

VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

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

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Prologue

It was the middle of winter, but Dolkness County was full of activity.

“I guess all that stuff about this place being terrifying was lies,” remarked Dan, a carpenter new to the area. “It looks to be doing better than the Royal Capital.”

Dan had traveled from the Royal Capital to find work, and he didn’t think that Dolkness Village seemed prosperous in the slightest by comparison. He knew of port towns much livelier than this one, and he’d even been to cities up in the mountains that were more developed. Despite all of that, and although he would usually feel nothing approaching affection for a town like this, Dan still felt that the place was doing well. This observation was probably due to his job.

Dolkness Village was right in the middle of a construction boom. The carts that traveled through the town were full of construction materials like lumber, stone, and brick, and the streets echoed with the sound of nails being hammered jauntily into walls. It was a simple matter to find work in a place like this. Dan felt that he’d made the right choice in coming here, and so he strolled through town happily.

“It does seem like I’m a little late to the party,” he admitted to himself, “but it’s probably better that I came now instead of welcoming the New Year in the Royal Capital.”

As he walked the streets, Dan saw several familiar faces. Not only did he see other carpenters, but he even passed by some merchants that he knew. Since there were so many itinerant workers gathered here, their presence drew merchants to sell them food and alcohol. Naturally, all of these workers and merchants alike spent money in the local shops. All of this together was the cause of Dan’s earlier observation: Dolkness County, the land rumored to be where the Demon Lord lived, was full of activity.

There was *one* off-kilter thing that Dan was a bit curious about, however: the fact that there were several strange concave spots in the ground scattered

throughout the town. After walking for a short time, he'd already seen several of these depressions. They were round holes that looked like they had been made by something like a large boulder falling from the sky, but in the end, Dan felt as if they didn't warrant any special concern.

Dan continued to aimlessly meander down the street as he thought about what he would do next.

First, I need to find someone in charge of a construction site and get a job, then I need to find somewhere to sleep... Maybe the person in charge can give me both a job and an inn to stay in. No, before that I should find a good restaurant—

Dan's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by someone calling out his name.

"Dan? I thought it was you! I didn't know you were in the area."

Dan turned to see a familiar face. "Oh, it's you, Tom! It's been a while."

"I think it's been about two years." The young man flashed a friendly smile as he came closer. "Did you come here for work?" Tom had been an acquaintance from before Dan had set out on his own, and they had worked together under the same head carpenter.

Dan launched into some small talk, hoping to learn more from his former junior coworker. "Yup, since the Royal Capital hasn't changed at all, I decided to try my luck elsewhere. I came here because I heard the county's doing well."

"It definitely is," Tom agreed. "There's a ton of work. Construction is underway for a large mansion, a wedding venue, and there are even some plans to expand the town."

"A wedding venue? They're building a brand new building for that?"

"It's actually a church, but it's being put up because of the wedding, so everyone just refers to it as the wedding venue."

Dan shook his head in disbelief. "Wow, nobles really go crazy just for a single wedding. How grandiose."

"No, well, um..." Tom looked a little uncomfortable at Dan's lightly mocking

words. He cleared his throat conspicuously and cast his eyes around them, which made Dan worry that he'd said something untoward. He scanned their surroundings.

Once he'd confirmed that they weren't being watched, he lowered his volume before he continued. "Do the nobles here not allow you to criticize them? Sorry, I forgot about the Demon Lord."

There were some aristocrats who didn't allow any negative things to be said publicly about them, even if it was just in small talk between commoners. Not only that, but this was the county under the rule of *the* Yumiella Dolkness. Dan couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of punishment she might sentence people to undergo if they displeased her, considering that she had destroyed the neighboring kingdom's army with her dragon's fiery breath. The thought of it made him tremble with fear.

However, Tom shook his head in response and reassured him. "It's fine. You should be okay as long as you're not making a grand speech or anything."

Dan's shoulders sagged in relief. "I let my guard down since the town seems so peaceful. It's true that she's a tyrant, isn't it?"

The younger carpenter considered this. "She's not exactly a tyrant... Oh, but she does go crazy sometimes, but, um... Well, the countess's fiancé is a person of upstanding character, though." Tom couldn't confirm or deny whether she was considered a tyrant by those who lived in her domain. It was hard to tell what people thought of Yumiella. Dan gave him a look that seemed to seek further clarification, so Tom hastened to explain his response. "I haven't gotten a good read on her yet. You get different answers from different people. Though, I will say, the people of this town seem to like her. It seems like things were pretty terrible when her predecessor was still in charge."

"I remember hearing that she stole her title from her parents back in the Royal Capital," Dan responded with a nod. "I wonder why. I think it would be much better to live as a carefree noble who didn't have to do any work than to become the head of the family with a bunch of responsibilities. I guess nobles just think differently from us."

"Yes, they probably do think differently."

“Have you ever seen her in person? All I know is that she has jet-black hair... Huh? There’s another one.” Dan pointed to another one of the mysterious holes he kept seeing. This one wasn’t particularly different from the others, but he felt it was strange that they were all over the town. *Don’t they want to fill them for safety?* he wondered.

Tom didn’t seem concerned, and he shrugged with a knowing expression. “Oh, those? They’re not usually around people or buildings, so they’re perfectly safe. If they’re in a place where a carriage might get stuck, they get filled in right away.”

“Is someone digging them? Who would do that? And why?”

Tom shook his head. “No, they fall from the sky.”

Fall from the sky? What falls from the sky? Before Dan could voice the question, a woman walking by caught his attention.

She was exactly what one pictured when thinking of a noble lady. She wore an extravagant dress that no one outside of the aristocracy would ever wear, and she had long, delicate golden hair. Dan had rarely seen people that appeared to be of such a high class, even when he’d been in the Royal Capital.

The woman, whose noble air stuck out like a sore thumb in this provincial area, was cradling a piece of scrap lumber as if it was something of great value. Several children holding similar random pieces of wood walked alongside her.

“I cannot believe they actually gave us some!” the woman bubbled. “What are we going to make with these?”

“I told you, we’re turning them into firewood,” said one of the children with a roll of his eyes. “Were you even listening, princess?”

“What?” The noble lady looked scandalized. “Burning it would be such a waste.”

The boy speaking to her wore worn-out clothes, and his tone was so brusque that it bordered on rudeness, but the woman was nevertheless smiling. Dan stared at them, unsure of how to respond to this strange group, one that comprised an elegant noble lady and a bunch of children who were clearly commoners.

“Dan? What’s wrong?” Tom asked curiously.

“That isn’t the countess, is it—?”

“No,” Tom immediately answered.

“Right, she doesn’t have black hair. Who is that, then? The countess’s sister or something?”

“She’s apparently just a friend. I heard that she was the only daughter of the duke of Hillrose.”

Dan continued watching the children meander away, led by the mysterious noble lady. He didn’t know much about the duke, but he’d heard a few rumors about him. “The duke is the next most powerful noble following the king, right? Wait... Wasn’t there a recent commotion about a coup led by the duke?”

“Was there?” Tom shrugged. “Maybe I’m wrong, then. It’s hard to distinguish between noble ranks.”

Faced with Tom’s uncertainty, Dan realized that he wasn’t actually sure if the person behind the coup was the duke after all. Regardless of whether it had been a duke or a count, it didn’t really matter—they were all just nobles to Dan. Since the coup hadn’t led to any real conflict, he didn’t know many details about it either, just that it had happened.

They’d gotten a little sidetracked talking about the enigmatic countess and mysterious noble lady. What Dan really wanted to ask about was prospective jobs. He figured it was a waste of time to get too caught up in rumors that had nothing to do with him, so he shifted the subject.

“So who do I talk to if I want to get a job?”

Tom had a ready answer. “The Archit Trading Company is in charge of the big jobs, so you’d want to talk to a higher-up there. I can take you there and introduce you. I’m sure they won’t question your skills if I tell them you used to be my senior. They favor workers who have experience with large-scale construction sites.”

“Oh, that would be great. I didn’t realize Archit was in charge here... Sounds like you’re in good hands.”

The Archit Trading Company was the foremost organization in the industry. They sold construction materials and they organized construction projects too. Despite being established fairly recently, they'd already managed to attract not only many skilled tradesmen, but mages as well.

Large companies with plenty of personnel often needed more workers, especially if they were tradesmen with proven skills. Because of that, it wasn't that uncommon to see independent carpenters like Dan who moved from company to company, depending on where the most work was to be found.

Figuring he could probably land a position that paid well, Dan was excited to get started.

"All right then, could you take me there right away? I'm sure you need to get back to your site before you get in trouble."

Tom laughed. "That was quick. Have you worked with Archit before?"

"Just once in the past. Aside from the fact that the architect didn't come to the building site even once, it was a great job."

"Funny you should mention that because you know what? I don't think they exist. I've been working for the Archit Trading Company for about a year now, but I've never once seen an architect."

Dan didn't like following blueprints drawn by someone he'd never even met. Even if an architect was someone like an academic who preferred to work alone, most of them usually would at least go check on a building they planned out... Perhaps there was some circumstance that prevented this particular architect from showing their face.

He felt a little irritated about the situation, but before he could open his mouth to complain, a sudden booming sound rang out behind him. The deafening noise came with a heavy impact that made him almost fall over. He turned around to see what had happened, and he saw someone standing within the rising cloud of dust and smoke.

The people around the pair of carpenters also froze, unsure of what was happening. The dirt that had been so aggressively thrown into the air by the impact began to rain down around them, and the smoke started to gradually

dissipate.

Just as he had initially thought, there *was* a person there. A girl with black hair stood among the smoke and debris, and she appeared uncomfortable with the attention she had gathered.

“Today I’m landing like Ultraman...” she called out. “Sorry for the commotion.”

Dan watched all of this occurring with his jaw hanging open, but the people around him quickly went back to what they were doing. Even Tom, who was right beside him, continued on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“That was surprising,” he said nonchalantly. “Okay then, let’s head out.”

Dan hurried after Tom, who was calmly sauntering down the street. “H-Hey! What was that? That was the countess, right? What’s going on?!”

“Yes, that was her, but...that wasn’t really an uncommon occurrence. You’ll get used to it quickly.”

“But where did she come from?!”

This woman, who had appeared with a booming sound and then had gone on her way after uttering some strange phrase, all while being ignored by the townspeople...there was no doubt in Dan’s mind that this was Yumiella Dolkness. Worried that she might overhear him, Dan held back the questions clamoring in his mind—questions like “Should we run?” or “Will she attack?”

In response to the question that Dan had asked, Tom pointed at the sky. Dan looked up and saw the dragon flying above them. Now that he thought about it, he realized that this was likely the same black dragon that he sometimes saw in the Royal Capital.

Did she jump off from all the way up there? How was she able to land unharmed on her feet? As he looked up at the cloudless winter sky, there was only one thing he could think of to say: “Maybe I should go home.”

Chapter 1: The Hidden Boss Carries Logs

It was cold today. It didn't snow in Valschein, and the weather didn't fluctuate that much. The climate was so temperate that students wore the same school uniform regardless of the season, but even so, there were definitely days that were cold. It was just cold enough that wearing an extra layer underneath your regular clothes would keep you warm enough.

The region in which I lived during my previous life hadn't experienced heavy snowfall, but it snowed enough for it to accumulate, so I was kind of used to it; I didn't mind the cold too much.

It feels like it was just fall, but now it's already winter.

The fall harvest in Dolkness County had successfully concluded, and the people were now preparing for the upcoming Foundation Festival, which was several weeks away. The new year was rung in every year during the Foundation Festival, and then two months into that new year, my wedding to Patrick would finally take place.

Our biggest concern with the wedding had been getting Patrick's older brother, Gilbert, to attend, but that had been dealt with. Other wedding preparations were going smoothly, although it seemed more true to say that they had progressed before I knew it. Unbeknownst to me, invitations had been sent out some time ago, and even the outfits had already been ordered.

There were various other things needed for the wedding as well. Some of the bigger items on the list were the new buildings that needed to be constructed, like a wedding venue and lodging facilities for our many guests. Apparently, preparations had even been made for all of the furniture and rugs and such that would go inside these new buildings.

Because of the current construction boom, even though the wedding was still months away, Dolkness Village already seemed to be in a festive and celebratory mood. As for myself, I spent every day dungeon crawling to obtain more funds, keeping an eye on the cheery town as I went to and fro between

the dungeon and my home.

In regards to the actual construction, Patrick was making a big splash by using his earth magic to help out with the foundations of the buildings. I was excited to help out too. I'd crashed into a construction site, but everyone there said it would be dangerous for me to help out, so I'd had to stop trying. (Just to clarify, they meant that it would be dangerous for the unfinished building, not for me—they were all afraid that I would demolish the building instead of the ground.) After I left, they were like, "All right, Yumiella isn't here. We can get started!"

Gasoline-powered engines or dynamite could get rid of massive boulders that were in the way, and nuclear bombs could blow up large asteroids. All those examples proved that there was always an opportunity for dangerous things to be useful. Surely even I, Yumiella, a person known for possibly being able to destroy the world if someone said the wrong thing, had a place where my skills could shine.

And at that very moment, I had an excellent opportunity to do just that standing before me: a massive pile of logs.

"Which of these can be transported?" I asked.

"We'd like all of these moved," said the worker by my side.

"Understood. I'll move these in a snap."

I was currently in the County of Archiam. It was a territory that was roughly at the midpoint between Dolkness County and the Royal Capital if you were traveling between the two. The County of Archiam was along a road that bisected the kingdom from east to west, and if you took a turn along that path and headed north, you would reach Dolkness County.

With all the new construction being built for the wedding in the County of Dolkness, we were suffering a lumber shortage. As a result, I was in Archiam County, a place famous for its high-quality lumber.

The man from a trading company (it had a name, but I couldn't remember it), looked at all the logs lined up on the ground. "Um... Maybe it's a little late for me to be saying this, but wouldn't this be difficult to carry manually? I heard you would be making the purchase on-site, so we had these prepared, but the

Archit Trading Company also provides delivery services for our lumber.”

“It’s all right,” I said, turning him down with a shake of my head. “It looks like I don’t have much time to wait, so I’ll just transport them myself.”

I remember now, it’s the Archit Trading Company in the County of Archiam. I guess they named the company after the territory. The names are way too similar; it’s confusing.

The Archit Trading Company had originally focused on construction services. They employed high-leveled, strong carpenters and several earth mages, so they could finish construction quite quickly, though the level of service they provided cost quite a bit.

On top of all that, they also now supplied and delivered building materials, and they’d even branched out into making furniture. Their business model was to handle everything from start to finish with all their associate companies, so it would honestly probably be better to leave the transportation to them as well. Unfortunately, I didn’t have time for that.

“It will take some time to deliver the lumber to Dolkness County by ground,” continued the man from the trading company, “but since we’ve been working with you in other departments, I’m prepared to give you a quote that will put us in the red—”

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t need the delivery.”

“I understand that you’re incredibly strong, Countess, but carrying all of this to Dolkness County seems a bit...”

Huh? This person is worried if I’m strong enough?

Looking at the logs, they appeared to be cedar or something similar that had been chopped down and had the unnecessary branches removed, but perhaps they were much heavier than I was expecting.

I guess I should see how heavy they are, just in case, I thought, picking up one of the logs with both of my hands. In my arms, the lumber’s flexibility became apparent, and the log started to bend like a bow.

“Oh, this should be no problem,” I said.

“I’ve heard about your strength, but I didn’t realize its extent...” The man seemed to be genuinely shocked. Perhaps seeing something for yourself was quite surprising, even if you knew about it.

Holding it like this would make the wood difficult to transport, so I put the log back down to reposition it. The best way to do this would probably be to carry the lumber on my shoulders. If I took one on each shoulder, then I could transport two logs at a time. While the weight wouldn’t be an issue, I *was* worried about whether I could actually hold them with my arms.

It’ll take over twenty round trips, but if I run, it should be over quickly. I hauled a log first onto my right shoulder, and then one onto my left. *The position I need to hold them in in order to carry them is uncomfortable, but... Okay, I’m fine now. Let’s go with two at a time as planned.* Now all I had to do was run toward Dolkness, but I decided I should say goodbye to the man first. The only problem was that the logs obstructed my vision and I couldn’t see him. I turned my entire body to the right, looking for him. As I turned, the logs loudly *swooshed* through the air, followed by a slightly delayed scream from the man.

“Whoa!”

“Oops! I’m sorry!”

I turned back around at a more reasonable pace. However, just as the tip of a blade moved faster than the rest of the sword, the ends of the logs had picked up quite a lot of speed. Along with their hefty weight, their momentum probably packed an unreasonable amount of force. It would be quite dangerous to get hit by the logs. I had managed to put myself in a position in which I could kill someone just by turning around.



“I’m all right. I was able to dodge it,” the man said from behind me. I was glad to hear he was okay. *I guess I turned the wrong way. I need to properly apologize to him,* I thought, turning around once more. “When you turn, you should be careful of your surround— Ah!”

“Oh,” I said.

His cautionary warning to avoid danger was a bit too late. This time I could clearly see the log just barely passing over his head.

This attack seems pretty strong. I could probably take down a vampire with it. I’m so sorry though. He would’ve been more than injured if that had actually hit him. I should apologize from the bottom of my heart.

I took a deep bow, which made the two logs slam against the ground on either side of him. It made a terrific booming noise.

“I’m truly sorry,” I said.

“Eek!” the man shrieked.

First he’d nearly been hit in the head twice, and now he’d been attacked from either side simultaneously.

Am I some kind of a disaster?

I couldn’t let the man from the Archit Trading Company be in danger any longer. “Please run,” I said, staying completely still. “Please escape from the attack range of my logs. Go while I’m not moving.”

“Y-Yes!” The man quickly got up and swiftly ran off.

I had ended up sounding like one of those characters who was losing control of their powers. *“It’s dangerous, you should keep your distance,” would’ve been enough,* I thought as I felt a delayed sense of embarrassment creeping in.

After apologizing to and thanking the man, who now seemed to be keeping a frankly unnecessary amount of distance between us, I began to move. I made sure to be considerate of the turns I made so that I didn’t slash through all the caravans along the way.

I’d thought that this job would improve my image. I’d thought it would be like

when a battle robot was being useful as a transportation device, but in the end I'd just ended up being the battle robot itself. Since being a runner sounded like I was involved in something illegal, I had thought of some good titles, like "the legendary courier" or "Shipperman," but those were probably never going to catch on.



I was able to complete my fetch quest of delivering several dozen logs to a specified location without any issues, save for the problems I'd had in the beginning. Back in Dolkness County, I placed the final log on the ground as instructed by the person in charge, who was also a member of the Archit Trading Company.

"This is the last one," I said.

"Thank you very much! You've really helped us out. By the way, I wanted to ask...was there anything rude about your interaction with the contact person in Archiam County?"

Does accidentally attacking someone three times with logs count as rude? I thought, before realizing that he was asking whether the man had been rude to me.

"No. If anything, I put him in danger."

"Oh... I can imagine why. Regardless, thank you for your hard work. Now we'll be on schedule."

"I can do more manual labor like this if needed," I offered.

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't think we'll need your help again, since we can get all the other building materials right here in Dolkness County or the neighboring territories, especially all the large items."

What else would be heavy... Like bricks and stones? I guess if they can get everything in Dolkness, that's good.

I was happy to see that the industries within the county were flourishing, but if our local traders were getting all of the business, then there was probably no benefit for the Archit Trading Company. Daemon, my deputy, said that the

company was doing a lot for us, so I had to be mindful about both their profits and the county's profits as well.

"Are there other things that are better to buy directly from Archiam?" I asked.

"There's no need for your concern. Our main business is construction after all. Even when it comes to lumber, if there is something of good quality available close by, we use that instead of our own products."

Perhaps I was overthinking things. After all, it was quite difficult to transport those logs using standard methods. There was no way to transport things by water from Archiam to Dolkness, so they had to use ground transportation along the same roads I'd passed through.

It would probably break your back to roll even small logs to Dolkness. There are a lot of small inclines on the way too. I guess things would've been more convenient for them if they could've gotten lumber within Dolkness County as well. I mean, Dolkness is riddled with mountains, so we have plenty of trees.

"Were you not able to use the trees in the area?" I asked.

"It's difficult to use the trees here because the forests here have mostly broad-leaved trees. Not only that, chopping wood in the mountains would just cost more because of the labor involved."

I see. I guess they prefer to use conifers like cedar and cypress. Now that I think about it, I probably like the look of the mountains in the winter because the broad-leaved trees have shed their foliage. I guess I can see why working in the mountains would be difficult. Cutting down cedar in a flat area is probably a lot easier.

I never thought that we'd have a lumber shortage while being surrounded by trees. The shortage wasn't too big of an issue because we just needed more wood for the large mansion being built, but if Dolkness County was to develop further, it was possible that we could run into a situation where we wouldn't have enough wood to build new houses. It would be a ton of work to build every citizen's house out of stone, commoner and noble alike.

I'm not sure if it will be a problem several decades or several centuries in the future, but I'm starting to get worried. I'm speaking to a professional right now,

so I might as well ask about it.

“This is a question for something far in the future, but would it be a good idea for us to plant some trees?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” the man replied. “It’s possible that there could be a lumber shortage in the future. It’d be more difficult to cut down and collect the wood, but it would be good to plant some trees in the mountains as well. I’m sure that your children’s and your grandchildren’s generations will be grateful.”

“Really? I guess we’ll do that once things calm down here.” I hadn’t expected him to be so enthusiastic about my idea without any reservations.

Several decades in the future, Dolkness County faces a serious lumber shortage, but they’re saved by the retired former lord...is how it’ll be. Maybe they’ll pass down tales of me as a great ruler. I’m going to plant a bunch of cedar and cypress for the future!

As I fantasized about the glorious future, another unexpected thought popped into my mind. “Huh...?” I blurted out.

“Is something wrong?” the man asked.

I shook my head. “Oh, no, it’s nothing. Thank you for your advice.”

“I’m always happy to help. If you need help procuring saplings in the future, I hope you’ll keep Archit Trading Company in mind.”

I wanted to tilt my head in confusion, but I quashed the impulse and said goodbye to the man from the trading company in a normal manner and left. As I slowly made my way home to the estate, I thought about the girl who had suddenly popped up in my head.

The moment I’d decided I would plant trees for the future of the county, a friend from my previous life appeared in the back of my mind. This image of my friend was desperately pleading with me, but I couldn’t tell what she was trying to tell me at all. She had a face mask and glasses on, even though she usually wore contacts, and she was putting eye drops into her eyes over and over and shaking a bottle of antihistamines at me.

Maybe I'm remembering a time when she had a cold? I've got it! I'll be careful of colds! And completely separate from that, I'm going to plant a bunch of cedar and cypress!

I gave a firm nod to myself, but the image of my friend still wouldn't go away. *Come on, I get it already,* I said to her in my mind. *I'll make sure to wash my hands and gargle properly.*

I continued to struggle with what to do about my friend who wouldn't leave my thoughts, but she immediately disappeared when someone called out to me. I stopped in my tracks to see who it was.

"Yumiella! Over here!" Eleanora exclaimed, waving to me as she ran over. Her hand was dark with a thick coating of dirt. There was even dirt all over her face and dress. What had happened to her?

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"I was digging up potatoes!" she responded. "Not regular potatoes, but sweet potatoes!"

"Oh, that's nice..."

"There's a field a short distance from town that the church manages, and we're going to use the potatoes grown there to hold a roasted potato contest!"

"That sounds like fun," I admitted. "Is the contest happening now?"

"Not today..." She leaned in closer to me. "This is actually a secret, but I'll tell you anyway. In a little bit, all of the people who helped dig up the potatoes are going to roast some. That means that if you help out with gathering them, you'll get to eat roasted potatoes *twice*."

Wow, I've been given some highly classified intel.

Behind Eleanora, I noticed about ten children who stood a little farther away from us. Their hands were all dirty as well, and the cloth bags they carried were likely filled with sweet potatoes. I couldn't help but note that it seemed that Eleanora was the dirtiest out of everyone. I wasn't sure if it was because she'd started out so clean that the dirt was even more apparent by contrast, or if she

had been more excited about digging up potatoes than the children had been—the details were unclear.

I was glad to see that she was still having fun even after her nobility had been revoked. “The children over there are waiting for you,” I pointed out. “You should go.”

“Yes! I’ll be off, then!” Eleanora trotted away back to the children, next to whom she didn’t look out of place at all, as she radiated the same childlike enthusiasm for their tasks (although it also might have been because of all of the dirt).

Rumors swirled about town that Lady Eleanora was the daughter of a duke and had been a noble lady in the past, but that lore seemed incorrect when seeing her now. She somehow managed to fit in with the townspeople—especially the children—much better than I’d ever managed to.

As I left Eleanora behind, I was struck by the distinct possibility that she might have been swapped for a clone, but I was distracted once again by running into another person who was fitting into this town better than I was. Well, he wasn’t actually a person—he was a dragon.

“Oh, Ryuu. What are you doing?” My son, Ryuu the large black dragon, was crouched on the side of the road. He was staying on the edge so as to not obstruct the flow of traffic, but even so, people weren’t able to move in any direction with him in the way. “Poke, poke,” I announced, nudging him. “What’s wrong, Ryuu?” It was only after I touched his tail that Ryuu finally took notice of this dragon poker.

Ryuu’s head took a meandering path down to look at me, doing his best to avoid the roofs of buildings. He was chewing something.

“Oh, you’re snacking?”

Ryuu responded with a growl. He was saying, “Hee hee, that’s right!” I could see something yellow peeking out from the spaces between his sharp fangs.

I wonder what he ate. I climbed over Ryuu’s body and got to the other side and saw that he was right in front of a produce shop. There were several

particularly large pumpkins lined up for sale. *That must be it.* My eyes then met the owner's, which prompted an awkward conversation.

"Oh, I apologize, it seems that Ryu's been in your care... Does he come by here often?"

"No, not too often..." the grocer answered.

"Um, how much do I owe you?"

"You don't need to pay me. He has such a good appetite, so I just give him things sometimes."

"Still, I insist."

As my indirect conversation with the greengrocer continued, Ryu chimed in. It only sounded like growls, but I could tell what he meant. He said, "Y'all are both terrible at talking. I can't watch this." (The "y'all" was a little extra flavor I sprinkled in.)

Ryu, who was friendly with both parties and could've been the bridge that connected us, checked his surroundings before flying off. He was probably being considerate of the traffic that he had stopped.

The greengrocer squinted through the dust kicked up by Ryu's wingbeats and said, "He looks scary, but he's a good boy."

"Yes!" I enthusiastically agreed. "He looks very cute, *and* he's a good boy."

I, the countess who was fitting into town even less than the former duke's daughter and a dragon, thought about the greengrocer as I continued walking home—maybe we could get along and be friends. A few moments later, I heard my name once more.

"You're on your way home too, Yumiella?"

I turned with a smile. "You too, Patrick?"

"I just finished up. You looked like you were seriously contemplating something, but...it wasn't anything big, was it?"

"Yeah, it was nothing," I assured him.

Even though I'm usually expressionless, he could tell that I had a serious look. He gets two points for that. He also knew that I wasn't thinking about anything important. Another three points. That's a total of five Yumiella Points. I'd expect no less from Patrick Ashbatten. He's steadily racking up points.

I'd made up a new game in my head, and although Patrick seemed to notice, he didn't comment on it. Instead, he began walking off with me alongside him, heading home together.

"Today you were in...Archiam, was it?" he asked.

"Yeah, in Archiam County. I carried logs *this* wide and brought them here, going back and forth," I explained, using my arms to indicate the size of the lumber.

He raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like you would hit people when you turn around."

"Your warning is a little too late."

"Any injuries?"

"I just barely managed to not hit anyone."

Patrick assured me that it was fine as long as I hadn't actually hit anyone, and he didn't bring up the topic any further. It seemed like the bar was getting lower for me every year. Eventually, he might praise me for going a whole day without breaking anything.

"Were you out using your earth magic again?" I asked him in turn.

"Nope, today I helped put up pillars. Manual labor."

Today I worked as a truck, and Patrick worked as a crane. It was the birth of a heavy machinery couple.

At level 99, Patrick could probably handle jobs that would require the work of several people with ease. But the carpenters working on the buildings also claimed that they had high levels.

"Couldn't that one guy do it?" I wondered. "The one who says he does the work of twenty people."

Patrick shook his head. "I think it would've been too heavy for him to handle on his own."

"You know, I really think we should—"

"No way," he said, cutting me off.

The man we were talking about was a level 20 carpenter who was working for us through the Archit Trading Company. When we'd first met, he had boasted, "I can do the work of twenty people on my own," so I upped the ante by asking him, "Do you have any interest in being able to do the work of ninety-nine people?" As a result, I was even less welcome at work sites.

He said he used to make a living by gathering magic stones in dungeons, so I'm sure he has potential... What a waste.

"Is level 20 that different? Isn't he basically just a bit stronger than someone who's level 1, but with really strong muscles?"

"We've both just lost our sensibilities for what's 'normal,'" Patrick countered. "Being level 20 makes someone quite skilled in the ordinary course of things."

"I wonder why he gave up being an adventurer, then. I feel like you could make more money dungeon crawling."

"He said that he retired from doing dangerous work after getting married, and then the Archit Trading Company recruited him."

I was surprised that Patrick had gotten to know him so well that they had even talked about things like that. To me, Patrick seemed quite standoffish, even rather curt with people he'd just met. And yet he seemed to be immediately considered trustworthy, and I wasn't sure why. I'd been beside him, watching him carefully, yet I wasn't ever able to copy his communication skills.

"He's in his thirties, right?" I persisted. "Does that mean he hasn't been a carpenter for long?"

"I'm not sure... From the way he talks about it, it sounds like he's been doing carpentry for about three years. That timing would also give a good reason for him to retire from dungeon crawling."

“Did something happen three years ago?”

“Remember how the value of magic stones went down? Especially the really high-grade ones? I’ve heard that the adventurer industry hasn’t been doing too well the past few years.”

That’s right, magic stones are a lot cheaper than they used to be.

I had learned about the market value of magic stones when I started attending the Academy. Until then, I had only needed enough pocket money to buy the bare necessities, so I wasn’t paying attention to the prices. There was also the fact that I was so focused on level grinding that I’d thought taking down monsters to collect magic stones was a waste of time.

Once I learned that I had maxed out my level during the entrance ceremony, I figured it didn’t hurt to have extra money, and so I began collecting magic stones and selling them. It seemed like they were selling for less and less every year. If their value continued to crash, the finances of the Dolkness household might be in deep trouble, since they were maintained only through the profits gained by selling magic stones.

“I wonder why that is. There’s no reason for the demand for magic stones to go down.”

“It probably has something to do with someone who keeps supplying high-grade magic stones,” Patrick remarked.

“So you’re saying that this is an adverse effect of you becoming level 99...?”

“No, it’s because *you*... Well, I guess I’m at fault too,” he amended. I had tried to pass the blame onto Patrick, but it seemed he actually felt responsible.

You know that it’s probably eighty percent my fault, right?

I knew that the value of magic stones had gone down after the market became flooded with massively large ones dropped by the boss of the most difficult fifty-floor dungeon. The only ones who could consistently obtain them were Patrick and myself, so I could see why there would be a destabilizing effect on the market for large magic stones. But I never would have imagined that even regular-sized magic stones would be flooding the market.

I might actually need to think of a countermeasure, or we might be in trouble.

I was starting to become concerned, which had made my voice a bit quieter.
“Will we be okay...?”

Patrick sighed. “Magic stones are cheaper, and there seems to be more people using magical instruments, so—”

“What you’re saying is that the consumption of magic stones used for magical instruments will also increase, thereby stabilizing the market price of magic stones? So I guess we can avoid magic stones being so cheap that they’re basically just pebbles.”

“Huh?”

“If they become cheap, everyone will buy them,” I explained. “If everyone’s buying them, then they’ll go up in price. Markets are moved by rebounding forces, so...as long as the demand grows with the supply, the equilibrium price won’t change.” It seemed that I would have to prepare for some level of decrease in profit, but it wasn’t as hopeless as I’d thought it would be. I looked up at Patrick, glad that we would be okay, but he was staring at me, his eyes wide with surprise. “Huh? What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Are you really Yumiella?” he asked, evidently dazzled by my grasp of economic theory.

“There is nary a point in denying it when thou dost know the truth... The genuine Yumiella dwelleth within mine own stomach!”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah, that kind of response is definitely from the real Yumiella.”

“What kind of method of confirming my identity is that? Actually, what made you voice your suspicions that I was an imposter in the first place?”

“I had a conversation before with some of the clerks in charge of finances, and we came to the conclusion that the value of magic stones would stabilize at a certain point. You were able to get to that conclusion immediately after just hearing the beginning portion of our argument, so...I just thought you’re really sharp today.”

It was a big compliment. I didn't think I'd said anything that was that impressive, but I was happy to get high praise, which was rare.

I mean, they teach this kind of basic economics in middle school social studies... Oh, right, I used to go to a school that specialized in economics.

I began speaking in a smart-sounding tone. Well, saying it was "smart-sounding" itself sounded like I wasn't smart. Either way, I spoke with that kind of tone. "Despite what you may think, I used to major in economics in college."

"College... That's a school where you can get the highest level of education. Wait... Didn't you tell me before that you'd learned a little bit about a wide variety of topics, but that you hadn't gotten far enough to gain much specialized knowledge when you were in college?"

The obstacle in my path to becoming an economist was my past self.

I mean, it's true. I was only a freshman when I died, and at the time, I didn't have the motivation to learn about economics that seriously. Now that I'm the lord of a territory, though, I'm constantly wishing that I had studied more.

I gave up on trying to be a brainy type and admitted the truth. "I did say that. But it's not like I didn't take my studies seriously. I'll have you know that around eighty percent of economics majors don't have any interest in economics."

"Aren't you exaggerating?"

"I was only a first-year, so I'd just gotten through a little bit of the introductory courses. There were people who took them seriously too. They even picked out what seminars they would attend and would ask the professors questions."

"If that's what serious students did, doesn't that mean you didn't take school seriously?"

That's called waiting for someone to slip up and finding faults, Patrick.

It seemed that we had a different understanding when it came to what kinds of students took their studies seriously. I decided I should explain what a regular college student was like.

"As long as you show up to class, take notes, and study before exams, that

makes you a serious student.”

“Isn’t that all normal...?”

“Well, instead, some students get addicted to a tile-based game where you shout out words like *ron* and *tsumo*, or some end up getting involved in a multilevel marketing operation where they’re told they can sell things nobody wants and make a lot of money, and then they stop attending classes.”

“I don’t get it,” Patrick said, tilting his head in confusion. It seemed that he couldn’t understand how people would ever want to pass on the opportunity to obtain specialized knowledge.

Despite the fact that I had properly attended classes, it wasn’t like I had been highly motivated to study.

I really should’ve studied properly instead of thinking, “I’ll never have a use for microeconomics for the rest of my life.” I’m sure knowing these things would have made my job as a lord easier.

“I would have studied harder if I’d known I would end up in another world in a situation like this,” I remarked. “It would’ve actually been useful here.”

“Is there any situation in which knowing economics *isn’t* useful if you’re living in a human society?” Patrick asked. “Regardless of what kind of job you end up working, having a diverse set of knowledge can shift your perspective...in my opinion.”

“I’m assuming you’re the type of person who suggests that someone find another job or demand better treatment when they’re venting about job stress.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to assume things about the world you were in without really understanding it.”

Though he had hit the nail on the head with his earlier point about diversified knowledge, he’d immediately retracted his statement when I jabbed back at him.

What he said isn’t wrong, though, and the truth hurts.

At this point, the conversation had managed to get quite off track. *Why were*

we even talking about this? I started to go back through my memories in order. *We began talking about economics because...we were discussing the decrease in the market price of magic stones. That's the reason that the adventurer industry isn't doing so well, which led to us ending up with a level 20 carpenter on staff. Wait, something's not right.*

The "level 20" part of all that caught my attention and left me with a new question to ask, but by then we had arrived at the estate. As soon as we stepped inside, it was immediately time for tea.

The warm tea was even more delicious than usual on a chilly day like this. Even the scones, which were topped with a white cream and a red jam, had been warmed up. Patrick didn't like things that were too sweet, so he left the scones untouched and only drank his tea.

"I think the tea that Rita prepares really tastes the best," I said, setting my teacup down.

"Yeah," Patrick responded.

"I bet you were just thinking, 'She doesn't know how to judge between the taste of different kinds of tea,'" I said, trying to read something more specific into his indifferent tone.

Even I know what good tea tastes like. Even when she put in way more poison than it would take to kill the average person, I was able to pick out the strange taste.

Patrick sat back from his cup and denied my assertion with an exasperated look. "I didn't think that."

"Really? But surely you're now thinking, 'She's picking a fight with me in an annoying way once again.'"

"*That* I did think," he admitted.

The peaceful tea time continued with similarly empty banter, and before I knew it...all the scones were gone.

"You just thought, 'She's eating too much,' didn't you?" I accused him.

"I did think that," Patrick said, as if it ought to have been obvious.

I was shocked. I knew that I was annoying, but I had no self-awareness of being a glutton. I liked sweet things, but it wasn't like my addiction was so strong that I was constantly walking around with a lollipop in one hand.

I became curious as to what he thought specifically about my eating habits, so I asked, "Am I really so greedy with food?"

"I don't think you're greedy. It's more like...you'll eat everything that's put in front of you."

It appeared that his opinion of me was that my relationship to food was similar to that of a dog. Dogs often ate however much dog food you gave them, regardless of whether or not they were full.

No, I just don't like to leave anything on my plate. I am just mindful about not wasting food.

Though Patrick probably didn't have any ill intentions with his comments, they still stung quite a bit. It hurt even more when I thought about the possibility that other people might think the same of me. I didn't want to rub any more salt into this wound, so I decided to bring the conversation back around to where it had been just as we'd gotten home.

"We can set aside the topic of my admirable frugality with food. I was thinking about the carpenter we were discussing on our way home, and how level 20 seems really low."

"Your perspective on levels compared to yours isn't what anyone would call normal," Patrick pointed out.

Thank you for responding exactly as I expected. That's not what I meant. Even when considering the fact I'm out of touch with how difficult the general public considers level grinding, it still doesn't make sense.

"Doesn't Archit Trading Company's ability to shorten construction schedules come from the fact that they have high-level tradesmen working for them? But from what I've heard, that level 20 former adventurer is the strongest person there. It seems like the other workers aren't even level 10. I know that makes them stronger compared to most people, but it doesn't seem like it's enough to make a dramatic difference."

“So that’s what you meant. That company does advertise themselves as having high-level workers, but a lot of them have no experience fighting monsters. It seems like there are other qualities that contribute to their ability to build so quickly.”

Some have never fought monsters before? That would mean they’re level 1. What do you mean “high-level workers”? Maybe I should go work for them so that they’re no longer exaggerating the truth.

I was still curious as to what could possibly be as effective as having high-leveled workers. I listened intently as Patrick explained.

“First off, they have mages. Apparently, even having one person who can use earth magic on-site completely changes the way they can operate. Other than that... Wait, weren’t you there when they showed us the model?”

“The model?”

What model? Like a 1/700th scale model of a warship, or a 1/144th scale model of a robot? People who have several shades of gray paint are 1/700th builders, and people who cover everything with primer before painting are 1/144th builders.

I still wasn’t sure what kind of model Patrick was referring to. I dug through my memories as Patrick went on.

“They were models for the new mansion. There was one constructed in a standard way, and the second was designed in a way unique to Archit. The latter had fewer pillars which meant there were fewer steps required to build it, but both designs had the same amount of structural integrity. They explained all of this to us with the models... Oh, right, you weren’t there.”

“I would’ve liked to see that,” I said, feeling a little disappointed. “Was I told about that meeting?”

“You were out at a dungeon that day.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Considering the timing, it had probably been before I’d met Yumiella 2 and unlocked my level cap, so it had probably been a nonessential dungeon

expedition.

Setting aside my obliviousness, I now understood the tricks that Archit used to build houses quickly. *I see, so there are fewer pillars.* Now that I knew that there were fewer pillars, there was just one question on my mind.

“Is that safe?”

“It’s not like there’s no support structure at all,” Patrick assured me. “Large mansions and regular houses are built in completely different ways. That’s especially true for mansions built for aristocrats, because designs for those often incorporate some of the architectural elements of a fortress. Mansions like that tend to be unnecessarily strong.”

“I guess there’s no harm in being extra sturdy.”

“The kind of strength required for a castle to withstand military attacks versus the kind of strength needed to survive natural disasters like earthquakes and storms is apparently different. Using the models, Archit showed me that their buildings had plenty of strength against disasters. They claimed that their building methods were perfect.”

I hadn’t had the chance to see the model, but that explanation sounded familiar. *I remember being asked which I wanted to be prepared against, catapults or earthquakes, and I said...*

“I remember now. I remember I asked for whichever option would be quicker and cheaper.”

“I get that; you didn’t have a choice because it needed to be completed in time for the wedding.”

He said it couldn’t have been helped, but I honestly felt an equal lack of interest toward both options, and it seemed to me that either was fine. I’d arbitrarily made a choice, but this wasn’t just my home; it was Patrick’s as well. He seemed satisfied with my answer, so it was probably fine, but I was still a bit concerned. I glanced at his face again, and I could tell that he was deeply agonizing over something. He gave me an incredibly serious look.

“Speaking of the wedding...” he began.

“Oh, this isn’t about the mansion?”

“It’s about the fitting for your dress.”

“You don’t have to worry about it. I got properly measured, and I told the dressmaker that anything was fine as long as it was wearable when I received it. I don’t want to deal with going all the way to the Royal Capital.”

“Okay, then... I guess that’s fine. Moving on...”

“What?” *That’s it for the dress? That’s such a strange way to bring up a topic.* Despite my internal confusion, I kept my mouth shut so that I wouldn’t miss the rest of what he had to say.

“Um, do you want to make some equipment?” Then he clarified, “When I say equipment, I mean like armor.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to. It won’t be strong enough.”

There was a time when I had considered buying a full set of plate armor, but plate armor wasn’t as hard as it looked, and it had no flexibility, so it would break from the inside if I were to move at full force. Metal armor was basically a restraint for me. There were some types of armor made of leather, but my skin was tougher than leather. All of that was to say that I didn’t need armor. Patrick probably wouldn’t need to use it for similar reasons, and so I wasn’t sure why he had even brought it up.

“It’s fine if it doesn’t contribute to defense. For example, we can give it a feature that...gives you advantage in battle or something like that.”

“Does that mean we could make it shoot out wires and then move from place to place using those wires?”

He shrugged. “Sure, if it’s technologically possible.”

“Could I install a pile bunker into the elbow of the armor for close combat?”

“Sure, if it’s technologically possible.”

“Can we add a purge function to it?”

“Sure, if it’s technologically possible.”

Wait, hold on, there are so many possibilities that my mind can’t keep up with

them. First, the wires are a must. Where should I put them? In the hips, or in the arms, or maybe installing one on each side would be good. Maybe we can make it so that there are backup parts stored in the posterior... Oh man, the possibilities are endless, and my mind is running wild!

What should I add and where should I put it? As I thought about it, I actually moved my body around to see my range of movement. I was having the time of my life when Patrick casually suggested something terrifying.

“Maybe you don’t want to do it?”

“No, I want to!” I insisted.

“Well, you have to get measured to make armor. You don’t like having fittings done, so...”

“I’ll do it! I’ll get measured as many times as I need to!” How could I pass on designing cool custom armor because I didn’t like fittings? That would be like trying to spread misfortune with good intentions. Patrick still seemed to have concerns about the whole thing, and he continued to check with me to make certain that I was all right with moving forward.

“You won’t argue that you don’t need to get it properly sized because you already know your measurements—”

“I won’t!”

“You won’t say that there’s no point in a fitting—”

“I won’t!”

“You won’t say that you don’t want to go to the Royal Capital—”

“I won’t! I’ll obediently go to the Royal Capital, get measured, and have a fitting!” Everything he pointed out was something I *would* usually say, so I could understand his concern. I desperately denied every single one of his worries, and finally he nodded.

“All right, let’s go, then. We’ll go to the Royal Capital by carriage, and you’ll get measured and have a fitting. After that, we’ll make some armor, within the limits of what’s technologically possible.”

“Thank you, Patrick!” I exclaimed ecstatically.

This is the best! Is it okay for me to be so happy?

Before I knew it, he'd apparently even decided that we would be going by carriage, but I couldn't care less about something so insignificant.

Chapter 2: The Hidden Boss Gets Tricked

During my past life in Japan, my family had owned a white dog. He was such a mixed breed that it was difficult to come up with an answer when people asked what kind of dog he was, but some people observed that he looked a bit like a Samoyed. We had gotten him from my mom's friend as a puppy.

In my current life, I was feared by all animals, but back then, my dog scorned me. He would listen to commands given by my parents and my younger sister, but he never obeyed anything I said. I remembered walking him as an elementary schooler, tears in my eyes as he kept tugging on his leash and dragging me forward.

Dogs were quite smart, able to distinguish one specific word from another. Words like "jerky" and "walk" could inspire a dog to wag its tail and clearly communicate its excitement.

On one particular occasion, my dog had heard my mother say "walk," and in response, he had jumped around with joy. He'd followed his owner, someone he trusted completely, into the car...only to discover that instead of the promised walk, he'd found himself at the veterinary clinic. Understanding there was no use in resisting, our beloved dog had allowed himself to be hoisted up onto the exam table. He'd looked up at my mother with plaintive eyes, as if he couldn't believe that he'd been betrayed. Watching this at the time, I had cackled.

Fast forward to now, and I was on the other side—the one to be mocked.

"Please try not to move too much."

I was covered in white, just like my dog had been on that exam table. My movements were restricted, and I was surrounded by several people while some strange thing was wrapped around my entire body.

Patrick the backstabber wasn't here, so I turned to his coconspirator, Eleanora. *Help me*, I pleaded with my eyes.

“It’s wonderful!” she exclaimed. “You look so lovely!”

It’s no use. Eleanora’s on the same side as everyone else who’s having their way with me.

I had been tricked into a wedding dress fitting. I probably looked quite foolish, running into the dress shop with my tail wagging.

It’s fine; mock me all you want.

Under the command of an older woman who seemed to be the boss, four ladies were busily working, running measuring tape all across my body.

I’d communicated my resentment toward Patrick, who had disappeared before I’d started getting changed, but the ladies had continued to work without paying any mind to my recriminations. I feared that it was highly possible that they had been brainwashed by their boss.

Even if I had been immortal, I wouldn’t be able to survive for long staying in a place like this. I’d entered the shop excitedly, and Patrick had firmly reminded me that I was there to “do a fitting and get measured.” Before I had been able to figure out what was really going on, I was forced to put on a wedding dress... By the time I’d realized something was wrong, it was too late.

I’ll run away. Patrick is my biggest obstacle when it comes to escaping. He’s not here, but maybe he’s waiting in another room. I decided to casually query Eleanora about his whereabouts.

“Where’s Patrick?” I asked innocently. “Shouldn’t we let him have a look as well?”

“You should most definitely wait for the wedding day to reveal your dress to him,” Eleanora said decisively. “That’s why I’m going through the trouble of keeping an eye on you.”

“He’s in another room though, right?”

“He isn’t here. Sir Patrick said he was going to deal with some other errands,” my watchdog explained, inadvertently revealing important information.

With Patrick elsewhere, I could escape at any time. That thought allowed me to relax a bit, but at the same time, some other concerns started to creep into

my mind.

Patrick had probably tricked me into coming to this dress fitting because he had been worried that I would try to run from it. If he'd told me the truth before we'd traveled to the Royal Capital, I would've completely refused to leave the estate. I understood why he'd brought me here the way he had.

What I couldn't understand was the need for a fitting. Now that I was actually here, I was able to confirm that my dress fit perfectly, and there were no issues whatsoever with any of the details. This could've been over in five minutes, but the strange, ritualistic adjustments were somehow still happening.

I turned to the older woman, the one who was commanding the other ladies with a stern look, and said, "The dress fits perfectly. I think it's fine to say it's complete, so why don't we call it a day?"

"Absolutely not," she sniffed.

"Well, um..."

"That spot, I think we can get it a bit tighter... Yes, about that much. Pin it like that. With that part a little more formfitting, maybe we should add another tier of frills... Hm, but the balance of the entire dress..." The woman completely ignored my request and only paid mind to the dress itself. I'd thought that I'd be able to deal with the other ladies as long as I took down the boss first, but I shouldn't have expected to win a boss battle so easily.

Knowing I was at a disadvantage, I decided to target Eleanora instead. She seemed genuinely ecstatic about the whole affair. "Could you talk to her for me, Lady Eleanora?" I pleaded. "Isn't this enough?"

"You have nothing to worry about," she assured me. "I'm absolutely positive that this dress can become even lovelier!"

That's not what I meant. I'm not worried that all the fussing will make it worse instead of better... As long as it's not so small that it doesn't fit, or so big that it's completely baggy, then it passes muster.

There were no issues with the size—after all, I'd gotten measured prior to ordering the dress. It already fit perfectly before they'd measured me themselves, so wasn't that enough? What was the point in making any further

adjustments? At this rate, it was going to be a disaster if I gained even the slightest bit of weight before the wedding.

“It’s fine the way it is,” I insisted a little desperately. “Having a little bit of extra room like this is perfect. I’m sure my body will change, even if only slightly, in the few months between now and the wedding.”

