rambling. That was because...

I did it—I finally found you! My archnemesis! Here I was, thinking I’d never get to see you again because you’d been stolen, and yet you’ve appeared before me. I knew it; I knew we were fated rivals! As two creatures who are destined to battle in order to settle things between us, it is only natural we’d be drawn to one another this way.

My first attempt at breaking the barrier was to hit it with a spin-kick, but it didn’t budge. That was when I noticed that, unlike in our previous battle, I could actually see a faint outline of my nemesis. I felt a rush seeing its dimly glowing, cuboid form—*this* was the formidable enemy I had to destroy!

It seems smaller than it did before, I noticed. *It can probably only fit like five people.*

I started to giggle. “Heh, you’ve gotten harder, my nemesis.”

“Hey, listen. I—”

I need to be quick! Let’s try...a right-handed punch!

My fist slammed into the barrier, and a large cracking sound reverberated through the air.

Did I...do it?

I looked down at my right hand, only to see that my wrist now bent in an impossible direction. I lifted it up closer to my face, and it swung limply on my arm.

I hummed thoughtfully. “If my wrist broke instead of my arm, that means I’m probably not putting my strength to use in the right places,” I muttered. “I need to focus more.”

“H-Hey! Your...your *hand*! Are you all right?! Doesn’t that hurt?!”

Ignoring the annoying sound of the duke's voice, I healed my hand with recovery magic. At the same time, I focused my mind—after all, it was time for me to deliver one of my full-power Yumiella Punches.

I drew back, but my mental focus was disturbed by the annoying whining of the man on the other side of the barrier.

Jeez, he's really keeping the irritating thing up, isn't he?

"Heyyy!" the duke yelled. "Listen! To! Me!"

"What do you want?" I said in disgust. "Actually, who are you again? You're in my way, so please go somewhere else."

"Yumiella Dolkness! Are you not here! Because! I called you out here?!"

What is he talking about? I was guided here by the laws of this universe, so I could reunite with my archnemesis...wasn't I?

My mind whirled, but I did my best to focus back on the man in front of me. I belatedly remembered he was the duke of Hillrose—it felt like it had been an age since I'd thought about him.

"Oh, right—I remember now. You're Duke Hillrose. What was it you wanted from me?"

"I've been trying! To discuss that! With you! For a *while!*" the duke desperately shouted.

Huh. Was the duke always like this...? Wasn't he doing somethi—

"Oh! That's right, you're plotting a coup d'état."

"That's what I've been..." The duke forcibly stopped himself from talking, then took a deep breath. "Yes, that's right. And right now, I'm going to have you join me on a little trip to the past."

I gave him a dubious look. *I mean...do I have to? I kinda don't wanna. I'd rather go back to battling the barrier.*

The duke must have caught on to my heated desire for battle, as he continued to speak at a faster pace. "It'll be over fast, okay?"

I sighed. "Fine, please hurry up."

“Where should I begin...? Do you know how the Hillroses came to be?”

I gave the duke a blank stare, and he groaned.

“I can see you’re not interested. Nevertheless... The Hillrose family dukedom was founded by the younger brother of the first king of Valschein, the very king that we celebrate as a hero.”

I know that much, I thought with disdain. Don’t underestimate me—I’ll have you know I read through all the books in the library when I was bored at the Academy!

And yet...despite my extensive reading, I hadn’t heard about what happened with the Hillrose family after its founding. Curiosity tickled at my mind, and my obsession with the barrier receded, laying claim over only half my thoughts instead of the entirety.

“The first duke thought about what he could do to protect the kingdom his older brother had founded. Instead of his own household, he put the entire kingdom first. He passed this way of thinking down to the next generation, and so they passed it to the next, and the next.”

That doesn’t sound quite right, I mused. The duke may say that, but the king told me the Hillroses have been at odds with the royal family for quite some time. The facts aren’t lining up.

As my face grew more confused, a grin spread across the duke’s lips. “Yes, I can tell what you’re thinking. We have not seen eye to eye with the royal family for generations. But that has been for the kingdom’s sake.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are several kinds of aristocrats in this kingdom. They of course existed back when this kingdom was first founded, but they have grown in number over the years. Naturally, some of their number have harbored thoughts of rebellion. It is terribly dangerous to the royal family not to know where these troublemakers are hiding.”

I nodded. This part, I could get. I’d seen myself that there were plenty of aristocrats who didn’t think well of Valschein’s royal family. They were all radicals, just like the duke was...

Wait, have the Hillroses been at odds with the royal family so they can gather all these renegades together in one place?

“Th-That can’t be! That would mean that you...”

“Ah, seems you’ve caught on. Yes, we have indeed been controlling those who would antagonize the royal family from behind the scenes. At times, we would discourage them from doing anything too bold, while at other times we would drag down aristocrats in the king’s faction to resolve their grievances.”

But if that’s true, why isn’t he just trying to discourage the radicals from going through with this current mess of trying to make Prince Edwin the king? My mind swirled. Couldn’t he just tell the radicals that now isn’t the time to take action, and warn them that if they do, they’ll be destroyed by the king’s faction? There were so many other things the duke could have done, so why did he take the lead in planning a coup d’état?!

“I fear our old method has reached its limits,” Duke Hillrose continued with a sad smile. “The kingdom has been contaminated too deeply. The time has come to gather every bit of poison lingering within its veins and purge it all at once. Besides, I knew the methods passed down to me would eventually fall short of being able to manage our kingdom’s malcontents. I had already committed myself to this operation before we even came close to the incident with the Demon Lord. That’s why I sent Ronald to *him*.”

The plan grew clear to me—the duke intended to get himself executed, and to drag all the scheming aristocrats who were opposed to the royal family with him.

“But you... How can you commit to doing something like that?”

The duke cocked his head. “Something like what?”

“Sacrificing yourself entirely for His Majesty!”

“Oh, that. Well, for starters, you’ve got it wrong—none of what I’m doing is for him. It’s for the *kingdom*. I adore this county, but that feeble royal? I couldn’t care less about him.”

I stared at the duke incredulously as a large, truly gleeful smile spread across the duke’s face. *Weren’t you two supposed to be each other’s closest friends in*

the past?! How can you smile like that while insulting him?!

But that's when it hit me—Duke Hillrose had spent the majority of his life lying in order to deepen the rift between the royal family and his own. Perhaps he was continuing to lie, even in this moment.

Regardless, I can finally understand his objective—he wants to take down all the radical aristocrats himself, in order to rid the kingdom of their influence. But what does that have to do with me?

“Now that I understand what you're trying to accomplish, I can't help but wonder why you came to me,” I told the duke.

He nodded. “Well, there are two reasons for me to do so. The first is to show the public that my intention to rebel against the kingdom is real. The second has to do with my plans, which have likely reached Ronald by now. I state there that I am going to unleash a monster attack onto the Royal Capital, while gathering the rebels to safety within this barrier. However, it would be quite dangerous for the kingdom to actually unleash such a plan within the capital. Which is why I wanted to do it somewhere a bit less dangerous...”

I clicked my tongue in annoyance. “What a nuisance...”

“The plans I sent Ronald also go over how the rebels tried to get you, Yumiella Dolkness, to join our forces, but when you refused us we went into a frenzy and unleashed a monster attack onto Dolkness County, in a practice run for what we were planning to do to the Royal Capital. I...think that's all of it.”

Oh, but wait...the plans for the coup d'état aren't with Ronald, but at my house, I realized. Ah well, I think I missed my chance to tell him. I have something I'm more concerned about, anyway. He says he's going to unleash monster attacks onto specific locations, but only the Demon Lord should be able to pull off something like that. As far as I know, humans shouldn't have the power to control monsters.

“Isn't it a bit unrealistic to use monsters to attack the Royal Capital?” I asked.

The duke nodded. “Correct—I have no power to make monsters go to a specific location. However, it is possible to draw them to a specific place... In fact, I believe the time has come to do just that.”

The moment the duke stopped speaking, a familiar sound rang out from behind me, from within Dolkness Village—the sound of a monster-summoning flute. It was a nostalgic sound, as monster-summoning flutes had been a great help to me back in the days when I'd been grinding experience. This sound was strangely different than my old flute's though—it was significantly louder, as if it had been amplified. It thundered through the air, reverberating through the entire area around the village.

