

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 the night, yet the king's office in the Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Valschein was lit brightly enough to be able to read even in its darkest corners.

The aristocracy was notorious for its obsession with appearances, and their decor reflected this obsession—rooms were often filled with rare artifacts from foreign kingdoms, and on occasion, an unusual relic from a different continent altogether. However, most of the furnishings in the king's office were created by artisans of his own kingdom.

The only object that was obviously foreign at first glance was the magical instrument currently being used to illuminate the room.

The occupant of this office, his strong features drawn into stern lines, was an incredibly busy man. As he scanned through the documents laid out before him, he was simultaneously listening to a report from the man standing before his desk.

A pair of glasses were perched on the king's nose. Recently, he had been having trouble reading the small letters on the papers he had to peruse every day, and so lately, he always had his glasses on hand.

The king wanted to hide the fact that he required reading glasses even though he was still under fifty years old, so the glasses never left this room. It was difficult to believe that this was the same King Valschein who was known far and wide for being nominally in control of *the* Yumiella Dolkness.

The king looked up from the documents and removed his glasses, returning his attention to what the man standing at attention before his desk was saying. The man finished his report, never wavering in his focus.

"I see, so we still do not know where *she* went," the king said as he rubbed his temples. His tone was troubled. "When I first heard she disappeared, I thought

we would quickly locate her somewhere nearby.”

“I apologize. It doesn’t seem prudent to make a big show of things and publicly announce that she’s a person of interest to the state, so we haven’t been able to expand our search as we’d like to...”

Though the young man seemed deferential enough in the manner in which he framed his words, a barely concealed grin hovered around his lips, an expression that made it seem as if he wasn’t concerned at all. The king, however, knew better: an amused smirk was this man’s default expression, and in this case, it belied his internal frustration.

The man with the constant smile was called Ronald. In aristocratic society, being able to trace one’s lineage was of paramount importance, but despite this fact, very few knew his family name. This was on purpose due to the simple fact that Ronald could easily get chased out of the Royal Palace if word got out that he was actually part of the notorious Hillrose family.

Prior to setting his plans for a coup into motion, the duke of Hillrose had sent off his son, Ronald, to serve the king. Although his father’s coup had ultimately failed, Ronald had climbed up the ranks to the point that his name had become the obvious answer if one were to ask who the king trusted the most in his court.

Trustworthy and highly skilled, Ronald took care of tasks the king preferred to keep hidden behind the scenes. Hence Ronald’s involvement in the current missing person case—the king wanted to handle this matter internally.

“She’s someone who has the potential to be a trump card for this kingdom,” the king said with a weary sigh. “I’ll send over several more skilled trackers. I want her found and brought back here, no matter the cost.”

Ronald nodded. “I am much obliged for your support.”

“I’ll leave it to you, then,” the king said. “I must ask, though, is there really not a single lead...?”

“Yes. It’s incredibly strange, but we have absolutely no reports of anyone seeing her.”

The king began to think through the facts as he understood them. She would definitely have been found if she'd traveled a long distance—there were guards on the town roads and many passersby to serve as witnesses. Even if she had traveled only on isolated roads, she would stand out precisely because there weren't many people there.

"She might unexpectedly be hiding somewhere nearby," the king suggested.

"It would be a great relief if that were the case, but...is she really the sort of person to do something like that?"

"It was just a thought."

Just as Ronald had pointed out, the king knew that she wasn't the kind of person who would expend a lot of effort to sneak around. Everything that the king knew of her suggested that she was straightforward to a fault. If she wanted to run, she would likely just run, going as far as she could without looking back. But, if that were the case, where exactly had she disappeared to?

"She must have someone helping her," the king said.

"Yes, I think that is definitely the case," Ronald agreed. "I wouldn't be surprised if she's already left the kingdom."

She would've been easily found if she were operating alone. If there was someone helping her escape, however, it would've been much easier for her to leave the kingdom undetected. With the girl's small stature, she could have been concealed within some cargo on a carriage, or some other such method that would've made it difficult to find her.

"Could it be considered a kidnapping?" the king asked.

"A kidnapping...?" Ronald considered. "If she had actually resisted, there would be some evidence of that."

"Kidnapping is not just putting a sack over someone's head and abducting them. Tempting someone with sweet promises and manipulating them into following you is a form of kidnapping."

"I understand," Ronald said. "You believe that someone goaded her into deciding to escape on the spot."

“From what Edwin’s told me, it didn’t seem like she’d been talking to any potential accomplices before that. This seems like it could be the most natural course of events.”

Ever since *that* incident, she had isolated herself completely, and the only one she’d opened up to was the second prince, Edwin.

Ronald thought silently for a bit before speaking again.

“We will only consider the worst-case scenario—the possibility that she was abducted by another kingdom. We will ignore all other possibilities for now and focus on that.”

“I’ll leave it to you. You must bring Alicia Ehnleit back at all costs.”

Ronald bowed deeply in response to the king’s command.

The girl they had been discussing, one Alicia Ehnleit, was a user of light magic—something incredibly rare in this world and a definitive trump card against the element of darkness. In other words, she was the strongest pawn the kingdom had against the ever-present threat of Yumiella Dolkness.

Back in the king’s office, another man entered a beat after Ronald exited, making them just miss each other.

“You’re back,” the king said to the second man. “Judging from your expression, I assume she wasn’t just hiding in the dungeon.”

“I apologize,” the man said. Unlike Ronald’s ever-hovering smile, this man wore a terribly haggard look.

This man was Adolphe, commander of the Knight’s Order and the pride of the Kingdom of Valschein. He was a swordsman who had been, until a few years ago, considered the strongest person in the kingdom. At the time, he’d been at the extraordinary level of 60. What was particularly notable about him was that this strength was despite the fact that he was completely untrained in magic.

As might be expected in a world where most skilled magicians were of an aristocratic background, genetics had a large effect on magical ability. It didn’t

matter if someone increased their level and mana stores—there was a certain level of innate talent needed to convert mana into elemental magical energy and produce a spell.

The commander of the Knight's Order was a symbol of hope for the people of Valschein who had no ability in magic—he was living proof that one could climb the ranks with just pure skill and swordsmanship.

However, Adolphe didn't brag about his accomplishments. He might have had a sense of inferiority because he couldn't use magic, but despite being the strongest person in the kingdom in both title and level, he showed no signs of being attached to the top of the ranks. Even when royalty from foreign kingdoms showered him with compliments, desperate to poach him for themselves, Adolphe would modestly deflect their commendations and say, "There will eventually be someone who can surpass me."

The king respected Adolphe for both his military performance and his integrity. Seeing one of his staunchest supporters looking so worn down with care, he offered words of comfort: "Don't worry too much about it, Adolphe. It's nothing you should feel responsible for."

"No, the failings of my subordinates *are* my responsibility," the grizzled swordsman countered. "Please decide upon our punishment once things have settled."

As Adolphe's words suggested, the Knight's Order had been involved in Alicia's disappearance.

A year and a half ago, Alicia had journeyed to the Demon Lord's castle with a party of warriors brought together in order to take down the Demon Lord, and of all the things she could have done during that battle, she'd ended up stabbing her ally Yumiella Dolkness in the back. Luckily, things worked out, because Yumiella recovered and even defeated the Demon Lord, but Alicia's choice meant that they had been one step away from the kingdom being swallowed up by the Demon Lord's army of monsters.

Naturally, the kingdom couldn't reveal such information to the public for fear of outcry, and even among the scant few who knew the events as they had

happened, there were some who'd thought there was no choice but to secretly execute Alicia for her deeds. It was Yumiella, the victim herself, who begged mercy for her. It was announced to the public that Alicia had been critically injured in the battle, while in reality, she was being confined in the Royal Palace under house arrest... This was all that Yumiella herself knew about the situation.

While it was true that Alicia had been confined to a room in the Royal Palace and was living out her days with no freedom, she was frequently taken on trips to a dungeon near the Royal Capital. There, she was forced to level grind while accompanied by members of the Knight's Order, who were there to both protect and supervise her.

During a break between battles in the dungeon, Alicia had briefly left the guards to relieve herself and disappeared into thin air—this was how she'd gone missing.

"I offer my deepest apologies," Adolphe said again. "We understand how important she is to the kingdom, yet still we failed."

"There's no use regretting something that's already happened," the king reassured him. "Now that she's gone, we must find her at all costs."

"If it comes to it, I'll handle Countess Dolkness, even if I have to do it on my own."

There were two meanings to Adolphe's somewhat threatening statement. First, it was his intention to serve as the first line of defense against Yumiella if she were to ever oppose the royal family.

The Kingdom of Valschein currently had a positive relationship with Yumiella, but things could easily change based on how she was feeling. The Kingdom needed a way to stop Yumiella if she ever became drunk on her own power and set out to unify the continent under her control. The king was well aware that Yumiella claimed that she had no intention of doing such, but what was important wasn't whether she *would* do it, but whether she *could* do it.

If Commander Adolphe weren't able to handle Yumiella on his own, then the second layer of the plan called for him and Alicia to cooperate on the

battlefront, combining the strength of his sword with the power of her light magic. There were several other people included in this plan, but the main strategy required Adolphe and Alicia at the center.

Preparation for this strategy meant that it was crucial for Adolphe and Alicia to build their strength. Accordingly, Adolphe had lessened his workload in order to focus on his own training while Alicia was being sent into a dungeon.

Even with all these countermeasures, Yumiella would still be tough to beat. She had superhuman physical ability, dark magic that was especially adept at destroying large areas, and recovery magic that could heal her own wounds... She was an entire army in a single person.

"I won't make you go up against Lady Yumiella on your own," the king said, gently opposing Adolphe's willingness to charge at an invincible living war machine. "That's a battle that you have little to no chance of winning, and I wouldn't want to lose you."

"My subordinates in the Knight's Order are making their own progress," the old warrior argued. "I'm easily replaceable. If anything happens, please take your feelings out of consideration and use me as needed, Your Majesty."

"How easily replaceable you are is up for debate. I believe you to be the strongest swordsman in the world. If magic didn't exist, Lady Yumiella wouldn't stand a chance against you."

The king's reasoning was thus: Magic relied heavily on the user's innate ability. The root of Yumiella's strength was her dark magic, so if she didn't have that advantage, Adolphe could probably win against her. She might not even have been able to reach level 99 without her magic.

Adolphe shook his head sadly in response. "I appreciate your praise, and I follow your logic, but I don't think that would be true. Even without her dark magic or her powers of recovery, I believe she would have eventually reached level 99. I could sense her strength and willpower from just the few words we exchanged during her audience with you right after she entered the Academy."

"Don't be so self-deprecating. You're incredibly strong," the king reassured him.

“I’m simply stating facts. I could feel that I stood no chance against her. I don’t feel jealousy or anything of that nature... That may be my weakness—the fact that I don’t particularly care whether or not I am the strongest in the kingdom.”

The king had always considered the commander’s humility a virtue of his, so this topic was of acute interest to him. Given what he knew of her, he had to agree that if Yumiella were to drop down to being the second-strongest person around, she would become incredibly frustrated and desperate to climb back to the top. She had a certain level of confidence that could be considered a form of pride.

“I see, that’s what you mean...” the king mused.

“My apologies, I’ve taken up your time with unnecessary talk. Is there any further progress on Lord Ronald’s investigation?”

“We have no leads. We’re continuing the investigation under the assumption that there must have been outside involvement.”

“I didn’t think someone would dare to come after her inside a dungeon...” Adolphe considered. “Although, there are many adventurers of unknown backgrounds making their livings in dungeons these days. It would be easy for someone to slip in.”

“One might say that such a plan is too bold, while others might call it a shortsighted method to gain access to a target. I’m thinking that the Lemlaestans might be getting out of control again.”

Lemlaesta was the kingdom neighboring Valschein. It was a small kingdom, but their technology-based economy meant that they were skilled in developing magical instruments. The small nation was currently embroiled in a conflict over succession to the throne, and consequently some Lemlaestans had taken some injudicious actions to further their own ends.

“Lemlaesta...” Adolphe said with a thoughtful frown. “It’s definitely close enough to flee to.”

“Are you thinking of going there undercover?”

“If I just disguise myself a bit, they won’t find out who I am. If an agent from Lemlaesta has her, I won’t be able to just bring her back by force, but I believe

there's an inherent value in me being close by."

Though she wasn't as strong as Adolphe, Alicia was quite strong. As an undercover noncombatant, Adolphe wouldn't be able to resort to extreme measures—measures that might be necessary to bring Alicia back if she were unwilling to come quietly.

The king considered the diplomatic issues that would arise if Adolphe's identity were revealed, the effects of the commander of the Knight's Order being temporarily unavailable, and all of the various other possibilities before he made his decision.

"Understood. You'll head to Lemlaesta, then. Once you reach the capital, coordinate with those on-site there and join the search for Alicia Ehnleit."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

And so, taking leave of his king with a final bow, Commander Adolphe headed to the Kingdom of Lemlaesta.

What Adolphe did not know was that Yumiella Dolkness had already surpassed level 99 not too long ago...

Chapter 1: The Hidden Boss Assesses Her Level

It was now autumn, and it would soon be time for my first harvest festival since moving back to Dolkness County.

Even though it felt like I'd been here for years already, not even a year had passed since I had graduated from the Academy. A lot had happened since then, from stopping Duke Hillrose's grandiose attempt on his own life to the appearance of Yumiella 2, a version of myself from a parallel world—having such an eventful life probably messed up my sense of time.

Around a month had passed since I had taken down the god of evil. I had largely recovered after using up all of my magical energy to turn back time in the parallel world—physically, at least. Mentally, I was still recovering both from the ordeal itself and from the new knowledge I had gained during my final visit to the parallel world...

What the hell even is the Holy Empire of Dolkness...? Whatever, I should forget about 2's speedy empire founding. I should think about more fun things. Something fun, something interesting... With that thought, the face of my fiancé, Patrick, popped up in my mind. *Oh, that's it! I should do a level assessment!*

We happened to own one of those magical crystal-orb instruments that were used during the level assessment that was part of the entrance ceremony at the Academy.

Everyone should have one of these in their home.

It had been quite expensive, but I couldn't *not* buy it. I sometimes brought it out, held it between my hands, and smiled at the "99" that popped up—it was a hardworking, useful device.

I can also assess Patrick's level. He's probably close to 99.

Once he maxed out, we were going to celebrate. I'd been trying to plan a

surprise party to congratulate him on reaching level 99, but it had suddenly been swapped for a wedding, so his level 99 celebration would have to be a quieter affair.

But mostly, I just wanted to check my own level. It had slipped my mind after the shock of everything that happened with 2, but since I had surpassed the level cap, I wanted to know by exactly how much.

I wonder if I'm in the hundreds, or the thousands, or even in the millions!

My level had been capped at 99 before, but I wanted to know if there was a new maximum or if the sky was the limit—there was a lot I wanted to know.

“My level will increase, forever and ever,” I belted out. “There’s deviation in the asymmetry between the hearth and the bamboo grove.” I was singing my totally original tune, “The Leveling Song,” on my way to grab the crystal.

Just in case the first half of the verse matched an existing song, I made sure that the latter half wouldn’t infringe on anyone’s copyright—I’d devised unique, original lyrics so that no one could even think of lashing out at me for copying a song. I’d also made the melody eccentric to dispel any allegations that this was just a parody song. The melody was like a mix of folk and metal.

I was finally at the chorus. I tried to sing it using a mix of techniques from Japanese enka and Western opera.

“The villainous device teaches the hunter meteorites,” I sang.

“Please stop! You’re scaring me!” a voice pleaded with me, bringing my happy singing to a stop as I came face-to-face with Eleanora in the hallway of the estate. I’d known Eleanora, daughter to the former duke of Hillrose and current freeloader in my home—ever since we were at the Academy together—but I’d never before seen her make such an obviously displeased face.

Looking back on it, when I used to sing karaoke in my past life, my friends would give me some candid feedback about my singing. They’d also referred to my singing as “strange transmissions.” I suppose it’s possible that I might be tone-deaf.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed. “My singing must have been bad.”

“I mean, it wasn’t *not* bad, but...” Eleanora hesitated. “I think it was actually in a realm far past ‘bad.’”

I’d apologized with the expectation that she’d say that I wasn’t *that* bad, but Eleanora had instead dealt a critical hit.

If I’m in a realm past being bad... Does that mean...?

“Do you mean that I’m so bad that I’m actually good?” I wondered hopefully.

“Not at all,” she said with a dark expression. “I meant that you’re so bad that I was about to lose my mind.” It seemed like there was a part of her that was actually angry with me.

Eleanora was surprisingly knowledgeable when it came to the arts. She probably couldn’t forgive my half-baked song. The lyrics were definitely fine, but perhaps the melody was a bit too odd.

“Which part in particular was bad?” I asked. “Was it my singing or the melody?”

“The worst part was the lyrics!” she exclaimed. “The words were so deeply nonsensical that they sent shivers down my spine!” She even rejected the lyrics, which I’d had such confidence about.

She didn’t have to be that harsh... Even I would be hurt by that. It hurts even more coming from someone as kind as Eleanora.

A normal person would give up here and never sing in front of others again, but I wasn’t going to give up. I was going to practice and become good enough for Eleanora to praise me.

“Understood. I’ll perform for you again at another time, so I hope you’ll listen.”

My determination didn’t have the desired effect either, because she immediately changed the subject. “Were you on your way somewhere, Yumiella...?”

“Yes, I was going to get the level-assessment crystal—” I started to explain before she abruptly cut me off.

“I want to see it! I want to see that crystal as well!”

Huh? I didn't expect Eleanora to be so interested.

She had never seemed that interested in the crystal ball before, so I wasn't sure why her attitude had suddenly changed. Was she perhaps leveling up in secret? I could understand her enthusiasm if she wanted to check her own growth.

"Well then, why don't we assess our levels together?"

"I would love to!" she responded enthusiastically. "I love level assessments!"

Ah, it's so nice to have friends who get really into the same interests as me. There's something about assessing our levels together that feels like an appropriate activity to do with friends. I don't care about singing that much, so I'll leave the practicing for later. Onwards to the crystal!

I began striding forwards once more, when I heard a voice mumbling something behind me.

"Phew, I'm saved..."

I turned to regard my friend. "What? Did you say something?"

"We have to focus on the level assessment!" Eleanora exclaimed, her smile seeming strangely fixed. "Hurry, Yumiella!"

As my level increased, my hearing abilities also became enhanced, but I didn't always catch everything everyone said. If their voice was too low or too quiet, it was like the frequency didn't match and my brain wouldn't process it. Besides, if I were processing every sound that my Yumiella Ears heard twenty-four hours a day, my brain would probably short-circuit.

And so, in the end, I didn't know what Eleanora was mumbling about, and I decided that it didn't matter. We continued down the hall together.

"The crystal is the same sort of instrument that everyone uses at the entrance ceremony, correct?" she asked. "I didn't know you had one at home."

"Yes, that's correct. It's nostalgic to think back on it..." I felt wistful for a moment. "Though, it was also the reason I became the center of attention."

"Center of attention? I don't remember much about the entrance ceremony."

“You mean the entrance ceremony where there was a huge commotion over me being level 99? You must’ve been watching too, Lady Eleanora.”

Eleanora considered this, her brow furrowing prettily for a moment, before shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I only remember hearing about you a little after the entrance ceremony. I assumed you were present, but I don’t recall seeing you.”

While reminiscing about the past together, shocking news had been revealed: seeing someone who was level 99 wasn’t a big enough deal to burn itself into Lady Eleanora’s memory.

I’d assumed that this was the moment when every student at the Academy took notice of me, but Eleanora was, in a sense, in a whole different realm. I was honestly impressed.

“Speaking of the entrance ceremony,” she suddenly cried with a cheerfulness that sounded suspiciously forced, “isn’t that the moment where you and Sir Patrick had your first fateful meeting? Did you feel something for him at first sight?”

“Oh, I didn’t notice Patrick at the entrance ceremony,” I said dismissively. “Though I do vaguely remember thinking that there was someone with a slightly higher level than others...”

“What? Didn’t your heart start beating the moment you locked eyes, or anything wonderful like that?”

“No, I don’t remember any reaction in particular.”

Eleanora seemed disappointed by my answer and its complete lack of romance.

That’s just how real life is. People rarely fall in love at first sight.

We’d reached our destination as we’d reminisced. It was a room on the first floor of the estate that we had turned into a storage room, full of things like unused pieces of furniture. Rita didn’t like me going to the storage room myself, but I always felt much more awkward calling over a servant to get something for me.

"I don't remember where I put it after using it last time... Oh, there it is." Since I used the crystal often, it was on a shelf right by the door. I picked it up with both hands and showed it to Eleanora. "Now we can assess our levels."

"That does indeed appear to be the case," Eleanora replied, a little stiffly.

Oh? She was so excited about the level assessment just a second ago, but now her response seems dull. I want her to go into this excited. I need to hype things up somehow...

"Maybe a song?" I wondered aloud.

"Wow, it's the crystal! Yay! Let's assess our levels!"

"What? Uh, okay."

Eleanora's excitement levels had suddenly shot back up. It seemed she wanted to check her level after all.

She can go first, then.

Of course, we'd be doing it here. I was too lazy to bring the crystal to my room. I was the kind of person who ate my takeout in the parking lot.

I caught sight of a tall, narrow desk nearby, which seemed like it had no other use than to display a flower vase. I moved the vase, placed the crystal on the desk, and encouraged Eleanora to put her hand on the smooth surface.

"Here you go! All you have to do is place your hand on top."

"Okay..." Eleanora said, nodding as she reached out her right hand.

I'd always assumed that Eleanora was level 1. That seemed like a reasonable expectation of someone who had never before defeated a monster. But considering how interested she seemed to be in the crystal, I suspected that she might have been secretly level grinding.

That's why she must've been going out with Ryuu. That's it! Being with the strongest dragon also guarantees her safety. I wonder what her level is...

"Oh, you're level 1." I was only a little bit disappointed.

"Well, yes, of course."

She was level 1, and she'd known it all along.

Why? Why did you want to assess your level?

As my mind filled with questions, the weakest of noble ladies moved away from the crystal.

“Next is your turn,” she said.

I shook my head. “I’ll go last, after Patrick.”

“What?” She looked at me quizzically. “Are you not feeling well yet?”

“I have my reasons, of course...”

I mean, I guess I usually would want to go first when it comes to the crystal, so her concern makes sense.

My hesitation was enough for her to suspect I was feeling unwell.

Of course, I had a reason as to why I wanted to go last. After recent events, I had surpassed level 99. I was definitely past level 100, and my level could possibly be in the thousands or millions.

I was on a completely different level—I basically possessed a strength so immense, it felt like I was cheating. I was in a situation one could describe with a ridiculous title like *My Stats Are What Now?! I’m the Only Person Who’s Level 999,999,999 in a World Where the Max Level Is 99*.

I’m sorry if there’s actually a book like that out there. Even if it’s not exactly that, I’m pretty sure there are some with similar titles. I myself am in the ridiculous situation of being a villainess who’s level 99, so please forgive me for any unintended copyright infringement.

Things were starting to get off topic. Back to the crystal—in these types of stories, it was common for an object like this level-assessment crystal to break because it couldn’t handle the person’s powers after they’d surpassed the world’s limits.

I expected that there was an eighty percent chance that the crystal would break—I wasn’t sure if it would just shatter or explode into pieces, but I figured it would break. As for the remaining twenty percent... There was a ten percent chance it wouldn’t be able to assess my level and would just display an error message, and a ten percent chance that a level above 99 would be displayed.

I wouldn't be disappointed by either of the latter options. An error message wouldn't be that different from the crystal breaking, but if I got to actually see my numerical level, that would be great.

This was my somewhat long-winded reasoning for having Patrick use the magical instrument before me, and when I explained the gist of things to Eleanora, she seemed to understand.

"I see. It's because you'll break something again."

"Break something again?!" I echoed.

"Um, that's pretty common, isn't it...?"

I'm not constantly breaking things... was what I wanted to argue back, but then I began to recall all the things I'd broken in the past. I'd broken various things, from dangerous artifacts to rare objects. I didn't want to affirm that I was Yumiella the Destroyer, so I decided to respond to Eleanora's question with silence.

"So..." I needed to change the subject. "Let's go look for Patrick. Though, I feel like he'll appear soon anyway even if we don't search for him."

"I don't think Sir Patrick would appear before us so conveniently," Eleanora said, seeming skeptical, but I knew that the probability of Patrick happening to show up was extraordinarily high.

Every time I just thought, "*Oh, won't my darling Pat-Pat just show up?*" he would suddenly materialize. He was just a convenient man... Hmm, that didn't sound quite like the compliment I intended it to be. A man with good timing? No, that wasn't it either.

Hm... Oh! He's a man that swiftly appears in a crisis! That's the kind of man Patrick is!

"Help me, Patrick!" I called.

"Couldn't you say 'help me' with a bit more emotion?" Eleanora suggested.

"He'll still come. He'd come quicker if, say, a child had been kidnapped."

"Is that so..."

Yes. He'll come. I know he'll come. As long as I believe, he'll show up.

Five minutes had passed.

"He's not here," I said.

"That appears to be the case," Eleanora responded.

He didn't come. Reality was cruel. Happiness wasn't something that came to you but was instead something you had to find for yourself. The bluebird of happiness was in Tytyl and Mytyl's home all along, but their journey to find the bluebird was no doubt meaningful.

Happiness might be closer than you think, but what's most important is the will to go and search for it yourself! Oh, right, my original train of thought about how the person I live with isn't showing up at the right time...

As I was pondering the philosophy of happiness, Eleanora picked up the crystal.

"You must be having strange thoughts again. Come, we're leaving."

"Please don't drop it," I said.

Eleanora seemed inappropriately casual in the manner in which she held the crystal and walked off with it.

Please don't drop it. I'm planning for the crystal to break, unable to bear the brunt of my strength. I can't have it falling and shattering on the ground before then.

Eleanora and I walked around the estate looking for the bluebird of hap—no, Patrick. He wasn't in his room, and Daemon was the only one in the office. As I wondered where else my fiancé could possibly be, I heard voices in the entryway. It seemed that he'd been out and had just returned.

I intercepted him. "Welcome home!" I said cheerfully. "Do you want to eat, take a bath, or—"

"Welcome back, Sir Patrick. Here, please place your hand on this crystal."

Eleanora interrupted the most important part.

Whatever, it's fine. I just said all that out of habit, since that's what usually follows "Welcome home."

Eleanora was holding out the crystal with both hands, a beaming smile on her face. She was adorable. I couldn't believe the fact that Patrick didn't seem too happy about the magical instrument being thrust before him.

"Thanks. Uh, let's do that later. It's not something I have to do right—"

"If you don't go first, then it'll never be my turn," I said, speaking quickly, knowing he would otherwise refuse based on his expression.

I grabbed his wrist with both hands and brought it to the crystal. He resisted and tried to pull away, but it was no use. Eleanora held up the crystal and pressed it against Patrick's palm. It was perfect teamwork, a combination move between us.

I'll name this move "Forced Level Assessment." It's a move where you forcibly assess someone's level.

"All right, good job, Lady Eleanora!" I crowed. "Check the number!"

"Um, it's... 99! It's 99! That's incredible, Sir Patrick!" Eleanora said, jumping up and down with joy in response to seeing the number displayed on the magical instrument.

Please don't drop it, I prayed. I definitely can't have the crystal dropping and shattering on the ground, okay?

Despite my concerns, I understood why Eleanora was so happy. I felt as happy as if this were my own accomplishment.

Oh, Patrick, you've grown so much...

"I feel like a mother seeing her son's growth," I cooed.

"Who are you calling your son?" Patrick snapped.

He must be in his rebellious phase. If you're going to join a biker gang, Patrick, then Mommy would appreciate it if you rode a CBX400F.

I thought about showing off my excellent impression of a straight-six engine,

but instead, I decided to genuinely celebrate his accomplishments. I'd save the impression for another time.

"Congratulations, Patrick," I said with a smile.

"Thanks..."

Despite reaching the max level, Patrick didn't seem too happy. He had also refused to do the assessment of his own volition, and I felt a little confused about why that might be.

Come to think of it, he hasn't really talked about his own level recently. Why not, Patrick? You're level 99! You're probably only the second person in the entire world to reach it. We're the strongest couple in the world... Wait. You don't need two "strongest" people. I was number one until yesterday, but now we're both at the top. We need to hold a competition to determine who's the strongest. The battle's already begun.

I took a dramatic pause before saying, "It appears the time to determine who's the strongest in the world has come."

"I knew this would happen," Patrick said with a sigh. "That's why I didn't want to do it. I'm fine with you being the strongest, so can you stop bracing for a fight?"

"Hey! That's something that a protagonist who's the self-proclaimed weakest character would say! You say that, but you're secretly the stronger one! It's like I'm the underdog who just says they're the strongest!"

In most stories, the one who wanted to figure out who was stronger was the weaker character. The peaceful character who said, "Come on, we don't need to fight," usually turned out to be the stronger one.

And in this case, that's not true. I'm the stronger one.

I was ready to fight, but Patrick appeared to have no intention of doing so. He looked at me with pity.

"Weren't you a bit more levelheaded when we first met? I feel like you've become more violent lately."

"I don't think I've changed that much."

I think I've always been like this. He's probably just seeing a different side to me because we've been together for a while. I don't think I have a violent side, though... Oops, I was about to get off topic again. We're in the middle of competing for the title of strongest in the world.

I inched closer to Patrick and took another dramatic pause. "This is the result of my levelheaded thinking. Generally speaking, the one with the higher level is stronger. If we're the same level, then we have no choice but to fight and see who's stronger... See, isn't it a logical train of thought?"

"Logical...?" Patrick echoed, as if he were interrogating the meaning of the word itself.

Since we were both level 99, we had no choice but to fight to see who was stronger. Perhaps the one with the higher base potential—in other words, innate skill—would win. Or perhaps elements outside of our levels, such as swordsmanship and precision with magic, would decide the winner.

If it's only two people, I reasoned, we won't have to worry about extra people turning things into a battle royal, and we can fight to our heart's content.

Come on, Patrick. Let's have the most powerful lovers' quarrel of all history!

Right when my excitement had built up, Eleanora chimed in.

"Yumiella, didn't you say you were above level 99?"

I felt myself deflate slightly. "Oh."

"Isn't that why you wanted to use this crystal? It was only a moment ago that you mentioned that. Have you already forgotten?"

"That's right."

Right. I'm not level 99 anymore. I'd completely forgotten about it until dear Eleanora pointed it out.

The fact that I'd surpassed 99 slipped my mind because I'd been wanting to battle Patrick to determine who was stronger when he reached my level. My feelings got me carried away.

There are just those times where you still want to go through with a plan, even if the situation has changed and it's not necessary anymore. It totally happens.

In my previous life, when I was a college student, I had purchased a power bank I wanted to bring on a trip, even though the trip itself had already been canceled. I'd had no other reason to go to the electronics store, but I forced myself to go anyway, and it was only when I got home and unboxed the power bank that I realized I didn't need it.

My increased level had slipped my mind. *Does this mean I just get to keep being the strongest person in the world? Should we still settle things with a battle anyway, just to be sure?*

As I mulled over whether or not to keep my battle stance up, Patrick decided this was his moment to convince me to choose peace.

Just how badly do you not want to fight, Patrick?

"That's right!" he said, mustering up his enthusiasm. "You've surpassed the maximum level. That means you're stronger than me, a normal person who is level 99, which is the limit. Right? So we don't have to fight, do we?"

"Am I number one in the world?" I wondered.

"Yeah, you're number one, Yumiella."

"What if I was the second strongest in the world?"

"Then you'd be number two, wouldn't you...?"

Number two was number two, after all. Even if number two was number two, number one was still number one, and I was number one, not number two, which meant I was number one.

I see, so there's no need to decide who's the winner between us.

As I relaxed my stance, Patrick let out a sigh of relief.

"You saved me. Thank you, Lady Eleanora."

"Did you forget about Yumiella's level increasing as well, Sir Patrick?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"I had been concerned that something like this would happen, but I didn't realize that the prerequisites had changed..."

Oh, Patrick had an "it totally happens" moment too. It seems like his occurred

because he expected I would want to fight. That doesn't sit right with me... How could a boy not be interested in being the strongest person in the world? Whatever, it's fine. Patrick's done with the crystal now that he's reached the max level, which means I'm free to destroy it as I please.

"All right then, my turn," I said.

"Why were you waiting for me to get home?" Patrick wondered. "I would've expected you to assess your own level first."

I guess I just seem like someone who's eager to use the crystal.

I summarized the explanation I gave to Eleanora for Patrick, explaining how there was a possibility that the crystal might break.

"And that's why I think the crystal might shatter," I finished.

"Even if they're sold in the markets, it's still a rare item. Don't break it," he admonished.

"Like I said, it's going to be an inevitable accident!"

"Just don't do it willfully, okay?"

Why would I do that? The only three possibilities here are the crystal physically breaking due to an inevitable overload, an error message being displayed, or a three-digit number being displayed. I would never willfully break a precious magical instrument. How absurd to think I would.

Patrick's suspicious gaze felt as if he were saying, "She's going to break it on purpose," and it was painful, so I decided to get the assessment over with as quickly as possible.

"I'm going to check my level now," I announced.

"Yes, go ahead!" Eleanora said with a smile as she held out the crystal for me.

If the crystal exploded while Eleanora was still holding it, her hands would become a bloody mess. It would be terrible if the flying shards hit her in the face.

I found a table near us and moved the vase that was sitting on it.

"It might explode, so please set the crystal down here."

Eleanora seemed slightly displeased, but she set the crystal down where I instructed. Then she took several steps back, as if she were afraid of it exploding. In contrast, Patrick cautiously took a step closer.

It's all right, I'll absorb all of the damage from the impending explosion. All right then, countdown to detonation: three, two, one, blast off!

"Huh?"

I lightly touched the crystal, but nothing happened. There were no signs of it exploding.

What's happening? Is it option two, an error message?

As I blankly scanned my surroundings, my eyes met Patrick's. He looked relieved.

I didn't realize you didn't want it to explode that badly. Whatever, there's nothing that can be done.

I collected myself and looked down to see if the crystal was showing an error message or a three-digit (or above) number.

Before I could turn my attention back to the crystal, Eleanora slipped past Patrick. She'd probably decided that it wasn't dangerous anymore, and so she'd gotten close without anyone stopping her. She was right across from me, with the crystal between us. She bent down to look at the crystal.

"It says...13!"

"Pardon? *Thirteen?*" I echoed.

What do you mean "13"? How could my level be so low? Oh wait, it's not 13, it's "13!" It's factorial thirteen, so it's thirteen times twelve, times eleven, times ten, and so on, so... It would be factorial ten multiplied by eleven through thirteen... So about six billion?

I felt a sense of pride about being level six billion. I hadn't realized that I'd accumulated so much extra experience after reaching the maximum level.

As I stood there, trembling with emotion, Patrick got closer and stared at the crystal.

“Oh, it really does say 13. What does this mean...?”

“It’s fine, it’s 13! Isn’t it?” I said, attempting to communicate the factorial symbol through my volume and excitement.

Although, do they even know what a factorial is here...?

“Why did you suddenly yell?” Patrick asked.

The way that he had said it made it seem like it was *just* 13.

Wait. What does it actually show on the crystal?

I couldn’t imagine that the factorial symbol would show up on the crystal, but if the full six billion number was showing, why would Eleanora have rephrased it?

I just remembered, Eleanora is a person who would confidently say that one hundred minus seventy-seven is thirty-three. She would probably freeze up seeing a number over a million, and then do her best to count backwards from the one’s place.

I have a bad feeling about this. It’s not even hot, but I feel sweat running down my back.

I ignored the feeling and looked at the crystal. My hand was still on it, and I leaned over the crystal as the results came into view.

“Thirteen...?”

The number before me was 13. It was a whole number, more than 12 but less than 14. XIII in Roman numerals. There was nothing else displayed—it was just the devil’s number on the crystal.

I let go of the crystal and then put my hand back on it to reassess my level, but the result was the same. I considered the possibility that my eyes were just deceiving me, so I decided to check with Patrick.

“It says 13, right?”

“Yup, it’s 13,” he confirmed.

“It said 13,” Eleanora added.

My world felt like it was twisting, and my vision was spinning, but I was the

calmest person in the room. I was calmly accepting that I was level 13. I was calm. And so, I calmly, quietly, coldly explained what I needed to do next.