“I’m confident that you’ll be able to maintain your current figure,” Eleanora said encouragingly. “You never gain any weight, even when you eat a lot.”

I was momentarily distracted from my dress-related despair. “Do I really eat that much? I think I eat a normal amount.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that you’re a glutton... You just eat everything that’s available.”

Patrick said something similar to me just the other day.

I set aside these disgraceful statements about the amount of food I ate and focused instead on the fact that I could probably convince her to end this fitting by using my weight as an excuse. I just needed one more push. Perhaps if I emphasized how much I was going to overeat between now and the wedding, I could win her over.

What would be the equivalent of eating junk food for three meals a day, every day? Maybe pasta for every meal...? No, that doesn’t sound as intense. Maybe it would be better to go with something sweet.

I was racking my brain for ideas, and suddenly the dungeon boss—or rather, the owner—firmly said, “We’ll be on-site several days before the wedding, and we’ll be making adjustments until the very last second. There won’t be any issues with the quality of the fit. Your body won’t change that much in just a few months.”

“Then I’ll lose weight...” I offered desperately. “I’ll keep fasting and be one step away from looking like a mummy.”

“We’ll just pad out the dress if that happens,” the head seamstress explained.

Oh, right. I guess they could solve that by just stuffing the dress with as much cotton as they needed.

It appeared that losing weight wasn't going to solve my problem either. I was interested in the Buddhist practice of self-mummification, but it wasn't something I needed to explore right before my wedding.

My shoulders drooped with disappointment, and as my chin fell, my own body came into my view, adorned with white lace and frills. I was reminded of those flashy birds that lived in tropical areas. Apparently male birds sported decorative feathers in order to attract females.

Who even cares about attracting a mate? The human species has prospered because of one reason: language. We have complex vocal organs, and the parts of our brains that oversee communication are highly advanced. So why do we humans, being that we are such an advanced species, have to adorn ourselves with decorations to communicate our love? Why not use the time spent on clothes and makeup to dress up your vocabulary?

Wait, maybe it can't be helped that humans also decorate ourselves. Words lack power. I tried to suggest we end this fitting with my words, but my idea was rejected. The same goes for the dressmakers—they tried to use their words to explain how important making these adjustments was, but it didn't change my mind.

No matter how many words one strung together, it was difficult to change someone's mind. No matter how wonderfully decorated one's statements were, or how honest and straightforward someone's words were, there were many situations in which words were overwhelmingly powerless.

"Is it a curse or a blessing that humans were given the ability to use language?" I wondered aloud.

"Please stay still," admonished the level boss.

I'd been reprimanded for trying to ponder the wonderful yet lamentable features of being human. *I guess philosophers are unneeded in these times*, I thought with an internal sigh.

I was starting to dislike this ambiguous communication tool called "words," so I began to plan out my escape route instead. It would be easy to get outside, but it was going to be difficult to deal with this white garment of restraint. I couldn't imagine how much it would cost me if I were to destroy it.

Should I get dressed and escape, or escape and then get changed? Right, I have to remember to secure a change of clothes as well.

Even though I was busy planning my escape, Eleanora used those powerless verbal tools once again.

“By the way, you’re not allowed to run away.”

“I’m not thinking of running...” I said innocently.

“Oh really? You’d suddenly become quiet, so I thought that you were coming up with an escape plan.”

She’d completely read my mind. I could understand Patrick seeing through me like this, but was my thought process really so simple that even Eleanora could figure out what was on my mind?

It seemed that my sudden silence had made my thoughts too obvious once again, and Eleanora frowned as if to say, “I knew it.”

What she actually said was “Why can’t you just stay still?”

“If I’m too obedient, I’ll be dragged into other situations like this in the future. It’ll be a loss on the books for me, a precedent stating that I obediently attend dress fittings. Even if I couldn’t avoid it in this first case, I need to visibly resist as much as possible so I can avoid this happening a second and third time.”

Even if my actions wouldn’t change the results, going through the process was important. I needed to act out to the point that Eleanora and Patrick would think, “That was horrible and I never want to take Yumiella to a fitting ever again.” Otherwise, there would definitely be a next time.

I’d really thought this through, but even after displaying my knowledge on how to navigate this cruel world, Eleanora just seemed deeply exasperated.

“Ugh... If you’d just endure the things you don’t like, they’d be over in a second.”

Huh? She doesn’t just seem tired of me, but she does seem kind of angry. Did I do anything to upset Eleanora?

Even though I was thinking of escaping, I hadn’t actually taken any action to do so. It would be unusual for her to be upset by my normal Yumiella antics,

especially if I had not, in fact, done anything yet...

I wasn't sure what to say to her, and some time passed without a sound. What finally broke the silence was Eleanora's voice.

"Ahhh!" she screamed.

"Huh?" I asked, startled. "What's wrong?"

Her lip quivered. "I said something so horrible without thinking. This is your bridal outfit, yet I described it as something you should just endure, something you don't like..."

I had to think about which part of her statement she considered so horrible. The fitting was naturally something I disliked, and there was nothing wrong with calling it what it was: horrible. I wasn't sure what exactly she was regretting, but Eleanora glumly looked down at her feet.

"I apologize. If I, too, continue to refer to the gown as something troublesome, you'll truly feel that it's a burden."

"It actually *is* a burden."

"You only get to wear a bridal gown once in your life," she said wistfully.

I would've been fine if that were the case, but if you count the fitting and wearing it on the wedding day, I'll actually be wearing it twice. I almost reflexively voiced that thought, but I held it back. That would just be me tripping her up with semantics. Eleanora looked up and steadily met my gaze as she continued. "That's why I wanted you to feel happy while wearing your dress... I'm truly sorry. I'm just imposing my feelings on you, aren't I?"

"I am happy though," I pointed out.

"Even though you tried to run away?"

Her statements had made me curious. "Generally speaking. Actually...from your point of view, is the act of putting on a wedding gown itself what brings happiness? If you were to put on a wedding dress right now, would that make you happy, Lady Eleanora?"

"If I were to put on a wedding dress? Well, I don't really have any plans of getting married. I do think wedding dresses are beautiful and lovely, but I don't

think I would be particularly happy wearing one right now...”

I’d expected as much. Eleanora was probably fretting at seeing me obviously annoyed by doing something that was supposed to be a joyful occasion. That was why she seemed a bit upset.

She was probably mixing up the idea of happiness itself with the things associated with happy moments. She probably understood in her heart that just wearing a wedding dress in and of itself wasn’t anything special.

“It’s not like putting on a bridal gown brings you happiness,” I explained. “It’s not that weddings are fun, or that the act of getting married is something that in and of itself makes someone happy. Happiness comes from the fact that you get to spend the rest of your life with someone you love.”

“You’re right,” Eleanora agreed with a nod. “The star is you, not the dress.”

“People take the necessary steps to be legally married in order to vow that they’ll spend their lives together, announce it to others, and then have a wedding to celebrate in an extravagant manner. For that ceremony, people put on beautiful dresses that match the opulence of the celebration. Many people might place a lot of focus on the dress, since it’s such a shiny, beautiful thing, but the only important element in the entire process is loving the person you’re marrying.”

Eleanora’s eyes were watering. *Was what I said really so moving?* As that thought crossed my mind, I noticed that all the ladies and their hands carrying measuring tapes and pins had also stopped moving. Because the room was so silent and still, it echoed when the boss clapped.

“How wonderful,” she said warmly. “All we can do is amplify that happiness. We can’t make unhappy people happy. I sometimes forget that, so it’s important to be reminded of this every so often.”

“I see,” I responded with a satisfied nod. “So you understand. Well then, let’s end the adjustments here. Please prepare my clothes for me to change into.”

The goal of my little speech had been to dispel any dissatisfaction Eleanora had been feeling, but I had been able to really stick the landing with a great conclusion. In the end, I had been able to use my words instead of just

physically running away.

I'll quickly get changed and flee from here having truly earned it.

I waited for the boss to signal that we were done, but she instead said the complete opposite.

"That has nothing to do with what you were saying," the head dressmaker said with a firm shake of her head. "Come on, ladies, don't just stand there! Let's keep working."

The seemingly useless adjustments continued. I felt like a patch of earth that was watching as people were ordered to dig a hole, and then refill that very same hole. I had no idea why they kept doing all of this, which made it unclear for how long this was going to continue.

I let out a sigh, and Eleanora followed with an even louder exhalation.

"Your words really made me think about the fact that you should pursue what makes *you* happy, Yumiella, but I must say this: you need to seem a bit happier right now."

"Well, I can't really help it..." I grumbled. "An annoyance is an annoyance."

"I thought even you would be excited once you actually saw your gown," Eleanora said with another sigh.

I couldn't imagine the existence of any person who would be excited to see a bright white dress after believing they'd be building some sweet mecha armor. It was just as disappointing as being told you were getting a gas welding machine and being given a pack of travel tissues instead.

Just what was Eleanora hoping for anyway? Did she think I was going to stare at my wedding dress with dreamy eyes and twirl around in front of a mirror or something? No way. That would never be me.

I stood there for a while, imagining myself doing things I would never do and feeling sickened by those thoughts. After some time had passed, whatever they'd been doing to me was finished at last.

"We're done now," announced the boss lady.

“I’m getting out of this,” I insisted. “I want to change. Please hurry.”

“All right, all right...” The owner sighed. “Some customers don’t even want to move away from the mirror...”

These last moments were the worst part of it all. I’d been enduring this torture for so much time, and my freedom was finally within my reach. The final seconds ticking by made me the most frantic to be free.

I rushed the ladies from behind as they slowly led me away from the fitting room. I wanted to get back into the casual dress I usually wore, the simplicity of which was only borderline acceptable for an aristocrat to wear. I didn’t get comments about it, but it was enough to make a classy noblewoman scowl at me.

As I walked through the store, a large reflection caught my attention. It was the mirror they’d suggested I stand in front of before going to change. I had been rushing to get out of the gown, and I wanted to rip it off my body right at this very moment, but for some reason I paused before the mirror.

It was just a regular mirror. Things were valued here much differently than they had been in Japan, which meant that in this world, this was actually quite an expensive mirror, but other than the price tag it was no different from any mirror that I’d encountered over the course of my past life. It reflected light, and it showed an image of whatever was put in front of it. It wasn’t a special mirror that might summon a fairy, nor was it cursed to show the reflection of a bloody warrior. It was just a mirror that reflected my image—that was all there was to it.

I took in my reflection. My shoulders and arms were exposed under the translucent lace. The waist was so tight that it would probably suffocate anyone else who tried to wear it. Under the tight bodice, the skirt spread out into fullness and the lace overlaying it was worked into a pattern with dainty flowers.



The silhouette of the entire dress had surely been planned with extreme precision, and the embellishments had probably been made with extreme skill and care, but the overarching effect wasn't something that took my breath away. I did think it was an impressive example of dressmaking, but I wasn't particularly moved by it. I knew myself, and there was no way I would look at a wedding dress and think to myself, *Oh, how lovely!*

Still, maybe I'll look at it just a bit longer, I allowed. My frantic anxiety seemed to have dissipated completely.

I tried different poses, bringing my hand down to my side and up to my chest to see what felt right. As I did that, I mumbled something that even I myself didn't quite understand.

"Huh, I see," I murmured. "So that's how it is."

I tried walking around in front of the mirror. I moved slowly and carefully, like I was dragging my feet, which made the skirt sway.

I turned around and looked back at the mirror. Bright white peeked out from between the locks of black hair cascading over my back.

"I understand," I murmured. "I see."

I started twirling around in front of the mirror, trying to get a glimpse of the dress from different angles.

So this is what I'm going to wear at the wedding. I'm going to wear this and walk out in front of everybody. I'm going to wear this and stand beside Patrick. I'm going to look up at his face, at around this angle...

As my gaze strayed from the mirror, I discovered Eleanora's grinning face at my shoulder.

"What is it...?"

"Oh no, please don't mind me. You can stare as much as you'd like to."

I didn't particularly care for the action of staring at glass covered in reflective material, so her words weren't really helpful. I'd only stopped for a short moment to take a quick glance at the mirror. That was all.

I thought Eleanora's smile was strange, so I looked around at everyone else as well, only to see that the boss and the ladies all had the same expression. They all looked like they were witnessing a deeply heartwarming event of some kind.

What is this? They're acting like I'm entranced by my reflection or something. That's not what's happening.

"I just took a quick glance at the mirror, that's all," I insisted. "I want to get out of this thing right away."

"You've been staring for quite a while," Eleanora pointed out.

"Time is relative. You just unconsciously extended the amount of time I was —"

"Yes, yes! You're absolutely right! Now, just forget about us and continue as you were," Eleanora said, urging me to keep looking. Her words weren't having the intended effect; I still wanted to change out of the dress as quickly as possible.

I'm going to move. I'm going to look away from the mirror and move.

"You have the wrong idea," I assured her and the dressmakers. "I'm going to quickly get back into—"

"Oh, we should put a veil on her as well," Eleanora suggested.

"I'll wear it," I said at once, the words leaving my mouth before I knew it. It was only then that I realized what was going on—I seemed like someone who was having the time of their life at a dress fitting. Observing me, Eleanora was trying to seem composed, but she couldn't help but smile. "No, it's not what you think..." I began, trying to explain myself. "A veil is that thing you put on your head, right? I need to check it out to learn how much such a thing might obstruct my vision. It would be bad if I didn't try it today and instead had to come to another fitting later on."

"Sure, of course, I understand," she agreed with a knowing nod.

Before I could come up with a retort to Eleanora (who definitely did not understand), the veil quickly appeared. I tilted my head down, and one of the dressmakers placed the veil over my hair. I could see past the thin fabric, but it

was like the resolution had decreased in clarity by quite a bit. Because of the lower quality of the image, my reflection looked like a completely different person.

I lifted my veil to expose my face, but it felt strange to do so. Perhaps it wasn't good practice if someone else didn't lift the veil for me.

"Lady Eleanora, please lift this up for me."

"Sir Patrick is the only one allowed to do that," she demurred.

"It's not like that. I just want to check to see if it'll snag anywhere."

"Well, if that's the case..."

I wasn't going to think of Patrick just because a piece of fabric was being lifted off of my face. Eleanora didn't seem too enthusiastic about the idea, but she nevertheless approached me. Though my vision was obstructed by gauzy white, I could tell that Eleanora, who was slightly shorter than me, was reaching up to take hold of the veil.

"Hold on; it would be better if you had a step stool."

"I can reach you," Eleanora reassured me.

"No," I insisted. "You're too short, Lady Eleanora."

One of the employees quickly brought forward a step stool from the corner of the room. Eleanora carefully climbed onto the stool, mindful of the hem of her dress...and it still wasn't right.

I sighed. "Now you're a little too tall."

"Um, you're thinking of Sir Patrick's height, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. I just felt that you were a bit too tall."

Eleanora bent down to make herself a little shorter.

This seems perfect. It's not like this is the same as a certain someone's height or anything, it's just that this is a good height.

"I'm going to lift it now," Eleanora said.

"Go ahead."

I closed my eyes. The feeling of her grabbing the edge of the veil, the sound of fabric rustling around, the air brushing against my cheek—even with my eyes closed, I could feel the veil being lifted.

I slowly opened my eyes, and discovered Eleanora's face inches from my own... *Oh, it's just Eleanora.*

"Are you really that disappointed?" she asked.

"Was it obvious?"

"Your expression instantly became cold."

My expression was always cold, though, because I was the intelligent and composed type. It was nothing surprising to point out.

I was perfectly satisfied with my own explanation until Eleanora continued, still holding up the veil with both her hands.

"You looked like a girl in love until you opened your eyes..."

"A girl in love?" I sputtered. "Who are you talking about?"

"You, Yumiella."

"I feel like you've been trying to make me out to be someone who enjoys wearing a wedding dress."

"Making you out to be...? There's no need to do so; you've been quite obviously happy about it."

This girl is trying to rewrite reality!

It wasn't ethical to change history, but it was quite easy to do so. Digital data lasted several decades, while paper could usually persist for several centuries, but each would eventually degrade to the point at which it would become impossible to read the information. The exception to this was stone tablets, which had a lifespan of thirty thousand years.

In other words, if I left an accurate record of what had happened today but Eleanora carved a false account into a stone tablet, thirty thousand years into the future, humans would believe that Yumiella actively enjoyed wearing a wedding dress.

Stone tablets are so strong. Paper and e-books are all trash. We should prepare for the future by transitioning every piece of information to stone tablets.

I needed to do my best to convince my best friend of the truth before she became a historical revisionist.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I earnestly explained. “Do you really think I would look at a wedding dress and think that it’s lovely, or that it’s beautiful? I would never close my eyes and imagine Patrick before me as my veil was being lifted, and I wouldn’t look forward to how he would react to seeing me dressed like this. I’m not thinking that it’s a waste that I’ll only get to wear this at my wedding.”

Eleanora nodded thoughtfully. “I hadn’t suggested all of that, but... I see.”

“I won’t allow you to carve this into a stone tablet.”

“A stone tablet? As in, words carved into stone? What?” Eleanora tilted her head in confusion, but it was possible that she was pretending to misunderstand me. She might actually just be bluffing.

I wanted to tell her that I wouldn’t allow her to use a clay tablet either, but before I could, my vision was obscured once again with diaphanous white fabric. The veil had left Eleanora’s hands, and it had covered my face.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s translucent, so I can still see more than I expected.”

“How much can you see?” Eleanora asked curiously. “I can’t even tell what kind of face you’re making.”

“I can’t see the details of someone’s expression, but it’s brighter on the other side of the veil, so I can see more than you probably can.” I nodded at her. “All right then, time to get off the step stool.”

I held my hand out for Eleanora. Even though my vision was still shrouded in white, I made certain that she had both feet on the ground before I let go of her.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I’m going to get changed now. It’s difficult to move around in this outfit, and my vision is obstructed. My ability to fight has significantly decreased.”

Eleanora sighed. “You still don’t plan on admitting the truth, do you?”

I gave up on trying to correct her erroneous assumptions, and instead decided to ask something else while I could—while I still had the veil covering my face.

I took a few steps back so that Eleanora could see me from head to toe.

“Um...in your opinion, how do I look, Lady Eleanora?”

“You look lovely. I think Sir Patrick will be completely taken by you.”

“Unrelated to what you think Patrick will think, what do *you* think? I’m not too knowledgeable on gowns and stuff like that, so I’d like to know how it looks to someone with your tastes.”

“I see.” I could see the gears turning in Eleanora’s mind while she stared at me, looking me up and down. She was quiet for so long that I moved my veil out of the way to see what was going on. With my unobstructed view, I could see her eyes clearly. Her glimmering ruby eyes were almost like a mirror, reflecting my image, and I let the veil fall back down, as if to hide behind it. “I think that it shows off your slender upper body really well,” she said at last. “The skirt spreads out elegantly, like a lily, and the lace on the shoulders is very grown-up! Most of all, the face you made earlier was so lovely, and it made me realize that wedding dresses enhance the bride. Sir Patrick will surely be stunned by your beauty.”

I see...

It was good to get her opinion, but I didn’t think much of it, and so I responded in an appropriately nonchalant manner.

“Huh, is that so?”

I wasn’t sure what kind of expression my face was making as I spoke. With my entire head swathed in the white fabric, no one was able to see it.

Covered by a veil of mystery, this moment was lost to history.



The awful dress fitting that I had so deeply loathed was finally over, and we were heading to our town house by foot. It was a short distance from the dress shop to the second, somewhat smaller Dolkness estate located in the aristocratic quarter of the Royal Capital. Eleanora curiously scanned our surroundings as she walked at a slow pace alongside me.

“Aren’t you more familiar with this area than I am?” I asked.

“That may be so, but I’ve never before traversed the district on foot, so it all feels new to me. Although the sights themselves are familiar, I feel like there are a myriad of new things to discover.”

Several months had passed since Eleanora had started living with me in Dolkness County. Eleanora’s ability to adapt was impressive. In her new environment, she had even started wearing shoes with lower heels, and her iconic and incredibly flashy dresses became just regular flashy dresses. Eleanora probably thought of her new dresses as “simple” garments that “prioritized mobility.”

The Royal Capital was a busy place, and I’d considered whether traveling by carriage might have been a better choice, but seeing Eleanora enjoying the stroll back home reaffirmed that a carriage had been unnecessary.

“It also feels strange to be visiting the Royal Capital after being absent for a while,” Eleanora remarked. “Until I moved to the country, I’d lived here my entire life.”

“I guess this wasn’t really meant to be a visit back home, but would you like to extend our stay here?” I asked. It would be dangerous to leave her in the Royal Capital alone. Not only could she get herself into trouble if I took my eyes off her, but Eleanora was in quite the tricky situation when it came to her status.

Duke Hillrose had perished in Dolkness County after being surrounded by monsters that he himself had called, and his only living kin, his daughter, had been missing ever since... So ran the official account of events. Eleanora, the freeloader who was currently residing at the Dolkness estate, was a completely different person from Eleanora Hillrose. If they looked similar, that was just a coincidence. This Eleanora was completely unrelated to the daughter of the treasonous duke, but no one believed the version of the facts that the Countess

Dolkness knew to be true.

The fact that the former duke of Hillrose was actually alive was a secret only known by high-ranking officials of the kingdom, Eleanora, Patrick, and myself, but everyone knew that the disgraced Eleanora was living in Dolkness County these days.

I didn't care if people wanted to celebrate her or direct their resentment of the Hillroses at her; I just wanted her to be somewhere where Patrick and I could keep an eye on her, at least for the next few years until the heat from the duke's coup died down.

Eleanora probably wanted to stay in the Royal Capital, but for now all I could do was extend our visit. It would likely not be a problem to stay an extra week or two.

As I thought about all the work I'd left behind in Dolkness County, Eleanora gave me a surprising response.

"No, that's all right. We'll return just as planned."

"It's no problem to stay a little longer," I assured her. "You want to go shopping, don't you?"

"I think I can do my shopping within the bounds of our current itinerary..." Eleanora was obviously swayed by my question.

I knew it, you want to do a bunch of things in the Royal Capital, don't you?

Eleanora didn't have any money to her name, but I was prepared to give her as much of an allowance as she wanted.

I'm basically Eleanora's sugar daddy. I'll make her call me "daddy" and boast about it to the former Duke Hillrose, her actual daddy.

Eleanora seemed to be deep in thought for a short moment before hesitantly opening her mouth to speak again. "Um, when I go shopping, um...I have a favor to ask of you."

"Of course! You can ask me anything."

"Would you like to go around the shops with me, Yumiella?"

My answer was instantaneous. “No, I feel like it would take a long time.”

Eleanora took a long time to shop. I’d gone out with her a few times when we were students, so I knew her habits very well. Not only would interminable actual minutes tick by, my internal sense of time would experience every one of those minutes as an entire year. Having been trapped in a prison of both absolute and relative time the last time we’d gone shopping was a traumatic memory for me, one which made me reflexively turn her down.

I’d gone back on my word in a blink of an eye, and in response, Eleanora pouted and looked the other way.

“I’m well aware that you don’t enjoy shopping,” she said with a sigh.

“It’s not that I don’t like it, it’s just...not in my nature? Or more like...I have no interest in it?” I was just trying to explain that I wasn’t antishopping as a hard rule, but it seemed instead that I’d dug myself into a deeper hole.

Is Eleanora upset that I’m rejecting something she likes? I thought. I cautiously eyeballed her, trying to get a sense of her emotional state, but she continued to silently look away from me. *Is she actually really mad?* Eventually, Eleanora just stopped walking altogether.

“Um, Lady Eleanora?”

Eleanora didn’t respond and just stared resolutely ahead. I followed her gaze and saw she was looking at some aristocrat’s estate. I wasn’t sure who lived there, but it looked larger than the Dolkness estate, so they were probably at least a count or higher in the aristocratic pecking order.

Eleanora tilted her head in confusion as she stared at the mansion that seemed perfectly normal to my eyes.

“Is that the Archiam estate?” Eleanora wondered aloud. “It looks different than it usually does when my vantage point is from a carriage, so I can’t really tell.”

Our discussion about shopping was over before I knew it. I’d managed to avoid one inconvenient topic, but the Count of Archiam was actually an even worse subject.

The Archiam family's territory was in the eastern part of the kingdom, and their land was famous for its lumber production. Yes, it was the very same Archiam County I had visited several days ago to pick up the logs. The memory was still fresh in my mind, so I was able to recognize the name right away, despite generally being out of touch when it came to members of the nobility.

If I recalled correctly, Count Archiam and his family lived in the Royal Capital. Unlike my parents, they were proper centralists, and the count probably had some kind of proper position related to the central operations of the kingdom. I wasn't sure about any of the details of whatever position he might hold, though.

The only reason I knew anything at all about the Archiam family (despite my total lack of interest in the murky political affairs of the Royal Capital) was because I knew their daughter. Well, I knew of her anyway. I'd never had a real conversation with her, but I'd seen her around a lot. We had been in the same grade at the Academy, more than that...

In anticipation of what Eleanora might say next, I decided to act quickly.

"I'm not very familiar with the family, so I'm not sure if that's their house or not," I said nonchalantly. "Let's look it up when we get back to my place."

"We can just knock on the door and ask," Eleanora suggested. "I haven't seen Dorothea in a while."

I let out a deep internal sigh in response to hearing Eleanora say exactly what I had expected her to say.

Dorothea Archiam, huh? After hearing her name, her face popped into my mind.

I knew Dorothea because she had always been at Eleanora's side while we were all attending the Academy. The Archiam family were radical aristocrats—in other words, they had been in Duke Hillrose's faction.

After the commotion caused by the duke's coup several months prior, most of the families in his faction had found their titles revoked. Not knowing about Duke Hillrose's plan to cleanse the Royal Capital of rebels, they had held a rally to take down the royal family, during which they had all been rounded up.

Of course, not every radical aristocrat had met this fate. At least half of the radical aristocrats had evaded punishment because they had been careful, by lucky coincidence, or because they had been visiting their provincial territories and so hadn't attended the rally.

Though the fact that half of the faction remained seemed like it might be a problem for those loyal to the royal family, halving the number of radicals didn't mean that the faction still held exactly half the power that it had commanded before the unsuccessful coup. With their unwavering leader Duke Hillrose and the other core members of the faction gone, the coterie had lost most of its influence.

I wasn't sure what the actual situation was like these days, since I'd been away from the Royal Capital for so long, but the remaining radicals probably didn't feel as if they could do anything that might call attention to themselves. Even if they were to claim that they'd known nothing about the duke's plans to rebel, no one would believe them. Just gathering together in any number would likely cast a great deal of suspicion upon them, so they probably weren't holding any gatherings these days to discuss any new plans to further their agenda.

Because of all of this, the Archiams would definitely turn away the daughter of their former leader. I wanted to avoid the possibility of Dorothea's refusal to see Eleanora causing her pain.

"It would be rude to suddenly drop by," I insisted, "so let's visit another time after we've contacted them first."

"I've sent several letters while living in Dolkness, but I haven't received any response..." Eleanora explained. "I'm worried about her."

There's nothing to worry about. She's probably just ignoring you.

Despite my concerns, Eleanora decided to charge ahead into the Archiam estate. She hustled up to the mansion gates.

She probably won't give up until she's flat-out turned away, I thought morosely as I followed her.

In front of the gate stood a single guard. I doubted that he'd let in any

unexpected guests, unless they were of incredibly high standing.

“Excuse me,” Eleanora called out to the guard. He seemed to recognize the daughter of Duke Hillrose at once, and his face tensed up as if someone dangerous had appeared. “I’m Eleanora Hill—I mean, Eleanora. Is Dorothea here?”

“Lady Dorothea is quite busy,” he answered stiffly. “We cannot receive any unexpected guests at the moment. I hope you understand.” It was an ordinary, professional response.

I was relieved that the guard wasn’t intimidated by Eleanora and had provided such a polite and innocuous response. *I should be able to take her home now*, I thought as I arrived late to the scene.

“Looks like we can’t see her today. Let’s try again some other time,” I suggested.

It was only then that the guard noticed my presence. His face tensed up even more than it had when he’d laid eyes on Eleanora, and beads of sweat appeared on his forehead despite the chilly weather.

Ah, he’s probably worried about what the protocol is if Yumiella Dolkness insists on being let in. He’s fully aware that it would be impossible to stop me if I decided to force my way in, but of course I won’t do anything like that.

I repeated my statement to Eleanora so that the guard would understand that I had no intention of imposing upon the Archiam family.

“We can’t force him to let us in,” I reiterated. “It appears that Dorothea is in fine health, so let’s go home.” Would that be enough for Eleanora to obediently back down?

Even if she can’t see Dorothea, maybe knowing she’s all right will be enough to satisfy her. I could tell that Eleanora was quite seriously concerned about the fact that her friend hadn’t replied back to any of her letters.

I continued before Eleanora could respond. “She’ll hear that you came by, so maybe Dorothea might try to come see you herself while we’re still in town. Even if you can’t see her, you can probably exchange letters...”

If Dorothea can't even send out a letter, Eleanora might try to come see her again. The guard seemed to understand the thought I didn't verbalize and nodded over and over. An innocuous letter stating that they couldn't meet would likely arrive at the Dolkness Estate in a few days.

I held my breath as I waited for Eleanora to respond.

"You're right..." Eleanora turned to the guard. "I apologize for our sudden intrusion. Please give Dorothea my regards." After her graceful response, Eleanora took a bow and stepped away from the gate. She truly seemed in that moment like the daughter of a duke.

After we left, Eleanora continued to walk along the stone paths of the aristocratic quarter with her own two feet. The familiar sights for some reason felt melancholic.

"If I strongly encourage them, we might be able to see her," I offered as I walked alongside Eleanora.

"My time in Dolkness County has been so much fun," Eleanora said with a sigh. "I'd forgotten that the Hillrose family name is no more."

Prior to now, Eleanora hadn't seemed to feel the slightest bit of disappointment at the fact that her nobility had been revoked. She even seemed to enjoy the fact that she was living a more modest life compared to the past. Even if she couldn't attend balls, she was discovering new ways to have fun.

However, the loss of her status had also taken away her friends. Even though I'd decided I would never bring this up, the thought left my mouth before I could stop it.

"There are plenty of ways to become an aristocrat again."

That was a true statement. The easiest method would be to adopt her into the Dolkness family, but that wasn't the only path. It was difficult to establish noble status for a new family, but it wasn't impossible if one was determined to do so. Regardless of which method she wanted to use, the steps toward either were a hassle, so I'd long ago decided that I wouldn't bring it up unless it

seemed like Eleanora really couldn't endure her situation anymore.

To my surprise, Eleanora didn't jump on my idea at once. Instead, she said, "I don't know what's different about my past noble self and my current self..."

Nothing was different. Eleanora was the same person, but it didn't feel right to deliver such platitudes when she had been so easily cut off by her friends. Still, I didn't know how to respond to her. I often made jokes or pretended to know what was best in these situations, but I felt like what she needed right now was my honest thoughts.

So I told Eleanora the truth of my feelings toward her past and current selves.

"I like you now, but I wasn't very fond of you in the past. I wanted to spend my time at the Academy without ever talking to you once. It wasn't that I disliked you, but more that I was...not good at dealing with someone like you? Yes, that's it."

"Huh? What?!" Eleanora stopped in her tracks and stared at me, her face full of confusion. "Do you like me more now because I've changed, even though I haven't noticed it?"

"You haven't changed at all," I assured her. "You've changed from my first impression of you, but what I thought of you around the end of our first year is the same as what I think of you now."

I didn't think that Eleanora's personality had changed much at all since she'd warned me to back off from Prince Edwin because of some incredible misunderstandings. But I hadn't wanted to get close to her at the time.

As we talked, I was able to gather my thoughts so that I could explain what I'd disliked about her.

"It's because you were the daughter of Duke Hillrose. I didn't want to get tangled up in any political annoyances, so I was avoiding you. But you were relentless, so I gradually gave in, and that brings us to today."

"Because I was the duke's daughter?" Eleanora considered this. "So you don't dislike me anymore because I no longer hold that status?"

"Uh, well, I feel like you might be more of a risk now when it comes to

possibly getting mixed up in political issues. But regardless of our current statuses, I think we still would've ended up having the relationship we have today." I felt like that wasn't enough of an explanation, so I decided to continue. "I already love who you are, so whether you're the duke's daughter or a commoner, and regardless of how much trouble you might find yourself in, I want to be your friend, Lady Eleanora."

No matter how good a person she was, I hadn't wanted to get friendly with a Hillrose. That was how I'd felt in the past... Actually, I still felt that way. Eleanora was an exception to my rule; I still preferred not to get involved with anyone who might drag me into their aristocratic problems.

In other words, I hadn't found Eleanora's company pleasant in the past simply because I'd wanted to protect myself, and now I'd exposed those feelings to her. We were now friends, and Eleanora was a very kind girl, so she would probably forgive me.

Maybe she'll be a little upset though, I thought, but when I looked over at her, I found that she was smiling as if she were relieved.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said, clearly relieved. "I wouldn't know what to do if you hated me..."

"Well, that's just how influential the status of being the duke's daughter was. That title was what people noticed first, not your personality."

Yay! She forgave me.

We'd ended up standing around talking for a while, and the conversation had come around to a good stopping point, so it was time to go home. I started walking again, and Eleanora trotted beside me.

Oh right, there's a path coming up that we can't use because of some personal circumstances. I stopped in my tracks again, and I turned around to let Eleanora know that we would be taking a detour.

When I faced her, I found Eleanora sadly hanging her head. "After talking with you, I'm now sure of it. Dorothea doesn't want to see me because I'm no longer the duke's daughter."

"Well, we don't know that for sure without asking her..."

“Oh, right, the title only affects first impressions.” Eleanora thought for a second. “Then that means that Dorothea became my friend *because* I was the duke’s daughter...?”

I had no response to that. All aristocrats based their relationships on the familial backgrounds of others. This was a notion that I’d accepted as common sense, but it felt like an incredibly cruel truth.

What do I do here? The only problems I can solve are ones that can be brute forced.

“What would you like to do?” I asked her helplessly. “Should we charge in on the Archiam estate? Should we steadily work toward getting you back into the nobility?”

“I’ll pass on both. I don’t want to cause Dorothea any trouble, and I don’t particularly want to become an aristocrat again.”

“It might be impossible to resurrect the Hillrose family, but if we try, I bet we can do something close.”

“There’s no need for you to exert yourself, Yumiella,” she refused firmly. “I love my life in Dolkness County.”

Eleanora did indeed seem to be having fun living in Dolkness County. But that was possibly because Eleanora had a strong heart, and so she was able to find the fun in everything. She always said she was having fun and enjoying things, but I’d never once heard her say that she liked her current life more than her past life. I wouldn’t be surprised if she secretly felt that while she enjoyed her life in Dolkness County, she’d loved her life in the Royal Capital even more. I wasn’t sure if Eleanora’s words were her true feelings, or if she was just being considerate—it felt like perhaps she herself didn’t know either.

Not only that, but the Royal Capital wasn’t the only thing about her past life that she’d loved. I had avoided the topic of her beloved until now, but I decided this was my opportunity to bring him up.

“If you’re in the Royal Capital, you’ll be able to see His Highness.”

Eleanora sometimes spoke of her memories with the prince even after she’d moved to Dolkness County, but the frequency had gradually declined. Eleanora

was the kind of person who repeated the same stories over and over, to the point that you could memorize them even while only paying partial attention to them, so the fact that she didn't talk about Edwin anymore definitely wasn't because she had no new stories to share.

"Now that I've lost my aristocratic standing, I cannot marry Sir Edwin."

"Huh...?" I sputtered. Eleanora had made quite the significant statement, but I was so surprised by its finality that I couldn't probe any further.

As I stood there stunned, Eleanora said, "Let's go," and she started walking off. "There's no way I could stay in the Royal Capital," she continued, looking over the townscape. "I have unfinished matters back in Dolkness County." Her profile suggested that these unfinished matters weren't silly games, but serious business. Eleanora's soft hands balled into a fist as she stated with determination, "I have to continue my battle with puttara."

"Excuse me? Did you say 'puttara'...?" My train of thought came to a screeching halt upon hearing the unfamiliar term. I had been paying unusually careful attention to Eleanora's words, so I'd clearly heard her say "puttara," but the sound was foreign to my ears. Most people would've likely responded, "Pu—what?"

Perhaps I was just unfamiliar with the word but was actually familiar with the concept of whatever it was. "Oh, that's what's called such-and-such in Japanese," was a thought I'd often had when confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary, which still sometimes occurred even after living in this world for quite some time.

Considering the context in which she'd used it, it didn't sound like something peaceful. I wasn't sure what kind of battles Eleanora was throwing herself into unbeknownst to me, but then Eleanora started explaining what puttara was.

"Puttara is a battle where you take other's planks," she explained. "You take a thin, wooden plank about *this* big, and you lay it on the ground... Oh, in some places, people use fired clay in place of wood. Um, so you put the plank on the ground, and then your opponent...oh right, it's usually done with two people. I also enjoy having a free-for-all with a large group. Now, where did I leave off... Oh, right, so the opponent's plank is also placed on the ground, and you win if

you flip over that plank with your own plank. You slam it onto the ground, and then it goes *flop* and *twirl*. You get to keep the plank you flip over. Oh, I almost forgot, the planks also have illustrations on them, and one of the ways to enjoy puttara is to collect planks with good art.”

I made sure not to miss a single word in Eleanora’s incomprehensible explanation, and I did my best to try and understand what this thing was.

Is this menko? The Japanese game where you flip cards on the ground using your own card? This is just menko, right? I see, it’s menko.

I imagined the daughter of a family that had been at its zenith, second to only the royal family in power, now playing silly games with children, and I suddenly felt deflated.

Right, she even participated in digging up potatoes. Isn’t getting lost in games like that, like...kind of my thing? Oh no, my worry for Eleanora almost went down to zero.

After being rejected by her friend from the past, Eleanora was obviously hurting. But at the same time, she was excited about playing *menko* back in Dolkness County.

“I’m glad you’re having fun,” I said at last.

“Would you like to aim to become a champion of puttara as well?” she asked me eagerly. “If we work together, beating Kye could become a reality.”

“I’ll pass. You’ll have to aim for the championship title on your own, Lady Eleanora. I’ll go and cheer you on, though.”

If someone like me (whose strength was on a completely different level) were to join in, I would completely mess up the game. I was perfectly fine with not ruining a children’s game.

I was so tired that I could push aside my curiosity and think responsibly. Perhaps I was more emotionally affected by today’s incidents than Eleanora had been.

We resumed walking as we continued chatting about the *menko*-like game apparently known as puttara. Eleanora, who was much more energetic than I

was, walked half a step ahead of me as if she were leading the way, taking the shortest route back to the Dolkness Estate.

Eleanora was the first to realize where we were. She wrapped up our conversation on puttara and said with her usual cheeriness, “It’s been a while since we’ve gone this way.”

“Oh, shoot!”

I had completely forgotten about letting her know that we would be taking a detour. Because we had taken the shortest path, we had wandered into *the* path I’d been trying to avoid—the most dangerous area in the Royal Capital: the Sparkle Street Poison Swamp.

The Sparkle Street Poison Swamp was a street in the aristocratic quarter of the Royal Capital. This was a business sector that always seemed to suddenly appear in regions in which the nobility resided. Various sparkly shops lined this boss-rush street. They were all luxury stores that targeted aristocrats.

First up, a sparkly dress shop. The pink dress in the shop window dealt a tenth of my max HP in damage.

Next was a sparkly café. The atmosphere around it made it seem like the servers and customers would laugh at you if you went in wearing shabby clothes, and that also dealt a tenth of my max HP in damage.

Then, a sparkly jewelry store. The gems shone with incredible luminosity and brilliance, taking another tenth of my HP away.

A sparkly fragrance shop followed. Just looking at the outside of the store made me feel like I couldn’t breathe, and I took another hit of percentage damage.

Finally, there was the sparkly black tea shop. I loved black tea, so this one I could endure... Agh! A creature so stylish that it had to have just visited the aforementioned four shops exited the store. Another tenth of my max HP disappeared.

I internally grumbled as the highly dense, sparkly miasma leached away my health merely because I was walking through it. The percent damage so

characteristic of the poison status effect accumulated, and I had only half my health left—my HP bar was now yellow.

“Coming here makes me miss the Royal Capital,” Eleanora remarked wistfully.

“This is the Sparkle Street Poison Swamp,” I pointed out.

“What? What is that?”

It was no surprise that Eleanora didn’t understand the name of the street. After all, I had come up with the name Sparkle Street Poison Swamp myself. How else could there be a street named “Poison Swamp”?

Ever since the first time I’d wandered into this street and just barely escaped with my life, my body flashing red, I hadn’t returned here even once. I was saddened to learn that this street had been left uncleansed and still remained to torment the innocent to this day.

There were cases in which areas like this had been purified. The town I’d lived in during my past life had boutiques selling the latest fashion and accessories and such, but over the course of several years, they had transformed into nerdy stores. There were several anime stores, specialty bookstores selling manga and light novels, card shops, PC stores, model shops... It had become a bonus stage of sorts.

I would like it very much if Sparkle Street Poison Swamp were to be purified, or rather, invaded in a similar manner to these boutiques in my past, but it was the same stylish space it had always been. Eleanora seemed to enjoy looking at all the shops lined up before us, but my life force was still slowly depleting.

I need to escape quickly. If I stay here, I’ll sustain nerve damage and my organs will start shutting down. By the end of it all, I’ll just be a pile of bones, my flesh melting away... At least I feel like that’ll happen. This space was just that unsuitable for me. *I’m more than aware that I’m letting my discomfort get to me and deal damage.*

As proof of that, Eleanora was strolling among the storefronts without taking any damage in the least.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been anywhere in the Royal Capital,” she said with a smile just as brilliant as every store in the area. “I’m excited for tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“Sir Patrick and I planned that today would be the dress fitting, and then from tomorrow onwards we could visit wherever we’d like. You’re going to go build some armor, correct?”

I hadn’t heard of this. I would’ve refused to go if I had heard the plans for the first day, so Patrick and Eleanora were correct to keep the true itinerary from me.

I see, so we’re going to be separated tomorrow.

Just before Eleanora had spotted the Archiam estate, I’d turned down her request to go shopping with her. *I mean, it’ll take so long, and I don’t care...* Eleanora also understood my interests, considering that our plans had already been set with the idea that we’d be doing separate activities. *Still, she said she wanted to look around the shops together...*

“I’m strong,” I suddenly declared.

“Yes, you are...?” Eleanora agreed, despite being clearly confused by my announcement.

I was strong. I’d surpassed level 99, and the level assessment tool didn’t work on me any longer. Even if I took percent damage that ignored the amount of defense I had, I could turn MP into HP by using recovery magic.

“I’m strong, so, in other words...poison doesn’t work on me. I can get around in a poison swamp just fine...” This poison was particularly blinding, but I was the strongest, after all. I was totally fine. I finally stopped using terminology that was ridiculous for me to expect her to understand, and I reworded my statement to be more direct. “Would you like to go shopping together?”

“What?! Really?!” Eleanora’s expression when she responded was also an incredibly potent poison, its strength incomparable to the sparkly poison swamp that surrounded us. Her smile was going to kill me before this stylish street did. “Yay! What order shall we visit the shops in? Hm... I can’t decide.”

“What if we just go to one shop...?”



After thinking long and hard about it, Eleanora chose the perfume store. She led us to the front of the store. She practically had to push me toward it. I steeled myself and was about to grab the door handle, but the entrance was opened from the inside.

“Welcome, please come... Huh?”

These sorts of stores often had the closest thing in this world to an automatic door. There was an employee inside whose job was to notice the arrival of customers and open the door to greet them. Some places even had a doorman stationed outside to do nothing but this job.

For this sort of store sans doorman, the person inside who opened the door for you would become the associate in charge of helping you, and they would guide you to whatever items you desired. They would even explain the products in detail, then ring you up and send you off. That was why I didn’t like these kinds of places. I liked to shop on my own, browse freely, pick up products of my choosing, and pay for it all at self-checkout. That was my ideal shopping experience. I didn’t want to go to a store where the employees would start small talk as if it were the natural thing to do.

Not only did I dislike these types of stores, but being Yumiella Dolkness, I had one other problem. The employees would start trembling with fear and think things like, “Oh gosh, Yumiella’s here. Who knows what kind of horrible things she’ll do to us...”

To prove it, the woman who opened the door for us was completely frozen, her friendly customer service smile plastered woodenly on her face.

*I understand why she’d react like this even if I’d never been here before.
Makes you really think about the disadvantage of having distinctive black hair...
Oh? Wait, the frozen woman isn’t looking at me...*

Eleanora suddenly spoke up, paying no mind to the unnatural silence.

“It’s been a while.”

“Lady Eleanora, it *is* you! I knew it!” The woman wasn’t staring at a dangerous being, but at a regular customer.

The employee’s customer service smile completely disappeared, and her

enthusiasm suddenly spiked. *Just who is Eleanora to the people in this store?* I wondered. *I feel like their relationship is more than something between just an employee and their customer.*

“I thought you wouldn’t be visiting us anymore,” the woman said. “I’m truly glad to see you here.”

“I’m happy to be here as well,” Eleanora replied. “Thank you so much for always sending me perfumes.”

Oh, I guess those packages Eleanora sometimes gets are sent from here, I thought, connecting the dots, as I was left out of the conversation.

But those aren’t mail-order items. This store was gifting them to Eleanora for free. Why would they do that?

After I had solved one mystery, another popped up. This was common for mysteries. It was a mystery why mysteries attracted more mysteries. That just added another mystery.

The employee finally turned my way. “I apologize for my behavior. I just got so excited.”

“It’s no problem,” I assured the clerk. “I’m just keeping her company, so don’t mind me.”

“You’re Countess Yumiella Dolkness, correct? I’ve heard a lot about you from Lady Eleanora.” The woman gave me a warm look, like I was an old friend. It seemed that she wasn’t afraid because Eleanora had spoken to her about me. Her impression of me was likely a much cuter one compared to what the general public thought of me. “Um... We don’t have anything strong here, so I would greatly appreciate it if you don’t thrash around in the store.”

“I wouldn’t thrash around even if there was something strong... Actually, what do you even mean by that? ‘Something strong’?”

“I’m sorry, I heard from Lady Eleanora that you were that sort of person...”

It seemed that the version of me that Eleanora had spoken of wasn’t too different from the general public’s opinion after all.

Really, what would “something strong” even be? That’s way too vague.

The woman's awkward expression quickly faded away as she guided us inside. I'd anticipated that the store would be filled with the intense smell of perfumes, but it actually didn't smell too much. I scanned the establishment and saw that several of the windows, of which there seemed to be many, were opened halfway. *And that's a...* They even had a magical instrument that generated wind. It seemed like the store had proper ventilation. Perhaps these features were so that customers wouldn't be distracted by any extra scents while testing the products.

I was relieved that the store was at least a comfortable environment. The employee encouraged us to take a seat.

"Please, have a seat over here," she offered. "I'll prepare some tea, so please wait a moment."

Oh no. Looks like we're going to be here for a while. I wanted to quickly go in, buy something, and then zoom back out. I guess it's fine. I was prepared for the possibility that this might be a long shopping trip.

Now that we were alone, I decided to ask Eleanora the question that had been on my mind.

"Lady Eleanora, I'd like to ask you something."

"I think I said something like, 'She overreacts to things that are stronger than her,'" Eleanora preemptively explained.

"That wasn't what I wanted to ask about..." I now understood how she described me to others, but that hadn't been my question. "What kind of relationship do you have with the people who work at this store? Did you invest capital in their operation in the past or something?"

"We have a regular shop-and-customer relationship. I was friendly with the clerks here."

I'd thought it was something more along the lines of Eleanora saving the store when it had been down on its luck, and now the store continued to send gifts to her as thanks or something like that, but Eleanora had immediately denied that.

Most stores wouldn't gift expensive perfumes to someone who's just a customer. I wanted to ask for more details, but the employee from earlier

returned. Not only did she have a tea tray in her hands, but several other people followed behind her. Apparently if an employee at a perfume store went to the back, they would return with more people.

“Lady Eleanora! I’m so happy you’ve visited us again!” one employee exclaimed.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well,” another chimed in.

“Have you been using the perfumes we’ve sent?” a third employee asked.

They were quite overwhelming. The level of their affection for her far surpassed how a store would normally treat a preferred customer.

I’ll just have some of the tea they brought out and calm down, I thought as I grabbed the tea cup. I brought it up to my face to take a whiff of the familiar scent, and... *Oh, this is herbal tea.* Even the tea here smelled elegant. I endured the never-ending wave of damage to my senses and sat quietly, like a piece of furniture.

Eleanora ignored my unusually obedient self and enthusiastically engaged in conversation with the others.

“I’m also glad to see that you’re all doing well,” Eleanora said. “Of course I’ve used all the perfumes you’ve sent.”

“It’s fine if you can only tell us about the ones you found particularly memorable, so would you mind giving us your thoughts?”

“Let’s see...” Eleanora began.

Eleanora talked about perfume for a long, long time. She went on for about as long as it took a military buff to answer the question “Is the A6M Zero strong?” It was one thing to talk about the turning performance and its weapons, but they would also go on and on about flight ranges and the quality of fuel back in the day, and then add on the reasons for their opinion that it was wrong to compare air superiority fighters to land-based interceptors. At the end of it all, their conclusion would be unclear.



I was the only one who had steeled herself for a long lecture on something they didn't care about. Everyone else surrounding Eleanora was earnestly listening to Eleanora's thoughts. Some were even taking notes.