"You know this sound too, don't you?" the duke boasted while listening to the tune. "It's a monster-summoning flute. I've prepared a very rare extra large one to boot."

"Oh! Actually, that one's mine! I tried really hard to buy it from a merchant, but it didn't work out... Anyway, I'll pay you whatever you want, so can I please have it?!"

The duke's nasty smile wavered slightly, but he got it back under control. "Soon, monsters will gather inside Dolkness Village. Then, you will—"

"One of your subordinates played it, right? Where are they? Oh, did you maybe plan to leave it there and have them flee the premises? If I grab it, it's finders keepers, right?"

"Pay attention!"

I gave him a confused look. *No need to shout—my attention is clearly on the most important subject here—the extra large monster-summoning flute! I truly regret not having bought it, especially after doing something so embarrassing trying to get it...*

"I apologize, I got a little carried away," I said, regaining my composure after remembering the tantrum I threw.

"There's something wrong with you," the duke said with a heavy sigh.

I've been told that many times by Patrick; it's not even worth bringing it up at this point. Speaking of Patrick, now that that monster-summoning flute was just played...

"They'll be coming..."

“Yes, a swarm of monsters will be making their way here.”

I waved him off. “No, not the *monsters*.”

If he heard that, my watchdog is definitely coming to get me. I better start preparing my explanation.

“We still have some time before the monsters appear,” the duke of Hillrose leisurely began from within his impenetrable barrier. “So I might as well tell you about the second reason behind my visit here.”

The duke had already told me his first reason for coming to Dolkness County was that he wanted to summon a monster horde somewhere less dangerous to people than the capital. He was right that things wouldn’t get too out of hand while I was here, but it was still a major inconvenience.

Seeing the grimace form on my face, Duke Hillrose let out a jovial laugh. I narrowed my eyes at him.

That guy has a straight-up twisted personality, I thought in disgust.

“You know, the information I’m about to tell you is my *real* reason for being here...”

“Oh, just get on with it already.” I sighed.

“Don’t look at me like that,” the duke said, chuckling. “You’ve got such a cute face; twisting it up like that is a waste.”

“The hell did you say?” I snarled, my temper finally snapping.

Honestly, it’s kind of a miracle that I kept it together this long, I thought wryly. *But I can’t let him distract me; I’ve got to analyze the situation. That barrier he’s using protects him against dark-type magic. Back at the church, I couldn’t get through, but all the others could. That means it’s only effective against monsters, dark magic, and people who use dark magic—in other words, physical attacks that don’t involve my body should work.*

I picked up a rock of a suitable size and threw it with all my might at the barrier, aiming right by the duke’s face. It flew through the air so fast it turned red at the friction.

He’ll probably start running if I keep this up, I mused. But just then, a loud

thud reverberated through the air, followed by a sudden cloud of dust.

Huh? I specifically aimed that rock so it would just barely miss the duke's face; why did it sound like it hit something?

To my surprise, upon closer inspection, it seemed the rock had hit the barrier and fallen to the ground. The duke still seemed to be just fine; he was staring at the rock in horror, moaning: "I thought I was going to *die*..."

I, however, was more preoccupied with other things. "I don't get it," I muttered. "Why did it block the rock when it doesn't even have an element?"

The duke, hurriedly resuming his composure, said flatly, "I've adjusted the barrier to be smaller, so its resistance against physical attacks has also... Didn't I explain this earlier?"

"I apologize," I said sincerely. "I was so shocked about being reunited with the barrier that I wasn't listening."

There was a brief silence, and then the duke huffed, "I'm done."

His words didn't make any sense to me, so my mind started wandering. *This barrier is crazy strong, isn't it? Like, way too strong. Heh heh, as expected of an opponent I've acknowledged as my rival. We may be enemies, but I'm proud of you all the same, barrier.*

Something about the look in my eyes must have set the duke off, because he let out a groan and plopped his head into his hands. "Ugh, was setting my sights on *this one* a mistake after all?"

"Can you just tell me why you're here, already? Nothing you say is making any sense."

The duke looked at me with decidedly less enthusiasm than he had earlier, but to my relief began speaking after my prompting.

"I've already explained the role of the Hillroses, yes?" he began. "Well, the future of this kingdom has been on my mind. What will happen if the aristocrats who hold resentment toward the royal family begin acting separately, of their own accord? There would be chaos like we've never seen before. Which is why I've been searching for someone to take on the Hillrose legacy—someone to

step into the position we've held until now."

I narrowed my eyes at him. *So he's saying he's been searching for someone who's willing to appear opposed to the royal family so they can round up ambitious radicals?* I scoffed internally. *Yeah right, there's no one who would agree to that—there isn't even anyone who can!*

At this point, I wanted out of this conversation. I was starting to get a bad feeling about where this was heading, but alas, I had no choice but to continue listening.

"In the end, I set my sights on *you*, Yumiella Dolkness. I have no doubt your house could head the opposition against the royal family, just as we Hillroses once did."

"Yeah, no thanks," I said. "I mean, I'm just a countess anyway. Why not ask the marquess?"

"The marquess?" Duke Hillrose repeated, disdain in his voice. "That family is at the crown's beck and call! Not to mention, they're too weak—they could never stand against the royal family."

I mean, I don't think my family has what it takes to do that either... You're expecting a bit much from me, Duke Hillrose. If you're looking for anything other than brute force, you've got the wrong person. Although... Jeez, that's kind of a depressing thing to think, isn't it? I'm the one who thought it about myself, but still...

I shook myself from my thoughts. "But I can't take the Hillroses place either. I might have a high level, but other than that I'm just a normal person."

The duke scoffed. "Having a high level like that gives you an absolutely incredible amount of power. And, while you might think you've succeeded in pulling the wool over everyone's eyes, *I've realized that you're actually quite sharp.*"

He's...totally misunderstanding things, I thought with a sigh. *It's taking things in a bad direction, even though he's making positive assumptions instead of the negative ones people usually make about me.*

Even if I could have taken on the role that the Hillroses played in the kingdom,

problems still arose when you considered the fact that it was a long-term commitment. Generations of my family would have to shoulder the same burden, and there was no guarantee that they would reach as high a level as I had. Although...I had to admit it was a possibility they would, considering that Patrick was on the verge of reaching level 99 himself.

After a moment's pause, I calmly said, "Hypothetically speaking, even if I could take on the role the Hillroses play in this kingdom, I would have no obligation to do so."

The duke's eyes narrowed. "Yumiella Dolkness, you have fondness for the town behind us, don't you?"

"Well... Yes, I do."

"I'm sure that wasn't always the case. Once, you couldn't have cared less about that town, but now it's become something dear to you—the same thing will happen with the entire Kingdom of Valschein. Trust me; I'm speaking from experience."

I pondered this. "We're quite different people," I said at last. "I don't think I would ever have such feelings."

"Let's reframe things then." The duke paused, and his face twisted into the nastiest grin I had seen from him so far.

This is bad; he's totally going to resort to some sort of nefarious method.

"Consider this, Yumiella Dolkness!" the duke exclaimed, letting out a boisterous laugh that gave me the distinct feeling he'd gone mad. "A horde of monsters will soon attack your precious town! Of course, you shall depart to protect it with your strength...but that's when I shall deactivate this barrier. And I... I'll likely be killed by monsters!"

I blinked at the man in confusion. *Did he...really just announce a plan that results in his death in such an excited, happy manner? And beyond that, what is his reasoning for doing such a thing? I still don't understand what he's trying to achieve. If he thinks that he can get me to obey his dying wish by killing himself, he's nuts. I'm not going to be bound by a request like that.*

"You're still too weak, countess," the duke began again. "You'll have to leave

me to die in order to save your town; the memory shall haunt you forever!”

“I... What?!”

“You may have superhuman physical abilities and dark magic that’s perfect for annihilating wide areas of land, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have any weaknesses. Light magic is one, of course, but you also lack the ability to coordinate well with others during a fight and are unskilled in defending a singular location. You’re aware of that, aren’t you? That you flounder when you must fight and protect something at the same time? You may have been able to get by before since you were only defending one thing at a time, but this time you’ve been left with two. There’s no doubt in my mind that you’ll fail.”