“All right, let’s destroy the world.”

“Calm down, Yumiella,” Patrick said automatically.

My only objective was to prove that the results of the level assessment were incorrect. I was going to find proof that I wasn’t level 13, no matter what.

“I’m calm. It’s just that if I can’t find proof that these results are wrong, I’ll destroy everything in the world.”

“That would just be taking your anger out on the world...” Eleanora said.

A person who was only level 13 wouldn’t be able to destroy an entire world, so I would prove that the results were wrong by doing just that.

“Exactly,” I said with a decisive nod. “The world will disappear not as a result, but as a process. It’s a necessary sacrifice in order to prove these results wrong.”

“I’ll prove it for you, so just calm down,” Patrick said, trying to placate me.

You don’t have to get so serious. As long as my thinking is correct, it should be all over soon.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a shadow wobbling, and a prepubescent boy’s high-pitched voice rang out.

“Hold on, miss! There’s no way that you’re level 13, so just hold off on destroying the world!”

I chuckled to myself internally, glad that my plan worked.

I would never *actually* want to do something as cringey as destroying the world. My statements were a trap to lure out the person with the most knowledge about the magical instrument used for the level assessment, an object which had not been constructed by mortal hands. He—the god of magical instruments, dreams, and darkness—was nearby at this very moment.

“Hello, Lemn,” I said cheerfully. “I knew you’d come.”

The black-haired boy jumped out of my shadow. It was Lemn, the god of

darkness. I would've noticed earlier if he had been hiding in my shadow all along, so he'd probably transported himself here from somewhere beyond the world I could perceive. This god was rotten to the core, and he didn't care about humans on an individual basis, but he got desperate whenever the stakes got high enough to affect the entire world.

Lemn appeared to realize what my thought process had been, and his expression of panic softened into one of disappointment.

"Oh, what a waste it was for me to hurry here," he grumbled.

"I didn't think you were going to fall for it so easily," I said.

"Of course I'd take this sort of thing seriously. You *could* do something to the entire world, miss."

"Do you think I'm the kind of person who would take their frustration out on others just because their level decreased?"

"I do," he said without the slightest pause.

I see, you do think that, huh... But Lemn doesn't even really make an attempt to understand human emotions. Also, I haven't known him for very long. Patrick surely knows that I'm not that kind of person.

"You knew, right, Patrick?" I asked, turning to my fiancé. "I see now, you were just acting when you were trying to stop me. You read my mind, didn't you? I knew I could count on you, Pat—"

"I was serious about stopping you."

"Oh. I see."

It appeared that he thought that I would destroy everything I could just because my level might have decreased, but that was only because both he and Lemn were obsessed with safety. They both constantly assumed the worst-case scenario. It was usually unnecessary worry, but I thought their cautiousness was valuable.

The one who truly understood me was Eleanora, who was more spontaneous and adventurous. I turned to her, my last hope.

"I-I... Even if you had become level 13, I believed you wouldn't do anything

strange! Of course I wouldn't think otherwise!" Eleanora said, darting her eyes back and forth, avoiding eye contact as she spoke.

Oh. I see. I now understand what everyone thinks of me on a regular basis. I'm not some member of a warrior race where my only form of identity is how high my level is... I guess people can't understand each other after all. Is there no way to truly understand someone and be understood...?

Though I was busy lamenting the imperfections of the creatures known as humans, I had something I needed to do right now. I needed to solve the mystery of my level. There was no way that I was level 13. I had felt an extraordinary increase in mana within my body when I surpassed level 99.

"I know that I haven't become weaker, so the magical instrument must be malfunctioning. That's the logical conclusion, right?" I asked, trying to keep the hint of desperation from my tone.

"Well, yeah. The strangest thing would be to think you're actually level 13," Patrick agreed.

"Right? See? I'm calm, just like I said."

"I don't know about that," Patrick said, unsatisfied with my claim of composure.

I'm calm. I'm composed, and I need to prove that I'm not level 13. I'm not in a hurry, but I can't leave this for later.

"Come on, Lemn," I wheedled. "Please take a look at this. Quickly. Is this magical instrument operating properly?"

"Miss... You seem irritated. You're calm, right?"

"I'm calm. I'm composed. So please, can you find out what happened? You're the god of magical instruments, right?" I said, my legs calmly trembling as I calmly glared at Lemn, because I was so very calm.

The god of darkness poked at the crystal as he spoke slowly.

"This artifact is outside of my purview... It already existed when I was born. We oversee the world, but we weren't that involved with the creation of it."

"I just want to know if this is operating properly," I insisted. (Calmly.) "If it is,

we will start narrowing down the reasons why it's showing I'm level 13."

"I guess I can tell that much... Can you put your hand on it one more—"

"Okay," I said, quickly placing my hand on the crystal before he finished his statement.

Hurry up, quickly! But I'm not in a hurry. Nor am I irritated. I'm completely calm.

Lemn curiously stared at the magical instrument and took a hefty pause before speaking.

"The instrument is operating correctly, which means you're level 13. You've become so weak, heh heh. 13... I mean, there are even children at that level," Lemn chuckled.

"Grrrrggggaaargh." I couldn't keep my emotions in check, and magical energy began to flow throughout my body. With great effort, I stopped the dark magical energy from leaking out, but at this rate, I knew that I could suddenly explode at any moment.

I whirled around and fled outside to let off some steam by shooting off some random spells... But I couldn't. Even though my stores of mana had increased, my actual output ability hadn't changed that much. It was like the faucet was still the same, but the water tank had gotten bigger.

I don't know if casting Black Hole at maximum force would even drain my excess of energy in time. I just have that much mana surging up within me.

Everyone was reacting to my strange behavior, but I couldn't even respond properly.

"Oh no, Yumiella!" Eleanora exclaimed. "Yumiella's broken!"

"Are you okay?!" Patrick called to me. When he didn't get a response, he rounded on Lemn. "Hey, why did you goad her like that?"

"It was just payback for always causing me trouble, or something like that...?" Lemn seemed genuinely repentant. "I didn't think this would happen, though. Sorry."

"You think you can get away with a 'sorry'?"

With nowhere to go, the magical energy building up within me finally shot out of my body.

A torrent of magical energy overflowed from my body. It felt like it was shooting out from between my shoulder blades. The force of the magical energy pouring out and my efforts to keep it inside opposed one another, which ended up having the effect of holding the magical energy in one place. Unable to flow as it normally did, the magic instead solidified, hardening into a structure on my back.

I couldn't see how it looked for myself, but it felt like I'd grown another set of limbs. Had I been able to catch sight of my own back, what I would have seen were wafer-thin sheets of magical energy, crystallized into the shape of wings, six pairs of them.

The fluttering black wings roared behind me, and I slowly floated up into the air...



Patrick and Eleanora raced outside after me, Lemn hitchhiking along in the shadows.

“I was kidding, it was just a joke!” the god of darkness cried. “I was messing with you, miss! I know why the crystal says you’re level 13! You’re not actually level 13!”

The moment I heard his voice, my outburst of magical energy ended. The twelve wings disappeared, and I stopped floating, causing me to silently land on the ground from a mere ten-centimeter height.

“Of course I’m not level 13,” I said. “I’ve obviously known that this whole time, which you can see because of how calm I’ve been.”

“Are you all right...?” Patrick asked, worried.

My body just got a little surprised. It’s like when you get heart palpitations after jumping into a swimming pool, so I don’t think you need to worry about it too much.

“I’m fine,” I assured him.

“You were floating...”

“I’m fine,” I repeated. “After all, I’m completely calm. I’m not level 13. I’m not level 13. I’m fine, I’m okay.”

I mean, even if I am level 13, I’d just get to level grind all over again...right?

I imagined all of my efforts until now going to waste, and my body once again felt the shock. I was starting to lose control again...

“You don’t seem fine at all!” Patrick exclaimed. “Hey, Lemn! Hurry up and explain what’s going on to Yumiella!”

“I’ve never seen such dense magical energy,” Lemn said wonderingly, ignoring Patrick’s agitation. “I think you could easily destroy the world if you wanted to, miss.”

“Now’s not the time to be impressed!” my fiancé snapped.

“Oh, right. Sorry, uh, I’ll reveal the secret of this trick, so to speak.” I gave Lemn my full attention so as to not miss a single syllable of his explanation. “I

only realized this just now after watching it work, but the function of this crystal isn't actually to assess and display levels."

"What does that mean? Are you saying that the results it's produced up until now haven't been correct?" Patrick asked.

"All of its results until now have been correct," Lemn said. "Which is exactly why I didn't realize its true function."

Why won't this god just get straight to the point? He might be a genius in the art of irritating me—no, I mean, I'm calm. I'm so very calm.

The level-assessing crystal, which was my fifth-most favorite magical instrument, was about to have its true functionality revealed.

The god of darkness continued speaking, settling into a pompous tone. "The proper description of this crystal's true function is the assessment of the target's level, followed by the display of the lower two digits of the subsequent result."

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"I'm not sure who made it originally, but I can see why they'd think a two-digit display was sufficient," Lemn remarked. "No one would've expected someone over level 99 to appear."

"So the last two digits of my level are 13?"

"Exactly. Though, I'm not sure if your true level is 113 or 1,013."

What? Does that mean my level could be 1,000,000,013? Hm, what to do...

As I stood there thinking about my level, I realized that everyone else was acting strange. Patrick was bracing himself for something, and Eleanora and Lemn hid behind him and looked over at me.

"Hey, are things okay now, mister?" Lemn asked Patrick.

He nodded a little bit uncertainly. "It should be all right... I think..."

"You never know," Eleanora chimed in. "Yumiella suddenly turns strange sometimes after time has passed."

Did I do something to make them distance themselves from me? I tricked

Lemn into showing up, then he said something, and then... Huh? My memories are a bit fuzzy.

“What’s wrong?” I called out to them.

“She seems fine...” Patrick assured the others. “I was worried that the wings would come out again.”

I blinked. “Wings? What are you talking about?”

Does he mean those things that birds have?

All three of them looked at each other before shaking their heads at my question.

“It’s nothing, don’t worry about it,” Patrick said.

I mean, I’m curious, but...I guess it’s fine.

For the moment, the mystery of my level 13 result was solved.

So the lower two digits, huh? It doesn’t seem like this will provide me with super useful information, but at the very least I’ll be able to tell if my level has gone up. If it shows 14, then I know I’ll have gone up a level.

Now I would be able to plan what I wanted to do moving forwards.

“If the crystal shows 99 and doesn’t change at all, that’ll mean I’ve hit the new limit, right?”

“What? You want to aim for the maximum level again?” Lemn asked, clearly puzzled.

“Of course.”

“There might not even be a limit anymore,” he pointed out.

“That’s a problem for my future self.”

Just having some sort of rough idea of where I wanted to go was enough, because it would allow me to slowly make progress towards my goal.

I’m so glad. This means my precious crystal can continue to serve me. I’m going to assess my level every day when I wake up and again before I go to bed. I’m going to imagine a large number, well over one hundred, that it can’t

display, and I'm going to do my best every day. I'm so glad that this cherished object didn't break as a result of my high level.

"Wait. Where's my precious crystal?" My crystalline child wasn't where it should've been. I looked down and saw clear shards scattered all over the ground. "When did it fall?!"

"That was, uh... Oh, it was when you were floating," Patrick said.

"I floated?"

He shook his head firmly. "No, you didn't float, nor did you grow wings."

"Of course I've never grown wings. Did you maybe mistake me for an angel or something strange like that?"

Even I wouldn't suddenly grow wings out of nowhere.

All of our shenanigans surrounding level assessments ended on the most boring and predictable note of all: with the crystal dropping onto the floor and shattering into pieces. As I mourned the fact that my crystal had died so tragically in the line of duty on the very day it had returned to work, the other three were whispering to each other.

"She looked more like a devil than an angel," Lemn remarked.

"Fortunately, she doesn't seem to remember," Eleanora said. "Yumiella would most definitely insist on doing it once more if she did."

"I think so too..." Patrick agreed. "Those winglike protuberances were something Yumiella would definitely enjoy."

My mind was filled with the joyful thoughts of level grinding, so their conversation went in one ear and out the other.

I should start carrying one of these crystals with me wherever I go, so I can assess my level whenever I want.

"I should get the backup crystal," I muttered to myself quietly so that Patrick and the others wouldn't hear.

Being the cautious person that I was, I naturally had a replacement for this crystal. It had been abandoned in storage along with the first crystal (now

deceased).

I don't have a replacement for the backup, though, so I'll have to handle this second one much more carefully.

Chapter 2: The Hidden Boss Shoots for the Moon

My home—in other words, the lord’s mansion in the center of Dolkness Village—was the largest, grandest architectural structure within the county.

Not only did the Dolkness estate serve as a residence, but it also served a function similar to that of a town hall, so it needed to be of a certain size. As an additional consideration, there seemed to be an unspoken rule that no citizen could build any structure larger than their lord’s manor, evidently because if the lord’s manor wasn’t the largest building in the county, then they weren’t worthy of aristocratic respect. Or something like that.

I didn’t care about such practices, but everyone around me did, so there wasn’t much I could do about it.

I’d love it if people just kept building bigger and taller structures. Wouldn’t anyone be happy to suddenly have the Tokyo Tower as their neighbor? Oh, wait... We can’t have the Tokyo Tower next to us. I’d want to play Godzilla with Ryu, so I’d probably destroy it.

Because of these tacitly understood customs, it should have been impossible for a large building to suddenly appear next to me. I say “should have” because construction had started some time ago next door to my property, and judging by the footprint, the house seemed like it was going to be bigger than mine. I was suspicious when I saw them preparing the foundation, but now that the pillars and support columns were going up, I was sure of what they were doing.

I sat working in the office, double-checking documents that my deputy Daemon had already reviewed, adding my signature for approval.

As a special promotion for my first year as the countess, there were to be no taxes collected this season, but we were still gathering data on crop yields. I looked through the various documents detailing the fall yields as I asked Daemon, “Do you know who’s moving into the house they’re building next door? They must be pretty rich.”

“By next door, do you mean there?” my deputy asked, pointing in the opposite direction from where I was indicating.

“No, on the other side,” I said, motioning towards the construction.

“Um... I believed I explained this before,” Daemon said, surprised. He seemed completely confused as to how I didn’t know.

If Daemon says he told me, I’m sure he did. I probably listened too, but I just wasn’t paying attention.

The trust between Daemon and myself was built upon the fact that we knew that most things that went wrong were my own fault.

I really don’t remember hearing about anyone moving in, though... Maybe if I stimulate my brain, I can remember. Maybe I could shove my fingers into my head, I thought, when Daemon began to explain.

“I believe I got your approval for the construction, Lady Yumiella... That building is a guesthouse for His Majesty. We didn’t have suitable accommodations to host His Majesty and Her Majesty for your wedding to Sir Patrick, which is now less than six months away, so we had to expedite the construction.”

“Oh, right, I heard about that... It’s going to be *that* big, though?!”

“When it comes to His Majesty, just hosting all of the royal attendants will require a lot of space... We’ve contracted builders who can use magic as well, so it’s on track to completion just barely in time.”

“I see. I guess it would take time to build something that large.”

It isn’t that I forgot about it, I just never expected the guesthouse to be such a large building. Now that I think about it, the budget for it was ridiculously high. Patrick looked over that document too, though, so I trusted it was fine. I remember thinking, “Wow, houses are more expensive than I thought,” and then I approved it. Of course it would be expensive.

“It’ll be of no use after the wedding, then. What a waste... Oh, wait, that’s right. I remember reading that we would transfer residential functions to the guesthouse.”

“Yes, that is correct; we will be moving the living spaces for you and Sir Patrick, as well as all of the guest rooms, to what is currently known as the guesthouse, and this building, the former estate, will only be used for county work.”

Oh, right, so that’s what’s going on.

At the moment, I basically lived in town hall, but I’d had it in my head that the plan was for us to start commuting here from something more like a regular house. I’d expected my new room to be smaller, but I didn’t really mind that. As it turned out, the opposite was going to happen.

Man, aristocratic weddings sure are expensive.



The next day, I was seated across from Patrick at the table, enjoying some after-dinner tea. My maid Rita entered and handed my boyfriend a letter.

“I apologize for my intrusion,” she said. “It appears this is an urgent matter.”

“No worries at all. Thank you,” Patrick responded. He used wind magic to slice open the wax seal and began to read.

Though the room was lit by a magical instrument, its illumination was slightly too dim for most people to read comfortably by its light. As I stared at the letter, I noticed that the seal bore the symbol of the Ashbatten Mark, Patrick’s ancestral home.

If the delivery person mentioned it was urgent, it must be a bit of an emergency. If it was something extremely urgent, however, someone from the mark would have been sent as a messenger.

“Missing...?” Patrick mumbled under his breath as he read through the letter, his face settling into a stern expression.

“Who is?” I asked.

Someone gone missing sounded serious. I didn’t want to be nosy about his family business, but the question left my mouth before I could think.

He finished reading and started to fold it back up as he explained. “Apparently my brother has gone missing.”

“What?! Isn’t that a huge deal?”

“Well, considering how my brother is...” Despite the news of his brother’s absence, Patrick didn’t seem too worried.

Patrick was the younger of two brothers, meaning that his one and only older brother was the heir to the margrave. I didn’t know much else about his family circumstances aside from that.

From what I’d heard from Patrick during the times he’d reminisced about the past, his brother seemed like he was kind and caring, but I didn’t get the chance to meet him when I had visited the Ashbatten Mark.

If he’s considering the type of person his brother is and isn’t too worried about the situation, I guess that must mean Patrick doesn’t think he was kidnapped or anything like that.

“Is your brother strong?” I asked.

“He’s somewhat strong, but I can’t imagine him getting into danger. He’s good at handling himself in those sorts of situations. Not only that, but there are several reasons why he’d leave on his own.”

“I would imagine it would be bad for the heir to just up and leave. What reasons might he have to want to leave?” I asked curiously.

Patrick hesitated for a moment before choosing his words carefully. “Do you remember why my brother didn’t want to meet you when we visited Ashbatten with Ryu?”

“He’s afraid of women, right?” I hadn’t gotten to meet his brother because the guy had avoided me the whole time. I didn’t even know what he looked like, so my knowledge of my future brother-in-law was very shallow indeed. I wasn’t even sure of his name. “Wait, what was his name again? I forgot it.”

“It’s Gilbert.”

“Oh right, Gilbert. It’s hard to remember someone’s name without knowing what they look like.”

Gilbert, Gilbert, Gilbert... All right, I’ve committed it to memory. If I ever run into someone named Gilbert in this kingdom, I’ll assume they’re Patrick’s

brother, even if they're a woman. I'll also try to not be too weird, since first impressions are important.

My thoughts were starting to get off track.

"So Gilbert is afraid of women, which is important because...?" I asked, encouraging Patrick to continue.

"It's not that he's afraid of *all* women, he's just not very good around, um...strong-willed...?" My boyfriend cast around for the correct word. "No, aggressive...? That's not right either... Women whose actions and words he can't predict, I think would be the best way to describe it. He's not very good with women like that. I think it's because of our mother."

Normally, Patrick's mother was a very kind and peaceful woman. However, when it came to the Kingdom of Lemlaesta, which she despised, her words and actions often became suddenly extreme.

"I'm not as intense as your mother, though, am I? Isn't it strange of him to refuse to even meet me first?"

"We've known each other for quite a while now, Yumiella. I believe that you are, in fact, more intense than my mother."

"Well... We can discuss that later. I still don't really get what kind of person Gilbert is."

"What kind of person he is...? The person we know that's the most similar would be..."

The length of time that Patrick was spending lost in thought meant that his brother was likely pretty different from both him and his parents.

I wonder whose name will come up. We don't have that many shared acquaintances, so it might be hard to compare Gilbert to a specific person. He's Patrick's brother, so he's probably pretty handsome. A good-looking guy that's like Patrick but is different from Patrick? That sounds awesome. I'd be happy no matter what he's like.

"I think he might be most similar to the former duke of Hillrose..."

"Huh?"

“The duke of Hillrose. Eleanora’s father,” he repeated.

The worst possible name had come up.

You’re telling me that your brother is similar to Duke Hillrose, a man notorious for his terrible personality? You’re talking about Eleanora’s father, who is currently hiding his identity and living in the newest village of Dolkness County as their village head?

What a family they were: a father who was absolutely horrible both inside and out; a son, Ronald, who was completely shady both inside and out; and a daughter, Eleanora, who was utterly angelic both inside and out—it was a complete mystery as to how a perfect creature like my dear Eleanora could have been born from such a lineage.

“The best way to describe it would be to say that they’re both highly strategic. They consider their opponent’s personality along with other factors, and they analyze situations logically to execute plans that involve what their opponent would most hate. That’s why my brother isn’t very good with people like you or my mother, people who can instantly change direction at the drop of a hat.”

“So basically he’s got a nasty personality.”

“My brother’s personality is...” Patrick struggled to say something diplomatic. “...not something I would describe as good, but he’s kind to family.”

Even the way that Gilbert is a softie when it comes to family is exactly like the duke. This is the worst.

I made a face. “I don’t think I’ll be able to get along with your brother...”

“He seems to think the same. He apparently got into a fight with our father recently over whether he’d attend our wedding.”

“Your father is telling him to attend, and he doesn’t want to?”

“That’s what I heard.”

So he might’ve stormed out and left the mark because of that... Just how much does he hate me that he wouldn’t even attend our wedding? We’ve never even met before.

It seemed that I had no choice but to accept the fact that Gilbert just hated

the idea of me, a conclusion he'd probably come to after learning enough about me. It didn't seem like we'd get along anyway.

"I guess he won't be coming to our wedding, then..." I shrugged. "My parents aren't coming either, so..."

"I'm sorry. I'll visit Ashbatten on my own when the time is right. I'm sure my brother will understand if I'm patient with him."

It seems like it would be difficult to convince him of anything if he's stubborn to the point of leaving home over an argument about attending a wedding.

As for my family, I'd invited my parents, who lived in the Dolkness Estate in the Royal Capital, but they had immediately declined.

Hm, I feel like there's no point in having a wedding if people aren't even going to celebrate us... Wait, is there even a point to a wedding where we are being celebrated?

I'd attended a wedding just once in my previous life. It was the wedding of an older female relative of mine, and it was a rough experience.

It had been incredibly difficult to get to the venue by bus, and when I finally figured out the route, there ended up being so much time between when I got there and when the ceremony began that I was bored out of my mind.

I couldn't tell what the bride's father was saying in his speech because he was crying so much, and the groom's boss's speech dragged on for so long that none of it processed in my head. I was in high school at the time, and it was the first time I'd recognized that, by comparison at least, my principal was actually quite the skilled public speaker.

After the speeches, a group of the couple's friends from college had done an act. Despite their age, they sang and danced to a pop song that was trendy with people who were at least a decade younger. Some of them were slightly too drunk to manage the choreography and had stumbled through the performance.

Lastly, there'd been the wedding favor for the guests to take home as souvenirs. It was a plate with the married couple's faces printed on it. I truly

couldn't have cared less about their faces, so I didn't want it.

If marriage was the grave into which life retired, a wedding was the funeral for single life.

Why did I forget all this until now? I wondered. *Will Patrick and I replicate that hell?*

"Let's just cancel the wedding."

Patrick looked at me, confused. "Don't say that. I'll make sure that my brother attends."

"That's not why I want to cancel it. I think it's better if we just don't have a wedding, regardless of if your brother decides to attend."

That's right. Weddings cost money. Even when you take into consideration all of the presents and cash that a couple receives from their guests, it's never enough to balance out the cost of the wedding itself; you'd still be in the red.

I had always believed that a wedding would be wonderful if it were with Patrick, but what I realized now was that this was along the lines of thinking being poor would be fine as long as I was poor with the person I loved. The fact of the matter was that I would rather be rich than poor, and I would rather not have a wedding than have one.

"Where is this coming from?" Patrick asked.

"You don't have to have a wedding to get married. I do want to get married; I just don't want a wedding," I explained. "I'll have to speak in front of a bunch of people, and I'll be on edge because His Majesty will be in attendance, and I won't be able to eat spaghetti and meatballs or anything that stains while I'm wearing my wedding dress."

"I mean, we can't *not* have a ceremony for an aristocratic wedding, especially not for the head of a county..."

"What's more important, social decorum or me?!" I demanded. "If you care more about me, let's cancel the wedding! If you care more about decorum, then I'll fall to my knees and cling to your feet as I cry and beg you to not break

up with me!”

“I don’t like either of those options...” Patrick said with a weary sigh. “I guess I have to convince you that a wedding is a good idea.”

Convince me? That won’t be possible.

Patrick sat silently in thought for a moment before coming up with an argument in favor.

“Oh, that’s right. You were excited for the wedding cake, weren’t you?”

“Oooh, big cake?”

“That’s right, it will be a big cake.”

I want big cake. Big cake that I could just keep eating forever. A dream come true... Oh no, I almost fell for his trick. I know the inconvenient truth about the wedding cake!

“The wedding cake doesn’t exist!” I declared, pointing my finger at him in an accusatory manner.

“No, I’m pretty sure it exists...” he insisted, completely lost.

Silly Patrick. Let me explain the truth of how the world works to you.

“The wedding cake doesn’t exist because it gets cut up into pieces and served to guests, which means that big cake ceases to be. Unless the wedding cakes at aristocratic weddings are just for decor, and you don’t actually eat them?”

“Actually, yeah, they’re usually just decoration, and the wedding guests don’t eat that cake. Traditionally, the decor cake is usually cut up and distributed to people in the territory after the ceremony.”

“See!” I crowed triumphantly. “If I never get to eat it, then it’s the same as the cake not existing!”

“That’s an absurd argument. Fine, we’ll set aside some of that cake for you too.”

“Then that’s just a normal-sized slice of cake! That’s not a big cake!”

“Then you can eat the whole thing.”

“But then wouldn’t you feel bad for all the people in the county who are expecting cake, since it’s tradition?!”

I certainly couldn’t do something as horrible as commandeering a cake that was meant for my people.

Your privilege is showing, Patrick.

“Then we’ll have two!” Patrick suggested. He seemed like he was completely fed up with this entire conversation. “We’ll have one for distributing to others, and another one just for you. We’ll prepare two wedding cakes.”

Hm. That would make it so the wedding cake definitively exists. I see, so the cake was not, in fact, a lie.

I began to imagine the cake. It would be taller than me, completely smothered in whipped cream. I’d wander around it, fork in hand, wondering which tier I should start with...

“No, no,” I murmured, still half in my cake trance. “There’s no way I could eat all that by myself.”

“Pardon...?” I could sense Patrick was a bit irritated.

Sorry, I just can’t eat that much by myself. I’ll start out strong, but after like the fifth bite I’ll start to regret it.

This realization about the cake was already making me feel bad and slightly deflated when Patrick delivered the final blow.

“We’re having the wedding,” he said firmly. “We’ve already sent out the invitations, and the planning has been, up to now at least, going very smoothly.”

“I’m going to go back home,” I retorted.

I could tell that this argument was getting us both a bit too heated, so I activated the hidden move, Going Back to Your Own Place to Get Some Distance from Your Partner.

If we hold grudges over the wedding, it’ll definitely lead to future arguments.

The relative whose wedding I attended in my past life had divorced her

husband after two years of marriage, right after a terrible argument. The argument was related to their wedding—they hadn't been able to afford an outfit change as part of the ceremony, even though it was a traditional element of Japanese weddings.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason for their divorce. There were probably other factors too, like small differences in personality or values. However, it was definitely the critical blow to their image caused by the wedding that tipped the scales.

I couldn't understand why she'd have wanted to extend that hellish event even longer than it already was, but it was a cautionary tale to couples everywhere about wedding-based arguments.

I'll just cool my head for a bit. That's why going home is a good idea.

Just as I got up to start preparing my things, Patrick calmly asked, "Isn't this your home, Yumiella?"

"Oh."

That's right. This is my home.

Between this line of thought and the cake issue from earlier, I was starting to seem like someone who only said strange things. No one would want to listen to a weirdo like that.

I need to save face without admitting my mistake. Go into overdrive, brain! Come up with a home of mine that doesn't exist! Something difficult that'll defeat this gentleman who's trying to push me into an unwanted wedding... That's it!

"The moon!"

"Moon...?" Patrick echoed blankly.

"I came from the moon," I explained with a degree of confidence that the statement did not deserve. "I'll go back to the moon, where my real home is."

"There aren't any people on the moon..."

I looked out the window, and I was gratified to see that a full moon was coincidentally glimmering in the night sky.

“You can see the rabbit, can’t you?” I said, pointing to the moon. It was surprising, but it looked exactly the same as the moon I had known in my previous life.

“I don’t see a rabbit...”

“Maybe you see a crab instead?”

“I don’t see a crab either,” Patrick said, shaking his head as he stared at the full moon.

You just don’t have a sensibility for these things. I guess I don’t see a rabbit or a crab either, if we’re being honest.

“Well, I’ll be returning to the moon.”

“Calm down, Yumiella. You can’t go to the moon.”

“Are you saying that it would be impossible for *me* to do it?”

“No matter how skilled someone might be at flying, going to the moon is completely impossible, even for someone as powerful as you.”

That’s wrong, humans can go to the moon. There are people who’ve done it. Some people think there was a conspiracy behind Project Apollo, and that the whole moon landing was staged, but I believe in Commander Armstrong. A person with strong arms could never lie.

I wasn’t sure for exactly what reasons Patrick considered going to the moon impossible. It could be that his objections were scientific ones, maybe because he thought being in space for three days wasn’t feasible, or if it was for religious reasons, perhaps it was because he believed it was wrong to visit a place that god had hung up in the heavens. It was best to clear things up.

“In my previous life, there were actually multiple people who visited the moon.”

“No way...” Patrick seemed suitably awed.

“This world, this planet, is a sphere,” I explained, “and the moon rotates around it. So if you just physically fly high enough, you can absolutely get to the moon.”

“I have heard before that this world is spherical. When looking at ships coming in from a distance on the open sea, they say that the top of the ship appears first.”

There was no religion here that forbade a nongeocentric view of the world. I wasn't sure of the details, but there was at least a basic acknowledgment that the world was round based on the experiences of sailors.

I think this is the first time I've had a need to display scientific knowledge from my past life ever since I've reincarnated into this world. I thought I'd be able to utilize it more, but surprisingly, there haven't been very many opportunities. Until now.

“So I'll be returning to the moon,” I repeated.

“Wait, hold on. Aren't there any dangers on the way to the moon?”

I let the pause drag on for a while before I answered, “There aren't.”

“There definitely are, considering how long you took to answer!” Patrick eyed me suspiciously. “Not only that, but they must be big enough risks that even *you* consider them dangerous.”

I stood up.

“Hey, wait—” he implored.

I shook Patrick off as he tried to stop me, and I ran out of the room, my mind racing.

Darn, I've impulsively begun a trip to the moon. This kind of travel seems like something that ought to be meticulously planned. I guess I wouldn't ever actually go to the moon under any other normal circumstance, even if it's something I say I'd like to do one day, so I should just take this excuse and go to the moon.

My main problem was going to be the lack of oxygen in space, but...I expected that problem was going to work itself out. Somehow.

I think I've heard somewhere that the lack of oxygen in space is just an urban myth.

Summoning up my modern, scientific sensibilities, I pinned my hopes on there being oxygen in space, and I ran out of the estate and into the yard.

“Ryuu, are you awake?!” I called out. “I’m sorry for bothering you when it’s time for good boys to be asleep.”

Though good boys should’ve been asleep, Ryuu was a bit of a delinquent, so he appeared to be awake.

He’s my child, after all. He gets his habits of breaking rules and staying up from my DNA.

Ryuu flapped his wings in greeting. He understood that the matter at hand was urgent, and he was ready to start flying at once. My son was so smart that I could barely believe he was related to me.

“I’m going to the moon, so I want you to take me up part of the way,” I explained to him. “Go as high as you can, and then I’ll take it from there.”

As soon as I jumped onto his back, Ryuu let out a troubled howl, but he obediently launched himself into the air. It seemed that Ryuu was skeptical of me going to the moon as well. I could sense that he was thinking, “Can you really go to the moon? Will you be okay?”

Ryuu sped up with each flap of his wings, and we left the ground behind at an incredible speed.

Maybe we can reach the second cosmic velocity.

The second cosmic velocity was the escape velocity—in other words, the minimum speed required for an object to leave the earth’s gravitational force. This shouldn’t be confused with first cosmic velocity, also known as the orbital velocity, which would leave you orbiting the earth like an artificial satellite. If we went all the way up to the third cosmic velocity, we’d leave the solar system. This felt like a legitimate concern, so I hoped Ryuu wouldn’t go that fast. Also, I had no idea what the escape velocity was in kilometers per hour! However, Ryuu was essentially just serving as a booster in the first stage of my launch into space—I would be fine as long as he brought me up to a certain height. From there, I would jettison my dragon booster and engage my second booster...which I didn’t actually have.

I wonder if you can get to space with just one booster.

The atmosphere was becoming thinner as we approached the maximum height Ryuuk could handle.

I should start preparing for the booster drop, I thought, when I heard something behind me. It was a voice I shouldn't have been able to hear, and it made me flinch.

"How far up are you planning to go?!"

"What?! Patrick?!"

My boyfriend was following us through the air, flying with enough power to catch up to Ryuuk at top speed.

Even I couldn't fly the way that he was doing it. I could change direction midair and I was capable of decreasing my speed while falling, but outputting pure magical energy in order to fly like he was doing now was incredibly inefficient.

Flying was just as tiring as continuously casting *Black Hole* over and over.

Setting aside the uselessness of dark magic relative to the other elemental schools of power, there was only one kind of mage that could fly: a high-level wind mage. Even within a subgroup of the strongest wind mages, only a very few could actually fly...

An extremely high-level user of wind magic is a description that fits Patrick perfectly. He's been able to fly for a while, but he doesn't usually do it because he doesn't really like heights...

"Ryuuk, stop!" he yelled as he closed in on us.

"Ryuuk, don't stop!" I yelled.

I'm his parent that raised him, while Patrick is just my boyfriend, someone to whom he's not related by blood. It should be crystal clear who he's going to listen to...

Ryuuk did as Patrick said and began to slow his ascent.

Why, my child?

Fortunately, we were high up in the sky, even higher than the clouds, which meant this was as high as Ryuuk could take me anyway. If the atmosphere got any thinner, Patrick's wind magic wouldn't be as effective either.

"Urgh... I'm sorry, Ryuuk!" I said as I kicked off his back for momentum. Of course, it was a very light kick. There was no way I could kick my sweet, adorable Ryuuk with force. "Dropping first booster Ryuuk!"

The momentum from my jump propelled me to greater heights. I shot magical energy downwards at full force. This method was the most effective way that I'd found to gain height at this altitude, because the thin atmosphere made dragons' wings and wind magic much less effective.

Thanks to the elevation provided by Ryuuk to aid my leap into the sky, I was able to get a good amount of speed. I converted kinetic energy into potential energy as I continued to soar higher.

I was doing my best to be my own booster, but my speed was gradually declining.

Am I going to lose momentum...?

I looked down and saw Ryuuk and Patrick falling downwards below me. They'd likely be able to fly again after dropping down a certain distance.

As I moved ever upwards and they descended, the relative speed moving us apart from one another was immense, and Patrick and Ryuuk became smaller and smaller with each blink.

Sorry, but I'm going to the moon.

Perhaps this was an effect of surpassing level 99. No matter how much magical energy I shot out, I couldn't sense my mana levels decreasing. Still, my output wasn't enough to fight the gravitational pull of the planet, and I was beginning to slow down.

Will I make it in time? Come on, Yumiella Booster, you can do it...

It was then that I felt myself pull free from the gravitational force.

I tried to comment on how it was beautiful, but no sound came out as I

moved my mouth.

I guess there's no air in space after all. Of course there isn't.

If an ordinary human were to go out into space without special protective clothing, the difference between their body's internal pressure and the sudden lack of atmospheric pressure would cause them to inflate like a bag of chips would in the thin air at the top of a mountain, and this would ultimately kill them... Well, that's what I'd heard, anyway, but it seemed like this problem could just be dealt with through sheer willpower.

I was probably on the orbital path that satellites would use, which meant I hadn't managed to reach the second cosmic velocity, but I *had* reached the first.