"After testing them all, what left an impression on me the most was Patchouli's newest product. The design of the bottle made me think it would be a chypre, but it was definitely a fougère."

"We do sell this one as a chypre," one employee commented.

"I can see why," Eleanora said with a nod. "There are some women who steer clear of fougère perfumes. I believe citrusy perfumes will continue to grow in popularity. I think that's a good thing, since not many people dislike citrus notes..."

"There aren't very many new releases for gourmand fragrances. It's unfortunate, since we know that gourmands are one of your favorite types of perfume, Lady Eleanora," an employee pointed out. "We do make one in-house, but it's gotten less-than-stellar reviews."

What language is this? There are so many technical terms that I have no idea what they're saying. The only word I've heard before is "Eleanora."

Eleanora had explained some of these concepts in the past, but I didn't know the terminology that went with these descriptions. I couldn't swap out the terms for Japanese equivalents, like I was able to with the *menko*-like game, so I couldn't remember the specific vocabulary very well.

I had no idea what they were talking about, but their discussion continued endlessly.

"Really?" Eleanora said curiously. "I don't remember seeing an original perfume in the packages..."

"It wasn't something we could send..." One of the employees reached for a bottle. "Um, we have it over here. Would you mind testing it out for us?"

"Yes, I'm very curious!"

I couldn't even follow the context clues, so I had no idea what Eleanora was curious about. I silently stood up. No one seemed to pay attention, and I was

able to wander around the store on my own.

“This is...” Eleanora voiced her opinions with confidence. “Hm, it seems like there’s some kind of animal musk mixed in. I wonder what the base notes are like... It seems like those notes aren’t meshing well, so it may need to mature for longer before they are cohesive. It’s too strong as it is, so you also might want to lower the concentration...”

“Yes, I see, this is very helpful.”

As I stared at the bottles lined up on the spotless shelves and desks, I could still hear their conversation. I could tell that Eleanora was saying something helpful—after all, I knew that the words “this is very helpful” meant that what she was saying must be helpful.

As I perused the store’s products without much thought, I realized that these bottles would be no different to me than a milk bottle filled with rainwater. Since this was the kind of store laid out for an attendant to follow you around, there wasn’t a single product description written anywhere. For now, I deduced that the bottles with the same mark on them were likely from the same brand.

With the still-continuing and apparently very helpful conversation as my background music, I walked around. Suddenly, something caught my eye. There was something off about one of the shelves. Of course, the surface was lined with bottles of perfume, but these bottles were different from the others. For example, there was a bottle that had a flower-shaped mark on it, and it was the only such mark of its kind on the shelf. But I had seen a bunch of bottles with this mark on it on a different shelf on the other side of the store. This was the only shelf I’d seen on which several brands were mixed up, and even the way they were displayed seemed disorganized. This entire store was impeccably organized, yet this one spot was chaotic.

What encouraged me to keep inspecting was a handwritten sign. It didn’t list any of the standard things that these sorts of signs usually did, like an explanation of the product or why the store recommended it. In fact, there was text that was strangely poetic on this sign, and written in terrible handwriting. Reading just a little of it gave me secondhand embarrassment. The thought of reading the rest of it sent a shiver running down my spine, but I decided to

Speak one of the verses aloud.

“A droplet of love trickles onto the endless expanse that is the sea—” I began.

“Ah! Ah! No! You can’t read that!” Eleanora interrupted my reading of the horribly embarrassing poem, despite the fact that she was supposed to be passionately engaged in conversation. It didn’t seem like it was anything for her to be *that* embarrassed about, but she turned accusingly to one of the employees, her face beet red. “You still have that poem displayed?!”

“It’s quite popular. We all think it’s lovely.”

“Something was wrong with me back then,” Eleanora groaned.

I tilted my head in confusion at their conversation, and one of the employees began explaining the origin of this little poetry corner. “This shelf is a collection of perfumes recommended by Lady Eleanora. We can’t put her name on it anymore, but they’re the favorite products of *the* Lady Eleanora, so of course they all sell very well. Her poems are also quite popular.”

“Lady Eleanora wrote this?” I asked.

“Yes, this is the original, handwritten poem.”

Whoa... So Eleanora created this back when she was blinded by love.

Judging from her reaction, this seemed to be a part of Eleanora’s past that she’d rather not remember, so I decided to not touch on it too much. She would probably lose her mind if I asked any more about this poem, so I decided to ask about something other than the handwritten sign.

“Does Eleanora’s recommendation change how well a perfume sells that much? I know she was the duke’s daughter, but was her endorsement that effective?”

“Of course it is,” the employee said eagerly. “Even ateliers from other kingdoms send us letters asking for Lady Eleanora’s reviews of fragrances. There isn’t a single person in this industry who doesn’t know her.”

Out of all the young women in this kingdom, the person with the highest standing had been Eleanora, the daughter of the duke. I could understand if the reasoning behind this had been something like the idea that she was in a

position to control the trends in a niche community for a specific age group in a single kingdom...but foreign kingdoms too? It was surely difficult for her to have such influence just because she was Dule Hillrose's daughter. It seemed that the revocation of her nobility hadn't affected her status in the fragrance industry, and she had in fact been giving some high-level advice earlier.

Is Eleanora actually a big deal in the perfume industry? Is she a celebrity reviewer or something?

Eleanora was hiding her face in both hands, still taking damage from the poem.

"You should just manufacture your own fragrance," I mumbled.

"We don't have a full factory, but we do have some she made." The employee pointed out a few bottles. "This, this, and this one as well. These are all sold as items that have been produced from start to finish by Lady Eleanora."

The employee lined up several bottles of perfume so I could get a better look, and I recognized them. Eleanora had received them all as gifts. Whenever I borrowed them to use them, Eleanora would notice and get excited, so I'd wear them just to see her happy.

Now that I think of it, she said she'd come up with a lot of ideas and had them make it for her or something...? I thought that meant they were custom fragrances, but I guess they're manufactured as actual products. Isn't that incredible? Is she making money off of this, like as a job? Oh, right, I don't think she has been sent any money.

"Do you buy the ideas from Lady Eleanora?" I asked.

"No." The employee looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure about the details of the contract, but every time we produce a new batch, Lady Eleanora receives a portion of the proceeds."

Huh? Is the money being taken by a middleman or something? I looked at the gullible poet herself, who seemed to have been listening, and she casually responded, "I've set things up so the money gets donated to the Sanonist church."

She's a saint. The church should hurry up and officially announce that

Eleanora is an actual angel.

Back when she was the duke's daughter, the amount of money she'd earned from this must have seemed like small potatoes. It probably wasn't that much, overall. I knew it wasn't polite of me to do so, but I ended up asking the question in my mind.

"So, how much do you earn from it?" I walked up to Eleanora and brought my ear close to her. Eleanora then softly whispered her profits from producing the fragrances.

"About..." Her voice fell in volume as she spoke the numbers.

"Huh...? *That* much?"

"Apparently, there's a trading ship that buys them in large quantities to sell them in other continents," she explained.

It was a number much too large for me to ever give away entirely to charity. However, it seemed that her products were going to continue selling, so that number was only going to increase. I was so stunned by this information that I could only give a half-hearted response.

"I see..."

For some time after that, everyone aside from me enthusiastically kept discussing fragrances. Of course, I still had no idea what they were talking about. Despite my lack of knowledge, I kept listening. Everyone's excitement kept growing, and eventually it seemed to have become something similar to a brainstorming session.

They began predicting future trends, and they tried to tread the fine line between common and niche fragrance notes before coming up with bottle designs, taglines, and marketing strategies. It took about two hours before they got to a point where everyone was satisfied.

After all that, it was finally time for us to go. Eleanora seemed quite hesitant to leave. Usually I would say something like, "Let's go already," but all I could do was watch her, full of newfound respect.

Dearest Eleanora, the freeloader of our family, was someone I'd believed wouldn't last three days if she went out in the world without a penny to her name. Contrary to my assumptions, she'd totally been able to make a living on her own this whole time.

I was proud of that, yet also somewhat sad. Before I could figure out how I felt, Eleanora and I left the perfume store.



When we reached the Dolkness estate in the Royal Capital, Patrick came out to greet us.

"Welcome back... Um, how was it?" Patrick seemed quite uncomfortable.

I was momentarily at a loss as to why that might be, but then it occurred to me. *Oh...I forgot! He tricked me into a dress fitting and getting my measurements taken. No wonder he looks guilty.*

I could understand why he'd bamboozled me, considering my usual attitude toward such things. But there was no way that I was going to forgive him that easily.

"It seems like you successfully completed your fitting," Patrick observed a little hesitantly.

I fixed him with a steely look. "I won't forgive you for the rest of our lives."

"I'm sorry."

"When I take my final breath, I'll use it to voice this resentment as I die. If you go first, I'll keep whispering in your ear as you drift off, reminding you of this incident."

Patrick's expression froze over. It seemed that he hadn't expected for me to be this upset. (To be honest, I wasn't actually *that* upset. The dress, as it had turned out, wasn't entirely evil—in fact, in some ways it was kind of good.)

Well, but...hee hee... I can't allow him to persist in some erroneous belief, like thinking that I actually like the dress... Don't underestimate Yumiella Dolkness. I'll hold quite the grudge against him for forcing me into that wedding dress. I'll hold it until I die. I'll bring it up every time we have a lover's quarrel, and I'll

wrap it up with a "You're always like this!"

As my train of thought continued, I found myself to be more riled up than I'd expected. I'd uncapped my level and Patrick was level 99, so if we faced off, it would be a battle between the two strongest people in the world. Before anything like that had a chance to happen, though, the noble lady who was one of the weakest people in the world chimed in.

"You have to hear about this, Sir Patrick!" Eleanora cooed. "Yumiella was so happy when she saw her wedding dress. She was staring at her reflection in the mirror, and she seemed like she was full of bliss."

"Are you sure you're not mistaken...?" Patrick asked, voicing his question before I could deny Eleanora's outrageous claims.

Patrick understands me. I would never be happy wearing a gown like that, let alone spending a long time staring at my reflection and imagining him lifting my veil, making me feel like I'm dreaming. I would never think something like, "I'm so happy I get to wear this." That would never happen.

Eleanora had just interpreted things in a way that worked in her favor. I decided to correct her version of events.

"Don't you remember how I was resisting?" I insisted.

"But...but after you put it on, in front of the mirror..."

"Lady Eleanora, Yumiella is the last person who would do that," Patrick said. "I'm sorry for forcing you to take on such a difficult role in accompanying her."

"I'm glad I went," she said decisively. "I got to see Yumiella's bridal gown after all."

Patrick had apologized to Eleanora, who'd responded by saying there was no need for it... *Excuse me? Aren't you apologizing to the wrong person?*

My anger that had died down was boiling back up again. Taking notice of this, Patrick awkwardly turned to me and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd dislike it to this extent."

"I understand that I needed a fitting," I grumbled, "but did you really need to trick me?"

“Would you have willingly come to the Royal Capital if I’d told you beforehand?”

No, I would’ve thrown a tantrum about how I didn’t want to do it, and I’d have stubbornly stayed holed up in Dolkness County... But if I answer truthfully, then Patrick wins.

I fell silent for a moment, my face impassive as I plotted my rejoinder of vengeance.

“Don’t change the point of the argument!” I retaliated at last. “At least tell me this—did you not trust me?”

I had to say, it was quite the inspired response. I’d cornered him now. If he said that he did trust me, then that would contradict the fact that he had tricked me. If he said he *didn’t* trust me, that meant that he was failing me as my boyfriend. I had picked a point of contention that was advantageous for myself, and I’d presented him with two options, neither of which would provide him with a win condition. I was the strongest, even when it came to arguments.

“I trust you.”

Aha! Here’s my opening.

“Then why—” I began to ask, but he cut me off.

“I trusted, from the bottom of my heart, that you would refuse to go to any kind of dress fitting, and instead stubbornly stay in Dolkness County, no matter what I said.”

“I see...”

Does this mean...I lost?!

Conversations weren’t supposed to be a battle in which you tried to get the other person to lose, and yet I had challenged Patrick and pathetically lost. I was the only one who’d even thought of this as a battle, and Patrick had triumphed without any intention of trying to win.

Patrick had lied to me, or rather, I’d driven him to the point where he’d had no choice but to lie to me. Still, if the world were truly filled with people who understood and accepted their faults when they were pointed out, then there

wouldn't be war. I, too, was ruled by human nature—in other words, I was going to be upset.

The white dog that my family had owned in my past life in Japan had also hid in the garden and sulked after we had returned from the vet. I was no different.

The man who'd baited me with new armor and brought me to a place I hated spoke to me now in a soothing tone. "Let's go make some armor tomorrow. I've found a place that makes custom pieces, and as long as it's within the capabilities of their craftspeople, you should order exactly what you want."

"Really?!" I practically squealed. "That part wasn't a lie?! I can do everything, including the wires and the pile bunker and the purge function?!"

"As long as it's technologically possible."

Yay! My time has finally come! I should request the ability to swap out various parts of it, to make it adaptable to different situations. Something with interchangeable parts would be good. Standardizing it would also be good. The biggest benefit would be that I could forcibly attach nonstandard pieces to it. This'll be the best way to design it. Or wait, maybe I should just throw everything onto it, like adding every possible topping onto a pizza. That would be wonderful too.

"Which do you think is better," I asked Patrick, "a convertible unit or a unit with everything on it?"

"You should go with what you want..."

I nodded with satisfaction. "That's true, it's my own armor after all." Shaking myself from my armament-based reverie, I realized we were still lingering outside the entryway. "Oh, we've been standing here for a while, haven't we? Let's go inside." I turned and happily opened the front door.

As I did this, I once again recalled the dog from my past. Even when he'd been upset after getting a shot, he'd immediately start happily wagging his tail once we gave him a piece of jerky...but I decided to not think too deeply about it and focus on my new armor.



I was excited to explain the purge function to Eleanora, but she clearly didn't appreciate the nuances of such a system, and gave me the unimaginative response of, "If you're going to take it off and throw it away, you shouldn't have those pieces in the first place." I was startled to discover that I'd chattered for so long about ideas for my new armor that night had fallen.

After eating dinner and taking a bath, I climbed into bed, ready to sleep. It felt a little strange to call it "my" bed. Once I had graduated from the Academy and left the dorms, I had only returned to the Royal Capital a handful of times. Though this room was technically mine, I couldn't help but feel like I was sleeping over at someone else's home.

Tomorrow, I'm going to make armor that's full of dreams and imagination. I should sleep in preparation.

Instead, I stared at the ceiling. "I can't sleep..."

I'd started thinking again about what kind of features I wanted to add to the armor, and my excitement was making me feel wide awake, and I couldn't fall asleep.

A beam is standard, right? Where should I put it? One beam right in the middle of my chest would look really powerful, but adding it to my arm and making it removable would also be a good option. I could also add it somewhere else so that I could whip it out in tricky situations. Even if I decide to add it to my arm, then comes the issue of where on my arm... I can't make this crucial choice on my own. I should ask Patrick what he thinks tomorrow.

"I can't wait..." If I kept agonizing like this on my own, I wouldn't be able to sleep peacefully tonight.

I leaped out of bed and headed to Patrick's room. *I hope he's still awake. If he's asleep, I'll have to force him to wake up.*

I crept down the dark hallway and arrived at the guest room he'd been assigned. First, I lightly knocked.

He answered at once. "Who is it?"

All right, he's awake. I opened the door without permission, and Patrick sat up in bed as he rubbed his eyes. *Oh, did my knocking wake him up? It's fine,*

he's awake now so we can settle this quickly.

“Oh, I didn’t realize it was you, Yumiella. Did something happen? I’d like to sleep.”

Are you planning to get some restful sleep while ignoring my feelings, Patrick?

I couldn’t let him flee from my feelings, so I made a beeline for the bed and climbed onto the mattress, straddling his knees through the sheets, pinning his legs in place. Then I grabbed his shoulders and pushed him down so that he had no possibility of escape.

“Hey!” he sputtered. “Yumiella?! What’s wrong?!”

The outer sides of the covers were cool to the touch, and I realized that I felt a bit chilly. *I need to be in perfect health tomorrow for Armor Day. I’ve never caught a cold before, but better safe than sorry—I should stay warm.* I wiggled my way under the covers and held Patrick down from there.

“H-Huh...?” Patrick wasn’t even struggling in my grasp; he seemed frozen with shock. *Oh, I guess it would be confusing for me to suddenly barge into his room without saying anything.* I decided that I needed to explain how dire the situation was so that he could properly give me advice.

“Um, Patrick...” I said, a little flustered. “I’m so excited that I can’t calm down.”

“I-I see...” he stammered.

“I tried to do something about it on my own, but it won’t go away at all.”

Patrick’s head fell back onto his pillow, his eyes wide and his body stiff with shock. In the dark room, and snuggled under the covers (which made things even darker), I could clearly feel the warmth of his body and hear the rapid beat of his heart.

Will he take the placement of the beam seriously? Or will he just give me a cold response, like, “I really couldn’t care less”? It’s a serious topic, Patrick.



“Please, Patrick?” I whispered into his ear as he continued to lay there silently.

Suddenly, Patrick aggressively grabbed me and flipped us around. He was now on top, and I found myself looking up at him. He held me down by my shoulders with his strong arms, and our faces were so close that our noses almost touched.

Patrick continued in his silence for a bit longer before swallowing hard and opening his mouth to say, a little dazedly, “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Shouldn’t I be the one to seek his approval for this important conversation? I guess it’s fine. It seemed that Patrick was going to take my beam discussion with the appropriate amount of seriousness after all, so I decided to jump right into it.

“I’ve been struggling to determine the placement of a beam,” I said in a rush. “I want to put one on an arm, but I’m not sure exactly where or what direction it should point.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not sure if I want it here, or here... Oh, I guess it’s hard to explain like this.” I shoved Patrick off of me and got back out of the bed. I stood at his bedside and started pointing at places on my body as I explained. “I’m not sure if I should put it *here*, between my wrist and elbow, or *here*, between my elbow and shoulder. In this configuration, I’m imagining that the beam would shoot out parallel to my arm. But I’m not sure about the direction. It could point this way, or the other way.”

There was a short pause. “I really couldn’t care less,” Patrick answered. There was a strangely defeated expression on his face, and he kept himself wrapped up firmly in the covers.

How rude. He was so serious just seconds ago. He even had an unusually intense look in his eyes.

Though Patrick seemed deeply uninterested, he gave a long-suffering sigh and pointed limply at the spot between my wrist and elbow.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to operate if it were positioned here?”

“What about the orientation of the beam?” I asked.

“I think this would be the obvious answer,” he said, indicating the angle with his hands.

That would require a shooting position in which I’d have to hold my arm straight out in order to shoot the beam. It would be very similar to Mazinger Z’s Rocket Punch.

I considered the virtues of this position, and then observed, “I think the opposite direction could work too.”

“The opposite?” Patrick repeated. “How would you even shoot that?”

My idea was to attach the beam between my wrist and elbow, with the beam pointed so that it would shoot out backward. I folded my arm in half at the elbow, bringing my hand up toward my shoulder and pointing my elbow upward to show him how it would work.

“Like this,” I clarified.

“Wouldn’t that be difficult to operate?”

“Oh my,” I said with a little pout, “don’t you have a sense of whimsy, Patrick?”

“I don’t see a benefit to it.”

That was a good point, actually. *What would be the practical benefits...? Maybe whimsy took too much priority here. I’m really glad I talked to Patrick about this, since he’s so often able to provide a perspective that I don’t have. Let’s see, could there be any benefit...? Oh, that’s right!*

“Here’s my logic,” I explained. “I wanted to add a device that shoots out a wire on this side, and it would be difficult to use if it didn’t shoot out toward my hands, right? That’s why I have no choice but to place the beam so it faces my elbow.”

He sighed again. “You came up with that just now, didn’t you?”

Now that we’d both shared our ideas, we’d come up with a wonderful plan together. I was so emotional that my body was trembling. *It’s incredible, just*

incredible what Patrick and I can accomplish together...! Okay, I'm getting a little too excited, I need to calm down.

I sat on the bed, and Patrick unraveled the covers from around his body and moved to sit beside me.

"This beam you're talking about is like the fiery breath of a dragon, right?"

"Yup."

"It's fine to think about where you want to put it, but something like that is..." He shook his head. "Well, I guess you'll find out tomorrow."

I forgot. It's not like we can just make whatever I want.

I was a complete amateur when it came to the practical considerations surrounding the construction of armor and magical instruments. There were probably good reasons for why professionals decided on a certain layout in a given design. It was probably best if I kept my nose out of the specifics about design specs when I didn't have all the information. *I should just tell them the big picture of what I want, and even if I notice an element that I think might look better if it was oriented in a different way, I'll keep it to myself.* It was possible that the golden ratio of beauty to utility could be destroyed by my unschooled opinions.

"I'm really excited about tomorrow," I remarked.

"You should be prepared for the possibility of things not turning out the way you expect..."

"My expectations are something ambiguous that only exists in my imagination, so I might end up a little disappointed," I admitted. "But even if that happens, I'm sure I'll get attached to whatever I end up with as I use it over time. Maybe the final product will be something better than I could ever have imagined."

"I hope that happens..."

Oh, I see. Patrick is worried about how long it'll take to make. Obviously I'm not expecting a custom-made item to be completed in a day. I'm sure it'll require precise measurements since it needs to conform perfectly to my body,

and I'll have to try it on repeatedly so that they can fine-tune it too.

I wasn't someone who would be bothered by getting measured and going to a few fittings, so I hoped that it would end up being a piece with meticulous attention to detail.

Speaking of measurements, that reminds me that the dress fitting from earlier today was the worst thing that's ever happened to me. Well, I guess the wedding dress itself might not have been so bad. Maybe.

The thing that I had least enjoyed was being told to stay still and being forced to go along with something that seemed meaningless to me. I would've had the time of my life if I had been going through maintenance that involved calipers and a welding machine, but the tools that had been used on me today were boring, awful tape measures and straight pins.

I still haven't forgiven him for that. Just what was Patrick up to while I was suffering through that ordeal without him...?

I wasn't sure if Patrick was going to fall back asleep right away, so I scooted closer to him. I leaned my head on his shoulder as I asked, "By the way, where were you during the day?"

"Sorry for sending you to the dress shop."

"I won't ever for—" I narrowed my eyes. "You just changed the topic, didn't you?"

"During the day?" He shrugged. "I popped into the Ashbatten estate here in the Royal Capital."

Suspicious. Patrick usually saw through me when I wasn't telling him something, but the opposite happened as well. *You must be hiding something, Patrick.*

There was only one reason a man would obfuscate his whereabouts: he was at a mixer...or he was gambling...or he was engaging in a hobby he'd promised to stop...or he was secretly meeting up with his mistress, and so on and so forth.

Wait, that's way more than one! Which is it? Is it a woman? Oh wait, it may

be premature of me to assume he's cheating on me with a woman.

"Are you cheating on me with a man or a woman?" I asked as I sniffed him for any evidence that might remain on his body.

"Fine, I'll tell you." Patrick finally seemed to be ready to come clean, though I doubted that he was about to tell me the gender of his partner in an affair. He was probably going to tell me where he'd gone after leaving me at the dress shop. Considering the fact that he'd returned to the Dolkness estate before I had, and had even come out to welcome us home, he probably hadn't traveled too far.

I sat up straight and turned to look at him. Patrick seemed much more uncomfortable than I had expected.

"Huh? Seriously, where did you go?"

"I was here the whole time," he said, still being vague.

There was nothing suspicious about admitting that he'd been at this mansion, the Dolkness Estate in the Royal Capital, since Eleanora and I had both been at the dress shop. Unless he had invited someone over, the only people here were the servants... *Oh, I see.* I finally realized what he'd been up to.

This estate did have other residents—my parents lived here. I had been in a good mood because of the armor, but I suddenly became overcome with melancholy at the thought of my parents.

"I see," I said heavily. "So you met them. What did you talk about?"

"I pretty much just introduced myself as your fiancé..."

"There probably wasn't much else to talk about, was there?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

Even if we didn't discuss the details, I could imagine how the interaction between my parents and Patrick had gone.

My mother and father were textbook examples of useless aristocrats. They only thought of their territory and the citizens who lived there as machines that produced money. All they wanted in life was to expand their power in the Royal Capital.

The Dolkness Family held no official position in the central government, and my parents didn't hide their ambition to climb up the ranks by teaming up with the radical aristocrats. They'd planned to use their daughter (me) as a tool to gain advantageous political connections through marriage, but—unfortunately for them—said daughter had been born with horribly unfavorable black hair and eyes. They had sent her off to their provincial territory as if to hide her, but in the end, that same daughter had forcibly succeeded to the family title. Now, the two lived out their disappointing days holed up in this estate.

I had spoken to them a few times since I'd snatched up the title of countess from my father, but we just never seemed to be on the same page. They were people who believed that actually working to better your territory was the ultimate torture, while climbing the ranks in the central government was the only form of happiness... Even if we understood each other's words, it was difficult for us to understand each other's thoughts.

My excitement died down, but more than that, Patrick seemed dispirited. I leaned on him once more.

"No one can really talk to them," I reassured him. "Don't worry about it."

"I'd heard about them, but I never thought that, um..."

"You didn't expect them to be *that* horrible, did you?" I said, filling in the blanks for him. He didn't confirm or deny it, but he'd probably wanted to say something along those lines.

He went on. "I know your situation. I know that you had a family in your previous life. Still, when I think about those people saying horrible things about you when you were just a baby..."

"We apparently didn't live together for too long," I said with a shrug. "Evidently, less than a week after I was born, the wet nurse took me to Dolkness County. Although that same wet nurse also seemed to have left before I turned one. I don't remember any of it, but that's what I've heard."

I had regained the memories of my past life at five years old, and I'd spent my days since then level grinding. Everyone had always been incredibly cautious when interacting with me, and I hadn't talked to people very much, so it was a miracle that I had gained a decent level of language skills at that age at all.

If I had spent my days in the Royal Capital as the count's daughter, I probably wouldn't have had the time to go to dungeons, which was an activity I loved. I felt that things had worked out all right in the end, but Patrick didn't seem to feel the same way. He seemed sad and a little angry as he spoke about my parents.

"You're their child!" he seethed. "I can't forgive parents who would treat their own child like that."

"I think you're absolutely in the right to feel that way, but also I think that having a black-haired child was outside of the scope of what was acceptable for them."

"I understand the reasoning," he admitted with a sigh, "but I think you're too objective about how you've been treated."

Since I'd had the mental age of an adult at five years old, it was hard to understand the perspective of someone who had experienced those events as their actual childhood. Perhaps I didn't think of my parents as my family any more than they considered me their child. In other words, neither my parents nor myself could even begin to understand Patrick's anger. I understood as a general theory that parental neglect wasn't good, but even if I was technically the victim in this case, I didn't feel like I was a victim of anything, so emotionally I had no further input.

I tried to put this into words in a way that Patrick might understand. "I would feel bad if I found out about another child who had been treated the way I was, but considering my situation, I don't actually feel much at all about what happened to me. Please don't get too upset."

"You're right... There's no point in getting angry." Despite Patrick agreeing with me, he didn't seem completely satisfied. He tapped his finger, like he was trying to figure out what to do with his unsettled feelings.

I tried again. "Back in Japan, I had a regular family. I had a mother and a father, and I was raised with genuine love." I'd had parents, a younger sister, and I'd even had friends. I'd even had significant others (I still thought they counted, even if they'd been in a digital world).

I didn't feel that way at the time, but looking back on it, I had been raised in

an ideal family. I wasn't a poor child who had been all alone since birth...unlike, for example, Yumiella 2.

I didn't like that Patrick was concerned with something that didn't really bother me. I turned to look at him, and I found that Patrick was already looking at me. Our eyes met.

"They're your family though," he insisted.

"Like I said, I had a family in my previous life."

"What about in this world? Isn't it painful to not be able to see the people you consider your real family, since they're in a world that you can't return to?"

I guess if I had to pick whether it's painful or not, it is, but...I'm the one who died. I don't think I'm too sad about it.

My family in Japan had probably mourned my death. *Oh, I wonder what picture they used for my funeral. Smartphones are for playing mobile games, not for taking selfies. Arcades are not places to take pictures in photo booths while screaming happily at friends, but places to lose robot fighting games while screaming in rage at a screen. I think the only usable picture I have was the one in my high school yearbook. Ha ha...*

I thought I'd be able to laugh off that thought in my head, but it wasn't actually funny in the slightest.

"You were like that when we first met at the Academy. You acted like you were fine on your own, and you convinced yourself that you could endure the loneliness..."

I considered this. "That may be true... Now, I can't imagine fleeing the kingdom and living on my own."

"It's not good to lie about how you feel...in my opinion. You should be honest about what you really think."

"Yeah."

"I didn't take notice of normal things because you weren't bothered by them," Patrick continued. "It was only just now, after discussing your lack of feelings for your family in this world that I even considered the fact that you

have a family back in your previous world. To be apart from people you are close to is..." He didn't finish his thought.

Now that it had been put into words by someone else, the reality that I'd accepted because there wasn't anything else that I could do suddenly seemed to weigh heavily on me. I felt relieved that I could remember the faces of my family in Japan, but I was still a bit sad about it all.

"I try not to think about it," I admitted, "but in the end, I guess I am sad about it."

"I wasn't trying to make you recall painful memories, but, um..."

"It's okay, I understand. It's not like the sadness will go away if I try to sweep these thoughts under the rug. I also might forget things if I don't think about them."

Patrick looked much sadder than I expected I did. I usually would've said something like, "Why do you seem more tragic than the actual person in the middle of all this? You should be careful about being too empathetic," or something like that, but I was currently grateful for Patrick's penchant for lamenting. The fact that someone existed who would be just as upset about how I had been treated as if it had happened to them was enough for me to feel like I was loved.

It hurt to be apart from my family, but even if I had been able to return to Japan, I wanted to stay in this world. I studied Patrick's face. *I choose him*, I realized. *I want to be by his side forever*.

Through an awkward smile, I tried to show the man by my side that not everything was so bad.

"I'm glad that I came to this world," I said decisively. "Maybe I didn't have the best parents, but I have a family now. Wait... Maybe we're not family yet because we aren't married yet? I guess it depends on what your definition of 'family' is."

"We're already family," he confirmed without hesitating. "I don't know exactly what definition I go by, but I know that I think of you as my family."

"Me too. You're my family, Patrick."

I had been misguided; I didn't have to worry about any of the traditional definitions of family. If I had my family—if I had *Patrick*—with me, I could overcome anything, no matter how painful it was. But just as I was feeling grateful to have him in my life all over again, Patrick said something that was equally as misguided as I had been earlier.

"I'm glad. I'm the first to become your family in this world."

"No," I corrected. "Ryu was the first to become family."

Man, I was really saved by my dear dragon son. Children may help their parents more than parents help their children.

I was now not only thinking about my family in my previous life but also Patrick and Ryu... Various thoughts were getting jumbled up, and I suddenly realized that I was about to cry. *It would be embarrassing if he saw me cry.* Just as that thought crossed my mind, Patrick's eyes glimmered in the moonlight. He appeared to be teary-eyed as well.

"Yeah, that's right... It's nice that you have Ryu."

"Yeah."

It was wonderful to be able to have someone to share both joy and sadness. Filled with the warmth of happiness, my tears sunk back into the depths of my ducts.

Though my mind had been headed in a negative direction, I was fine once I turned my attention the other way. I even started thinking about the armor I was going to make tomorrow. I was truly blessed.

"Well, we need to get up early tomorrow, so I should go to bed. Sorry for intruding like this so late at night."

"It's really nice that you have Ryu," Patrick repeated.

"Huh? Yeah, it is."

Still uncertain of why Patrick had reiterated his statement about Ryu, I got up. *I guess "first" isn't the right expression when discussing family. Family isn't something you order by who was first. I should tell him that some other time if I have the chance,* I thought as I left his room, closing the door behind me.

Interlude 1: Darren Archiam

In the current affairs of the Kingdom of Valschein, if one were to ask whose movements were the most in the spotlight, the only name that would come to mind would be Yumiella Dolkness.

She had defeated the Demon Lord, become two people, and of course, surpassed level 99... There were countless rumors of unknown authenticity regarding the countess. It had even been theorized that the recent mysterious natural phenomenon in which black stripes had covered the skies of the entire world had also been her doing.

Since she was someone whose presence inspired constant attention, information of her appearance in the Royal Capital had spread throughout the town within the day. It was a popular subject of conversation between commoners who lacked entertainment, and even members of the aristocracy were sending their subordinates out to gather intel.

The same went for the head of the Archiam family, Darren Archiam. He was currently in his estate in the Royal Capital, listening to a report given by one of those very subordinates.

“First, she headed to a dress shop that deals in wedding dresses,” the man was saying. “After that, she stopped by a fragrance store before returning to the Dolkness estate.”

“Right, she has a wedding coming up...” Count Archiam recalled. “Perhaps we shouldn’t rely on her—”

“Do you have any other options?” his subordinate asked.

The count fell silent for a moment as he pondered this question. Finally, he shook his head. “No...”

“Then I believe we have no choice but to rely on Countess Dolkness.”

The man standing before the count, giving logical advice, was the estate’s steward, Kevin. He was the longest-serving member of the staff working for the

Archiam family, and his father had served the Archiams as well. He was an elderly man who had looked after Darren ever since Darren had been a young child. Whenever the count had a decision to make as the head of the household, he always first discussed it with Kevin.

As always when it came to strategic moves, Kevin was the one who had suggested they should approach Yumiella, who had just appeared in the Royal Capital. The count was forced to admit that this suggestion had virtue; he couldn't think of another way to escape the predicament he was facing other than to ask for Yumiella's aid. He wasn't too happy to have to consider relying on his daughter's classmate, and to avoid the shame of it, he tried to find faults in the plan.

"She has no obligation to save Archiam," he pointed out. "She won't agree to meet with me."

"We should be able to at least get her to see us," Kevin countered. "Oh, I forgot to tell you about this... Today—and, chronologically, this would be before the visit to the fragrance store—Countess Dolkness was standing at the gates of this very estate. It would have been most advantageous if we'd invited her in right then, but the guard stopped her... Admittedly, that's the correct response at any other time, so I cannot blame him too much for how he handled it."

"Why was she here...?" Darren had some interaction with her parents, the previous count and countess, but Yumiella and the Archiam family had no connection whatsoever. He couldn't think of a reason Yumiella would visit the Archiam estate.

Even if Darren didn't grasp her reasoning, the elderly steward probably understood why she'd stopped by. While the count wasn't surprised that Kevin hadn't expected Yumiella's sudden visit, when he considered the manner in which the steward had delivered the information, the man was likely not flustered by Yumiella's unexpected presence.

Darren Archiam asked his steward directly for the answer. "Why? Why was she here?"

"As you already know, Lord Darren, Countess Dolkness has no obvious reason to visit here. Considering that fact, it would be natural to think that the

reasoning lies in the desires of another person. For example, perhaps she came to deliver a message for someone else, or she was here because she was following someone else, something along those lines.”

Though Kevin’s answer wasn’t a straightforward one and quite roundabout in its phrasing, it provided enough information for the gears of the count’s mind to begin turning through the possibilities. *Someone Yumiella Dolkness knows, and who also has business with the Archiam family. Yumiella’s parents, the Ashbatten family...* As he mentally scrolled through possible candidates, he quickly found the answer.

“It must be Eleanora Hillrose.”

“Yes,” Kevin agreed. “According to the guard’s report, she was there as well.”

Eleanora, who was “missing” according to official records, was in the care of the Dolkness household. Though this was technically a secret, it was generally public knowledge, so of course Count Archiam knew of it as well.

His daughter Dorothea and Eleanora had been friends before they’d attended the Academy together. Most centralist aristocrats knew each other from a young age, but because their families were in the same faction, Dorothea and Eleanora had many opportunities to become friends growing up.

Knowing that Eleanora was an innocent girl without a single scheming bone in her body (a continual surprise to everyone, given that she was the ever-conspiring Duke Hillrose’s daughter) Count Archiam couldn’t help but feel a bit relieved that she seemed to be doing all right.

Since they were only friends because of the association of their families, the count wasn’t sure how his daughter actually felt about Eleanora deep down, but in this case, he knew that he could turn their relationship to his advantage. This started to make him feel a little guilty about essentially using this disgraced young noble as a way to get Yumiella to meet with him.

“Thanks to Lady Eleanora, Dorothea was able to escape being alone over the course of her time at the Academy, despite her shy nature...” the count mused. “Is it right for me to be using the person who is practically my daughter’s savior?”

“I don’t believe it’s something to be proud of...” Even Kevin, who preferred to express disapproval indirectly whenever possible, could find no way to sugarcoat this. But before the count could suggest they give up on asking Yumiella for help, the steward continued. “However, as the head of an aristocratic household, it’s necessary to be prepared to get your hands dirty. Even if your subordinates and children despise you for it, there are times where one must pick the options that contradict what is ethically correct.”

“So you think that I should ask for Countess Dolkness to help?”

“I did not say that,” Kevin responded stiffly. “If you wish to accept the predicament the Archiam family is facing, then by all means follow your own ethics and live a free life with your unsullied integrity. You *do* have the option of accepting everything and letting go of your status.”

Though his words seemed to communicate the opposite, the count was beginning to feel that Kevin was encouraging him to take the less ethical path.

Currently, the Archiam family was facing a crisis. Accepting the situation would mean that what the count most desired for his family’s legacy—a dream passed down from generation to generation—would be even farther out of reach. He needed to make a decision not as Darren Archiam, but as the head of the Archiam household.

The count steeled himself and hoped that the steward, who was deeply trusted by his father as well, would give him the final push that he needed.

“What would my father have done in a situation like this?”

The steward responded without pause. “The former count would have done anything to protect his status.”

“Then that’s what I shall do. As the head of the Archiam household, I’ll do anything that I have to.”

“*You* should be making this decision, Lord Darren, not your father.”

“Yes, I understand.”

It was best to put the Archiam family first and toss aside any personal feelings—to act in the way that his father would have done, despite the fact that he

had been hated even by his own family. This was logically the correct thing to do. Not only that, but his father's former right-hand man, Kevin, had even said that he would do the same.

Despite all of this, Yumiella was terrifying. Her standing in the aristocratic society of the Royal Capital was strange. At one point, there had been families trying to form an alliance with her, but she shooed them away. Now, everyone observed her from afar. The fact that she rarely showed her face in the Royal Capital contributed to the air of mystery surrounding her.

Considering the fact that she had taken in Eleanora, she was clearly not the monster that some rumors claimed. At the very least, she was someone who could be reasoned with.

This course of action is the one I must take to survive in the Royal Capital—to protect the fruits of our family's labor. After all, we've worked so long in order to fulfill our long-desired wish. I must use Eleanora and Yumiella... Even if people talk about my foul deeds behind my back, I must do it.

The count's determination was solid. He would think about how to ask for Yumiella's help later on, but he had no concerns about using Eleanora to get to her.

"Well then, please invite Lady Eleanora for a visit."

"As you wish. The countess or the margrave's son may find our actions suspicious, so I will head over there tomorrow morning."

Though the count had no idea what kind of methods Kevin would use to achieve his ends, he knew that his steward had helped him time and time again. The count was sure that one way or another, Kevin would ensure that Yumiella would come before him.

Chapter 3: The Hidden Boss Visits the Count's Home

Good morning. To whom it may concern: despite the fact that I went to bed so late last night, I'm feeling perfectly fine. The weather is pleasant, and it's a beautiful day for making custom armor.

I finished getting ready to go out very quickly, and now I was spending the remainder of my morning wandering restlessly around the estate. Eventually, a servant who seemed to be looking for me appeared and interrupted my impatient pacing.

"Good morning, Lady Yumiella," the servant greeted me. "I didn't realize you were over here."

"Good morning. Did you need something?"

"I'm sorry to bother you so early in the day, but there's a messenger here from Count Archiam."

Count Archiam...? Oh, the lord who lives at that house that Eleanora and I stopped by yesterday. Dorothea's letter for Eleanora has probably arrived. I wonder if Dorothea's response came so quickly to reject a potential visit from Eleanora because the Archiam family already has enough problems. The duke's old faction is crumbling—that's plenty going on without a former Hillrose suddenly visiting on top of that. That's probably why the letter got here sooner than I expected.

"You can just have them leave the letter for Eleanora," I instructed.

"Well, the messenger seems to have something for *you*, Lady Yumiella," the servant explained. "I told him to come on another day, but he insists on waiting as long as it will take to see you."

There were quite a few aristocrats who wanted to see me. They would often request polite social calls, or they'd invite me to swanky parties or to afternoon tea. I generally assumed that what they were after was the social leverage that would come with befriending the strongest person in the world, so I usually

turned them down.

I wonder what this is about, though. I can't imagine why Count Archiam would want to see me when he really ought to be lying low right now.

The reason for the messenger's visit was unclear to me, but I had Eleanora's feelings to consider as well. I decided to go to the drawing room and meet with the messenger, if only to urge them to hand over Dorothea's letter.

I found a nervous, elderly man seated in the drawing room. He was undoubtedly of an age to be considered a senior, but he carried it well, perhaps because of his impeccably tailored clothing. He had an air about him that reminded me of my county deputy, Daemon.

Noticing my presence, the man quickly stood to greet me. "I'm terribly sorry for my sudden visit. I am Kevin, a steward of the Archiam family. I have a request that I must earnestly implore you to consider, Countess Dolkness, one I make on behalf of the head of the Archiam household, Count Darren Archiam."

He seemed so desperate that I found him somewhat off-putting. I had already entered the drawing room, but I was overcome with the desire to take several steps back and close the door between us.

He's definitely going to ask for something insane. I should just accept the letter addressed to Eleanora and have him leave ASAP.

"Thank you for coming," I said stiffly. "I'm Yumiella Dolkness. Before we speak, please let me accept Lady Dorothea's letter."

"I do not possess such a letter."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"I do not have a letter from the daughter of Count Archiam! Lady Dorothea!!!" he exclaimed with uncomfortable intensity, raising his voice at seemingly random points in his statement. From his face and his general demeanor, he seemed like a quiet man, but right now, he was speaking in a distressingly loud voice for reasons which were unclear to me. It made him seem all the stranger.

Also, what do you mean by that? You don't have a letter? Without something

like that, Eleanora won't accept that she can't see her old friend.

"You've heard what happened from the guard at the gates, haven't you?" I asked the steward. "Without a letter from Dorothea, I'll have no choice but to visit her with Lady Eleanora in tow." I decided to use the same threat that I'd used with the guard, but this only caused the man to increase his volume further.

"Would that mean that you, Countess Dolkness, and Lady Eleanora will visit Lady Dorothea?! At the Archiam family estate...?!" He pressed his hand against his throat and coughed several times.

That's what you get for pushing yourself, gramps... You're obviously not used to yelling. This guy said he was a steward, but is he doing okay?

As I stood there, taken aback by this incredibly strange visitor, I heard footsteps pattering toward the drawing room. *Yeah, of course people are going to wonder what's going on and come in here to investigate after he's been yelling like that... Wait, he was generally loud with everything he said, but he exclaimed the loudest whenever he said Dorothea's name, and that means...*

The only person staying in this estate who would react to Dorothea's name burst into the drawing room.

"I heard Dorothea's name!" she exclaimed. "Is she here?"

It finally dawned on me that the man's target was Eleanora. I looked askance at him and, sure enough, I saw a faint smile on his face, as if he was satisfied that his plan had been successful. I finally realized that he wasn't a screaming weirdo, but instead a troublesome opponent—unfortunately, this realization had come too late. The man's expression switched at once to a gentle smile that made him seem completely at ease. He spoke in a kind tone, all traces of his former volume gone.

"It has been a while, Lady Eleanora," he greeted her. "Do you remember me? I'm Kevin, a steward of the Archiam family. I've come here under Lady Dorothea's instruction in order to extend an invitation to you for a visit."

"Of course I remember you," Eleanora said. "Is Dorothea doing well? I haven't gotten a response to any of the letters I've sent her, so I've been worried about

her.”

“Yes... Lady Dorothea is doing just fine.” Eleanora seemed incredibly pleased to hear that her friend was in good health, but Kevin responded only with an uncomfortably awkward smile.

If you're going to play dirty, you should commit to being a bad guy. You're really making it difficult for me to get rid of you.

I sighed before hitting him where it hurt. “If you’re going to feel guilty about it after the fact, then don’t try to trick me in the first place.”

“I apologize,” the steward responded smoothly. “I tried to play the part of a fool, but it seems that some tricks are too complicated for an old dog like me to learn.”

“Well then, Lady Eleanora will be visiting Dorothea at the Archiam estate, so please take good care of her,” I said. “I won’t be going.”

“Lady Dorothea has asked for your presence as well, Countess Yumiella,” Kevin insisted.

Is the guilt an act too? I wondered, repressing the urge to suck my teeth at him. Eleanora appeared by my side before I could say anything else, giving voice to a predictable request.

“Please join me, Yumiella!”

I could tell how experienced the steward was in the use of dirty tricks like this—he’d given up on trying to convince me, since he could tell that I would definitely refuse his invitation, and he’d instead used Eleanora to get to me. *I see, so he’s here for me.*

“Is this what you were after all along?” I accused him.

“Of course, but the invitation is only if you’d like to come,” he assured me. “I’m under strict orders from the count to bring you as well, but I personally believe that just bringing Lady Eleanora shall suffice.”

“If that were the case, couldn’t you have sent out an invitation to just Lady Eleanora?”

The steward shrugged. “Epistles can be lost in transit.”

I found this to be a pretty dubious argument. When letters were sent between aristocrats, it was the sender's responsibility to make sure the letter was ultimately received by the addressee. Though things weren't as reliable when sending a letter to a foreign kingdom, there were rarely any postal accidents in the Royal Capital. In other words, Kevin was insinuating that I would've destroyed the letter.

I would never get rid of a letter addressed to Eleanora... I fumed indignantly before reconsidering. *Oh wait, I guess I might have. In this case, I think I would've handed it directly to her, but if it seemed suspicious, I would totally have looked at the contents or even destroyed it.*

The steward's concerns turned out to have been valid, but whether I would admit that in front of Eleanora was another matter.

"You'll go with me, right?" Eleanora begged excitedly. "Dorothea has lots of beautiful dolls."

"I'll go, I'll go," I immediately answered. If I'd kept pushing back, I probably could have gotten out of going with her, but I was worried about letting Eleanora visit the home of such a suspicious noble family on her own. I turned back to Kevin with a sigh. "So when should we go? We're busy, you know?"

"How about today or tomorrow?" he offered. "Day or night, whichever is convenient for you would be fine... The Archiam family is prepared to welcome you at any time."

I gathered that Count Archiam likely had his back against some kind of political wall, considering the fact that he'd taken the risk of reaching out to me. But was it really this bad? Was it so bad that the day after tomorrow would be too late?

The increasing suspiciousness of this whole situation made me grimace, but Eleanora seemed obliviously pleased.

"Today is..." She considered a moment. "That's right, you're going to go make your armor. Would it be too late to visit after that?"

"I think the armor will take the entire day. I think we'll have to go tomorrow," I said firmly before turning back to Kevin. "Please let Count Archiam and Lady

Dorothea know we'll be visiting tomorrow."

"Very well. If your business concludes earlier than expected, please feel free to visit today."

"We'll be visiting *tomorrow*," I repeated firmly.

After being goaded into it by this cunning old man, it seemed to have been decided for me that I would be visiting the Archiam estate on the following day.

There's no way I'll be able to just have a cup of tea and leave. I'm already anxious and depressed about whatever political ordeal might be waiting for me. Whatever, I'll focus on my custom armor for today. I'll spend the whole day working on it, and then I'll figure out what I'm going to do about the Archiams after that. I'm sure Patrick can give me some advice and help me come up with a good solution. I'll spend the entire day having fun. I'm going to make several incredible and indulgent pieces of armor!



It was our second day in the Royal Capital—in other words, the day we were supposed to sally forth to make my custom armor. Now, the sun was nearing the highest point in the sky, indicating that it was a little past noon. Patrick, Eleanora, and I were sitting in a carriage, swaying with the movement of the vehicle. Our destination: the Archiam estate.

Eleanora was in high spirits, since she was excited to be seeing her friend after a long time. My mood was the complete opposite.

I let out a tragic sigh, my dark thoughts keeping me from hearing Patrick's voice.

"Yumiella," he called out.

"This is the problem with technologically underdeveloped kingdoms..." I muttered morosely.

"Yumiella!" Patrick exclaimed this time, snapping me back to reality. My attention turned from the annoyingly sunny view outside the window to the inside of the carriage.

We were about to visit the home of an aristocrat, an event that always reeked

of trouble, but my mind was totally distracted. I had been trying to listen to Patrick talk about Count Archiam, but most of it had gone in one ear and out the other. Even if I'd wanted to pay attention, it was difficult considering how unmotivated I was feeling. If I were to use the words of the person who had made my mood plummet earlier in the day, I would say that it was "technologically impossible" for me to care about any of this.

Brushing up on my Count Archiam knowledge is motivationally impossible. Ugh, this world has no imagination or whimsy.

"Sorry, I was distracted and wasn't listening," I admitted.

"It's okay. I shouldn't have started with the history of how the Archiam family came to be," Patrick said. "From here on out I'll be talking about the current situation." He looked down at the papers in his hands. They were documents compiled by the people working at the Ashbatten estate in the Royal Capital.