My chest went a little tight, listening to the duke. It felt odd to have someone dare me to save them if I could when they’d made the selfish decision to let themselves die in the first place. But despite the ridiculousness of his plan, the reality was that it had proved quite effective. Indeed, it was working even better on me than I’d have ever thought it would, if I’d heard of it earlier.

So that’s why he wanted to separate me from Patrick and Ryuu. He really did his research on me.

Despite what I’d thought earlier, I knew that I’d regret it for the rest of my life if I left the duke to die. It was possible that I’d even try to control the turbulent elements of the kingdom by acting in opposition to the royal family, just like the duke wanted. But...

That will only be the case if I actually leave here to defend the town.

“Don’t you need to get going?” the duke asked arrogantly. “The monsters are almost here. Soon, they’ll be swarming the town in droves.”

“Actually, I’ll be staying here,” I replied calmly. “The moment you deactivate the barrier, I’ll knock you out and carry you to safety. After that... Well, I’ll think about that later.”

“Wh-What do you mean?!” the duke sputtered. “What’s more important to you, your people or me?”

“The townspeople are, of course. Now hurry up and turn that barrier off. They’re going to be here any second now.” I turned around and pointed up

toward the sky, where a large shadow was gradually growing bigger and bigger. “See? Here they come: the second strongest person in the world, and the most adorable dragon to ever exist.”

I’d always believed that they would come back—although I hated to admit it, Ryuu *was* a monster by classification. There’s no way the monster-summoning flute would have failed to catch his attention; not after how loud it had been.

Even though they were still quite far away, I heard Patrick yell, “Can you hear me, Yumiella? What happened?”

I grinned internally, impressed. *It’s pretty slick of you to use your wind magic like that, Patrick.*

I called back, “One of Hillrose’s people played a monster-summoning flute. It was that huge one that merchant brought by before. It *wasn’t* me, okay? I really didn’t do it.”

There was a short pause. “I’m...sure you didn’t,” Patrick replied. “Regardless, how can I help?”

Hey, what was that pause for?! I know I shouldn’t be trying to clear my name right now, but how can Patrick be so suspicious of me at a time like this?

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to focus. Duke Hillrose had been right when he said I wasn’t good at defending a singular point—I’d leave protecting the town to Patrick. Unlike me, he was the perfect person for the job.

“I need you to go to town,” I yelled to Patrick. “I think monsters will be arriving there soon.”

“Got it,” he said seriously. Faintly, I heard him tell Ryuu, “I’m going to go ahead and get off now.”

Nearly the same instant the wind delivered the words to my ears, I saw Patrick jump off of Ryuu, who was hovering over Dolkness Village.

I can’t believe he’d do that when he’s afraid of heights, I thought, encouraged by his bravery. *I need to do my best here, so I can repay him in kind.*

But before I went back to dealing with the duke, I had one more thing I needed to do. I leaned down and swiped up the wand that I’d left lying in the

grass, then took off at a run.

“Patrick, take this!” I shouted, catapulting the wand forward like it was a spear in a spear toss.

The wand zoomed forward in a straight line toward Patrick, bowing with the force of its passage. My eyesight was good enough to see it hit Patrick right in the stomach in the middle of his slow descent toward the ground.

“Whoops, sorry!” I yelled over to him.

Although the wand had gotten to him well enough, I wasn’t sure my apology had; while Patrick had been carefully manipulating the wind to decrease the speed of his descent just seconds before, now he was free-falling, clutching at his stomach.

Look at that, I thought in surprise. He landed without slowing down.

The wand must have bounced off of Patrick, because it plunged to the earth a short distance away from him, just outside of the edge of Dolkness Village. It looked like it had pierced straight into the ground.

“Now *that* was pretty awful,” I heard the duke say snarkily from behind me.

I ignored him. “Oh, Patrick got up! I knew he could handle a fall like that.”

“Isn’t he just the margrave’s boy?” the duke asked, uncomprehending. “The dragon’s a threat, but what does him being here change?”

What is he talking about? I wondered, glancing back over my shoulder at the duke. *Wait...did he really only call Patrick to the capital so Ryu would go? If that’s the case, that’s quite rude of him. There’s no one else who would be more useful than Patrick in this kind of situation.*

“I think you may be operating under a misunderstanding,” I said. “Patrick is probably the next strongest person in the world after me.”

Though he was stumbling a bit, Patrick wobbled over to the wand and pulled it out of the ground, holding it up high over his head. I couldn’t hear his voice now that he wasn’t using wind magic to ferry it to me anymore, but his magic was easily visible. In fact, you’d have to be at least as far away from him as the duke and I were to gaze upon the full scale of what he’d just done.

“Wh-What is that...?” the duke muttered.

Within seconds, Dolkness Village, which lacked any walls, was surrounded by a towering earthen rampart. It was incredibly tall and thick for something Patrick had just made on the spot, and even more impressively, he’d surrounded the entire town with it.

“Our countermeasures for the monster attack are taken care of now,” I boasted to the duke, who had fallen into stunned silence. “Well then, I’ll be getting back to my match with my little friend—the barrier.”

At this point, I’ve got to admit that this light-elemental barrier is just as strong as I am, I thought wryly. I gotta give this my all.

Now bereft of my wand, I walked back over to my sword and picked it up off the ground. I hefted it in my hand, then gripped it like I would have a baseball bat.

Who gives a damn about swordsmanship!

I swung the sword as hard as I could toward the barrier, braced myself for impact, and...

“Huh?”

I was sure I’d hit the barrier, but I hadn’t felt an ounce of resistance. Perplexed, I glanced down at the weapon in my hands, only to find that the blade had snapped in half.

“No, this can’t be...”

A genuine rush of sadness went through me. Sure, I hadn’t had many chances to use the dark-type sword I’d grinded so hard for, but it was still quite important to me. There was no other sword in existence that could hold up against my full strength.

I can’t believe it would break so easil— Wait.

I stared more intently at the end of what was left of the blade, where it had broken off. It was brownish in color, almost like...wood.

“This is that wooden katana I bought!” I exclaimed.

I must have mixed the two swords up since they're the same color! They were both collecting dust under my bed, along with the wand, so it would've been easy for me to grab the wrong one. What a stupid idea—who the heck decided to put it there?!

“You doing all right over there?” the duke mumbled. He eyed me warily as I writhed in agony over my mortifying mistake.

“It’s just...the barrier, you know? It’s incredible—my magical sword was nothing against it!”

“Isn’t that a wooden swo—?”

Before the duke could finish his thought, I shot forward, making my next attack.

The only way I’m going to beat this thing is with magic. So...I should give it a proper send-off with the highest class of dark magic I can use—it’s the polite thing to do!

“Black Hole!”

A black orb appeared, roughly the size of a human head. I’d condensed the size this time, since I hadn’t wanted to erase Duke Hillrose along with the barrier. The orb swallowed a portion of the softly glowing light barrier, then disappeared, and...the light barrier went with it! A small circular hole had been left in my spell’s wake.

I did it! I’m definitely a mage after all! Some may think I’m all muscles and no brains, but this proves the opposite—I’m actually an intellectual who belongs in the rearguard!

The duke stared at the hole in the barrier, his eyes wide with shock. “How... How is that possible?! This is a legendary class magical instrument!” He opened his mouth to continue ranting, then paused, as if he’d noticed something. “Hmm?”

Curious, I followed the duke’s gaze back to the hole I’d made in the barrier. It was slowly closing.

It can even repair itself! Unbelievable!

Even as the duke and I watched, the barrier began to repair itself at a faster and faster pace. The hole that had once been large enough for me to stick my head through could now barely fit one of my arms. Any moment now, it would close completely.

“Aah! Wait, hold on!” I shouted. Without thinking, I stuck my right arm into the closing hole.

I'll just force it to stay open with my overwhelming strength! I believe in my all-powerful muscles!!!

Alas, the light barrier was not cowed by my arm. It completely closed up, taking, uh...something with it. On the duke's side of the barrier, the front portion of my arm, from fingertips to elbow, plopped to the ground.

“Wow, that was kinda cool,” I said, examining my bleeding stump. “If someone used a barrier like this to dismember someone, it would be pretty stylish, don't you think, Duke Hillrose?”