Well, I guess the first cosmic velocity is the initial speed at zero elevation, so it would be a speed that would allow for you to get straight into orbit without speeding up partway, so I had obviously not reached the true speed needed to get to either cosmic velocity in my initial ascent; that's why I used the Yumiella Boost.

I looked at the planet below me. It was blue as I'd expected, but it was much more beautiful than the Earth I'd seen in photographs during my previous life.

Intellectually, I knew this would be the case, but it's so interesting to see that the continents are shaped differently. I never thought I'd end up in outer space in another world. I guess you really can't predict where you'll end up in life.

It was truly beautiful to behold. I could imagine staring at it forever without getting bored.

I tried to say, "I'm bored," but I'd forgotten there was no air, and I'd just uselessly flapped my lips again.

All right then, let's head back. Guess I can't get to the moon after all. I don't think I could hold my breath long enough to get to the moon and then back home. I'll have to practice holding my breath and try this again in the future.

I tried to say, "So, how do I get home?" I still hadn't learned my lesson about talking up here.

If I didn't get back to Earth, I'd continue orbiting the planet on this path for the rest of my life.

Actually, as someone over level 99, would I even be able to die from something as simple as a lack of oxygen? Maybe I'll just continue floating in space for all of eternity. Even if I want to die, I won't be able to...

I tried to say, "Yumiella decided to stop thinking about this." I knew it wouldn't work, but I really wanted to say it out loud.

Well, I guess I should just shoot magical energy upwards. If I tried outputting air instead, then it would freeze, and I wouldn't be able to go home.

All right then, let's begin with the descent of Yumiella, I announced in my head.

I threw out an upward burst of magical energy and propelled myself towards the ground. By using just a bit of my power, I was able to reenter the planet's gravitational force once more, and once I had done so, I felt myself being pulled towards the ground.

Oh, I kept looking down and forgot to look up at the moon. I'm sure if I turn around I'll see the moon at a size much larger than it appears from down on earth... Huh? What's that...?



I didn't have any time to confirm what I had just noticed on the surface of the moon before my speed of descent increased.

I guess I should focus on my reentry into the atmosphere, because it could be dangerous, I thought, shooting magical energy downwards to break my impending fall. *I get the impression that accidents happen during reentry more than during take-off. It might be more difficult to return, so I should be careful.*

As I began to head downwards, I was starting to feel my body warming up again.

Apparently, the red glow that appeared around objects when they entered the atmosphere wasn't from heat caused by friction with the atmosphere. I'd thought it was friction for the longest time, but the actual reason that spacecraft, meteorites, and mobile suits burned red was due to a phenomenon known as adiabatic compression. An object moving at a great enough speed would push the molecules in the air together, which generated heat, or so I'd heard...

Either way, while I was acting like everything was fine, I was actually at my limit. I wasn't able to properly slow down, and I was pretty sure I was about to crash-land on the ground.

It would be ridiculous if over half the population of this planet died because of a Colony Drop—no wait, a Yumiella Drop.

I continued falling as I did my best to decelerate.

It was only when I began to see rooftops that I realized I'd been focusing too hard on my speed and not enough on the location of my landing.

Oh, I won't decelerate in time. Actually, where am I? This doesn't look like Dolkness County.

From what I could see from my vantage point in the sky, it was quite the nice-looking city. It was smaller than the Royal Capital of Valschein, but much larger than Dolkness Village.

There should be way more uninhabited areas than inhabited ones in this world, but of course I'm managing to land in a city... I'm not sure if this is fortunate or not. At least I won't have to wander aimlessly in the wilderness.

I crashed into the unfamiliar roof of an unfamiliar house in an unfamiliar town, piercing through the unfamiliar ceiling and finally crashing to a stop in an unfamiliar room.

I lay there, blankly staring at the ruined ceiling, my limbs sprawled out across the destroyed furniture on which I'd landed.

I heard someone rushing up the stairs. Whoever lived here had probably heard me smashing through their roof and was coming to see what had happened.

The person that barged in was a gray-haired young man with an incredibly haggard expression on his face. He used the magical instrument in the room to create some light, and he inspected me for a moment before asking, "Who are you?"

Chapter 3: The Hidden Boss Crashes into the Neighboring Kingdom

“Who are you?” the gray-haired young man repeated. Presumably, he was a resident of the house into which I had so unceremoniously crashed.

“Don’t think about it too deeply...” I pasted on a winning smile. “Just pretend you’ve suddenly gained a younger sister.”

“So you must be in some kind of trouble.” The young man shook his head. “I have a younger brother, but I don’t have a younger sister, nor do I want one.”

I guess my plan didn’t work. I thought it was a genius plan, one that tapped into the psychology of men, since it’s a well-known fact that all men would be thrilled to suddenly gain a younger sister.

Judging from his tone, this person seemed to have an unusually guarded personality. A normal man would’ve been chanting, “Yay, I got a sister, she’s so cute” by now. Even though his disinterest in a surprise bonus sibling meant that the conversation was ultimately meaningless, I decided to continue it in order to buy myself time and think about what to do next.

First of all, how is he going to respond to this situation? He’ll probably make me pay to fix the roof and furniture, but he might also turn me in to the local guards. Also, where am I? Am I somewhere in Valschein? It would suck if I ended up in a different kingdom altogether. I’m a countess, so suddenly appearing in a foreign state could turn into a diplomatic crisis.

“So you don’t need a younger sister...” I replied as these various thoughts swirled in my mind. “Feel free to think of me as your older sister, then.”

The man sighed and ignored my statement. “Why were you on top of my roof?”

I groped for a lie. “I wasn’t specifically on *your* roof. I was walking around, going from rooftop to rooftop, when I suddenly ended up here. I don’t even know where I am.”

“That’s so dangerous... It’s a miracle that you don’t have any injuries. Well, allow me to aid you in orienting yourself. You must know of the bell near the vendors on the western end of the main thoroughfare. If you keep going west from there, and then turn right on the second street, this house is located along that alley... Does that make sense?” He hadn’t used any names to describe where we were—he couldn’t have expected that I had actually come down from out of the atmosphere and didn’t even know the name of the town we were in.

Even if he told me the name of the town, there’s a chance that I still won’t know what kingdom we’re in. It would also be incredibly suspicious to ask what kingdom this is, so I’d like to avoid that. I’ll try to get some information out of him as naturally as possible.

“Um, I’m sorry. It’s my first time in this area, so I didn’t really follow that.”

“I see. Which part of the Royal Capital are you more familiar with?”

The Royal Capital? Did he just say we’re in the Royal Capital? From what I could see from the sky, this isn’t the Royal Capital in Valschein.

That meant that this was the Royal Capital of a different kingdom. This was bad. It would be even worse if it was one of the kingdoms neighboring Valschein. Yumiella Dolkness was a name known to many even in the neighboring kingdoms, so the higher-ups of this place might start panicking if they knew I had suddenly appeared.

Honestly, I would prefer this to be a different continent altogether so they just go “Yumiella? Who’s that?” It would be harder to get home, though.

The worst-case scenario would be that this was the Kingdom of Lemlaesta. When we had visited Patrick’s home in the Ashbatten Mark, we had gotten into a little scuffle with their army.

“It’s my first time in the Royal Capital,” I said, being careful to keep my flustered thoughts from showing on my face. I wanted to keep gathering information. “I came from pretty far away.”

“Far away? You don’t mean you’ve come from outside of Lemlaesta, do you?”

“Of course not. I’ve never left this kingdom since the day I was born,” I fibbed

boldly.

Why is it always the worst-case scenario that comes true?

This was Lemlaesta after all. To top it off, we were right in the Royal Capital.

This is really bad. Maybe I should brute force my way back through the border in the dark of the night. If I keep running without taking breaks, I should be able to make it back to my home in Dolkness.

The man seemed to be unsure as to what he should do with me, the obviously suspicious stranger in his home. He stared at me silently, lost in thought.

If it comes to it, I can use that move where you karate chop someone on the back of their neck and make them unconscious, and then I can escape. I haven't done that move before, though, so I don't know how hard I should hit him. If I use too much force, I'll kill him; but if I don't use enough, he won't fall asleep. How does that move even work? You hit the back of the neck, so...maybe it's stimulating some nerves? Wouldn't that cause some negative side effects?

It wasn't like I *had* to render him unconscious to escape, so I decided to save that chop to the back of the neck for another time. I was too scared of what might happen if I failed.

As I pondered the various ways I could make my escape, a different voice rang out. It sounded like it was coming from outside the house.

"Are you all right?! There was a really loud noise!" It must be a neighbor coming by to check on the man after hearing me crash loudly through his roof.

I don't want too many people seeing me here. He's probably going to tell the neighbor that a strange person fell through the ceiling, and then they might report me to the guards and throw me into a jail cell.

I was curious about getting to experience wearing a black-and-white-striped prisoner outfit one day, but it probably wasn't good for a member of the Valschein nobility to be imprisoned by her home kingdom's potential enemy.

The gray-haired man let out a long-suffering sigh before whispering, "Don't move and stay quiet." He looked irritated as he turned and left the room.

I could hear his footsteps as he headed downstairs, the sound of a stubborn

door being forced open, and the man and his neighbor speaking.

“Oh, I’m glad you’re all right,” the neighbor said.

“I apologize for all the commotion in the middle of the night. I was carrying something heavy and I dropped it down the stairs.”

“I’m just glad to see you’re not hurt... But you shouldn’t be doing hard labor like that at night,” the neighbor’s voice scolded.

“I apologize. I’d like to properly make amends tomorrow.”

“No, no, there’s no need for anything like that. But what excellent manners for such a young man!”

“Even if it’s only for a short time, I’m still responsible for my uncle’s home while I’m here. I can’t be causing trouble for his neighbors.”



I decided to make my escape while the man and the neighbor were talking. I got ready to jump up through the hole in the ceiling and climb back onto the roof, but while doing so, I couldn't help but listen in on their conversation.

This guy's so affable that it's kind of scary. It's normal for people to change how they act depending on who they're talking to, but I don't know what happened to the high-strung, irritated young man I was interacting with just moments ago. If I only heard this conversation, he'd seem like a pleasant man and a model citizen. Not only that, but he lied to hide that I'm here. Why? What benefit does he gain from helping me?

Even setting aside the fact that he was concealing my presence for some reason, it didn't feel right to destroy someone's home and then just flee. I could escape anytime I wanted to. For now, I wanted to stay and apologize to him from the bottom of my heart.

It seemed like everything with the neighbor was going to be fine. They were speaking in whispers, perhaps so as not to disturb the others in the neighborhood. Their conversation probably wasn't audible to anyone else.

"It's fine, it's fine. Just let me know if you need anything," the neighbor said.

"I truly appreciate your concern, thank you. Good night."

"Good night. All there is to do when it's dark is sleep. Make sure you rest too, buddy."

The door shut, the neighbor left, and the young man sucked his teeth.

Wow... What was that innocent act with the neighbor? I'm sure that neighbor would start to distrust people if he knew that the seemingly pleasant young man he'd just spoken to immediately sucked his teeth like that the minute they left.

I wanted to apologize, but I was starting to feel a little afraid. It was a bit embarrassing to admit this, but I was someone who tended to cope with serious situations by goofing off. Whenever I thought of doing something off-the-wall, this thought would be followed up with another about how it would probably be better if I didn't do whatever weird thing my brain had come up with, but I always found myself doing it anyway.

Even just now, I was thinking about how apologizing with your entire body prone on the ground might be considered a rank above groveling on your knees, but I wondered if I could take that even further and do a handstand, which would therefore be the highest form of showing one's respect. That was today's ridiculous thought appearing in my mind.

If I were operating as usual, I probably would have just done the handstand apology. I would've positioned myself while I was still waiting for him to come back, so that he would return to me already doing a handstand. But in the end, I decided that I shouldn't do that today and that I should maybe act serious for once.

Though I found this young man to be terrifying, I wasn't paralyzed with fear or anything like that. I knew that if it came to a fistfight, I would definitely win—that confidence kept me from being nervous in most situations.

I'm not sure why, but my instincts—which are famous for being incredibly off—are telling me that I can't let him think I'm a weirdo, despite the fact that he's a stranger from the neighboring kingdom that I'll probably never see again after this.

I could hear him making his way upstairs. The way that his footsteps resonated made it clear that he was moving at speed.

The door opened quickly but quietly. For a split second as he stood in the doorway, the gray-haired man almost looked like Patrick, but when he sucked his teeth again, looking at me, the resemblance faded at once. He appeared to be irritated that I was still here. I would've expected him to be relieved that I hadn't escaped, but his teeth-sucking was definitely in response to seeing me.

In ordinary circumstances, you'd think that he'd want to make me pay for everything I destroyed, but he seems like he would actually prefer it if I just disappeared.

"You're still here?" he asked, voicing the obvious.

"I'm sorry, I wanted to talk about paying for everything I destroyed..."

"There's no need for that. What you can do for me is to leave at once."

“I can’t just leave without paying you back...”

“You can, in fact. Leave and don’t ever return.”

*He’s not even going to yell at me for breaking so many things in his home?
Things are suspiciously working out in my favor.*

There was no way that he was just that altruistic of a person, so there had to be an ulterior motive, but...I wasn’t interested in investigating what it was.

I guess I’ll just make my escape before he changes his mind.

I bowed deeply to him—no groveling on my knees or apologizing with a handstand.

“I’m truly sorry for the trouble I’ve caused. I’ll be taking my leave, then.”

I straightened back up and started making my way to the door. I tried to slip past him, but he blocked the doorway with his arm.

“Wait, do you have somewhere to go?”

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted, projecting what I hoped was an air of confidence. “Whatever will be, will be.”

“So you don’t...” He sighed. “It would be annoying if you got mixed up in some accident because you were walking around by yourself at night. Let’s see... Just for tonight, I’ll allow you to stay here.”

“Thank you...?”

Why is he suddenly so concerned for my well-being? I thought. I was confused, but I thanked him anyway.

His actions weren’t very consistent. First he hid my existence, then he pressured me to leave while refusing any payment for damages, and then he suddenly decided I should stay the night because he was worried I’d run into danger. Until he invited me to stay, I’d thought he was treating me like some bad omen that would only cause him trouble—that maybe he thought I was someone on the run from a mysterious organization, or something complicated like that.

No one would enjoy getting caught up in some stranger’s potentially

dangerous drama. I'd thought that was why he had hidden the fact that I was here before trying to rush me out. I'd assumed he wanted me to disappear with as little fuss as possible and have nothing to do with me ever again, which was why he didn't want me to pay for the roof and the furniture I'd broken.

My theory worked for everything he'd done up to his very last offer, when he suddenly became worried about me walking around at night. I had thought that he'd wanted me out of here so badly that he'd lied to his neighbor and given up on collecting funds for what would surely be expensive repairs. I had tried to leave without incident, and he should've just let me go.

I don't understand. What kind of person is this guy?

Though I was curious, it would be a huge problem if he figured out who I was, so I decided to not dig too deeply into it.

It would probably be for the best if I just fled back to my home kingdom right away, but after traveling to space, I was a little tired. Being able to rest here would be nice.

"I'll be in your care, then," I agreed. "As for our discussion earlier..."

"About repaying me? Like I said, don't worry about it," he said, waving my offer away once again.

I still think I should pay for it. I'm sure patching up a Yumiella-sized hole in the ceiling isn't an easy job. There's also the furniture. Some items just got knocked down, but the shelf I used as a landing pad is completely destroyed. I'm sure if you add up all the little things like that, it'll be quite the sum.

Though I was a very wealthy woman, I'd headed to the moon without any specific plans, so I didn't have much money on me. I did have a little pocket change, but this was the money I always kept on me in case I wanted to buy a little snack while I was out. It was just a few silver and bronze pieces—nowhere near what it would cost to repair and replace everything.

It was embarrassing that I didn't actually have the ability to pay him back, even though I was the one insisting that I wanted to do so. He probably wouldn't be too happy if I said I'd come back another day to repay him, nor did I

want to do something as risky as sneaking across the border more than once. I could ask a merchant who traveled between the kingdoms to serve as an intermediary...but that also sounded dangerous.

“I don’t actually have money on me right now...” I admitted.

“You really don’t listen, do you? I’ve said countless times that I don’t want any money from you.”

I turned my attention to my body and took a mental inventory of what I was wearing to see if I had anything that I could exchange for money.

On my left hand was a ring filled with wind-type magical energy. It was a precious gift from Patrick, and it was proof of our engagement. There was no way I could sell it.

I continued looking, but I couldn’t find anything else. It was the first time in my life that I wished I was the kind of countess who wore jewels on a regular basis.

I just don’t usually have anything valuable on me most of the time... Oh, wait, I do! This is worth money, and I’d be okay with selling it. I don’t really want to get rid of it, but I don’t really have a choice. It’s too bad that this is the backup, because I don’t have a second backup for this one.

I pulled out the level-assessment crystal. I carried it with me so I could assess my level whenever I wanted to.

“I won’t be satisfied if I don’t repay you, so please accept this instead,” I said, handing him the crystal. “The money you get from selling this should cover at least the cost of repairing the roof.”

The young man blinked in confusion. “Where were you hiding that...? Where did you pull it from?”

“Don’t worry about the details,” I said.

“Also, what is this...?”

“It’s a magical instrument that can assess your level. Most shops dealing in magical instruments should know its value, and they’ll buy it off of you,” I explained, assuming that a layman wouldn’t be able to immediately identify the

crystal for what it was, but he shook his head because I'd misunderstood his question.

"I know what it is. It's a level-assessment crystal. What I meant was: why are you walking around with this? Do you have some bizarre obsession with your level...?" His eyes widened. "And that black hair of yours... Could it be that you're...?!"

Uh-oh. Something completely unexpected is about to reveal my identity.

Since he hadn't said anything about my black hair until now, I thought that as long as I didn't have any other slipups, he wouldn't realize who I was. I never thought that bringing out a magical instrument as compensation for payment would reveal my identity.

"Um, well..." As I wondered how I was going to salvage this situation, I mindlessly rolled the crystal around in my hands.

"13...?" the man wondered aloud.

I wasn't sure what number it was that he had suddenly brought up, but a second later, it clicked—the magical instrument had activated while I was touching it, and it was displaying the last two digits of my level for the world to see.

There's only one way to make it seem like I'm not Yumiella here.

"Oh, this?" I said. "Your level appears on the crystal if you touch it like this. I'm level 13. Pretty high, right?"

"It's impressive for a girl your age to be level 13..." He nodded. "I see, so you're not..."

The Yumiella he'd heard of would surely have vociferously defended the fact that she was level 99, but I held back from doing so. If anyone who knew me well had heard what I'd just so casually said, they'd probably think I was a fake.

Though, if his reaction was like "13 is so weak LMAO," then I might've lost all sense of reason. I'm so glad that didn't happen.

Though he muttered something about how he must be mistaken, the gray-haired man still didn't seem satisfied. I decided to push forwards and really

hammer home the message that there was no way that I could be Yumiella.

“Oh brother, you must’ve thought I was Countess Dolkness. It’s okay, it happens pretty often. Especially with my hair color.”

“I apologize. It must feel terrible to be compared to *that*.”

“It’s not that bad... I feel bad tricking people into thinking I’m someone so incredible.”

“Incredible?” he echoed. “Don’t you mean dangerous? From what I’ve heard, Yumiella Dolkness isn’t right in the head. She was born and raised in a dungeon, she only thinks about fighting, and she has an evil pet dragon... The more I hear about her, the crazier she sounds.”

I struggled to keep my expression neutral.

Huh? Am I that horrible of a person? What the heck have the people in neighboring kingdoms been saying about me?

It was a lie that I was born in a dungeon, but I supposed that saying I was “raised” in one wasn’t too far off from the truth, and it wasn’t wrong that I thought about fighting a lot. The main inaccuracy was that Ryuu’s status points were all thrown into being adorable, and he didn’t have a single ounce of evil in him.

Overall, it seems like everything about me has been a bit exaggerated.

“B-But I’ve heard she’s working hard as the lord of her county,” I said, striving to sound casual. “I don’t think she’s as bad as she’s rumored to be.”

“The people around her must be the ones with all the skills. She probably hasn’t done anything all that impressive on her own. I’m not so foolish that I would just believe everything I hear. There are some ridiculous stories about her too, like one about a second Yumiella appearing, or that she’s actually from a different world, and other far-fetched things like that.”

It’s true that there was another Yumiella, but now 2 has gone back to her world. It’s also true that I’m from a different world, or at least my soul is. It’s also true that the people around me help me with my work as a lord. It’s all true.

Upon realizing that even the “far-fetched” rumors about me were true, I was

speechless. It was better to have baseless rumors make people think poorly of me for no reason than to have ridiculous rumors that turned out to be true.

As I, the dangerous person for whom no one would ever want to be mistaken, stood there silently, the man before me abruptly changed the subject.

“Also, don’t call me ‘brother.’ I’m not your brother.”

“I’m sorry. What should I call you, then?”

“Gilbert is fine.”

Gilbert seemed to be touchy about matters related to siblings.

Wait, Gilbert...? I feel like I’ve heard that name before. I began searching through the memory files in my brain, filtering out the people close to me and people from the Kingdom of Valschein. *He’s not a member of the royal family of Lemlaesta, and I don’t know most of the aristocrats here. I definitely don’t know any regular citizens here either... I guess I was just imagining things.*

Since he’d given me his name, now I had to give him mine. I clearly could not admit to being named Yumiella, so I had to come up with an alias. The first one that came to mind was someone close to me.

“Very well, Gilbert. I’m...Eleanora.”

“I didn’t ask for your name.”

This guy is so prickly. Did I do something to upset him? ...Yes. I did, I destroyed his home. I guess I can forgive some prickliness because it honestly wouldn’t be surprising for him to just yell at me.

I wasn’t confident that I’d be able to respond to the name Eleanora, so it was actually good that he seemed to be planning on referring to me as “you.”

Well, no matter how he was planning on addressing me, I needed to get things back on track. “I apologize once again for making a mess of your house. Going back to our earlier discussion, please use this crystal to fund the repairs.”

“I’ve said that I don’t need you to pay for the roof. After tonight, I just want you to leave, and don’t ever come by again.” Gilbert was stubborn about not accepting payment, but I really wanted him to take it.

Maybe I should just leave the crystal here when I head out.

“Come with me,” he said, turning away. I silently followed him out of the room I’d trashed and down the hallway. He stopped in front of the room next door. “This is...a guest room. It’s clean, so use it as you’d like.”

“Thank you very much.”

Why does he already have a room ready? Does he frequently have guests over? I feel like this house is sort of weird too. There’s something suspicious about it.

Gilbert opened the door and urged me inside. I did as instructed and stepped over the threshold, and he suddenly shut the door behind me.

“You better leave in the morning,” he said through the door, and I heard him walk away before I could respond. I still couldn’t tell if he was a kind or strict person.

I scanned the room. There was a bed made up with clean sheets, a table with one chair, and thick curtains. There was nothing else in the room, and it was unnaturally empty. It felt less lived-in than a room in a business hotel.

Most people don’t have a room like this in their house, do they?

This room seemed like it only anticipated someone going to bed and waking up in it. I couldn’t tell what kind of person would use this room regularly, which only deepened the mystery of this house.

It was a bit frightening to dig too deep into things right now, so I decided to rest instead.

I sat on the bed and let out a sigh. Between wondering about this strange house and worrying about having to cross the border tomorrow, there were too many things on my mind, and I didn’t feel like I’d be able to sleep.

Even if I can’t sleep, I should lie down and rest my body, I thought. I lay down on the bed, and...

“Mnn... It’s morning?”

It was now morning, and I had totally fallen asleep. I’d slept like a log in a

suspicious stranger's house, in a foreign kingdom that wasn't on great terms with mine.

I hadn't shut the curtains, so the sun was shining right in my face. I sat up and stretched.

All right, time for me to get going. I need to get back to Dolkness County and report that I wasn't able to reach the moon, and that we'll be having the wedding after all... No, I don't want that. I don't want to go back home. I don't mind the idea of having the wedding because my resolve was worn down, but it's embarrassing that I declared I was going to the moon and then didn't actually do it.

In the Cold War, the side that couldn't get to the moon lost, so giving up on my trip to the lunar surface was basically the same thing as admitting defeat. Even if I arrived back at home today and told everyone that I went to the moon, no one would believe me because I had just left last night. At the very least, I wanted to wait to go home till after three days had passed.

Time for Operation Prince Ishitsukuri.

In the Japanese folktale "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," five noblemen asked for Princess Kaguya's hand in marriage. As she didn't care to marry them, she gave them each an impossible task to accomplish. Prince Ishitsukuri, one of the suitors, was told to bring her the Buddha's stone begging bowl, but instead of traveling all the way to Tianzhu where it was located, he hid out in the countryside for three years before reappearing before the princess with a random bowl.

They found out that he lied about the bowl, but I wanted to highlight the part of the story where he waited three years to return. In order to make it seem like he'd actually traveled to Tianzhu, he hid out for three years—similarly, I wanted to wait three days before going home to make everyone think that I'd actually gone to the moon.

If I returned to wait in Valschein, word might reach Patrick that I was holed up somewhere. On the other hand, it was probably dangerous to stay in Lemlaesta and go to an inn somewhere around here.

Isn't there a kind person out there who would just give me a place to sleep and

hide me from others?

As if in response to my thoughts, I heard footsteps headed my way. They surely belonged to a kind person who would provide me shelter.

The first knock had barely sounded when I opened the door, and just as I expected, Gilbert was standing there. It was only morning, but he already seemed exhausted.

“Get up already and—”

I cut him off with a chipper “Good morning.”

“You’re awake. Hurry up and leave already.”

“I have a favor to ask you,” I said. “Would it be possible for me to stay for three days? I don’t need anything else, just the room.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The truth is, I ran away from home, and it just wouldn’t look good for me to return so soon.”

“Why should I help you with that? I could just turn you in to the guards instead.”

That gave me exactly the opening I needed. “I wonder who would really be in trouble if the authorities were to end up snooping around this particular house...”

I felt the atmosphere in the room instantly change.

I mean, I would also be in big trouble if the Kingdom of Lemlaesta found out I was here, but all of the evidence points to him being in some kind of special situation too.

I’d been thinking about the reasons that he refused any payment, told me to leave right away, and hid me from his neighbor. I kept thinking it had to do with me, but if I instead assumed that Gilbert himself was caught up in something, it all made sense. He likely had some reason for not wanting to stand out too much.

He didn’t want to attract notice, which was why he wanted me to disappear,

why he faked being a pleasant man to that neighbor, and why he wanted to avoid sending a woman out alone late at night. I thought I'd had only about a twenty percent chance of being right, but it looked like I'd hit the jackpot.

Gilbert's gaze sharpened into a glare, and he seemed to be bracing himself. He didn't have any weapons on him, but he took a stance that I could tell would allow him to restrain me if necessary. I wasn't very versed in those kinds of martial arts, but it was similar to how Patrick braced himself around me sometimes, so I recognized it right away.

"What do you know?" he asked flatly, his guard completely up.

"I don't know anything," I admitted. "All I know is that you don't want to attract attention."

"You said you ran away from home? Even if that's the truth, you're clearly not running from a normal family situation. You're the one who would be in trouble if someone came here to investigate. Just leave."

"The truth is, I *would* be in trouble if you called the guards over, but the same goes for you, right? The fact that you're trying to convince me to leave proves that."

I decided to be honest about the fact that I was in a special situation myself. I didn't want to threaten him—I just wanted to make it clear that we both had our own reasons for wanting to lay low. I wanted to establish that things wouldn't end well if either of us tried to get rid of the other.

Gilbert moved his right hand into a slightly different position and loosened the muscles in his left shoulder. He was settling into a stance to throw a backfist. I'd learned about such things when Patrick was teaching me the basics of hand-to-hand combat. I didn't want him to think I was knowledgeable about fighting, though, so I pretended to not notice.

"What do you want from me?" he finally asked.

"Just what I said earlier. I just want to stay for three days, that's all."

"I'll also admit to the fact that I have some things that I would prefer to remain unknown. I need you to stay quiet, and while I'd rather you left as soon as possible... Well, dead men tell no tales, nor do they have to return to their

homes.”

Wow, a death threat. I guess whatever he’s dealing with is much bigger than I thought. Still... If he really wanted to kill me, he would’ve just done it already instead of threatening me. I feel like this guy is especially strict about following those kinds of rules in combat.

The fact that Gilbert had threatened me verbally probably meant that he had no intention of actually harming me. It would be strange if I didn’t react at all, though, so I pulled out my incredible acting skills to appear scared.

“Oh no, I’m so scared,” I said woodenly.

“Are you mocking me?” he said and sucked his teeth loudly.

He’d probably be just as annoyed if I didn’t react at all, wouldn’t he?

I felt like I was pretty close to securing lodging. If my being here could benefit him somehow that would be great, but the thing he wanted most was for me to leave... I decided to try bringing up the disadvantages of me leaving.

“If I were to leave as you’re asking me to, I might just leak information about you to someone else. It would be best to keep me here in order to keep such information from spreading.”

“That’s a fallacious argument. Even if you stayed here for a few days, you would eventually leave. Nothing would change.”

“How I feel would change,” I pointed out. “If I were able to stay here for just three days, I’d leave here feeling quite cheerful.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, I’m simply stating the fact that anyone wouldn’t feel too great about being kicked out. It’s just human psychology.”

“So you’re saying that after destroying my roof, *you* would feel bad if I were to kick you out?”

“Oh, well, um...” He had me there, but I pressed on. “I intend on paying for the damages, so... Oh, but I’m not saying that money solves everything... I’m sorry.”

I admit that all the destruction I caused is fully my fault. I suppose that if you add on the fact that I came crashing in from the sky, I'm basically breaking and entering, and now I'm trying to steal lodging from him.

Not satisfied with just destroying his home, I was now threatening him for a place to stay. These were truly the acts of a heinous criminal. There was no way for me to negotiate a deal benefiting us both when I had come to the bargaining table already branded as an outlaw. Truthfully, I was a bit embarrassed about having tried to act like some kind of negotiator in the first place.

Now that I recalled that I was the perpetrator here, I decided to just give up and leave. I'd get out of the city first, and then I could decide whether I wanted to go straight home or kill time somewhere else.

"My deepest apologies, I'll leave right away. I won't tell anyone else about you or the fact that I was here, so you have nothing to worry about. It's better if I keep my distance moving forwards, right? If possible, I'd like you to keep quiet about me as well. I'll be leaving the Royal Capital soon, though, so if someone asks, you can just tell them I was here."

There's nothing else for me to do here. I just need to apologize and get out. Okay then, I can tell general directions from the sun's position, so I can use that to return to Valschein. Once I've crossed the border, it won't matter if the people around me know who I am.

I bowed deeply to Gilbert before slipping past him and leaving the room. I headed down the stairs, and I was pleased to see that they led right to the entryway. I reached for the door.

"Hold on, Eleanora."

"What? Lady Eleanora is here?" When the voice behind me spoke the name of my dear friend, I couldn't help but look around for her.

There's no way Eleanora would be somewhere like this... Oh, right. That was the fake name I gave him. I don't think I can bluff my way out of this one. I guess it's better than him calling me Yumiella and me responding, "Yes, what is it?"

Since I'd already admitted to being in a difficult situation, I didn't think it

would be too big a deal for him to find out that I'd given him a fake name. I was on my way out anyway.

Of course Gilbert had realized that my name wasn't actually Eleanora, and he seemed exasperated as he observed, "You seem pretty sharp and you have good instincts, but you're a terrible actor."

"That seems to be the case," I admitted.

"You could've just forgotten about the roof and kept pushing to stay here," he pointed out.

"I can't be that much of a villain."

"If only *that* idiot were possessed with this kind of conscience and intelligence..." he muttered with a heavy sigh.

"That idiot" seemed to be referring to a person who lacked a conscience and wasn't very smart. I gathered that he didn't much like this person.

He refocused his attention on me. "Where are you headed? Last night you said you didn't have anywhere to go, but you must be headed in some direction, right?"

"Um... I'm leaving the Royal Capital and heading east."

"By east, do you mean towards Tytenia?" he asked, referring to some region I didn't know. It was probably somewhere within Lemlaesta.

I was actually headed farther east, towards the Kingdom of Valschein, but adding on too many lies would make me suspicious. It seemed best to share what was basically the truth, with some details omitted.

"Farther east. Right around where the Ashbatten Mark is."

"You shouldn't go there..." Gilbert said immediately. He was clearly reacting to the idea that I might be headed towards the border.

It's not like a war is going to break out soon or anything... Ashbatten is pretty peaceful, but maybe the area of Lemlaesta around the border isn't very safe.

I would have to lie outright if he asked for details, since I was indeed planning to cross the border, so it seemed like it was definitely time to make a quick exit.

I reached for the doorknob again.

“Wait,” he said, stopping me once more. He walked up close to me, and he tried to get past me in the narrow space. I stepped aside to let him through, and he grabbed the door, continuing to speak while he faced away from me. “I’ll allow you to stay here. You can stay in the same room and use the things in this house freely. You can have whatever food you’d like as well.”

What’s with the sudden change of heart?

Before I could ask any follow-up questions, he said, “I’ll be out for a bit,” and then left, shutting the door behind him. I stood in the entryway for a short while, staring at the door, completely frozen.



After recovering from the acute shock of Gilbert’s abrupt departure, I returned to the room he’d instructed me to use, but I was bored out of my mind. I couldn’t stay in this room with nothing to do for three days. As I stared out the window, thoughts of Patrick came to mind.

He’s probably worried about me. Still, if I go home now and say I couldn’t get to the moon, he’ll probably be seriously upset with me, and then he’ll force me to agree to holding the wedding celebration as planned.

I needed to wait to go home for long enough that Patrick would get sad and think, “I should’ve just listened to Yumiella and agreed to cancel the wedding. I never wanted this to happen. Also, I should stop complaining about the weird things she buys. Also, I should record some clips of my soothing voice guiding her to sleep and give them to her as a gift.” Time was necessary for him to reflect on his actions.

Thinking back on it, my original goal hadn’t actually been to go to the moon. Since we had been arguing about the wedding, I had wanted both of us to have a chance to cool down. That’s why I’d said I would go home, but instead, I’d ended up breaking through the atmosphere and crashing into the Royal Capital of a neighboring kingdom.

That’s right, not only does Patrick need time to consider his actions, I ought to cool my head as well.

I needed to think about things calmly. Getting lost in thought in a quiet place like this could help me accept a different point of view.

I brought up some pretty unreasonable arguments for why we should cancel the wedding. I said I couldn't eat foods like spaghetti while wearing my wedding dress, but all I have to do is not eat it. This world doesn't have spaghetti anyway.

My other reasons for being reluctant are more understandable: I don't want to appear in front of a bunch of other people, and I don't want to see the king because he'll stress me out so much on my big day. These concerns have to do with how I feel. You could say I'm just being selfish, but is that really the case?

A wedding ought to be a celebration for both members of the couple getting married, so if the bride didn't want to have the wedding, it should be canceled immediately. However, if Patrick, the groom, wanted the wedding, then perhaps a half wedding should be held.

What would a half wedding even look like? You'd only have one member of the couple, which in this case would be Patrick. Half the relatives would be there, so only the members of the Ashbatten family would participate. We'd only have half the guests as well, and dividing by quality instead of quantity, we could have just the king and queen participate. You only get half the priest too. Since a priest is the middleman between gods and humans, you'd have to settle on just the god part or the human part... Let's go with the god; that's why we keep Lemn around.

This hypothetical celebration was starting to sound like a house party hosted by the Ashbattens, to which the king and queen were invited, along with the god of darkness, Lemn. Since this was meant to be the groom's half wedding, this strange gathering of people would then be celebrated only by the men of Dolkness County.

Hm, that sounds pretty good. I guess I won't be participating, so it doesn't really matter what I think about it, though.

Because I was bored out of my mind, I was coming up with such cool ideas for compromise, even though I knew that Patrick would never agree to them.

Thinking about how to avoid the wedding is just going to make me sad. All right then, time to explore around the house.

Gilbert had said I was free to use whatever I wanted in the house, which meant I could legally snoop around.

I was a bit excited, like when I got to stay at a hotel and go through all the various drawers. It was also fun to get confused by trying to figure out how the alarm clocks and safes worked.