Patrick hadn't been too knowledgeable on Count Archiam either, so we'd decided to enlist the help of the margrave's information network. The fact that the Ashbattens had people who could gather intel so quickly and thoroughly here in the Royal Capital was a reminder of how wide the family's reach was.

Patrick flipped through the papers and skimmed over the text. "This is... It seems like my people didn't put too much effort into their research. I guess it can't be helped since the Archiam lands are pretty distant from the Ashbatten Mark, and we're not too involved with them."

"It's nice enough that they could get something to us so quickly," I pointed out.

"From what this report says, it seems like the Archiams have avoided making any big moves since the Hillrose family's nobility was revoked. They're centralists, but they visit their territory several times a year. Their tax rate is reasonable too... Though, there are rumors that the count spends lavishly and excessively."

"I didn't realize there were radicals who act somewhat reasonably..."

I mostly knew the worst kind of aristocrats, people who never visited their territories despite lacking any official central position and who taxed their

subjects as much as they could while spending all of their money. Given all that, I couldn't help but feel that Count Archiam was one of the better aristocrats. I was concerned about the last bit that Patrick had said regarding the count's spending habits, but then again, most aristocrats who lived in the Royal Capital were big spenders.

"Apparently, whether it's the exterior finish on his mansion or the desserts he serves with tea, he isn't satisfied if everything he has isn't at least the same or better than other aristocrats on his level."

"Oh, that's... Do they have enough money for all of that?"

I think it's fine to be picky with the things you like, but if you keep trying to have better things than everyone around you, you'll never have enough money.

Patrick also seemed curious about the Archiam family's financial situation, so he scanned through the papers in his hands to find out more.

"Found it. This must be it," he said after a short moment of silence. "There are rumors that the family is struggling with debt, but it's unclear how true that is."

"They're probably riddled with debt," I observed with a shrug. "They're taking on more expenses than those around them, but their income is average, right?"

"Probably. Their territory is pretty large too... I think their primary source of wealth is their lumber production."

Something dawned on me. "The construction company that's working for us, Archit Trading Company—is it possible that Count Archiam is profiting from the tax revenue on the business that company is doing?"

Patrick considered this. "If the company was started by the count, sure, but otherwise..."

"Oh, I see. I guess their names are just similar, and they're probably separate entities."

I recalled how Archiam County looked when I'd gone to transport the logs. Aside from the trading company with whom we were working, the place hadn't seemed particularly prosperous. If there were mines somewhere in the territory that were managed by the count or something else along those lines, the family

might have been incredibly wealthy, but there appeared to be no such sources of income within their county borders.

Given the information we currently had, Count Archiam seemed to be a centralist who wasn't necessarily a bad person, but he clearly liked to show off. The only thing that concerned me was the matter of his probable debts. I was also disappointed that there was no personal information that might indicate what kind of person the count was.

Oh right, Eleanora's probably met him before.

I turned my attention from Patrick to the blonde and bubbly girl sitting beside me.

"You've met him before, right, Lady Eleanora? What kind of person is Count Archiam?"

"Every member of that family is very dedicated to their hobbies, including Dorothea. Dorothea has lots of adorable dolls."

I wonder if the dolls Dorothea owns are like those really fancy ball-jointed dolls like they have in Japan. Dolls are just as expensive in this world as they were in my last one, so it's just more evidence that the Archiams might be the reckless spenders I'm imagining they are. I don't think they'll ask to borrow money though... Reaching out to me was probably a last resort.

What kind of trouble is this visit going to bring? I wondered as I turned forward to look at Patrick. He shook his head as if to say, "I don't know either."

Patrick seemed worried, but I hadn't heard anything about the count yet that would give me a real reason to be so concerned. We'd ended up destined to go to the Archiam estate because Eleanora wanted to see her friend, but I had no reason to be considerate of the count's wants or needs, especially since I would be meeting him for the first time. There was no need for me to hear out his concerns with empathy, nor did I have any obligation to accept anything he might request of me.

"It'll probably be fine," I said. "I'll just turn him down, no matter what he asks for."

"Can you really turn him down?" Patrick asked, giving a significant look at the

woman by my side.

Is something wrong with Eleanora? I thought, only to notice that Eleanora was on the verge of sticking her head out of the carriage window. It would've been a little dangerous.

"We're here!" she exclaimed.

The carriage gently came to a stop, and I was surprised to find that we had already arrived at the count's estate. The gates that had been tightly shut the day before were now wide open, positioned to welcome us. That was how I ended up unwillingly visiting the home of a radical aristocrat.



Kevin, the steward of the Archiam family, greeted us and led us down the halls of the estate.

"He's the one that came by this morning," I whispered in Patrick's ear so the elderly man walking in front of us couldn't hear.

"The one who loudly caught Lady Eleanora's attention?"

"Yeah, he might seem quiet, but be careful of him."

Once we'd entered the mansion, it became clear that Count Archiam's sense of ostentatiousness was pretty intense. From the outside, it just seemed like the estate was a surprisingly large one for someone who held the rank of a count. But it turned out to be absolutely ridiculous on the inside.

The halls of the Archiam estate were like a cluttered art gallery. There were countless paintings, antique vases, foreign folk art pieces, beautiful decorative plates, and much more. *Is that...a scale model of this estate?*

Apparently, the density of objects decorating the estate weren't enough. All of the fixtures, from the lights to the doorknobs, were excessively decorative. The Royal Palace and Eleanora's former home were quite flamboyant in their choice of decor, but even those places didn't go as hard as the count. Even from the perspective of a noble, the decor here was far too gaudy. Patrick seemed just as taken aback as I was as he took it all in.

We continued down the hall, and Kevin came to a halt right before we

reached the stairs. A maid waited at the foot of the stairwell.

“You’ll be headed this way, Lady Eleanora,” Kevin instructed. “Lady Dorothea awaits you.”

I guess only Patrick and I are needed to hear whatever the count has to say. Eleanora’s here to see her friend, so it should be fine if we split up.

I watched as Eleanora did as she was told, and Patrick whispered to me, “Isn’t it dangerous to let her go alone? Who knows what Dorothea might say to Lady Eleanora...”

Patrick had a point—I did have some concerns. Eleanora did have a very strong will. For instance, even though I’d continued to brush her off for years at the Academy, she never doubted her belief that I liked her, and so she continued to persistently and stubbornly interact with me. Still, I found that I was worried about her. I decided to go with her.

“I’ll join her,” I said, which made Eleanora turn around.

“Please do!” she happily exclaimed. “Dorothea’s dolls are lovely! Please join me.”

The count was going to have to wait a bit, but surely he wouldn’t mind. Just to make sure it was all right, I looked to Kevin, who nodded at me with a smile.

“Lady Dorothea will be pleased as well,” he agreed. “Just make sure not to stay too long...”

“I know,” I reassured. “I’ll come back and listen to what Count Archiam has to say.”

Patrick decided not to join us on the second floor because he felt awkward at the idea of essentially crashing a gathering of noble ladies, so Eleanora and I alone followed the maid to where Dorothea awaited us.

Right before we reached the top of the stairs, I heard the voice of a young girl.

“Is Lady Eleanora really visiting?!”

“Lady Dorothea, please—”

“How am I supposed to face—”

“Lady Dorothea! She’s already here.”

Oh, the landings of the stairs probably caused a blind spot on the way up, so she only saw the maid leading the way...

I couldn’t tell just by her voice, but that voice had probably been Dorothea’s. Despite what the voice had said, Eleanora reacted with unabashed joy and rushed ahead of the maid, hurrying up the stairs to the second floor. I followed.

“Dorothea! I’m glad to see you’re doing well. It’s been so long.”

“I’m glad to see that you’re just as well, Lady Eleanora...” Dorothea said, looking down awkwardly. Her reaction slowly brought back memories of when I’d vaguely known her at the Academy.

I seemed to recall that her long hair had been tied in pigtails back then, but now it was cut off at her shoulder. It added a lightness to her appearance, but despite that, she was just as unconfident and timid as I remembered her to be.

She had probably been fourth in Eleanora’s entourage, and I’d always had the impression that she wasn’t that bad of a person—in other words, I’d thought she was a good deal better than the other aristocratic daughters who’d tried to control Eleanora and make her do things for their benefit.

I remembered that Dorothea had been someone of few words. She’d never tried to fill Eleanora’s head with ideas, nor had she voiced her opinions. She’d just conformed to and agreed with the group. She’d never seemed to have any ill intent, but she hadn’t tried to do any good either. Things wouldn’t have been different with or without her.

“We can head to the doll room, yes?” Eleanora asked. It seemed like she’d been here countless times. She tried to press forward in a familiar manner, but Dorothea stopped her.

“Yumiella is here too, so, um...” she said hesitantly.

“It’ll be all right!” Eleanora reassured her.

“Okay...”

Oh, it looks like Dorothea doesn’t want me to go to the “doll room,” whatever that is.

Dorothea kept glancing over at me. I could understand why she wouldn't want to bring someone unfamiliar into a room that housed possessions that were so important to her, but that sort of reasoning wouldn't work with Eleanora.

Eleanora took the lead and stopped before a certain door. She didn't open it, though, instead turning to Dorothea as if she was urging her to go inside first. Dorothea looked like she had given up, but she said one thing to me as she reached for the doorknob.

"I think you'll be shocked."

What's waiting inside? I peeked into Dorothea's hobby room and...gritted my teeth and tried to hold back the scream that almost leaped out of my mouth.

"It's...incredible," I managed to say.

"Isn't it?!" Eleanora exclaimed. "Their faces and clothes are all so adorable. I love everything about them."

The dimly lit room was filled with dolls. I wasn't sure if these were like ball-jointed dolls, but they were dressed in a similar manner to Western antique dolls.

If that was all there was to it, they would have actually been cute, but there was an outrageous number of them. A tall display case standing against the wall had four shelves, each filled to the brim with these dolls. On top of that, the curtains were drawn despite the fact that it was daytime.

"Why do you keep the curtains drawn?" I asked curiously.

"The sunlight damages them, so I keep them shut," Dorothea said as if it were obvious. She entered the room, and Eleanora excitedly followed.

I stepped into the room that looked like a horror game level. There was a desk that had dolls missing all four limbs lying on top of it, and there was a chair with a larger doll sitting on it. It was definitely a room just for dolls. I felt my heart pounding, worried that one of the dolls might start moving, and Dorothea bowed her head to me.

"I'm sorry. You must be surprised."

“No, not at all,” I lied. “The one that’s taken apart... Are you fixing it?”

“It’s one that I’m in the process of making,” Dorothea explained.

“Dorothea makes her own dolls,” Eleanora added.

I was surprised. *You can make these things yourself?* Impressed, I took a closer look at the doll on the desk and noticed it was missing one eye. *She’s probably going to add a glass eye in that hole... It’s still scary.*

“I see, you make them yourself...” I said, a little bit put off by how seriously she apparently took this hobby.

“I know it’s a little creepy that I have all these dolls and even make them myself,” Dorothea admitted, her expression clouding over.

Eleanora was a rare breed, and she was still excitedly examining every doll in the room. Dorothea probably hadn’t wanted me to come in because most people probably reacted the way I currently was.

As someone who also had hobbies that most people had trouble understanding, I didn’t want to shame someone else’s interests. I felt a little pathetic for being weirded out by something I couldn’t comprehend.

“That’s not true at all,” I assured her, trying to swallow my sense of unease. “I also used to make something similar.”

“You also made dolls?!” Dorothea squeaked in rapture.

“They were humanoid, but they were a bit different from the dolls you have here.”

Back in Japan, I’d indeed had a similar hobby. My “dolls” had been plastic, but usually human-shaped. I’d argue that a plastic model of a human-shaped mobile suit was basically a doll.

Dorothea, who mistook me as a like-minded person, inched closer to me, eyes shining.

“Really?! I wish I’d known about this back at the Academy. What kind of dolls did you make?”

“Mainly those from the Universal Century.”

“Did you dress them up?”

“I used green and red on their exteriors. I apologize, I didn’t really do things the correct way...” I said sheepishly. “I even used markers to color them.”

The proper method would have been to airbrush the parts, but I didn’t have the motivation to take it that seriously. I had always dreamed of having a red model painted with candy paint, but that required skill and took too many steps. Modeling kits in recent years had also gotten so high in quality that just building what was in the box made for a decent model without any extra effort at all. *Wait, this isn’t the time for this. I can’t really answer all of her questions since I’m trying to pass off plastic model kits as the same as doll making.*

We were obviously not on the same page, so Dorothea was probably not understanding me either, and yet our conversation continued for some unknown reason.

“There are lots of difficulties when making dolls. Did you have any particular troubles?”

“It’s so difficult to make them stand when you’re displaying them.”

“You could make your dolls stand on their own?! That’s incredible!”

I shook my head. “They always fall backward without some sort of base or a stand.”

“Yes, it’s difficult to balance them,” Dorothea said sagely.

“It also gets more difficult the more extravagant the piece is.”

“I completely understand!”

Wait, are we actually on the same page? I was talking about how models with lots of clunky parts fall backward...

Dorothea was more animated than I’d ever seen her at the Academy. She pointed at the doll she was currently working on.

“This one, she doesn’t have a name yet. Would you do me the honor of naming her?”

“Um, how about Nightingale?”

“Nightingale. That’s a nice name, it’s lovely.”

She liked it. I guess it’s fine; it does sound like a person’s name. Now that I’m thinking of her dolls as plastic models, they’re easier to understand. I can see why she’d want to collect a whole bunch of them and display them all.

After asking Dorothea’s permission, I touched the arm that hadn’t been attached to the body yet. The ball joint on the arm was similar to the hip joint on a plastic model. Unlike the knees on my models, which only moved in one direction, this ball joint could move freely. This was revolutionary.

I didn’t want to break it by overhandling it, so I gently placed the arm back down on the desk. I looked over to Eleanora, who’d been uncharacteristically quiet, and she was staring intently at each doll one by one. I looked back and made eye contact with Dorothea.

“Until now, only Lady Eleanora understood my passion,” she said happily. “You’re the second person. I thought it might be possible, since Lady Eleanora said it was all right for you to join, and it seems she was right.”

It appeared that Eleanora had been the only person who’d appreciated Dorothea’s hobby. The fact that she could accept everything equally was one of Eleanora’s many amazing qualities.

Though, if we’re being real, I feel like she said it was fine to let me in because she wasn’t thinking that deeply about it...

Eleanora kept staring at the dolls, mesmerized. I wondered if she was going to start making silly faces at them.

“You really get what’s great about Lady Eleanora,” I said, observing the girl in question with great fondness.

“She’s a lovely person,” Dorothea agreed. “I’ve always loved Lady Eleanora, ever since we were little.”

“Oh, I’m not sure if you knew—she’s actually living with me right now,” I said proudly.

“Thank you.”

Huh? I was trying to boast about how I’m living with Eleanora, but she sneak

attacked me with gratitude?

Dorothea looked down and continued in a sad tone. "Lady Eleanora always treated me so well, but I couldn't do anything in return for her. When we were younger, and even when we were at the Academy, I couldn't do anything for Lady Eleanora when I saw others taking advantage of her."

"Oh, well, I'm guilty of that too," I admitted.

I had also left Eleanora alone despite knowing her situation. I'd just ended up taking Eleanora in somewhat accidentally after I'd gotten involved in the commotion caused by Duke Hillrose. I couldn't judge Dorothea for not having done anything.

"That's not true," Dorothea responded. "After meeting you at the Academy, Lady Eleanora changed."

I shook my head. "I don't think I did anything in particular when we were students."

"I think it would be difficult to call what you did 'nothing.'"

Back at the Academy, I had tried to keep a low profile and avoid standing out, even when Lady Eleanora had started to follow me around. I was trying to be careful so that I didn't upset the daughter of the duke.

Well, I don't know about Count Archiam, but there's no reason to be cautious of Dorothea. Eleanora should be fine alone with her. I'll quickly hear out whatever he's invited me over to say, turn him down, and leave.

After politely taking my leave, I exited the room and allowed the maid to lead me to the drawing room, where I found Patrick waiting alone.

"Where's Count Archiam?" I asked.

"He should be here soon now that you're here."

I guess he thought it was pointless to discuss his issues with just Patrick. I personally think that convincing Patrick first is a better way to get me on board.

I looked around the drawing room. It was also decorated to appeal to the taste of a wealthy person with an excessive number of paintings and curios. *If they have the space to display weirdly shaped miniature houses, they should put*

out one or two of Dorothea's dolls.

Even the cups in which the tea was served were probably impressive to someone with the right eye for these things. I took a sip and tried to relax, but Count Archiam arrived right away. He was incredibly quick, almost like he had been waiting in the next room over so that he could appear the moment I was ready. *Can you at least wait till I eat all the desserts you've served?*

"It's nice to meet you," he greeted nervously. "I'm Darren Archiam, head of the Archiam household."

"I'm Yumiella Dolkness," I responded, only a little coldly. "It's a pleasure."

"I thank you for taking the time in your busy schedule to stop by today. I heard that you might be visiting tomorrow, so... I'm glad you came today instead."

"It's no problem. We wrapped up our business much sooner than we'd expected."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness."

Count Archiam looked to be in his forties, which seemed correct for a parent of my classmate. He was also quite built. He wasn't overweight by any means—he was either a man of large stature, or he had large muscles under his expensive clothes. I had expected the usual overweight physique typical of evil aristocrats, so this was a surprise. The man shrank his large body into a bow and humbly thanked me.

I think you may be getting the wrong idea. I didn't cancel my plans to come here. I need to set him straight so that he isn't overly hopeful for my cooperation.

"Really, my plans just ended early because this kingdom's so behind in its technological advancement," I explained.

"Technology?" he asked curiously. "What sort of technology?"

"Armor processing and magi-technology."

"I thought I could be of help, but those are outside my area of expertise. When it comes to magi-technology, we're behind in comparison to Lemlaesta."

Remembering what had happened at the armor shop made me irritated all over again. I found myself upset enough that I wanted to vent my feelings to this man I was meeting for the first time. “The so-called top craftsman of this kingdom, who completely destroyed my dreams, was quite awful. It was really horrible. No matter what I suggested, he would just mechanically respond, ‘That’s technologically impossible.’”

“What kind of item were you trying to make, Lady Dolkness?”

Why thank you for asking! Of the various ideas that were rejected, which should I start with? I considered the possibilities. Patrick attempted to interrupt.

“Lord Archiam, we should quickly get to the main—” he began, but I cut him off.

“As someone who doesn’t understand creativity, you should stay out of this, Patrick,” I said, and then turned back to the count. “I went to make some armor... I was planning to add various features and specialized pieces.”

Count Archiam nodded. “It’s not uncommon for the head of a household to have their own custom suit of armor, especially if they’re part of a noble family who is frequently involved with combat.” Though he seemed troubled by Patrick’s obvious discomfort with this conversational tangent, the count joined in on the conversation readily enough.

I don’t think the Dolkness household is particularly involved in combat...? We have hired soldiers who are basically police, but we don’t have a military. Patrick and I can fight, and we have a slightly strong dragon, and that’s about it. But I guess it’s fine. There’s no use in correcting such a small detail.

“First, I wanted a wire on the arm... I basically wanted it to be able to shoot out a strong rope from here.” I pointed to my wrist. “The tip of the rope would have a hook so I could jump from roof to roof. However...” As I spoke, I couldn’t help but relive my traumatic conversation with the guy who was supposedly the best craftsman in the kingdom.



“That is technologically impossible.”

“It’s just shooting out a wire,” I insisted. “I want the tip to stab into the walls

of buildings so that I can swing through the air.”

“The shooting mechanism might be possible, but since the rope needs to be stored inside the device, it could only be as long as the average height of a person.”

“There would be no point in something that short,” I grumbled. “But you’re saying that it’s possible to shoot *something* out, right? Then let’s do the pile bunker—an iron stake shooting out at incredible speed so that it can pierce armor.”

“It won’t be fast enough to do that.”

“Really? Okay...well, assuming we could solve the issue of the rope length for the wire, are you saying that the metal tip wouldn’t stab into walls?”

The proprietor shook his head. “But if you shot it at a wooden plank that’s about an arm’s length away, it should be able to pierce it.”

“Then how about a beam... Could you make the armor shoot something similar to a dragon’s breath?”

“That’s impossible. That’s the most impossible request of them all.”

I sighed. “What about a purge function? Can you make it so all the pieces of the armor fly off my body?”

“Can’t you just take it off normally?”

“The point is to get rid of the heavy armor to make yourself lighter during battle,” I explained. “No one is stupid enough to slowly take off their suit of armor mid battle.”

“If you’re in battle, you shouldn’t remove your armor.” The craftsman perked up. “Oh, but research on simplifying how we put on and take off armor is making progress! So please look forward to that!”



“...that’s what he told me, and he was so proud. He doesn’t have any imagination. The purge function needs to be so strong that the pieces of armor flying off can knock your enemies down. Don’t you agree, Count Archiam?”

Man, I feel better after talking about it.

Count Archiam, who had listened intently without interrupting me, nodded. "I agree..."

"So, that's why our business ended early, and that's why we're here now."

"Are we back on topic...?" Count Archiam asked worriedly, his eyes swimming in confusion. He glanced a little desperately at the man sitting at my side.

Patrick answered quickly. "We're back. Please, explain the reason for our visit at once. If you don't, we'll have to listen to an even longer story."

"A-All right... Right, I was the one who asked to meet with Lady Dolkness." Count Archiam's mind seemed to snap back to reality, and he adjusted his posture before continuing. "The Archiam family is facing a predicament. I would like to ask you for your help, Countess Dolkness."

"No thank you," I responded automatically.

"I see, of course. Thank you for taking the time to come here."

Things had been resolved rather quickly. Patrick and I were stunned, but the count paid no mind to us. He stood and headed for the door...before suddenly stopping in his tracks, his shoulders trembling. Before him was Kevin the steward, standing in front of the door as if he were keeping the count from leaving the drawing room.

"As I've always said, you are too understanding, Lord Darren," Kevin began. "Please at least explain the details of the situation to them."

"But..." The count wavered. "What would my predecessor have done in this situation, Kevin?"

"He would have at least explained the details," the steward responded firmly.

"Even if the foundation is useless and the frame could further crumble?"

"It is up to the head of the household. Please make your decision, Lord Darren." The way Kevin said the count's name sounded as if he were admonishing him.

Though they were a middle-aged lord and his elderly steward, they were far

enough apart in age that they could have been parent and child. Kevin had probably looked after the count since he had been a young boy, and so it appeared that the count now had trouble taking a strong stance against Kevin's will.

Count Archiam sighed as he sat back down.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, but I'd like you to hear about the Archiam family's crisis."

"I'm only going to listen," I warned him.

"I would be grateful if you were to sympathize and help us, but it would mean getting deeply involved in a dispute between central aristocrats. I understand why you would want to avoid such a situation."

Personally, I was starting to feel that the count had made a really great impression on me. Most centralists—especially those who were radicals—didn't understand that I wasn't fond of power struggles between the nobility. After all, those kinds of struggles came from their seemingly genuine belief that expanding your power was the ultimate form of happiness. Because the count seemed to understand that I preferred to live a peaceful life in my county, I felt quite a bit more relaxed.

I don't know the details yet, but it looks like this is some sort of power struggle. Patrick's people didn't have enough time to investigate properly, but from what he's saying, I guess he's going at it with some other aristocratic families.

"So this is about a power struggle between centralists? I would've preferred you asking for a loan."

"There is no need for that sort of concern," the count assured me. "We're doing well financially."

There are some rumors about you drowning in debt, but I'm glad to hear that you don't have money troubles after all. Still, I'm surprised that you're doing fine financially, considering... I looked around their overly decorated drawing room.

The count fell silent in thought for a while before he continued. "I don't believe you're too familiar with what's going on with the centralists in general,

so I'll start at the beginning. I'm sure you know all about Duke Hillrose's coup, so...let me start from the current state of affairs in the Royal Capital. The Hillrose family's nobility was revoked, and other powerful families also disappeared. Our faction has completely lost influence."

"I understand that the radical families are in a difficult situation," I said in a neutral tone.

"Radicals... I see," Darren mumbled, his voice taking on a note of self-derision. Patrick poked me with his elbow, as if to point out my rude comment.

Right, "radicals" is an insulting term, and they're officially the duke's faction. But the duke is gone, so... The former duke's faction? I'm not sure what to call them.

"Oh, I apologize. Um, the former? Previous? Duke's faction...?" I had no intentions of helping out the Archiam family, but I didn't want to unnecessarily upset him. As I racked my brain to think up a diplomatic way to refer to the radical faction, the count seemed to realize that I'd meant no harm with what I'd said.

He let out a nervous chuckle before he continued. "If I recall correctly, you grew up in Dolkness County. You would've learned the term 'radicals' after you moved here to attend the Academy. Do you remember who you first heard it from? What position was that person in?"

I learned about radicals when... Oh, I heard it from the queen when we met after my audience with the king. She told me about how there are moderates and radicals, and the latter are aggressively ambitious, so I should be careful of them.

I hadn't realized it at the time, but I was now amazed by the queen's duplicity in referring to herself as a part of the "moderate" faction. Even if she had explained that these were colloquial names for the factions, if you had to choose between "moderate" and "radical," the latter obviously sounded much worse.

"The moderates are the ones who started referring to your faction as 'radicals'—in other words, the royalists started this by trying to manipulate your faction's image," I said slowly.

“Exactly,” the count said, sounding impressed that I’d understood. “Before the coup, we called ourselves expansionists.”

Expansionists, huh? You’re part of the group who wanted to use military force to expand your territories, so you still sound like radicals to me. They probably have words that ridicule the royalists too, so this battle between factions just sounds like kids name-calling on the playground.

Perhaps Count Archiam could tell that I was thinking that all of this sounded like silly nonsense, so he cleared his throat to get back to the topic at hand. “My apologies, it’s all just wordplay. Let me get back to the main point... We’re facing a difficult situation and royalist nobles believe this to be a good opening for an attack. They plan on sucking their weakened prey dry.”

“I’m sorry, but in this situation, what is the definition of ‘moderate’?” I couldn’t help but sympathize. Regardless of faction, centralist families loved things like money and power. *I guess it’s not hard to imagine centralists seeing their opposing faction weakened and trying to thoroughly wipe them out. Even if I didn’t expect it to come to this, I never thought moderates were all saints or anything in the first place.*

Still, in order to take something from another person, a just cause was needed. “Give me your territory because I’m stronger” wasn’t acceptable reasoning in this kingdom. If such reasoning was to go unchallenged, things would get out of control, and the king or a third party would have to step in and calm things down. I reflected that when something like this occurred between different kingdoms, there wasn’t really anyone who could step in and mediate, so absurd claims often got blown out of proportion... *Wait, this kind of thinking isn’t relevant right now.*

The atmosphere grew heavy. The intense quality of the scene, set against the glittering, lavish backdrop of the drawing room made it even more uncomfortable. The count seemed to be depressed by the situation he was trying to explain, and an awkward silence fell.

Despite how difficult it felt to say anything, Patrick urged the count to continue.

“We understand the situation surrounding the expansionists,” he prompted.

“So, what is about to be taken from the Archiam family?”

The count took a deep breath. “I’m going to be stripped of my position. Our family has always been a centralist one, but at this rate we’re going to be diminished into a mere provincial family.”

“Your position... I see, without the duke’s power backing you, it’s not impossible for that to happen...” Patrick said with a nod that indicated that he understood.

I had no idea what the issue was. *Positions are like...when you’re a minister of something, like the “Lord of Whatever,” right? Like the Lord of Home Affairs, the Lord of Foreign Affairs, the Lord of Military Affairs?* I substituted the word “minister” for “lord” in my head to better understand.

The famous positions of which I was thinking were usually held by one person of a certain family and passed down to each succeeding head of the family. For less impressive positions, there were multiple people who’d held the office, or two families would take turns every few years, and in those cases things were a bit more complicated.

What is Count Archiam the lord of...? It seems like Patrick knows. It would be rude to ask him directly, I thought, looking askance at Patrick and hoping that he would tell me. *Oh, but asking in front of the person in question would also be rude.* I turned back to face the count.

It seemed that my actions were awkward and suspicious, and Count Archiam let out a nervous chuckle.

“Oh, I am the Lord of National Affairs...technically.”

The Lord of National Affairs? The title makes it sound like it has something to do with protecting the kingdom as a nation, so maybe it’s military-related? The Lord of Military Affairs is the highest-ranking militarily related post, and there are other positions within that category, but I don’t remember learning about a “Lord of National Affairs” while at the Academy.

I hadn’t forgotten about it or anything like that. There were two radical families working in positions related to the Royal Army, and both had fallen after the coup. *I know all of this, so I’m definitely not mistaken. What the heck is*

a Lord of National Affairs?

“Excuse me for asking, but what exactly does that job entail...?”

The count paused for a moment before he answered. “I help to encourage the people of this nation, including aristocrats, to protect this kingdom from both external and internal forces. Technically speaking.”

“Encourage the people of this nation?” I blinked in confusion. “Um, what kind of authority do you specifically have?”

“None at all. I have no authority, no benefits, and no budget.”

A position with no real substance, and just some ambiguous description... Oh, I finally get it!

“Oh! You’re one of those Lords of Doing Nothing.” The moment the words left my mouth, I knew I’d screwed up.

The “Lord of Doing Nothing” was a title I had come up with and only used in my thoughts to describe aristocrats who held an empty title that required no actual work. Despite their idleness, they were still legitimate centralists, and they were treated the same as the other lords in name.

I’d always felt that there was no benefit to remembering all the various positions and people with these titles, so I didn’t know anything about the official positions for most of the Lords of Doing Nothing...including the Lord of National Affairs.

I totally just made it seem like I’m making fun of him. Will he get mad? I wondered, bracing myself.

Count Archiam just seemed gloomy and defeated as he mumbled, “At least call me the Lord of Being Unable to Do Anything.”

“The Lord of Being Unable to Do Anything... It takes away the implication of apathy, but it also makes you sound like you’re useless,” I pointed out. “Perhaps ‘Lord of Not Being Allowed to Do Anything’ would be better?”

“Then let’s go with that,” he said as if he didn’t care anymore.

Count Archiam isn’t upset, but he’s definitely hurt. Sorry.

Now that I'd caught up to Patrick, I understood why he understood the situation. It would be easy to strip the count of a position that didn't really do anything.

Encouraging the people of this nation, including aristocrats, to protect this kingdom from both external and internal forces, was it? If they just ask him, "Have you conducted such activities?" and he can't respond, he would be fired for neglecting his duty. If he gets upset and asks them what in the world a Lord of National Affairs is supposed to do, which is a totally valid question, they would then say the position isn't needed anymore.

Even if the count had been busy running PR-type events, they could just claim that his efforts weren't effective. The job description was so vague that it would be impossible to prove whether he'd succeeded or not. I could imagine the majority opinion would win.

Even someone like me who wasn't familiar with politics could easily come up with these methods to bring down the Archiam family. All of the people who loved messy political struggles probably had much more nefarious tricks up their sleeves.

"It sounds like you're doomed," I said.

"You're right," the count agreed. "This central position that my ancestors worked so hard to obtain will end with me. Not only that, but the one trying to destroy the Archiam family is *the* Marquess Prynan."

There were three families that held the rank of marquess in Valschein, and the Prynan family was one of them. Starting from the highest rank in the kingdom, there was the royal family, the now-fallen Hillrose family, the three marquess families (who all held equal power), and *then* all of the various counts.

The royal family would never go out of their way to take down a mere count, and the duke was out of the picture, so this meant Count Archiam's enemy was the most powerful that he could possibly face.

If I recall correctly, Marquess Prynan is the Lord of Finance. Why would a person of such legitimate power want to take down a Lord of Doing Nothing? I could understand it more if it was the Lord of Military Affairs getting upset

about the Lord of National Affairs being an empty title.

“Did you do anything to offend the Lord of Finance?” I asked curiously.

“We have no personal or familiar issues, but...other members of our faction were making a commotion out of unreasonable things, like how the kingdom’s budget was being divided and our level of compensation. I’m sure just the fact that my family is an expansionist one is probably enough to garner his resentment.”

“So it’s a private grievance...” I nodded. “That makes sense, since there’s nothing to gain from taking your position from you anyways.”

“That isn’t true,” Count Archiam countered. “It would mean reducing the power of his opposing faction, even if it’s only by a small amount. He might be planning to give the position to someone he’s brought up himself. There are plenty of aristocrats who would want such a position, even if it’s an empty title.”

What? People want that? People want to be a Lord of Not Being Allowed to Do Anything? I wouldn’t want that. Even if there was a Lord of Leveling... No, I don’t want it... Well, I mean, no one else would be fit for the position. I also wouldn’t be able to stand it if someone else was randomly calling themselves the Lord of Leveling.

Setting aside the (sadly) nonexistent position of Lord of Leveling, the Lord of National Affairs was an unnecessary position, but there were still some people who wanted it...and Count Archiam wanted to keep his position.

I don’t really see a reason to keep the position. Lords of Doing Nothing don’t get an allowance from the government, and all you get is status. There isn’t a single detriment to letting go of the position. Why not give it up?

“I don’t see any issue with just losing your position,” I admitted. “Giving it up seems to be an option.”

“The Archiam family has long wished to use the position of Lord of National Affairs to have influence over the army. Losing the position would push back the advancement of this family.”

“I see...” In the meandering turns that this conversation had taken, I had

completely forgotten that the Archiams were also radicals.

I had to give props to the fact that if nothing else, their ambitions were extensive. *I thought you guys were different...* I felt strangely betrayed by this person I'd just met.

The count continued, unconcerned. "The Lord of National Affairs is a position that my predecessor five generations prior struggled to obtain. As the head of the Archiam family, I can't just hand it over like it's nothing."

"If you've inherited such a title, your predecessor must have achieved something really impressive."

The count shrugged. "No, he bought the title. He got close to the predecessor of Duke Hillrose and used money he drained from Archiam County to purchase the position. He made up some appropriate-sounding achievements and used the duke's power to create the new position of Lord of National Affairs."

"Heugh?" An incredibly strange sound left my mouth.

I can't negate his respect for his ancestors... was a thought that now felt silly. The current Count Archiam was just as weird for so plainly admitting that the position had been bought. *Does he really want to keep this position?*

"Because of that, our family was riddled with debt until the previous generation. Now that we've fully paid everything back, we have a little more room to breathe, but...we basically worked that hard to keep this. Even if it's a position we bought, I can't let it easily be taken from us."

"Is that so?" I said with a sigh.

"Not only that, if we give up this office, we'll lose our central status and be reduced to mere provincial aristocrats. If I were to attend any soirees in the Royal Capital with other centralists, they'd mock me for being a pseudocentralist."

"If you become a mere provincial aristocrat, then you can just live like one. No one will say anything to you if you only visit the Royal Capital every now and then, right?"

From what I'd heard before this meeting, Count Archiam was one of the few

central aristocrats who properly managed his territory. Archiam County was doing much better than Dolkness County, so surely living there wouldn't be so bad.

But at the end of the day, Count Archiam was a centralist. I'd never had someone like him agree with me in a discussion like this.

He sadly shook his head. "I was born and raised in the Royal Capital. The same goes for my children. We couldn't endure living in our territory. Even if I would be fine moving back, my children would be unhappy."

"Living in the country is pretty nice," I pointed out. "I'm quite happy."

"That's because you're Yumiella Dolkness. My daughter may be the same age as you, but do you really think she would have the same sensibilities as you?!" His voice rose sharply.

Excuse you?! What he'd said basically meant, "Don't you dare compare a barbarian like yourself to my sensitive, city-bred child!" Well, maybe the "barbarian" part is me trying to come off as a victim in this situation, but he's basically saying I'm nothing like his daughter, who's a proper noble lady.

I'm not that upset but... Go, Patrick! Your beautiful fiancée is being treated horribly! Do something super effective!

I looked to him to show that I chose him, and I saw his mouth move. He didn't voice it, but he clearly said, "He's not wrong."

I thought the same—he wasn't wrong. Eleanora was a rare case considering how well she'd adapted to life in the countryside, despite the fact that she was a noble lady from the Royal Capital. The change in environment would be an incredible stress to the weak constitution of a typical lady of the aristocracy. Dorothea seemed like she would be weak to such a change.

Ugh, I guess I won't be able to get him to give up his position.

Count Archiam, who had no intention of ever giving up his position, apologized for raising his voice. "I apologize, I just..."

"It's all right," I said with a deep sigh. "I see now your resolve to hold on to your position until the end."

“I think you now understand our situation. With all of that said, I implore you to consider helping us.”

“No thank you.”

“I expected as much.”

It was a repeat of our previous conversation.

I’d found out that I had a little sympathy for them, that the thing they were holding on to had no value and that getting involved would only get Marquess Prynan upset with me. I definitely didn’t want any part of this. Count Archiam asked for my help knowing perfectly well the position I was in, and so he understood why I refused to help.

“I apologize for taking up your time with this long discussion regarding our troubles...” the count said before turning to his steward. “This is fine, right, Kevin?”

Right, it wasn’t his idea to explain things to us. He had no choice after his old steward ordered him to.

Following the count’s gaze, I looked toward the only door to the room where the disingenuous steward awaited, and...he wasn’t there. *You’re the one who told him to do this*, I thought crossly in the steward’s general direction. *You should see it through!* I felt my energy nearly drain away, but Patrick’s sharp voice pulled me back to reality.

“Curses!” he swore. “I thought I was paying attention.”

Hey, Pat-Pat? Why are you so flustered? My question was answered before I could actually ask him.

Someone knocked on the door we were all looking at, and the answer was waiting on the other side. What had Patrick been afraid of when we’d split up from Eleanora? I, an idiot, had thought that he’d been worried about Dorothea treating her coldly, and so I’d assumed things were fine after seeing them interact in such a friendly way.

I just would have had to think a little more to get to the real answer. The reason we came to the Archiam estate was because Eleanora wanted to come.

The person who'd made all of this happen had left us. If he wasn't going after Patrick or me, then...

The door opened to reveal a smiling Kevin and a sad-looking Eleanora. Dorothea wasn't there—Kevin had probably separated them somehow.

"Dorothea's family, the Archiam family...they seem to be in trouble," Eleanora said. "Couldn't you do something about it, Yumiella?"

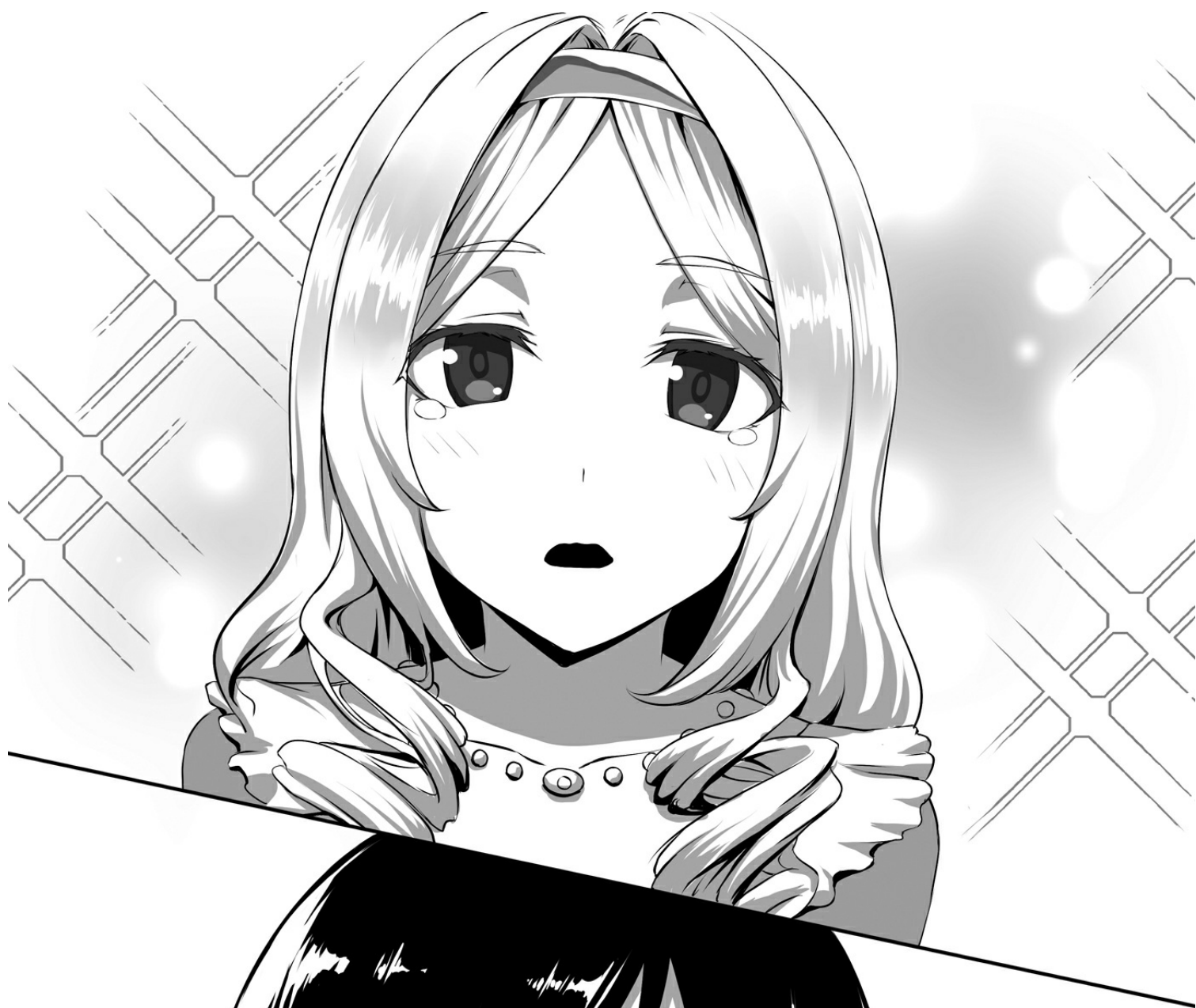
Even if it was Eleanora's request, there was a limit to what I could do. This was impossible for me to fix. It was much too big of an issue, and there were too many complications. Just yesterday I'd considered establishing a new aristocratic family for Eleanora, or reviving the Hillroses, but this issue had nothing at all to do with Eleanora, just her friend.

I steeled my heart and plainly refused. "I'm sorry, I can't do anything about it."

"I see, I'm sorry for asking. It has nothing to do with you, does it? I'll do my best to do something about it on my own, and I won't rely on you! Could I at least talk to you about what I might be able to do...?" Eleanora looked at me with teary eyes, but I wasn't going to waver. Crying wasn't going to work on me; it wasn't going to make me want to help in any way I could. The world wasn't so kind—

"Leave it all to me!" I exclaimed—it was a prime example of a rash promise.

And so, I'd ended up agreeing to help. *Why? Because dear Eleanora's happiness is my happiness.* Setting this attitude (an attitude that honestly made me more of a bleeding heart than Patrick was), the real reason I'd promised to help was because Eleanora wouldn't give up. If I refused, she would try to press forward on her own. I couldn't leave her to go it alone when it came to a task like this.



Eleanora's eyes glimmered with grateful tears as she looked at me, and Patrick let out a heavy sigh. I turned to Count Archiam and made my declaration to him.

"I'll help you a little. But please, don't expect too much from me."



The count saw us off, and we left the Archiam estate. Naturally, the count was aware that Kevin had manipulated Eleanora in order to gain my help. Count Archiam hadn't even seemed particularly happy when I'd agreed, and instead had just gloomily said, "I apologize for my steward."

Now inside my carriage, I found myself thinking about the cunning old steward. "I'm sorry, I should've expected him to do something like that," I told Patrick with a sigh. "You even warned me to be careful before we split up..."

"I was being cautious too, but..." He shrugged. "Even I didn't notice when he left the room."

It was a bad move on my part to have left Eleanora on her own without watching out for that mastermind. If I'd just thought about it a little more, I could have guessed that Eleanora would be the one the steward was going to target.

I was totally on guard when Kevin came over this morning... My brain probably wasn't working after I ended up being unable to commission the armor I wanted. I even got caught up in talking about the armor with the count. The one most at fault is of course the count's steward, but this kingdom's technological capabilities come in at a close second. And then, moving down the list of things to blame, Eleanora is obviously the most innocent. I wonder if she's okay. Did that sneaky geezer plant the wrong ideas in her head?

"What were you told about the Archiam family's crisis, Lady Eleanora?" I asked.

"They said that the Marquess of Prynan is about to take something important of theirs away, and you're the only person who can resolve things. Dorothea said that it wasn't anything I should be concerned with, but...I couldn't help but wonder if there was anything we could do, and so I ended up asking for your

help.” She looked crestfallen.

“It’s all right. I also wanted to be of help after hearing about the count’s situation,” I lied casually, in an effort to cheer her up.

I see, so it seems that neither the count nor his daughter were really enthusiastic about this plan to use me.

Though the steward had definitely been decidedly nefarious in his methods, I couldn’t think of him as a bad person. Perhaps this was because the fact that he would do whatever it took for his lord to achieve his goals could be described as loyalty.

“What are you planning to do, Yumiella?” Patrick asked, swaying with the motion of the carriage. “Are you thinking tomorrow or the day after?” I knew he was wondering when I was planning to try and negotiate with the marquess.

Whether this was fortunate or unfortunate for me was up for debate, but my visit to the Royal Capital had just happened to overlap with the monthly court conference. This was a gathering during which aristocrats rallied around the king and made decisions that related to how the kingdom was being run. The conference would be held the day after tomorrow.

Any member of the nobility of this kingdom was welcome to put in an appearance, but most provincial aristocrats didn’t attend, and I’d certainly never gone before. I’d heard that a party was always held at the Royal Palace the night before the conference. Central aristocrats tended to be present at both the party and the conference every month, working hard to schmooze their way toward more power. *What a chore that must be.*

The topic of whether the Lord of National Affairs was a necessary or useful position was definitely going to come up at the conference in two days. Because of the looming deadline of tomorrow night’s party and the conference in two days, Count Archiam had rushed to see me.

As someone who didn’t want to go to either event, I already had an answer to Patrick’s question.

“I’m not going to the party *or* the conference,” I said firmly. “I’m going to settle things much sooner than that.”

“Makes sense,” Patrick said with a nod. “It’d be better to settle things privately beforehand rather than at a public event with everyone watching.”

Things could move quickly since he already agreed with me. “Great! Let’s head to the Royal Palace, then.”

“Right now?!” Patrick exclaimed with surprise.

Did he think we’d be going tomorrow afternoon before the party or something?

It was just past noon, and it was still early in the day. Since he was the Lord of Finance, Marquess Prynan was likely at the Royal Palace. I was going to launch a blitzkrieg operation on him there.

“You know, I don’t think this is that big of a deal,” I said. “There’s not much in it for Marquess Prynan to diminish the power of a count, right? I don’t think we even have to ask him for a favor and owe him one. We could probably just hint at what we want and get him to comply.”

“That’s true,” Patrick agreed. “We won’t know how much force the marquess is putting into getting this done unless we meet with him. Still...are you sure you want to see him right now?”

It seemed that Patrick was reluctant to barge in without an appointment. *It would be troublesome if we took all the trouble to go to the palace, only to be told that we can’t see him until the court conference.*

Even if Patrick (someone with common sense) was against it, surely Eleanora would agree with my plan, as she was wont to charge into people’s homes like no one else I knew. I turned to look at her, and she gave me a troubled look.

“It’s rude to visit someone while they’re working...” she hedged.

“What? You used to visit me without any notice too, Lady Eleanora.”

“When visiting a friend’s house, all you have to do is say, ‘Let’s play’...” she countered.

Who taught this noble lady something only a boy in grade school would do?

“...that’s what you told me once, Yumiella, so...”

Nice to meet you. I'm Yumiella, the grade school boy.

It seemed that I was actually the one at fault for Eleanora's tendency to go charging in places. I had no memory of saying such a thing, but considering the kind of person I was, I could imagine myself having said it. *Eleanora's father says I'm a bad influence on her, and he might not actually be wrong.*

"I'm friends with Marquess Prynan, so it's fine," I said after a short pause.

"Oh? Is that so? Then there's nothing to be worried about!"

That was only a little bit of a lie. Members of the human race are all friends, after all. I had no idea what Marquess Prynan even looked like, but he was a dear friend that inhabited this planet alongside me, which obviously meant that it was all right to suddenly intrude on him. *Humanism is so convenient.*

My determination was so strong that I was ready to use such nonsensical logic. Taking notice of this, Patrick sighed and said, "Fine. We'll first drop Lady Eleanora off at the estate, and then we'll head to the Royal Palace."

"Oh, it might be better if Lady Eleanora comes with us," I argued. "My motivations will probably be clearer."

"You have a point, but..." He hesitated. "Are you sure It'll be okay?"

If Eleanora wasn't also there, the marquess probably wouldn't be able to understand why I would want to help Count Archiam. Rather than give him cause to be unnecessarily cautious of my unclear intentions, it would be better to have him understand that I was only doing this because Eleanora was asking me to do so, and so I needed him to back off just this once.

For this reason, the only daughter of the ringleader of a failed coup was heading to the Royal Palace. *Stay tuned for what happens next.*



It had been a while since I'd visited the Royal Palace. We made it through the palace gates, carriage and all, thanks to the power of the Dolkness name. Upon exiting the carriage, the three of us made our way into the palace...only to be stopped by a guard.

"Excuse me, who is that with you?"

I didn't expect to be stopped here. I guess passing through the palace unnoticed was a difficult goal.