But the duke was too busy shrieking in horror to answer my question. “*Aaagh!* H-Hey, are you okay?! Y-Y-Your arm!”

I examined my arm more intently, noting that the barrier had cut through it cleanly, leaving my stump a flat cross section.

I've got a lot of injuries up till now, but I don't think I've ever seen a cut like this before, I thought, intrigued. *Even back when that monster with a sickle for an arm attacked me, the injury it left was much messier.*

“Do you think if I press the front part of my arm onto my stump, it'll stick back together?” I asked the duke idly.

“*HEY!*” the duke shouted, fully hysterical now. “You're pouring blood over there! If you lose too much blood, you'll—!”

I pressed my remaining hand thoughtfully to my chin. “Oh, that's right, there's a little less blood on the right side of your body than on the left, hmm? Maybe it's because the heart is on the left side of the body? I could just be imagining it...”

I glanced back over at the duke, but he was in no condition to reply. He'd

shrunk away from my dismembered arm as much as possible within the small space inside the barrier, his back pressing against the opposing wall.

Jeez, there's no need to be so afraid... Although, I guess it would be pretty bad if he turned out to be some freak who got turned on by women's arms and tried to take mine home.

"I apologize, I didn't realize that this sort of thing would scare you this much," I told the duke. "*Heal.*"

All the blood that had splattered around me got sucked up and flowed back into the stump of my arm, but my severed limb stayed where it was, trapped behind the barrier. And, without the ability to reattach it, the spell decided to grow an entirely new one. I could feel tons of mana pouring out of me, but I wasn't alarmed—that wasn't anything new.

A few seconds passed between the duke and I in silence, and before long I was sporting an entirely fresh arm. The only mark that something had happened was that one of my shirt sleeves was much shorter than the other, giving me a slightly avant-garde look.

"Are you really human...? Just what kind of person did I get myself involved with...?" The duke pressed his hand against his mouth, looking sick.

Here we go again, I thought. Why must everyone always treat me like I'm some kind of inhuman being? Although, there aren't that many people who can use recovery magic—I guess I can't fault him for thinking I'm an angel.

Forcing myself to focus on the task at hand, I locked my eyes on the barrier in front of me once more. All I had to do was capture the man behind it now that Patrick and Ryu were here; they would take care of the monsters. Even better, it had now been revealed that my rival, the barrier, was powerless against the highest class of dark magic spells. Sure, it *did* repair itself if it was partially destroyed, but it was slow enough at it that it left me an opening.

"This is the end of the line for you, barrier!" I cried. "*Black Hole!*"

This time, I summoned an orb of darkness that was much larger than before. It spanned roughly half the size of the duke's glowing cuboid. It was easy for me to avoid injuring him too—he still had his back pressed up against the side of

the barrier opposite me. Then, my black hole vanished, and I was pleased to see it took half of the barrier with it.

All that's left is to capture the duke, I thought, turning toward him. But there was something odd happening—why was his chest shimmering so radiantly? His clothes are pretty good quality; what could be shining so brightly that it's visible through such premium, high-quality fabric?

I had just been about to step into the barrier, but I stopped, my instincts prickling. It was the only thing that saved me—before I could fully register what was happening, the barrier repaired itself entirely, the speed completely incomparable to its response to my previous attack.

If I'd tried to go in there, my torso would've had to say goodbye to my legs! That was dangerous.

Sure, my recovery magic could handle healing a lost arm or a leg, but regenerating half my body? It was very possible that might have been too much. I'd never tried it before, so I honestly wasn't sure how far I could push it.

Duke Hillrose reached into his shirt and pulled out a glowing jewel, staring at it in bewilderment. It seemed he didn't quite know what had happened either.

"I thought it was over for me, but..." An ugly grin formed on his lips. "I see, this truly is a legendary magical instrument."

"Is that the...?"

"Yes, it's the magical instrument that cast the barrier. It was pretty difficult to steal."

So that's the jewel responsible for the barrier, I thought. I'm not sure what it draws its power from, but it's gotta run out of steam at some point, right? If I keep destroying it and making it repair itself until it runs out of fuel... I let out an irritated sigh. It would be quicker if I could just destroy the entire thing, but that would wipe out the duke along with it. A battle of endurance it is.

I began to plan out my attack, but was struck by a sudden realization: the barrier only blocked dark magic and physical attacks, *not* other elements. They could probably pass through no problem.

That means all I have to do is wait for the town to reach a safe point, and then I can just have Patrick blow the duke away using his wind magic! I can settle things with my barrier friend later; right now, I need to be patient.

“I’ve just gotta hold myself back,” I muttered to myself.

“Haven’t you forgotten something...?” the duke asked haughtily. “My goal was never to make you fight monsters.”

He must have gotten used to my severed arm, I mused. That nasty grin of his is back in full force.

“All I want,” the duke continued, “is to die and leave you full of regret. This may not be as impactful as what I had planned, but it’ll have to do.”

With that, the duke took out a short sword and held it up to his neck.

“What?! Hold on—wait a minute.”

Shivering, I thought, *If he dies like that, I’m definitely going to have nightmares.*

My left arm was the first part of me to react—my right arm still wasn’t at full strength after the whole regrowing thing. But, just as my fist was about to strike the barrier, I caught sight of the ring on my fourth finger, shining the same green as Patrick’s eyes. I pulled away, just barely stopping myself from slamming it into the barrier.

“I need to be more careful,” I muttered, clutching at my hand.

That was really close—I almost destroyed Patrick’s gift to me. Maybe it’d be safer if I stored it somewhere instead of wearing it, but...

The ring was one of my most prized possessions. Every time I looked at it, I remembered how Patrick had filled it with his wind-type magical energy, and...

Hold up. Wind?

My lips quirked, even as I reached my left hand back out toward the duke. “Thank you, Patrick...”

“Please...” the duke said, the short sword pressed to his throat, ready to slice at any moment. “Take care of my daughter, Eleanora.”

“It’s too soon for your last words,” I replied flatly. “Also, I’ll have you know that she’s sleeping at my home even as we speak.”

“*What?! That girl is supposed to be at Ronal—*”

“*Wind!*”

The green glow coming from the ring Patrick had given me grew stronger, as if in response to my words. Suddenly, storm-force winds gusted through the area around me.



The fierce gale struck the duke directly, and he stumbled back a few steps before tumbling backwards off his feet. Still, he managed to keep a hold of his short sword. He fumbled, trying to press it against his neck once more.

Finally getting his weapon in place, he grinned. "Heh, this is goodbye!"

Little did he know, but I'd been after the other thing the duke was holding. *I knew it; he prioritized that sword after all!*

"I'll have you know, it wasn't that sword I was aiming for," I told the duke lightly. "It was your other hand."

As I spoke, the wind moved exactly as I wanted it to, forming into a small tornado which rolled the jewel across the ground toward it, then cast it from the ground to the air.

I'm sorry, my dear barrier. I must destroy your true form. You're strong, but Black Hole can still destroy you. If the duke wasn't here, I would have taken you out along with the jewel, so I win, right? Right?!

Still aflight on the tornado of wind, the jewel shot around the inside of the barrier. Ironically, it crashed into the very thing it was generating, shattering on impact.

"Wh-What?!" the duke exclaimed, his eyes widening in surprise as the barrier vanished. He dug the blade a little further into his neck, and I kicked off the ground, flinging myself in front of him and knocking the sword away with one of my feet.

The duke's nasty smile widened, even as his gaze turned vacant and blood spewed from his throat. "It looks like...you were too late..." he breathed.

"Nope!" I said firmly. "I've made it just in time! *Heal!*"

I can regenerate whole arms! Healing a slit throat is a piece of cake to me!

In a matter of seconds, the duke's injury had fully healed. Life returned to the duke's eyes, and soon he grew conscious enough of his surroundings that he turned and looked at me with abject shock.

Heh heh heh! Come on, praise the angel that saved your life!

The duke's face contorted with rage. "Dammit! You devil!"

I smirked. "Isn't that a little too harsh?"

"Whatever! You're just wasting your time! My plan has already come to light, and since I've made a stand against the royal family, there's no way I'll be able to avoid execution."