Let's begin, then, I thought. I jumped out of bed, where I'd been lying around having all of my gloomy wedding thoughts, and then quietly stepped out of the room. Since the house was deserted and I wasn't doing anything wrong, there was no reason for me to stay quiet, but it was part of the fun.

I walked down the hall and first checked the room next to mine. I considered the possibility of it being locked, and since I didn't want to accidentally break the lock, I turned the doorknob with extra gentleness.

It opened easily, and I saw a destroyed room. Judging by the shape and color of the splintered pieces, the furniture hadn't been that different from what was in the room I was staying in prior to its total obliteration.

Would a regular house have this many business-hotelesque guest rooms? Also, what's with all this destruction here? Does some unfettered samurai stay here regularly or something?

It wasn't just the furniture that was destroyed. There was also a hole in the ceiling, and I had a clear view of the blue sky above us...

"Oh, this is where I landed."

I knew that I'd been led to a room adjacent to this one, but I had thought it was on the other side of me.

Your sense of direction just gets messed up in an unfamiliar house, I assured myself.

I, the unfettered guest, slowly closed the door. Just as I heard the quiet sound of the door latching shut, a louder sound echoed from farther away. It was the sound of the door in the entryway.

Maybe it's a trick house, like those places where closing a drawer opens something somewhere else, or...

"He's home," I said, finishing my thought out loud. It was definitely the latter.

Roughly an hour had passed since Gilbert had departed. Because I'd spent so much time lost in thought, I had barely had a chance to explore the house. I scampered back to my room and sat in the chair, acting like I'd never even thought of leaving my little room. All I had to do was stare out the window, and my ruse was complete.

I heard his footsteps head upstairs at once. Soon after the sound of his ascent, there was a knock on my door.

"Yes, come in."

"You're still here..." he observed, cracking open the door. "I was hoping you'd be gone."

"I'm planning to stay for three whole days. I'll be in your care."

Gilbert sighed, muttering something about me being annoying. Unlike his previous attitude, though, it seemed more like a "guess it can't be helped" statement, rather than one of genuine annoyance. I could tell, because it had a similar tone to the kinds of comments that Patrick often made.

"Did you eat? I assume you haven't had anything since last night."

"I haven't. I'll take some food."

"We have some preserved things stocked, so take whatever you want."

It didn't seem like there was anyone else here, nor did Gilbert seem like the type to cook for himself. Perhaps he was just eating food from the pantry.

In this world, most foods that were preserved or easy to eat were disgusting, so I was starting to feel a little worried about his diet.

All right then, why don't I repay him by preparing him a home-cooked meal?

"If you'd like, I can make us something. Cooking for two isn't too different from cooking for one."

"Don't do anything unnecessary. I don't plan on eating anything prepared by

someone else, and it would just be troublesome if you caused a fire.”

I'm pretty good at cooking now... What a waste.

The last time I cooked, it had turned into a huge commotion because people thought that I'd created some poison gas, but I'd grown since then. I was banned from the kitchen at the estate, so I hadn't had any opportunities to cook again, but I knew that I would be able to make delicious dishes now. (I had no evidence to support this.)

Also, a fire...? I wouldn't be making anything that crazy. I'm pretty sure that those clumsy main characters who burn everything they cook to a crisp don't exist IRL.

Perhaps he felt he'd been a bit harsh with me, because he averted his gaze from mine and added, “Also, we only have cooking utensils for outdoor use.”

Outdoor cooking utensils? Why is that all he has?

It didn't seem like he would be happy if I kept pushing for this, so I decided to give up on cooking.

Darn, I was hoping to use it as something to kill time with... I guess I should just go sightseeing or something.

“Understood. I have something else I'd like to ask. Do you have any issues with me going out?”

“What?” He seemed genuinely confused. “I thought you were going to stay inside for three days.”

“I just wanted to take a look around, I'd be back right away. You know, um, it's my first time in the Royal Capital, so...”

“Aren't you a runaway?”

“No one is searching for me here. I'm not sure if anyone's even looking for me at all.”

Hm... I wouldn't want Patrick and the others to be searching for me too desperately, but I'd also feel disappointed if they weren't at least a little worried about me. No one ever thinks I could be in danger, but I could see them looking for me because they don't want me to cause trouble for other people.

Gilbert, the person who I was currently troubling, thought silently for a moment.

“There’s no problem. It’s common for a variety of people to go in and out of this house. The fact that you’re a stranger wouldn’t make you stand out, but...” As Gilbert spoke, his gaze turned to my head.

Oh, right, my black hair would make me stand out.

Unlike the Kingdom of Valschein, Lemlaesta didn’t have any legends of black-haired Demon Lords to inspire discrimination. Still, it was rare to have black hair, so I would still end up drawing attention to myself.

“I guess I would stand out after all,” I admitted.

“Of course. Especially here in the Royal Capital. If you’re unlucky, someone might report you to a guard.”

Huh? Even people in Valschein wouldn’t report someone for having black hair. I wonder if there is a different legend of the Demon Lord in Lemlaesta.

“I would be reported?”

“People in the Royal Capital are really sensitive to rumors. They’d mistake you for Yumiella Dolkness.”

Oh, that’s what he meant. Sorry, Demon Lord. This has nothing to do with your evildoings. So it’s my fault. If they think I’m me, they’ll report me. Of course they would, after seeing someone who’s the same gender, age, and hair color as the neighboring kingdom’s ultimate weapon.

“I guess there isn’t much I can do about people mistaking me for that crazy countess...”

Come on, look at the way I’m naturally slipping in the fact that I’m not Yumiella. I’m an actor after all.

Gilbert was perhaps moved by my portrayal of a wistful, dainty maiden, because his tone suddenly softened. “I don’t think you’re that Yumiella girl. Don’t get so upset. You’ve never tried to burn Lemlaesta to the ground, have you?”

Um, I’m not upset. I’m confused. I thought I was acting sad, like this was my

poor self's destiny... Also, the real Yumiella has never tried to burn Lemlaesta to the ground either.

"You'll probably be fine if you wear a hat," he continued. "I think I have just the thing." He motioned for me to follow him, and we headed downstairs.

Would a hat of his fit me? It's hard to hide your hair in men's hats.

Though I was slightly worried, I followed him obediently enough, and we arrived at a room near the entryway on the first floor.

Gilbert stopped, seeming to consider for a moment before he said, "This is a private room, so you—"

"I understand. I'll wait over there," I said before he could finish. I retreated a little down the hallway and kept my distance. It would be bad if I got too curious so that he refused to lend me the hat.

Gilbert pulled out a key from his pocket and entered the secret room.

I guess he said I could use the stuff here freely because the important stuff is behind a locked door. Don't people just accidentally sometimes break locks, though? No, stop that line of thought at once! That was close... I almost showed my Yumiella side for a moment. Right now, I'm not Yumiella. I couldn't do something barbaric like destroying the lock on a door, which is a thing Yumiella totally would do.

Gilbert exited the room soon after, locking the door behind him. Assuming it was fine for me to come closer, I did so, and that's when I got a good look at the hat in his hand. It was a white hat with a wide brim...

It was very clearly a woman's hat.

"Oh, so that's what you meant by private... No, I'm not judging you. You're free to wear whatever you like."

People had different kinds of interests. Even if Gilbert were to dress up as Gilberta, well... Regardless of whether he'd look good or not, it wasn't my place to judge him about it.

As I imagined him wearing a magnificent white hat and running along the beach, his bare legs peeking out from under a skirt, I noticed that Gilbert was

glaring daggers at me.

“What kind of misunderstanding is your brain manufacturing now?” he asked, clearly peeved. “This room belongs to a woman. She’s away for a bit, so I think you can use this without asking.”

Oh, that’s what he meant. I don’t understand the family makeup of this household, but let’s set that aside for now, because going on this little excursion is currently my top priority.

Gilbert handed me the hat, and I put it on, pulling it quite low on my face. All I had to do was tuck the long ends of my hair inside my clothes, and it was perfect.

“Thank you very much!” I said happily, and then added, “Oh, and sorry for thinking you’re a cross-dresser!”

Gilbert saw me off with a terribly sour look on his face as I headed out the door and into the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta.

Chapter 4: The Hidden Boss Enjoys Sightseeing

The Kingdom of Lemlaesta was a small kingdom roughly one-eighth the size of Valschein in terms of its land and population. The principality was graced with a small coastline, and its borders touched three other kingdoms. One of those three was the Kingdom of Valschein, and the other two were large states with power and influence equivalent to that of Valschein's.

Luck and circumstance favored Lemlaesta in its ability to survive as a free state, encircled as it was by higher-ranking kingdoms. In the past, when other large kingdoms (including Valschein) had tried to launch attacks on Lemlaesta in turn, the other surrounding nations didn't sit idly by and watch it happen. Because of that, Lemlaesta had become a de facto buffer zone between all three of the larger kingdoms, which is how it had survived to this day without being invaded. This explained the military aspect of their continued independence.

The Lemlaestans had also worked hard to build a strong economy. Naturally, it wasn't as robust as those of the surrounding larger and more resource-heavy kingdoms, but considering the size of the population, it was perhaps one of the fastest developing nations in the area.

Magical instruments from Lemlaesta were famous all across the continent. The magical light fixtures in Dolkness Manor were all made in Lemlaesta, and many other useful artifacts that we used every day were all mostly Lemlaestan as well.

Not only did Lemlaesta sell many magical instruments to the general public, both within and without its borders, their research and development on new advances in magical items was also quite extensive. They were known for reverse engineering magical instruments sourced from dungeons, which were hard to come by, and were often able to reproduce them and move them into mass production.

I'd done a bit of research on Lemlaesta's magical industry while I was at the

Academy, but once I found out that they hadn't done any research on reproducing monster-summoning flutes, I lost all interest.

With all that said, now I found myself in that very same magi-technologically advanced kingdom. Carriages moving on their own, train-like vehicles traveling through clear tubes, a small aircraft zooming through the sky, and people dressed in strange, colorful full-body suits...was not what I saw.

To be honest, I couldn't even tell I was in a foreign kingdom. The architecture, the clothes people wore, and even the language people spoke were all the same as in Valschein.

This is so disappointing. This is as disappointing as when I visited a university town in my past life.

Contrary to my expectation of a city full of near-future technology that the phrase "university town" evoked, all that I'd encountered there were residential neighborhoods filled with perfectly normal gardens and unnecessarily large research facilities, which all just looked like regular university buildings from the outside.

Though I will admit that the particle accelerator I got to see was pretty cool. It consisted of a ring-shaped tube underground paired with large pieces of observational equipment. They made small particles collide so that they could observe the effects, so that was something, at least.

My point was that the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta was the same sort of disappointing townscape. It looked much nicer than my hometown in Dolkness County, but it wasn't as grand as the Royal Capital in Valschein.

I'd been so excited about the prospect of sightseeing in a foreign kingdom, but I hadn't flown on a plane to get here, and I spoke the local language, so it didn't feel like I'd left my home kingdom at all.

Considering the fact that I illegally entered the kingdom without a passport, that makes things a little more exciting, but...not by that much. This world doesn't have passports anyway.

Since this was a kingdom known for its magi-technology, I wanted to visit a magical-instrument shop. I was really regretting my lack of money. I decided to

give up on buying souvenirs and just enjoy window-shopping.

Magical instruments required maintenance, so there were shops dealing specifically with such products in every kingdom. Large trading companies had resident magical-instrument specialists, but generally, establishments were just stand-alone shops that dealt only with magical instruments.

Lemlaesta was no different, and I was easily able to find a magical-instrument shop. The sign showed that it specialized in magi-technology, and there was even a piece of paper taped to the door that read, “We repair lights.” Since they had gone out of their way to post such a message, getting lights repaired was probably the service with the highest demand.

As expected of the kingdom famous for magical-instrument production. I guess magical-instrument lights are pretty widespread.

I was surprised to see that the shop was quite small. It felt like a local electronics shop, but what I actually wanted to visit was a big-box electronics retailer.

I guess I'll have to go to a large trading company that mainly deals in magical instruments if I want that. But those kinds of places usually check for identification when you enter... This small store will have to do if I want to avoid people asking awkward questions about my identity.

Admittedly, these thoughts were incredibly rude to the shop owners, but they were still top of mind as I headed inside.

An elderly woman was minding the store. Every last hair on her head was white, but she was sitting perfectly straight at a desk in the back of the store, and her excellent posture made her appear more youthful than she was. She turned and lowered her glasses to regard me.

“Welcome.”

“Hello,” I responded politely.

The woman immediately readjusted her glasses and went back to work. She appeared to be taking a magical instrument apart. She pinched the tiny parts between her fingers and held them at a distance to inspect them.

I began looking at the magical instruments haphazardly placed around the store. There were no prices or product descriptions, so I couldn't guess the purpose of many of the items.

I guess this is a small business focused on one-on-one sales after all. It's not a very good place to window-shop.

"You should leave if you're not going to buy anything," the owner said, keeping her eyes on her work.

"I'm sorry for the trouble."

Yeah, I should leave. There's nothing I'm looking to buy, and I probably won't ever buy something here. If I'm not a customer, I'm just in the way.

I bowed my head and turned to leave, but something caught my eye and stopped me in my tracks.

"What is it?" the proprietor asked, a little brusquely. "If there's something you need, just say it."

"Um, could I hold this?" I asked, pointing at an item.

The elderly woman looked over to see what I was referring to before nodding her approval. "Be careful, it's heavy..."

The item that caught my attention was a cylinder propped against the wall in a corner of the shop. It was an elongated metal tube, with a hole on just one end of it. It had a wooden handle, and there was even a protruding tab of metal that looked like a trigger.

This is definitely a gun. Things are getting exciting.

The magical instrument looked similar to a musket rifle, but the barrel was quite wide, and the muzzle was about the diameter of a gold piece. It wasn't as large as a cannon or anything like that, but if a regular human were to shoot this gun, they'd probably get hurt by the kickback.

I grabbed the handle with my right hand and supported the barrel with my left. Then, I positioned the stock on my shoulder, and my shooting stance was complete.

"Bang," I muttered.

I had a little bit of experience with using guns. In the past, I had carried out special operations to completion while wearing a skull mask, and I'd even once parachuted onto a deserted island and fought until I was the last one standing. (Of course, this was all in video games.)

"Rat tat tat tat... Hmm. There's no way this is fully automatic," I grumbled. "I don't like single-shot weapons."

The only single-shot weapon I can accept is a shotgun.

I didn't see a magazine or any loading mechanism, so I figured this was a muzzle-loading gun. After each time you shot it, you would have to reload it with gunpowder and a bullet through the opening in the muzzle.

Hm... Bolt-action rifles where you pull on a lever are cool, but loading a matchlock-style weapon isn't that exciting. If you can only shoot one bullet at a time, this would realistically be best for a sniper.

I grasped the rifle tightly and pressed my cheek against the body, locking onto my target.

"Distance is nine hundred meters. No wind... Fire."

One shot, one kill... I'm too old for this. What am I doing? This wannabe musket would be better off being used as an iron tube to swing around... Oh, I should just imagine using this in melee combat. If you add a bayonet to this, it would be really cool.

I was almost able to calm down and remember to act my age, but my passion for bayonets was stronger.

"Ready, aim... Fire!"

You greet the oncoming enemy with a barrage of gunfire, and then use the bayonet tip of the gun in close combat. What an exciting development.

There was no place in my imagination for unrefined arguments about the benefits of having a proper sword separate from a gun, or that having different units for shooters and swordsmen would be better because each discipline requires different skills. Guns that could transform into swords were also cool, but the way that adding a knife to the tip of the muzzle ruined the straight lines

and elegant form of a gun was amazing—I loved that. Bayonets were awesome.

“Taking them out with a bang after stabbing them would also be pretty nice...” I tried moving my body into the appropriate positions to land such a thrilling mortal blow. This revealed that such a technique would require different skills from swordsmanship, which I found very interesting.

And so there I was, mumbling to myself and playing in the store.

This probably isn't a gun, though, I pointed out to my excitable brain.

Perhaps it was because of the existence of magic, but technology using gunpowder wasn't highly developed in this world. Gunpowder itself existed, and there were basic bombs similar to the thunder crash bombs used in the Mongol invasions of Japan, but their use wasn't widespread. Apparently the cost of manufacturing gunpowder was so high that it was just better to raise mages.

But what would this be if it isn't a gun? I thought, looking back at the woman, who was giving me quite a dubious look. *I'm sorry. I was being too weird. I'm really embarrassed. I want to jump into a void and run away.*

I was going to apologize for my strange behavior, but before I could open my mouth, the woman pointed at the item in my hands and asked, “Do you know what that is...?”

“I don't,” I admitted.

“Huh?! Say it louder.”

“I don't,” I said louder than before, so that she'd be sure to hear me even if her hearing wasn't great.

The elderly woman stood up and came closer to me, moving with brisk confidence. She was much taller than I'd expected her to be.

“One more time,” she demanded.

“What?”

“Hold that up again.”

I did as she asked and again held up the gun-like object.

What's going on? I can't imagine this is the proper way to hold it.

"Huh..." she observed. "So you choose that stance despite not knowing anything? Pretty impressive."

"How do you use this?" I asked.

She asked a question of her own instead of answering mine. "How do you think it's used?"

"Does something shoot out of the tip of it?"

"Of course. It's a projectile launcher that you hold like *that*... It works essentially like an archer's arrow, but stronger."

So it was a gun after all.

I see. This is a magical-instrument shop, so this must be a gun that uses a magic stone or something in place of gunpowder to operate. I guess in this world, even if you don't have the skills or resources to build artillery, you can still make a magical instrument that's as close as possible in function to a gun.

If this *was* a gun, I wasn't sure why it was just collecting dust in a small shop like this. It seemed like its use should be more widespread, and if Lemlaesta had been developing these as weapons in secret, it shouldn't have been haphazardly left out where anyone could see it.

"It's my first time seeing one," I said. "If it's stronger than a bow, why isn't it more common?"

"Because it's a piece of trash with no practical application."

"Huh? I thought you said that it's stronger than a bow."

"In potency, yes, but just one shot uses up a first-class magic stone. That's one stone per shot. This world is full of mages who can consecutively cast spells of a matching potency. Because of that, it's essentially a piece of impractical garbage that wouldn't even be useful as a clothesline pole."

I didn't realize its energy conversion efficiency was so bad. But hearing about it makes me want to understand the details of how it works. Since it uses up such a valuable magic stone, I probably can't give it a test shot, but I do want to hear more about it.

“Does the bullet, um, I mean... Does something shoot out of this hole?”

“Pure magical energy. Though I doubt you know what that means in terms of magical theory.”

“I do,” I assured her. “Wouldn’t you lose potency if you shoot out pure magical energy?”

She blinked in astonishment. “Huh? Can you use magic?”

“Just a little bit of fire magic...” I couldn’t go around admitting that I was a dark magic user, so I decided to go with fire.

I don’t understand why it would shoot pure magical energy. What a waste of power! The decrease in potency would be so profound that it would be totally useless.

“You can shoot pure magical energy out of your body, can’t you?” the proprietor asked me.

I nodded. “I can, but it’s incredibly inefficient. It’s standard practice for magic users to convert it into elemental magical energy and shoot out a fireball or something like that instead.”

“That’s how most people use magic. If you just shoot out magical energy with no elemental focus, it’ll simply dissipate in the air. Even if someone used all the mana they had, it would only produce enough magical energy to move a cotton ball.”

“That’s true...”

I’ve heard that there are people who have used that very same magical energy, which can only move a cotton ball, to travel above the atmosphere. I won’t bring it up, though, since it has nothing to do with the topic at hand.

“That’s why magical instruments also convert their fuel into elemental magical energy before starting a fire or providing light.” The elderly woman sighed. “Piercy would be so much more useful if he could shoot out something like a fireball.”

“Piercy?” I echoed, tilting my head in confusion. It was a word I’d never heard before.

The woman cackled as she explained, “He *piercys* through enemies. It’s like a nickname for this magical instrument. What do you think? Pretty apt, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it sure is...”

Whoever named it is a weirdo. I know it’s an experimental weapon, but why would you name it something so ridiculous?

“I know!” she went on eagerly. “So you see, Piercy wants to shoot fireballs, but category one interferes with category four.”

“Category one?” Now she’d lost me completely. “What is that?”

“Oh, sorry. I felt like I was talking to my old work buddies and got a bit carried away. You seem to be able to use magic, but I forgot you’re a novice when it comes to magical instruments. How do I explain this...” She considered for a moment, and then she continued. “The various kinds of powers that magical instruments can tap into are split up into different categories. In this case, one category of power would have to create a projectile, either elemental or physical, and the other would propel that projectile. So in order to shoot out a ball of fire, you have to use two categories that aren’t compatible. It’s impossible to create an item that will make the arrow while also shooting it.”

“I see,” I mused. “So because it can’t go through the process of making an arrow, it just shoots out pure magical energy.”

“Exactly.” The woman nodded.

Wait, if the artifact can’t make its own arrow, can’t you just add one? If you were to just load the magical instrument with something like a lead bullet, then it should only have to use one category of power to shoot the bullet. If you make a fire-type explosion occur in an enclosed spot, like the muzzle of this object, it would serve the same function as gunpowder. The energy efficiency should be pretty decent too. I think the person who invented this thing wanted the magical instrument to handle every step of the process, but if you just solve part of the issue with physical items... Wait, maybe I shouldn’t say anything. Is this one of those plot points where you bring in technology from an otherworld and it changes the course of history?

It was possible that someone well-versed in magi-technology would be able to

tell my idea was impossible, but it was equally possible that they could recreate it just by hearing it. This felt like a rare case of me bringing technological concepts from my previous life in a potentially dangerous way, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“Thank you for explaining everything to me,” I said instead. “You’re very knowledgeable on Piercy.”

“Well, I am the one that made him.”

I’m really glad I didn’t mention anything about guns.

I was surprised to find out that this woman made magical instruments herself. I’d assumed this was a simple shop that just sold affordable magical instruments to the general public and handled repairs. I’d thought she was cold at first, but she seemed to be very happy to talk.

“Now I’m just the owner of this shabby little shop,” she said jovially. “I used to be a researcher at the First Armory.”

“The First Armory...?”

If I recalled correctly, armories were basically factories that made military supplies. It was a concept with which I wasn’t very familiar, and I imagined that the same would apply to the general public, but the woman seemed shocked that I didn’t know what this “First Armory” was.

“It’s *the* First. The good-for-nothing First.”

“Um... I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with the name.”

“I’m talking about *the* First Armory,” she repeated, “the very one that broke almost all the windows of the aristocrats’ estates. I’m sure you remember the incident; it was pretty recent. It was right after I retired, so... Right, actually, that was ten years ago.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but it seemed to be infamous in Lemlaesta. The only image this conjured to mind was a band of delinquents smashing in windows, so I decided to ask for details.

“I’m from the countryside,” I fibbed unrepentantly, “and I just recently moved to the Royal Capital. Could you tell me more about the First Armory?”

“Huh, I thought you were from here since you’re pretty polished. The First Armory of Lemlaesta is a research institution run by the kingdom. There’s the First Armory and the Second Armory. First in the red, Second in the black.” She spoke this last as one would repeat a common mantra.

The meaning was lost on me. “It’s in the red?”

“Yup. The First Armory obtains dungeon-made magical instruments, which are rare, to conduct research upon. On top of that, the experimental materials are expensive, and the process uses up tons of large magic stones... No matter how much budget they have, it’s never enough.”

“Research does sound expensive,” I remarked.

“Well, the Second Armory sells the products of both the First Armory’s research and their own, and also exports them to other kingdoms, so they pretty much drive Lemlaesta’s economy.”

Do you even need the First Armory?

I believed a government-run research facility didn’t have to produce revenue, but if one armory was throwing money down the drain while the other one was profiting, I didn’t see a problem with getting rid of the former. Of course, I wasn’t going to tell a former researcher of the First Armory that it was unnecessary to her face, but she seemed to gather what I was thinking.

“You’re probably thinking that the First is unnecessary, right?” she said with a fearless smile. “You’re not a very expressive girl, but I can tell that much.”

“I was thinking no such thing,” I lied.

“It’s fine. Everyone thinks that when they first hear about the situation. Even some of the nobility in Lemlaesta think the First Armory should be shut down.” In other words, it seemed that there were lots of other people who felt the First Armory was unnecessary.

Reflexively, I judged it to be a redundant organization; was there really such a difference when both institutions were researching magical instruments? Even if the Second Armory was the one profiting, surely running it required the same kind of funds as the First did.

Then it dawned on me. “The two research facilities aren’t doing the same things, are they?”

“Heh heh, that’s right.” The proprietor beamed at me. “You knew how to hold Piercy, and now you’ve reasoned your way through this. You’re pretty sharp.”

Piercy... Oh, right. Piercy through enemies, I recalled as I looked at the uniquely named wannabe gun. Speaking of Piercy, if she invented it, that means it was created as a research project of the First Armory. It does seem like it would be hard to profit off of something like this as it is now. If research progressed and they were able to mass-produce them, it would probably make a fortune, though. Not only that, but the person who’d profit off of it most wouldn’t be the inventor but the person who made it practical to use, even though she’s the one who contributed the most to its development...

“I see, it’s because the First Armory makes these types of things. Things that require a lot of skill but aren’t really something that can be mass-produced and sold.”

“Wow, I’m impressed that you were able to figure that out on your own...” she said admiringly. “Just as you say, the First Armory aims to develop technologically advanced magical instruments, without concern for things like whether or not they are marketable. The Second Armory uses techniques developed through that research to produce items with a demand.”

“Isn’t that unfair? The Second is just stealing the First’s research.”

She shrugged. “That might be so, but no one in the First Armory thinks that.”

“Why not?”

Just as I’d thought, the values and goals of the First and Second Armories were completely different. The former was never concerned with generating a monetary profit, while the latter had been after money from the very start, which meant that the Second Armory would end up getting all the praise from outside observers. Despite the situation seeming far from ideal, the woman claimed that the First Armory researchers weren’t particularly unhappy with this state of affairs.

This elderly woman had somehow managed to invent something as close as

you could get to a gun in a world that rarely used gunpowder, and now she stood before me, giving me the biggest smile I'd seen today. "I mean, isn't it way more fun to just *think* about magical instruments and research them?" she asked with relish. "The aristocrats who fund our work say they're investing in the future, but I couldn't care less about that. Research is fun in and of itself, that's all there is to it."

The woman was a researcher through and through. Perhaps it was only people like her that could become a researcher of magical instruments in a kingdom as magi-technologically advanced as this one. Investing in the future sounded cool, but she seemed to have no interest in it whatsoever.

After our conversation, the woman seemed to be in a good mood, and she offered me some tea, but I felt it would be strange if I were to accept her invitation but never remove my hat, so I regretfully declined.

It's too bad, I wanted to hear more about magical instruments. Though, there's one more thing I want to ask about before I leave. What was that window smashing thing she was talking about before, when she was explaining what the First Armory was?

"What was that incident with the windows in estates being broken that you mentioned?"

"Oh, that. My apprentice was a really loud kid," she explained, "and that's definitely why my ears don't hear so well these days... You see, we were doing a test run for a magical instrument that my apprentice developed, but we were doing it too close to the aristocratic quarter, so we ended up breaking most of the windows."

"What..." I shook my head in disbelief. "Why did you decide to test it in the middle of the Royal Capital?"

She shrugged. "It was close to the lab."

"Oh, I see. Can I ask what kind of magical instrument it was?"

"The kiddo said it was an acoustic weapon. It produced a sound with enough volume to break glass, which could be used to take down an enemy's soldiers."

"Wouldn't that take out your allies too?"

“Yup,” she said with a nod. “It had no directionality, so it would blast this booming sound in every direction. Because the ones using the device would be closer to it, your own army would actually feel the brunt of its force. That experiment busted my apprentice’s eardrums.”

They had tested the item out while leaving a problem unsolved that even a novice like me noticed. I hadn’t realized that people working at the First Armory were that crazy.

Now that I think about it, this lady is also pretty crazy for trying to launch a long-range attack only using pure magical energy. That explains a lot if those are the kind of people that work there. I see that I need to be wary of magical-instrument researchers, especially those from the First Armory—not that I think I’ll ever run into them, though, so maybe this is unnecessary caution.

“Was your apprentice all right?” I asked curiously.

“The kid healed up right away. My apprentice was, if nothing else, a passionate researcher and a healthy young person. The only thing that changed was that the kid got a lot louder after that.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“That kiddo hasn’t come by recently, though. The last time we spoke, my apprentice was saying something about recreating a several-hundred-year-old magical instrument or something like that. Probably just at the critical part of research. The kid even found someone who could use it, so no news is probably good news.”

“A several-hundred-year-old item...” My interest was piqued. “That sounds incredible.”

“Right? It makes me want to come out of retirement.”

I felt like I’d learned a lot from the proprietor of this store. We had ended up talking for some time. I put the wannabe rifle back in the place where I found it and got ready to head out.

“Thank you very much for everything today,” I said politely. “I hope your apprentice’s research goes well.”

“Thank *you*. I haven’t gotten to have a nice chat like this in a while. Apologies in advance if you get mixed up in the kiddo’s research. My apprentice is the type to go out and destroy windows, so...”

“Of course, I’ll be careful.”

“I hope you’ll come by again.”

I didn’t actually have any intention of coming by again, but I politely said goodbye to the woman anyway. It would be difficult to come all the way here once I returned home, and it was unlikely that I’d get mixed up in her apprentice’s experiments. I decided to treasure this wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime meeting deep in my heart as I left the small magical-instrument shop forever.

Visiting that shop was really fun. I didn’t have anything else I really wanted to see, so I aimlessly wandered around the area. It was similar to the countless walks I took around the Royal Capital in Valschein.

I usually would go out of my way to explore dangerous-looking areas, but I wanted to avoid getting into any trouble here. I didn’t enter any strange alleyways, and so I kept wandering while I looked for something fun.

What caught my eye next was a blacksmith’s shop. Judging by what I could see from the outside, it seemed to be a shop that was more focused on weapons than items for daily use.

The first thing you do when you reach a new town is head to the weapon shop. I almost forgot the basics of gaming. I should live a proper life and remember to do the little things like this. Also, I wonder why weapon shops suddenly increase the variety of weapons they have the closer you get to the boss battle, I thought as I pushed open the thick wooden door to the shop.

It had been a while since I’d visited a weapon shop. A lot of things had happened in my past, and I’d ended up banned from all the weapon shops in the Royal Capital of Valschein.

“Hello,” I called out as I entered the shop. There didn’t seem to be anyone present other than me—there didn’t even seem to be anyone manning the

store.

I looked around, but the store seemed kind of lackluster. There were swords, spears, and pieces of armor lining the shelves, but everything was covered in a thin layer of dust. They didn't seem to carry very many products either. There were empty spaces on the shelves and walls that stood out.

I wonder if this store's not that popular.

Just as that somewhat judgmental thought was crossing my mind, someone appeared from the back of the store. It was a man with a large build and a buzz cut.

Now that's a boss man if I've ever seen one.

"What do you want?!" the man snapped, looking me up and down. He sounded incredibly displeased. "This is no place for women or children!"

"Are you talking to me...?" I wondered.

"Who else would I be talking to?"

I suddenly remembered how I had been told something similar the first time I stepped foot in a weapon shop.

Recently they just say things like, "I'm begging you, please leave," or, "Don't ever come here again, you harbinger of destruction!" so this is really refreshing by comparison.

"I see, so that was directed at me."

"It was!" the blacksmith bellowed. "Now go home and do some embroidery or something!"

This is where I would usually egg the shopkeeper on by saying something like, "I couldn't even do embroidery if my needles were as dull as your blades," which would make the blacksmith get mad and yell, "Are you calling the swords I forge dull?!" Then I would say, "They'd break if I swung them," which would lead to the blacksmith saying, "Let's see you try it, then!" and so on and so forth... At the end of it all, I'd get kicked out of the store by the crying blacksmith.

If I were to let things progress as usual this time, however, I would surely gather unwanted attention... It was already bad enough that I was a young

woman with black hair, but if you added on the fact that I was ridiculously strong, it would be obvious that I was the dreaded Yumiella.

It's not like there's anything I want here anyway. I should just leave.

"I apologize. I just came in because I was curious to see what was here. I guess it wasn't a place for someone like me," I said, bowing my head politely.

The man's eyes widened with surprise. "You're pretty weird..."

"What? Is there something strange about me?"

"Usually if I yell at someone like you to leave, they either get scared and run away or lecture me for treating them condescendingly because they're a woman... This is the first time someone's responded so calmly."

I didn't think acting like a well-mannered lady would come back to bite me like this. How do I respond here?

As I searched for the right words, the man gestured towards a sword with his chin.

"If you're that calm, that must mean you can wield a weapon. Go on, give it a swing."

"Well, if you insist..." I said with a nod. It would've seemed strange to turn him down, so I had no other choice.

Just as he told me to, I grabbed the sword that was leaning against the wall. I held it with both hands to make it appear as if I found it heavier than I actually did. It was a typical double-edged, one-handed sword, which had probably been designed to be wielded with a shield in the other hand. It was incredibly light and felt quite brittle.

I glanced over at the man, and he was staring at me with a serious look.

I have to swing this, don't I? But even if I only swing it once, it's going to make it obvious that I know how to wield a sword. I need to find an excuse to get me out of this.

The man suddenly let out a boisterous laugh. "I thought you might know your way around a sword, but I guess you're a complete amateur after all. You wouldn't even be able to slice through a stationary target if you hold it like

that.”

Stay calm. Keep your cool. You already know that you’re not all that skilled when it comes to swordsmanship, Yumiella. It’s fine. I’m strong, and I’m perfectly effective in a fight if I just use a hard, heavy iron rod to knock someone out. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I consider swords to be similar to clubs. I’m totally not hurt by him laughing at me.

Despite my internal pep talk, I was slightly irritated, which led to me gripping the sword a little too tightly.

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen.

The hilt of the sword was completely crushed, and it snapped right off. The naked blade tang fell to the ground, and it clanged as it hit the floor.

“Whoa?!” cried the blacksmith. “You all right there? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, but your product...”

“Sorry! It was a crude, mass-produced sword, but this one seems to have been particularly defective. Darn, how did it even break like this...?”

I’m in the clear. I definitely thought I’d be caught. I guess it’s not that easy for people to figure out who I am.

The man reached his hand out to me, so I gave him the remnant of metal that used to be the hilt. The man stared at the piece while tilting his head in confusion.

“Was the iron I forged too weak...?” he wondered, turning the scrap over in his hands. “No, that’s not possible. Maybe there was a weak spot that all the pressure built up in... No, that’s not it either.”

It seemed like the possibility of me being ridiculously strong hadn’t crossed his mind. I felt bad for making him perplexed like this.

In contrast to the somber storefront, the shopkeeper seemed incredibly passionate, which surprised me.

He continued mumbling to himself while comparing the broken sword to his other items, and then he suddenly noticed that I was standing there, unsure what to do.

“Sorry, that must’ve surprised you. This is the first time I’ve ever seen anything like this too... I didn’t think that the sword I forged was so brittle...” He sighed. “Maybe my skills need a refresh after they made me forge too many mass-produced items? But this is one of the pieces I crafted before all that...”

“Please don’t worry about me. Um, may I ask what you mean by being made to forge mass-produced weapons?” I asked, curious to see if it had anything to do with the strange lineup of products in his shop.

The man answered right away. “Most of what I make these days are official weapons for the royal army. I make all the parts of their standard equipment—their swords, their spears, and even their armor. I have no idea what they’re planning with all these new soldiers.”

“I would imagine it’s profitable to get large orders from the monarchy.”

He shook his head. “It’s boring to make things according to certain specifications. Because I’ve spent all my time doing that, this is the state my shop’s been left in,” he said sadly, scanning his dusty store.

I see, so that’s what’s going on. Even if he’s making a ton of them, they’re still handmade items from an artisan. I’m sure it takes a lot of time just to prepare one set of equipment.

“I didn’t know that was going on. I’m sorry to be intruding. You must be busy.”

“It’s fine. Be careful on your way home,” he said in a listless tone before returning his attention to the broken sword.

It doesn’t feel right to leave him like this... This man might be scary-looking, but he’s actually pretty nice. I’d hate for him to start doubting his own skills because of me. It’s a durable sword that wouldn’t have broken if a regular person used it normally. Still, I can’t tell him who I am... But, no, well...

After some hesitation, I made up my mind.

“Um, what will you be doing with that broken weapon?”