Eleanora was currently hiding her face behind a veil. Before heading over to the Royal Palace, we'd stopped at the dress shop at which I'd had my fitting and borrowed my veil. The white veil paired with her pale green gown made it obvious that she wasn't a servant, and she admittedly looked quite suspicious. *Too bad they didn't just ignore us.*

Without panicking, I lifted up the veil and exposed Eleanora's face. "Take a good look. This is Lady Eleanora."

"How do you do?" she greeted him cheerfully. "I'm Eleanora."

The guard froze upon seeing the former lady's face. Since he was entrusted with guarding the Royal Palace, he surely knew the faces of the prominent aristocrats. That naturally included Eleanora, since she had been a member of the nobility until just a few months ago.

"We can go in, yes?" I asked the still-frozen guard. "I, Yumiella Dolkness, and my entourage will be entering the palace now."

"Please head inside," the guard said faintly after a long moment of silence.

I win. Intimidation defeats all.

The fact that Eleanora was staying with me was technically a secret, but pretty much everyone knew about it. As long as we didn't outright use the Hillrose name, her presence probably wouldn't cause any repercussions for us later. *That's the case, so please don't look so dismayed,* I thought guiltily at the guard as I passed him on my way inside.

"My apologies," Patrick whispered to the guard as he passed by.

After that, we were able to progress forward in the palace without any further impediment. My presence in the Royal Palace itself was a rare occurrence, so I gathered more attention than the person with the hidden face beside me. Even if some people realized it was Eleanora, it was unlikely that they would challenge us.

The bottom floors of the Royal Palace were where the kingdom's administrative system was located. It was basically the Kasumigaseki government district of Valschein. The Lord of Finance's office was located one section above, between the lower floors and the top floors. The top floors were reserved for the royal family.

There was no guard posted outside of the office. No dangerous insurgents would ever be able to make it this far, so further security measures were probably unnecessary. On top of that, no one expected an aristocrat, even the lowly and unpredictable ones, to suddenly become rebellious out of nowhere. *We're not insurgents*, I thought to myself confidently. *I'm just suddenly barging in and asking him for something. We're fine.*

I knocked to be polite, and then I realized that since the visit itself already deviated from what was polite, it wouldn't matter if I just opened the door before I got an answer.

"Excuse me, hello," I said, casually invading the office. The elderly man sitting behind the large desk at the back of the room was definitely Marquess Prynan. I recalled that I had spoken to him just once at a party held here at the Royal Palace. His eyes widened with surprise, making them just as round as his body. "I'm sorry for my sudden appearance," I added. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about..."

The marquess wasn't the only one frozen with surprise. I wasn't sure if they were aides or secretaries, but there were four men and women also staring at me, stunned. The first to come back to life was one of those four.

"Th-This is the Lord of Finance's office!" the young woman said indignantly, seemingly overwhelmed by my presence, her voice trembling. "Y-You shouldn't be entering here without permission—"

"Adele," the marquess called out in a gentle tone. She fell silent and then abruptly collapsed to the ground. After seeing that, the marquess continued, filling his voice with kindness. *"The Lady of Dolkness is visiting, and with such haste that I believe it must be an important matter. Could you all give us the room? The two of you waiting outside may come in as well."*

I turned around to see Patrick and Eleanora, both wearing expressions that

screamed, "She really barged in." They seemed quite put off, but they entered as the marquess's subordinates left the office.

"Come, sit here... Oh, let me have some refreshments prepared." Marquess Prynan picked up one of the many bells on the edge of his desk and rang it.

It made a pleasant sound, and... *Wait, something's wrong. Why is this old man so calm? It wouldn't be strange for him to react like the lady who got so scared earlier, considering that it's such a sudden visit from me. Why is he handling this so serenely?*

I had hoped that he would be shocked and flustered, giving me the advantage, but it seemed that he'd already assumed control of the situation. Even Patrick was taken aback by how kindly the marquess had welcomed us.

Right after the bell rang, tea was prepared at an abnormal speed and brought before us. The three of us sat in a row, and Marquess Prynan settled across from us.

"Um, I apologize for my sudden intrusion..." I began.

"There's no need to be so formal. So, Countess Dolkness... Hm, I can't help but sound a bit rigid as well. Would it be all right if I called you by your given name?"

"Yes, please refer to me however you'd like."

"Oh my, thank you, Yumiella."

I hadn't encountered anyone in my life since I'd met Eleanora who had tried to get so familiar with me, which was surprising in retrospect. But the marquess had a different air about him than Eleanora did. Though he seemed like a nice old man, there was something unsettling about him. Patrick also seemed confused by how overly friendly the marquess seemed to be.

"I believe it's our first time meeting, Patrick," the Lord of Finance continued. "We don't have many opportunities to interact with one another, but I have a great deal of respect for the Ashbattens. I'd be grateful if you could pass that on whenever you have the chance."

"Th-Thank you very much," Patrick responded, a little taken aback. "I'll be

sure to let my father know.”

Finally, the marquess turned to Eleanora. She had already taken off her veil, and the two of them made eye contact. They had definitely met before. “Well...it’s been a while.”

“I-It’s nice to meet you,” my friend said, only a little hesitantly. “I’m Eleanora.”

“That’s right,” the marquess agreed with a knowing smile. “It’s nice to *meet* you, Eleanora. It’s unfortunate what happened to your father, but I’m glad to see you’re doing well.” I’d expected him to complain about me bringing Eleanora here, but he accepted her presence without a care.

The marquess’s reaction to our unannounced visit was so different from what we’d expected that we were all confused. I’d never expected him to handle things so calmly when we’d barged into his office. Was he just that tolerant, or was he the kind of person who always hid how he truly felt?

“Well then, I would have enjoyed hearing about how Dolkness County is doing, but I believe you’re in a hurry,” he said, guiding us toward the topic at hand. “I have no idea what you need to speak to me about so urgently, but go ahead and tell me what’s on your mind. You can take your time.”

Influenced by the genial atmosphere, I couldn’t help but bring up the Archiam family without beating around the bush at all.

“Before coming here, we were at Count Archiam’s estate,” I began.

“Oh! The Archiam family...” He nodded. “I understand what you want, but this is strange. I have always gotten the impression that you’re not one to get involved in political squabbles in the royal capital, Yumiella.” Though he seemed surprised for a moment, the marquess didn’t seem bothered, and he continued to speak gently.

His assumptions about me were accurate—I was currently acting in a way that was out of character for me. That was why I’d brought Eleanora along so that he could understand why I was doing this...and he seemed to pick up on that right away.

“I see, so that’s why Eleanora is here with you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“There’s no need to apologize. If it were just yourself and Sir Patrick who’d come, I might’ve been confused as to what your intentions were. It was a good choice on your part,” he assured me, nodding repeatedly.

Considering his attitude, it seemed like he might immediately agree to not crush the Archiam family, so I decided to directly ask for his aid.

“Thank you very much,” I said politely. “So, about the Archiam family... I’ve heard that you’re planning to take the count’s position away from him, the position of Lord of National Affairs. Is there any way that you could refrain from doing so?”

“I assumed that was what this was about. The thing is...” He paused and looked me over, that kindly expression never leaving his face. “Let me give you some friendly advice. I’ll pretend that this discussion never happened, so you should just withdraw yourself from this matter.”

I’d thought that he’d be open to at least some negotiation, but I’d ended up getting a straight-up warning instead. I felt utterly helpless.

There wasn’t much for the marquess to gain if the position of Lord of National Affairs were to be dissolved and the Archiam family fell into disfavor. I couldn’t tell why he was being so stubborn about crushing the Archiam family, but I didn’t have to wait long for the answer to come from his own mouth.

“It’s not that I have anything against the Archiam family, but it’s already widely known that they’ll be losing their position in the court. If I reverse this decision, then there’s no question that you’d be targeted next.”

“I’ll stay out of these matters and concern myself with nothing but my own county from now on, so maybe just this once...?” I sighed. “I guess things wouldn’t go so easily.”

Troubled, the marquess scratched his chin and looked at Eleanora.

“Is there an issue with Lady Eleanora?” I asked.

“You refer to her as ‘Lady’? I believe she’s no longer a member of the nobility. Why do that?”

I shrugged. "She just has a certain elegance to her. I don't have a definitive reason as to why I do it."

"You weren't stopped when entering the palace?"

"They checked her face, but the guard didn't say anything."

"How unfortunate for the guard..." The marquess said cryptically before turning his attention back to Eleanora. "So, where was this elegant woman born?"

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. "I found her under a bridge on a rainy day, so I don't really know where she's from."

I had no idea why the marquess was asking all these questions at this point. *He and I, heck, even the knight guarding the entrance, all know that she's the only daughter of the Hillrose family. No one's going to believe I'm being sincere when I say I found her under a bridge.*

"What...?" murmured the lady in question. "I have no recollection of which bridge I was found under. I need to ask about this later..."

I ignored Eleanora's mumbling, since she probably thought no one was listening to her. The marquess nodded enthusiastically.

"If that's what you say, Yumiella, then that must be the case. I have no intention of disagreeing, and His Majesty will surely agree as well." Marquess Prynan's expression finally changed. The kindness in his face subsided, and there was a tinge of seriousness. "No one will argue with it, but everyone will know it's a lie."

"Well, that's true..."

"Oh, I don't mean to chide you. You have the power to force the impossible, to make lies the truth, but...you shouldn't use that power too much. Eleanora's situation is accepted, and you'll probably get your way with this matter as well. But you can't force the impossible forever. You understand, yes?"

"I'm well aware that I'm being selfish," I said with a stiff nod.

Eleanora's situation worked out, and the Lord of National Affairs issue would probably be resolved. It seemed that my Yumiella Power would let me selfishly

get my way, but it was by no means an infinite power. It only worked on matters that were relatively small, ones that didn't negatively affect others. If I were to say, "Starting tomorrow, I want to be the king," obviously no one would accept that.

It wasn't possible to deal with the world using only brute force. Even if people deferred to me, they would probably secretly resent me, and I could easily imagine opposing forces popping up who were willing to die to take me down.

Yumiella 2 had successfully unified the continent in *her* parallel world, but I couldn't do that, despite the fact that I was stronger than her. I didn't like admitting it, but 2 had strengths other than just physical strength. *I'm still stronger, though.*

"We moderates think fondly of you, Yumiella. That's because you have no interest in the power struggles between centralists. However, if our treasures are about to be stolen, then this friendly attitude toward you will have to change."

"The Lord of National Affairs isn't a significant position though, is it?" I asked. "Does it have that much influence?"

The marquess shrugged. "What is significant would be for you to have a say in Valschein politics, since it's an arena you have nothing to do with. I'm sure you haven't done so in the past."

"That's...true," I admitted.

I thought back on the past. I'd turned down all marriage offers, succeeded my family's title, taken in Eleanora... These were all things that puzzled other aristocrats, but they were all matters related only to me.

He's right... I'm really acting out of character on this matter. Maybe it was wrong for me to accept the count's request, since I usually would've turned him down.

My positive relationship with moderate aristocrats was based on the fact that I stayed out of central matters, but this course of action might destroy that. It would be troublesome if people became needlessly suspicious that I was out to get in the way of their plans every time I came to the Royal Capital.

“I also think that this matter with the Archiam family is unfortunate,” the marquess continued. “But, although they haven’t occurred in public, there have already been discussions about this topic, and things have gone far enough that we’ve decided to revoke the position. We might have been able to do something if you’d come to ask for this a bit sooner, but it would be very difficult to change course at this point. I understand why you’d go out of your way to do something so unlike your usual behavior, but...” The marquess glanced over at Eleanora. Seeing her saddened expression, his aspect became similarly pained. “I know what it’s like to want to please someone you love—I feel the same way when my granddaughter asks for my help. I don’t want you to hold on to too much hope, but I’ll try to do what I can. It’s possible that the situation could change by tomorrow.”

I bobbed my head in thanks. “I apologize for suddenly intruding and asking for something so difficult.”

“It’s quite all right,” he assured me. “Do feel free to visit again if you ever need anything from me.”

The air of kindness from earlier still lingered as our discussion concluded. I’d expected things to be much thornier and more dramatic, so this was a welcome surprise. The only thing that had been unpleasant was the result. Even though there was no benefit to the marquess in crushing the Archiam family, I hadn’t imagined that so many issues might arise from reversing the decision—maybe that was what had led me to lose. Both the marquess and I had too many annoying constraints to work within.

The four of us engaged in some additional small talk, and then we took our leave from the Lord of Finance’s office.



In the carriage on the way home, we found ourselves engulfed in a deflated atmosphere that was neither joyous nor sad. We’d all been completely taken aback by the friendly old man.

“I knew it was a long shot, but it sure didn’t work out,” I sighed.

“I didn’t expect him to evade the issue so masterfully,” Patrick remarked.

“He was so friendly that it actually made it difficult to be forceful.”

“That’s probably not his actual personality, but instead a calculated move on his part.”

What should I do now? Do I just report to the count that the negotiations failed and that’s it? I hadn’t planned on trying too hard in the first place—I wasn’t really on board to help, and how Eleanora felt about things was much more important than actual results.

“What would you like to do, Lady Eleanora?” I asked her. “We tried negotiating with him.”

“There isn’t anything else we can do, is there?” she asked a little mournfully. “Is this something that can’t be helped?” She couldn’t accept it, but she had no choice but to do so.

The members of the Archiam family probably wouldn’t accept it until the very end, but I had already come to the conclusion that this was how things were going to be, and I was ready to give up. If Eleanora were to also accept the family’s situation, then I was happy to consider this matter concluded.

“It’s difficult to do anything more,” I reiterated.

“I expected that was the case...” Eleanora said with a sigh. “Thank you for hearing out my selfish request.”

“It’s no trouble,” I assured her. “I also thought that Count Archiam seemed like he could use the help.”

Though I felt bad for the Archiam family, I couldn’t be expected to do much more. *I think it’s time to back off on this issue. I’m sure both the count and Eleanora will be willing to accept defeat after what we’ve attempted today. I’d prefer to avoid a public battle with a major authority of the kingdom.*

Though this was an unsatisfying end to things, my involvement with the matter regarding the Lord of National Affairs was over. We returned to the Archiam estate and reported that we’d visited the Royal Palace to little success. The count thanked us for our efforts with a voice laden with regret. He said that he was willing to give in since I’d directly gone to the marquess with no success.

After that awkward meeting, Patrick, Eleanora, and I returned home. What a hectic day it had been—a messenger from the count in the morning, an unsuccessful attempt to make the armor I wanted, a visit to the count's estate, and a trip to the Royal Palace in the afternoon, then back again to the count... I supposed that it was fortunate that the matter had been settled within a single day. Still, Eleanora didn't seem like she was quite satisfied with how things had gone.

I'd survived the fitting on the first day as well as the tumultuous second day of my visit to the Royal Capital. *I'm so ready to go home. I couldn't make my dream armor. I couldn't accomplish the goal of this entire trip.* There wasn't anything left to do, and I didn't have anywhere in particular I wanted to go.

"Is there anywhere else you want to go while we're here?" I asked my fiancé.

"No, not really," Patrick said. "I was thinking we could relax tomorrow, and then go home some time after that."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

He was right; it would've been tiring to suddenly get on a carriage and head home tomorrow. Relaxing and then maybe going out on a short outing somewhere tomorrow could be nice. I could do something like a date with Patrick, or even accompany Eleanora to wherever she wanted to go.

If each of those activities take up a day, then I guess we'll be returning home in three days.

After suggesting to Patrick that he should think of places to go, I set off to find Eleanora. Ever since we'd returned from the Royal Palace, she'd seemed to be in low spirits. *I'll go with her wherever she wants to cheer her up...but preferably somewhere that's not as out of my comfort zone as the fragrance shop.*

"Lady Eleanora? Are you there?" The former guest room was now Eleanora's room. I knocked on the doorframe and then peered inside. She was staring out the window, and she didn't hear me calling for her. "Lady Eleanora?" I repeated. "Lady Eleanora!"

She turned to look at me with a start. "Oh, I'm sorry. It seems I was in a daze."

“I’m making my plans for tomorrow. I’m sure there’s somewhere you’d like to go. We can go together.”

“Somewhere I’d like to go...” She considered my offer.

We’d already visited the fragrance shop, but surely there were other stores in the city that she was fond of. There were probably even some shops that had opened up since we’d last been here, so there was likely a long list of places she wanted to go. Eleanora thought silently for a while, perhaps considering the multitude of options she surely had in her mind, before finally settling on an answer.

“Not particularly...”

I blinked. “You don’t want to go anywhere? It can be anywhere at all.”

“I think you should go out with Sir Patrick instead of me. Please prioritize your time together,” she responded with a beatific smile.

This seemed to be how she truly felt. Though she was often considerate of Patrick and myself, I was surprised to learn that there was no multitude of storefront options crowding her mind. An Eleanora that truly didn’t want to go anywhere wasn’t really Eleanora.

I knew she had been concerned about the Archiam family, but I hadn’t expected it to be this degree. Their family’s position didn’t matter to me or to the larger world at all (and I had to admit that maybe my attitude toward the situation was partly informed by the fact that I thought the mastermind marquess wasn’t actually that bad of a person), but it seemed that the disparity between my degree of concern and Eleanora’s was immense.

“It’s about the Archiam family, isn’t it?” I asked, trying to conceal a resigned sigh.

“Yes.”

“Marquess Prynan told us to stop getting involved, but we don’t have to listen to him. If I interfere in this situation, I might end up being on slightly bad terms with that old man, but I think that’s all that’ll happen.”

I guess it can’t be helped. Time to change the plan from making a futile

attempt to making sure that we actually reach our goal. Now that I seemed more motivated, Eleanora had a question.

“If we help out Count Archiam’s household, will that cause trouble for Marquess Prynan?”

“I think it’ll cause a little trouble, since we’ll be reversing a decision that’s already been made,” I admitted. “But I’m considered a wild card, so I don’t think it’ll affect my influence or stop me from doing anything in the future.”

I’ve decided that I’m going to hear out all of Eleanora’s requests and then make them happen, so the Lord of Finance is just going to have to think his luck was bad and back down. Surely he’ll change his mind after seeing the strength of my resolve. Just as I began thinking about my next move, Eleanora countermanded me for some reason.

“That won’t do,” she said quietly.

“Huh?”

“It’s Dorothea’s family, so I do want the Archiam family to be all right. But I don’t want to cause trouble for Marquess Prynan either. He’s always been kind to me. He’s given me rare perfumes from other kingdoms, and he’s even taken care of me in the past. He’s a kind man. Is there no way for them to both avoid any trouble, Yumiella?”

Eleanora was the complete opposite of me—I had no strong feelings toward either party, but she was close to both. Unfortunately, this battle had begun a while ago, and the course it would take had already been decided with a clear winner. It was going to be impossible to find a resolution that would satisfy everyone.

I don’t think I have any choice but to tell her that we can’t have it both ways... Unable to even attempt to make the irresponsible promise that everyone could win, I gave her an honest answer.

“It would be very difficult to settle this in a way that will turn out positively for both of them. Though the degree will vary, no matter how things go, one of them will have to face a loss.”

Her shoulders slumped a little. “Of course...”

“I think you’ll have to be pragmatic about this.”

“I understand,” Eleanora said with a nod. “After all, I don’t like causing trouble for you. You should go on a date with Sir Patrick, and then we’ll return to Dolkness County after that.” She still didn’t seem quite satisfied.

With my powers that were specialized for battle, we wouldn’t be able to reach a resolution that would satisfy everyone. *I could come up with countless ways that this could end with everyone unhappy, though.*

Unable to come up with any easy way out of this situation, night fell on our second day in the Royal Capital, and everyone headed off to bed.

What should I do? Will Eleanora be able to sleep? These were the concerns that filled my mind as I fell into slumber.

Interlude 2: Dorothea

Earlier that day at the Archiam estate, not too long after a certain group of visitors had arrived at the manor, Yumiella had gone downstairs to call upon Count Archiam, leaving Dorothea and Eleanora alone in the room full of dolls. Until that point, the conversation had centered around Yumiella, but with her departure, the two old friends could speak one-on-one.

Dorothea had been elated by the appearance of someone who understood her love of dolls, but once Yumiella had departed, her mood instantly dropped. Naturally, the pair of young women ended up discussing the period after the duke's coup during which Dorothea had refused to contact Eleanora.

Once she'd heard that Eleanora would be visiting the previous night, Dorothea had been trying to think of excuses for her behavior, but her mind had gone completely blank, and she found herself at a loss for words. It was unclear whether or not Eleanora was able to consciously understand her friend's dilemma, but either way, she opened the conversation with kind words.

"I'm so glad to see you're doing well."

"Yes..." Dorothea responded faintly.

"I didn't get any responses to my letters, so I was worried that you might've been ill."

"I apologize..."

Eleanora had been genuinely worried. Dorothea was well aware of this, having known Eleanora for a long time. She felt like she was being crushed by her guilt, but at the same time she was glad that Eleanora hadn't forced her to use the only excuse she'd been able to come up with the previous night. That would have likely made guilt even worse.

"I'm truly sorry," Dorothea repeated. "I was only thinking about myself. I'm still thinking of ways to make myself feel better."

"If it helps you feel better, I think it's all right."

“It’s not! I, I tried to cut you off—”

“I know,” Eleanora reassured her friend. “After Yumiella explained things to me yesterday, I was finally able to understand things. After all, my father did do something quite awful.”

It would have been much too great a risk for the Archiam family to continue fraternizing with the daughter of a rebel. Things had already been difficult enough because they had been a part of the duke’s faction. It was only acceptable for an unconventional aristocrat like Yumiella to continue to associate with Eleanora.

Still, even if she hadn’t had much of a choice, the fact remained that Yumiella had been the one to take Eleanora in while Dorothea had cut her off.

“You’re the one suffering the most, yet I... I’m sorry.”

“I’m not suffering at all!” Eleanora emphatically declared. “I’m having fun in Dolkness County!” It didn’t seem like she was hiding her true feelings, but Dorothea thought it was a strange thing to say. After all, Eleanora had lost her father.

From Dorothea’s perspective, Duke Hillrose was an unsettling man whose thoughts she’d never been able to read, but Eleanora had been quite close to her father. After losing her mother at a young age, her only family member was surely dear to her. These thoughts made Dorothea believe that Eleanora was forcing herself to broadcast an outwardly cheerful demeanor.

I’m not the one who’s suffering, Dorothea reminded herself once again as she desperately held back her tears. “But, you can’t see your father anymore, Lady Eleanora...”

“What? My father? I went to see him just the other day...” Eleanora paused and then suddenly became flustered. “Oh! U-Um, that’s right, I don’t have a father! His passing fills me with sadness!”

Dorothea was well aware of the fact that Eleanora was completely unable to lie, and she immediately understood that the duke was alive. Eleanora’s slipup hadn’t fully explained the circumstances, but at the very least it seemed that the two of them were able to see one another.

Dorothea resolved to not tell anyone, not even her family, and so she pretended not to notice what Eleanora had said. “I’m sure your father is up in heaven watching over you.”

“What? My father can go to heaven?”

Eleanora’s question was clearly genuine, and the unintentional insult to her father almost made Dorothea laugh, but she did her best to refrain from doing so. Eleanora had left her on the verge of tears just a moment ago, and now she’d almost found herself bursting into giggles within a matter of moments—Eleanora was truly a wonderful friend.

As Dorothea’s shoulders trembled from her attempt to hold back her laughter, there was a knock on the door, followed by the steward’s voice.

“Excuse me,” Kevin called. “I was told that Lady Eleanora should join in on the discussion as well, so I’ve come to take you downstairs.”

“Oh?” Eleanora asked curiously. “I’m to join Yumiella?”

It hadn’t been that long since Yumiella had left the room. If Eleanora’s presence had truly been necessary, then she probably could’ve left with Yumiella. It was rare for Kevin to overlook such details, and Dorothea couldn’t help but feel that something was a little off.

She hadn’t been told why her father had invited Yumiella and Eleanora to visit, but she had an idea. He was probably trying to protect his pointless position, the Lord of National Affairs. Eleanora would probably be fine, since Yumiella and Patrick were obviously much better choices for aid, but Dorothea decided to make sure.

“Lady Eleanora, there’s no need for you to be concerned with our family’s affairs,” she assured her friend. “We’ll be all right; it’ll work out.”

Eleanora just tilted her head in confusion, but Dorothea wasn’t too worried. The pair who stood by her side were much smarter and more courageous than she was. Dorothea was relieved that Eleanora was so well taken care of.

“I don’t understand,” the disgraced former noblewoman murmured, “but I’ll be off.”

“Of course,” Dorothea said warmly. “Goodbye.”

Up to now, there had only been two people outside of Dorothea’s family that had been accepting of the doll room. Eleanora left the place behind for what was probably the last time. And as for the other girl...well, neither of them would likely ever visit here again.

Dorothea sat alone in the dimly lit and doll-filled room. She wasn’t uncomfortable. Looking back on her past, this was probably the natural conclusion to things.

Dorothea was used to being alone. She hadn’t known how to make her own dolls as a small child, and so she’d continuously played with the dolls that others bought for her. Her parents had tried to introduce her to other children her age, but she had always been a shy girl, and whenever she spent time with other girls, her precious dolls would often be stolen from her.

The young tyrants probably had no idea that they were stealing from her. Upon being told, “Give it,” the young Dorothea would always say, “Okay, here,” and she’d inadvertently give her dolls away. It was only after it happened that she would cry.

As she reminisced about these childhood incidents, Dorothea thought that she’d been quite pathetic, and she had to admit that she hadn’t changed all that much. If having her way meant that people would dislike her, then she would defer to others as much as possible. She’d spent all of her days at the Academy unable to stand up for herself.

Because she knew she’d give them away if someone asked for them, Dorothea began to hide her beloved dolls from others. Perhaps she’d gone too far in concealing them, as the ultimate result of this had been this room.

She’d even surpassed the realm of just collecting them when she started making her own dolls, and she’d gained the awareness that people would probably find it unsettling if she showed them off. That had provided a second reason to keep her hobby hidden, and so she further concealed her dolls.

All of that had led to her growing into a gloomy girl who wasn’t very social, but no matter what she wanted, she couldn’t escape from the world of central

aristocrats. She already had trouble with the intricacies of maintaining relationships within her own family, but on top of that, she had to deal with the gatherings of her family's faction, as well as the broader community of central aristocrats.

When Dorothea had entered the Royal Academy, her mother had given her the names of two people around whom she'd been warned to be particularly cautious. One was the second prince, who was the same age as she was. The other was the only daughter of Duke Hillrose, who stood at the top of the faction to which her family belonged.

She recalled a gathering of members of the duke's faction, an occasion for which she had gotten dressed up just like her dolls. She remembered that same girl that her mother had cautioned her about, standing at the center of the room. Dorothea could still picture the confident, strong look in her red eyes.

Dorothea's first impression of Eleanora Hillrose had been horrible. In the world of the nobility, there was always someone greater than you, and even the tyrant who stole Dorothea's doll had tried to curry favor with Eleanora. Dorothea had felt pessimistic about the whole situation—she was painfully aware that she'd have to kiss up to Eleanora until she graduated the Academy, at the very least.

Wanting to avoid her attention, Dorothea had stood in a corner of the gathering, lying low. She had thought she would be able to survive the night without running into Eleanora, but her plan had failed.

No one could talk like Eleanora.

"What are you doing standing there?" she'd ask. "Why won't you come over and speak with me?"

"But I'm over here!" she'd insist. "I was interested in you because you seem different from everyone else."

"What's your name?" she'd persist. "I'm Eleanora Hillrose! It's nice to meet you, Dorothea."

"Let's play together some time," she'd pleaded. "Today we're at my house, so I'd like to go to your house next time."

Her memories were fuzzy, but Dorothea felt that all she'd said in response to the conversational barrage was her name. Eleanora had talked to her because she'd found it strange that Dorothea had been shrinking away in a corner, and she had even pushed to make plans for the two of them to see one another again.

And so it was that a tyrant even more intense than the previous one made plans to arrive at her house. Dorothea had been prepared for her life to be over, but the exact opposite had happened.

The barrage began anew.

"What's in this room?" Eleanora squealed. "Wow, there are so many cute dolls! Oh, I'm sorry... It's not right to touch other people's things without asking."

Dorothea could only get a word in on occasion.

"What? She's not a thing, she's 'Alice'?" Eleanora exclaimed. "Oh, oh my. You must be so surprised that I suddenly hugged you, Alice! I knew you were special, Dorothea!"

Eleanora hadn't taken anything, and instead, she'd just genuinely validated Dorothea's interests. Eleanora was Dorothea's only friend that she could say that she loved from the bottom of her heart.

"Goodbye, Lady Eleanora," Dorothea muttered to herself in her empty room. She was surrounded by the silence of the dolls... No, she could hear a sound; loud footsteps echoed down the hallway outside of the room. Both in the past and the present, *she* was the only one who would barge in like this.

"Dorothea! I completely forgot that I had something I wanted to ask you!"

"Did you forget something?"

"We're friends, right?" Eleanora asked.

Dorothea was taken aback. "Yes, if you so kindly consider me to be your friend, then I am."

"I don't mean what I think! I want to know your opinion!" Eleanora's gaze fell. "Um, now that I'm not the duke's daughter, I was worried that maybe we can't

be friends, or something like that..." This was surprising coming from Eleanora, who usually considered someone a friend as long as she felt they were.

Dorothea's eyes widened to see Eleanora so nervous, but she knew her answer without any hesitation.

"Your family has nothing to do with whether I consider you a friend, Lady Eleanora," she responded firmly. "You've always been my friend, ever since you first picked up Alice."

"Alice..." Eleanora smiled. "That brings back memories. The current Alice is...the fourth bisque doll, was it?"

"No, there are no generations or anything of that sort. Alice will always be Alice."

"Oh, right, of course!" Eleanora's eyes swam with frantic tears.

Seeing her flustered reaction, Dorothea reflected on the uncharacteristically direct way that she'd communicated that they were friends regardless of background. *That wasn't like me. Of course Eleanora is flustered.*

"I just wanted to ask that question, which is why I came back. I must go now. Yumiella is surely waiting for me. Well then, I'll see you again!"

Eleanora had come and gone like a storm.

Some time had passed since Eleanora had first left the room, so Dorothea wondered if she had left in the middle of her discussion with the count and Yumiella to return. *She wouldn't just talk to someone else either...* Dorothea shoved that unnecessary line of thought into a corner of her mind and, though her friend wouldn't hear these words either, spoke to Eleanora once more, even though she knew that only the dolls would hear.

"I'll see you again, Lady Eleanora."

After taking a moment to collect herself, Dorothea thought about her irreplaceable friend.

"I'm glad she's doing well. I'm sure there are plenty of things she can't get in Dolkness County, so perhaps I should send her some gifts."

Dorothea knew of Eleanora's particular fondness for a certain fragrance shop, so perhaps she could send her other cosmetic items. Dorothea had managed to earn a little bit of money as a doll maker, but it wasn't enough to afford something elaborate like gemstones.

Though Eleanora surely encountered difficulties in living so far from the Royal Capital, there were ways to send items to her. The only problem was that there were some items that couldn't be sent to her—things that weren't really objects, but places like the theater or visits with a person.

"I wonder if she still has feelings for Prince Edwin."

Dorothea thought of the second prince, someone that Eleanora had once believed that she would definitely end up marrying.

He had been incredibly popular. Back before she attended the Academy, when the relationships between children in the aristocratic faction began to form, Dorothea had found herself with many opportunities to see the prince. She had heard Eleanora earnestly go on about how wonderful he was, and she'd known that he was just as she'd described.

Perhaps they were attracted to his position, his appearance, or to both, but all the girls around her age had held feelings for Edwin. Even the girls that had declared their support for Eleanora tried to get his attention behind her back.

Back then, Edwin had been praised for being a genius. Being a shy girl, Dorothea had kept her distance from him, and she certainly didn't think of him as a genius. Of course, he'd had some innate talents that were above average, and he was in some ways better than other people at some things (including herself), but to her, Edwin seemed like someone who had worked hard to gain his skills.

If they're going to praise him for being a genius, they should also praise the effort he puts in. Do people become blind when they're in love? Dorothea remembered thinking when she'd been younger, as someone who'd never been in love.

When you observed him closely, Edwin showed his faults quite often. He'd fail just like a child would, and he sometimes lacked common sense. He'd even make mistakes when showing off his sword skills. But the next time she'd see

him show off that same move, he'd always fixed those faults. The only reason that Dorothea had noticed all of these things (despite being someone who wasn't good at observing people) was because she'd had someone close by endlessly talking about him.

There was something that Eleanora had once said that had confirmed things for her. "Even if things might get worse for you, if there are people currently in trouble, then you need to press forward." Eleanora had heard this from Edwin, and she'd apparently been deeply moved by it.

Dorothea had thought that Edwin was trying to be perfect because he was the second prince, but she realized that he genuinely wanted to help his people. That motivation gave him the ability to not fear failure, and for the first time Dorothea had thought that Prince Edwin might actually be quite lovely.

And so, because he was someone who could lose today and climb to the top tomorrow, it probably had been difficult for him to accept *her*—the girl who'd suddenly appeared at the Academy.

This girl had appeared out of nowhere, destroying and changing many things, including Eleanora's own interpersonal relationships.

Once aristocrats reached the age to enter the Academy, their minds only worked to play social games—practice for dealing with their inevitable future political struggles. This was especially true for the children of central aristocrats. One had to find people with similar interests and work against others who didn't share those interests while making sure to protect oneself and calculate which relationships would end up being of the greatest benefit. This game existed in the world of noble ladies as well.

However, the girl who had held the most powerful cards—cards that could control the entire game—had been a complete idiot. Eleanora had been surrounded by people, and to those on the outside, she must have seemed like the leader of the faction. But what had actually been happening was that Eleanora had been constantly manipulated without knowing it—the people surrounding her vying to use her to their advantage.

Dorothea had been one of those surrounding noble ladies. She'd never said anything on her own, but she'd never stopped Eleanora from heading in the

wrong direction either. When asked for her opinion, she'd go with whatever the group thought instead of Eleanora herself, and she'd only ever give vague answers. Though she'd had concerns about the situation at the time, she'd never had the courage to do anything about it.

The incident that Dorothea had felt was the worst of all was when the clique had decided to target Alicia. Alicia was always with the prince and his friends, and Eleanora, who harbored feelings for Edwin (along with all of the other noble ladies), didn't think too fondly of her. It had started with indirect harassment, but eventually even Alicia's belongings had been targeted. Dorothea could look away from the snide remarks, but she couldn't stand to see Eleanora sincerely believing the validation from her peers and ordering bullying that she didn't really like. Eleanora had known that it wasn't right, but everyone around her had said it was the correct thing to do. Eleanora only knew how to trust, and so she'd seemed incredibly bothered by this. If she hadn't been so upset by the bullying, then things might have escalated to the point at which Alicia could've been harmed. Still, Dorothea hadn't done anything. She had been terrified that the insidious behavior might be directed at her instead.

Dorothea had known that if Prince Edwin noticed what was happening, his attention would bring things to an end, and so she prayed that the bullying wouldn't cross a line before that occurred. Though she didn't know if this had been in answer to her prayers, that was when Yumiella had appeared. Just like when she'd turned down Eleanora's offer to join her faction, she hadn't hidden how annoyed she'd seemed by Alicia's mistreatment. She'd called out the ringleader of the bullying, expressionless as always. She'd convinced Eleanora to stop, she'd settled things quietly, and she'd even defended the girl who had actually carried out the bullying.

Ever since then, those around Eleanora had changed. If they'd tried to lead Eleanora down a bad path, Yumiella, who Eleanora liked for some unknown reason, would have heard about it. Yumiella wasn't terrified of anything, whether it was the intricacies of interpersonal relationships or the immense power of the royal family—things that certainly scared the other noble ladies. Not only was her personality fear-inducing, but her physical power from being level 99 was just as terrifying.

The excessive manipulation of Eleanora had died down, and the most the group had been able to do was to compliment the strange-tasting treats Eleanora would bake. (As a side note, Yumiella had declared they tasted off only after eating an incredible amount of them.)

Regardless, Dorothea had been grateful for Yumiella. All she'd been able to do was watch from the sidelines, but she'd admired how Yumiella, who was also on the outside, managed to take down the others.

"I would've liked to talk to Yumiella sooner," Dorothea said wistfully.

When other noble ladies had accidentally seen the doll room, they'd all found it creepy and had been taken aback.

Dorothea picked up her newly named work in progress. "Nightingale... That's actually more normal-sounding than I expected. She could've given her a really weird name."

Dorothea, unaware that the name had come from a robot that fought in space, hugged Nightingale. *What color should her clothes be when she's done? Maybe a deep red like the dress Yumiella was wearing would be nice.*

"Black might be nice too," Dorothea muttered, finishing her thought out loud. Though she'd seen many examples of accessories or other details done in black, she'd never seen a doll dressed in black from head to toe. Since Nightingale was named by someone who was unconventional, Dorothea felt that unconventional clothing was a natural choice for the doll.

As Dorothea held the doll, she thought about how little she had changed from back when she had been at the Academy. She'd hurt Eleanora, she was still afraid of others in the nobility, and she couldn't even share her opinions about the things that mattered to her.

Though she wasn't too concerned about it actually happening, it was possible that her father was going to try and use Eleanora to force Yumiella to help them. She couldn't imagine that her father, who was just as passionate about his hobbies as she was, would get involved in such machinations, but if that were to happen... *I'll stop him.* Dorothea decided to be courageous for once in her life.

At that moment, though, she wasn't yet aware that the steward had been busily working behind the scenes...

Chapter 4: The Hidden Boss Falls for a Trap

The next day, Patrick and I didn't actually get to have our lovey-dovey date event. For the second day in a row, we found ourselves meeting with an unexpected guest.

"I apologize for visiting so suddenly. I wish I'd known you were coming to the city... I worried you might immediately leave after you'd taken care of business, so..."

"Wow, I really agree with your impulse to apologize," I said. "It seems that the second prince lacks common sense."

"I apologize," the unwanted visitor repeated. "I only knew you were in the Royal Capital when you showed up at the palace yesterday."

"I don't think it's such a bad thing to suddenly show up to someone's home unannounced... It's revolutionary. I'm impressed, Your Highness—I'm impressedness."

Our visitor was Prince Edwin, and for some reason he didn't seem very excited about the revolutionary new ways I was working to make language more efficient. Patrick and I were sitting with him, but the second she had heard the prince was here, Eleanora had hidden herself. She was apparently still quite curious as to how he was doing, because she seemed to be right outside the drawing room. *Oh, I can almost hear her pressing her ear against the door.*

I hadn't seen the prince in a while, but we kept crossing paths, so it seemed I was karmically connected to him. He clearly had no inkling of Eleanora's presence, and he was instead tilting his head in confusion over something that didn't matter.

"Impressedness...?"

"Please pay no mind to that," I said. "So what brings you here today?"

Prince Edwin shrugged. "I don't really have a particular reason... I haven't seen you or Patrick in a while, so I wanted to see you two."

What's with this guy? We're not that close, are we? Maybe I should start referring to him as Prince Idiot when I think about him. I'm not impressedness anymore!

I wanted to tell him to leave now that he'd seen us, but Patrick cut in.

"You only wanted to see the two of us?"

"You got me..." he said with a sheepish grin. "I guess you see right through me, Patrick."

"You *were* the male student I was closest to in the Academy, Your Highness."

"I'm also glad to have met you at the Academy," Edwin said. "Who knows what would've happened if I didn't have you."

They seemed to be having a male bonding moment. *I think I'm in the way here, so I'll leave you young'uns to it... I can just eavesdrop on them with Eleanora.* I silently stood up, and Patrick turned to me.

"Oh, are you calling her over?"

I stopped short. "Huh?"

"You got up to call Lady Eleanora over, right?"

"Right..." I lied. "I'll be right back."

Eleanora, huh? I see. I guess Prince Edwin and Eleanora haven't seen each other since the commotion caused by Duke Hillrose. Even if the love was one-sided, they've known each other for a long time, so I can see why he'd be worried about her now that she's lost her noble status. I'd gotten up for a different reason, but I decided to call Eleanora over anyway.

We had talked about this a little in the past, and she'd said something about how she couldn't marry the prince now that she wasn't an aristocrat. I hadn't probed her much about it, but I imagined it would be hard to see someone she loved but couldn't ever be with... That was probably why she'd hidden herself. I decided I would refuse the prince on her behalf if she didn't seem up to it, and so I headed toward the door of the drawing room. I grabbed the doorknob and listened to make sure that Eleanora had moved away from the door before I opened it slightly and slipped through the narrow gap. As soon as I entered the

hallway, the first thing I did was cover Eleanora's mouth.

"Mmph!"

"If we return right away, they'll realize that you were eavesdropping," I whispered into her ear. "Let's wait a little bit before heading back." I led her a little ways down the hall where the prince couldn't hear us.

We should be fine around here. Just to be safe, I spoke softly.

"Did you hear what Prince Edwin said?" I asked. "His Highness came here because he was worried about you, Lady Eleanora. He probably doesn't know that the duke is alive, so—"

"I won't meet with Sir Edwin. Please tell him that I'm doing well," Eleanora said, looking me right in the eye, nodding resolutely to communicate that this was her choice. She seemed firm in her decision.

I feel like it would be fine to meet with him really quick and just say hello... I still didn't have a proper grasp on how Eleanora currently felt about the prince. Anything related to the complexities of a maiden's heart was completely outside of my purview.

"Are you really okay with that?" I asked her. "It's Prince Edwin. I guess it's fine if you're not interested in him anymore."

"My feelings for Sir Edwin haven't changed," she admitted after a short pause. *Then why won't you see him?* Before I could ask, Eleanora continued, her expression steely with fortitude. "Both my father and myself are under your protection, and though it might not be the whole truth, I *am* the daughter of an insurrectionist. Sir Edwin is trying to fulfill his duties as a member of the royal family—so he can't be meeting with me."

Before me stood an impressive noble lady with integrity. The lady taking a step back in order to protect the man she loved, an illustrious intellectual, was indeed Eleanora— *No... This is a complete stranger.*

I reached out at once to rub her back. "Are you all right?! You must've picked up something strange and eaten it. Come on, spit it out."

"What?! I haven't eaten anything! I wouldn't pick things off the ground and

eat them..." she pointed out indignantly. "I'm not you, Yumiella."

I don't pick things up off the ground and eat them either, I thought, but I didn't have the time to argue back. This is alarming. At the very least, I'm certain that Eleanora's having psychosomatic issues. Maybe she's severely ill.

"Do you feel any pain anywhere?" I asked.

"I'm not injured," she insisted.

"I'm worried you might have come down with an illness of some kind. I can heal injuries with my recovery magic but not illnesses. Are you in any pain?"

"Pain comes from injuries. When you're ill, you suffer..." She frowned. "Wait. There are also illnesses that cause pain. Could illnesses and injuries be the same...?"

Yay! Lady Eleanora's back to her usual self! I wuv you! Anyways, I'll observe her for a while just to make sure she's okay. Also, sorry to break it to you while you're trembling with excitement over this new discovery, but illnesses and injuries are completely different.

"They're different," I assured her.

"Oh! The ones from the outside are injuries, and the ones from the inside are illnesses!"

"Well...I guess. I think you're correct." *I guess injuries can also be referred to as external wounds, so that interpretation seems accurate enough. Are there any exceptions...?* It was good to know that I was back to speaking with the Eleanora I knew, but because of our conversational detour, I'd forgotten that we were keeping Prince Edwin waiting. "So you're really okay with not seeing His Highness?"

Eleanora just gave me a short "Yes" in response to my final inquiry for confirmation. Despite how flighty she sometimes seemed, Eleanora was stubborn, so it was hard to persuade her otherwise when she'd made a firm decision. *I guess there's no need to force her to see him.*

I returned to the drawing room and the waiting prince. Patrick and Prince

Edwin both seemed confused by the fact that I'd returned alone. *All right, then...what should I say?*

I chose my words carefully as I began to explain. "Lady Eleanora—Ahhhhhh!" Instead of finishing my explanation, I screamed.

The second prince's shoulders jolted upward. *I know it's scary when someone expressionless like me suddenly screams, but I didn't expect him to be so surprised.* In contrast, Patrick didn't even raise an eyebrow—he was the textbook definition of composure.

"Don't eat things you picked up off the floor, Yumiella," he said calmly.

"I don't eat things off the floor—I'm not *you*, Patrick." After passing the "scavenger" title that Eleanora had bestowed upon me onto Patrick, it seemed that I didn't need to provide cover for any suspicious sounds anymore, so I silently took a seat.

I'd yelled in order to hide the sound of Eleanora's movement in the hall. She'd returned here, following me from a distance, and I could tell that she was already back to pressing her ear against the door. *If you're that curious about him, you should just meet with the prince. Also, I know Patrick said what he just said in order to trick the prince, but what if he really starts to think I eat things off the floor?*

Patrick (whose assist I couldn't praise in good conscience) urged me to continue. "Where's Lady Eleanora?"

I knew that I was expected to share the details, but I still hadn't come up with a good excuse. If I told the truth, that would disregard Eleanora's desire to not be a burden to the prince. But it would sound harsh if I just said she didn't want to see him.

"Lady Eleanora isn't feeling well," I said.

"*The* Lady Eleanora?! Sick?!" the prince exclaimed.

Usually one would simply say "How unfortunate!" and then the conversation would end, but Prince Edwin had reacted more strongly than I'd expected. That was when I remembered that Eleanora had asked me to tell him that she was doing well, and so my statements became inconsistent.

“She’s been doing well until now,” I corrected. “She just isn’t feeling her best today.”

“I’m surprised,” said Prince Edward. “She’s never gotten sick before. They say that a change in environment can be a strain, and there’s also the issue of Duke Hillrose. You should take her to a doctor while you’re here, just in case.”

“Today’s an unusual case, and she’s doing incredibly well. She’s really active in Dolkness County, and is even more social than I am...” *I hadn’t expected him to latch onto this topic like this. Is Prince Edwin just someone who gets really concerned when an acquaintance is ill?*

Patrick also contributed some additional anecdotes about how well Eleanora was doing in Dolkness County. That seemed to finally convince Prince Edwin that there were no long-standing issues with her health.

“I’m glad to hear she’s doing well,” he said in a gentle voice, one filled with relief and fondness.

“Are you really that concerned?” I asked him.

“I’ve known Lady Eleanora since before we could even walk properly. I can only recall a single incident in which she came down with a slight cold, but she returned to her usual energetic self the next day.”

I see, so he got overly worried when he heard that Eleanora wasn’t feeling well, since she’s never really been sick. I’d only known Eleanora from our time in the Academy, which meant that Prince Edwin had known her for over a decade longer than I had. I’d only ever seen the two of them interact in the context of the relationship they had settled into as young adults, in which Eleanora had unrequited feelings for him, but Prince Edwin didn’t have eyes for her. Everything I knew about how they’d been before that came from stories Eleanora had told me. I remembered one of those stories now.

“Lady Eleanora fell into a fountain when you two were together and she caught a cold as a result, right?”

Prince Edwin seemed startled. “How do you know about that?”

“She’s told me that story more times than I really needed to hear it. The truth is, she didn’t even catch a cold. She wanted people to visit her, so she

pretended to be sick. She apparently got tired of waiting after a day, so she stopped faking it the next morning.”

“I didn’t know that. If she’d been sick for three days, I would’ve gone to visit her...”

Even if I always let them go in one ear and out the other, Eleanora’s childhood tales were forever etched into my mind with sheer repetition. Because of that, I’d ended up accidentally exposing the truth about her “illness.” *Lady Eleanora, if you’re listening, I implore you to be merciful when you decide upon my punishment.*

I heard a strange “Mm!” sound coming from outside the door. The prince looked at the door curiously, and Patrick jumped in to assist with an explanation.

“It’s the sound of the wind. I think that a window was left open somewhere.”

After that, the strange sound wasn’t mentioned again.

Patrick and I took turns talking about Eleanora’s new life in Dolkness County. Now that I knew how worried he was about her, I wanted to give him as much reassurance as possible. Hearing about how the former duke’s daughter was romping around, Prince Edwin seemed to think that there was no need for him to worry. My past self probably wouldn’t have been able to believe that a day would come when we’d peacefully chat like this.

After our conversation had reached a certain point, Prince Edwin abruptly changed the subject, as if he’d only just remembered it.

“That’s right, I almost forgot. I would like to discuss the matter regarding Count Archiam for a little bit.”

I shrugged. “About the Lord of National Affairs, you mean? We’ve already backed off...is a strange way to put it, but we aren’t planning on getting involved any further.”

Prince Edwin nodded. “That’s good, especially if you haven’t changed your stance on staying out of central politics. It’s a fact that it’s a central position in name only, so it assuredly would’ve been dissolved sooner or later in any case. I

came here this morning because I was of course worried about Lady Eleanora, but I wanted to talk about this as well.”

Being uninvolved is definitely for the best. Now that Prince Edwin has also asked that we stay out of it, hopefully Eleanora will give up too... But it might be difficult, since she cares for her friends just as much as she cares for the person she loves.

“Thank you for your concerns. I must say, I’m surprised at how well-informed you are.”

“I heard about it from Marquess Prynan,” the prince explained. “I was feeling troubled about whether or not it was all right for me to come see Lady Eleanora, and he’s the one who pushed me to come, even if it ended up feeling like an imposition. He’s always taken good care of me.”