"Oh, about that. Your daughter seemed to have come straight to me, without stopping by at Ronald's, so..."

"What?! Eleanora is *really* here?"

I nodded. Right now, the radicals in the Royal Capital were likely puzzled, wondering why the duke wasn't there. The biggest oversight he'd made in his planning had most likely been leaving the delivery of such important documents to Eleanora.

"Considering how things are right now, I believe we can actually settle things privately, so—"

"That's...that's impossible! This is the role of the Hillroses—this is our destiny!"

"You're doing all this for the kingdom, right? Well, I think you've done more than enough."

"No, I haven't!" the duke shouted. "I have nothing more to discuss with you. Just...just take care of my daughter. Despite how she seems, she can get lonely easily, so make sure you pay close attention to her. She'll also start doing something ridiculous every once in a while, but she'll get bored and stop practically right away, so she'll be fine as long as you keep an eye on her. And...what else is there?"

It seems that Duke Hillrose foresaw the destruction of his family years ago, when he sent Ronald away. I've been wondering why he didn't do the same to Eleanora, but...it seems he just loved her too much. He couldn't bear to be apart from her.

"If Lady Eleanora is so important to you, why don't you stay with her?" I asked.

But the duke didn't seem interested in giving me an answer. "Can I leave her to you, or can I not?" he demanded.

Come on, just listen to me, okay? I don't want to do all that stuff the Hillroses have been doing. Although...if all I have to do is take care of Eleanora, I can probably handle it.

"I guess you can trust me with her," I said slowly. "She won't be an aristocrat anymore though, so it would be good for her to learn some fighting skills..."

"Are you going to make her become an adventurer or something?!"

I waved him off. "Don't worry, I'll just help her with her leveling. Oh! Can I have the big monster-summoning flute? I want to use it for grinding."

The duke's face went pale with horror. "Wh-What are you planning to make Eleanora do?! I can't die—I have to protect Eleanora!"

And here I was worrying that he might take all that to mean I was someone he could trust his daughter to, I thought with an inward grin. That was me being nice, dude. Honestly, I don't get what's so terrifying about it, but I guess things turned out how I wanted them to anyway.

"If you don't want me to subject Eleanora to stuff like that, you need to live," I told the duke sternly. "You need to go see her again too—she's a total daddy's girl."

Duke Hillrose let out a displeased groan, and his shoulders sagged. Now that he'd accepted his defeat, these events were now resolved, and—

"Wh-What am I feeling?" the duke asked, shuddering.

Huh, I thought. Now that you mention it, the atmosphere does feel like it has changed.

"There's something...almost nostalgic about it..."

"Nostalgic?! No, it's something dreadful... Wait, what's that thing?"

The duke's gaze had fixed on a singular point in the distance. I turned and looked in the same direction myself, and found myself gazing at a knight on horseback. The horse was massive, and the knight was dressed in impressive armor, a black mist wafting around him. And, on top of that...both horse and

rider were headless.

“A Dullahan...” the duke breathed. “I didn’t even know they existed.”

I wasn’t quite as shocked as the duke—after all, the final boss of the dark-type dungeon in Dolkness County was a Dullahan. Still, I hadn’t known that the flute Duke Hillrose had used could summon monsters even from inside of dungeons.

As we watched, monsters began to appear one by one behind the Dullahan; they seemed to be following its lead. From what I could see, each of the monsters was a strong enemy that I’d typically only see in the depths of the dark-type dungeon. Working together, it was possible they were even stronger than the Demon Lord had been.

I quickly glanced toward Dolkness Village and saw that monsters were swarming around it as well. It didn’t seem like they would be able to climb over Patrick’s dirt wall though, and with both him and Ryu protecting the town, it would likely be just fine.

“Leave me and go!” the duke wailed. “It’ll be difficult to keep the monsters at bay if you don’t help the Ashbatten boy!”

I glanced back at Duke Hillrose and discovered that he’d fallen to the ground, overwhelmed by the rich presence of death boiling off the Dullahan.

“It’ll be fine,” I told him with a fed up sigh.

“From what evidence did you form that conclusion?!”

“Relax,” I told him. “I’m just gonna focus on taking down the boss for now. I’ll bring you somewhere safe after that.”

And with that, I began running toward the headless knight, completely disregarding the duke’s frantic yelling I could hear over my shoulder.

This is it, I thought. I’m going to go up against one of the strongest monsters with only my bare hands.

My eyes darted to the head clutched in the Dullahan’s right hand, and for a moment it almost felt like I’d made eye contact with it. I couldn’t be sure though, since its eyes were hidden behind a helmet.

Maybe I’m just imagining things, I mused, but at that exact moment the

Dullahan's horse, which had been walking at a leisurely pace, let out a panicked neigh. The horse reared, its front legs lifting high into the air, and the Dullahan fell right off its back.

Staring in confusion at the scene, all I could say was, "Huh?"

The headless horse turned and galloped off at full speed, leaving its owner behind. Abandoned, the Dullahan picked up its dismembered head and turned to face me.

Oh, we totally made eye contact that time. I guess we're not total strangers, so...should I say hello?

"It's been a while," I told the Dullahan. "Thanks for all your help in the past."

Looking at the monster, I couldn't help but think, *Man, this takes me back*. I'd actually grinded out my last few levels in the dark-type dungeon; I couldn't even count how many times I'd defeated the Dullahan in front of me.

We've known each other for so long, my friend. Our encounters are too numerous to put a number on.

There was a long, frozen moment, and then the Dullahan spun around and began running away from me at full speed.

"Is it...fleeing?" muttered Duke Hillrose. His fear of the Dullahan seemed to have ebbed a little.

There's no way, right? A monster said to spread death wouldn't just run away, would it...?

"Wait, hold on," I called out, running after the Dullahan.

The headless knight only increased its running speed, as if it were fleeing desperately. Then...

Oh, it fell.

The Dullahan's head tumbled from its arms, rolling across the ground.

Is it...trying to run from me? I wondered.

When I'd fought the Dullahan in the past, it'd seemed to grow faster with each battle I waged against it. By the time I'd gotten close to level 99, it had

become quite the difficult task to land a blow on it at all. Watching its pathetic attempt at escape, I found myself feeling slightly bad, but I couldn't let it escape—the Dullahan would be a tricky monster to handle even for Patrick. I absolutely wasn't going to send it his way.

The Dullahan was running around in a panic in front of me, apparently looking for its dropped head. With a sigh, I began attacking it with my magic. It wasn't long before I struck my final blow.

"See, everything's fine," I said, turning to look back at the duke.

That was when I saw it—Duke Hillrose was being attacked by several monsters. I'd been so focused on killing the Dullahan that I'd forgotten that it wasn't the only monster that had appeared.

Duke Hillrose's words from earlier flashed through my mind. He was right—my abilities *were* endlessly ill-suited for defense. To make things worse, I was now a significant distance away from the duke since I'd gone chasing after the Dullahan. I could use a long-range attack to try and get rid of all the monsters that were after the duke, but that would likely hurt him as well.

In a panic, I started running toward the duke, but it was too late—the horde of monsters were already closing in. Despair washed over me at the sight.

And so, the man known as Duke Hillrose met his end.

Epilogue

It had been a month since the commotion Duke Hillrose caused in Dolkness County. Things had been slightly chaotic, but the kingdom seemed to be getting things under control.

As for what happened after I defeated the Dullahan that day, we were able to take down all the other monsters pretty easily. Thankfully, we were left with almost no casualties, and in an additional strike of good fortune, none of the towns surroundings Dolkness Village were affected at all.

Although...we had faced *one* brutal loss. Patrick had destroyed the monster-summoning flute—you know, the extra large one. I would have done my best to save it from him if I'd had the chance, but by the time I'd taken care of most of the monsters and returned to the village, it had been too late. It was a significant loss for all of humanity.

Once we'd had things under control, we'd headed straight to the Royal Capital. Using our knowledge of the duke's plans, a large-scale raid had been launched on the Hillrose estate, where all of the radicals had conveniently gathered in preparation to launch the coup d'état. Things had been a mess for a while after that, but now things were finally calming down. I could at last focus on Dolkness County again.