“This? I’m going to research it thoroughly. Us blacksmiths are responsible for the lives of swordsmen. I can’t ever have something like this happen again.”

“There’s no need for research,” I assured him. “This was a perfectly durable sword, it’s just brittle in my hands specifically.”

“What do you mean...?” He looked confused, and then his eyes widened in alarm. “Hey, be careful!”

The sword had been split into two pieces: the hilt and the blade. I was reaching down to grab the blade still on the ground, and that was what made him yell out of shock. It would be dangerous if he tried to take it from me and ended up hurting himself, so I quickly squeezed the blade.

The metal crumpled in my hand before snapping into shards—I’d crushed a steel blade with my bare hands right before the blacksmith’s eyes.

“This is what I mean. It’s not the blade; it’s me. Don’t worry, I think a weapon just like this should be able to cut through midtier monsters with no problem.”

The owner of the weapon shop stood completely stunned, and I took that as my cue to flee the scene. I quickly opened the heavy doors, slipped out, shut them gently behind me, and then scampered away.

Okay then, now the legend of the woman who goes around destroying items in weapon shops has crossed the border. Does anyone really think that mere borders can confine my powers...? I mean, that sounds cool and all, but if I really think about it, I’m basically just an unhinged person who isn’t satisfied with just ruining weapons in her own kingdom. Man, I was planning to avoid leaving any traces of Yumiella here. I hope it’ll be fine since he didn’t see my hair.

I kept up a brisk pace for a few minutes and then slowed, figuring I’d gotten far enough. I adjusted my hat to make sure I hid my face and resumed sightseeing.

“What a normal town...” I sighed.

It was so, so normal. Just now, I was approaching a market selling groceries. There were various stalls lining both sides of the street, selling normal things like grains and vegetables.

It was all very peaceful. My initial impressions of the Kingdom of Lemlaesta had been heavily influenced by the time they attacked Patrick’s home, so it felt

like kind of a letdown. Still, it was a nice place.

Even if we were in different kingdoms, the people living in both were essentially the same.

I feel like I could live a more peaceful life here than in Valschein. It seems like there isn't as much bias towards black hair here either.

If I hadn't met Patrick at the Academy, I likely would've fled the kingdom. There was an alternate timeline where this could've been my home.

"No, no! I want it, I want it!"

I heard a voice that reminded me of myself in the past. I looked over to see a boy whining in front of a stall. The stall seemed to be selling some kind of candy. The boy's mother was dragging him away while he kicked and screamed.

"I'm not buying you any," she said. "We're going now!"

"No!"

Perhaps this was a regular occurrence, because the mother seemed completely done with him. The boy was resisting with everything he had, but there was nothing he could do to prevent being dragged along the ground.

I kept watching them from the corner of my eye. The mother finally got fed up and let go of the boy's hand.

"I'm leaving you here, then!" she said before storming off. The boy's eyes were swollen from crying, and he gritted his teeth as he stood there.

Wow, what a tough kid. If it were me, I would've run to my mom in a panic. Well, I didn't really throw tantrums like that as a kid. The time I did it in front of Patrick a few months ago was the first time I'd ever thrown one. Am I maybe becoming more immature with age...? No way. That's not possible...right?

I was on the edge of my seat, watching this little psychodrama play out between the parent and child. The mother turned back. She obviously wasn't going to actually leave him behind like she'd said she would.

Is she going to break and buy the candy? Or will she just keep dragging him? I wonder which is the correct choice here, developmentally speaking. I might be in a similar situation one day too... Oh, obviously as the mom, though. So, how do

you handle this little one, my unknowing mentor?

“If you don’t listen, Yumiella is going to come get you.”

“No! I don’t want Yumiella!” The boy, who I thought had already been screaming as loudly as he possibly could, began bawling at an even higher decibel. His strong stance from earlier disappeared and he immediately ran at full speed towards his mother. “Is Yumiella coming? I don’t want Yumiella to come!”

“Yumiella won’t come if you’re a good boy,” his mother promised.



The boy buried his face in his mother's skirt as he sniffled between sobs.

Yumiella's right here, kid.

As I watched them hold hands and walk off, I understood then that my fantasies of living here peacefully were asinine.

I, Yumiella Dolkness, am treated like a boogeyman in the neighboring kingdom!

There were many people who turned their heads upon hearing the name "Yumiella," and I thought I even heard a young girl scream, "Eek! Yumiella?!" *I should head back*, I thought with an internal sigh.

Completely dispirited, I decided to return to my temporary home.

Interlude 1: Alicia

Alicia Ehnleit was taking a walk.

“Freedom is...wonderful!” she breathed.

Sure, she was still under watch, but it had been a while since she had been permitted to go out into the world and walk around as she pleased. *This kingdom is full of kind people*, she thought as she strolled through the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta.

It had been over a year since the Demon Lord had been defeated. Alicia had been spending her days under the supervision of the Kingdom of Valschein, forbidden to leave her room in the corner of the Royal Palace. She was provided with food and a place to sleep, but she was about to lose her mind staying cooped up in that room.

Every once in a while, the Knight’s Order would allow her to leave the confines of the palace, but only to force her to level grind in a dungeon. Alicia wasn’t sure why she had to keep training when the Demon Lord was already gone. There was only one other reason she could think of as to why the kingdom would pour significant time and resources into strengthening a light magic user.

“No matter how strong I get, I’d never be able to fight *her*...” she lamented.

The person to whom she was referring was, of course, Yumiella Dolkness. Alicia was able to use light magic, and while that *was* Yumiella’s weakness, Alicia still didn’t want to even think about going up against Yumiella.

“First of all, *she’s* the reason I’m imprisoned here...” the light mage grumbled. After a moment, she amended, “I mean, I guess it’s actually my fault.”

When Alicia was alone, she often thought about how things would’ve been if she could go back in time and start over.

If I’d hidden the fact that I could use light magic, I might’ve never attended the

Royal Academy. If I'd just become friends with Yumiella... No, I would've just died while level grinding. At the Demon Lord's castle, if I just hadn't stabbed Yumiella in the back...

"I wonder where things went wrong."

The fact that she could use light magic, the fact that she'd been forced to attend the Royal Academy despite being a commoner, and the fact that she'd antagonized Yumiella until the very end had unfortunately come to its inevitable conclusion, and that had ultimately led to this outcome of Alicia living out her days in confinement.

Naturally, Alicia didn't have any positive feelings towards Yumiella.

"She's creepy, and she almost killed me in that dungeon. She also took down the Demon Lord, who I was supposed to defeat..." Alicia seethed. "I really hate her."

Alicia recalled the girl's completely expressionless face, a flat affect that made both her thoughts and emotions unreadable. It made the light mage shiver just imagining it. She didn't like Yumiella, but now that some time had passed, she was able to think things through with a clearer head. It allowed other perspectives to cross her mind.

"You know... She was weird, but she might not have actually been a bad person. All that stuff that happened in the dungeon didn't seem to be out of ill intentions or anything either."

Alicia had almost always held negative opinions of the black-haired girl, but what really sealed her dislike for Yumiella was when they'd gone dungeon crawling together. As Alicia had fought desperately, Yumiella had done nothing but stand behind her and watch as if she found the whole thing satisfying—and to Alicia, that had made Yumiella seem even more wicked than the Demon Lord.

However, she was beginning to realize that this had been Yumiella's way of showing kindness. The truth was, Alicia's level had spiked on that day. Ever since she'd realized that, Alicia's regrets had only grown stronger. Now she no longer harbored any resentment—

“Man, can Yumiella just become level 13 or something? Then I could just beat her up.”

Okay, maybe she still harbored some resentment. She still hated Yumiella. No matter what kindness the dark mage had meant, Alicia had still almost died in that dungeon, and Yumiella was the reason why she was being forced to level grind during her imprisonment. The truth of the matter was, though, that Alicia was terrified of actually fighting her. That was why she had fled here, to Lemlaesta. And that was only the beginning; she ultimately planned to flee even farther away.

“It’s fine,” Alicia assured herself. “I’m just going to flee the continent.”

Alicia had gone dungeon crawling while being both supervised and guarded by the Knight’s Order. During one of her breaks, she happened to be alone, and she had encountered a man who had appeared to be an adventurer.

“I’d like your cooperation in an experiment to test a magical instrument, for the sake of world peace,” he’d offered. “I’ll pay you whatever you’d like.”

The man had admittedly seemed pretty shady, but she’d named her price: she wanted to get on a ship to travel to a different continent. He’d agreed right away. All she had to do was operate a magical instrument that required light magic to activate, and she would be able to flee far away. Not only that, she’d also be able to contribute to world peace.

There was no better deal than this. If she didn’t run away, her imprisonment would only continue, and she might have to fight Yumiella one day. Alicia jumped at the opportunity and fled from the Kingdom of Valschein.

Now, Alicia was walking through this unfamiliar town, feeling completely free, when a scream rang out, breaking her happy reverie.

“Bag-snatcher!” cried a voice.

Alicia turned to see a man running towards her. He was hiding his face with the hood of his cloak. Pursuing the muscular thief was a young woman, and she was the one who was screaming.

The handful of surrounding passersby stepped out of the man’s way, likely

worried he might have a weapon on him. The culprit was making his way right towards Alicia.

“Get out of the way, woman!” he bellowed.

“I’ve been told to not stand out too much...” Alicia reminded herself.

Despite the fact that the man running towards her was much larger than her dainty self, Alicia didn’t budge. The man reached out to push her away, but Alicia just let out a sigh, grabbed his arm with graceful ease, and forcefully threw him, sending him flying. It was a move of brute force, possible only because of their stark difference in level; Alicia’s stats were so much higher that the action required no martial arts skill of any sort.

“Ough!” the man moaned.

“Just give me what you took and leave at once, please,” she enjoined him.

The man was still on the ground, stunned by the fact that a girl with such a small frame had thrown him so effortlessly. Alicia ignored him and picked up the bag that he’d evidently stolen.

“Here you go. Is this what he took?” she asked, handing the nearby victim her belongings.

The woman stood there, staring blankly for a moment before stammering, “Yes, thank you...”

Alicia didn’t think she had stood out *too* much, but she nevertheless quickly fled the scene.

Alicia was strong. She was strong enough to rank high even among the members of the Knight’s Order of Valschein. If she went out of control, the only person who could likely suppress her was the commander of the Knight’s Order himself. Despite being one of the strongest people in the kingdom, Alicia didn’t think very highly of herself, because she knew that despite her incredible power, she was still no match for Yumiella.

Alicia slowed, figuring she had left the site of the incident far enough behind, and she found herself in a market on one of the main streets. She took a

moment to collect her thoughts about what had just happened.

“Wait... Am I strong?” she mumbled to herself.

She’d assumed that her skills had gotten rusty after being confined for so long, but she *had* been continuously entering dungeons during the course of her imprisonment—she just hadn’t gotten an opportunity to test out that strength. Now she knew: she’d definitely gotten stronger.

I might be stronger than anyone in the Knight’s Order, even stronger than their commander. I might even be stronger than Yumiella...

Just as that thought crossed her mind, a woman’s angry voice caught her attention.

“If you don’t listen, Yumiella is going to come get you.”

“Eek! Yumiella?!” Alicia squealed, reacting at almost superhuman speed and ducking behind a nearby sign. A moment later, she heard the voice of a child.

“No! I don’t want Yumiella!”

“Oh, it’s just a whining kid and his mom,” Alicia mumbled to herself. Relief washed over her.

She was slightly embarrassed by the fact that she’d had such an extreme reaction because of something a mother said to scare her child, and so she forced herself to leave her hiding place and continue to stroll through the market as if nothing had happened.

Because she was focused on the boy, who was burying his face in his mother’s skirt as he cried, she didn’t notice that she walked past a woman in a white hat.

Chapter 5: The Hidden Boss Reunites with the Secret Agent

I returned to my temporary lodging at Gilbert's house. After wasting my time walking all over town, the sun was just barely starting to set, but it wasn't quite evening yet.

I tried to open the front door.

Hm...? This door feels weirdly heavy, like it's not going to open. Maybe that doesn't matter, since I could probably open it no matter what if I gave it a hard enough tug.

Just to make sure this wasn't one of those times I was pulling on a door that was actually labeled "Push," I tried pushing the door inwards as well. I even tried sliding it to the side.

"Stop making so much noise!" Gilbert's voice rang out from behind the unopenable door. "I'll be right there to open it, just wait." Shortly after, I heard the click of tumblers unlocking before the door slowly opened to reveal Gilbert's annoyed expression. "Haven't you heard of a door knocker?"

"A door knocker...?" I asked blankly. My eyes traced the outside of the door. "Oh, this thing?"

I didn't know this metal loop on the door was called a "door knocker." I've always called it "the loop with a high chance of being in a lion's mouth."

I hadn't really had an opportunity to use one before. Whenever we had guests at the estate, the servants usually answered the door first, and when I visited other people's homes... Well, I hadn't really visited others that many times, so I didn't have any recollection about what I did to get in.

A door knocker! I'll commit it to memory. I've become even smarter.

Gilbert continued to stand in the entrance, holding the door open, and he stared at me as he kept turning the key over and over in his hands.

“I should also tell you why the front door didn’t open. This is called a key.”

“I didn’t think the door would be locked,” I sheepishly admitted.

Right, keys. Door locks are a thing that exist. I almost destroyed the lock and broke in.

Perhaps this was another problem only an aristocrat would have. There were servants on duty at all times at the estate, so I didn’t have a habit of locking the front door. As for my own room... I never locked it in case I accidentally forgot or lost the key and ended up destroying the door to get in.

This all, of course, explained why a device that stopped a door from opening and required a specific object to unlock it was outside of my immediate sphere of recognition.

Gilbert stared at me as if he couldn’t process what he was hearing. “Are you being serious?”

“Most people in my home region don’t lock their doors,” I explained.

“I see. I guess some areas are like that,” he said, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

Back in my previous life, the area where I’d lived in Japan wasn’t *that* rural, but it wasn’t a big city either. I still locked my doors. Even in more rural areas where people didn’t habitually lock their doors, officials encouraged them to lock up anyway, because there was otherwise a risk of becoming a target for burglars who traveled in from other places.

I need to add onto my fake background that I’m from the countryside.

As that thought crossed my mind, Gilbert turned around and headed inside. I followed him, shut the door behind me, and made sure to lock it.

Without thinking too hard about it, I followed behind Gilbert. We continued moving through the first floor and got to a...kitchen? I didn’t see anything that resembled food, but there was a magical-instrument stove against one wall. I looked around, standing slightly behind Gilbert, taking note of just how unlived-in the kitchen appeared to be.

“I can’t believe I have to ask this, but did you leave your bedroom door

unlocked last night...?" Gilbert asked, his back still turned to me.

"Yes, that's right."

Gilbert let out a deep sigh before turning to me. "You should be a bit more cautious," he said in a tone tinged with a mixture of exasperation and kindness. "Though it might already be too late for you to hear such advice, given the fact that you're staying in a stranger's home..."

"What do you mean by cautious...?" I wondered.

"I mean that if I were a bad man, I could've had my way with you, country girl."

"I see. I *am* a fragile lady whose strength would be no match for a man's after all. It's important to stay aware of such dangers."

He nodded. "Exactly."

Though our exchange was, on the surface, a proper conversation, there was something that felt off about it, or rather, something seemed to be missing. The awkwardness probably stemmed from the disparity in our common sense. Even though Gilbert had just agreed with my previous statement, he seemed extremely confused.

I feel like things would feel more natural if we had one more person here... I wonder who's missing. It wouldn't be helpful to have a stranger here, but it would also be awkward if it was someone known only to one of us. What am I thinking? There's no way Gilbert and I share any acquaintances.

I pushed aside the strange feeling and turned my attention back to the kitchen area. I peeked into a carelessly placed wooden box and saw hard-looking rolls of bread wrapped up in paper. There were also several other boxes that were similar in appearance, but they all had lids on them, so I couldn't see inside.

"Are these all preserved foods?" I asked curiously.

"That's right," Gilbert affirmed. "Like I said, take whatever you... Wait, have you not eaten since last night?"

"That is indeed the case..."

Although he'd told me to use whatever I wanted, I couldn't bring myself to do something that was basically like going through someone's fridge without permission. (Although I was forced to admit that maybe it was too late for that sort of consideration, given that I'd crashed through his roof and even tried to explore around the house when he wasn't home.)

Still, I wasn't really hungry. It hadn't even been a full twenty-four hours since my last meal. I'd heard that a person's metabolism was supposed to increase with their level, but if anything, my resistance to thirst and hunger had gotten stronger. And so I had no intention of eating any of these rather less-than-delicious preserved foods.

Oh, only if I could cook. Then I'd be able to eat something really yummy.

"You don't have to hold back on my account," Gilbert said.

"It's not that. I'm just not hungry..."

"Okay... Well, I'm going to eat dinner now. What if we eat together?" he offered.

I felt bad—I'd made him go out of his way for me, and now he was acting surprisingly kind.

It would've been strange to turn him down, so I decided to join him for the meal. I readied myself to help him prepare the food, but before I could do anything, he pulled out two wooden plates and handed me one.

"Just pile whatever you'd like to eat on this."

This is the least excited I've ever been for a buffet.

I followed Gilbert and began loading my plate up with a variety of the available options. There was some iron-hard bread, jarred pickles that I could tell were too sour just by smelling them, and some dried meat, which also appeared rocklike in its consistency. These represented the entirety of tonight's culinary options. Both Gilbert and I made sure to get a portion of each of the three colorful foods.

There were four chairs at the table. It looked like the kitchen table you'd see in a typical home, which made it seem out of place in this one. We both sat

down, taking chairs across from one another. The table was already set with cups and a water pitcher.

It still wasn't quite evening, and the last vestiges of the day made the room bright enough to not require the use of artificial lights, but the space was nevertheless slightly dim. This wasn't exactly the atmosphere for a fun dinner.

"Thank you for the meal," I said, and then took a bite of the hard bread. "Bread" was perhaps not the right word. It was more an unsweetened biscuit or hardtack...

The flavor of this "bread" made me realize that, by comparison, the hardtack I'd had when I'd lived in Japan was delicious. I felt nostalgic remembering the packaging, with the picture of the man playing a bagpipe on the can, and the pieces of sugar candy mixed in with the crackers.

I took small bites of this wildly inferior hardtack and let them hydrate in my mouth before swallowing them. The more I chewed, the more moisture the bread leached from my mouth. Unable to bear it, I gulped down some water.

I looked over and saw Gilbert silently eating his bread.

"Is it good...?" I asked.

"It's fine. What do you think?"

It wouldn't be polite to tell him it's gross... But I'd never call this delicious, and I don't know if it's accurate to call it "fine" either. I feel like I'm being tested on my abilities as a food critic, to see how well I can spin a description of something bad to make it sound good.

"Once as a child, I found a cave, and I went inside," I began. "It was summer, but the cave was nice and cool. It was so comfortable that I ended up lying down. I started rolling down over the boulders, and I fell into a concave spot that was filled with water. I found myself covered in mud... This bread tastes like how I felt when I washed my muddy clothes in the river..."

Huh, maybe I'm good at reviewing food after all.

I sat there, fearing that I had burdened myself with yet another hidden talent, while Gilbert thought silently for a moment before responding.

"I take it you mean that it tastes bad...?" he asked.

"I was describing the good parts..." I explained. "Was that unclear?"

Gilbert fell silent again. As he continued thinking, we both continued munching laboriously on the bread. After a long pause, Gilbert finally opened his mouth again to speak.

"You said you ran away from home...right?" He was very obviously changing the subject.

Well, I guess it's fine. I could probably tell him what's going on while obfuscating some of the specific details.

And that's how we began to have a normal conversation.

"It's true," I agreed. "I ran away from home. I guess you could say I had a fight with my fiancé. Or rather, we got into an argument over our wedding."

"I'd assumed you were in some kind of abnormal circumstance, since you were traveling along the rooftops, but...I guess it was just a lovers' quarrel." Gilbert followed that up with something mumbled under his breath, something along the lines of how ridiculous it was.

Well, it wasn't really a lovers' quarrel, but maybe it seems that way to others?

"I have a relative in a similar situation," he continued, his voice tinged with anger. "It's this relative whose wedding was interrupted, and they keep bringing it up over, and over, and over again..."

"What?!" I cried out in excitement. "Their wedding got interrupted?! How wonderful!"

I would love to know how they canceled their wedding. Perhaps I can implement their method in my own life.

My eyes gleamed with curiosity as a beaming smile spread across my face.

Oh, wait. I'm sure that I still look expressionless.

It was easy to forget about it these days, but the muscles in my face still seemed, by and large, unresponsive. I wouldn't think about it, because I felt like my face was being expressive, and because Patrick and Eleanora had spent

enough time with me to be able to notice the minute differences in my countenance, but I had to keep in mind that most people barely noticed my face moving at all.

“Sure...?” Gilbert seemed a little baffled by my enthusiastic response. “Why don’t you tell me why you got into an argument over your wedding?”

“I suggested we either cancel it or have a much smaller-scale celebration, but my fiancé won’t budge about having a grand ceremony...”

“I see. I guess some women *are* like you. I apologize,” Gilbert said, sounding a bit awkward. “I misjudged you.”

Oh, he probably thought it was the other way around. Most people think women have stronger opinions when it comes to weddings.

“Why did your relative’s wedding get interrupted?” I asked. “I’d like to know for future reference.”

“A large crowd of uninvited guests swarmed the ceremony. It happened before I was born.”

A large crowd of uninvited guests... That would probably be difficult to recreate in another setting. Even if a crowd like that showed up at my wedding, all the servants of the Dolkness estate would do everything they could to shoo them away. What kind of a crowd would require Patrick or me to deal with it...? An army, maybe? Or monsters. Monsters would also do the job.

Perhaps I could use the monster-summoning flute under the guise of celebrating our marriage. Hm... I don’t think that would work unless I had one as big as the one Duke Hillrose used. A regular-size monster-summoning flute won’t summon anything if you use it in town.

Still, an idea was an idea. “Thank you very much,” I said to Gilbert. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I have to ask: why are you so against having a wedding?”

Obviously because it’s annoying, was what I was about to say, but I stopped myself. It occurred to me that until just a few days ago, the idea of forcefully canceling my wedding hadn’t even crossed my mind. *If I recall correctly, what*

started this all is...

“My fiancé has an older brother, and he is refusing to attend the wedding...”

“Pardon?” Gilbert’s tone became slightly harsh. “What kind of older brother doesn’t want to celebrate such a big milestone for his sibling?”

That’s right, Gilbert did mention that he has a younger brother. Being an older sibling himself, maybe he can’t forgive the way Patrick’s brother is behaving.

“He’s going to become my brother-in-law, but he doesn’t like me very much,” I explained.

“Did you two have some kind of conflict?”

“Not at all,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ve never even met him, but apparently he’s heard some nasty rumors about me...”

“He must not be a very good man if he just believes everything he hears. I’m not sure what kind of rumors have been spread about you, but I’m sure he’d recognize they’re untrue if he’d sit down and have an actual conversation with you.”

I could feel a silent anger radiating from him, as if my problems were an issue he was facing in his own life. I had merely alluded to the nasty rumors without explaining what they were, so it made me happy that he trusted me enough to declare they were lies.

The conversation was flowing a bit too well. It would be bad if I talked too freely and let something slip, so I returned my focus to eating. I’d only taken a few bites of the bread so far, but it was too painful to keep forcing myself to eat that bland ball of flour, so I reached for the dried meat instead.

It was similar to jerky, and it was much tougher than I’d expected it to be. I needed to use every bit of my jaw strength to tear off even the smallest bite. And it was salty... So much so that it was basically a salt bomb. I couldn’t taste any of the savory meat flavors that I was sure must be there somewhere. It just felt like I had a piece of rock salt sitting in my mouth.

Not only was the jerky incredibly salty, but it was far too tough. I had to let it sit in my mouth for a little while in order to soften it enough to swallow. The

sudden spike to my sodium intake left me horribly parched, and I downed my second glass of water.

“Your jaw strength is incredible,” Gilbert remarked.

I scrambled to invent an explanation. “We don’t have the luxury of always eating soft foods like city folk...”

That was close. I never thought my jaw strength could be the reason I might get outed as Yumiella. I’m glad I was able to come up with a good response that makes sense in the context of my countryside backstory.

I realized that since Gilbert was graciously sharing this meal with me, it would be polite to share my thoughts on the food in return. It was time for another food blog review.

“This, um, tastes like the top of a tree.”

“What?”

“While my current circumstances might make me seem somewhat unrefined, I do come from a decent background. Nevertheless, I’ve climbed a tree before. I believe that tree was a...maple. As I pulled myself up through the branches, a certain symbol popped into my mind...”

“I get it,” Gilbert said quickly. “You don’t have to tell me your thoughts on the food anymore.”

Yeah, I figured. Preserved foods aren’t very good, so no matter how appetizing my descriptions are, I’m sure he doesn’t want to hear them.

I returned to my meal, and silence descended upon the table. We continued to wordlessly masticate our portions of hard foods. The first person to break the silence was Gilbert.

“I’m also here for reasons that aren’t dissimilar to your choice to run away from home. It’s because of my relative’s betrothal.” Gilbert was an obviously suspicious person, so I was surprised that he would volunteer any information about himself at all.

Considering the unusualness of this house, he probably wasn’t *just* trying to avoid whatever family drama he’d left behind at home, but he had no reason to

lie right now. His lips had probably loosened because he found that he related to my situation.

Gilbert continued, speaking slowly. "I have a younger brother. He's an incredibly skilled young man, and he's going to get married soon."

"I would say congratulations, but it doesn't seem like you think it's good news..."

"Yes, you're right. You see, my brother's fiancée is the issue. She's an incredibly violent person, and her thought processes are abnormal."

A violent person with strange thought processes... Saying that you'd rather this person not be a part of your family would be putting it lightly.

It seemed like Gilbert had kept his grievances bottled up until now, and his words rushed out as if a dam had burst. "She's the kind of woman to settle everything with her fists. She even summons monsters and leaves people in dungeons without a second thought."

"Wouldn't your entire family be against him marrying someone like that?" I wondered.

Both of those situations sound like attempted murder. As a pacifist who tries to talk everything out, I can't believe how horrible this woman sounds.

I would expect the entire family to try and stop his younger brother from marrying this person, but judging from the fact that Gilbert had run away from home, that probably wasn't what was happening.

"My father and mother both agreed to the marriage. My mother is especially excited for them..."

"Um, if everyone else seems okay with it, then is your brother's fiancée really such a strange person?"

"I've wondered that too." Gilbert sighed. "My brother and our parents are all on board for this, and I'm the only one who's against it. I thought maybe I was the strange one, but objectively speaking, that woman is crazy. Even my brother agrees that she isn't normal, but he says he loves her despite that and still wants to marry her... I can't believe it."

Hm. I obviously don't have any direct experience with how abnormal this woman is, so I can't say for sure, but I've heard of cases like this before. It wasn't too uncommon for someone, regardless of gender, to be incredibly good-looking and a great person, but then they marry someone that makes you think, "Wait, why is that perfect superhuman with that person?"

"Um, this might not be the most delicate question, but...is your brother's taste in women...?"

Gilbert nodded sadly. "I believe so. I thought he'd grown up to be a good man, but his taste in women is the absolute worst."

"I'm sorry for your loss..." I said sympathetically.

It seemed like his brother's terrible taste was at fault here—that, and the horrible woman who had seduced his supposedly incredible brother.

As the only person in the family with a different opinion, it was probably difficult for Gilbert to stay at home.

"My brother is a really skilled man," my inadvertent housemate said wistfully. "Unlike me with my twisted personality, he's a really honest person... When he was younger, he'd run after me saying, 'Big brother, big brother!' Now he just calls me 'Gilbert'... Oh, how I long to be called 'big brother' again."

Gilbert seemed to have been holding all of this in for a really long time. He was being incredibly open and frank with some very personal feelings, and it was...a bit creepy.

He seems pretty obsessed with his brother. I feel like he wouldn't have blessed his brother's marriage in any case, no matter what kind of woman his fiancée was.

"Your brother must be important to you..." I observed.

"Of course. He's my only brother; we share the same blood..." He paused to consider. "No, I think I would've been fond of him even if we weren't siblings. I'm sure you'll understand how great he is if you ever meet him."

"Sure..." I half-heartedly agreed out of exasperation.

This man was a bit too fond of his brother, and he was wasting his

proselytization efforts on me; I had no interest in converting to the Church of Gilbert's Brother.

I've only got eyes for Patrick, so I don't need to meet him, whoever he is.

Gilbert continued to go on about how wonderful his younger brother was for the remainder of our meal. Several stories made me feel déjà vu—I'd heard similar stories from Patrick before. It seemed that brothers all over the world were quite similar.

Right as we were finishing the last of the food on our plates—or rather, the nutrients that we were generously classifying as “food”—I heard the distant sound of metal hitting wood. It was the sound of the object whose name I'd just learned earlier that day: the door knocker.

Even though we clearly had a guest, Gilbert didn't seem to be concerned with getting up. Just then, I heard the sound of the door unlocking as well.

If they have a key, do they live here? Why would they knock if they did? It seems like Gilbert knows who's here, though...

As these various thoughts ran through my mind, I could hear that the guest had entered the house and was heading our way.

“It seems as if I have a visitor,” Gilbert said at last. “We're going to be talking. I apologize, but do you mind giving us some space?”

“Of course. Not a problem,” I said.

This unknown person and I can't help but see one another, but he didn't tell me to hide, so I'm guessing it's okay for me to meet this person. They're assuredly a stranger anyway.

The visitor appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. He was exactly what I'd been certain did *not* exist right before we sat down to eat this meal—an acquaintance shared between Gilbert and me.

“Hello, is Sir Gilbert her—” The moment the visitor and I recognized each other, we both froze. He gaped at me. “Why are *you* here?!”

“It's Linus, right...?” I asked.

It was Linus, a secret agent of the Kingdom of Lemlaesta.



This was my third time meeting Linus.

When I was a student at the Academy, he had come to me and asked me to turn on Valschein. He offered to reward me with anything I wanted, but I wasn't someone who was so easily swayed with sweet promises like that. It turned out that Linus had expected as much, and he'd only been reaching out to me because his bosses had forced him to.

The second time we met was at the Ashbatten Mark. He was apparently part of the Lemlaestan royal army, and he had been forced to serve as the de facto commander at the time. Ryu and I had landed right between Lemlaesta's and Valschein's armies, and the Lemlaestan army had crumbled in seconds. The original commander, the second prince of Lemlaesta, and the officers all ended up fleeing from Ryu's unbearable adorableness, so Linus had been the one to participate in the ceasefire negotiations with the margrave.

And now, this marked our third meeting. Linus was likely the only Lemlaestan who could recognize my face, let alone had ever had a conversation with me. I couldn't believe that out of everyone in the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta, I had somehow run into him.

To be fair, of the two of us, I was the one who shouldn't have been here. Out of shock, he almost said my name.

"Why are you here, Cou—"

"It's *Eleanora*," I said, interrupting him.

"Huh?"

"It's been a while. My name is *Eleanora*," I repeated, trying to imply that he would be sorry if he called me "Countess Dolkness."

Linus silently nodded, and then nodded again. Gilbert already knew that Eleanora wasn't my real name, but as long as Linus didn't say the name "Yumiella Dolkness," I didn't think it mattered.

Linus then turned to Gilbert and cautiously asked, "What should I call you...?"

"You can call me Gilbert as usual. I'm surprised you know Eleanora."

“Of course, Sir Gilbert... Why is it that just one of you is using a pseudonym?”

Shoot, he outed me. It's fine since Gilbert already knows, but Linus doesn't know that he's aware... I thought he was a more careful agent than that.

Gilbert seemed to arrive at the same conclusion.

“I know that her name isn't actually Eleanora, but...I don't think it's your place to expose that,” he admonished.

“What...? Oh yes, I'm sorry...” Linus seemed confused by the whole situation, but he still apologized. Though he didn't seem satisfied, he continued the conversation, turning his attention back to me. “Lady Eleanora...is it? What brings you here?”

“I ran away from home,” I said.

“I see... Why did you come all the way here?”

“It was a coincidence. I didn't mean to come here specifically.”

Linus was somewhat aware of my attitudes towards the political climate between our two kingdoms, so he was probably baffled to find Yumiella Dolkness in Lemlaesta.

It's not my fault. I came crashing down from outside the atmosphere.

The agent's confusion was evident in the tone of his voice. “I didn't believe you were familiar with this place, Lady Eleanora.”

By “this place,” he must mean this house, and not the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta. Well, yeah, I had no prior information of this mysterious residence in the neighboring kingdom.

Gilbert was the one to respond to his implied question.

“She arrived here by true coincidence. She crashed through the roof,” he explained.

“Oh, so she fell from the sky,” Linus said, as if this explained everything.

“The sky?” Gilbert blinked in confusion. “She was walking across the rooftops of the houses here, and she fell through my roof.”

Usually, if one were to hear that someone crashed through a roof, they would

expect that the person's foot must have punched through the roof while they were standing on top of it. I could tell what Linus thought had happened when he suggested that I'd just fallen straight from the sky, and what that meant about his impression of me.

If a black-haired girl who looked to be roughly twenty fell from the sky, then she would undoubtedly be Yumiella. I have to refute this theory at once.

"How would a person ever fall from the sky?" I asked, looking significantly at Linus. "If that did somehow happen, they'd surely be badly injured."

Linus probably knew that falling from a great height wasn't enough to injure me, but he swallowed whatever he had been planning to say and gave a faint nod. He seemed uncomfortable with the entire situation, and he darted his eyes around the room before turning his focus back to Gilbert.

"So how is it actually meeting her?" the agent asked, seeming genuinely curious. "You seemed to really dislike her, but she's pretty normal once you actually talk to her, right? I certainly never expected that she would run away from home and end up in the same place as you."

It was Gilbert's turn to look confused. I was also unsure of what Linus was hinting at.

"What do you mean?" Gilbert asked.

"This is the first time you're actually meeting, um, Lady Eleanora, correct?"

"Of course I haven't met her before... How do you two know one another?"

"What? I believe I've told you in the past when you asked me about her, Sir Gilbert," Linus responded.

The two men stared at each other. They seemed to be having two completely different conversations. Gilbert fell silent and thought for a moment before clearing his throat and getting the topic back on track.

"You can forget about her. You've arrived a bit earlier than we agreed on. Is there some burning issue I need to deal with?"

"Oh, I apologize, I got distracted due to my surprise. It seems—"

"Hold on." Gilbert cut him off quietly but sharply. "Don't forget that there's

an outsider here.”

He wants me to leave. I'll leave them alone before he tells me to do so.

Just as I was about to get up, Linus's listless voice said, “What are you talking about? She should be here for this.”

Don't get me involved. Considering Linus's job and how suspicious this house is, Gilbert's probably a spy for Lemlaesta or something... Wait, if that were true, why would he be hiding out in his own kingdom?

I was confusing myself with these thoughts, but it was clear that I wasn't involved in any of this. It was better to leave before I heard something I wasn't meant to hear.

See, Linus? Even Gilbert seems dubious. He doesn't want me to be here.

“She's an outsider,” Gilbert reiterated.

“This is related to Lady Eleanora as well,” Linus insisted.

“If you say so...” Gilbert didn't seem convinced, but he clearly wanted to prioritize getting the information quickly. I'd lost my chance to leave, and I was now somehow involved in their secret meeting.

“I'll make it short. The army has started making its move,” Linus reported.

“Are you sure?” Gilbert asked. “It's possible that the soldiers here are just getting transferred to a staging base.”

“The entire army has definitely started moving forwards. I've received word from my subordinates in Tytenia, where the main forces were last stationed.”

I was starting to get an idea of what was going on. It appeared that Lemlaesta was deploying their army, likely to the Kingdom of Valschein. If that was the case, it would explain why Linus wanted me here, so my hunch was probably correct. I didn't know enough to participate in their conversation, so I continued my sleuthing as a silent observer.

“That's so soon,” Gilbert muttered. “I'd heard that they could move out right away, but...I'm sure they're not fully prepared.”

“That's correct. We're currently investigating the reason for them moving up

their timeline.”

Linus was here to communicate what his own kingdom’s army was up to, and Gilbert was doing...something while hiding out in the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta. Those two facts together meant that Gilbert was a secret agent from Valschein who was sent to Lemlaesta, while Linus was a double agent betraying his kingdom. In other words, Linus was leaking his own nation’s state secrets to an agent from the neighboring kingdom.