As soon as Marquess Prynan’s name came up, something felt off. *That’s right, the only way that Prince Edwin could’ve heard about the reason for our visit to the palace would have been through the marquess. He must have heard it from the marquess...or rather, the marquess made sure that he heard.*

Patrick, who seemed to have reached the same conclusion as me, asked hesitantly, “Your Highness, do you have many opportunities to meet with Marquess Prynan? I would like to know what led to your discussion yesterday about this matter.”

“Why?” the prince wondered. “We pass by each other in the palace sometimes, but it’s not very often. Yesterday he came to me, saying there was an urgent matter he needed to discuss.”

I asked the next question instead of Patrick, but my wording didn’t end up being the most polite. “Was it actually urgent?”

“I thought it could’ve been discussed later... What have you two been trying to get at?” Prince Edwin didn’t seem to entirely understand our underlying motivations, but he did seem to feel that something was off about our behavior. It would probably be difficult for him to accept what had happened.

I responded to the prince’s question with one of my own. “Do you really believe that I would go all the way to the Royal Palace just to protect Count

Archiam's position?"

"I heard that he cried, begging for your help, and you couldn't turn him down."

"After seeing me continuously reject offers from various aristocrats during my three years at the Academy, do you really think that I wouldn't be able to refuse someone just because they cried?"

"That's a fair point..." Prince Edwin admitted. "But if that's the case, then why...? Archiam... Oh, it must be because of Dorothea Archiam!" The prince's eyes widened as he recalled the count's daughter.

Prince Edwin had lived in the Royal Capital his entire life, so he likely knew about Dorothea and Eleanora's friendship. If he'd finally made that connection, then he could probably understand why Marquess Prynan had sent him my way.

It was Eleanora who wanted to protect Count Archiam, not me. The marquess wanted to stop Eleanora's attempt to help by sending the prince to reprove our attempts to help the count—in other words, the marquess was trying to take advantage of Eleanora's romantic feelings toward Prince Edwin. That was frustrating on its own, but it made me even more furious that he thought Eleanora was such a shallow person that she would turn her back on her friend just because the prince told her to do so.

I suddenly recalled the words that black-hearted geezer had said to me when we had parted ways. *"I know what it's like to want to please someone you love—I feel the same way when my granddaughter asks for my help. I don't want you to hold on to too much hope, but I'll try to do what I can. It's possible that the situation could change by tomorrow."* Trying to manipulate a sheltered girl by using her beloved prince to encourage her to cease in her attempts to help her friend—is that *"doing what you can"*? I'll have you know, Marquess Geezer, that Eleanora was even worried about causing you trouble. My anger continued to rise, coloring my tone so that I spoke a little more harshly than I meant to with the prince.

"If you're here to persuade me that the revocation of the position of Lord of National Affairs needs to go smoothly, you're talking to the wrong person. It's

Lady Eleanora who needs convincing, not me. And the best person to do that convincing would obviously be someone special to her. I won't let you say that you don't understand where I'm going with this."

To his credit, Prince Edward seemed abashed by my words. "So I was used..." he said bitterly. "Well, now that I think about it, everything about the marquess felt off. I'm at fault here. He nearly manipulated me into hurting Lady Eleanora..." He buried his head in his hands.

It was a truly foul plan, and if one knew what kind of person Eleanora was, it felt like an even more nefarious scheme. While I was extremely peeved, the prince seemed depressed about this revelation. *Stoke up those flames of anger!* I mentally chided him. Before I could fan said flames, Patrick chimed back in.

"I met him yesterday for the first time as well. I was taken aback by his seemingly kind demeanor—so much so that I lowered my guard. I can understand how you were misled by him."

"Thank you, Patrick," the prince responded gratefully. "But it's still not okay. His oddly timed visit, the information that he so conveniently had, and the fact that he sent me here...it all felt strange. Looking back on it, there were plenty of suspicious aspects to his visit. If I had just thought about it some more yesterday, I should've been able to realize what was happening. I didn't think things through enough. Again." Prince Edwin sounded defeated. He seemed to be quite upset about this.

Being the second prince, there had probably been many times in his life in which older, malicious aristocrats tried to involve him in their Machiavellian tricks. I felt sorry for him being put in that position.

"I think it would have been for the best if I wasn't born into royalty," he continued in a quiet tone. "If I weren't the second prince, people wouldn't try to take advantage of me. If my actions cause trouble for others, sometimes I think it would be better if I never interacted with anyone or did anything."

I couldn't believe that he seemed to be considering abdicating his place in the succession. I'd never heard of any actual cases of it happening in the past, and I would imagine it wouldn't be so easy to leave the royal family. He would probably have to leave the kingdom and never step foot in Valschein again for

the rest of his life.

Hearing this candid and despondent confession, both Patrick and I found ourselves at a loss for words. I couldn't just agree and tell him to quit being the prince if he wanted to, nor did I feel that I had the right to stop him from making such a choice.

There seemed to be no escape from this silence, but an evasion came from the door to the room, which was suddenly flung open. All three of us turned to see the very person who'd been pressing her ear against the door, listening to the entire conversation.

"What are you talking about?! That's not like you to say such a thing, Sir Edwin!"

"Lady Eleanora?!" Prince Edwin exclaimed. "Were you there the whole time?"

Eleanora was furious. She was glaring at him with furrowed brows, which was a wholly uncharacteristic expression to see on her face.

"I thought you wanted to be of help to people. Did you only have such feelings because you were a prince and felt you had no other choice? That isn't the case, is it?! You wanted to make the world a better place because that's who you are, right?! You didn't like academics, swordsmanship, or magic when you were younger, but I know that you worked hard to get better in all of those disciplines so that you could better support your older brother when he became the king!" Her words continued in an unabating torrent, exploding with emotion. Tears sprang to her eyes. "You always said that even if things get worse than they currently are, you should keep pushing forward for as long as there is someone in need of help." Her words hiccuped between sobs. "I took those words to heart, and I still remember them to this day! You've changed, Sir Edwin, and I... I-I hate you!" After getting everything she wanted to say off her chest, Eleanora turned and fled from the room without waiting for the prince to respond.



The sound of Eleanora's sobs disappeared into the distance, and the drawing room, its door still hanging open, was once again filled with a terrible silence. No one could say anything, and we sat there for a while until Patrick finally mustered up the will to speak.

"Can you go check on Lady Eleanora, Yumiella?"

"S-Sure." I jumped up from my seat and went after Eleanora. I left without looking at Prince Edwin, unable to bear the thought of what his expression might be.



It was easy to follow Eleanora. The servants of the estate were also worried about her after they'd seen her running through the halls while crying, and they told me where she'd gone without me having to ask.

I went upstairs to the second floor and walked down the hallway. It seemed obvious in retrospect that she would retreat to her room.

"I'm coming in," I said before opening the door. I scanned the room, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Did she disappear...? No, that's not possible. The window is shut and there aren't any holes in the walls to crawl through. She has to be hiding somewhere. The moment I looked under her bed, I heard something rustling inside her closet.

"I'm opening this door too," I announced before opening the doors to Château Eleanora (aka her suspiciously rattling closet).

Eleanora sat there, shrunk down in a corner of the cramped closet. She looked up at me, her eyes redder than usual from all of the swelling caused by her tears.

"Sir Edwin won't come here, will he?" she asked me plaintively.

"Don't worry. If he does, we'll hole up here together," I said, crouching down to her eye level.

Eleanora was still sniffing, but she seemed to be calming down. Though she stumbled over her words, she began speaking. "I... What did I do...?"

“They do say that if taking action doesn’t work, it might be time to take a step back. You shouldn’t worry too much about the fact that you said you hate him.”

“But...I said that I hated that he’s changed... The Sir Edwin I love, the Sir Edwin he used to be...I used that against him... That makes me no different than the people who have troubled Sir Edwin by constraining him, using his position as the second prince to their advantage...”

“Perhaps that’s true...” I admitted.

I’d misunderstood the situation. I’d come here under the impression that I was just going to comfort a girl who’d told the boy she liked that she hated him without thinking. Just moments ago, I had been furious with Marquess Prynan for underestimating Eleanora, but now I was doing the same. Eleanora’s love was incredibly pure. She might be a lover of romance as a concept, but the love she held in her heart for others was true.

I pushed aside the dresses hanging in her closet so that I could join her inside, squeezing in next to her shoulder to shoulder before reaching out to close the door. It was a game of hide-and-seek, which wasn’t something anyone would expect from two women of our age.

In the warm darkness of the closet, I slowly spoke again. “You liked that His Highness worked hard for the sake of others, right, Lady Eleanora?”

“That’s right. I love all the sides of him. When he’s kind, when he’s cold, when he’s smiling, when he’s angry... I love it all. But what I loved the most was when Sir Edwin was doing his best and working hard.”

“Would you still love him even if he stops being the second prince...?”

“That’s not relevant,” she said firmly.

“What if he loses his drive and stops trying?”

Though she had been responding instantly, at this question she suddenly fell silent. My eyes worked fine in the darkness of the closet. I turned my head to the side and saw Eleanora shutting her eyes tightly, twisting her face into a mess as she thought hard.

The silence continued for a while before Eleanora finally said, “I would still

love him... Even if that happened, I would still love Sir Edwin.”

I see. If that's the case, the rest will be easy to deal with. It's like talking to a grade schooler who's been mean to their crush.

“Aw, did you tell your beloved Prince Edwin that you hate him, Eleanora dear?” I asked her in a gentle voice.

“Agh,” Eleanora groaned. “What do I do...?”

“It happens sometimes; it's no big deal. You'll be all right.”

Man, Prince Idiot really is dumb. I can't believe he'd continue to ignore the feelings of such a good girl. What does Eleanora mean when she says she likes when he's "working hard"? If he's going to work hard, he should start by grinding up to level 99.

Thinking about it now, the reason that Eleanora and I had met was actually the prince. I wouldn't have known what to do if she suddenly said, “I don't care about Sir Edwin.”

All right then, it's starting to get uncomfortable in here.

“Why don't we get out?” I suggested.

“Already?” she asked with a little pout. “I was starting to have fun.”

I shook my head fondly. “You really get over things quickly, don't you, Lady Eleanora...?”

“Wait, ‘Lady’? You called me just Eleanora earlier, and even added ‘dear.’”

“Did I?” I shrugged. “I've always referred to you as ‘Lady Eleanora.’ It's embarrassing to change the way you address someone after being used to one way for so long.”

“Yumiella dear...” she tried out, then shook her head. “I'll stick to just ‘Yumiella.’”

She probably doesn't think I notice because it's dark, but, Eleanora dear, your face is bright red. Now my heart's starting to pound... The part of her I'm pressed against is also soft, and she smells good... What do I do if I make a mistake here?

I really needed to get out of the closet. Eleanora wasn't crying anymore, and Patrick would send the prince home sooner or later. I also had a task of my own.

"Let's get out. We're moving to the closet in my room."

"Are we going to hide again?" she asked, only a little hopefully.

"No, I'd like for you to choose a gown for me. I have a party to attend tonight."

I now understood that Prince Edwin still acted as carelessly as he had when we'd been at the Academy, and I'd learned how deep Eleanora's love was. I also knew that I was the strongest and that Marquess Prynan was a wicked villain.

It's time for a rematch. I don't care whether I end up saving Count Archiam or not. I won't let Marquess Prynan get his way. I won't be satisfied until he faces the consequences of trampling on Eleanora's feelings.

I exited the closet, and I looked back to see Eleanora squinting at the brightness and gaping up at me, jaw dropped.

"You're going to voluntarily put on a gown?" she squeaked in amazement.

"A beautiful gown is what a noble lady wears to battle, no?" I was aware that I was saying something uncharacteristic, but I wanted to gain a political victory against Marquess Prynan. I wanted to mess him up in a way that he wouldn't be able to make excuses about, like he would if I got physical with him.

I reached out my hand to Eleanora, which she grabbed and finally let me pull her from the closet.

"Yumiella, please listen carefully," she said seriously. "Beams don't shoot out of gowns."

"I know that..."

"What? But you said you'd be wearing it to battle..." She frowned in confusion. "You're going out somewhere to fight, aren't you?"

"Well, that wasn't quite what I meant. To sum it up, I think I know how to end up saving the Archiam family's position."

Though I wasn't terribly thrilled that I was about to do this, the smile that appeared on Eleanora's face when I said I could protect the position of Lord of National Affairs made me not care about anything else.



The swaying of the carriage was making me feel ill. I was usually fine, but I wasn't in top condition at the moment, and thus I was experiencing motion sickness.

"I can't do this anymore," I groaned. "I've used up all my stamina."

"What happened to your enthusiasm from earlier?" Patrick asked with an exasperated look. He was dressed more formally than usual as well.

Aside from the driver, we were the only two in the carriage. The party we were headed to at the Royal Palace was quite the official affair, so Eleanora was waiting for us at home.

Right around the time we'd finished hiding in the closet, Prince Edwin left his goodbyes for Eleanora and me with Patrick before taking his leave. It was hell after that.

Eleanora had suddenly become very motivated. She'd started with selecting a dress, and then she'd curled and braided my hair, applied a full face of makeup, and even sprayed a perfume on me that apparently would smell perfect by the time we arrived at the venue... Several people had worked on my beauty routine nonstop, and it had taken several hours. Thinking back on it, my last chance to escape all of this was when I had been leisurely enjoying my early bath.

It was now evening, and I was being tortured by my motion sickness. I was suffering as much as someone traveling a long distance on a bus eating squid jerky with a slight cold. I let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well, but I need to check something with you" Patrick said apologetically. "The plan is to first negotiate with Marquess Prynan again, and then if that doesn't work, we're going to talk to Count Archiam and make the case for why he deserves to be the Lord of National Affairs...correct?"

Considering what had happened last time, I'd wanted to come up with a plan,

but since we couldn't discuss things with Count Archiam prior to the party, we were going to make our first charge at the marquess. *We might not be at much of a disadvantage if we bring up the fact that he tried to involve the second prince in this matter.*

The party to which we were headed was the celebration that always preceded the monthly court conference. It was common for His Majesty to not attend. I'd also heard something about how most of the decisions that would be made at the conference the following day were settled at these parties.

I hated the thought of owing other nobles any favors, but I had a lot to do at the party, like getting the other marquesses on my side. *I need to give it everything I've got. But I'm so nauseous.*

"I'll go to Marquess Prynan to declare war, so can you find Count Archiam and make plans with him?" I asked Patrick.

"Hm? Is it okay to split up?"

"We might run out of time if we don't."

This was truly a race against time. It would've been best if we could've met with the count prior to the party, but I'd lost time after being attacked by Eleanora's mob of stylists. *I shouldn't have been cocky and said it was what I was wearing into battle.*

The carriage arrived at the Royal Palace—I could finally get out. Patrick exited the vehicle first, then considerately lent me his hand to help me down because I was wearing heels. *Heels... I can't help but think of a heel in terms of wrestling, since that's what they called the villains... Maybe I should call what I'm wearing on my feet "forcefully heightening shoes" instead.* I took Patrick's hand and stepped onto the battleground.

Patrick looked me up and down before saying, "You really are beautiful, Yumiella."

"What?" I asked, indignant at his tone. "You say that like I'm some comic relief character that doesn't care about her appearance."

"That is what I meant," he agreed with a teasing smile.

“Excuse you?”

“You should direct that fighting spirit at the marquess.”

As I continued walking toward the palace, breathing in the fresh air, my nausea started to subside.

Despite the fact that an event was being held today, we didn’t see very many people on the way to the great hall. The reason for that became clear when we entered the chamber—everyone was already here. I’d tried to arrive early, but it seemed we were late.

The tables were laid out with bright white cloths and filled with a colorful array of dishes. The partygoers stood by the tables, drinks in hand, chattering away. There were even some attendees dancing in the middle of the hall where there was some open space, moving to the music the band was playing. *I wanna go home...*

Not only were the heads of noble households in attendance, so were their wives. There were even plenty of young people. This was not only a place to engage in negotiations prior to the council, it was also a space to exchange information, gossip, and meet potential suitors.

One person near the entrance took notice of me and whispered into the ear of the person next to them. The news of Yumiella’s invasion spread quickly throughout the great hall.

“Is that...Yumiella Dolkness?” I heard someone gasp.

“The one next to her is the Ashbatten boy, so it’s probably Countess Dolkness,” observed another.

Huh? Has everyone forgotten what I look like? I’d thought that the fact that I was a woman with black hair would always be enough for them to recognize me as Yumiella.

I quietly asked Patrick, “Why is everyone acting like they don’t know who I am?”

“They’re all surprised by how beautiful you are when you’re dressed up,” he

answered in a matter-of-fact manner.

My, my. You flatter me, Mr. Patrick. You're the only one who would say I'm pretty. Don't you know that most normal people think I'm some kind of monster? I can't imagine people's impression of me would change no matter how dressed up I am.

I suddenly noticed that there was a boy who was obviously staring at me. He looked to be around the age when nobles entered the Royal Academy, and he had stopped in the middle of dancing with a girl who looked to be the same age. I could hear the whispers from the dance floor.

"I didn't know she was such a lovely woman," I was able to pick out from the murmurs.

Are they for real? I know, though—I know that if I respond, they'll go, "Eek, the monster glared at me." That's always the reaction to a monster that steps on tanks, chews on trains, and destroys towers.

As fan service, I decided to wink at the boy, which made him turn red before my eyes. *Huh...?* The girl dancing with him shot me a glare before leaving his side. *You've got it wrong. I wasn't trying to act like the older woman seducing a young man. I didn't mean to tear you two apart when things looked to be going well.*

As I stood there, apologizing to them in my mind, Patrick exasperatedly said, "Why are you messing around?"

"You're wrong," I assured him. "I've only got eyes for you, Patrick. I was just having fun—it was a momentary lapse in judgment..." I trailed off. "I sound like I'm trying to excuse an affair or something."

"I'm not worried about that. Some people might be fooled by your looks, but that's because they don't know what you're like on the inside."

"Are you saying I tricked that boy?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "I'm probably the only one who could still like you after seeing what you're really like."

Should I be happy or upset by that? Unsure of how to respond, I looked away

and scanned the venue. There were so many people here that it was going to be difficult to find our targets.

As I tried to pinpoint Marquess Prynan, Patrick whispered, "There are more radicals here than I expected."

After what had happened with the duke, their numbers had decreased quite a bit, and they were supposed to be lying low... It seemed that they couldn't stand not attending the big monthly party though. *If you're going to show your face in public only to be treated with disdain, you should just stay home... Oh, I don't see the marquess, but I found Count Archiam.*

"Patrick, over there."

"All right, let's go."

I shook my head. "I'll keep looking for the marquess, so you handle the planning with him."

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Patrick protested. "Why don't we stay together as much as possible?" He sounded anxious.

I could understand why he'd be worried, but I wasn't stupid enough to behave strangely in a place like this. Though I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if I, say, suddenly started screaming, I knew that I could suppress my curiosity without issue.

"I'll be fine. Haven't I always behaved in these sorts of situations? I'm going to go look for the marquess." After reassuring my worried boyfriend, I began to circulate through the hall.

Immediately after I split up with Patrick, a stranger started talking to me.

"It's nice to see you again. It seems you're doing as well as always, Countess Dolkness."

"Hello," I said with a stiff bow. I tried to walk away, but the unfamiliar man persistently followed me.

"When we last met, you took off with Lady Eleanora, so I was hoping to someday have the chance to properly talk to you," he said smoothly. "What

brings you to the Royal Capital? I can connect you to people if there's someone you'd like to meet with."

As he rattled on, his identity finally dawned on me. It was the man I'd exchanged a word or two with at that party I'd been invited to at Duke Hillrose's home. Just like Patrick had observed, this gathering *was* full of radicals.

I reluctantly addressed the man as I continued walking. "It's nice to see you again. It appears you were able to escape the roundup."

"Ha ha ha." His laugh did not sound terribly sincere. "That Hillrose sure did come up with a foolish plan. I would never have any intent of rebelling against the royal family."

He's definitely lying. He probably avoided being caught by coincidence. I'm sure when he heard about the coup he was like, "Hip, hip, hooray! Our great Duke Hillrose is amazing as expected! Huzzah!"

I couldn't trust this man with his humorless smile. He had definitely been in Duke Hillrose's little clique. Considering the marquess and his smarmy expression, I could understand why the duke had decided to do a deep clean on the aristocracy of this kingdom.

Still, a guy like him who loves sucking up to powerful people might know where Marquess Prynan is. I'm sure if I walked through the venue from edge to edge I'd find him eventually, but it'd be quicker to ask this guy.

"I'm here to see Marquess Prynan. Do you know where he is?"

"What! You want to see Marquess Prynan?! He's a wicked old man."

"I'm aware," I responded drily.

"He's trying to take the loyal Count Archiam's position as the Lord of National Affairs away from him!"

"Like I said, I'm aware. I'm here regarding that matter."

This guy just keeps lying. Even the count himself has admitted that he's a Lord of Doing Nothing. Can he just tell me where the geezer is already?

I'd been walking this entire time without even looking his way, but now I

stopped to face him. The noble, whose name I didn't even know, was staring at me, mouth agape.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Are you perhaps going to discuss Count Archiam with the marquess?"

"That's the plan, yes."

This is so annoying. At this rate, he might ask me to take care of an issue he has while I'm at it. It's fine; people have asked for similar favors in the past. I'll just refuse and ignore him. I'm sure he'd have learned about this sooner or later.

Finally, the man pointed across the hall.

"Marquess Prynan is over there. You can't see right now because of all the people, but...that's his usual haunt."

"I see. Thank you very much."

My destination was one of the most densely packed areas in the entire venue. *Oh, it's all older men. It's probably where all the heads of households are gathered. Since this guy next to me is a radical and he isn't over there, it's probably all moderates.*

I pressed onward with an even more emotionless expression than my usual. Perhaps everyone could sense my anger toward Marquess Prynan, because the crowd parted to make way for me without me asking. I kept walking, and I found the marquess quickly enough. He didn't move out of the way, so our eyes met, following the path created by the parted crowd.

I strode right up to the marquess, who greeted me with a smile, but my battle spirit wasn't diminished by his friendliness.

"Oh, what a rare sight," he said jovially. "I didn't think I'd be seeing you again, Yumiella."

"We're in public," I responded coldly. "Please refer to me as Dolkness."

"Hm... Were you unsuccessful in persuading your obstinate little friend?"

"Lady Eleanora, a member of my household, isn't the type of woman to abandon her friends, regardless of what anyone says to her. That was a really

unnecessary thing that you did. I'll have you know that I'm firm in my resolve, and I won't be backing down like I did yesterday."

"Does that mean your demands haven't changed, Countess Dolkness?" the marquess asked.

"Yes, that's right. I am asking you to cease your attempts to annul the position of Lord of National Affairs in the court conference tomorrow," I said, clearly stating my demands.

Since we had an audience, he surely couldn't make any dishonorable remarks. If he brought up the fact that the position of Lord of National Affairs had no substance, I could use aristocrat logic to make something up and discuss how wonderful a person Count Archiam was. Even if everyone knew it was a position in name only, it would be meaningful to hear me acknowledge it.

Marquess Prynan covered his mouth with his hand and stared at me. *If I look away, I'll lose.* The marquess and I continued our staring contest until...the marquess looked away. But I only felt victorious for a moment, because he was staring intently at something behind me. Whatever he'd seen caused him to move his hand away from his mouth to reveal a beaming smile. Still wearing his affable grin, he began to speak in an exaggerated manner, as if he were hamming it up on a stage.

"Oh my! If it's a request from *the* Countess Dolkness herself, then even I, the Lord of Finance, must rethink my decisions. It seems that Count Archiam has forged a great connection. I must consider treating him kindly if he is now under your protection, Countess Dolkness."

It's that easy? Things had gone exactly the way I wanted them to, but something didn't feel right. As I wondered what the origin of this strange feeling was, I noticed that Marquess Prynan's gaze was still focused on whatever was behind me. I quickly turned around to see that the crowd had unexpectedly swelled in size. The man I had been talking to earlier was at the front of the press, and the entire crew was probably made up of radicals. They had gathered like moths to a light, and they seemed to be excited.

"Wonderful!" someone called out. "I thought it was over for Count Archiam, but it seems a savior has appeared."

“I will follow Countess Dolkness as well,” swore another.

“That’s right,” a third concurred. “Even though we’ve had the rug pulled out from under us, if we gather under her leadership...”

At this rate, they’ll turn from the radical faction to the Yumiella faction. They’d gathered around me, which had nothing to do with what I’d come here to accomplish, and now they were proclaiming that they were in my faction. These people were going to use my influence without my permission and do whatever they wanted.

This is bad. Could this be what Marquess Prynan was after? I quickly turned back around and saw his face twisted into a horrible grin.

“Oh my,” he simpered. “Are those people behind you all your friends?”

“So you’ve shown your true nature...” I observed through gritted teeth. “Is this what you wanted?”

He shrugged. “Ever since Hillrose has been gone, things have been a mess within the moderate faction. However, now it seems that a formidable rival has appeared. We must come together as well.”

This is actually really bad. He’s trying to force me into the position Duke Hillrose used to occupy—as the person who gathers all those who oppose the kingdom in one place. I feel bad for him, but do I have any other option other than abandoning Count Archiam? No... I can’t back down here. Even if I were to turn my back on him and say that his position isn’t necessary, it won’t do anything to solve the problem I’m in now.

At this point, all that could happen was that Marquess Prynan wouldn’t bring up the issue regarding the Lord of National Affairs at the court conference tomorrow. He’d later complain (just like he was doing now) and say, “I don’t have a choice, because this is what Yumiella told me to do.” Just that would be enough of an achievement to say that I’d saved the radicals.

What if I just hid away in Dolkness County while the radicals all get excited? No... That wouldn’t work either. They’re the same people that ignored what the second prince wanted and tried to set him up to succeed the throne. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if the uproar in the Royal Capital affected my county.

It wouldn't matter how far I might try to backpedal—I'd been forced into a corner. *If taking a step back doesn't work, then I need to press forward. I'll keep pressing and pressing until he has no choice but to back down.*

I launched into a performance as well. I was going to be the successor to Duke Hillrose's mission, stand at the top of the radicals, and take power from the moderates with everything I had...or, at least I would pretend to.

"Count Archiam is someone who brings honor to the title of Lord of National Affairs so...I think it would be fine to give him more tasks regarding the protection of this kingdom." I spoke vaguely on purpose, but I was basically telling the marquess that he ought to hand over the right for Count Archiam to have some say in military affairs. Just as I'd expected, the radicals falling into position behind me buzzed with excitement.

"A position in the central army?!"

"How envious. However, what status would he be given?"

"*The Demon Lord is endorsing him, so...could he become the Lord of Military Affairs?*"

I know you guys are excited, but if you're going to claim to be in my faction, please don't refer to me as the Demon Lord. Still, I'm surprised by how wild they're letting their delusions become.

The Lord of Military Affairs, the position they'd brought up, was the most important position in the army. Historically, one of the marquesses, of which there were only three, had held that position. Something like this would probably require negotiations with other military officers as well, so it would be impossible for someone with no experience (like Count Archiam) to suddenly be assigned the job.

Well, the radicals overreacting like this is convenient for me. I'm sure it'll be bad for Prynan if things were to become difficult with the other marquesses. Though he'd been the one to manipulate the radicals, they were now under my control.

The marquess flashed a tense smile. "The reassignment of a military position isn't something I can decide on my own. The final decision would of course lie

with His Majesty. I don't know if the other ministers will agree either."

"Oh," I said airily. "But just earlier you said you were considering better treatment for Count Archiam. Aren't you going to be giving me your full support?"

The marquess took a half step back, probably unconsciously. *This is good, I'm pressing him. I'll just keep pressing and pressing... Where do I stop?* I was pushing him so hard because I knew taking a step back would ultimately push me into a corner, but I couldn't see a way forward from here.

Um, well, let me think. The marquess probably doesn't want me to actually get involved with politics. He wants someone with no ambition and hates politics to gather all the radicals, so...I need to make him believe that I truly want power. He probably knows that I'm bluffing though.

This battle-hardened old man had probably seen through my posturing. Not only that, but he saw that this was probably going to become an issue, so he was starting to feel a bit discouraged. The one-on-one battle between marquess and countess had already changed. It wasn't even a battle between two camps. Now that the radicals were involved, this situation was a chaotic mess in which everyone's objectives and methods were completely different. If we continued arguing, the moderates and even the king could get involved, which would make the situation even more chaotic.

This was more than I could handle, and I wasn't sure what the right thing was to say next. As I stood there at a loss for words, a euphonious masculine voice reached my ear.

"Hold on, Yumiella." Patrick appeared on his own, slipping through the crowd and coming to stand by my side with a glass of champagne in his hand. *What are you doing drinking while I'm in such a difficult situation?*

Fortunately, this gave me the opportunity to reset the stage. The radicals didn't seem to like this development, and they started booing.

"Isn't this our chance to push?" one grumbled.

"Disregarding a head of household like that..." griped another. "Who does he think he is?"

Patrick ignored the onlookers and gazed steadily at me. The serious look in his eyes seemed to be saying, "Trust me."

"You're doing too much," he said. "Don't be too unreasonable."

"You think so...?"

"The only one we've interacted with is the Archiam family, and we don't know the other aristocrats very well. I'm sure we can find someone else better suited for a military position."

The buzzing among the radicals morphed into uneasy whispers. They all shot glances at each other. *Oh, I see. You guys are so easy.* Basically, Patrick had made them think, "Someone better suited? Could it be...me?" Now, the tone had shifted away from me unreasonably endorsing Count Archiam.

It seems like the radicals are all the kind of people who hear the popular girl in class say she has a crush and immediately think, "Is it me?" You're wrong. You're all definitely not the popular girl's crush.

Patrick's words really got to them because more than the kingdom, more than their own factions, they cared more than anything about themselves. This previously touch-and-go situation had now been resolved.

I'm just going to rely on Patrick, I thought, and so I waited for his next move.

"Yumiella, you..." As he spoke, he started to raise his arm to point at something.

That was when the accident occurred. As Patrick turned his body, the glass in his hand hit against me. The expensive, paper-thin glass of the champagne flute left his hand and dropped to the floor.

The slow motion countdown to an explosion of shattered glass began. Patrick looked at me as if to say he'd messed up. *Wow, Patrick, you're such a clumsy...* But that, I realized, was obviously not the case. Patrick or I could still easily grab the champagne flute without spilling its contents.

He's doing this on purpose. There's a reason he's pretending to drop the glass. In that case I should stay still and wait until it breaks... Isn't it a waste, though? Maybe I can forgive breaking the glass. It's a waste, but everything eventually

breaks. But letting the drink go to waste is...

It wasn't good to waste good alcohol. I caught the glass just as it was nearly about to hit the floor. As I stood back up from my crouched position in one, vigorous movement, I chugged its contents, then tipped the empty glass downward as I crouched again and threw it onto the floor.

All of this happened in the same amount of time it would take a normal person to say "Oh." I pretended I had been reaching for the glass and then stared mournfully at the broken shards on the floor.

"Oh, I didn't make it in time," I said sadly, pretending that I had been trying to catch it.

Patrick shot me a judgmental look. *It's fine; no one could've seen what I did. I don't know what your goal was, but you wanted the glass to break, right?* I thought things had gone according to his plan without issue, but instead he seemed panicked.

Patrick pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it against the sleeve of my dress at an angle that would hide it from those around us.

"I'm sorry. It might leave a stain."

The liquid hadn't sprayed everywhere; instead, it had ended up in my stomach, which meant there wasn't going to be a stain. *Oh, sorry... That's what was supposed to happen.*

There was one other problem as well. The liquid I had just quaffed was alcoholic. It was only a little bit of it, but my face was starting to get hot. Patrick's face (which was looking up at me as if to say, "Why did you drink that?") was starting to blur.

Patrick stood up as he said, "Your face is beet red. Didn't I tell you to stick to drinking juice? How many glasses did you have before coming over here?"

"I don't remember..." I truly had only had one drink, but he probably wanted me to pretend to be drunk. Though my head was pounding, I could understand that much.

I see, so my face looks red to other people. It's strange that I have poison

resistance, yet I get drunk.

“We should probably go home,” Patrick suggested.

“You think so?”

“It wouldn’t be good if you got drunk and lost control again.”

The moment he mentioned I might lose control, the people around us all took several steps back, making the ring of people around us wider. I was about to leave, and now because of what Patrick had said, there wasn’t a single radical against the idea.

Patrick lent me his shoulder, and we began to move away. The crowd backed up and parted for us instantly.

And so, thanks to Patrick’s quick wit, the matters at the party concluded without being settled.

We escaped the great hall. There didn’t seem to be anyone around us in the hallway, but just in case, we spoke in quiet voices.

“Why did you drink it?” Patrick admonished.

“Because it would’ve been a waste.”

“You’re lucky we were able to flee the scene.”

“Thanks. I didn’t know where to go from there...” My stomach twisted. “Eugh, I’m not feeling so well.”

“It looks like we really should be going home.”

We headed outside, and we were led by a servant to where the carriages were. The cold night air felt good, and I felt a little better. I thought we would be heading home together in the carriage, but Patrick didn’t get in.

“Patrick?”

“I’m staying. There’s someone I want to talk to,” he said before shutting the carriage door between the two of us.

The carriage immediately took off. As I swayed with the movement of the vehicle, I started feeling lonely and anxious. No... It was motion sickness that I

was feeling on top of the inebriation, and now I was feeling even worse.

After leaving the front lines of the battlefield, I had no choice but to leave the rest to Patrick and pathetically endure the sick feeling of being drunk.



Interlude 3: Patrick

After getting his fiancée back into the carriage, drunk as she was after the stunt she'd pulled at the party, Patrick headed back to the Royal Palace. He walked slowly as he mulled over the situation.

"If I just convince Count Archiam... No, he's already achieved his goal." Patrick's feet felt heavy. The situation was hopeless.

Patrick wasn't sure whether it had happened the previous night or today, or perhaps even at the point he'd first seen Yumiella at the soiree, but Marquess Prynan had changed his plans. He'd altered his strategy—instead of revoking the position of Lord of National Affairs from Count Archiam, he'd forced Yumiella to publicly stop him from doing so. While there was nothing wrong with Yumiella defending the count, using that action as bait to rile up the other radicals wasn't what anyone involved had wanted.

Just like they'd relied upon Duke Hillrose in the past, the radicals would now expect Yumiella to be a noble who could stand up against the royal family. Aristocrats with such fiery ambitions brought nothing but trouble.

"We're backed up against a wall. Our only escape route is..." Patrick stopped in his tracks and tilted his head.

It was pointless to convince Count Archiam to give up on his position now, because at this point it was likely that the marquess wasn't even going to bring up the issue at the conference tomorrow. Regardless of what had really happened, everyone would believe that the Archiam family's position had been saved because of Yumiella's actions. This would lead to avaricious aristocrats gathering around her like vultures, hoping she might do the same for them.

Marquess Prynan was a lot trickier to deal with than they'd expected, and now he was going to accomplish his goals without having to do anything else. As for Yumiella and Patrick, there didn't seem to be any viable strategies left to them.

“Asking the royal family for their help would be...a last resort,” Patrick muttered to himself.

Even if it resulted in worsening the relationship between the royal family and the Prynan family, the king would nevertheless most likely settle the matter at once if he and Yumiella were to ask for help. One word from the top would settle the issue at hand, but at the same time it would mean that Yumiella would owe a favor to the royal family.

The king wouldn't condescendingly demand compensation for his help, but Yumiella herself would feel obligated to do something in return. Despite how Yumiella might seem, she was actually quite loyal. Feeling grateful for the royal family's help, she would try to do something in return and take it too far...which would inevitably result in giving the paradoxical (and accidental) impression that she wasn't loyal at all.

Though he had plenty of corridors left to walk before reaching the great hall, Patrick's legs were firmly planted on the ground. He took a deep breath to deliver a fresh infusion of oxygen to his brain. He set aside his jumbled feelings and forced himself to stop thinking about the inconvenient truths about the situation; instead, he began to rack his brain to think of how he could solve this problem.

As Patrick well knew, because of everything that had transpired, Marquess Prynan would get his way without taking any further action, whereas Patrick knew that he and Yumiella couldn't stop what had been set into motion, no matter how much they might struggle against it.

“If the marquess would just make his move, things would be easier...”

If Marquess Prynan revoked the position of Lord of National Affairs and Yumiella didn't interfere—if they were to just follow the original plans—then it would be possible to show all parties involved that Yumiella had no intention of siding with the radicals.

“Could that work...?” he wondered aloud.

In the end, Patrick never returned to the party. He returned the way he'd

come, and he headed outside. As he stood in the cool night air, he watched the other aristocrats slowly trickle out of the palace. Soon enough, the person he'd been waiting for arrived. An attendant acknowledged him first, and he led Patrick to a carriage marked with the Prynan family's crest.

Moving in too hurried a manner would ruin everything. Instead, Patrick maintained his composure and walked at a brisk pace toward the carriage. He arrived at the same time as Marquess Prynan, who'd come from the direction of the palace. The two faced each other; it might have appeared to an outside observer as if they were going to ride home together.

"I apologize for earlier," Patrick said in a detached manner to the marquess, as the other man's face settled into a dubious expression. "After sending my fiancée home, I have no way to get back there myself."

"All right..." the marquess said, giving tacit and monosyllabic approval. Without another word, he climbed up into the carriage, signaling that they would continue their discussion inside. Patrick followed.

The marquess knocked on the roof of the conveyance, and the carriage began moving. The creak of the wheels and the clip-clop of the horses against the stone pavement served as a cover to their conversation. It was the perfect place for a secret meeting.

Marquess Prynan was the first to speak. "Your fiancée isn't even here. What is this about? I don't believe I have anything to discuss with you."

"It's a matter that I would prefer to discuss out of her hearing," Patrick said, ignoring the comment that seemed to imply that the marquess saw him as little more than Yumiella's sidekick. "Please think of me instead in the context of my position as the Ashbattens' secondborn."

"Ashbatten... It's a rare sight to see you out of the mark."

"I'm sure it is. The Ashbattens want nothing more than to maintain their independence, which is how I feel as well. But in order to do that, we need some degree of influence in the Royal Capital."

The marquess nodded. "The Ashbatten Mark is currently a buffer zone, but

the family's position will weaken if our Lemlaestan neighbors finally manage to settle down."

"Yes, but we don't have any intentions of furthering any need for obsequious fealty toward the royal family," Patrick said, posturing himself as desiring political power. This wasn't typical of an Ashbatten, but he felt that his reasoning made sense.

Patrick wanted to advance his right to speak concerning central matters, but he also didn't have any desire to curry favor with the royal family. There was a position that perfectly accomplished those two things, and Patrick was certain that there was no way that the marquess wasn't picking up on what he was thinking.

The corners of Marquess Prynan's mouth twitched up into a predatory grin. He looked like a completely different person than the man who'd spent the entire night smiling like he wouldn't even hurt a fly.

"So your fiancée's predicament has actually turned out to be a favorable situation for you?"

Patrick shrugged. "Duke Hillrose's former position is enticing. He was second only to the royal family, and even if they were a ship of fools, his allies were quite the faction."

"I see. Things will be easier for me if the Dolkness family becomes our rival."

"I'm surprised that you're willing to take all of this at face value..."

Though it had been Patrick's goal to make a secret arrangement with the marquess, things were progressing so smoothly that it was beginning to make him suspicious. Considering what a sly old man he was interacting with, Patrick knew that it would be easy for the marquess to pretend to go along with Patrick but ultimately leave him hanging.

As if he'd anticipated Patrick's concern, Marquess Prynan spoke as if he saw right through him. "There was no way you would've become engaged to that woman without any plan. I've suspected for a long time that the Margrave of Ashbatten's secondborn was planning something. Now, let's get to the heart of the matter."

“I see...”

I wasn't planning anything, thought Patrick. I just like her.

Chapter 5: The Hidden Boss Exposes the Kingdom's Dark Secret

The last time I'd had alcohol, I'd found that I didn't much like the taste, and I'd ended up acting differently than I normally did. That was why I hadn't had a single drop since, but I had to admit that I also had memories of feeling like I was walking on air and having a fun time.

But right now, I felt terrible. I wasn't sure if my mistake had been to chug the whole drink at once, or if it had been the carbonation (which I wasn't fond of) that was making me feel worse.

Once it pulled up to my estate, I exited the carriage at once, almost falling out of it in my tipsiness. I decided to stand in the cool, night air for a while to take my mind off the sick feeling in my stomach. I took a small jump onto the roof, using the sheer strength of my muscles to forcibly maintain my balance; even without the alcohol, I felt unsteady because of the heels I was wearing. *I shouldn't have done this in a dress. I can't even sit anywhere since I don't want to get it dirty.*

Though I regretted my decision to come up here, it was soothing to look up at the night sky. The crescent moon was peeking out from behind the clouds. I continued to gaze at the moon for a while, maintaining my unbalanced posture through sheer force of will, my ankle still twisted into a strange position.

All I was able to focus on was the moon, but eventually my sickness died down. As I prepared to jump back down, a carriage stopped beside the estate. It didn't come through the front gates, and it instead parked next to the moat. I stared at the carriage and its unfamiliar family crest until eventually Patrick climbed out. He walked to the front gate and tried to nonchalantly enter the estate.

"Up here," I called out.

Taking notice of me, Patrick jumped up and joined me on the roof.

“Why don’t you take a rest from the romping around at least while you’re wearing a gown?” he admonished.

“So standing on the roof constitutes romping around?”

“I feel like climbing onto a roof with a single jump actually surpasses the realm of romping... Were you waiting for me?”

“Yeah...” I finally said after a pause. “I was worried if you’d get home all right, and I thought I’d sober up in the meantime. Also, I wanted to look at the moon.”

“It sounds to me like it was mostly the latter reason. It does seem like you’ve sobered up, but the moon? Are you planning to go there again?”

I shook my head. “I think I’m done with space travel for now. I was looking to see if the thing I saw last time was still there.”

“There’s something on the moon?”

“I thought I saw something that looked like a flag, but maybe I was mistaken.”

When I’d tried to travel to the moon, during my descent, just before my reentry into the atmosphere, I’d looked back at the moon for just a moment. When I’d done so, I thought that I’d seen something flag-shaped, but perhaps I’d been mistaken. I hadn’t had time to get a close look before I’d been sucked back into the atmosphere, so it hadn’t really been clear at the time, and afterward, I’d been too busy crashing through someone’s roof to think about it very much.

Though I’d called it space travel, I’d only managed to go far enough to enter the orbital path of the planet. The way the moon looked from up there wasn’t too different from how it looked from the ground, so maybe I had been mistaken after all.

“I can’t see it from here,” Patrick said, gazing up at the moon himself.

“I think it was around the rabbit’s head...”

“I know I’ve asked this before, but what is this rabbit in the moon?”

“See how there’s a pattern on the moon? In Japan, we always said that it looks like a rabbit pounding rice cakes.”

“Oh, it’s mythology from the world you used to be in. So what pattern are you talking about?”

Didn’t I just explain it? That pattern is supposed to look like a rabbit pounding rice cakes... It doesn’t really though. Unless you explain how that part is the ears and the other part is the mortar and the hammer using a diagram, it doesn’t resemble a rabbit at all. I set aside the explanation for another time when I could draw it out and explain it—we didn’t have that kind of time at the moment. I needed to ask Patrick about a matter far more important than the rabbit in the moon.

“I’ll explain the rabbit later with a drawing,” I promised. “Anyway, what happened with Marquess Prynan?”

“It’ll work out...hopefully. We need to go to the Royal Palace tomorrow, but we should be able to suppress the radicals’ reinvigorated fervor.”

Wow. How did he negotiate us out of that situation? I’d been worried about what might happen the whole time I’d been up here, but Patrick had ended up taking care of everything. I felt bad that he was always cleaning up after the messes caused by my carelessness.

“Sorry for going on my own,” I said, abashed. “I thought it would be okay if I talked to Marquess Prynan on my own since I had nothing to lose.”

“It’s okay,” he assured me. “I wasn’t able to predict what he’d intended to do either. If you hadn’t used your wits to buy us time, the radicals might’ve already been the Yumiella faction by now.”

That would have been truly terrifying, since that was clearly where the marquess’s objective had shifted. It was probably convenient for him to have ambitious and rebellious people gather under an unambitious leader. However, it seemed that Patrick’s negotiations had convinced the marquess to back down. *I’m so glad.*

“I’m so glad he gave up. What did you say to him?”

“Marquess Prynan hasn’t given up. If anything, I gave him my support.”

“What?” *You haven’t resolved anything*, I thought, completely lost.

Patrick seemed uncomfortable, and he looked away from me as he explained, “You have no intention of getting involved in politics. But the same doesn’t go for me, so what I said was that I’d win you over and get you to agree to form a faction... He believed me pretty easily.”

Huh, so that’s what he was thinking. I can’t believe my fiancé’s taking advantage of me for the margrave’s sake. He even revealed to me that he’s going to win me over. Gosh, Patrick. You’re not good at this whole “doing evil” thing, are you?

Of course, none of that was possible, so I pressed him for clarification on what he was trying to say. “So that’s what you told Marquess Prynan you’d do. What did you talk about after that?”

“Since the party ended on an ambiguous note after you left, the plan is to have the Dolkness faction form tomorrow at the conference. More specifically, Marquess Prynan will call for the end of the position of the Lord of National Affairs, and you’ll argue against it. If you defend Count Archiam in front of the king, everyone will understand that he’s under your protection.”

“So Marquess Prynan believes that’s what’ll happen, and all I have to do is not react to his petition.”

“Exactly.”

I see. I thought I was out of moves because Marquess Prynan was able to accomplish his goal without taking any further action. If he stayed quiet, rumors of how I protected Count Archiam would quickly spread. But Patrick had used the situation to make the rumors into something that had definitively happened. The marquess was going to expect me to argue as he backed the count into a corner, but I wouldn’t do it. This meant that it would be public knowledge that Yumiella Dolkness had no intention of helping the radicals. All that would happen was that Count Archiam would lose his position... Oh, so that’s going to happen after all.

“What about Count Archiam?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, we can’t have it both ways... But if you decide that you want

to help not only Count Archiam but all of the radicals, I won't stop you."

Sorry, Count Archiam. You'll have to give up on your position. I promise the kingdom will be okay without another Lord of Doing Nothing.

It would've been nice if I could've actually apologized to the count in a manner that made light of the situation, but it weighed heavy on my mind. It was perhaps fortunate that I hadn't run into him between the prince's visit and attending the party. If I had made a formal declaration of my intention to help him, it would've been harder to apologize. Eleanora was going to be upset about this as well... *I feel depressed...*

Just then, there was the sound of something snapping. *Does your heart make a sound when it breaks? Even my vision is askew...*

"Oh." I looked down to see that one of my heels had broken off. *That's what made the sound.* Because I had been forcing myself to stand upright on the slanted roof for so long, I had probably put too much pressure on the shoe.

At this rate I was going to fall down, so I reached my hand out to Patrick. He stared at it quizzically for a long moment before grabbing my hand right before it was too late.

"Did you have to wait so long?" I asked him grumpily.

He shrugged. "I thought you'd do something about it yourself."

"I can't do too much in these clothes," I argued.

"Then you shouldn't have gotten up on the roof in the first place."

Usually banter like this was fun, but I wasn't having any fun right now. Before the court conference tomorrow, I had to go apologize to Count Archiam. His family was going to have to move to their county and become provincial aristocrats.

Maybe I can teach them how to have fun in their territory. It's the least I could do. I think there's a dungeon in Archiam County. It's not particularly great with only ten levels, but... Oh, maybe it's perfect to show them the charms of speed farming. I could convince Eleanora to go with us. She's pretty good friends with Dorothea, and having her there would make things a lot less depressing. I'm

sure Eleanora would have fun too.

All right, this doesn't sound too bad.

I didn't like problems that couldn't be solved with the *pow* of a punch or the *boom* of a spell, but *pow* and *boom* both came in handy when supporting someone's level grinding.

Though the battle for the position of Lord of National Affairs had ended up having some twists and turns, it would finally be settled tomorrow.



The next day, we planned to head to the Royal Palace in the afternoon, which meant that we had to visit the Archiam estate during the day. Patrick needed to continue pretending to cooperate with Marquess Prynan in order to “trick” me, so he left for the palace first to meet with the marquess. Eleanora was staying home, so I had to meet with Count Archiam alone.

I was led to the same drawing room as before, and it was there that I met with the head of the family. He seemed to know what I had come to discuss, and he consequently had a gloomy air about him. It seemed like he hadn't slept properly in a while either, because the bags under his eyes were terrible.

I forced the words out of my mouth. “I'm sorry I wasn't able to greet you yesterday.”

“I'm just grateful you came to the party. However, things seem to have become quite complicated...”

“It's all because of my own carelessness. Please, you have no need to feel responsible,” I said.

“I don't think it's so simple,” he countered. “By the time I asked for your help and you more or less agreed, it was already too late. If my case creates precedent, then everyone will depend on you.”

Oh, I see. Even if the marquess hadn't come up with this plan, I would've gotten dragged into a similar situation either way. Although it was unfortunate, the count was going to have to give up on his position. As a heavy atmosphere

filled the room, we both bowed our heads to the other and apologized.

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t anything more I can do.” I sighed.

“I’m sorry as well,” he said morosely. “I apologize for getting you involved in such a troublesome matter.”

Talking about this any longer would just make us more depressed. I was waiting for the right moment to announce my intention to leave when I heard a third person’s voice. It was the steward, Kevin—he was lurking in the corner of the drawing room.