Today, I'd planned to go see how our newest village was faring in terms of its development. But, before I went, I decided to invite one more person to come along with me—a certain girl who was currently staying at my estate, and appeared to be well on her way to becoming a shut-in.

"Lady Eleanora, would you please come out?" I called from outside her room.

No response could be heard from behind her door. This wasn't much of a surprise—Eleanora had been acting like this ever since I'd told her about her father's death. Perhaps she was still stunned by the fact that she was now a commoner, the title that had come along with the Hillrose name having been destroyed due to her father's treasonous acts.

All right, how am I going to get here out of there? I wondered. *I could bring up Edwin to bait her... No, she'd probably resent me for that later.*

Left bereft of other ideas, I finally just said in my best coaxing voice, "We're going somewhere fun..."

There was a rustling inside Eleanora's room. "I'm coming!" she shouted.

Is she depressed or not...?



Although she'd sworn to be ready right away, it was an hour before Eleanora finally joined me at the entryway to the house.

There's no way it took her that long to prepare, I mused. *It's starting to feel like there's a good chance that my home contains some kind of warp in space-time.*

Looking for confirmation from a secondary source, I turned to Patrick, who had been waiting alongside me this whole time. "Isn't it strange to take a whole hour to get ready for an outing?" I asked him. "Shouldn't it take like, forty seconds?"

Patrick snorted. "Even I take a little longer than that. To be honest, I think Lady Eleanora actually was trying her best to be quick."

I wrinkled my nose at him. *No way,* I thought, resolute. *If you took that long getting ready every day and died at eighty, that would mean you spent three years of your life just getting ready to go out! That's insane!*

Our conversation was interrupted by Eleanora scurrying over to us. She was wearing an outfit that didn't look at all like what I thought was appropriate to visit a remote village surrounded by nature, but I kept that to myself.

"Thank you for waiting," Eleanora said with a big smile on her face. She didn't seem apologetic in the least.

Narrowing my eyes slightly, I replied. "It *was* quite the wait."

This seemed to go entirely over Eleanora's head. "I'd actually like to see Dolkness Village as well!" she said. "Would you show me around?"

“As you wish...”

She's a member of the upper class through and through, I thought with an inward sigh. Still, even if the fact that she's a freeloading fallen noble woman makes things difficult, her good-naturedness and general obliviousness toward ill intent makes up for it. Those things are what I like best about her, after all.

With Eleanora in tow, the three of us headed to Dolkness Village. We strolled through the streets on foot, which I worried would bother Eleanora, but she surprised me by energetically pressing forward.

“What is that?” she demanded.

“That's a store that sells grains.”

She pointed to another building. “What is *that* one then?”

“That's just a house.”

Hold on. Why does it kinda feel like Dolkness Village doesn't have anything going on? How can that be when it's the administrative and economic center of the county?

While I descended into worries over the featureless townscape before me, Eleanora jovially roamed along, oblivious.

“Oh! People are gathered over there!” she exclaimed, pointing to a plaza at the intersection of several main roads. “Is something going on?”

My brow wrinkled slightly as I took in the crowd ahead. Sure, vendors would sometimes set up stalls in the plaza, but that didn't attract nearly this many people.

“Huh...” I mumbled, confused. I turned to Patrick, who was standing at my side. “Is there some kind of event today?”

He shrugged his shoulders, head tilted in confusion as he stared at the people who'd flooded the plaza.

He seems to be as clueless as I am.

Eleanora didn't waste any time rushing into the plaza herself; she dived right into the crowd and began pushing her way through to the front. I went after

her, struggling to make my way to the origin of all the noise. I got jostled around as I waded through the throng of tightly packed bodies, but did eventually manage to make it to my destination.

Peering ahead, I saw a man holding a string instrument. He was likely a bard, and there was something about him that seemed a tad familiar...but I didn't have time to dwell on it, since he began his performance.

The bard sang a tale of a young girl's adventures. The girl had black hair and a dark power in her right arm that she lived her whole life trying to suppress. Alas, she was forced to set it free in order to use its forbidden strength to take down her archnemesis. In the final act, the girl won the battle, but was almost swallowed up by her power. She was only able to be saved and brought back to herself because of the efforts of her beloved partner.

Hmm, I see, I mused. The story kind of feels like something a kid would come up with to be edgy, but overall, it's pretty well written.

Now finished with the main story, the bard concluded with an epilogue. He sang that the black-haired girl had become a countess, and had thereafter ruled over a county.

This brought me pause. *Wait... This is just me, isn't it? Oh! That's right, I met that bard in the Royal Capital. Did he really take the edgelord ideas I came up with on the spot seriously?! Is he crazy?! I pressed a hand to my forehead. What's he gonna do if some of these normal children turn out to be cringey weirdos?! Once they come to their senses, they'll have to carry that pain with them for the rest of their lives, just like I do! Just like me!*

I wanted to flee from the scene immediately, but the roaring applause of the crowd, interspersed with cheers, made me freeze on the spot. Eleanora, who had been standing more toward the front than I had, looked back over her shoulder, and our eyes met.

"Yumiella, you're so cool!" she yelled in a loud voice. Somehow, I managed to hear her even through the excitement of the crowd.

"That was completely fictional," I shouted back.

"What? What did you say? I can't hear you!"

Lady Eleanora, must you call out my name in such a loud voice?! Ugh... I guess it's too late to signal her to be quiet.

I let out a long sigh, but then froze when the crowd's cheering suddenly stopped, all their eyes turning to me.

"Is that...Lady Yumiella herself?"

"Indeed, it's the countess, in the flesh."

I braced myself for what was to come next. After all, at this point, I was used to people being uncomfortable around me. I was used to them putting distance between themselves and me, leaving me standing alone in an empty space.

It's all right, I told myself. I'm just destined to be feared...

But then, from in the crowd, I heard a voice yell, "You're so cool!" And then, another: "Lady Yumiella, was that story just now true?!"

No, don't look at me with those eyes of envy, I moaned internally. I can't take being surrounded by everyone's glimmering gazes!

I glared at the bard, trying to ignore the intense stares from the crowd around me. Alas, he didn't notice me.

"This song is very popular in the Royal Capital as well," he began. "As the composer and lyricist of this song, I came here in hopes of performing it in Dolkness County, since that is where the tale takes place."

It's already too late. Unbelievably embarrassing as it is, the bard's tale based on me has already spread among the public... Not only that, but this entire crowd seems convinced that I actually am the protagonist. I looked around, wincing at all the eyes boring holes into me. *I've gotta get out of here.*

As I was planning my escape, a voice called from nearby, "Take a look at Dolkness County's specialty, the wooden sword! Made under the total supervision of our countess, these are even big with the children of aristocrats in the Royal Capital!"

Trust a merchant to always capitalize on a business opportunity. But why do you have to bring up the wooden swords now? I feel like people are gonna get some weird ideas about them after hearing that story...

Up until now, the swords hadn't been selling that well in Dolkness Village. Today, however, the demand seemed to skyrocket. The crowd around me rushed over to the merchant, desperate to buy themselves one of the wooden swords. Even Eleanora tried to join them; I had to grab her arm to stop her.

"I want one too!" she yelled at me, pouting.

"We're going now, I'll buy you one later."

Somehow, I managed to escape the crowd, dragging Eleanora along behind me. I found Patrick standing not far away; apparently, he'd been enjoying the view from afar while I'd been in the middle of the chaos.

Patrick, I won't forget this!



Soon after the bard's performance ended, the three of us left Dolkness Village and headed for the area the villagers from Cottoness were developing. I'd wanted to do something about that story the bard was telling, but ultimately I'd decided not to. I'd felt like things would only get more out of hand if I intervened.

It's just a temporary fad, I told myself. Soon enough, that story will disappear from everyone's minds. Hopefully. Probably.

I didn't have much time to dwell over it though, as we quickly arrived at the developing village. The flight was easy, and we faced little to no issues—that is, beyond Ryu's annoyance over Eleanora's exuberant excitement toward flying.

Even landing didn't dampen Eleanora's glee; she ran off practically immediately once Ryu had landed, not even giving me a chance to explain our plans for the day.

"Hey, hold on!" I yelled after her.

"But I see a river over there!" she exclaimed.