Wow...my brain is super sharp today. I feel like I could realize anything now that I’ve figured out Gilbert is from Valschein so quickly... Wait. Gilbert, Gilbert...if Gilbert is a citizen of Valschein... That sounds familiar...?

I was starting to get worried. If what I had so proudly deduced was completely off, then I would be totally embarrassed.

I can’t take any actions based only on my own assumptions. I need to make sure I’m correct.

As Gilbert sat there thinking, resting his head contemplatively in his hands, I turned and asked Linus, “Um, is it correct to say that you’ve betrayed your kingdom?” Right as the words left my mouth, I realized I’d messed up. “Betrayed” hadn’t been the most sensitive word choice... Perhaps “converted from” or “transferred loyalties” would have been a better way to put it.

My poor selection of vocabulary seemed to have gone over just as badly as I expected, and Linus let out an uncomfortable, nervous chuckle before responding.

“I guess you could say that... In my defense, I *am* only doing what I believe is best for the entire kingdom... I apologize for getting you involved in our succession struggles.”

“You were on the side of the first prince, correct?” I asked.

“Yes, but that was just because my family and faction were on that side.”

I see, so he didn’t just completely transfer his loyalties to Valschein. Since he’s a supporter of the first prince, it must be the second prince’s faction that’s deployed the army... So he’s leaking information from his political opponent to get in their way. Still, I’m worried about Linus. If this comes to light, the second

prince's faction won't forgive him for this perceived betrayal, and he might even be abandoned by his own people.

"Is there really a need for you to put yourself into such danger...?"

"I'm not interested in this succession squabble, or rather, the political battle dressed up as one, but the second prince's faction is saying they'll shut down the First Armory. I want to avoid that, no matter what, for the sake of Lemlaesta."

The First Armory was the place at which the woman from the magical-instrument shop used to work. That was the place where they didn't make anything that was immediately useful, but they were researching certain items that might develop into something amazing one day. For instance, even though it wasn't useful for large-scale deployment, they were skilled enough to invent something similar to a gun.

"Do you feel that way because you think the First Armory is necessary to invest in the kingdom's future?" I asked curiously.

"You're aware of it? I'm surprised."

"It's just what I heard from the owner of a magical-instrument shop," I admitted.

Investing in the kingdom's future... The shopkeeper said she couldn't care less about that, but that's probably how those outside of the First feel about its place in Lemlaestan society. The researchers there seem to want nothing more than to be allowed to develop magical instruments to their heart's content. Either way, I understand the situation now. Seems like my assumptions weren't too far off.

I still had one more thing to confirm.

"So, it's the second prince's faction that's deploying an army, correct?"

"No, it's the first prince's faction."

Huh? Linus is in the first prince's faction, and he wants the first prince to succeed to the throne for the sake of the kingdom's magi-technology, but he's leaking information about the first prince to an enemy kingdom...

Once I followed the thread of facts, I was left even more confused. Perhaps my assumption that Gilbert was from Valschein was incorrect.

“Gilbert is from Valschein, right?”

“Of course he is,” Linus said, affirming my thought. Though I’d gained a lot of information thus far, that just added another mystery.

Linus seemed happy to answer all of my questions, so I wanted to figure out what he was thinking, but Gilbert finally opened his mouth after being silent all this time.

“This doesn’t change the plan,” he said firmly.

“But—” Linus protested.

“They’ve probably already heard of our plan,” Gilbert said, interrupting him. “If *that* doesn’t make it in time, I won’t ever accept *that*. That’s all there is to it.”

“What?! Make it in time? But...” Linus trailed off as Gilbert glared daggers at him.

It appeared that because of the unexpectedly fast-tracked deployment of the Lemlaestan army, led by the first prince for some reason, their plan had become especially precarious. However, none of this had anything to do with me, so I didn’t really care.

Gilbert launched into a rapid-fire set of instructions. “You’re the supervisor of the main forces. We’ll send out a contact person, but I need you to let us know as soon as you’re able to confirm the reason they moved up the timeline of their plans. You can send word to my home.”

“Understood. What will you do, Sir Gilbert?”

“I’ll go on ahead to the designated battlegrounds.”

“Then will Coun—” Linus caught himself. “I mean, will Lady Eleanora also be going with you?”

Can you get used to my alias already, Linus? Well, I guess I can’t judge him too harshly, because every time I’m referred to as Eleanora, I think, “What? Lady Eleanora is here?”

Now that I knew that Gilbert was from Valschein, there wasn't really a compelling reason for me to hide who I was.

Actually, does any of this even have anything to do with me? Can't we just end things here? I'd like to use what I've learned to support the Ashbatten army.

"Her? Coming with me...?" Gilbert asked, clearly baffled.

"No, no. Nothing good will come of me being there," I said. Both of us were on the same page about my complete noninvolvement.

Linus was clearly surprised at our instant rejection of the idea that I would go with Gilbert. He thought for a moment before seemingly coming to a realization.

"I didn't think it was possible, but could it be that you haven't been told about the plan?!" Linus asked incredulously, indicating me.

Yeah, of course not. I'm just an unrelated outsider.

Linus looked back to Gilbert and asked, "You haven't told her about the plan?"

"I haven't... Is that necessary?" Gilbert responded.

Hearing his answer, Linus appeared to panic. It felt like he'd surpassed some kind of deeply felt irritation, and it was clearly making him upset. Linus had thus far spoken humbly, maintaining a lower position to those around him, but now his tone became harsh. "Sir Gilbert, you must thoroughly brief her on the plan! Otherwise, we'll never get anywhere!"

"But—" Gilbert began, but this time it was Linus who interrupted.

"After that, you two can discuss what she'll be doing. Is that clear?" Gilbert seemed overwhelmed by the agent's outburst. Linus continued speaking as he got up from the table. "Do you understand? Tell her *everything* about the plan. I'll be returning to my position! We don't have much time, so goodbye!" Despite his anger, Linus still gave us a stiff bow before turning around and quickly departing the kitchen.

We sat there completely stunned, only snapping back to reality once we heard the front door slam shut.

“He’s gone...” I remarked.

“What was that about?” Gilbert wondered, shaking his head in amazement.

“I’ve never seen Linus get that worked up before...”

Interlude 2: Patrick (Part 1)

Roughly an entire day had passed since Yumiella, the lord of the Dolkness estate, had departed. It was late autumn, and winter was nearing. Without any care for the night's cold, Patrick was standing outside and looking up at the moon shining in the night sky.

"I really thought she'd be home by today..." he murmured.

Yumiella had spouted some nonsense about going to the moon and flown off on her dragon Ryuu's back, and Patrick had chased after them using magic to create a gale that bore him aloft into the sky. He still had a fear of heights, so he always preferred to stay away from flying high up in the air, even under the power of his own magic.

However, he'd been worried for Yumiella, and he'd also been just a bit nervous that she might actually go to the moon and never come back—though, most of his concerns were for the inevitable damage that Yumiella would cause to the area when she crash-landed, as well as whatever difficult things she might say when she finally returned.

"I wouldn't put it past her to say something like, 'Why didn't you run after me? Are you really okay with me leaving?' ..."

His various complicated feelings *had* resulted in him running after her, but he hadn't been strong enough to actually reach Yumiella. He'd been able to stop Ryuu, but Yumiella had continued to ascend on her own.

Right below the ascension limit of dragons, who were masters of the sky, the air was incredibly thin, to the point where it was difficult for a human to breathe. Patrick's magic, which manipulated wind—in other words, air—wasn't as effective at that altitude.

In order to get any higher than he'd managed, he would have required pure power. Patrick had considered that if he were a high-level fire mage, he might've been able to fly higher (although a lack of oxygen would weaken

flames as well). He unfortunately had no aptitude for fire magic, and he was capable only of producing a flame no larger than a candle's—it wasn't his fault for not understanding how fire magic worked.

"Maybe I should've just kept going without thinking about the consequences..." He sighed.

Though he wasn't able to use his wind magic at that altitude, he still had another method that he might have used to follow after her. He could have shot out pure magical energy to boost his body upwards, just as Yumiella had done. It looked similar to the manner in which high-ranking fire mages flew, but the mechanics were completely different. It was an incredibly, exceedingly inefficient method of locomotion.

Humans moved by expanding and contracting their muscles, and their bodies delivered the necessary energy to do so through the bloodstream. If standard elemental magic was like pumping your leg muscles to run, then flying using pure magical energy like Yumiella had done was equivalent to opening a vein and shooting blood out to propel yourself forwards. It wasn't something most magic users would even consider, and it was a method that was by most metrics the height of nonsense. Most people would run out of mana before they'd be able to move their bodies even an inch.

Being of an aristocratic background, Patrick had been lucky enough to inherit the quality of having naturally large stores of mana, and these had been further increased as his level went up, but he calculated that he would run out of mana after less than a minute if he were to attempt to fly using pure magical energy alone.

Patrick finally gave his neck a break and stopped craning his head to stare at the sky, but he continued to ponder Yumiella's whereabouts.

"It gets harder to breathe the higher you go up," he considered. "If you go any higher than that, you might not be able to breathe at all. It'd be like being underwater. The distance to the moon is...well, it's surely closer than any star..."

He couldn't even begin to imagine how far the moon was from the ground. If

the moon were as big as the stars, then it had to be much closer than any star. However, he supposed that it was also possible that stars were actually quite small and much closer to the ground, while the moon was much larger and much farther, or it might even be that some stars were small and close, while others were gigantic and far away, and the moon just fell somewhere on that spectrum...

What about the sun, then? I wonder if you'd just burn up getting close to that kind of heat.

Such thoughts had never crossed Patrick's mind before. He regretted discarding such wondering under the assumption that it was the kind of thing academics dealt with and was of no practical use to him.

Thinking back on it, Patrick felt that Yumiella was quite well-versed when it came to natural science. She had once taught him about the reason why the sky was blue, and she'd explained at one point that all physical objects in the world were made up of incredibly small particles.

He'd ignored her more outlandish statements about brown cows that produced something called chocolate milk, and that there was a place called a "theme park" that sold the meat of strange creatures under the guise of smoked poultry, but if she was right about other things, then perhaps these things existed too.

Since this was the very same Yumiella who had declared that humans in her otherworld had landed on the surface of the moon, he was forced to admit that was probably also true.

Patrick lifted his head up once again to look at the moon.

"Are you on the moon, Yumiella...?" he asked, knowing he wouldn't get an answer. Surprisingly, though, there *was* a response. A voice spoke from the dark ground near his feet.

"No way, it's impossible. Even she couldn't get to the moon."

"Oh, it's you, Lemn..."

"It's the first time we've spoken one-on-one," the god of darkness observed.

The entire area was so dark that there wasn't anywhere that looked distinctly like a shadow, but Lemn still managed to appear from Patrick's faint shadow cast by the dim moonlight.

Patrick's face twisted into a grimace when Lemn came into view. He couldn't help but think that Lemn was endlessly shady and always seemed to be up to no good.

"What's wrong?" Lemn asked. "Did I do something to make you hate me, mister? Oh, are you the jealous type that hates any guy who gets near *her*?"

"You're planning to kill Yumiella whenever you get the chance to, aren't you?" Patrick accused. "Am I also a target?"

"Nope, I could easily handle someone of your strength. I'm a bit late, but congratulations on reaching level 99."

"So you don't deny what I said about Yumiella."

"Well, no," the god of darkness said with a shrug, as if this ought to have gone without saying. "She turned back time in a world, and can move between worlds. I can't let someone as dangerous as her run around. However, now that she's unlocked her level cap... Well, my hands are tied right now. I won't do anything to her until I've found a way to fight her."

Le mn's casual tone almost made Patrick relax, but he stayed cautious. This rotten god wouldn't have appeared unless he had a reason. Patrick believed he'd shown himself precisely because Yumiella wasn't present.

"If you're here for Yumiella, you'll have to come back another time," Patrick pointed out.

"Even if I'm hiding in the shadows, she can tell when I'm near, so I thought I could come by now that she's gone. She's not here at the moment, right?"

"She's gone to the moon."

"The moon, huh...? No matter how physically high she got, there's no way she could reach it..." Lemn remarked.

Patrick thought that it made sense that she couldn't go to the moon after all, but he'd noticed something strange about Lemn's choice of words.

“Physically high...? Does that mean she could go to the moon using another method?”

“What you want to know is where she is right now, right, mister?”

Lemn was very obviously avoiding the topic, but Patrick had no interest in how to get to the moon anyway. He couldn't help but take the bait and ignore the obvious evasion, because Lemn seemed to know where his fiancée was located.

“You know where Yumiella is?” Patrick asked eagerly.

“Yeah, she's on land. It seems like she's at mister's house right now.”

“Do you mean she's gone to the Mark of Ashbatten?”

Lemn shook his head. “No, farther than that. She's at mister's house, alone with mister.”

Patrick had initially assumed that this “mister” referred to himself, so his first thought was of the Ashbatten Mark. However, as their conversation continued it was clear that this “mister” was referring to someone else. Lemn's stubborn habit of not referring to humans by name was terribly annoying.



“Who’s this ‘mister,’ and where is he?” Patrick asked, trying to keep the exasperation out of his voice.

“Mister is mister,” Lemn said with a shrug.

“Be more detailed.”

“He’s your mister.”

Patrick could only guess that Lemn was trying to be vague on purpose, and he decided there was no point to continuing this conversation. All he knew was that Yumiella was staying at some man’s house, which left him feeling irritated but with nowhere to direct that frustration. He also felt slightly panicked at the idea that there existed another man aside from him who could spend time with Yumiella without any issues.

Complex feelings started to swirl inside of Patrick, and his expression clouded over. Seeing this reaction, a mocking grin spread across Lemn’s face.

“Oh, it looks like someone’s here. I’ll be off, then. Bye!”

By the time Patrick turned back to where Lemn had been standing, all that remained of his presence was a slightly wobbling shadow.

He focused his hearing and heard the rhythmic clop of a horse’s hooves. It was rare for the estate to have visitors at night, and the fact that they came by horse indicated that they must have come from out of town.

Patrick headed to the estate’s formal entrance.

Once he reached the gates, Patrick easily hopped over the fence and walked to the edge of the road that led to the estate. The clacking of hooves grew closer, coming towards him. A muscular warhorse materialized out of the darkness, and Patrick stared at the person astride its back.

“Is that...Rufus?” he wondered.

Rufus was one of the vassals of the Ashbatten family. He was about ten years older than Patrick, and Patrick had memories of playing with him as a child. Because Rufus was of similar age to Patrick’s older brother, the vassal currently served as Gilbert’s attendant.

It was strange for him to be sent elsewhere as a courier for the Ashbatten family, which led Patrick to believe that he carried a confidential message from his older brother.

The warhorse slowed down and stopped before the estate. Rufus started speaking as he dismounted.

“I apologize for the intrusion so late at night. I’ve come from the Ashbatten... Oh, Sir Patrick, I didn’t realize it was you.” Once he’d gotten closer, he finally realized it was Patrick standing before him. His expression questioned what Patrick was doing in front of the estate gates at night, but he said nothing and instead quickly pulled out an envelope from his shirt pocket.

“I knew it was you, Rufus,” Patrick greeted him. “What are you doing here?”

“I have a letter from the young master. It’s dark here, so we should—”

“It’s no problem. I can read it here. It’s urgent, isn’t it?”

Patrick opened up the letter and used only the moonlight to scan its contents. Rufus stood beside him so as to not cast a shadow and peered over his shoulder, but he tilted his head, unable to read it in the dark. Since he was bold enough to make no secret of his nosiness, Patrick assumed that Rufus was aware of the letter’s contents. He continued to read through his brother’s words.

Once he finished, he held his brother’s face in his mind’s eye as he mumbled, “Lose the war with Lemlaesta, huh?”

Chapter 6: The Hidden Boss Heads to the Battlegrounds

After Linus departed, the room fell silent. I digested what I had learned: Gilbert was apparently from the Kingdom of Valschein, and he was colluding with Linus. As an unrelated party, I wanted to pretend I hadn't heard anything and just leave as if nothing had happened, but Linus had left behind a parting gift—he had advised Gilbert to detail the full scope of the plan to me. He didn't even give me a chance to ask why *I* needed to know about the plan.

Gilbert was staring at me as if to say, "Just who is she?" I couldn't take it anymore, so I broke the silence and said, "I didn't realize you were from Valschein."

"What about you?" Gilbert asked, a little suspiciously. "What kingdom are you from? I assumed Lemlaesta, since you know Linus, but..."

Maybe I can reveal who I am since we're from the same kingdom... No, I can't. Terrible rumors about me don't only circulate here, they're prevalent back home in Valschein too.

People in my kingdom didn't go as far as to treat me like some kind of boogeyman, but having others assume that I was some crazy person who indiscriminately shot dark magic spells was just part of my daily life.

And so, in order to avoid any unnecessary chaos, I decided that it would be more prudent to continue hiding my identity.

"Who cares about me?" I remarked airily. "There's no problem with you thinking of me as someone who isn't bound to the framework of national borders... Like a fairy or something."

"I do, in fact, have a problem with that."

"Do you?"

I guess there's a problem after all.

I felt like I'd had a similar interaction in the past. Trying to find the source of this déjà vu, I stared at Gilbert's face, and for some reason I began to see a resemblance to Patrick.

Maybe I'm so Patrick-deficient that I'm starting to see him in any man with gray hair.

"Since Linus had insisted so strongly, I guess I should be telling you about the plan," Gilbert grumbled.

"Oh, there's no need. I don't really care to know about it," I said.

"Still, I can't fully trust you."

"Like I said, I don't want to hear about it," I repeated.

I didn't need to know about any plans to know that what I had to do right now was fend off the army making their way to the Mark of Ashbatten. I wanted to travel there as quickly as possible. It would be best if Gilbert and I could split up to do our own things without saying another word to one another. But he continued on, ignoring what I had said.

"How about this? I'll tell you on the way there," he offered.

Now I was lost. "On the way where...?"

"I'm going to head to the Ashbatten Mark tomorrow. As we go, I'll tell you about the plan, just as Linus instructed me to do. If you prove to be untrustworthy and you turn on me at the mark, you won't be able to do anything to mess up the plan." It was a course of action that balanced Linus's instructions to Gilbert and Gilbert's distrust for me.

I guess I don't mind, since we both want to go to the same place. I only vaguely know which direction to go, and I was admittedly worried that I would get lost on the way to the mark.

If you've ever seen students on a field trip, you'd know that it takes more time than one would expect to transport a large group of people from one point to another. Even if Gilbert and I left tomorrow, we'd be able to reach the border well before an army.

According to the conversation he had with Linus, Gilbert's plan is to arrive at

the mark before the army, so I guess it sounds like a good idea for me to go with him.

“Understood.” I nodded. “What time will we be leaving tomorrow?”

“We’ll leave at sunrise. You should get to sleep early tonight.” With that, Gilbert stood and headed upstairs, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

Up to this point, I had just been going with the flow, and now it seemed like I was going to end up back home earlier than I had planned. I glanced out the window, and I noticed that it had already gotten dark outside. I thought about what might happen once I returned home.

I guess we’re going to have the wedding after all. It’s true that I don’t like the event itself, but I also kind of hate that Patrick’s brother isn’t coming. I haven’t gotten a chance to meet him yet, and I need to make that happen somehow.

This was most likely a problem that wouldn’t be solved just by letting things play out by themselves. It would be a miracle if we somehow managed to meet without knowing and it turned out that I had already overturned his horrible impression of me, but that would never happen.

I guess I can agree to have the wedding if we can hold it on the smallest possible scale... Well, either way, there’s no point in thinking about this now.

I had nothing else to do, so I, too, headed upstairs, returning to the room that had been provided for me. I lay down on the bed and shut my eyes, but it didn’t seem like I was going to fall asleep. I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. I couldn’t help but get lost in my thoughts.

Why does Patrick’s brother hate me? I wondered. *I mean, sure, I have some ideas of why he might... Oh, right. I was just thinking about how it’s no use thinking about all this now.*

I decided to set aside my thoughts of Patrick’s brother and think about something else: Gilbert.

Because of Linus, I now know where Gilbert is from, but some things are still unclear, like this plan that he’s going to tell me about tomorrow.

Ugh, I don’t really want to know the details... That was what I had acted like I

was thinking, but I had to admit to myself that I was actually very curious. I didn't want to get involved by knowing about the plan, but if I could just be an uninvolved observer, that sounded like it might be interesting.

One of the most confusing things about this whole situation was that the army headed towards the Ashbatten Mark had been deployed by the first prince of Lemlaesta. Linus, a member of the first prince's faction, was leaking sensitive information about his plans... *Wait, I wonder: is it the opposite? Is it actually Gilbert who's betraying his kingdom, not Linus?*



The faint light of the sunrise woke me. It seemed that my concern that I wouldn't be able to get up on time had been an unfounded one. I stretched and got up from the unfamiliar bed. I wasn't going to be coming back here, so I made the bed and scanned the room to make sure that I wasn't leaving anything behind.

I headed downstairs, where I found Gilbert already awake. He was eating from a plate piled with the same preserved foods that we'd dined on yesterday.

"Good morning," I greeted him.

"You're awake. I was just about to go wake you up." Gilbert washed down whatever was in his mouth with some water before quickly standing. A pair of plain brown cloaks were draped over the chair next to him, and he grabbed them and handed one to me. "We're leaving right away. It's an exhausting trip, so we'll need the whole day."

Before I could even put on the cloak, he immediately started moving. Because the cloak seemed to have been designed specifically for long-distance travels, it was meant to cover an entire outfit, and it was much too long for me. If I wore it normally, the hem would likely drag along the ground. For now, I just put on the hat and hid my hair. I balled the cloak up under my arm and followed after Gilbert.

Once we got outside, Gilbert still showed no signs of stopping or even slowing down, so I gave up on wearing the cloak for now and walked alongside him.

"I'll buy you breakfast at a stall when we pass one," he promised.

“Thank you... Where are we headed right now?” We were moving in what I was pretty sure was the wrong direction—we should’ve been leaving the Royal Capital, yet we were headed towards the center of the city. I turned the cloak around in my hands, unable to distinguish the top from the bottom after I had balled it up.

“There’s a trading company that Linus reached out to for me. We’ll be renting horses there... Do you have any horseback-riding experience?”

“I don’t.” Then I reconsidered and added, “Oh, but I’m always riding something that’s not a horse.”

“Donkeys are different from horses, but...” Gilbert shrugged. “As long as you learn how to tell it to stop and go, it’ll walk along the roads.”

Actually, I ride a dragon, not a donkey... I guess they’re similar—they’re both adorable, sweet animals. Man, I’m excited that I’m going to ride a horse...

I’d had several opportunities to ride horses in the past, but the cute little horsies always seemed to be off their game, so Horse Lord Yumiella never became a thing.

I should stop trying to muddle the truth... The real reason I don’t have any horseback riding experience is because horses are scared of me. I’m sure these horses will also go crazy the moment I get close, and once again I won’t be able to ride one. I bet that’s what will happen.

“What will happen if I can’t ride the horse?” I asked.

“I guess you’ll have no choice but to sit behind me on mine. A carriage wouldn’t get us there in time, and those cause a lot of other inconveniences too.”

Riding a horse together sounds nice, but I’m not asking about what would happen if I fail to ride the horse—I’m asking what happens if the horses reject me. I’m sure they’re going to go crazy. No matter how skilled of a horse it is, it’ll probably be terrified. I already know how things will play out. Even if it’s a horse from another kingdom, I’m sure...

“I apologize, they’re usually calm...”

We stood in the stable built next to the trading company. The stablehand's apology echoed in the tall rafters.

As soon as I had arrived, the horses seemed to be slightly unsettled. I was told I could pick any horse I wanted, but as soon as I began staring at the adorable horsies, this had happened. Usually I was optimistic, thinking things would work out, but they never did—I thought that if I instead thought that things *wouldn't* work out this time, maybe they actually would...but my efforts appeared to have been in vain.

The proud and presumably usually well-behaved horses had thrown themselves into a frenzy as if to say, “No, we don't want to, we're scared of letting Yumiella ride us.” They were thrashing around to the point that they seemed like they might tear the ropes tying them to their stalls. The caretaker, who had clearly spent more time with these horses than anyone else, seemed completely stunned.

“Hey, what's going on with you guys?!” he scolded them, then turned to us. “I apologize. They seem to be afraid of something.” The stablehand began looking around, searching for any abnormalities in the environment that might be spooking the animals.

I'm sorry, the abnormality is me. Animals fear me terribly. It's so bad that I never even see a single bug around me.

As I apologized in my thoughts, I looked askance to see Gilbert completely dumbfounded.

“What's happening...?” he wondered aloud.

“Let's just run there,” I suggested. “If we can get there in time on horseback, then running will also be fast enough, won't it?”

I had seen horses walking alongside the main roads before. They weren't running at full speed like racehorses, since they had to be continuously traveling the entire day. While they were much faster than a person on foot, they were still basically just lightly jogging. If a human had leveled up to a certain extent, it wouldn't be difficult to travel the same distance as a horse. Just being level 20 or 30 was surely high enough for the right amount of speed.

“I could get there on time on foot, but as for you...” Gilbert looked at me skeptically. “Right, you’re level 13. I guess I have some concerns, but...”

“I’ll be all right,” I assured him. “I’ve always had a lot of stamina.”

“I guess we have no choice. I’ll carry you if it comes to it,” he said with a sigh.

We had given up on riding horses to our destination, so we left the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta on foot instead, walking along the main roads. Now that the sun had fully risen, the path before us was well lit, and I ate some bread that Gilbert had purchased for me as we walked. I let Gilbert set our speed, and I kept up with him easily.

“I’m surprised you can do that,” he remarked.

“Huh?” I asked, confused. Gilbert slowed down and looked at me. His eyes were on the strawberry jam-filled bread in my hands. “By ‘that,’ do you mean that this is poor etiquette? I’ll remind you that you were the one who told me to eat as we walked.”

He shook his head. “Not that. I’m surprised that you can keep up with me while eating.”

I shrugged. “Well, you’re not going that fast.”

“I wanted to see how much stamina you have, so I tried speeding up too, but you’re keeping up with me perfectly. Does that mean you could go even faster?”

I see, no wonder why he was suddenly decelerating and accelerating. I guess I don’t seem like a normal person if I can keep eating even while he’s speeding up. It’s hard to hide that I’m Yumiella.

“It’s difficult,” I lied. “I had to jog while eating, so the side of my abdomen is starting to hurt.”

“Sorry for trying to test you...”

“It’s fine. I’ll get better after walking slowly.”

“I apologize, you’re not very expressive, so...” He seemed to come to some realization. “Wait. Could it be?”

As Gilbert slowed down and looked at me, I worried that he was thinking of Yumiella because of my lack of expressiveness. Once again, trying to hide that I was Yumiella made it look like I was Yumiella. It seemed that I was always Yumiella after all.

I'm still ostensibly hiding my identity, so I'll try to casually change the subject.

"You were going to tell me something on the road, correct?"

"Oh, that. I'm from Valschein, but I'm pulling strings so that Lemlaesta can win. That's all there is to it." He stated this with remarkable casualness.

"Would I be correct to interpret that as you betraying the Kingdom of Valschein?"

"I guess that would be correct."

I see, so you're committing treason. I guess everything will be settled if I take down Gilbert the Rebel.

As I prepared to deliver my Yumiella Punch, Gilbert continued his explanation, seemingly unashamed.

"I'm sure you can guess what's going on after hearing my conversation with Linus," he said without any hesitation. "Linus's allies are currently on the move. Despite how he seems, he's a patriot. He's loyal to his kingdom, and he didn't care to join us."

"You tried to recruit Linus? You're in a position to do such a thing? You're the one who needs to join the other side, aren't you?"

It was only a bit, but I was surprised to discover that I was angry, even though I had not a single ounce of loyalty to the Kingdom of Valschein. Perhaps, as Duke Hillrose had warned me in the past that I might, I had finally ended up feeling fond of the kingdom.

I mean, even if a battle breaks out somewhere unrelated to me... Oh, right. The battle's going to be at the Mark of Ashbatten—that's Patrick's home! Of course I would be upset. What a relief: it looks like I can continue to avoid feeling any patriotism.

Gilbert accelerated, and I easily matched his pace even though most people

would have needed to run to keep up with him. He brushed his bangs absently away from his eyes and let out a little groan.

“Where should I begin... First off, I’m part of the Ashbatten household. It’s not my intention for the battle to escalate.”

“Then there’s no reason to lose on purpose. If you’re with the margrave, shouldn’t you want to thoroughly take down the Lemlaestan army?” I asked. “You could learn a thing or two from the margravine.”

“I have nothing to learn from *her*...”

A bitter look came across his face and he turned away the moment I brought up Patrick’s mother. She was famous for wishing for the annihilation of Lemlaesta above all else, so I wondered if that was why.

I’m assuming he’s a vassal of the Ashbattens or something, but isn’t it rude to refer to your lord’s wife as “her”?

“That’s a bit much,” I admonished him. “She’s kind as long as Lemlaesta isn’t involved...or so I’ve heard.”

“That’s the thing. I’m not fond of people whose thoughts and actions are hard to read.”

Well, I guess I can understand being uncomfortable with people who lose their minds when a specific topic comes up. I feel like I’ve recently heard about someone else who feels the same way.

Gilbert looked resolutely forwards once again, and he continued in a dispassionate tone. “War... To Valschein, it’ll just seem like a squabble in the countryside, but from Lemlaesta’s perspective, it’s a full-blown war. Winning isn’t always the right answer.”

“Um... Are you trying to say that keeping war from happening in the first place is the best option?”

Of course, it was best if military engagements like war and other conflicts never occurred in the first place. However, that was just an ideal—in both the history of my previous world and in this one, humans continued to go to war again and again. Still, it didn’t feel right to be resigned to the idea that this was

just human nature. Perhaps it was thanks to the people who continued to chase after the ideals of peace that wars like this didn't grow to a larger scale...

I thought that I would end up caught in a debate about war with Gilbert, one that had no real answer, but that didn't seem to be the case. He continued in a quiet tone.

"The ideal solution would generally be to prevent a war completely, but not for this case. I'm talking about what's best after a battle has already begun."

"You're saying that losing is better?"

He nodded. "It might be, depending on the circumstances."

Between winning and losing, I knew that winning was definitely better. Especially in this case, where neither the Kingdom of Valschein nor the Margrave of Ashbatten had done anything wrong, winning would surely be for the best.

Maybe if I give Gilbert the Insurgent a good punch, then tie him up and present him to the margrave as a traitor, Patrick's brother might see me in a different light.

I clenched my fist as I stared at the back of his head, but then my target began speaking again.

"The history of the Ashbattens goes on for much longer than the Kingdom of Valschein's. The margrave had control of an expanse of land before there was even a king, so when the first king of Valschein ascended the throne, he took steps to ingratiate himself to the margrave. Ever since then, the Ashbattens have continued to be responsible for protecting the western border."

I was suddenly getting a history lesson, and it was a little different from what I'd learned in school. I'd always been told that the first king had suddenly appeared in the warring world, and after an undefeated streak of incredibly speedy victories, he'd founded the Kingdom of Valschein! That was all the history books had recorded, so it wasn't until Patrick had told me about it that I'd found out about the Ashbatten family's long history.

The Ashbattens of the past had no ambitions to expand their territory, and they wanted to avoid an all-out war. At the same time, the royal family back

then had wanted to get the Ashbattens under their control without crossing swords. Their goals aligned, and as a result, the margrave was granted a noble title in return for an amicable annexation. It was a relationship that was somewhere between an alliance and a servant-master relationship.

“Ever since the foundation of the kingdom, even when other kingdoms occupied what is now Lemlaesta, the borders of the Ashbatten territory have never once changed,” Gilbert stated.

“That’s because the Ashbattens haven’t ceded any territory, because they’ve been so strong, right?” I asked. “I still don’t see why they should lose this time around.”

“You said it yourself. They didn’t *lose*.”

What does he mean by that? They didn’t lose, so they were able to maintain their domain and the borders never changed... Oh, I see. They weren’t taken over by anyone, but they didn’t take over anyone else either.

“They didn’t lose, but that doesn’t mean they always win.”

Gilbert nodded. “Exactly. War isn’t always something with a clear victor. The Ashbattens have selectively lost and won their battles through all their long history.”

“They don’t go on the offensive much, do they?”

“No, because there’d be no point in invading Lemlaesta and seizing their cities. Lemlaesta would try to regain control of their cities, and the war would only escalate. Even if the Ashbattens convinced other lords to join them, depending on the course of events, allies like that could easily switch sides.”

That’s true, the margrave does seem to focus on defensive battles.

The Ashbatten army’s method of hunting monsters, which Patrick had demonstrated while we were at the Academy, was focused on creating a formation and fending off monsters coming their way. Their training and equipment were likely specialized for defense as well.

“Even if you’re just defending your own territory, if you totally wipe the floor with their army, wouldn’t that be considered a victory?” I asked.

“Perhaps the mark’s soldiers would achieve an even greater victory if they pursued the Lemlaestan army even after they fled, but what would that accomplish? Lemlaestan soldiers have families too.”

“Huh...?” Without thinking, the confused sound had left my mouth—it was because we had been discussing military strategy in such a logical way until Gilbert suddenly began appealing to my emotions.

Well, yeah. Fighting someone is more painful if you think about them having a family back home.

After glancing at my face to gauge my reaction, Gilbert shook his head at me in a way that seemed more than a little mocking.

“Did you think I was trying to say that we shouldn’t pursue the enemy because I feel bad for them?” he scoffed. “Yes, they have families, and if people’s precious family members never returned home, hatred for the Ashbattens would only grow. Continuously winning would only lead to unnecessary resentment.”

“I see, that’s what you meant...”

Many soldiers would probably prefer to go home without fighting, but if a battle broke out, they had to participate because it was their job. If you had to choose between a soldier trying to get home with their next paycheck and a soldier trying to get revenge for their family, the latter was definitely harder to deal with.

I was starting to get the intention behind Gilbert saying, “Winning isn’t always the right answer.” It wasn’t good to lose a battle, but winning too much brought its own problems. How complicated.

“If one side is going to win, they need to have a complete victory,” Gilbert went on. “The victor must be endlessly ruthless in order to thoroughly secure their advantage.”

“So they have to go as far as killing every Lemlaestan and burning the entire kingdom to the ground.”

“I never said it had to be that extreme,” Gilbert protested, staring at me with horror. “You sound like my mother.”

I mean, I said it because I thought it was obvious that the Ashbattens could never do such a thing. I'm against war. Also, I'm scared of his mom. First Patrick's mom, and now Gilbert's. It seems like there are a lot of people in the Ashbatten Mark who hate Lemlaesta.

Despite Gilbert claiming that he didn't want to create more hatred, the existing cycle of hatred seemed to have already reached critical levels.

I'm surprised he revealed personal information about his mother like that. Maybe he feels less of a need to be cautious now that I know he works for the Ashbattens.

These thoughts swirled in my head as I continued walking. Beside me, Gilbert looked away and dramatically cleared his throat.

"You get it now? The Ashbattens want to avoid a total victory. The best result would be if it were a win-win for everyone."

"Wouldn't that be difficult?"

"It's difficult to pull off, but it's possible. If, rather than hiding in the fortress, the Ashbatten forces march forth into battle and then retreat immediately, there wouldn't be any casualties. Lemlaesta would interpret this as a rout, and they'd celebrate their victory at the top of their lungs."

That just makes the Lemlaestan side sound ridiculous. All they'd accomplish would be to make the margrave send out soldiers only to immediately call them back.

"Would that work?" I wondered. "It doesn't seem like Lemlaesta would gain anything from that. Sure, they might declare themselves victorious, but would they really back down after zero fighting?"

"They're spending a lot of money to mobilize their army, so they have a goal worth at least that much to them," Gilbert pointed out. "Do you know what that goal is?"

Lemlaesta wants to conquer the Kingdom of Valschein... No, that can't be the case. Considering the disparity in power between the two kingdoms, even if Lemlaesta started an all-out war, it would be impossible for them to win. Then...they must want to take over a part of the mark... No, there's not much

benefit in doing that either, unless there's a valuable resource there or something.

Now that I really thought about it, I had no idea why Lemlaesta kept attacking the mark. Considering the way the forces had been equipped when I sent them away the last time they'd tried to invade, they hadn't looked prepared for a long-term battle.