“Please wait,” the wicked old man (the one on the count’s side) said. “Will you be able to stop the plans set in motion by the marquess? If the topic itself isn’t brought up at the conference today, surely there will be more voices in support of you, Lady Dolkness.”

“Oh, that’s all right. Patrick is...” I was about to bring up Patrick’s plan, intending to explain why they didn’t need to worry about me, but I realized what I was doing, and I quickly shut my mouth. I saw a grin spread on Kevin’s face, and it became clear that I’d already said too much.

“I’ve heard that Marquess Prynan has changed his plan to one in which he can position you as the head of the anti-moderate faction. If that’s the case, the best thing would be for nothing to be said at the conference. However, you say that there’s no issue. Could it be that Sir Patrick is feigning cooperation with the marquess—?”

This is bad. I forgot that the count has a guy on his side who doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty either. Even if the information came from an unknown source, it would be the end for us if the marquess suspected Patrick. The marquess would get a passing grade on how successful his plan was just by keeping his mouth shut, whereas our plan was only going to work because he was trying to get a perfect score by forcing me to speak out in public support of Count Archiam. If he had the slightest suspicion that something was off, that nasty old man would likely give up on getting a perfect score and pick the safer option.

I was alone in this drawing room. What was I to do in a situation where I couldn’t count on Patrick to help? As I listened to Kevin go on, wondering what

to do, someone else entered the room.

The person who came through the doorway was my comrade in plastic model making, Dorothea. She was quiet and preferred being indoors, just like me.

“Stop it!” she said, raising her voice. “Father, make Kevin stop!”

“You shouldn’t be meddling in an adult’s affairs—” the count began.

“Is it really so important to stay central aristocrats?!” she exclaimed, interrupting her father. “You’ve caused so much trouble for Lady Eleanora and Yumiella. Is it really so important to protect a useless position like the Lord of National Affairs?” Dorothea closed the distance between her father and herself as she scolded him.

Um, can you guys save your family squabbles for when I’m not here? My wishes were futile, and Dorothea’s father argued back with a scowl.

“Don’t you know how much I’ve struggled to maintain this position?!”

“But what is the point of so desperately clinging onto your status?!”

The argument between father and daughter looked like it was going to get even more heated. *Can you quit just standing there and stop them, Kevin?*

“What?!” the count cried. “It’s for you! We need status and money to find a good suitor to marry you off too. Don’t stomp all over my efforts as a parent!”

“I don’t need a good suitor!” Dorothea insisted. “I just want to make my dolls; that’s enough for me!”

“There you go with the dolls again. We might not be able to live in the Royal Capital anymore. Don’t you understand that?!”

“I don’t mind living in Archiam County. You’re the one who’s so attached to the Royal Capital, father!”

“I am not! I would love to be able to do endurance tests for new construction methods using the space we have in the county!”

The conversation stopped there, but they both glared at each other. Neither seemed like they were going to back down.

I can understand that they’d rather focus on what they want to do in the

county than deal with the scheming in the Royal Capital. They both can't back down because of that. They're arguing to each defend the one thing they can't... Wait. There's no need for them to argue, is there?

They seemed like they were going to resume yelling at one another at any moment, so I checked in with them just in case. "Does anyone here actually feel like they need the position of the Lord of National Affairs?"

The sudden question made them both turn to look at me, then back at each other once more.

"I don't need it," Count Archiam said.

"I don't need it either," Dorothea agreed.

Their aggression evaporated at once. Count Archiam tilted his head in confusion, while Dorothea stood there with her mouth agape. It seemed that they couldn't believe that they shared the opinion that the position was unnecessary.

The silence continued for a while until Count Archiam seemed to remember something.

"My son!" he exclaimed. "I need to pass on the status of being a central aristocrat to my son."

"He's probably the last person who would want the position," Dorothea pointed out.

"Oh, perhaps it was a mistake to teach him trigonometric functions. I thought it would help him in the construction industry."

"As for mom... She already spends all her time in the county when it's warm."

"She has to tend to her flowers, so it can't be helped," the count agreed.

As it turns out, none of the members of this family have aristocratic sensibilities.

Not only had the heat from their argument died down, the temperature of the room was falling toward negative. No one had yet said it, but everyone, including myself, was thinking the same thing: what had all the struggle until now been for?

Count Archiam had been trying to think of what was best for his children's future, and so he'd clung to his status as a central aristocrat. Dorothea wanted to respect what her father valued. The other two members of the family probably felt similarly.

Since the count had no choice but to give up on maintaining his position, the tables had actually turned to a favorable result.

Well, it's not really favorable for me. Do they know how many of my own rules I bent? Please apologize to everyone who worked to protect your position as Lord of Doing Nothing. Maybe Kevin is just a victim who was troubled by this strange family. Sorry for calling you wicked, Kevin.

Wait a minute, it seems strange that Kevin isn't complaining... Just as that thought crossed my mind, the steward actually did speak up.

"Just wait a moment, please. The Lord of National Affairs is an important position that has been passed down for generations in the Archiam family. I've been told by your predecessor, as well as his predecessor, to protect it at all costs."

What's this wicked old man bringing all this up for now? It seemed that the tables were going to keep turning.

I expected the count to flat out ignore the old steward's statement, but he took Kevin's words seriously.

"You're right... Must I follow in my predecessors'—my father and my grandfather's—wishes?"

I don't think you need to worry about those things. Before I could butt in, Kevin responded with a firmer tone.

"If you are the head of the Archiam family, then please make a decision like the head of a household would. You must decide what is more important: the wishes of your past predecessors, or your family members who are currently alive. All you must do is make a clear decision, and then command me accordingly!"

"I want to take the previous generations' wishes into consideration," the count said slowly, "but...I...I want to prioritize my family and myself!"

All right, he said it! Good job, dad! It seemed that the steward was just worried because the count seemed indecisive. Though he'd just made a declaration, the count seemed worried about something. His voice immediately reverted to his usual nervous tone.

"Would my father be angry with me...?"

"No one could disobey the great head of the Archiam family and its noble lineage. All of the servants will follow your command and prepare to move the family's home base from the Royal Capital to the county," Kevin said, bowing at a right angle. When he raised his head, he was smiling like he was truly happy. "It took us quite a circuitous path to get here... I apologize to you, Countess Dolkness, for all the trouble we've caused you."

"Don't get people involved in your problems," I grumbled. "You should've told him what to do from the start." I had no intention of getting swept up in this suddenly touching atmosphere, so I called them out on it. *Shoot, that wasn't at all polite. My graceful image is ruined.*

The count and Dorothea looked like they were going to cry. The words that the count and Kevin had just exchanged had probably been necessary for the count to separate himself from his ancestors' wishes and to finally let go of his position without worry. I couldn't relate to how he was feeling, and I really didn't want to be involved in all of this. Kevin had probably known from the beginning that this point of compromise existed, but he had also made this my problem. I had been tactfully used by this family.

It'll probably be fine if I just help myself to a few pieces that look expensive in this room, as a fee for my troubles. I looked around the wannabe wealthy aristocrat's drawing room, and a miniature shaped like a house caught my eye. There was a similar model on display in the hallway. *Models of mansions... I feel like we were talking about them before we came to the Royal Capital.*

The pieces suddenly fell into place for me. "Is the Archit Trading Company perhaps...?"

The count nodded. "That's right. I founded it when I was young, and it's since grown into a large and successful company. Thanks to the business, I was able to repay the family debts, and we're no longer struggling financially."

“Oh, my county has been in your company’s care as well. We thank you for your help.” Back when I’d gone to transport the logs, I’d thought it was confusing that the business located in Archiam County was named the Archit Trading Company, but of course they were called similar things—the president of the company was the lord of the territory. *You could’ve come up with a better name though. Is the count an architect? Is he the one that makes all the blueprints?* I wasn’t sure of the actual title for that position, but I bet that he was the person who drew up the plans.

“Do you use CAD tools?” I asked curiously.

The count’s face clouded in confusion as he tried to sound out the unfamiliar word. “Ki-yad?”

“It’s nothing,” I assured him with a dismissive wave. “Please forget about it.”

Setting the count aside for now, when it came to his daughter, Dorothea... That doll room of hers had long ago surpassed the realm of a mere hobby. I was quite the hobbyist myself, but I’d at least gotten into video games of varying genres, and I had several other hobbies as well. It was a kind of talent to be able to dedicate oneself to a single hobby. Just like Eleanora with her perfumes, it was probably something she could turn into a job if she wanted to.

As for the mother, she seemed to be in the county already. The count had said something about her flowers, but from the looks of it, she probably wasn’t into simple gardening. *And what’s the deal with Dorothea’s brother...?*

I turned to Dorothea and asked, “What does your brother do?”

“Arithmetic? Numbers, I think? He stays holed up in his room, just doing that. He seems to have a teacher of some sort, but they only exchange letters.”

“I see.” Math was quite advanced in this world. Trigonometric functions were something that came up normally.

Academics didn’t reveal their knowledge to the public in this society. It seemed that the concept of publishing academic books wasn’t really prevalent, and so academics were satisfied just sharing the results of their research with each other. It made it hard to figure out how advanced certain topics were.

Numbers, huh? My natural enemy. Maybe I can teach her brother Euler’s

equation. There's the numbers 0, 1, pi, the imaginary unit i, and e, which is the base of natural logarithms. It's the most beautiful equation in the universe, one that incorporates various elements of mathematics... So, what does the base of natural logarithms even mean? I read about it online, but I didn't understand any of it. If he asked me to explain I wouldn't know what to do, so I decided against telling Dorothea's brother about all that.

And so, I now knew that everything that I had done for the count was all for nothing. I had racked my brain quite a bit trying to help them, but in the end, I found that I didn't regret it. Now our evacuation plan, one which left an unpleasant aftertaste, was going to just be a wasted effort and nothing more.

It was nice to see a family in which everyone had pursued their own path with passion. I wasn't sure if Kevin could read my mind, but he smiled as he looked at my face.

"Aren't they a lovely family?" he asked.

I guess so, I thought begrudgingly. I won't forgive you, though. No matter how nice they are.



After Count Archiam and Dorothea relentlessly apologized to me for all of the unnecessary work I had put in for them, we discussed how we were going to handle the upcoming court conference.

The basis of our ideas was Patrick's plan. If Marquess Prynan ended up feeling so suspicious of Patrick's motivations that he didn't say anything at the conference, then the count planned to relinquish the position himself. After confirming our intentions, we said our goodbyes, and I headed for the Royal Palace.

The monthly court conference was held in the royal audience chamber. The vassals would each present their concerns to the king, who would then give his decision on each matter. Most of the topics addressed had already been negotiated behind the scenes, and so they tended to pass without issue; it was rare for those attending to argue over something. Even if there was a disagreement, the issue in question would be set aside until the following

month's meeting (but it would be settled behind closed doors long before then).

The whole affair was basically a trial in which backroom deals and maneuvers were all allowed. It seemed like something that would be difficult for the judge—in this case, the king—to handle. Though the king's decisions were ostensibly the final word, if his verdicts were considered unreasonable by his subjects, then they would no longer follow him... *Thinking about all of this, I'm starting to get worried about 2, with her being an empress over in her world.*

Today would mark my first time attending the court conference, and I was forced to wear a gown to the palace once again. I alighted from the detestable carriage, and I mingled with aristocrats who I detested even more. It seemed like there were even more radicals present here than there had been the previous night. The nobles who'd been lying low were crawling out of the woodwork, clearly expecting things from me.

"You look beautiful today as well, Lady Yumiella," simpered one.

"We have all gathered here for you, Countess Dolkness," another assured me. "I'm sure there will be customs with which you might not be familiar, given that this is your first time attending, but please let us handle things."

They all scrambled to butter me up with their flattery. I didn't even feel like being silly and responding with something like, "Hee hee, they said I'm beautiful." All I could focus on was the fact that I was surrounded by people trying to make me like them. I'd lately been hearing comments from certain parties about my decreasing intelligence and maturity levels, but in moments like this, it really felt like the opposite was occurring. *If only Patrick could see me now.*

As I stepped forward, the crowd of people parted, creating a path. I headed to the audience chamber, still not having said a word. The large crowd of radicals moved in an intimidating pack, and the officials working in the palace furrowed their brows as they stepped out of the way.

Their expressions seemed to say, "What are they doing?" but their reactions changed when they saw that I was the one leading the posse. As I sailed by with the eager radicals crowding in my wake, some of the staff's eyes widened with

surprise while others trembled with fear. It seemed that I caused some degree of unease when walking with a crowd behind me. *I guess to others it looks like Yumiella Dolkness is walking the halls of the Royal Palace like she owns the place, followed by her own private army of aristocrats, so I can see why they'd anticipate trouble.*

On the way, I saw Patrick standing off to the side in a branching hallway. Our eyes met, and we acknowledged each other's presence. He made his way toward me, but our rendezvous was prevented when several of the aristocrats behind me came forward and cut Patrick off.

"As a rule, the court conference only allows heads of households to attend," one of them admonished.

"There's no room for you here," another tutted.

"It's unnecessary to listen to the things your fiancé says, Countess Dolkness," a third assured me.

Oh, right. Patrick ended last night's incident just when things were about to get good. No wonder they're all so prickly around him. They don't want him to take me home like he did at the party. I feel like one of those gamers with a female avatar in an MMO who gets carried by a bunch of other players. I know what that's like.

I'd been in quite a serious guild, and I remember telling one of the members who wasn't playing as well as she could have been, "Maybe you should try this instead." I had tried to give my advice with the utmost consideration, but a different member had become really upset at me, saying, "How dare you make accusations against her." Yes, that was right—I hadn't actually been the one being carried.

But I was in that position now. Right now, I was just like one of those players who would type into the chat things like, "weeeh don't fight [insert annoying emoji here]." *I wanna say it, I found myself thinking. I wanna say "weeeh."*

I choked down my desire to "weeeh," since this was a serious situation, and instead I talked to Patrick over the heads of the people between us.

“Weeeh...” *Whoops, I said it anyway.* “Do you know the situation?”

“I heard it’s changed,” he responded.

I guess it’s fine, then. Although the term “count” wasn’t spoken by either one of us, there was no doubt that he was talking about Count Archiam. The only thing that had changed while Patrick was gone were the count’s plans. He’d probably had a messenger contact Patrick about it.

Our side of the plan hadn’t changed, though, so it wasn’t really a problem if Patrick wasn’t aware of the count’s change of heart, but it meant that now all his efforts behind the scenes had been wasted. Patrick was probably the one who’d put the most unnecessary work into this whole thing, now that I thought about it.

I couldn’t tell what was causing the exhausted look on his face—it could have been because his efforts had ended up being in vain, it could have been because of the radicals currently holding a grudge against him, or it might even have been because I had made such a strange sound.

Once Patrick and the group had passed each other, the other radicals fell back into formation, putting me back at the lead of the column.

We finally entered the audience chamber. *I wonder if there are assigned seats or, rather, an assigned order to line up in. I’m sure those who regularly attend have designated spots, but I’m an irregular member, so...* Technically, every aristocrat was allowed to participate, so there should be spots for even the provincial aristocrats.

As soon as I entered the chamber, I spoke to the official standing there. “Where do I go?”

“C-Countess Dolkness, you, um...”

“Please tell me where someone who’s just a count should be.”

“Since you are a provincial aristocrat without a designated court position...you are in the very back...” He blanched and then tried to backpedal. “Oh, and that is just in terms of being a participant of this conference; it does not mean that the officers of the Royal Palace aren’t taking you seriously... I-I’ll

try speaking to my superiors!” The man was about to run away, but I grabbed his shoulders and brought him to a halt.

I just asked where I should stand, since I know aristocrats care about seating and things like that. I remember Daemon racking his brain over the seating chart for the wedding.

“I don’t mind being in the designated area. I’m letting you know that I’m fine with it,” I assured him.

“Of course! Understood,” he stammered.

Things are settled for now... Not. Those claiming to be part of my faction immediately dogpiled on the hapless official.

“You’re saying that Countess Dolkness belongs in the very back?!”

“Are you saying she’s no different from those who are mere provincial aristocrats?!”

Please stop. These kinds of things are going to bring down my image. The very back is the best place to be—I’ll finally get away from you all, and I won’t stand out.

I turned to the radicals. “Please stop. Today is the only day that I’ll be participating from the furthest row.” *It’s just for today. Today is the only day I’ll be in the furthest row, because I’m never participating in this again, no matter what row I’m in.*

Though I spoke the truth, the radicals took that to mean that I would be in the front row after today, and their eyes glimmered with hope as they let the official go. *You guys really are easy to manipulate. Now I can get away.*

I was guided to my designated spot. The front row was reserved for heavyweights like the marquess (who hadn’t arrived yet). After him was the margrave (who wasn’t usually in attendance anyway), followed by an annoying set of rules that governed which central aristocrat would stand where, based on a complicated calculus that took into account their rank and position. At the very back were provincial aristocrats, who lined up in order of their ranks only.

I had thought I could relax for a moment now that I was in the back row, but I

still had noisy people around me.

“I can’t believe they would treat Lady Yumiella like any old provincial aristocrat.”

“The order of precedence might completely flip around during next month’s conference.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. It’d be quite the sight to see us and the marquesses switch places.”

Right, they’ve all become radicals because they can’t get important court positions. Of course they’re in the back. Maybe the front would’ve been better, I thought regretfully as I waited for time to pass. There were no chairs, which meant that we all just stood around. Once the king arrived, I knew we would all have to get on our knees.

Seeing how empty the front rows were, I figured that the bigwigs were off in a waiting room somewhere until it got close to the starting time of the conference. *Actually, we’re the only aristocrats here. The radicals aren’t treated very warmly.*

“Until recently we used to enjoy our time waiting for things to get started while having tea with Hill—I mean, with a certain person, but things aren’t so nice these days...” grumbled someone near me.

I felt bad for Duke Hillrose having to socialize with these people on top of dealing with them politically.

I didn’t want to participate in this game of catch masquerading as a conversation, so I kept every ball thrown to me and maintained my silence. I ranked my favorite stew ingredients in my mind, and time dragged on. Once I got to number eight, onions, there was movement at the front of the hall.

One after another, aristocrats began to gather in the audience chamber. Count Archiam was there as well. Our eyes met, but we didn’t say anything to each other as he moved to a place in front of me and a little to the side. *Ah, so your position is near the back too.*

Tensions were rising, and the long-awaited Marquess Prynan finally arrived.

He glanced over at me very briefly before looking away. Now that all the central aristocrats had arrived, the court conference began.

“Please kneel for His Majesty’s arrival!” cried a court official.

As one, the assembled crowd kneeled down and bowed their heads. I wasn’t sure about what I was supposed to do, so I watched those around me before I moved into position, trying not to lag noticeably behind. *So this is why long gowns with voluminous skirts are a good choice for this sort of thing*, I thought as I went to my knees and inclined my head.

The silent audience chamber echoed with the sound of footsteps clacking against the dais before a deep and resonant voice rang out.

“Thank you for gathering. Raise your heads.”

I looked up, and my eyes met those of the king, who I hadn’t seen in a while. He was staring at me incredulously as if to say, “You really *are* here.” *He could actually pretend like I’m not here if he wanted, but I guess he doesn’t know what my plans are.*

Though my intentions hadn’t been communicated to the king, he clearly knew that this conference needed to go smoothly. The king looked around at the entire room as if to collect himself. I thought I was probably the only one who noticed his unusual demeanor, since I was pretty sure I was the sole person who’d made eye contact with him.

Oh, Prince Edwin is here too, off to the side. Perhaps he had come in with the king and had decided to keep out of the way.

The meeting progressed. Everyone was acutely aware of the irregularity that was my presence, but the central members didn’t seem terribly bothered. The proceedings seemed to go on just as usual... Admittedly, I didn’t actually know if it was as usual, but no one seemed particularly flustered as they reported on their various political matters. The only ones who appeared disconcerted were the radicals.

An approval of a matter; a question and response to a topic; a confirmation of documents that would be submitted at a later time for a petition, followed by a response to that petition; an opinion on an issue brought up at a previous

conference during which dissensions had been put off to the following month... This perfectly normal, adult, bureaucratic gathering felt exceedingly corporate, and it continued interminably. *Is this like that horrible practice in Japan of having pointless meetings that could have been emails instead?*

With nothing but time on my hands, I continued ranking my favorite stew ingredients in my mind. Once I got to number seven hundred and three (pine cones), the king cleared his throat.

“And next to speak is...the Lord of Finance, Marquess Prynan.”

This is it. I looked to Count Archiam, and I could see his hands trembling with anxiety. If Marquess Prynan didn’t say anything, then the count would have to announce his intent to step down from his position himself. I held my breath as I waited, and Marquess Prynan stood up to address the assembly just as planned.

“Yes,” he said respectfully to the king. “I would like your permission to humbly present you with an idea.”

“You have my permission,” His Majesty responded.

“I am truly grateful for the opportunity. At this time I would like to bring up a matter that concerns the Lord of National Affairs, Count Archiam. Although he claims to be a crucial part of the protection of the kingdom, there doesn’t seem to be any concrete activity proving he is taking any meaningful action toward doing so. If he is not going to fulfill the duties of the role he was granted by the royal family, I think it would be only just to revoke a position that clearly does nothing but provide him with an ultimately meaningless title.”

“Your observation seems reasonable,” agreed the king. “Count Archiam, Lord of National Affairs. Do you have anything to say regarding this matter?”

In the blueprints drawn up by Marquess Prynan, I was at this point supposed to jump in and protect the count while the radicals frothed at the mouth. But unfortunately for the marquess, neither the count himself nor I were interested in the position any longer. The soon-to-be former Lord of National Affairs, now embracing his life as an architect and a father, trembled as he stood up, but the words he spoke were confident.

“I am Darren Archiam, head of the Archiam household. I must regretfully admit that I have not been adequately fulfilling the role of the Lord of National Affairs, which was so graciously given to me by the royal family. Therefore, I wish to step down from the position, effective today. I am deeply ashamed that I wasn’t able to carry out the duties of this role, and I will instead endeavor to put all of my efforts into managing my county from now on in order to help the Kingdom of Valschein become even more prosperous.”

The king’s eyes widened with surprise as the count’s words sank in. The corners of his mouth twitched up; it seemed like he couldn’t completely hide his happiness at this unexpected turn of events.

“I see,” he said. “Well then, we will remove Count Archiam from the position of the Lord of National Affairs starting today. I wish you well in managing your county... And may I say, you are looking well, Darren. I fondly recall the times back when you were my underclassman at the Academy.”

Despite the jovial atmosphere, the radicals around me didn’t hesitate to pointedly stare in my direction. *I don’t care what you guys are expecting from me; I won’t say anything.* Marquess Prynan turned around as well, glaring at me with a look that said, “You’ve really done it.” *You got what you initially wanted, didn’t you?*

I tilted my head in what I hoped was a cutesy manner, trying to communicate that I didn’t want him to get too upset. The anger on his face seemed to die down, all the emotion draining away before he turned back around to address the king.

“I have one more issue I’d like to report, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll allow it.”

“It is regarding Countess Dolkness,” the marquess continued smoothly. “She is harboring the missing daughter of the insurrectionist Hillrose, the Lady Eleanora.”

The king’s eyes widened theatrically as he turned my way. “Is this true, Countess Dolkness??”

Marquess Prynan was shooting me a nasty glare. *Really? Now he’s just being*

spiteful.

Though the king had asked me to confirm this claim, he was well aware of the truth. He actually even knew that Duke Hillrose was still alive. In fact, everyone here knew about Eleanora. This wouldn't benefit anyone or change anything—there was no point at all to this action other than spite. *I can't believe a marquess would do something so petty.*

I had nothing to hide—or rather, I wasn't able to hide anything—so I spoke confidently.

“Your Majesty, I am completely innocent of such a thing. I am indeed looking after a woman by the name of Eleanora, who lives in my home, but she is completely unrelated to Eleanora Hillrose. I found her under a bridge.”

That last statement was apparently too much for someone else in the room, and they burst into a laugh. Since this world didn't have DNA testing, it was obviously going to be the word of the marquess against mine. If this wasn't resolved today, then we might even have to bring Eleanora herself here so that she could say, “I'm not Eleanora Hillrose.” *That would actually be kind of fun.*

Man, the marquess is probably going to be really mad. Though all I could see was the shiny surface of the back of his head, he turned around once more, and I was able to see the expression on his face.

“Under a bridge?” he seethed. “Who would believe such a lie? I've seen the girl with my own eyes, when Countess Dolkness brought her here two days ago.”

I shrugged. “That's where I truly found her, so there's nothing else I can say. I think you are mistaken about the woman you saw two days ago. I saw her every day during my time at the Academy, so I can easily tell her and the woman living with me apart. They're completely different people.”

Eventually, the king would have to side with one of us. For me, it was a matter of life or death that would determine whether or not I would flee the kingdom with Eleanora. But for the marquess, this was just a petty power move. That was why I believed the king would choose the side that had more to gain—in other words, I was certain that he would side with me.

Still, the king had to be fair when making judgments in disputes between aristocrats. I had added in the little detail that I could tell which was the true Eleanora Hillrose because of our time together at the Academy, and I was pretty sure that the king could use that as a reason to side with me.

I'm, um, sorry I joked around and said I found you under a bridge, Eleanora...

"I see, at the Academy." The king considered my words. "Does that mean you haven't seen her since you graduated?"

"It hasn't even been a year since then," I pointed out. "We've met several times since."

How shocking. It was weird to think that it had been less than a year since we'd graduated. In that time, I'd become the lord of my territory, been inadvertently involved in Duke Hillrose's plans, Yumiella 2 had showed up and we'd fought a god, then I crashed into the neighboring kingdom and met Patrick's older brother... There were so many things that had happened, and it had all somehow taken place in the same short span of several months. Though a lot had happened during my three years at the Academy, the sheer density of post-Academy activities was something else entirely.

Did I see Eleanora while she was still the daughter of a duke...? Yeah, I did. I'd been to the duke's home as well, so that would serve as enough of a record of us interacting. I hadn't had any communication with *that* Eleanora (the duke's daughter) since all the commotion with the attempted coup. A little after that, the Eleanora from under the bridge started living with me.

It was a total coincidence that I had interacted with both Eleanoras at roughly the same time, which meant that I was technically correct when I said they were different people (from a certain point of view). I was using reasoning that everyone knew was a sham, but I was a tough opponent encased in my armor of stubborn pseudo logic.

Marquess Prynan gritted his teeth and pasted on a courageous smile. "So you only knew her for the three years you spent at the Academy. Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask someone who has known her from a young age all the way up to the point when she went missing—someone who has known both her and her family."

The marquess turned his attention away from me toward all the radicals standing around me. They were looking from one to another, wondering what they ought to do. Those who noticed me looking at them averted their gazes awkwardly. *Yeah, you guys are the type to easily switch sides if there's something in it for you.* Their lack of loyalty was almost refreshing and endearing at this point.

It would be bad if they switched sides, though. Even if I manage to get out of this current situation, if this issue gets drawn out to next month's meeting, it'd be annoying to have to come to the Royal Capital again to deal with it.

My argument that I could tell them apart because we'd been friends at the Academy had been shot down. I needed to come at this from another angle... As I thought about what kind of rhetoric I could churn out, another voice spoke out, one that didn't belong to the marquess or the king.

"If we are discussing who has known Eleanora Hillrose the longest, that would be me. I've known her since a young age, and we attended the Academy together as well." In a room containing a majority of older men, a younger man's voice stood out.



“Your Highness...” Marquess Prynan muttered in frustration, surprised at the unexpected interruption.

If someone were to poll all the people here on who’d seen Eleanora’s face more than anyone else, there was only one name people would be likely to answer: Edward Valschein, the second prince. He had spent a great deal of his time with Eleanora throughout the years—or more accurately, he had been forced to do so.

“I also know of the lady Countess Dolkness is looking after,” the prince continued in a confident tone. “Though her name is Eleanora, she is a completely different person than Eleanora Hillrose. There can be no doubt about it, since I am making this claim. I declare it with certainty as the second prince.”

Surely there had been moments in his life during which the prince had noticed that Eleanora, the daughter of the leader of the radical faction, had feelings for him. While at the Academy, I’d seen Eleanora throw herself in front of the prince countless times, only to be treated coldly in response. But even so—even if they had spent their childhood in an awkward manner that had led them to settle into such a relationship—what they had built over the years was real.

It was clear that the prince was worried about Eleanora now that she was a fallen aristocrat. And for her part, Eleanora had scolded the prince when he’d been down on himself. Their relationship wasn’t something that could be described as a simple unrequited romance—there was something there of which I had been previously unaware, and perhaps they were the only two who could see it.

Still, saying that the Eleanora staying with me is undoubtedly a different person is a huge lie, Prince Edwin... I guess when all’s said and done, though, I’m still the biggest liar here. But thanks to the prince’s fib, the current in the room had shifted. The marquess had fallen silent, and the king was about to give his decision.

“If you insist to such a degree, then I’ll believe you, Edwin,” the king announced. “The woman that Countess Dolkness is looking after is clearly not

related to Eleanora Hillrose. However, if any evidence to the contrary comes to light in the future, then there will have to be some punishment meted out to Edwin, considering that his statement was the most taken into account.”

Eleanora’s vague status had now been publicly sanctioned by the king. This was perhaps the first time I had ever felt gratitude toward Prince Edwin. He’d even put his own position in jeopardy to protect her, and I was touched.

Thanks to the prince’s help, I was able to dodge Marquess Prynan’s ridiculous act of spite. However, the marquess wasn’t finished. He changed gears remarkably quickly.

“How impressive, Your Majesty. It was an excellent decision. Since His Highness, who is a childhood friend of Eleanora’s, says that these two women are indeed different people, that surely must be the case... And so now that this matter is settled, let’s circle back to the former—do you have someone in mind to take over the position of the Lord of National Affairs, now that Count Archiam has stepped down?”

“If there is someone who is appropriate for the position, they must be appointed.” the king explained.

“If that is the case, I would like to recommend Viscount Alton. He is a good man with an impressive territory in the north. I believe he is an appropriate candidate for the Lord of National Affairs, which is a position that aims to encourage the people of this nation, including aristocrats, to protect this kingdom from both external and internal forces.” Every time the marquess opened his mouth, my heart raced wondering what bomb he was going to drop next.

Oh, I get it. I understand why he’s recommending one of his minions. So his original plan was to take the position from Count Archiam and pass it on to that guy. He gets to weaken his enemy while gaining an ally.

I didn’t really care who became the next Lord of Doing Nothing. It was frustrating that Marquess Prynan would end up benefiting from this whole affair in the long run, but there was nothing else for me to do other than watch silently.

As the topic switched from something that might have ended unpleasantly to

a question with an obvious answer, the tension in the room relaxed. I heard several people let out sighs of relief, and I exhaled in a similar manner. *I was really worried for a bit.*

The king and the marquess continued to go back and forth about the position. The king seemed less inclined to maintain a pointless title, but I could tell that he was probably going to give in so that he didn't end up antagonizing Marquess Prynan too much. They went back and forth, bringing up different points to provide a foundation for this decision, probably so that in the end it would seem that the king had made a reasonable judgment on the matter.

What even is the Lord of National Affairs? Encouraging people to protect the kingdom from external and internal forces... That's impossible without an army. Just like Count Archiam, that viscount or whatever won't be able to fulfill his duties. Even I'm more useful to the protection of this kingdom, as someone who's been an actual, proven deterrent to external forces. That viscount probably doesn't have that high of a level either, nor would he do something helpful like launching a campaign to get everyone in the kingdom to level up... Hm? Wait, does that mean...

As I experienced the revelation, I couldn't help the words slipping out of my mouth. "In other words, the Lord of National Affairs is..." My synapses were firing off spectacularly as I examined the available information and arrived at the obvious conclusion. I was certain that I was in this moment the sharpest I'd ever been in my entire life. My IQ was at its peak. "So that's what it is..."

Those around me turned to look my way. Only those who were closest to me had heard my muttering, and the king and the marquess had almost settled on the viscount as the man to take over the position. *This is bad. I can't let them destroy the will of those who came before us, and what they wanted from the position of the Lord of National Affairs. It's me! I'm the only one who can do it. I'm the one who truly understands what our forefathers intended, and so I am the one they'd want to pass it down to!*

"Please wait!" I exclaimed.

"What is it, Countess Dolkness?" the marquess asked, a little impatiently. "I'm in the middle of—"

“Isn’t the Lord of National Affairs actually...the Lord of Leveling?” I said, interrupting the dubious marquess as I revealed the truth that had been hidden for all these years.

“Excuse me?” he sputtered.

“If an individual of this kingdom raises their level, then they can protect the kingdom from the threat of other nations, as well as the harm caused by monsters inside our borders. The fact that the position description makes a point to mention *all* people of this nation, which would include aristocrats, is further proof of this. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a commoner or an aristocrat when it comes to leveling. Leveling up and then encouraging everyone else to do the same—*that* is the job of the Lord of National Affairs! It’s an extremely important position!”

Time seemed to stop in the audience chamber.

Perhaps the king, the prince, and the aristocrats were all shocked by the same realization: “So that’s what the position was for all along! That makes sense!” They were so surprised that they couldn’t say anything. I had been just as shocked when I’d figured it out.

It was like when all the foreshadowing in a mystery novel came together to reveal the true culprit, or like when everyone in a battle manga—allies and enemies alike—all gathered to take down the final boss... Perhaps this was what catharsis was. It felt like there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky of my mind, and I felt a deep satisfaction. It was like when a series had such a perfect ending that the small inconsistencies didn’t matter.

The one to get in my way was once again Marquess Prynan.

“What are you talking about?” he snapped.

“Do you not understand?” I asked. “Everyone aside from you understands.”

I know it’s hard for you to accept defeat, but this is just pathetic. As proof that everyone else understood exactly what I was talking about, even the king himself sat there with his mouth agape. I turned to my side and addressed one of the radicals.

“Do you understand it?” I demanded.

“Huh?”

“The Lord of National Affairs is the Lord of Leveling, right?”

“Um, I have no idea what that means...” he insisted, clearly feigning ignorance.

Wait, why did he lie and say that he doesn't understand? There must be a reason he chose to not tell the truth. He's a radical, and they are always the best at protecting their own interests, so...maybe there's more than one Lord of Leveling?

I wanted to keep pursuing this, so I started interrogating the man next to him. “You have a position, right?”

“Yes...” he admitted reluctantly.

“What is it?”

“What does that have to do with this?”

“The way you're hiding it is suspicious... Is your position also the Lord of Leveling?”

“N-No,” he stammered.

“What level are you? If you're also a Lord of Leveling, you must go dungeon crawling every day, which means you're level 99, right?!” *Bingo. He's a Lord of Leveling too.*

If he wasn't going to tell me, I just had to ask others. I looked around me at all the radicals standing around me; they had strength in numbers if not anything else. But those who were looking at me with blank faces all looked away with extreme speed once our eyes met. No one would meet my gaze.

Could it be that they're all Lords of Leveling? All of them hang out together as members of the leveling faction, and they don't even have regular meetings to go dungeon crawling together? Oh, but going as a group lowers the efficiency of leveling, so having meetings where you exchange dungeon information would be more constructive.

I had accidentally brought the hidden “darkness” festering within the Kingdom of Valschein to light. This wasn’t just a matter for the radical faction. I decided to address the king directly.

“Your Majesty! There are plenty of aristocrats who are actually Lords of Leveling, yet they classify themselves as having other positions, and they are therefore not fulfilling their duties! Let me ask you something, as an aristocrat concerned about the future of the kingdom—what do you think of this situation, Your Majesty?!”

Even though my question was directed at the king, Marquess Prynan was again the first to answer.

“How dare you speak to His Majesty in such a tone!” As anger washed over his face, he shot a significant look toward the guards. *I don’t think they would do anything in this situation even if they are the king’s personal guards.*

It was obvious to everyone here that the Lord of Leveling was the most important position in the entire aristocracy. It was precisely because they were the king’s personal guards, who had pledged their loyalty to His Majesty and to the kingdom, that they knew exactly which person in this room was the most fit to take on the position of the Lord of Leveling.

But in a kingdom where even the Commander of the Knight’s Order is only level 60, the only person who can appoint someone to the role of Lord of Leveling is...me? Am I the only one? I am Yumiella—Yumiella Dolkness, the Lord of Leveling for the Kingdom of Valschein!

I had steeled my resolve to go against the will of our leader in order to fulfill my sacred duty. I ignored the lower-ranking Lord of Finance and instead focused on the king. I noticed that his expression seemed strangely tense.

“Your Majesty, please answer,” I demanded.

“If I think about it, the Lord of National Affairs might be the Lord of Leveling?” he repeated. “Was that it?”

“Which means that the Lord of Leveling, who advocates for leveling, should naturally raise their own level to level 99, correct?”

“That line of thinking could be correct...”

The king's statements were a bit vague. It seemed like he was trying so hard to not misspeak that it made him unable to articulate himself properly. *Why are you using the kind of language that important people use at press conferences to avoid making definitive statements?*



“Could it be that you’re also a Lord of Leveling, Your Majesty?”

“Please listen carefully. The king and the Lord of Leveling are not the same thing,” the king said very seriously. He seemed as serious as someone who’d had their palace taken over and was about to be overthrown.

I guess they are different. The Lord of Leveling has considerable aptitude, but one of its cons is that it doesn’t give you any right to rule over a kingdom, which means that they’ve got to be separate positions. As I stood there, impressed by the king’s ability to compare the two so quickly, he continued without a pause.

“It is an undeniable truth that there are possibly some members of this kingdom’s aristocracy who are Lords of Leveling but have neglected their duties.”

“So you understand!” I’m glad. Those who get it, get it.

The king, who clearly deserved to be the one at the top of this kingdom, relaxed his expression a bit. He seemed relieved, as if he’d just been about to be dragged down from his throne but had been saved at the last minute.

Since it had become the official view of the kingdom that there were hidden Lords of Leveling, I could rest assured of the accuracy of my arguments as I continued the discussion.

“Which means that the Lord of Leveling, who advocates for leveling, should naturally raise their own level to level 99, correct? After that, they should devote themselves to supporting those around them, and they should create an environment in which as many people as possible can level up. I believe that is the true objective of the Lord of Leveling.”

“Countess Dolkness, the Lords of Leveling are...”

“Yes, there are several who are present right here,” I said, turning around and scanning the chamber.

One person who did actually make eye contact with me turned blue and shook his head from side to side. He seemed very suspicious. There was another man trying to hide behind the man shaking his head. That person seemed even more suspicious.

Actually, now that I'm paying attention to it, everyone in the room is facing this way, but I can't seem to make eye contact with anyone else. There were even some people shutting their eyes tightly, like they were waiting for a storm to pass. Could it be that...they're all Lords of Leveling?!

The mission of a Lord of Leveling was to help others, and those who were helped could then in turn help more people—mutual support was important. I needed to start the cycle of happiness. *Who should I help... In other words, who should I bring into a dungeon with me?*

I tapped the shoulder of the person beside me.

"Eek?!" he shrieked.

"Wait, Countess Dolkness." The king brought me up short. "First we must unravel who the Lords of Leveling are." It seemed that I had been too hasty—that was my bad. The king cleared his throat to give his decision. "Regarding the positions aside from the Lord of National Affairs, we will launch an investigation into whether there are other positions that are actually Lords of Leveling. If they appear to be Lords of Leveling, instead of punishing the person who holds the position, we will handle it by instead changing their title."

That's fair. I'm sure there are a lot of people who were unaware that their job was actually to be a Lord of Leveling, just like Count Archiam. It wouldn't be right to punish someone who wasn't willfully neglectful, I guess... The king is a kind man.

"Regarding who will take over the position of Lord of National Affairs," His Majesty continued, "we will postpone the decision until next month. This future discussion will examine whether it will be dissolved, whether the title will be changed, and what the position will be if the title for the position *is* changed."

It was a wonderful decision. I got on my knees and bowed deeply to show my loyalty.

"And finally..." The king rounded on the marquess. "Marquess Prynan, this was all started by you."

The court conference concluded on a deeply satisfying note, with the king scolding Marquess Prynan.



The king exited the audience chamber, and we were dismissed from the court conference. I wanted nothing more than to sprint home, but I was worried that the marquess might bother Count Archiam. I scanned the area, looking for either one of them, and... *Oops, I made eye contact with the guy next to me.* I'd at no point managed to hear what his position was either. It was probably fine because the king had said that he intended to investigate this matter, but I decided to ask anyway.

"Are you a Lord of Leveling?"

"Eek!" he whimpered, seeming excessively terrified. *Judging from how scared he is, he's probably a Lord of Leveling.* Since the king had said he was going to handle the punishments, there was no point in me pressing this guy any further.

It didn't seem like I was going to get any more out of him, so I took another look at the rest of the radicals around me.

"Are there any other Lords of Level—" I began.

"Run! She'll take your position!"

For once, the radicals seemed to be of one mind, and they all began moving at the same time. They stampeded together toward the chamber exit. *Running home from school like someone who doesn't have any after-school activities isn't very classy, you know?*

The back row was now deserted, and Count Archiam seemed to be the only other aristocrat left in this part of the chamber.

"Hello," I greeted him with a bow. The count tried to respond through his evidently lingering anxiety, but just as I'd expected, Marquess Prynan materialized beside him.

"Countess Dolkness, you did well," he said in a tone that dripped with deep displeasure. "Your technique of clouding matters by spouting nonsense was masterful."

"Spouting...nonsense...?" I slowly repeated.

"So you're choosing to keep feigning ignorance..." The marquess shook his

head. “His Majesty is waiting for us. Archiam, you’re coming too. Follow me.”

I wasn’t feigning anything, but the marquess seemed to be growing ever more irritated. He turned around and walked off, so I followed after. We headed for the front of the audience chamber, passed through the door through which the king entered and exited, and continued to follow the hallway beyond. The count seemed tense with nervousness, and he walked alongside me with awkward footsteps.

Soon enough, we were led into a small study. Bookshelves lined both sides of the room, but it didn’t seem like an office. I understood it to be the king’s private space.

We were surrounded by books, and a writing desk faced the window at the back of the room. In the center of the space stood a round table just barely big enough for four people, as well as four chairs. The room felt cramped, but in a good way. *I like this place.*

The king, who had removed his ceremonial cape, was sitting at one of the chairs at the table. A smile appeared on his face as he caught sight of the marquess and me, and it grew even wider when Count Archiam crept through the door behind us.

“I’m glad you came too, Darren,” His Majesty said warmly. “Both of you, sit.”

The marquess hadn’t waited for an invitation, and he’d already taken a chair next to the king’s. I was sure that the count wanted to keep his distance from the marquess, so I chose the seat facing the king, next to the marquess. Count Archiam attempted to sit in the open seat—the seat between the king and myself—and Marquess Prynan shot him a glare, which made the count flinch.

“Don’t bully him so much,” the king scolded. The marquess huffed and passive-aggressively averted his gaze from the count instead.

The king gave a signal, and an attendant brought us tea. All four of us silently sipped from our teacups. I couldn’t tell if this was a moment of relaxation, or if there was just too much tension in the air to allow for any conversation, but time passed... Eventually, Count Archiam couldn’t take the silence anymore and spoke up cautiously.

“Um... Why are we here...?”

Oh, he came along without knowing what he was in for. He’s probably scared. In order to help soothe the count’s anxiety, I jumped in to explain why we were gathered.

“You see, Count Archiam, this is a meeting during which we’ll discuss how we’re going to deal with the insolent members of the aristocracy who have neglected their duties as Lords of Leveling!”

The marquess snorted in disbelief. “Excuse me...? Do you intend to keep up this act?”

Huh? I was expecting the king and the marquess to agree and say I was spot on, but the marquess had instead scoffed at my explanation. I looked to the king to confirm who was in the right, and he seemed uncomfortable.

“If this incident is resolved in this manner, people will remain discontented. I had us gather here so that the parties involved could discuss things alone.”

“What are you going to do about those who claim to be Lords of Leveling?” I asked again.

“Let’s first get something out of the way...” the king said with a constrained sigh. “I truly believe that there isn’t a single member of the aristocracy who has ever claimed to be a Lord of Leveling...”

“Oh, right,” I agreed with a sage nod. “They’re crooked aristocrats who are secretly Lords of Leveling, but they aren’t raising their level.”

“Perhaps I should’ve invited a certain person...” the king muttered to himself.

It seemed that this pressing issue of our nation’s plague of false Lords of Leveling was going to be set aside for later.

A discussion with just the involved parties... This honestly feels like a roundtable. It was true that with the way things were going that the marquess and I were going to end up being enemies for the rest of eternity. Although we probably wouldn’t be able to reconcile our differences at this point, we could perhaps escape the fate of becoming complete adversaries.

Many topics couldn’t be discussed openly at the court conferences because of

the other aristocrats in attendance. I decided that I needed to apologize to the king for the trouble I'd caused him.

"I apologize for speaking up like that in the conference despite knowing that it would cause unnecessary confusion."

"No, no. It's all right," the king reassured me. "All the heads of aristocratic households in Valschein are welcome to contribute. I should apologize for watching silently while knowing you were getting pulled into such a troublesome situation, Lady Yumiella."

I shook my head. "I can't see what you could have done to prevent this. It was only this morning that Count Archiam decided to let go of his position. It only would've caused issues if I'd discussed it with you prior to the conference...right?"

If I had gone to the king directly and asked him to protect the count's position, the king probably would've had a hard time deciding what to do. Though he couldn't ignore a request coming from me, if he did as I asked without hesitation, he would have run the risk of upsetting the marquess, along with the rest of his faction.

It seemed that my assumptions were spot on, and the king responded with an ambiguous nod. In complete contrast to the king's vague answer, Marquess Prynan evidently decided to speak the quiet part out loud.

"If the leader of our nation is to be at some little girl's beck and call, perhaps the day on which I take the throne isn't so far off."

The count and I froze, shocked to hear such a bold-faced declaration of possible insurrection, but His Majesty seemed surprisingly blasé.

"You shouldn't say such things, Prynan," he responded mildly.

Oh, he's joking. I didn't think the marquess would have gotten away with a statement like that if this was truly a feudalistic society, but the pair of them seemed used to this sort of banter. *If they talk like this often, are they actually close friends?*

I stared at the two, thinking about how they were as far apart in age as a parent and his child. In this case, the "parent" wore an audacious smile, while

the “child” let forth a long-suffering sigh. The king turned to Count Archiam.

“I must say, I feel bad for making this observation, but...I’m grateful that you decided to step down from your position. I’m glad you decided that for yourself, and I think it was a good choice.”

“I-It’s nothing,” the count stammered. “I feel embarrassed for clinging onto a position with no substance to it for so long.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” the king assured him. “If anything, I’m envious of you. I’m similarly a prisoner to the previous generations of kings. Though I must admit that I’m curious about one thing... For whose sake did you decide to make this change?”

“I changed for my wife’s sake, as well as my own, but most of all, it was for my children.”

“I see, I see.” His Majesty nodded. “There’s a lot that can be learned from our children.”

I don’t think there’s anything His Majesty can learn from that prince. I kept that thought to myself, and it didn’t even appear on my face, yet the count reacted to the king’s statement in obvious surprise.

“*You* have something to learn, Your Majesty?!”

The king tilted his head curiously. “Parents grow as people by watching their children both fail and learn from their mistakes. Surely you had this experience too?”

“Oh, I see now what you’re saying,” the count said thoughtfully. “When interacting with my son as an infant, when he still couldn’t understand a thing I said, I wondered why he cried so much. I know that I always listened to my parents.”

“You’re asking too much of an infant,” the king chided.

“I knew that, but I guess I never thought of how I myself behaved at the same point in my development. But after experiencing it for myself, I now think about how my father and mother must have had their hands full with me.”

Hrm, I don’t quite follow. The dads continued their conversation, leaving me

in the dust.

“There *are* some parents who don’t pay attention to how their children are doing,” the king said. “While I must admit that the most difficult parts of child-rearing were largely handled by the servants, when I think about what it would’ve been like if I hadn’t been there when Maurice started walking... It’s terrifying.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” the count agreed. “By facing those who are younger and less experienced, you can also face the juvenile, inexperienced parts of yourself.”

I still don’t think I get it. Oh, but when I compare how I was before and after Ryu was born, I think I’ve changed. I guess that change was a kind of growth. The conversation led me to think about my dear Ryu, who I hadn’t seen for several days, and I briefly felt the contented glow of a proud parent...until a tasteless person didn’t read the room and changed the subject.

“Speaking of children, your child got in our way, Your Majesty,” Marquess Prynan accused.

He’s talking about Prince Edwin. I’ll have to thank the prince later for backing me up on Eleanora’s identity. I decided that now would be a good time to remind the marquess that it wasn’t wise to get involved in Eleanora-related matters.

“Just so you know, the Eleanora from under the bridge staying with me isn’t the duke’s daughter,” I reiterated.

“There’s no need to lie about a fact we all know in a closed room like this,” the marquess sniffed. “I’m sure Hillrose is alive as well.”

He knows about that too? Well, I suppose he did try to force me into a similar leadership position as the one the duke used to hold, so the marquess probably knows all of the reasons that the duke tried to lead a coup. I looked at the king, who was the only person in this room who actually one-hundred-percent knew the truth, and awaited his instructions on how to proceed.

Count Archiam, who knew about none of this, seemed confused. “Duke Hillrose is...alive? Why?” He seemed flabbergasted as he looked at each of our

faces in turn. *What do we do about him if he decides to spread this around?*

“Duke Hillrose isn’t alive,” the king said in a tone that suggested he was stating the obvious. “Of course not. Lady Yumiella herself confirmed it.”