I sighed. *We're here to inspect the village, not play around! Although...does Lady Eleanora know that? Yeah, probably not.*

"You go check on the village," Patrick told me, heading after her. "I'll look after Lady Eleanora."

“Thanks.”

Saved by Patrick’s considerateness, I thought, feeling relieved.

With Eleanora safely taken care of, I turned to Ryu and told him he could go off to play, then headed to the village. The first thing I did was look over the areas that we’d planned to turn into fields. They were neatly divided up, and as far as I could tell, about half of the work on them had been completed. It looked like they’d be able to properly start farming next year.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry to disturb you while you’re working,” I called out to a villager who was tilling a field close by. “How have things been?”

“Oh! Countess!” responded the man, who looked to be in his thirties. “Things have been going well, thank you very much. Starting next year, we’ll be doing our best to be able to feed ourselves.” He gave me a cheerful smile.

I felt a bubble of happiness burst inside me. The way the villagers treated me now, it was like the fear they’d felt toward me when they’d been thieves had never even existed.

“Ah!” the man continued, as if he’d just remembered something. “Are you all right, countess? I heard that you were attacked by the duke.”

I gave him my best attempt at a reassuring smile. “I’m fine; he was up against *me*, after all.”

“That’s good to hear. Do you know what ended up happening to him?”

I paused, then said delicately, “He...passed away. The title the Hillroses held has been destroyed as well.”

So, it appears the details of our confrontation haven’t spread, I mused. *If they had, he’d have heard that the mastermind of the situation, the duke of Hillrose, was the sole fatality in the commotion.*

The villager quietly muttered, “I see.”

I felt a flicker of affection toward the man. Even though he most likely thought the duke was just another crooked aristocrat, I couldn’t sense even an ounce of happiness coming from him over the duke’s demise.

This guy seems like he’s got a good heart, I thought. *Regardless, there’s no use*

in talking about such depressing things.

“Umm...” I mumbled, trying to think of a different topic. “How’s that strange old man been? The one who recently came to the village.”

The villager’s face lit up. “Oh, he’s really something! He’s very smart, and the other day he even took down a monster!”

I felt a flicker of relief at this. I’d brought the man to the village roughly a month ago, but I’d worried over how well he’d get along with the other villagers. He had a nasty look about him, you see, and his personality was actually quite nasty as well. It seemed he’d settled in well, though.

He did protect himself from the swarm of monsters back then... I mused. I guess he can fight a little after all.

“I’m glad he’s doing well,” I told the villager. “Would you happen to know where he is right now?”

“He should be home, I believe,” the villager replied, pointing to a house.

Waving goodbye to the villager, I headed over to the building and examined it a bit closer. I noted that it was small, and quite new, and that the strange man seemed to be living in it by himself.

I knocked on the house’s door, and mere seconds later a man’s voice responded from inside. Without any further ado, I let myself in, then locked eyes with the middle-aged man waiting for me within.

“It’s been a while,” I said lightly. “You’ve been settling in quite well, I’ve heard. I’m a bit surprised.”

There was a brief silence, then the man at last responded, “Being retired in the countryside isn’t all that bad.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. I actually came by today to let you know that most everything has now been settled.”

“I see.”

As the man listened attentively, I explained all that had been going on in the Royal Capital since Duke Hillrose’s failed coup d’état. Unfortunately, we hadn’t been able to round up all the radicals, even though we’d raided the duke’s

mansion with Ronald's help—half of them had left before we'd arrived, concerned about the duke's nonappearance. Those who fled were staunchly feigning ignorance on the matter.

"If you had been quicker, you could've taken care of them all at once," the man complained. "Ronald was too lax."

"Isn't it Lady Eleanora's fault that Ronald showed up late?" I pointed out.

The man's face screwed up, his expression turning indignant. "There's no way she could be at fault!"

Ignoring the emphatic shift in his tone, I continued to detail out the rest of what I knew. From what I had heard, most of the radical aristocrats who had avoided capture were small fry, and they hadn't carried any of the duke's plans through to fruition. The radicals that had been caught had all their titles stripped and their wealth confiscated, and had been told to live out the rest of their lives as commoners. Hopefully that would be enough to scare the radicals that hadn't been apprehended and keep them from dipping their toes into any other trouble.

"They could've faced harsher punishment," the man fussed, lips thin with displeasure.

"That's scary coming from you," I said, giving the man a look before continuing on to the next topic of discussion—the kingdom.

Thankfully, the results of the duke's actions had caused practically no disturbance within Valschein. The territories that had been confiscated from the former aristocrats had been put under the direct control of the royal family, which had made the kingdom seem more stable than ever. As someone who prioritized stability over all else, I felt like things had worked out as well as we could have hoped for.

But the strange man's interest seemed to lie beyond the kingdom. "So?" he demanded nervously. "How's she doing?"

"As best as could be expected, as I've told her that you've died," I replied. "I can't do otherwise, since she's so bad at keeping secrets."

"I see," he replied. "Well, as long as she's doing all right, I suppose that's

fine... You aren't making her grind experience, are you?"

"Of course not," I said, scoffing. "Our deal was that as long as you stayed out of trouble, I wouldn't do that."

She's probably still running around and playing in the river right now... I thought. Oh, right! I never told him that Lady Eleanora's here.

I glanced over at the man, taking in how restless and irritated he looked. *Heh, the second I brought up Eleanora, his attitude completely changed.*

The man sighed. "Why is that girl so attached to you?" he asked, looking lost. "Why does she like someone so crazy so much?"

I shrugged. "I don't have a clue either."

"Why did she even come to Dolkness County back then? I've still don't have any idea."

"She apparently came to congratulate me on my marriage," I informed him.

After I'd realized Eleanora's invitation had been for a wedding instead of Patrick's level 99 party, I'd checked to see if all of them had been like that. Indeed, they had, and not only that—everyone up to the king himself had received one. Daemon and his people had even started preparing for it for some reason, so it seemed we really would be having a wedding in six months, as the invitation had stated. The knowledge had left me utterly lost.

I really don't get it... I moaned internally. Patrick and I haven't even actually decided to get married, let alone agreed to have a wedding! All we did was get engaged—marriage was never part of the deal! But I, uh, you know...I wouldn't mind getting married. Some day...

As I writhed in internal conflict for the umpteenth time since everything had come out, the man's brows rose in surprise.

"Marriage?" he asked. "Oh, I didn't notice the ring."

I gave him a confused look. "What about my ring?"

"It's a magical instrument and engagement ring, isn't it? I can't believe the magic in that thing is what got me."

My brain stuck on the first statement, skipping right over the second. *An engagement ring?* I wondered incredulously. *There's no way, this ring I'm wearing is just a surprise gift that Patrick gave me...*

Feeling assured, I told the man firmly, "This isn't an engagement ring."

"Then why are you wearing it on that finger?" he demanded.

I glanced at the fourth finger on my left hand. *Wait, are engagement rings supposed to go on this finger? I mean, it's not like I knew that when I put it on; I just wasn't thinkin— Wait. Patrick was the one who decided I should wear the ring on this finger.*

"Patrick is surprisingly ignorant..." I muttered to myself.

The man let out a long, long sigh. "I'm starting to feel sorry for that kid."

Just then, the door to the man's house suddenly flew open. I was overcome with the need to press my hand to my forehead.

Does she live by some principle where she can't knock or something?

"Yumiella, I caught a crab! Can we eat thi—"

Eleanora froze midsentence, staring at the man standing behind me. He had gone rigid as well, his gaze fixed on her.

"F-Father...?" Eleanora whispered, squeezing the words out.

"I'm... I'm just a simple villager. The duke of Hillrose is dead."

The surprise vanished from Eleanora's face. "I see, my mistake! You just looked so much like my father."

"E-Eleanora...?" the man stammered.

That's right—Lady Eleanora takes everything at face value. Even this.

It took everything I had to hold my laughter in, seeing the look of blank incredulity that came over the man's face. The fact that I knew a touching reunion was just moments away somehow made it even funnier.

"Oh, Yumiella," Eleanora began, turning to me. "I also got a cra—"

"Eleanora, it's your daddy!"

We all turned to look at the man. He looked a bit sheepish, having blurted his words out in a panic. Then, Eleanora's face lit up.