So what are they after this time? Linus wants to protect his kingdom's magi-technology, and he's a part of the first prince's faction. Military achievements would help them gain an advantage in the succession struggles...

"Is this all a performance for those in Lemlaesta?"

"You understand," Gilbert said with a satisfied nod. "They're not out to obtain any spoils like territory or wealth; they're seeking honor and glory through war. If all we have to do for them to accomplish that is send our troops out and then bring them right back, we can indulge them as much as they'd like."

I see, so all Lemlaesta wants is for it to seem like they're victorious. I thought Patrick's home was an endless battlefield, but I guess it's more like a professional wrestling ring: it's all a performance.

I was floored by this unexpected revelation, and Gilbert took my silence as an excuse to provide some additional context.

"Lemlaesta is surrounded by powerful kingdoms. It's beneficial to their political standing if they can make it seem like they have the capacity to deploy their army on a regular basis."

This performance gets more elaborate the more I learn about it. Either way, I understand Gilbert's objective now. With Linus in on it, it's probably easy for them to orchestrate a smooth, bloodless loss for the Ashbattens. Sorry for calling you an insurgent, Gilbert. My bad.

"I understand what you're trying to do. I guess maintaining balance is important." (My best attempt at coming up with a diplomatic way to say "staging battles" was "maintaining balance.") I was glad that the mystery of this situation was mostly solved. Linus had probably wanted Gilbert to fill me in on the plan so I didn't get in the way.

“Balance, huh...?” Gilbert sighed. “Well, that balance we’ve continued to maintain is starting to crumble. This plan is meant to reset things.”

“You’re not just going to hand Lemlaesta their win and call it a day?”

“Do you remember how I told you my brother is engaged?”

I nodded. “Yes, to that incredibly strange woman.”

According to Gilbert, his younger brother had horrible taste in women. The things that Gilbert had told me about this woman were still fresh in my memory.

She doesn’t sound like the kind of person who would be willing to lose on purpose. She seems like someone who would show off her strength for no reason, create unnecessary resentment, and generally fail at maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships.

“Yes, that crazy woman,” Gilbert said bitterly. “We’re leaving this losing battle to *that* idiot.”

“Isn’t that a bit much...?”

I get that you don’t like her, and she does sound more competitive than the average man, but I’m not sure how I feel about leaving such a big task to a civilian woman. Isn’t leaving the fate of the Ashbatten Mark to someone because of your personal grudge taking things a little too far?

“I’ll be the first to admit that I have some degree of personal resentment towards her, but that’s not all there is to it. There’s a purpose in her being the one to fall to them. If she loses to the Lemlaestan army, our balance will be restored.”

That mostly sounds like an excuse. I bet it’s ninety percent because he hates her.

I was going to give him some candid advice and tell him he was making things too personal, but Gilbert had more to say.

“That idiot wins too much. No matter who her opponent is, she always seems to come out on top, but her victory streak will surely end one day. That’s why I want to see if she’s even capable of gracefully losing. If she passes my test, I

might approve of her marriage to my brother.”

“Oh, so that’s what you’re after.” His reasoning was definitely personal, but at least he wasn’t trying to bully her—it seemed like he genuinely wanted a reason to be able to bless his brother’s betrothal.

Looking at him walking ahead of me, my gaze softened a little. He turned back and returned my warm expression with a cold, sharp glare.

“I haven’t accepted that woman, though. I just want to respect my brother’s choice. If she can’t pass a test as easy as this, she doesn’t deserve my brother.”

“That’s not so different from accepting her,” I pointed out. “It would be nice if my fiancé’s brother would just give me a test like that. I wish it could turn out that you were going to be my brother-in-law.”

“If you were my brother’s fiancée, I wouldn’t have been against your marriage in the first place...” He perked up a little. “Would you like to meet my brother?”

I think he might be seriously trying to get me to exchange Patrick for his brother. No way. I only have eyes for Patrick. Also, his brother has terrible taste in women, right? He probably wouldn’t be into me.

“No, thank you,” I said politely.

“Sorry, I know you wouldn’t want to. I couldn’t help thinking about it since you and that woman are somewhat similar in appearance.”

We look the same? I don’t really like that, considering the wild stories I’ve heard about her.

“Even though you might have thought hard about your reasons, I still think your plan is too much,” I insisted. “Commanding an army is an unreasonable responsibility for a regular woman to handle.”

Gilbert laughed. “Command? There’s no way I’m going to let her run the Ashbattens’ precious army into the ground.”

“You need to make the Lemlaestans think they won, right? Wouldn’t that be impossible without using an army?”

It feels like he doesn’t want her to pass this test at all, but I also don’t think he was lying when he said he wanted to respect his brother’s choice...

I couldn't figure out what Gilbert was thinking, but he cleared things up for me. Sort of.

"That would be true of a regular person," he said, still facing forwards. "It's not that I'm suspicious of you at this point, but the answer to your question is the core of our plan. I'll explain things to you more fully once we arrive."

With the most important details set aside for later, we continued down the road.

We had nothing else to talk about, so Gilbert increased his speed, which I effortlessly matched. Right as I was starting to get bored of the unchanging scenery around us, Gilbert suddenly stopped.

"Let's take a break here. You must be tired."

I wasn't, but I didn't want to give myself away. "Sure."

"I have to say, I'm surprised you were able to keep up. I thought you would throw in the towel partway."

I'm not tired at all. I guess the speed we were going at would've been a jog for a regular person, but anyone with more than a couple levels under their belt should be able to handle something like that without running out of breath.

In order to avoid being outed as Yumiella, I decided I would try acting tired from here on out.

We stopped by a town on our way to hydrate ourselves, and then we continued onwards. Right as the sun had passed its highest point, Gilbert suddenly veered off the large main road.

"From here we're going to take a detour," he explained. "Otherwise we might run into the Lemlaestan army."

A little ways back, we had passed a group of carriages that seemed to be the army's rear guard. They were probably logistics officers carrying supplies and following behind the main force.

As we continued down the narrow side path, we passed a small village and then entered a grove of trees. Slowly, our path was starting to slant uphill.

I see, we're going to hike up a mountain to get to our destination.

I was used to mountains. This one was going to be an easy hike, since there was a path that seemed relatively well traveled. Really hardcore mountains had way more trees and lots of tall grass, which made it difficult to discern what direction to travel. When I hiked through mountains like that, I had to use attack spells to create a path for myself—if I couldn't use magic, then a billhook would be necessary. But that wasn't the case on this mountain.

I followed behind Gilbert and enjoyed the leisurely hike. Eventually, we reached an area with a steep incline that was littered with boulders. Ahead of me, Gilbert was easily jumping onto boulders as tall as he was, scrambling his way upwards, and I followed suit.

Once he was past the difficult terrain, Gilbert glanced back and yelled, "This is a tough area! If you can't climb up—"

"You don't have to yell," I said in a normal voice, quite close behind him. "I can hear you just fine."

Discovering me much closer than he'd expected, he flinched. It seemed like he had no idea I would be able to keep up with him.

"How did you get up here...?"

"What? I just climbed up."

"I didn't hear you behind me."

"Oh, well...of course, girls are pretty light in weight, comparatively speaking, so... Come on, let's get going," I said, urging him to hurry forwards and hopefully not think too hard about how easily I'd scaled the steep route. Though Gilbert seemed confused, he continued onwards.

We kept heading up the mountain, eventually straying from the path that led to the peak. From there, the side path became even more narrow.

I guess there aren't that many people who travel this way. It's finally starting to feel like a hidden shortcut.

I excitedly traversed through the dense, overgrown foliage.

"Something's wrong," Gilbert said, sounding tense.

“What’s going on?”

“There don’t seem to be any animals in the area. We’re quite far from any monster habitats too. Usually you’d see a small animal or two, but I don’t even hear any birds chirping.” He anxiously scanned the area.

I didn’t find this situation strange in the slightest.

Isn’t this what mountains are always like? I thought mountains without monsters are quiet places. If there’s any sound, that means that you’re probably going to run into some monsters. Now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever encountered a wild animal, even though animals like deer and bears live on mountains that don’t have any monsters. The same goes for the mountain in Dolkness County.

Though he didn’t stop walking, Gilbert seemed extra cautious of his surroundings.

“When it gets quiet like this, it means a strong monster has wandered into the area,” he explained to me. “The animals are lying low out of fear.”

“Monsters leave their habitats pretty often, huh?”

“It doesn’t happen that frequently. At most it happens a handful of times in a year.”

I guess if you go by how many appear in a certain settlement, that might be the case. I usually make it my business to take down monsters as soon as there’s a sighting near any villages in my territory, so my sense of how common it really is might be off.

Just then, Gilbert held his hand up and looked me in the eye.

Oh, he wants me to stay quiet.

Gilbert appeared to have found something, and he gently parted the branches of a bush to reveal...

“It’s just a boar...” he muttered.

Inside the bush was a piglet—a baby boar. The striped pattern on it was adorable.

This is my first time seeing a piglet. I didn't know you could have encounters like this in the mountains. As soon as the piglet saw me, it flopped onto the ground, and I could see more motion behind it. Oh, he has brothers. Looks like there's five piglets. They're all on the ground, so cute! Though, they look more frozen than like they're napping.

"Stand back!" Gilbert exclaimed.

Something was rustling past the bushes and coming towards us at an incredible speed. What appeared was...an adult boar. It was probably the piglets' mother.

The mother boar glared at us—or rather, me—and snorted loudly through her nose as she tried to intimidate us. At the same time, the piglets squealed and fled. I was impressed by their coordination. Once the sound of the piglets grew distant, the mother boar turned around and ran off.

I guess the mom was on edge because she knew she had to protect her babies. It's not like I had anything against her, so I'm glad we didn't have to fight.

I found the wonderful mother and her desire to keep her adorable children safe incredibly heartwarming, but Gilbert still seemed suspicious. He was looking in the opposite direction of where the boars had fled—in other words, he was looking behind me.

"That boar didn't make eye contact with me, which is as much to say it wasn't afraid of humans. It was staring directly behind me, which means there must be a monster over there," he said, pointing over my shoulder.

Uh, the mommy boar was looking at me. She thought that I was more dangerous than you... Oh, I see now. The quiet forest—this explains my usual wilderness experience.

The boars and animals of this forest were undoubtedly afraid of me. They were quiet because they were terrified.

"I don't think a monster will appear... Let's continue forwards." I couldn't explain why I thought that, though, so Gilbert remained on edge as we proceeded through the forest.

Of course, he needn't have worried; we made it to our destination without

running into any strong monsters.

The scenery before me suddenly unfolded, and we found ourselves near the edge of a cliff. I could see every inch of the prairie spreading below us. I had seen this place before—it was the spot where the Ashbatten and Lemlaestan armies had once faced off, the place where I had landed between them on Ryuu's back.

The Lemlaestan army's main force had already arrived, and they were pitching tents behind them. There wasn't anyone on the Ashbatten side—their forces were likely holed up in the fortress, which was a bit farther away. They had no need to come out and face the Lemlaestans. It was only now that I understood that my previous encounter with the Lemlaestan army had probably also just been a performance.

"It looks like we somehow made it in time," Gilbert observed. "The unit spent a day traveling, so they won't start taking action until tomorrow. That's how they usually operate. Now it all depends on when *she* arrives..."

"Right, you mentioned that the Lemlaestan army mobilized sooner than you expected. The woman you're planning on leaving things to is in Ashbatten, correct?"

"Nope, she's in eastern Valschein. A message should've been sent to her yesterday..."

Eastern Valschein?! The Ashbatten Mark is on the western border, so she's even farther away than the Royal Capital? She definitely won't make it in time. Oh no, I'm not sure why Lemlaesta deployed their army so soon, but now Gilbert's plan must be ruined.

"I guess she won't make it in time," I said sadly. "Out of curiosity, where in eastern Valschein is she?"

Dolkness County was located in eastern Valschein, so I had some awareness of the area. I was familiar with most of the territories around me, and I'd probably know the specific place if he mentioned it.

"I guess I can tell you now..." Gilbert opened his mouth to tell me the

location, and it turned out to be a region I was somewhat more than familiar with. “It’s Dolkness County.”

I blinked. “Dolkness...? What?”

“That woman will probably ride a dragon here from that cursed Dolkness County.”

Huh? What? There’s only one person I can think of who rides a dragon in Dolkness County.

“Um, could it be...”

“That’s right. I’m Gilbert Ashbatten. My younger brother, Patrick, is engaged to Yumiella Dolkness. Now that I’ve told you this, I’m sure you can understand why it’s possible to leave everything to her alone.”

I see! I completely understand why you’ve orchestrated a situation in which a civilian woman has to lose to an army, without giving her command of any of your own forces. That Yumiella Dolkness is as strong as an entire army on her own after all! Wow, the satisfaction of knowing the core of the plan...is not actually what I’m feeling!

Wait, but isn’t Patrick’s older brother named Gilbert...? Oh. It’s this Gilbert.

I was completely over what a piece of junk my brain was sometimes. I was sure I had solidly programmed my thoughts to assume that anyone named Gilbert within Valschein was Patrick’s brother...

Oh, right. I suppose we did meet outside of Valschein. Still, what a joke. Even AI would be more flexible with its filters.

Wait. Does that mean that the crazy fiancée he was talking about is me? Does that mean his brother with horrible taste in women is Patrick? Does that mean that Gilbert is my future brother-in-law?

My mind was in complete chaos after this shocking revelation that absolutely no one could have seen coming. I froze up for a few moments, my mind running through various thoughts and assessing the situation.

Wait... I was thinking this is the worst possible situation, but maybe it’s

actually good.

One of my concerns about the wedding and part of the reason I had run away from home was the fact that Patrick's brother had refused to meet me. This problem was now solved, and we had even had several successful conversations. There was also the issue of Patrick's brother hating me. This, too, had been solved, because Gilbert seemed to think well of me. Lastly, there was the fact that he didn't want to attend our wedding. There was an easy solution to this too—all I had to do was run towards the Lemlaestan army and put on a performance that ended with me going, "Oh noes, I have been defeated!"

Hey, I've totally solved all of my problems without realizing it.

After I'd been frozen for a while, Gilbert ran out of patience and shook me by my shoulders.

"Are you all right? Did her name bring up some traumatic memories? I don't blame you if it did."

My eyes came back into focus, and I looked him square in the face. "I have a question for you, Gilbert. What do you think of me?"

"I can't really answer that without knowing the intent of your question..."

"I apologize. If I said I wanted to be your younger brother's fiancée, how would that make you feel?"

"You? Compared to Yumiella, it's like night and day. I'd want to root for you..."

All right, I got this! If I reveal my identity here, Gilbert will surely say "What?! You were Yumiella all along?! I would love for you to marry Patrick! I'll bless your engagement right now."

This fortunate conclusion was all thanks to the fact that I had run away from home and said I was going to the moon. Several wonderful coincidences had followed my descent from outside the atmosphere, and now things were going to have a happy ending.

"Eleanora isn't really my name," I told Gilbert.

"I know that."

“My real name is Yumiella. I’m Yumiella Dolkness, future brother.”

It appeared to be Gilbert’s turn to freeze up. “*You’re Yumiella...?*”

“Yes. Let me show you a dark magic spell.”

In order to prove I was Yumiella, I cast the spell *Dark Bind*, which made black arms extend up from my shadow.

He should believe me now. I don’t think just my black hair was enough to convince him, but the fact that I can use dark magic surely makes it clear that it’s me.

“That magic and your black hair...” Gilbert mumbled, his hand clapped over his mouth in shock. “I knew that Eleanora was a fake name, but... I see, so that’s why Linus told me to tell you the plan.”

Looking back on it now, Linus had probably thought that each of us had known who the other was. He probably never expected that we had thought of each other as strangers.

It seemed that Gilbert accepted that I was Yumiella. He turned to look me in the eye.

“I see, so *you’re* Yumiella Dolkness.” At that, his eyes dulled in anger. Life returned to his face, and his frozen lack of expression was swiftly replaced with a look of fury.

Wait...what?

“So you’re Yumiella!” he roared. “How dare you trick me! I’ll never approve of your marriage to Patrick!”

“What?!” I was flabbergasted by his response. “You just said I was worthy of being Patrick’s fiancée! You’re being mean, future brother.”

“Don’t ever refer to me as your brother! I’ve thought you were strange from the beginning. Who just shows up by crashing through someone’s roof?! Like hell I’m going to let someone as ridiculous as you be a part of my family!”

“Please wait!” I cried. “When I explained my situation to you, you said that my fiancé’s brother was horrible for disliking me without even meeting me! I was talking about you, brother!”

“Stop calling me brother! Everything about you was strange! What was with your descriptions of the preserved foods?! Those were beyond eccentric! Now I understand why you have an abnormal amount of stamina! I bet the animals in the forest were all terrified of you!”

I was betrayed. I never would have imagined that he would turn on me so utterly. We both leaned forwards as our close-contact argument continued.

“I see, so the moment you find out that I’m Yumiella, you completely change your tune!” I snapped. “Maybe you’re just a bad judge of character. No wonder you passed judgment on someone just based on hearsay without ever meeting them!”

“I can tell how ridiculous you are just from other people’s reports!” Gilbert fumed. “You’re the one who said Patrick’s taste in women was horrible!”

“Patrick has amazing taste!”

“That’s right! My brother is perfect in everything aside from his choice of partner!”

I hate Gilbert. I guess even though I was on my best behavior, this is how he thinks of me. It’s probably impossible for us to talk this through, get on good terms, and have him approve of my marriage to Patrick. I guess I’ll just have to carry out his stupid plan.

“You said that you’ll approve of our betrothal if I can lose this battle properly, right?”

“Yeah, I sure did! Go on! Go and lose the battle!” he exclaimed, going tit for tat.

We were going to skip all the preparations and execute the plan. Gilbert and I were so close to each other and so angry that we could end up in a tussle at any moment. We each sucked our teeth at the other before each taking a step back.

“I’ll be going, then!” I huffed, glaring at Gilbert.

“Go on already,” he grumbled.

My eyes never leaving his, I took another backwards step, let myself fall off the edge of the cliff, and headed towards the Lemlaestan camp, still seething

with rage.

Interlude 3: Patrick (Part 2)

The very land of the Mark of Ashbatten was designed from the literal ground up for defense. In the past, it had been a geographically difficult location to protect, but over the course of the several hundred years prior to the establishment of the Kingdom of Valschein, every successive margrave had slowly developed the land. These centuries of effort had led to the impenetrably defensive mark of the current day.

The main roads were well maintained so that a large army could quickly move through the streets. Not only that, but there were several traps laid along the roads, roadblocks that could be instantly activated to stymie enemies of the mark if it were to come under attack. The stone bridges were even ingeniously constructed in such a way that they could be made to crumble away if a certain spot in their architecture was manipulated. The valleys were normally safe for people to travel through, but avalanches could be caused at a moment's notice if they were needed to halt the advance of invaders.

These defensive provisions were not only present on the western side of the mark, which was close to the Kingdom of Lemlaesta, but they were also installed in the eastern side, which faced Valschein. Officially, the eastern fortresses were abandoned, but they were able to be operational at a moment's notice.

The Ashbatten family understood the importance of protecting their borders against any form of invasion, which was why the royal family couldn't underestimate them.

Although the Ashbattens were quite powerful, they weren't considered to have high standing in aristocratic society. This was due to the fact that they kept their distance from central politics, preferring to remain in the safety of the mark.

On the westernmost edge of the Mark of Ashbatten, lands which were

already on the westernmost edge of the Kingdom of Valschein, stood one of the many military strongholds within the territory. Highly trained soldiers were stationed at this fortress, and it served as the front line of defense against Lemlaesta.

On the Lemlaestan side was an open, grassy field, free of any obstructions, which left the fortress standing alone on a barren plain. At first glance, it appeared quite easy to invade.

It didn't just appear that way, though—it *was* actually quite easy to invade. The lack of natural obstructions in the terrain made the task of surrounding the Ashbatten army effortless. An enemy could simply go around the fortress and enter the mark.

That was where things stopped being so straightforward. Even if the fortress itself was easily surrounded, it would take time to actually charge in and claim it. While the enemy was so occupied, mounted soldiers from the Ashbatten forces would have an opening to charge in and destroy the invaders, who would have to stretch themselves dangerously thin in order to surround the defending army and its stronghold.

If the enemies ignored the fortress, bypassing it completely to directly enter the mark, they would have to face the awaiting main forces while simultaneously fending off the soldiers from the fortress attacking from behind.

In the past, an army had attempted to execute both of these methods at once. The Talyon Empire, the nation which had preceded Lemlaesta, had sent their main forces around the fortress to enter the Ashbatten Mark proper, while at the same time commanding a separate troop to surround the fortress. Even with their army split up in this manner, the empire had still had the upper hand in terms of sheer strength.

Several hours before the enemy forces arrived, the Ashbatten contingent at the fortress began to take action. The Ashbatten cavalry mustered to face the Talyon forces on the western side—in other words, the area closest to the empire. The commander of the Talyon troop surrounding the fortress assumed that the cavalry had taken a detour, just as the primary Talyon forces were

doing to get around the Ashbatten stronghold and into the mark. In order to avoid getting caught between the soldiers stationed in the fortress and the cavalry coming from behind, the Talyon commander strengthened the western edge of the formation besieging the fortress by transferring soldiers away from the side that faced the Ashbatten Mark. However, right as the Ashbatten cavalry was about to make contact with the Talyon forces, they abruptly retreated. The Talyon commander and his men were left reeling with confusion, and before they could recover, the Ashbatten forces in the fortress attacked the now-weakened eastern side of the Talyon formation—the side closest to the mark. The Ashbatten forces were composed entirely of high-level, exceptionally trained soldiers, and they broke easily through the weakened formation, pressing onwards to attack the empire's main troop from behind.

The mark itself ended up as the final battleground for the Ashbatten and Talyon armies. The Ashbatten regiment was outnumbered. The vanguard on the right side of the formation and the rearguard on the left fought gallantly, but the soldiers in the middle had no choice but to fall back...or so it had appeared to the Talyon commander.

As the two armies fought, the elite troop from the fortress suddenly appeared from the rear, as well as the cavalry who had circled back around to the mark. They all attacked the Talyon forces from behind while Ashbatten's primary battalion surrounded them on either side, each column moving into the formation of a semicircle, partially surrounding the empire's army at the front and sides. The troops stationed at the fortress, who had launched the surprise attack from behind, completed the cordon. Left without a single escape route, the Talyon army fell into a panic and ultimately surrendered.

Anyone could imagine what followed. The Talyon Empire fell and split into different territories. The Ashbatten-Talyon war had, in many ways, established the present-day state of the region.

The perfectly executed annihilation of the empire's formation during their futile attempt to surround the fortress ought to have been recorded in every military training manual on the continent, but surprisingly, the narrative only existed within the records of the Ashbatten family. The decisive victory wasn't

widely remembered in the present day. It was possible that the Talyon Empire's records had disappeared in the chaos of the empire's fall, or it could be that no one able to record their history had survived to do so.

Despite having achieved such a momentous military triumph, every successive margrave after had declared, "Our specialization is defense, and we have never experienced a complete victory over our foes. Our forces merely have the capacity to protect the mark and no more." Perhaps this was said out of humility, but it might also have been a posture meant to obfuscate the belief that they might be able to pull off the same operation themselves should the need to do so arise.



At that westernmost fortress in the mark, Patrick Ashbatten was recalling the accomplishments of his ancestors, which he had learned about before he'd entered the Academy. He, however, wasn't of the belief that he could execute such a brilliant plan.

But if a strong enemy were to appear, I could just create some tall dirt walls along the border. If I go alone and directly attack their commander myself, it wouldn't be too hard for me to just... Patrick shook his head before he could continue in that train of thought.

"I guess I'm starting to take after Yumiella," he mumbled to himself.

"Is something wrong?" asked the man standing next to him, the frontline commander in charge of the fortress. He'd just entered his forties, and he was quite careful in his conduct, a rare quality for a soldier in the Ashbatten army.

Patrick was still treated like a child quite often, and so he felt a slight discomfort at the way the commander responded so formally.

"When I was a child, I learned that there is no way to significantly change the course of a battle, no matter how great of a hero you might have on your side," Patrick explained.

"That seems to be the case, generally speaking."

In a war between two kingdoms, even if one army had a warrior skilled in one-on-one combat who was as strong as a thousand soldiers on their own,

most experienced soldiers believed that this wouldn't be enough to overturn things in their favor. History provided ample proof that gathering large numbers of soldiers who met a base standard of strength and leading them well with sound strategy was the best way to win a war.

"Even if one person could take down a thousand troops on their own, their effect in a battle against over ten thousand troops would be insignificant," Patrick remarked.

"I believe you could take on a thousand soldiers easily, Sir Patrick," the commander said confidently.

"Even if I could, the thousandth-and-first soldier would take me down. By then, my fatigue would have built up, and all the cuts and scrapes I got wouldn't feel so small."

Even the legendary hero of a certain kingdom, who was said to have been able to take down a hundred men at once, had eventually fallen: he lost all his underlings, and although he managed to stall the enemy forces on his own, he eventually met his end despite taking a hundred lives before doing so.

The commander of the fortress thought about how although Patrick had been just a child until not too long ago, he'd grown into a strapping young man. As those thoughts crossed his mind, he found himself feeling a bit sentimental.

"If even you couldn't accomplish such a feat, then perhaps conventional wisdom isn't wrong," the man observed. "Still, by continuously launching surprise attacks and retreating, it would be possible to overturn a battle, even with a large difference in strength. It can also be quite effective to target only the higher-ranking members of the enemy forces."

"Well, I don't really care about the various tricks I could pull," Patrick clarified. "I'm thinking about if there were a person who could destroy a thousand people in the flash of an eye, recover as soon as they're hurt regardless of the injury, and additionally possessed unlimited stores of mana..."

"If there is such a person...?" The commander snorted. "There is. We've discussed it among ourselves as well. We've debated how we would take on the countless if, gods forbid, we ever had to."

“What would you do...?” Patrick was genuinely curious. He wanted to know what kind of strategy this experienced soldier would use against Yumiella.

The man flashed Patrick a placid smile as he answered, “We came to the conclusion that taking you as hostage would be the best course of action, Sir Patrick.”

“I see. And where do you usually have such discussions?”

“There’s only one place where people get excited about what-ifs. We imagine these scenarios while drinking, of course.”

Patrick imagined respectable adults getting together and excitedly discussing how they would take down their lord’s son’s fiancée, going back and forth as they drank—the thought of it made him grimace.

“It’s nothing to be so upset about,” the commander reassured him. “If we could come up with a plan like that while drunk, anyone else could have done so as well. Even if you’re all right, little master... Oh, I’m sorry. That was out of old habit.” The way the man called him “little master” had felt so natural that it took Patrick a second to figure out what he was apologizing for.

It wasn’t until Patrick had become an adult at eighteen years old that the commander had begun to treat him with the same deference as he did the margrave and Patrick’s older brother. *I guess I reached some personal threshold at which he thinks I ought to be treated with a similar level of respect*, Patrick thought, internally writing off the slipup and continuing the conversation.

“Thanks for the warning,” he said to the commander. “I’ll be careful. She has a habit of pushing herself to protect others.”

“O-Of course... If only the young master were as honest as you, little master,” the man complained, slipping back into his old habits once again. The “young master” he spoke of was the margrave’s heir, Gilbert Ashbatten.

“Well, my brother is...” Patrick shrugged. “He’s always been like that. I’ve heard he’s been doing great in negotiations with those from the Royal Capital.”

“His skills are definitely suited for politics,” the commander remarked. “He’s in charge of most of the negotiations with officials from the capital.”

“So, about that brother of mine...”

“Yes, one minute we think he’s missing, then the next he turns out to be planning all of *this*.” The man gestured expansively. “I guess it’s something I ought to have expected from him.”

The two were looking at a letter. It was a letter from Gilbert to Yumiella and Patrick. Gilbert’s subordinate Rufus, who had delivered the letter, was currently sitting on the floor in the corner of the room—the dragon ride here had been a bit too much for him.

“I was against it...” Rufus mumbled from the floor. “Eugh... I’m getting nauseous again...” He got up, stumbling a little as he made his way outside, which no one tried to stop him from doing.

I used to be like that too, before I got used to it, Patrick thought before turning back to read through the letter once more.

The letter instructed Yumiella to appear to lose to the Lemlaestan army, an army that was evidently headed their way. The letter explained that the purpose of this plan was to lessen the Kingdom of Lemlaesta’s fear towards Yumiella, as well as to stabilize Lemlaestan politics by giving the first prince’s faction an advantage...but Gilbert’s true reasoning was recorded in the very last sentence.

“‘If the plan is properly executed from start to finish, I will consider attending your wedding’...” Patrick read again.

“I believe Sir Gilbert wants to give his blessing to your union, but he’s just not very honest about his feelings,” the commander commented. “So will Lady Yumiella be able to handle this? From what I’ve heard, she doesn’t seem to be the type who is capable of losing on purpose.”

“I don’t think she could do it. On top of that, she’s still missing.”

As Patrick stood wondering for the hundredth time where Yumiella might have gone after leaving for the moon, a young soldier ran into the room. He whispered something into the commander’s ear, and in response to the message, a serious look appeared on the commander’s face.

“Understood.” He nodded at the soldier. “In that case, tell the soldiers to

switch to the second formation, then send a message to the main forces as well,” the commander instructed the messenger, then turned back to the margrave’s younger son. “Things have fallen into quite the mess, Sir Patrick. It appears that the Lemlaestans are taking action sooner than we expected.”

Following the news of the Lemlaestan approach, things became hectic within the fortress. The commander was quite busy, giving instructions to various members of the army. Trying to stay out of his way, Patrick waited for him quietly by the window.

He stared outside towards Lemlaesta, knowing that their army would appear soon enough. Suddenly, the door was flung open behind him. He assumed it was another urgent message, but when he turned, he saw Rufus standing at the door. He seemed to have recovered from his dragon-flight-based trauma, and he had brought another man with him.

The man accompanying Rufus was someone who shouldn’t have been present within these fortress walls at all—it was Linus, an agent from the neighboring kingdom of Lemlaesta.

“Why are you—”

“I apologize,” Linus began, interrupting Patrick. “It’s urgent, so I’ll explain things quickly.”

The only other time Patrick had spoken with Linus was during the incident in which Yumiella had shooed away the Lemlaestan army in the past, but he knew that Linus was a man with a great deal of common sense. If he was so impatient to deliver his message, then it had to be quite the emergency.

“I was the point of contact for Sir Gilbert, who has been hiding out in the Lemlaestan Royal Capital,” Linus explained. “Regarding the plan where Lady Yumiella will be pretending to lose—”

“I know of it,” Patrick confirmed. “Continue.”

“Yes, I’ve discovered the reason that our army moved up the timetable for their plans, so I’ve come here to report it! The First Armory of Lemlaesta has succeeded in recreating the sealing instrument. Its function is identical to the

one used to seal away the Demon Lord in the Kingdom of Valschein!”

He was speaking of the magical instrument that had been used to seal away and trap the Demon Lord for hundreds of years. The first queen of Valschein, a powerful user of light magic, had used it against the Demon Lord, whose dark elemental nature had been vulnerable to the instrument’s full potency.

This type of magical instrument would serve as a specialized weapon against Yumiella Dolkness. It made sense that the army would move out at once if they had obtained a weapon that would work against their biggest threat.

“So they’ve come to actually take Yumiella down...” Patrick grumbled.

These squabbles occurred over and over again between the Ashbatten and Lemlaestan forces, and this time around, they were supposed to have been an even bigger show than usual with the addition of Yumiella. However, the deployment of this sealing instrument had destroyed the pretense that these military exercises were a mere performance.

It was no surprise that Linus was in such a panic. After all, Yumiella was in danger. However, although it was a difficult situation, it wasn’t like their backs were against a wall. Yumiella wasn’t even here. Though Patrick felt a strong sense of danger, he wasn’t overly alarmed. He began speaking in a gentle tone to try and calm Linus down.

“It’ll be all right. Yumiella isn’t here. If Yumiella isn’t here, then the sealing instrument is basically useless. If we just go up against them with our regular forces like we always do, there should be no problem.”

“What...? She’s not here?” Linus blinked in confusion. “But Lady Yumiella was most certainly in Lemlaesta.”

Patrick’s mind went blank for a moment upon learning where his missing fiancée had been. *Why is she in Lemlaesta...? With her hair color and her strange behavior, I could imagine her getting caught by the Lemlaestan army long before managing to get here. After all, both their army and Yumiella must be heading for the Ashbatten Mark. There’s a good chance that they’d run into each other here...assuming she hasn’t already been caught.*

Could she survive being hit with the sealing instrument? She’s definitely

stronger than the Demon Lord, who stayed sealed away for a very long time after the saintess used a similar magical instrument on him. Still, Yumiella is just as weak against the element of light. It's possible that the extra dark magical energy she has will make light magic affect her even more.

The various thoughts running through Patrick's mind leaned towards a pessimistic outlook, but he got himself together. This situation wasn't yet a worst-case scenario. There was no guarantee that Yumiella was heading for the mark. She was someone who followed the beat of her own drum, and he could just as easily imagine her leisurely enjoying herself as a tourist back in Lemlaesta. As long as the Ashbatten forces managed to disable the sealing instrument before she returned, everything would be fine.

"Let's get rid of the magical instrument before she gets here..." Patrick said.

"They're already here!" Linus said mournfully. "I'm sure she's arrived by now with Sir Gilbert..."

Patrick flinched. "I guess this *is* the worst-case scenario."

There was a very high chance of Yumiella running into the Lemlaestan regiment, who were unexpectedly armed with a secret weapon of the sealing instrument. The situation was, in fact, absolutely the worst Patrick could have imagined, and so he quickly ran out of the room.

Chapter 7: The Hidden Boss Is Sealed Away

I finally reached the main Lemlaestan forces. The soldiers were huddled up in groups and lighting fires, preparing to camp outside for the night. Active maneuvers would commence tomorrow, making the atmosphere tense and restless. Still, the soldiers seemed a bit relaxed as they enjoyed the delicious smells wafting over from the cooking pots hanging over their fires.

Into this apprehensive yet calm atmosphere I moved slowly but confidently. Some soldiers turned their heads, wondering who I was, but no one came to talk to me. No one would think that their enemy was casually walking through their base camp. Even if the soldiers asked each other who I was, I was long gone before they could ask me anything.

If my black hair had been exposed, I knew that things wouldn't have gone so smoothly. If a woman with black hair appeared anywhere near this place, she would undoubtedly be Yumiella.

I guess there are some people—cough, Gilbert, cough—who still can't tell who I am even after seeing my hair.

Eventually, I managed to make my way all the way to the rear of the encampment. Before me was a grand, round tent that felt like it was loudly proclaiming that someone important was inside. Considering how extravagant a tent it was, it was no surprise that two knights stood outside on guard.

If I quietly make them fall asleep and barge inside, I can catch the first prince off guard and... No, no. I'm not supposed to kill their leader. I shouldn't sneak around like this. Instead, I should properly duke it out in a way I can be proud of... No, that's wrong too.

I had to lose to the Lemlaestan army, and I had to do so in a convincing manner.

What do I do now...? After I left Gilbert so dramatically, I can't ask to start over with him.

If I were to just yell, “Oh noes, I have been defeated!” in an unbelievable manner, it would be clear that I was faking it and the plan would fail. But on the other hand, if my acting was *too* convincing, it would also cause problems. I didn’t want rumors spreading that I had shamefully fled a battle after committing a blunder. That would just encourage the Lemlaestans and make them think I was an easy target.

Ideally, I want them to think, “We were blessed with luck and were able to fend off the incredibly strong opponent that is Yumiella! Still, it would be difficult to keep fighting the Ashbatten army, so let’s go home. Now the first prince’s faction has the advantage in the succession struggles!” or something like that. If I can strike that kind of balance, that would be great.

Just retreating without showing any will to fight was out of the question. They needed to feel like they had accomplished something in their victory.

How annoying... I can’t believe the margrave has been walking a tightrope like this for all this time.

According to Gilbert, all the Ashbatten army usually did was send out soldiers from the fortress on the front lines, have a little squabble, and then retreat. It sounded simple, but surely there were complications during the executions of these maneuvers. The soldiers would have to fight just hard enough to not let their comrades get hurt while still not overpowering the enemy. Even if the enemy just wanted a nominal victory, one that could garner excellent press back home, it was difficult to neatly accomplish such a thing.