“Yes, it’s true,” I agreed. “Duke Hillrose was swallowed by a swarm of monsters and passed away on the spot.”

“Is this room filled with people who don’t know how to go about having a private conversation behind closed doors?” Marquess Prynan complained.

Shut up, grandpa. I felt bad for the count, who still seemed utterly lost.

Even though this *was* ostensibly a private discussion, I honestly felt that the wicked marquess would use this conversation to his own ends, hoping to find any weaknesses to use against us later. It would be best to keep the pretenses going.

“I’m grateful to His Highness the prince with regards to his knowledge of the Eleanora from under the bridge,” I continued, ignoring the marquess. “I’d like to thank him before I leave the Royal Capital.”

“I’m proud of Edwin as well,” the king said. “He’s not always successful, but he did well this time.” The king seemed both exasperated and happy—it was interesting to see such a mingled expression on his face. He cleared his throat, and I could feel the atmosphere shift, bringing some tension into the room. *I guess we’re finally getting to the main topic.*

“It must be time to discuss the Lords of Leveling!” I exclaimed.

“No... Not yet.” *Really?* I was getting a little impatient with the king, but I kept my mouth shut and listened to him. “Prynan, don’t meddle with Lady Yumiella.”

“Oh my,” the marquess simpered. “I can’t believe His Majesty is infatuated with an unmarried noble lady.”

“This isn’t something to joke about!” the king scolded. “What were you thinking, trying to get her involved in central political issues?!”

“Are you trying to tell me that it would be better if I avoided rocking the boat so as to head off any unnecessary chaos? Aren’t political struggles all about gaining advantage after plunging the game board into a state of bewildering

confusion? This is a much healthier way to go about doing things than putting on a peaceful front while filthy sludge pools behind the scenes.”

Man, this grandpa sure is combative. I’d wondered what would occur if I were to actually get involved in central politics. It seemed that the king believed that it would never happen, and it felt like he thought it wouldn’t go well if it did. Marquess Prynan had declared that if I were to end up jumping into the political fray, he’d use the commotion caused by my joining the battle to his advantage—he would welcome the chaos.

“You’re underestimating Lady Yumiella!” the king roared. “Everyone at the conference was put in danger!”

“I’m well aware of her strength.” The marquess shrugged off the king’s concern. “But she also understands that using her power can have a harmful effect. I’m sure she wouldn’t just force her way with brute strength.”

The marquess’s words implied that he thought I was someone who could participate in the subtle game of politics as well. *Hee hee, that’s right. I’m totally capable of handling political matters, I just don’t actually want to do it.*

Seeing that the marquess wasn’t going to stand down, the king let out a sigh and turned to me.

“The Lord of Finance is a Lord of Leveling,” he informed me.

“Huh?” I blinked stupidly at him for a moment. *The Lord of Finance is actually a Lord of Leveling...?*

Unlike the Lord of National Affairs, I didn’t understand what aspect of the position of finance gave it any relevance to leveling, but since the king had just said so, it had to be true. *I can’t believe one of those insolent aristocrats who don’t bother level grinding despite the fact that they’re a Lord of Leveling has been right before me this whole time! I won’t allow this!*

“But,” the king continued, “Prynan, the Lord of Finance, is interested in leveling.”

Oh, then that makes things easy. I jumped at the topic and turned to address Marquess Prynan, since he was a Lord of Leveling. “What level are you?”

“What...?” It was the marquess’s turn to blink stupidly. “What are you talking about, Your Majesty?”

“I’m asking what your level is,” I reiterated.

“Countess Dolkness? You’ve got a strange look in your eye.” Marquess Prynan continued to evade the question of what level he was. *Is he really interested in leveling up?* If I were to get mad at him now, I’d lose a comrade in leveling. I choked down the anger that was endlessly fuming inside of me and asked once more.

“Your level, what number is it? Tell me. Hurry.”

“I think it’s 15... It’s been quite a while—”

“Thank you for telling me! There’s no such thing as starting too late when it comes to leveling, so it’s no problem for seniors! There’s nothing to be worried about! Everyone starts at level 1. You can slowly get used to it, and in one...no, let’s take it easy, in two years, we can accomplish our goal. Let’s work hard together to aim to be at level 99 in two years.”

“Dolkn—”

“It would be best to start as soon as possible, so let’s head out today. It’s incredibly fortunate for us that there are two dungeons near the Royal Capital. I’m sure that they’ve always been super popular spots to visit, which is why the people of the past built their capital here. Unfortunately, those dungeons aren’t great for boss farming, so we’ll have to travel elsewhere eventually. Please keep that in mind.”

“Wh-What are you—” The marquess was no match for my enthusiasm.

“Let’s see. If you’re level 15, then... Well, there isn’t much I can do without seeing your actual performance, so let’s just head to a dungeon right away.” Marquess Prynan had tried to interrupt me several times, and I understood that he was probably worried, so I tried to use my barely functional face muscles to create something resembling a smile before I continued. “I understand; you must be worried about getting injured. It’s true that it’s harder to recover as you age, but there’s no need to worry. With my recovery magic, you can regrow a limb or two as many times as you need to do so. Though please keep in mind

that I've never tried to regenerate a head, so if you're ever in a situation in which you think you might be about to get your head crushed, please try to sacrifice a different part of your body and dodge it. Well, now that I'm thinking about it, maybe I *can* grow you another head, but I'm not sure if your new brain would retain your previous memories. Oh, but if you think about it as regenerating your neurons and synapses, maybe your memories would be intact. It's kind of like the Ship of Theseus—if you break down a body at the quantum level and put it back together in a different location, would that be the same person you started with...? I feel like we might end up with that sort of paradox. That's not really science though; it's more in the realm of philosophy... Oh, I'm getting off topic. We're talking about leveling. I'm working hard every day to understand normal sensibilities better. If you're the kind of person who insists on wearing an amulet of protection when going to a dangerous area, you can wear one. Wow, I've really become—”

I was in the middle of discussing something incredibly important, but a hand had reached out from behind me and covered my mouth. *Who is it?!* I grabbed the arm and turned around, about to deliver a Yumiella punch, but...

“Huh? Patrick? What are you doing here?”

“I was called over here. I'm here to take you home.”

But I have so much to discuss with Marquess Prynan, who is a Lord of Leveling... Huh? Where did the marquess go? I scanned the cramped study and found Marquess Prynan cowering in a corner. Before I could ask if he was all right, the king chimed in.

“I apologize. I made a mistake—the Lord of Finance isn't a Lord of Leveling after all.”

“What?! Really?”

The king shook his head. “There's no connection between finance and leveling, is there?”

“That's true... Oh, but it's true that you're interested in leveling, right, Marquess Prynan? If you'd like, I can—”

Since I was the true Lord of Leveling, I needed to make sure I didn't neglect

my duties. Though he was a crooked aristocrat that I detested, I spoke to him kindly, but even so, he vigorously shook his head.

“No...no, thank you. I don’t need to raise my level. I vow to never meddle with you ever again. I won’t resent your boy for tricking me either. Please, just take her away from here and leave!” The marquess seemed uncharacteristically desperate, his voice veering toward a yell at the end. He seemed to be mostly speaking to Patrick.

I wasn’t done talking, but Patrick tugged on my arm and tried to drag me out of the study.

“Even if you’re not a Lord of Leveling, you can still level...” I looked up at Patrick. “Hey, don’t pull me.”

“I apologize,” Patrick said, not to me but to the marquess. “I’ll be taking her back right away. Let’s go, Yumiella.”

If I had truly wanted to, I could have resisted, but if I was honest with myself, I didn’t really want to go dungeon crawling with Marquess Prynan either. I noticed that Count Archiam had disappeared without me realizing. The trembling marquess and nervously chuckling king saw us off as I was unceremoniously dragged out of the study.

Interlude 4: Marquess Prynan

Marquess Prynan had succeeded his father as the head of his household during the reign of the king two generations prior. Immediately after taking over from his grandfather, the marquess's father had left this world at a young age.

At the time, other nobles had whispered that the Prynan family, despite the fact that they had held the position of Lord of Finance for many generations, was finally facing its downfall, but the young marquess rose to the occasion. If his servants snapped at him, he punished them excessively in order to make an example out of them. When one of the other branches of the family started causing trouble for him, he fabricated evidence of them committing fraud to shut them up. When several noble families that had served the Prynans started to attempt to undermine his position, he manipulated them into having a falling out, weakening them considerably. When another marquess tried to take advantage of his youth, plotting to turn Marquess Prynan into his puppet, Prynan led the other marquess's younger brother astray, causing a terrible disturbance in their family.

Marquess Prynan continually used underhanded methods to get his way, taking advantage of the evil, and sometimes the good, in people's hearts. He performed skillful political maneuvers and desperately defended not only the Prynan family's nobility, but also the role of being the safekeeper of the kingdom. However successful he was, though, he found it endlessly painful. The marquess couldn't bear seeing people fall for the tricks that a mere novice like him was able to devise, and he found it taxing to expose the hideous thoughts hidden within them as they faced destruction.

Though his heart was drowning, the young Marquess Prynan focused on his work and only his work. By the time things had settled down and his power was secure...he realized that he was starting to have fun. Political battles were an incredible rush, and he loved watching arrogant aristocrats dancing around in the palm of his hand.

The king reigning at the time often looked out for him out of genuine worry, but all the marquess could think was “How can I drag him down?” He knew that he would never actually do it, but just making plans in his head made him feel excited.

And so, Marquess Prynan had gone past a point of no return, completely transforming himself. Unlike his father, he had led a long life, and that had brought him to his current ascendance. After becoming the head of his household before the age of twenty, he was now one of the oldest aristocrats in the kingdom, and he had been politically active for the longest time by an overwhelming margin.

Even the king himself was considerate toward the marquess. It was partially because he was from a famous family that held a core position in the kingdom, but the king had also found that he had trouble asserting himself toward someone older than his own parents. Despite that, the Prynan family continued to be loyal to the royal family. The king and the marquess had settled into a relationship in which His Majesty was able to tell the marquess to tone down his machinations in jest.

Marquess Prynan’s latest project was diligently working to deliver an additional blow to the extremely weakened radicals. He’d first set his sights on Count Archiam.

Though the Archiams held an empty position, it was precious to them, and there were plenty of aristocrats who would be happy to have it. The transfer of this position wouldn’t really affect the populace, but the marquess decided to rob the count of his title for his own entertainment.

Count Archiam was quite different from his predecessors, and Marquess Prynan was excited to see how he would react, but to his surprise, the count had been able to catch quite the big fish as an aid to him.

Yumiella Dolkness was a countess who ruled a small county in the eastern part of the kingdom. Her potential didn’t lie in her land or her family, but rather in herself. Yumiella had reached level 99, and the marquess found her to be an

incredibly boring person. She had no interest in politics, evidently wanting nothing but to do as she pleased in her county—she was incompatible with him. He knew that her decision to stay out of central matters was a smart one, but the marquess wasn't interested in someone with no involvement in politics.

The marquess had kept his eye on her for a period of time, as she'd become the head of her household while attending the Royal Academy, just as he'd done, but everything she did was a bore. She was similar to the margrave, who never showed his face in the Royal Capital. That very margrave's secondborn son was Yumiella's fiancé. The marquess had made many a bitter remark in his mind about how they were a perfect, boring match.

The moment he'd realized that he could drag Yumiella into central politics was during the soiree held the night before the monthly court conference. Until that point, he'd feigned kindness in order to attempt to put her in her place and get her to give up on Count Archiam keeping his position. He'd even sent the second prince to stop her, just for good measure.

But for some reason, it seemed that attempting to manipulate the second prince into doing his bidding had hit a nerve of hers. Upon seeing the faces of the radicals arrayed behind her at the party, Marquess Prynan had decided to change his plans on the spot.

Now that the Duke of Hillrose was gone, it seemed that the royal family was stronger and more stable than ever, but the marquess thought that the true political climate was actually quite the opposite. Marquess Prynan didn't have to go out of his way to do something as petty as revoke the position of the Lord of National Affairs from the count—no matter what he did, he knew that the radical faction would naturally disappear in the near future. What came with that future would be internal struggle within the royalist faction. Things would appear peaceful on the outside, so as to maintain the kingdom's reputation. But as someone who knew all about wearing a kind smile and acting like an ally while taking down others, the marquess knew how dangerous such internal conflict would be. It was much more stable for those on the king's side and those on the duke's side to be in battle. After the Hillrose family had fallen, the marquess had been sure that the duke had been intentionally maintaining that stability between the royalists and the radicals for all this time. That would

certainly explain why someone as smart as the duke would've tried to do something as foolish as foment an all-out rebellion.

With all that being said, Yumiella Dolkness was the perfect candidate to fill the role the duke had previously played. It should've been too late for her to escape the situation at the party, but Patrick Ashbatten had interfered. The marquess had believed that the margrave's hellion of a son sought power in the central government. It was Yumiella's fault that his long-honed senses had been dulled. The marquess couldn't imagine that Patrick actually *liked* this living weapon who continuously acted in a bizarre manner—the marquess had thought that Patrick must have been plotting something for a long time.

If that was the case, then what was Patrick Ashbatten's true objective? What was he planning to do by using Yumiella? The marquess couldn't figure out what the margrave's son was thinking, and because of this, he had a bad feeling about it.

However, the marquess had ended up facing something much more horrifying than the young man he'd been unable to read. In the immediate wake of the court conference, he'd ended up having a decent time despite losing. He wanted to hear Court Archiam's reasons for his change of heart, and he'd held a little tea party of sorts in the king's private study.

It was there that the marquess learned what it was like to be terrified of Yumiella Dolkness for the first time. Yumiella was already feared by most, but the marquess had always felt those who feared her were fools. There was no record of her ever instigating a violent incident. She was bothered by troublesome people while attending the Academy, but he had heard through trustworthy channels that she had resolved those issues without causing a fuss.

If Yumiella didn't have her level 99 strength to back her up, she was just a normal person who, despite being somewhat intelligent, didn't care for power. If one were to never attack her, she would never attack them, so she was therefore nothing to be feared.

But what was that...?

After Yumiella had left the king's private room, Marquess Prynan found that

he was still trembling.

“It’s unbelievable...” he breathed. “Was that really a human?”

There was one other person left in the room. The king looked at him with a pitiful gaze. “Her obsession with leveling is real. You shouldn’t touch on it—”

“No! That was...strangely logical! She was overflowing with good intentions!”

The marquess wouldn’t have been so terrified if she had been inviting him to level up with her as a threat. He was terrified because everything Yumiella had said was backed by logic. Marquess Prynan was rich in experience when it came to negotiations, and he was quite good at seeing through lies and bluffs. He was also extra sensitive when it came to sensing the nefarious intentions of others.

That was why he knew—he knew in his heart—that Yumiella was of a completely sound mind when she’d offered to take him out to a dungeon to get him to level 99. She’d offered to do so without losing her sense of reason, and with no hidden intentions other than goodwill.

People who were of sound mind weren’t generally terrifying. The marquess had seen plenty of people who were certainly unsound, but he’d never seen anyone who’d maintained their state of mind while being in the farthest place from sanity. That was what had been so terrifying—it was terrifying to be in a position where he’d found himself being forced to understand her point of view. A simple, careless statement or action could have caused who knows what to happen. It wouldn’t have been surprising if he’d done something he couldn’t take back at the end of it all.

“Her goodwill may be misplaced, but...just stay out of Lady Yumiella’s way,” the king warned him.

“I’m well aware!” the marquess snapped.

The king tilted his head in confusion, wondering what had bothered the marquess so much about Yumiella being logical. Marquess Prynan just sat there, vowing to himself that he would never get involved with Yumiella ever again.

Chapter 6: The Hidden Boss Gets Pampered by Her Parents

It was the day after the court conference, and a thought had suddenly popped into my mind.

“What the heck is a Lord of Leveling?” I found myself saying aloud. “That makes no sense.”

“I agree,” Patrick said.

It wasn’t out of the ordinary to feel differently about something after sleeping on it. (Although another contributing factor might have been that Patrick had spent quite a while last night convincing me that the whole Lord of Leveling business was ridiculous.) Even setting Patrick’s points aside, now that I was thinking about it calmly, the entire concept of the Lord of Leveling made no sense.

“What should I do?” I asked. “I said some things that were kind of weird during the court conference.”

“Kind of?” Patrick shrugged. “It’s fine... I’m sure everything with the Lord of National Affairs will settle down. When we were leaving, His Majesty said they’ll be dissolving the position.”

Did he say that? I was so focused on the Lord of Leveling that I don’t remember much else.

We’d been able to quash all of Marquess Prynan’s objectives, and the Archiam family seemed to be headed in a good direction—everything had turned out great, so I decided to consider that all’s well that ends well.

I nodded with satisfaction. “Now we can go home without any worries.”

“Things took a little longer than expected. Are you okay with returning tomorrow? Is there anything else you have left to do?” Patrick asked.

There wasn’t anything more for me to do in the Royal Capital. *Wait, there’s*

something I heard at the meeting last night in the king's study that's still bothering me.

"There's a lot that can be learned from our children."

"By facing those who are younger and less experienced, you can also face the juvenile, inexperienced parts of yourself."

Though I didn't think that raising a child made you a better person, it was undoubtedly a valuable experience. I could certainly think of some people who'd had a child, yet had no experience with child-rearing. In fact, they lived in this very house.

It didn't help that they had found their black-haired child disturbing and so had sent her back to their territory as soon as possible. There was a good chance that my parents had never held me even once as an infant. They hadn't given themselves the opportunity to rethink things—to hold me and consider that their child might actually be cute, despite her black hair.

Thinking back on it, my parents had never once tried to have a relationship with me. Though our relationship as a family was at this point far beyond saving, perhaps if I reached out to them and made them experience an aspect of child-rearing by speaking with their child, as late as it might be, things might improve just a little.

I made up my mind and declared my resolve to Patrick. "I'm going to try talking to my parents again."

"Where's this coming from?" Patrick asked, surprised.

"It was just a thought. I have something I need to prepare first, so I'm going to go and take care of that." I decided not to go into too much detail and set off to begin making preparations.

"Good luck," Patrick said as I left.

Thanks, Patrick. I'm going to do my best.



Some time had passed, and it was now the afternoon. I'd finished making my preparations, and I had made my way to my parents' room. I took a deep

breath to calm myself down before knocking on the door and opening it.

My parents... *Actually, that sounds so formal. Let's call them Mommy and Daddy.* Mommy and Daddy were in the middle of having a little afternoon snack. They were enjoying some pancakes together. From what little I'd seen of them and what I'd heard from the servants, it seemed that my parents were actually quite lovey-dovey. *I can't believe the child of a couple so in love with one another was left out of all the fun.* My parents seemed a little heavier than when I'd last seen them. Perhaps it was due to their shut-in lifestyle.

The moment Daddy saw me, he quickly stood up. "You! What are you doing here?!"

This is actually my estate now. I think I'm allowed to do whatever I want in my own home. Though I'd usually talk back in such a manner, things were different today. Love wasn't something to be received, but something you had to give. Today, for the first time ever, I was going to act like a baby and force my parents to pamper me. As embarrassing as it was, I planned to call them "Mommy" and "Daddy."

"Mmm! Nnnn!" I tried to call out, my mouth full.

"What is that...?" Daddy asked.

"Mmnnph, mnn..." It was too difficult to speak, so I pulled the pacifier out of my mouth. I'd thought that pacifiers were a must-have item for a baby, but I hadn't realized that it would make my speech completely unintelligible.

It'll make me less of a lovable baby, but I have no choice but to continue without it. Actually, do they even know what a pacifier is? You probably miss out on some basic knowledge when you immediately send your newborn away.

"This is a pacifier," I explained, holding it up.

"I know that!" Daddy fumed. "Why do you have that with you?!"

"You and Mommy never interacted with me as a baby, Daddy. I thought it was unfortunate that you never got to see your precious daughter at her cutest. Come on, fawn over me all you like. I'm your baby."

Naturally, I had a bib on as well. The servant who I had asked to purchase

these items for me had said that I was getting ahead of myself, but if anything, I was behind and needed to catch up.

I made my way closer to Daddy. Conveniently for me, he was standing up, so I waved my hand and signaled for him to move and sit next to Mommy. I lay on the vacated space on the sofa—facing up, of course. Sleeping on my stomach at such a young age carried the possibility of suffocation, and I was just a baby who couldn't turn myself over yet.

“Waaah, waaah,” I said plaintively.

“Wh-What's the meaning of this?!” Daddy exclaimed.

“Save me, dear!” Mommy cried as she clutched at Daddy.

I'm well aware of how close you two are. Hurry up and comfort your crying daughter.

Since I couldn't actually perform that specific cry that infants had, the one that brought their parents running, I was just saying “waaah” out loud. I couldn't recreate the scrunched up face babies made while crying either; my face carried its usual lack of expression.

“Waaah, waaah,” I repeated.

“I'm so sorry,” Mommy wailed. “I'm sorry for giving birth to such a child.”

“It's all right,” Daddy assured her. “You've done nothing wrong.”

“Waaah...” I repeated. “Hurry up and comfort me! Your baby is crying!” The two were neglecting their infant. Mommy had started sobbing, and Daddy was busy comforting her. *What's wrong with you two?* My patience was running thin.

“Tell us your demands,” Daddy said as he pulled Mommy closer to him.

“Peekaboo.”

“Peek... What?”

“Peekaboo. You know what it is, don't you?”

“I do...”

“Please play it with me. If you're really a daddy, you should be making your

daughter smile. Waaah, waaah.”

“Everything will be all right. I love you,” Daddy whispered into Mommy’s ear before making his way toward me. He covered his face with both hands. *It’s coming! “Peekaboo...”*

I believed I would see Daddy’s smile appear, but what had come out from behind his hands was a lifeless, corpse-like face. *He completely subverted my expectations... That’s hilarious!*

“Hee hee hee!” I let out that distinctive laugh that babies had, a sound which was hard to tell apart from crying. (Of course, it was impossible to fully imitate, so I was actually expressionlessly saying “hee hee hee” in a flat tone.)

All right, I’ve bonded with Daddy. Next is Mommy’s turn. She seemed like she wouldn’t be able to understand what a baby wanted, so I decided to voice my needs out loud.

“I’m hungry.”

“I’ll have something prepared—”

“I want to eat right now.”

“Um, if you’re all right with these pancakes...” Mommy offered me the pancakes on the table. They were untouched, and covered in a generous amount of honey... *Wait. Honey?!*

“It’s common knowledge that you can’t give honey to a baby!” I exclaimed.

“Common knowledge?!” she repeated, perplexed.

“You should at least know that much as someone who’s had a child.”

Eating honey could cause an infant under a year old to suffer from botulism. Though it seemed like something a baby might enjoy, since it was a sweet liquid, honey was an absolute no-go for infants.

I lay there on the sofa, completely exasperated. Though she seemed to feel bad, Mommy also seemed unsatisfied with the way things were going.

“Even without the honey, pancakes wouldn’t work,” I explained. “I don’t have teeth yet, so I can’t eat solid foods.”

“It seems like you have all your teeth...”

“Don’t you know what babies drink to grow big?”

Was it possible that she’d never seen an infant before, since she’d neglected raising her own child? Our conversation was becoming such a mess that such fears were starting to cross my mind.

Mommy wrapped her arms around her body, covering her chest as she took a step back. “You don’t mean...”

“No, that’s way too far.” *No way. That’s way too much. I may be a “baby,” but I’m a full-grown adult.* It would only cause trouble for both of us if my mother were to take this role-playing to the next level, so I brought out another item I’d prepared. *Ta-da!* “Here you go.”

“What is that...?”

Baby bottles existed in this world... *They had them, so they exist. There aren’t any status windows, bicycles, or seafood rice bowls, but there’s a level system, horse-drawn carriages, and baby bottles. That’s the kind of world this is.*

The baby bottle was filled with milk. The maid who’d filled the bottle with milk for me said I was getting ahead of myself, but I was in fact roughly twenty years late.

Mommy looked at the baby bottle and seemed confused. *What? You don’t know what this is?*

I voiced the thought. “It’s a baby bottle... You don’t know what this is?”

“I see,” she said faintly. “I’m supposed to feed you with it.” I could see a firm resolve in her eyes, like she was about to commit murder. She took the baby bottle.

I’m so glad she’s trying this child-rearing thing. I guess you can’t help but feel that motherly instinct when you see your baby hungry. As for Daddy and his fatherly instinct, he seemed like he couldn’t care less about my empty stomach.

“Stop this!” he insisted. “I’m begging you!”

Please quiet down, Daddy. Mommy’s willing to try.

The trembling baby bottle made its way closer to my mouth. I grabbed onto the tip and began sucking on it, drinking the milk. No matter how hard I sucked, only a little bit of milk made its way into my mouth, and it felt very frustrating.

I didn't drink that much, but I guess this is good enough. I let go of the baby bottle. *I'll act happy since I'm supposed to be full.*

"Hee hee."

"Is it over...?" Mommy had gone completely pale, and she stumbled backward.

I knew it. You don't just feed your baby, lay them down, then call it a day. You have to do that thing after eating.

"Excuse me," I said politely. "Can you sit me up and tap on my back? I need to burp."

Mommy, whose motherly instincts had been completely awakened, was immediately by my side. Her voice trembled as she spoke between tears. "Yes, I'll do it."

She grabbed both my shoulders and pulled me up from the sofa. Since it would be cruel to make Mommy pick me up with her thin arms, I helped get myself up. The moment I sat up, I let my head flop to the side without any warning.

"Eeeeeek!" Mommy squeaked.

"My apologies. I can't hold my own head up yet."

Mommy fell backward. She screamed, and she fell to the floor. Babies needed their heads supported when held—otherwise, their heads would flop around, which was dangerous. *I hope she'll learn her lesson and avoid holding babies in the incorrect way.*

Mommy's piercing shriek seemed to echo throughout the estate, and I heard footsteps running toward us. Less than a minute after the scream and fall, Patrick appeared.

"What's going on?!" As soon as he opened the door, Patrick froze up.

I was sitting there with a bib, my head flopped to the side. Mommy was on the ground and couldn't seem to get up. Daddy had rushed over to Mommy, and he was holding her in his arms. Patrick was surely grateful to witness such a picturesque scene of a family having fun together.

After taking in this heartwarming moment straight out of a rambunctious family comedy, the expression on Patrick's face slowly drained away before he silently exited the room, closing the door behind him.

"Wait!" Daddy exclaimed. "Please, help us!"

"Don't go!" Mommy cried. "I'm begging you!"

Patrick was gone. I could tell that he was trying to be considerate of our family time, but for some reason my parents were desperately trying to stop him from leaving. After a short moment, Patrick returned and shot me a look of incredible displeasure.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm a baby," I said.

"You shouldn't do that..." he responded with a sigh.

"Are you trying to say that it's uncomfortable to see me acting like a baby?"

"Why would you do it at all when you clearly understand all that?"

It's all to repair my relationship with my parents, duh. I'll stop, then. I was hoping for them to go, "So cute!" They don't seem to care for the baby act at all though. I guess Baby Yumiella, age nineteen, is too much for my parents to handle.

I decided to give up on trying to start over with my parents. I guess that it was actually perfectly fine for a child and their parents to never see eye to eye, for the entirety of their lives.

After losing my momentum, I stood up and left the room. I noticed Patrick wasn't following, so I turned around and saw something unbelievable: my mother and father had extended their hands to hold Patrick's, and they were thanking him.

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” my father said. “I’m truly grateful that you’re taking *that* off our hands.”

“I’m so sorry,” my mother apologized. “It’s all my fault for giving birth to a girl like that.”

Patrick seemed troubled by the four hands holding his. “I don’t think you should be referring to your own child in such a way—”

“I’m so glad to have you,” sobbed my mother. “I can’t believe you’re even going to marry her.”

Why are they getting along with their son-in-law better than with their own daughter? Not only had my parents left me out of their little group, they’d accepted Patrick while still excluding me. I pouted and left.

Still, while Baby Yumiella might have seemed like an act that made me look incredibly ridiculous, if it had created an opportunity for my parents and Patrick to become closer, I was glad that I had done it.

Epilogue

The news of me appearing in front of my parents with pacifier and baby bottle in hand had spread throughout the estate, and not only the servants but even Eleanora had all been completely put off by my actions. The next day, we decided to return to Dolkness County.

Including this final day, we'd stayed in the Royal Capital for a total of six days. The first day had been spent getting my measurements taken, as well as taking a peek inside of the fragrance shop. On the fifth day, I had been a baby, so...all the events related to the Archiam family and the Lord of National Affairs had started and ended within the span of three days.

Count Archiam and his daughter Dorothea came to the Dolkness estate to see us off. The expression on both of their faces was relaxed and refreshed.

"You were a great help to us, Countess Dolkness," the count said warmly. "Once various small matters are settled, our entire family is planning to move to Archiam County. Since we aren't too far from Dolkness County, I hope you'll keep in touch with us."

"Of course," I assured him. "If any monsters show up I'll fly right over... Oh, in case there are monsters, it might be best for you to level—"

Though the Lord of Leveling had turned out to be a nonsense position, I nevertheless wanted to work hard at spreading the good word of leveling. I thought Count Archiam would be an easy target, since he was going to be a provincial aristocrat, but Eleanora jumped out in front of me and interrupted my evangelizing.

Eleanora addressed Dorothea happily. "I'll be able to visit you easily from now on, Dorothea!"

"I'll make sure things are prepared to welcome you." She smiled shyly. "Um, if it's all right, I would also like to visit Dolkness County..."

Eleanora turned around and looked at me. Despite how often she barged in on others, Eleanora could choose to be polite at the strangest times, like now when she was asking for my permission. I nodded yes, naturally.

“Of course. You’re welcome to visit, Dorothea.”

“Yay!” Eleanora exclaimed. “When will you visit? You could also just come with us now!”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry; my visit will have to wait until after we’ve moved and settled in.”

We wrapped up our conversations and our goodbyes before Patrick, Eleanora, and I boarded the carriage.

“Did anyone forget anything?” Patrick asked as he shut the carriage door behind us.

“I’m good,” I said, full of confidence. It was always when someone was confident that it would inevitably turn out that they’d forgotten something, but I definitely hadn’t forgotten anything. *I didn’t bring that many things with me, and I even remembered to take the baby bottle and the bib too.*

I couldn’t think of anything else I might have forgotten, and so the carriage began to move. I waved back at the count and his daughter, and eventually they disappeared into the distance.

As I stared out of the window at the Royal Capital, a blond head of hair suddenly invaded my view. The townscape was passing by slowly, but between the view of the buildings and the window was a blond head—someone was running alongside the carriage. I stuck my head out of the window and saw Prince Edwin, trying his best to keep up with the carriage.

“Oh, hello,” I said.

“If you’re going to leave the Royal Capital...” The moment he spoke he decelerated, and the carriage started to leave him behind. He rushed to speed up and caught back up to the carriage. “...tell me,” he panted.

What level are you? I'd understand if you were a civilian, but is it okay for the second prince to be struggling to keep up with a carriage that's not even going that fast?

Oh wait, I remember now. I forgot to thank him.

"I'd like to thank you for what you did at the court conference."

"Don't worry about it. It's the least I could do... Could you call Lady Eleanora for me?" he asked, his gaze focusing on her.

Eleanora crouched down at once so that she would no longer be visible through the window, covered her mouth, and emphatically shook her head.
Okay, got it.

"Lady Eleanora isn't here," I said archly to the prince. "I got rid of her and left her under a bridge. Goodbye, then."

I shut the window. *All right. I thanked him like I meant to. Now I can leave without any regrets.*

Eleanora was still hiding below the window. She had accidentally said she hated Prince Edwin when she'd been upset, but I certainly didn't mind if she ended up actually disliking him.

"Are you okay with this?" Patrick asked her quietly, so as to not be heard from outside of the carriage.

"It's fine, it's fine," I reassured him.

Perhaps Prince Edwin had something important to tell Eleanora, but if a mere carriage could stand in his way, then it must not have been that significant.

Prince Edwin was one of the few people in this kingdom who was actually skilled *and* had power. There were plenty of ways he could have stopped or caught up with the carriage.

Oh, the background sounds of travel have changed. Did we leave the walls of the Royal Capital and make it onto the country roads? I shut my eyes and listened to the noisy creak of the wheels and the comforting clop of the horseshoes.

Then the sound of the second prince broke through the other noises.

“Lady Eleanora! Regardless of whether I’m a member of the royal family or not, I’ll always do what I can! Thank you for reminding me!” He was loud, and the words he’d ended up saying felt flimsy in comparison to his volume, but the prince was definitely a prince.

I couldn’t exactly describe his shout as a pleasant sound, and it jarred me into opening my eyes. I saw Eleanora at the carriage window. She opened it up and yelled back at the prince.

“I don’t hate you after all, Sir Edwin!”

There was one yell from a distance, and then one up close, which made for two yells. I didn’t hear a third. All I could hear was the sound of the carriage wheels scraping against the stone path.

The next voice I heard was a quiet one. “Do you think my words reached Sir Edwin?”

I thought about being mean and saying he probably hadn’t heard, but I stopped myself before I actually said it. *I have a bit of a debt to repay with Prince Edwin, so I’ll pay it off now by choosing to be kind.*

“His Highness said he’ll be doing what he can,” I said.

“What...?”

“What he can... In other words, he meant that he’d chase after the carriage until he heard your response. If he isn’t following us anymore, he must have heard what you said.” *The way I described it actually makes him sound like a creepy, persistent stalker.* It made a chill run down my back, but in contrast to my sudden discomfort, Eleanora seemed happy.

“I see, that makes sense,” she responded warmly.



I couldn't imagine a future in which Edwin and Eleanora ended up together—or rather, it seemed a near impossibility. I gave Patrick a look that asked, “What should we do?” Patrick seemed just as troubled as I felt and simply shrugged his shoulders.

Still, we didn't know the future. After this trip to the Royal Capital, I realized that Eleanora had countless possibilities before her. If she were to really throw herself into producing fragrances, she would probably be incredibly successful. That was an accomplishment she could achieve through her own skills, and because of the kind of person that she was, everyone around her would support her with everything they had.

The church was also ready to welcome Eleanora at any time. If anything, they might extend an offer to her.

Eleanora had endless potential, so perhaps ending up with Prince Edwin was actually possible for a girl like her. She might even end up having a fated meeting with someone else (or even marry me).

The girl had many possible paths ahead of her, but for the moment, she was seated in a carriage heading to Dolkness County. She opened her mouth and said, “I must train for puttara when I get home.”

Oh, I guess she's decided to set off on the path to becoming a menko champion. It's difficult to make a living off of menko. After saying goodbye to the man she loved just moments ago, Eleanora was already making plans for what she'd do when she got home, and she seemed to be looking forward to it.

“There's also going to be the roasted potato contest,” she went on. “I'm going to be very busy.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “I remember you mentioning something like that.”

Well, she seems to be having a good time, so I think it's fine for Eleanora to stay the way she is.

She'd inspired me to also think about what I was going to do once I arrived at home. I needed to check if there had been any problems while I'd been gone, look through all the documents that needed my approval, tell Daemon about anything related to the county that had happened in the Royal Capital... *I guess*

I should tell him that we now have a relationship with the Archiam family. What else happened? I tried to think back to what had happened over the past few days.

“Oh! I wonder if Ryuū would use this,” I said, pulling out the pacifier. *I guess he’s already three, so he might be too old for it.*

Patrick seemed horrified by the pacifier. “Throw that away! Don’t bring it back!”

“But that would be such a waste,” I protested.

“Don’t tell me you brought the other things with you.”

“They’re all packed up. I have the bib and the baby bottle... Oh, I have a rattle too.”

“I can’t believe there was another thing that I didn’t know about,” he groaned.

I’d ended up not using the rattle in front of my parents, but it had been a great purchase. I hadn’t expected it to make such a lovely sound. It was going to be a gift for Ryuū. He was a dragon that appreciated art even more than I did, so he would probably enjoy it.

“If Ryuū doesn’t want it, you can have it, Lady Eleanora,” I offered magnanimously.

“That’s not necessary,” she declined firmly.

“It makes a beautiful sou—”

“That’s not necessary.”

I see. She doesn’t want it. I turned to Patrick, but he stopped me before I could say anything.

“I don’t want it either.”

“I see...”

When I’d returned to Dolkness County (though I would clearly be listening to the beautiful sound of the rattle all by myself), what awaited me were busy but peaceful and fun-filled days. If I had the time, I could even engage in silly banter

with Patrick or go watch Eleanora play in a *menko* match.

Although I had been in the Royal Capital for less than a week, I missed my home. As I listened to the noisy, clattering sound of the carriage wheels, I impatiently waited for us to arrive at Dolkness County—my precious home.

Afterword

Hello! It's been a while. I'm Satori Tanabata. Thank you very much for picking up this book. It's been about a year, but I hope you've all been doing well. I myself have been doing well.

This may be a sudden question to ask, but do you know what afternoon tea is? It's the thing where you have small cakes and sandwiches that come on a three-tiered stand. Of course, the snacks come as a set with some tea.

I'm sure anyone who enjoys stories about villainesses can conjure a detailed image of this activity in their mind's eye, but I feel like there aren't as many people who have actually seen an afternoon tea, and even fewer who've actually partaken of it. I'm also someone who's never had afternoon tea before, and I've only ever seen illustrations of villainesses engaging in the said activity.

First of all, I've never even had tea (aside from green tea) that wasn't from a tea bag. I believe there are a lot of people like me. I drink coffee made with actual grounds at cafés, and I drink loose-leaf green tea made in a traditional pot every day, but I've never had any other kind of tea in loose-leaf form.

Oh, but I'm sure that some of my readers are people who go to afternoon tea with their friends sometimes, find the tins of tea cute, and even buy the tea on a regular basis. If you're one of those people, please read the following statements from a position of absolute power, and be lenient in your judgment.

Because of my aforementioned complete lack of a relationship with non-green teas, I write about them with the same amount of understanding as things that don't exist, like magic and dragons. There was a point in the first volume where Yumiella kept drinking poisoned tea without realizing it was poisoned, and I think I would be the same. I would just think, "This authentic tea has such a stimulating flavor," and I wouldn't notice the poison. There's only a small difference between Yumiella and I: while she would end up fine after

drinking the poisoned tea, I would foam at the mouth and die.

I must admit that I do think it's a bit neglectful of me to not have had proper tea or afternoon tea while being an author of a villainess series. I should take a stab at it...

That thought led me to seek out places that have afternoon tea service, and I found a hotel that held said services in their lounge. A hotel lounge...? Could I go somewhere like that on my own? I asked a friend, and he responded, "A lot of people wait for others there, so it's totally fine to go on your own. I was supposed to meet someone from a dating app, but they flaked, so I ate cake by myself and then went home."

I wasn't sure how to respond to the latter half of that message, but the point was that it seemed to be okay to go on my own.

During my years in middle and high school, when I was at an impressionable age, I had admired the dark knights who could say, "I work alone," without being embarrassed, and as a result I don't mind going out on my own. I go out to movies, Japanese barbecue, and even the aquarium on my own.

And so I set up a plan to enjoy an elegant tea service like a noble lady at the hotel lounge. Smart readers would expect a write-up of my experience to subsequently follow...but I haven't been able to go yet. I don't have anything else to say about this topic.

I thought about finding a way to experience an afternoon tea service around when the first volume of this book came out, so it's been on the back burner for about three years now. That's the kind of person that I am. My wisdom tooth in the bottom left part of my mouth hurts from time to time, but I'm the kind of loser who keeps putting off going to the dentist.

Still, I'm interested in the tea service, and I'd like to go sometime soon. I hope I can share my experience having proper tea in the afterword of the next volume. If I make the declaration here, maybe I'll be more likely to put it into action.

Act 5 was the Eleanora volume so there were extra illustrations of her by Tea. Between the scene in the closet with Yumiella and her declaration to the prince,

Eleanora's friendships and romance both had some progression in volume five.

Between the release of the previous volume and this volume, the second volume of the manga adaptation has gone on sale. Patrick made his official appearance. The second volume was also released as a special edition that came with a drama CD. It's a lively story about investigating the seven wonders of the Academy. Also, there's a voice comic available on YouTube.

Everything is currently available to purchase or watch, so if you haven't yet, please check it out.

I apologize for leaving my thanks to everyone until the very end. To my two editors, who are always taking care of me; to the illustrator, Tea; to the proofreaders and everyone involved in the publishing of this book; and to everyone who continues to support this series—I truly thank you.

Upon hearing that she could build custom armor in the Royal Capital...

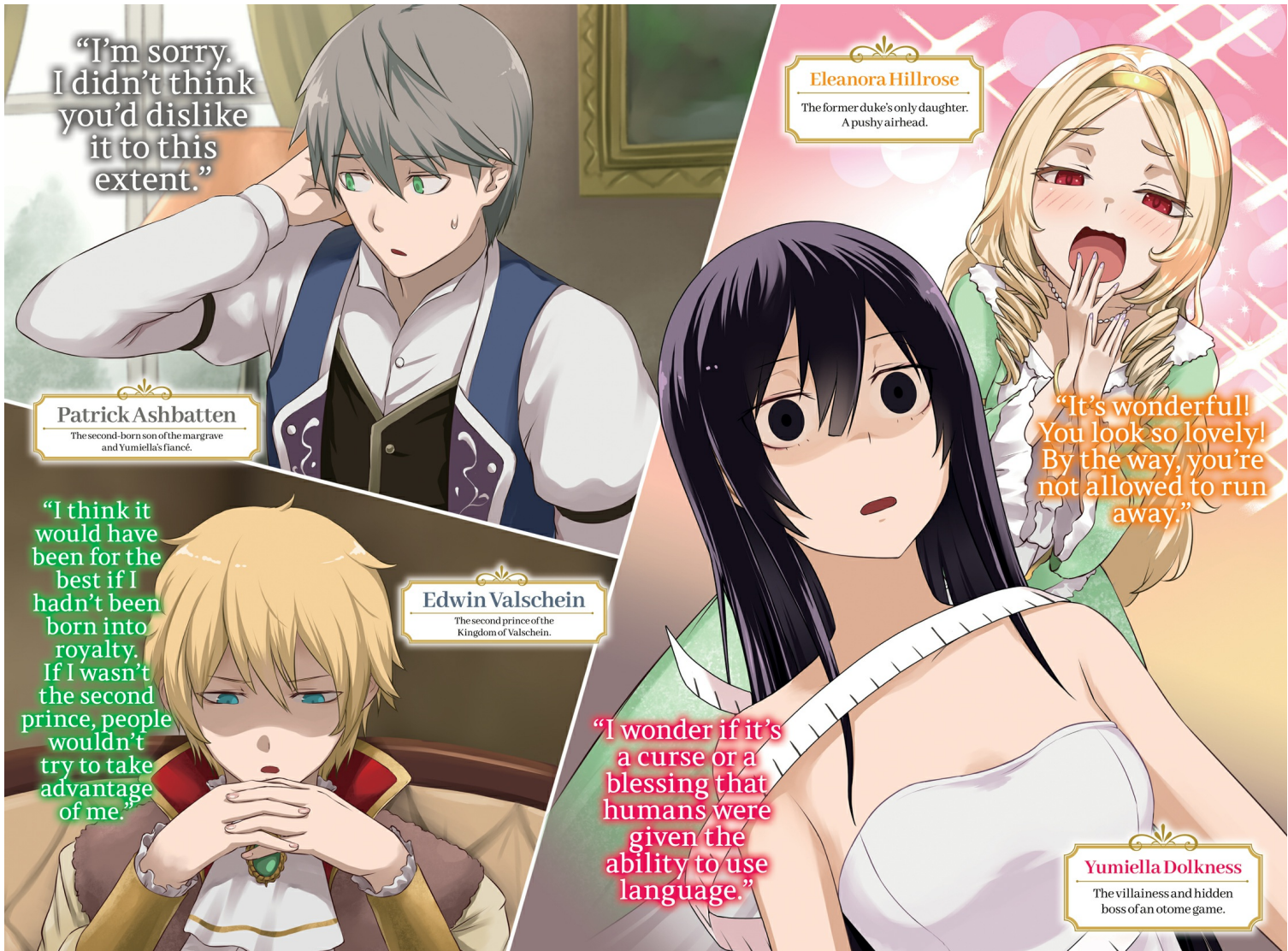
“Does that mean we could make it shoot out wires or add a purge function?”

“Sure, if it’s technologically possible.”

VILLAINESS
LEVEL 99

5

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



"I'm sorry.
I didn't think
you'd dislike
it to this
extent."

Patrick Ashbatten

The second-born son of the margrave
and Yumiella's fiancé.

"I think it
would have
been for the
best if I
hadn't been
born into
royalty.
If I wasn't
the second
prince, people
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of me."

Edwin Valschein

The second prince of the
Kingdom of Valschein.

Eleanora Hillrose

The former duke's only daughter.
A pushy airhead.

"It's wonderful!
You look so lovely!
By the way, you're
not allowed to run
away."

"I wonder if it's
a curse or a
blessing that
humans were
given the
ability to use
language."

Yumiella Dolkness

The villainess and hidden
boss of an otome game.

“Aw, did you tell
your beloved
Prince Edwin
that you hate
him, Eleanora
dear?”

“Agh.
What do
I do...”

“It happens
sometimes;
it’s no big
deal. You’ll
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VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

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

5

SATORI TANABATA

ILLUST. TEA

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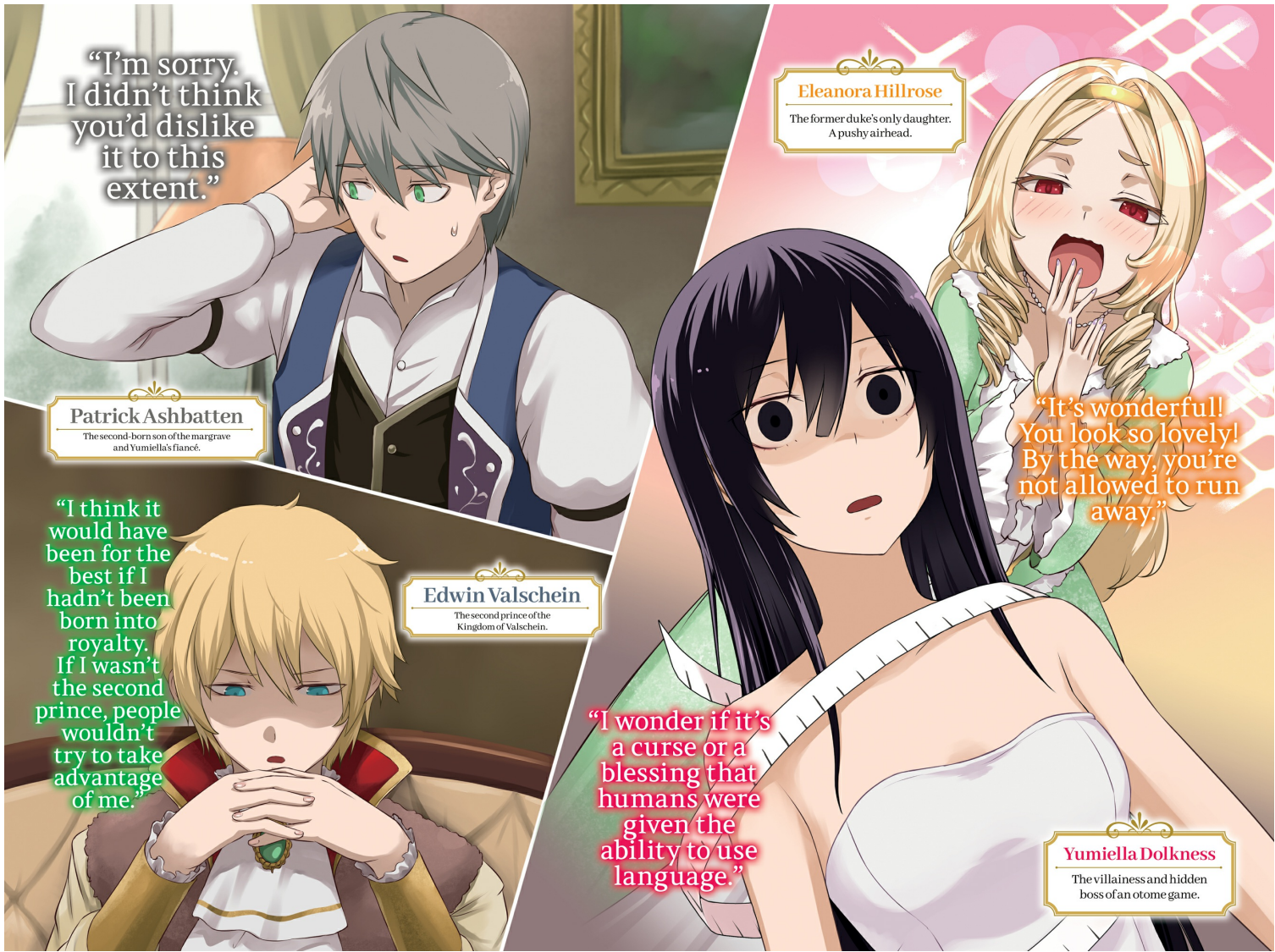
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Villainess Level 99: I May Be the Hidden Boss but I'm Not the Demon Lord Act
5

by Satori Tanabata

Translated by sachi salehi Edited by Rachel L Kohler

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