"Father! I knew it, you *are* father!"

"Yes, my dear daughter, it's me! And *you* are the cutest girl in the whole world!"

I gave them a look of disdain as they embraced, then stepped outside. *"It's your daddy"?! Come on! I can't stand doting parents like him; they're so undignified. I wonder if he's aware how cringe he is.*

Left without anything to do but wait, I wandered aimlessly around the area until I came across Ryuu, who was digging a hole in the ground outside the village.

"Ryuu!" I called out. "It's your mommy!"

My little mole-dragon didn't react; he was too absorbed in digging, his legs moving rapidly over the dirt before him. Instead, a nearby voice said with a sigh, "Don't you feel embarrassed, saying something like that?"

I looked over and saw Patrick; he must have come after me once he'd led Eleanora to the house.

"What's weird about what I was saying?" I asked, baffled.

He sighed. "Never mind..."

He's saying strange stuff again, I thought. Ah well, he's just kind of a weird person. It's not his fault his understanding of things is a bit off.

We looked out at the view of the village before us in a companionable silence. The landscape of the little development had completely changed over the span of the last few months. Looking at it, it was hard to believe that there had been nothing there just a short while ago.

Oh, that's right! I should tell Patrick what that man just mentioned. I bet he'll be surprised.

"Hey, did you know that there's a meaning behind wearing a ring on each finger?" I asked. "Apparently engagement rings and wedding rings go on the fourth finger of your left hand!"

There was a moment of heavy silence. “I...already knew that,” Patrick said.

What, he already knew that and put the ring on this finger?! Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. So, I guess this ring is probably an engagement ring, huh? Wait—it’s that kind of engagement ring?

“So, uh...does that mean this is... It’s...”

Did...Patrick propose to me without me knowing? Was he proposing to me when he gave me this ring?!

Logically, I could understand that was what had happened, but my mind just couldn’t quite grasp it. Even so, he deserved a response. Although, it did feel pretty strange to suddenly give him an answer after all this time...

My mind spun, confusion and anxiety overheating it to a dangerous degree. But before I could have a total meltdown, Patrick reached out and took my left hand in his, then plucked the ring right off my finger.

“Huh? Why did you...? Wait, did you not propose to me back then? Do you not want to get married?”

We’d just been going with the flow of things, but now we were suddenly engaged, and the day of our wedding had already been decided. *Is any of this what Patrick wants? I just thought that we’d lucked out, but if Patrick feels differently—*

“You won’t get it unless I make things clear, so I want to formally tell you this,” Patrick said. He got on his knee in front of me and held out the ring with both hands. “I love you, Yumiella. Let’s get married.”

In normal circumstances, I would have already looked away out of embarrassment. But for some reason, right now my gaze was fixed, my eyes locked on to his. A moment passed, seconds stretching into what felt like hours as we stared at each other. The only thing that moved was our hair, jostled by the wind.

I may be clueless when it comes to romance, and I may have had no idea what wearing a ring on the fourth finger of my left hand meant, but even I know what to do next.

I held my left hand out, my eyes still staring into Patrick's as I said, "Sure, it would be my pleasure."

Behold, my finishing move! With a simple, "Sure, it would be my pleasure," I have proclaimed how I feel without using words such as "like" or "love" or "I want to marry you!" Oh, what a convenient phrase! I see why those in customer service use it often.

But...something was off. I went to let out a little giggle, happy that I'd been able to give him a satisfactory response, but the sound came out watery, and my eyes were full of tears. The ring, with its pale green glow, was put onto my left hand once again. But the tears didn't stop.



“This isn’t— I’m not sad or anything, just...”

“I know.”

Even though Patrick wiped my tears away with a handkerchief, the tears kept coming. It seemed like they wouldn’t stop until all the water was depleted from my body.

That’s when a certain person’s strident voice drilled into our ears.

“Hey, you! What’s this I hear about you carrying Eleanora while walking around?!”

“Wait, father! It was nice, but it wasn’t like that!”

At this exchange, my tears completely stopped falling. My eyes, which had been overly hydrated the moment before, dried up.

Good going, Hillroses. Now I don’t have to worry about leaking all my water out of my eyes and turning into a mummy.

Sensing the noisy yet joyful presence of the two ex-aristocrats, Ryuu flew over as well. Eleanora excitedly waved at him, but her father stood before her as if to protect her.

“Ryuu, over here!” Eleanora called out, leaning around her father’s body.

“No— *Eleanora!* Hey, hurry up and do something about the dragon!” The man grabbed his daughter, holding her in place. “Eleanora, you stay where you are!”

“Don’t worry, father, I’m friends with this dragon!”

“So?! What if something happens and you get crushed?! No, I won’t let that happen—your father shall protect you!”

It looks like this all-too-noisy father-daughter duo is going to be in my life for a while, I thought to myself with a sigh.

“Can you believe that *that’s* the guy who rebelled against the royal family?” I asked, turning to Patrick.

“He just seems like an overprotective father to me.”

We both looked at each other and let out a wry laugh.

Afterword

Hello, it's been a while. This is Satori Tanabata. Thank you for continuing to support *Villainess Level 99* by picking up the previous volume as well as the current volume. This volume's afterword will only be a single page; you'll arrive at the end so fast it'll be like you're riding a *Nagomi* bullet train!

While the first volume of *Villainess Level 99* barely stayed within the maximum page limit, this volume surpassed that, making it a decent amount thicker than the previous volume. Though the page count is higher, the cost of the book is the same for both! What a great bang for your buck! It should be in the Hall of Fame for cheap things! It's a friend to housewives! A must-see deal for students! An unparalleled price! An imoni party! A radial engine! ...Writing unnecessary things like this is why I keep running out of pages.

Tea provided some cute and cool illustrations for this volume, of course, as they did in the previous one. I thought the design for the Royal Academy uniforms was great, and I adored the casual wear as well.

Now, I'd like to make a special announcement. *Villainess Level 99* will be getting a comic serialization! It's becoming a manga. It will begin this winter and will be published in *B's-Log COMIC*. It will also be available through various online mediums; please see the official website for details. The artist for the manga is nocomi.

Finally, I would like to give thanks. To my two editors, to the illustrator, Tea, to the proofers and everyone who was involved in the publishing of this book, to everyone who continued to purchase this book...I truly thank you all.

To my readers, I hope you will continue to support *Villainess Level 99*.



Upon returning to the Dolkness estate for the first time in a long while, Yumiella greets her servants.

“It’s been a while.
I haven’t forgotten
the fun days I spent here;
I would love to give
back to all of you
for taking care of me.”

One of the maids
screamed, falling
to the ground.
Multiple other servants
collapsed after her,
strewing the ground
with limp bodies.

What just
happened...?

VILLAINESS
LEVEL 99

I May Be the Hidden Boss But I'm Not the Demon Lord

2



Ryuu

Yumiella's "adorable" pet.

"Kinda tagged along...?"

Patrick Ashbatten

The second-born son of the margrave and Yumiella's boyfriend.

"Patrick is, um, you know... He just kinda tagged along."

"Having the chance to serve Lady Yumiella should bring you to the pinnacle of happiness!"

Rita

A maid that serves Yumiella.

"Yumiella, I've arrived!"

Eleanora Hillrose

The duke's only daughter. A pushy airhead.

Yumiella Dolkness

The villainess and hidden boss of an otome game.



**“I’ve got it!
We just need
to make the
county bigger!”**

**“No invading
anywhere.”**

**“That’s not what I meant!
We’re going to flatten the entire
county with my Yumiella-strength!
I’ll get rid of mountains,
fill in valleys, and eradicate
monsters!”**

**“Are you serious?
You’re joking, right?”**

VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

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SATORI TANABATA

ILLUST. TEA



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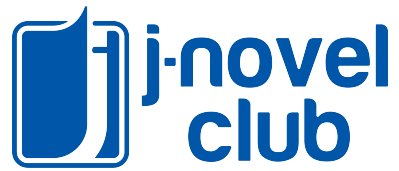
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Villainess Level 99: I May Be the Hidden Boss but I'm Not the Demon Lord Act
2

by Satori Tanabata

Translated by sachi salehi

Edited by Stacy Stiles

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Illustrations by Tea

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