On top of that, the Lemlaestan army had only needed to take one look at me before they’d made a run for it the last time round. It might’ve been because I surprised them by suddenly appearing during a very tense moment, but I hadn’t actually done anything.

Surely Ryuu’s cuteness should’ve softened how scary I am. I don’t have my calming mascot with me this time, though. It’s a much more difficult situation.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I reached the grand tent.

I just walked here without any issue, but would it have been better if they’d caught me before I got here? I guess a threat coming from far away isn’t as nerve-racking as having a threat suddenly appear beside you.

I stared blankly at the tent, and one of the knights guarding the tent made his way towards me.

Oh, right. Just standing here like this makes me super suspicious. I'm sure the prince's guards will be able to tell that I'm an outsider. They'll force me to take off my hat, and it'll immediately be revealed that I'm Yumiella. That'll throw the Lemlaestan army into chaos, and... I can't imagine losing properly if that's how the process begins.

I guess this is the end for me, I thought, and then the knight started speaking.

"What brings you here, miss? This area will become a battleground soon. It's no place for a lovely lady like yourself."

"Huh...?"

He seems way too friendly for a knight guarding the prince... What are his intentions?

The knight flashed me a smile that was much too sparkly as he brushed back his unflattering bangs. The other guard, who had stayed put by the tent, had a disappointed look on his rugged face.

"But there's nothing to worry about," the knight who had approached me continued. "Because I—the wild dancer of absolute swordsmanship, Emmanuel—am here!"

"Cool...?" I ventured.

Who even are you? What's with that title? Am I supposed to know who you are from that introduction?

Though I was confused, there was one thing I had learned: this man was most likely useless. These kinds of people often diffused the tension in a situation. If he were a character in a horror movie, he would provide the audience with some relief by making them think, "Oh yeah, he's definitely going to die first."

I guess I'll try to use him to my advantage. I'll ask the, uh, "mild answer something something, Emma-whatever" to go against me in a round of combat. If he's the first to go down, it might keep everyone else from panicking too much, just like in a horror movie.

Though my response to him had been lukewarm, he was still giving off the same “I’m so handsome” vibe as earlier.

That’s good, just use that energy of yours to accept my challenge. You seem like the overconfident type, so I’m sure you’ll do it.

“What’s wrong?” the knight asked. “You should smile! Being so expressionless ruins your lovely face.”

“I’d like to challenge you to a battle. Also, my face is just like this.”

“A-A battle...” He recovered quickly. “That must mean you want to go on a date!”

No, it doesn’t.

I took off the white hat and threw it into the air, pulling out my hair, which had still been tucked into my clothes, with a flourish. I brushed my fingers through my long, black hair, hoping that I looked somewhat presentable after having had my hair stuffed down the back of my dress for so long.

“I apologize for not introducing myself. I’m Yumiella Dolkness, the countess of Dolkness. I challenge you to...”

With a pathetic look on his face, Emma-whatever followed the hat with his eyes before returning his gaze to me just as I spoke my name. His next move was quick.

I guess he does have that strange title, so he must be a bit strong, I thought, watching his hands flash through the air.

With precise movements, he pressed his hands against his stomach and assumed a tragic pose.

“My stomach hurts so I’m gonna go home.” He continued to move quickly—he turned his heel and began running away, rushing past the tent that he was meant to be guarding, heading in the direction of Lemlaesta. He quickly became smaller and smaller in the distance.

“Really?” I said, disappointed.

According to horror movie logic, the cocky one who tried to run away, leaving everyone else behind, would certainly be the first to die. But in this case, I had

no interest in going after him, so he was probably going to live a long life.

Though I didn't get to actually have my battle, it didn't change the fact that I had declared who I was. The other knight—the one with the rugged face—had heard me loud and clear.

“Yumiella! Yumiella's here! Valschein's Demon Lord is attacking the command center!” His loud alarm traveled through the army like a wave crashing through a calm sea.

Soon after, screams broke out. Some soldiers stood up only to topple over with dismay. Cooking pots started getting flipped upside down.

Oh well. It'll be difficult to get things under control with people in such a panic. Even if I try to do something to help, it'll only make things worse...

I stood there, unsure of how to proceed, when someone suddenly yelled, “Calm down! Have you forgotten about our secret weapon?!” The voice had yelled so loudly that my ears rang for a moment.

The announcement had come from the grand tent in front of me. It had been so loud that the tent fabric was still shaking with the force of it. Someone who could produce such a sound *had* to be a terribly strong person. Judging from the fact that it came from inside the extravagant tent, the voice likely belonged to the first prince of Lemlaesta.

I wasn't sure if it was the charismatic power of a royal's words, or if they had just been shocked by the loud sound, but the army that had just been in utter chaos quickly quieted down.

A man threw back the flaps of the tent and strode outside. He was very tall, and his body was muscular enough that you could clearly see how built he was even under his clothes. He had not a single strand of hair, though I wasn't sure if this was natural or if he shaved his head. The prince of Lemlaesta was supposed to be around thirty years old, but he seemed so dignified that he looked to be in his fifties.

There was just one strange aspect to the large and impressive man: he was wearing something that looked like a gas mask over his nose and mouth.

“You must be wondering what this is!” he bellowed at me. “I'll tell you! Its

official name is ‘Wind: Model 347 Version 4,’ also known as the Voice Amplify-inator! It’s a magical instrument that I myself invented!”

I couldn’t help but cover my ears at the booming sound of his voice resonating around us once more. Just as I thought that I’d already met the intense personality in this camp, another crazy person showed up. Even though he didn’t need it anymore, the first prince continued using the bullhorn-like magical instrument as he spoke.

“You must be wondering about how the Voice Amplify-inator works! I’ll tell you! This device uses wind magic to disperse the wearer’s voice! In other words, it amplifies their voice!” he said with a boisterous laugh. I was starting to feel nauseous, buffeted by his loud voice at such close proximity.

Why did he even bother explaining it? It’s an extremely literal name for the device. He reminds me of the woman from the magical-instrument shop. I wonder if these corny, overly long names are the current trend or something.

As the man who I had assumed was the prince left me in baffled silence, another man exited the tent. He was the complete opposite of the large man; he was so thin, it seemed like the smallest breeze could knock him over. His skin was also an unhealthy, pallid shade—he looked like he had been a shut-in for many years.

The man, who seemed like a researcher or something, covered his ears as he spoke softly. “Doctor. Doctor, please. Take off the Amplify-inator. It’s too loud.”

“What’s that?! I can’t hear you!” barked the doctor (who was apparently not the prince). “Why don’t you try projecting your voice from your stomach?”

“Also, the one you invented was Wind: Model 347 Version 1,” the thin man corrected. “Versions 3 and 4 were iterated upon by the Second Armory. I’m impressed with how they were able to transform the basically useless Version 1 into something practical.”

“How dare you! This version only exists thanks to the original model! The mind which creates from nothing is the superior one!”

“See, you can hear me after all... You created Model 347 when trying to copy a dungeon-generated magical instrument, right? So you were also copying an

existing item.”

“Urgh... That’s enough!” the doctor snapped.

“No, I’ve had enough of *you*, Doctor. Come on, let’s take the Amplify-inator off.” The thin man reached towards the bald man and managed to slip the magical instrument off his face.

The knight with the intense personality had fled the scene, but now I was facing two people with personalities just as big. It also seemed like neither of these people were the prince. From their conversation, it appeared as though they were a doctor and his assistant.

Yet another man popped out of the tent. He was well put together, but he looked quite plain and didn’t have much of a presence, especially in comparison to the two researchers.

I wonder if he’s also an assistant. I’ll name you “Assistant: Part Two.” But if they’re all researchers, then where is the first prince of Lemlaesta? Is this grand tent just a distraction, while they keep the prince hidden elsewhere?

“Excuse me, where is the first prince?” I asked.

“Hey, they’re asking for you, Prince,” the doctor said casually to Assistant: Part Two.

Huh? That plain-looking guy is the prince?

“I wish you wouldn’t keep telling everyone who I am,” the prince mumbled quietly.

“What’s that?! I couldn’t hear you, Prince!” the doctor boomed.

Considering the tone the man was taking with a member of the royal family, I was starting to wonder if he was really a researcher. He seemed willing to answer my questions, so I decided to ask for introductions from them as well.

“I’m the director of the First Armory of Lemlaesta, Leonard!” the bald man roared. “This is my assistant.”

“I’m just a researcher.” The thin man shrugged. “I’ve been forced to protect the doctor.”

I guess they're exactly who they appear to be.

The doctor, who was remarkably loud even without the amplifier, was heartily smacking his assistant on the back, which seemed to annoy the smaller man. I'd had more than my fill of weirdos today, but the panic in the army seemed to have died down. If it weren't for the appearance of these two odd researchers, it probably would've been difficult for me to pretend to lose.

I wonder if I can utilize them somehow to lose in a more convincing way.

"It's our turn to ask a question!" the doctor confidently declared while staring at me. "Are you Countess Dolkness?!"

"Yes, I'm Yumiella Dolkness," I answered.

"Very well, target confirmed!" Now that introductions had been made, the researcher duo I had internally entrusted to aid in my performance started to take action. "Prepare the coordinate-specifying device!"

"Right away," the assistant responded before quickly heading into the tent.

Oh yeah, the professor first said, "Have you forgotten about our secret weapon?" or something like that. I guess he needs to prepare his secret weapon that isn't really a secret anymore thanks to his loud voice. I would totally win if I just attacked right now.

Instead, I continued to stay still and observe them. If they did end up using their secret weapon, I could probably fake losing quite well.

The assistant returned from the tent, carrying four poles that were as long as he was tall over one shoulder. The poles were quite thin, but they still seemed heavy for him—perhaps it wasn't the most prudent thing to assign a task that required physical strength to someone with arms that thin.

The assistant walked up to me and started stabbing the poles into the ground around me. He planted the poles one by one until I was surrounded by all four. I took a couple steps back as he worked, trying to stay out of his way.

"Don't move! I'll have to redo it if you do, so stay still," he instructed.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

I got scolded by the assistant...

He finished placing the poles in a square, with me at the center, and then he eyeballed his work critically.

“A little to the left, please,” the assistant said.

I took a step. “Here...?”

“Agh, no! That’s too far!”

Following the assistant’s orders, I moved to the true center of the square. It seemed like their secret weapon would use the four poles to determine the location of the target. It seemed like quite an impractical hassle for a weapon.

You could only use this on someone who would wait for you to set up the device without moving around. Only someone trying to lose would get hit by this. Are they really planning to win using this thing?

I decided to give up on the researcher duo, who appeared to not be paying any attention to me while they busied themselves with their device, so I looked instead towards the prince. He awkwardly looked away from me.

“I’ve finished setting up the coordinate-specifying device, Doctor,” the assistant announced.

“Good work! Now it’s time for the Seal Away-inator!” the doctor exclaimed, pulling out a white cube. It was so small that it fit in his palm, and it seemed to be glowing slightly.

“What is that...?” I asked.

“This is Light: Model 997 Version 1, also known as the Seal Away-inator. Several hundreds of years ago, the person known as the Demon Lord of the Kingdom of Valschein was sealed away by the first queen of Valschein. This is a recreation of that sealing instrument!”

Wow, he really will answer any question I have. Yeah, I remember hearing about that magical instrument that sealed the Demon Lord away. It looks like this one is a light-type object, so I’m sure it’ll be effective against me. If that Demon Lord got sealed away for hundreds of years with something similar, then I might actually be in danger.

“The first queen of Valschein was a light magic user, right?” I asked. “Doesn’t

it need light magical energy?”

It was hard to imagine light magic not playing a part in sealing the Demon Lord away. Light magic users were incredibly rare, so I couldn't imagine that they had found one so easily. If I were only considering people currently alive, Alicia was the only light magic user that came to mind, but she was currently imprisoned somewhere in the Royal Palace.

I thought I might be in danger after hearing about the sealing instrument, but I might actually be safe, I thought, feeling a bit relieved.

The bald man let out a fearless chuckle. “Of course it does, and we have a light magic user right here. I have to say, I'm impressed with our kingdom's agents.”

“Agents...?” Now I felt a little lost.

Wouldn't you be boasting about your kingdom's mages, or the people of your kingdom in general for producing a rare light magic user? Why the agents? He's talking about spies, right? If a spy got them a light magic user...

“You don't mean...?!” I exclaimed.

“That's exactly what I mean!” The doctor turned to call back to the tent. “You can come out!”

Alicia Ehnleit, the main character of the otome game, was the one person who could take down the hidden boss, Yumiella. I couldn't believe she was on Lemlaesta's side.

After the doctor called her out of the tent, she was going to...

Hm?

“Um, there's no one there...” I observed.

“You're right, there isn't,” the doctor agreed. “Assistant!”

The assistant ran back into the tent.

Maybe Alicia isn't here after all? Maybe I was overthinking it. Alicia disappearing from Valschein and joining the kingdom's enemy just to defeat me seems like a bit of a stretch, after all...

Soon after the doctor's assistant barged into the tent, I could hear some commotion inside.

"I don't want to!" a familiar voice cried. "This is the first I'm hearing of this! No one told me I'd be dragged out so far from the Royal Capital! I thought we were conducting an experiment on a magical instrument!"

"It *is* an experiment," I heard the assistant soothe. "It's just that we're conducting it on Countess Dolkness."



“No, no, I can’t do it! I’ve made up my mind to never face Yumiella ever again! My stomach hurts! I’m gonna go home!”

The assistant appeared at the entrance to the tent, aggressively tugging on a pink-haired girl’s arm. It was indeed Alicia Ehnleit.

I was flabbergasted. *She’s actually here?!*

As she was dragged out of the tent, Alicia looked away from the assistant and turned her attention to me. Our eyes met, and I could tell that she was obviously terrified.

“It’s been a while,” I greeted her.

“Yumiella...! You’re all right!” she squealed. “The evil kingdom of Lemlaesta is trying to seal you away! I infiltrated the enemy in order to squash their plans! Come on, let’s take down the diabolical Lemlaestans together!”

Wow, she seems so talkative today. Was she always like this? I don’t really remember what she was like, but I think her personality was different at the Academy.

I silently stared at her, skeptical of her words, but she continued speaking.

“I’ve been having such a rough time. I was suddenly kidnapped by a Lemlaestan. I resisted, but I’m not strong like you, so I was taken away! Goodness, what an inconvenience that was! But everything’s okay now, because you’re here, Yumiella! I guess my services are no longer needed. You’ll take Lemlaesta down on your own, right?! Because you’re so strong! Hee hee!” Alicia had a strained smile stretched across her face.

This hurts to watch... Yeah, she definitely wasn’t like this before. I guess being confined for a year or so changes a person.

“So...which was it? Did you infiltrate them or were you kidnapped?” I asked.

“Um, well, what do I...” Her eyes darted around uncertainly before she settled on her answer. “I was kidnapped! It’s true! After that, I pretended to betray Valschein, and I focused on gathering intel... It’s true! Please believe me!”

It appeared that both stories were lies. I wasn’t a very convincing liar either, but I wondered if my own falsehoods were this obvious to others.

“What?” The doctor looked at her strangely. “I thought you said you wanted to get on a ship headed for another continent and say goodbye to your enemy.” His comments trampled unceremoniously all over Alicia’s efforts to make a cover story. His words only backed up my assumptions.

“Don’t be fooled by him...!” Alicia exclaimed, sounding a bit desperate. “They’re the enemy! And they have evil plans!”

I was starting to put the pieces together. Alicia had probably been told that she would be allowed to flee the continent if she helped the Lemlaestans with a magical-instrument experiment, and she’d followed a Lemlaestan spy out of Valschein. She had never expected to be forced to go up against me, which was what had brought us here.

The only reason Lemlaesta would want a light magic user is for anti-Yumiella purposes. Why would she believe that they wanted her help in a magical-instrument experiment?

Things had gotten too crazy—this was no longer the time to be worrying about convincingly losing. Fortunately, Alicia seemed like she had no intention of actually fighting, so I could probably just destroy the magical instrument.

I immediately launched into action. I kicked off the ground, leaping forwards to snatch the device out of the doctor’s hand. Then suddenly, I felt an impact to my forehead.

“Ow...” This sensation was familiar. It was a similar pain to the time I had crashed into the barrier-producing magical instrument that the duke had stolen from the church.

I quickly spread out my arms, and my fingers touched something solid in the air; I confirmed that a perfectly square-shaped barrier had formed around me, one that used the four poles as the corners.

If I can’t destroy the instrument itself, I’ll destroy the device that supports it.

I grabbed one of the poles surrounding me, but...

“Ow, hot!” The moment I touched the stake, there was an unbearable pain in my hand, and I reflexively let go of it.

“I guess the element of light is your weakness after all.” The doctor nodded to himself as I groaned in pain.

I can't believe their weapons have been this effective before Alicia has even done anything. The sealing instrument is a threat even if Alicia isn't. Still, only someone who uses magic can fully seal someone away. As long as Alicia doesn't see me as an enemy, I might not actually get sealed—

“Ha ha ha!” Alicia cackled. “I guess you are weak to light after all! I wasted my time worrying!”

I gaped at her. “Alicia?”

“I lied about both the kidnapping and the infiltration!” she gloated. “I didn't know I'd have to go up against you, but it's for the sake of my freedom! I'll seal you away!” Alicia was now on the enemy's side, betraying me as soon as she saw how the device affected me—basically, as soon as she saw how weak I was against the element of light.

I guess she's what you'd call a turncoat.

The doctor handed Alicia the magical instrument, and as her fingers closed around it, she let out a delighted chuckle.

“Goodbye, Yumiella. I don't think we'll ever see each other again. I didn't hate you that much...” She stopped and seemed to reconsider. “No, I did hate you. Well then, do your thing, Seal Away-inator!”

The cube began to glow radiantly, and it floated upwards, hovering over Alicia's palm. Guided by the stakes, the cube started moving in spirals around me. I steeled myself for immense pain, but I felt nothing at all. I was enveloped in light magical energy, but it was like I was being lulled into a comforting sleep...



I could have jumped upwards, or dug below me and hid underground. I could've used *Black Hole* to destroy the stakes. There were countless possibilities available for my next move. I had to keep thinking of escape routes, but I couldn't break free from the comforting sensation. It was like I was just going to melt into slumber, and I found myself wanting to let it happen.

As my consciousness began to fade away, I heard the sound of Patrick's voice.

"Yumiella!"

I'm sorry for running away from home. I'm sorry for whining about not wanting to have a wedding. There's no way Patrick would be here. I'm sure I'm hallucinating the sound of his voice...



Before I knew it, I suddenly became aware that I was standing in the same place as before. In front of me stood the doctor, the assistant, and Alicia. It seemed like not much time had passed.

"Huh?" I said, confusion evident in my voice.

"Nineteen seconds to escape!" the doctor exclaimed. "Record it for your report! Nineteen seconds!"

"I've already noted it," the assistant replied.

Did he say nineteen seconds? They used a similar magical instrument to the one that sealed away the Demon Lord, and it only kept me sealed for nineteen seconds? What a downgrade this copy is.

I experimentally moved my body, and I felt perfectly fine.

I guess I was able to escape on my own. Darn, I thought Patrick was going to come save me. Now that the deployment of the enemy's secret weapon has ended in a misfire, I can just go ahead and take down the Lemlaestan army... Wait, no, that's right. I need to pretend to lose.

As I recalled my intended goal, I had a revelation.

I can use this situation to my advantage... I can make it seem like I was able to immediately nullify the effects of the sealing instrument, but that it took up too

much of my power, leaving me weak and with no choice but to retreat...

I had come up with the perfect story. My reason for retreating would be clear, and it was the perfect balance of winning without appearing too weak.

“Wow, um, I’m so impressed, Yumiella,” Alicia said, right as I was about to make my next move. I couldn’t help but notice that her legs were trembling. She pasted on a shaky smile. “Wow, you know, your skin is so nice! Do you do anything special? Oh, I guess you have no reason to tell *me* your secrets! Hee hee!” This girl, who had at this point switched sides too many times for me to count, seemed to be tearing up.

I’ll ignore Alicia. I don’t even know how to deal with her.

I had to stop paying attention to Alicia and focus on my plan to lose.

The reason Linus was on the side of the first prince was because the faction of the second prince didn’t value researchers. If they had developed a magical instrument that was capable of weakening *the* Yumiella, then the researcher duo before me would probably get praise for their skills, perhaps proving their worth in the eyes of all of Lemlaesta.

I’m feeling as strong as ever, but I guess I’ll pretend to lose. They won’t believe me if I just say, “Oh noes, I’ve run out of energy so I have no choice but to run!” It would be best for them to notice I’ve been weakened, I thought. Accordingly, I dramatically stumbled as if I had become dizzy. *How’s this?* I glanced over to see how the researchers were reacting.

“Her escape was much faster than we expected,” the assistant remarked. “I wonder if a long-term sealing effect will be impossible to recreate.”

“My inventions rival those that come from dungeons!” roared the doctor. “It must either be because the user wasn’t strong enough, or the target was too strong!”

They weren’t paying attention to me at all.

Um, I just escaped immediately after being sealed away? Aren’t you the tiniest bit concerned about how I might retaliate?

The researchers could’ve learned something from Alicia, who had moved on

from nervously complimenting me to sitting on the ground and crying. Suddenly, the assistant looked my way. He didn't seem terrified in the slightest—in fact, he seemed completely neutral, like he was staring at a guinea pig he was experimenting on.

“Countess Dolkness, I'd like to hear your thoughts on the nineteen seconds you were sealed away.”

“It felt like it ended in the blink of an eye...” I responded. “It feels like it was less than a second.” *Is he really asking for my thoughts?* Just then, I had a realization. *Wait, this is my chance to make it seem like I've been weakened by the experience.* “I guess the sealing instrument isn't such a threat after all. I feel perfectly fine even after breaking the seal.”

If I simply told them that I wasn't feeling well, they would probably be suspicious—that was why it had to seem like I was bluffing and pretending to act fine. The fact that I mentioned how I was feeling after breaking the seal, which they hadn't even asked about, made my ruse extra convincing.

How's that, assistant? Please, notice that I'm weakened... Or that I'm faking it, I guess, since I'm doing great.

“I didn't ask about your thoughts regarding the period after you broke the seal,” the assistant admonished. “Human subjectivity is unreliable.”

“It's too bad we couldn't bring out the assessment tool!” the doctor exclaimed. “If only we had brought along the device that can assess a human's current mana levels!”

“That device is humongous,” the assistant pointed out. “It's also rare, so we probably couldn't have gotten permission to borrow it.”

The researchers continued their conversation, completely ignoring me. They showed no signs of noticing my weakened state—well, my fake weakened state because, again, I was feeling great.

They probably only have eyes for magical instruments. Maybe I really need to ham it up for them.

“I see, so you had anticipated my mana decreasing, as it totally has... Still, it's only been depleted by a small amount. I'll have no trouble fighting.”

How about that?! Doesn't it seem like I'm desperately bluffing? I, Yumiella Dolkness, have obviously been weakened! (Even though I'm actually doing great.)

"That's your subjective opinion, no?" the assistant repeated with an exasperated look. "Or are you able to provide some kind of objective data?"

I hate this guy.

It was true that I could be misinterpreting things due to my own subjectivity—especially considering that I was, in fact, lying about the whole thing. My mana hadn't been depleted at all, nor did it feel like any had been taken from me. In the end, I supposed the researchers were correct to maintain their skeptical attitudes, since my body hadn't actually been affected by the device in any appreciable way.

"We just can't get meaningful results outside of the lab," the assistant observed.

"I agree. Let's return at once!" the doctor suggested.

"Our belongings are already prepared. As for the backup coordinate-specifying device—"

"Leave it!"

Without further ado, the doctor reached into the tent and slung an already packed knapsack over his shoulders. He sprinted off. The assistant, who appeared to be traveling lighter than his companion, was still unable to match the doctor's pace, and he desperately followed after, wheezing and out of breath.

Their all too swift retreat left me and the Lemlaestan soldiers standing there with no other recourse but to watch blankly as the researchers traveled quickly out of sight.

Oh, they're getting smaller and smaller. Wait, they're gone now. Oh well, I guess it's fine. I don't think I was going to succeed in making them think I was weakened anyway.

I needed someone who was going to think, "Maybe she used up her strength

escaping,” after seeing how quickly I broke the seal—someone who would make assumptions about the odds being in their favor.

There wouldn't be someone here who conveniently fits that, would—

“Are you perhaps weakened after being sealed away, Yumiella?”

“Oh.”

There was such a person: Alicia Ehnleit.

“Maybe she didn't go after the researchers because she's weakened...” Alicia mumbled to herself. “Maybe I should run too... No, maybe now I could beat her...?”

How convenient for me. I love you, Alicia. I'm glad that those researchers are gone, since they might've contradicted my claims of being weakened. Oh, but I do regret not getting to ask them if they know about any other level-assessment tools.

Currently, I owned only a crystal that could show the lower two digits of someone's level, which meant that my true level was unknown. The researchers might have known of other magical instruments that could perhaps display three, four, or even *more* digits of one's level. It was unfortunate that I hadn't been afforded a chance to ask them about it.

Oh, right. Level assessments!

I had completely forgotten to do my daily level assessment. It slipped my mind because I had left so early this morning and had spent all day traveling with Gilbert.

Despite only being able to see the lower two digits, it was fun to see my level go up, one level at a time. I hadn't taken down any monsters, so my level likely hadn't changed from when I'd checked it yesterday and the day before, but I was still going to do it—I'd classified it as a daily task for a reason.

I pulled out the crystal, which made Alicia start screaming. I ignored her.

“Waaaugh! She's pulling something out...?! It's all over for me! I'm going to die!”

Disregarding Alicia's latest round of hysterics, I crouched down and placed the

crystal on the ground. Then I placed my hand over it, and I peeked hopefully over at the number displayed on the other side. I hadn't planned for it, but I'd ended up placing the instrument so that the display faced towards Alicia. Since she was still flopping around on the ground, she probably had a good view of the crystal.

Of course, my level was unchanged, and the crystal still said "13." Still, these were only the lower two digits—my actual level could be in the hundreds or even thousands.

"13...?" Alicia mumbled. She scrambled to her feet. Her face, which had mere seconds ago been twisted in fear, was suddenly filled with confidence and hope. "13! *The Yumiella* is level 13! I can win! Even I can beat her!"

No, no. I've surpassed the limit of 99... Oh, right. Most people would just look at the crystal and assume I'm level 13. This will make me look like I'm weakened more than ever. I never thought this crystal would come in handy here. Patrick and Gilbert are so shortsighted, thinking it's strange to walk around with it. This is my chance to pull off my plan!

"Oh noes, what has happened?" I said in an extremely dramatic fashion. "Being sealed away has made my level decrease! I have no choice but to retreat and regain my strength."

I'm really glad the researchers aren't here. They might've explained that it wasn't possible for my level to decrease because of the sealing instrument. Actually, can levels decrease? If they can, I want to exterminate all possibilities of that happening.

Okay then, the plan has basically been completed. I just need to run away with my tail between my legs; then Lemlaesta will think they weakened Yumiella and won, which will give them glory. They probably won't bother forcing their way into Ashbatten after all this.

Actually, if I run away too quickly, they might not believe I'm weakened. I should retreat in a more relaxed manner.

As I considered how I should go about withdrawing, Alicia stalked towards me.

“Do you know how much I’ve been through because of you, Yumiella?!” she yelled. “Do you understand the pain of living without any freedom?!”

I’ll let her say whatever she wants. After all, I’m the one who suggested she be confined instead of executed.

I responded to her with only silence, so she continued her rant.

“*The* Yumiella is only level 13?! How pitiful! How does it feel to have lost the only thing that gave you worth? I have the higher level! I have the advantage! Looks like the winner is clear!”

I was well aware that my level wasn’t 13. I wasn’t going to lose my cool over such a low-grade attempt at egging me on.

“How pathetic!” Alicia exclaimed. “Level 13...?” She began giggling. “That’s lower than a first-year!”

Endure it. Stay calm, me.

I was strong, so I wasn’t going to take such a weak-looking person seriously. The stronger Alicia’s taunting became, the more it showed how weak she was.

I’m strong. I’m strong. I’m strong. Iamstrooo—

“You’re weak!” Alicia continued mercilessly. “You’re truly, unbelievably weak! You’re a small fry! You’re nothing, small fry!”

“Grrrggggaaargh!”



Interlude 4: Patrick (Part 3)

Patrick left the fortress at speed, moving out on his own.

“Yumiella... Please be okay...” he prayed.

Since hearing about the sealing instrument from Linus, he knew the situation was more dire than he’d imagined. If Lemlaesta’s secret weapon, the sealing instrument, was as powerful as the magical instrument used against the Demon Lord, Yumiella would be sealed away for several hundreds of years.

Though Yumiella herself might only experience it as a long slumber, she would be gone for much too long. Patrick wouldn’t see her for the rest of his life, and what would await her upon awakening would be a world with no one she knew still alive.

Patrick continued running, fast as he could, almost as if he were trying to leave his thoughts of a cruel future behind.

He continued onwards, moving at such speed and leaning so far down that if he didn’t maintain his momentum, he would easily topple over. With each step, he kicked up the earth.

Patrick eventually crested a small hill, and the Lemlaestan army came into view below him. He could see their entire camp. He scanned over the crowd of tents, and...there she was. At the back of the camp, standing in front of a large tent, surrounded by strange poles. However, right as Patrick found her, Yumiella was being sealed away.

“Yumiella!” He knew his voice wouldn’t reach her, but he couldn’t help but call out to her.

His fiancée didn’t visibly resist as she disappeared into the light. That light, along with the mysterious poles, quickly disappeared along with Yumiella. What appeared in their place was a large, white box. The cube, which was big enough to fit a person inside, floated in the air, turning clockwise.

“I didn’t make it in time...” Patrick mumbled. Stunned, he hung his head and stared at the ground beneath him.

She wasn’t dead—just like the Demon Lord, she would be resurrected one day. It might take several hundred years like in the Demon Lord’s case, or it could be just a few years, or even a few days. It was also possible that he could negotiate with Lemlaesta and get them to release her.

I’ll wait until she comes out, however long that is. I’ll wait until she comes out with a soft smile on her usually expressionless face, and she’ll say, “I’m home. I couldn’t go to the moon...”

It had only been a few days since he’d last seen her, but Patrick missed his fiancée so much that he couldn’t take it. As he thought of her, he lifted his head back up.

“Huh...?”

He had only been looking down for a handful of seconds. In that short moment, something had changed.

The once pure-white cube was covered in a speckled black pattern. The black spots were spreading out all over the cube; it was as if they were consuming the white surface. Several seconds later, the cube was covered in an equal number of white and black stripes. It only took an instant for most of the cube to be engulfed in black.

The cube finally turned entirely jet-black—the same color as Yumiella’s hair—before crumbling into pieces. Once it had disintegrated, not a speck of dust left over from the cube remained, and Yumiella was standing there, just as she had been before being sealed.

“Oh...” Patrick had considered the possibility that they would never see each other again, and he let out a long sigh as his body released all of its tension at once. “Can I take back all the worrying I did?” he muttered to himself.

Now that he saw she was all right, he felt that he ought to have expected this. Yumiella had a track record of making Patrick worry over what turned out to be nothing. However, it was still true that she *had* successfully been sealed away, even if it had only been for a moment.

“I should be grateful,” he told himself.

His gratitude towards her being all right and the anxiety of being unnecessarily worried fought for ascendancy inside him. He let out another sigh, which seemed to have become a habit of his, and he stepped forwards to make his way to Yumiella.

“Wait. Don’t go, Patrick.”

Patrick whirled around in shock. “Gilbert?!”

It was Gilbert. Compared to Patrick, usually a calm and measured person, Gilbert appeared high-strung, and he was currently glaring at the Lemlaestan army with a grim expression.

The sealing instrument that had so worried him appeared to have been neutralized. There was no longer a reason to hurry, so Patrick did as his brother asked.

“I heard you were in Lemlaesta,” Patrick said. “Something about you working with Yumiella over there.”

“Did Linus tell you that?”

“Yes, along with giving a warning about the sealing instrument.”

“Oh, so that’s what was happening,” Gilbert said with understanding dawning on his features. “She was being sealed away. I understand why the Lemlaestans moved up their schedule now.”

“You sent Yumiella over there without knowing?!” Patrick exclaimed. “Without even knowing why they expedited their plans? You surely understood that there had to be a reason behind their actions.”

“I knew that there must be a reason they were heading out sooner than expected, but... I knew it would be fine. Your fiancée wouldn’t get hurt that easily.”

“Well...” He had Patrick there.

Patrick felt angry at his brother for putting his fiancée in danger, but he couldn’t deny that the possibility was small that Lemlaesta could prepare something that would actually hurt Yumiella. The two emotions battling inside

him finally decided on a winner: he felt, in the end, that he had worried unnecessarily.

Gilbert scowled to see his younger brother expending yet more of his energy in worrying about Yumiella.

“The sealing will prove an advantage to her,” Gilbert said. “Her assignment from me will be far too easy for her to complete now.”

“Assignment...” Patrick thought for a moment. “You mean her task of pretending to lose?”

“The stories of that woman have spread to Lemlaesta, and they now consider her quite the threat. I’m sure of it, now that I’ve been there.”

“I don’t appreciate you calling Yumiella ‘that woman’...”

“What’s wrong with it? Are you trying to say you care more about *that woman* than you do your own brother?”

Patrick’s brother and girlfriend were both important to him, and the reasons that they were important weren’t really comparable. However, Patrick knew from experience that his brother wouldn’t be satisfied with an answer like that.

Patrick had long thought his brother was strange, but he’d never imagined that it was to this degree. Gilbert’s questions brought to mind another person who liked to ask similarly ridiculous questions. Patrick knew that telling Gilbert that his behavior was reminiscent of Yumiella would only make things a bigger mess, so he kept that thought to himself.

While the brothers were talking, the situation on the ground had continued to change. The two men in white coats had now completely disappeared into the distance, and Yumiella and a pink-haired girl were facing each other.

“That dull-looking man standing in the back is the first prince of Lemlaesta,” Gilbert said, pointing him out. “Who is that woman, though...?”

“That’s...” Patrick strained his eyes to see. “Alicia Ehnleit?!”

Patrick had just now taken notice of her small figure. It now made much more sense that the Lemlaestans had been able to use the sealing instrument.

“Alicia? That one that can use light magic?” Gilbert asked. “Even *that woman* would have no trouble fooling such an imprudent opponent.”

“Do you really have no intention of calling Yumiella by her name?” Patrick asked, irritated. “Regardless, I’m sure Yumiella could come up with some simple excuse, like saying that the sealing instrument depleted her mana. As I’ve written in all of my letters to you, she has a sharp mind.”

“That’s true,” Gilbert admitted as he squinted at the Lemlaestan army below them. “I was also fooled by her for a while. Countess Dolkness seems to be good at feigning charm.”

Patrick had wanted to be there the first time Yumiella and Gilbert met. They were both easily misunderstood, and the idea of letting them talk on their own wasn’t even funny as a joke. However, the two had ended up meeting without his careful supervision, far away in the Royal Capital of Lemlaesta.

Patrick was sure that the pair now had the worst first impressions of each other, and he wondered what kind of conversations they’d managed to have. Hearing that Gilbert had been fooled by her, he thought it likely that there had been some kind of a communication breakdown.

“What do you mean when you say she fooled you...?” Patrick asked, hesitant.

“She had been hiding her identity. I say I was fooled, but...it was a wise decision on her part, considering she was in a foreign kingdom.”

“I see. Surely you figured it out right away.”

“Like I said, she was good at feigning charm. I just found out a short while ago. She was using the fake name ‘Eleanora.’” Gilbert narrowed his eyes in recollection. “Now that I think about it, that’s the name of the duke’s daughter.”

Patrick assumed that Yumiella must have crashed down in the neighboring kingdom after flying towards the moon, and that she had spent over twenty-four hours with his brother—they had spent all that time together, yet Gilbert only learned of her identity within the past hour or so.

Yumiella was able to act polite, but she would also politely do strange things. Even if she were to use an alias and hide her features, one would easily be able

to tell she was an eccentric person after speaking to her for only a few minutes.

Patrick had always respected his brother for his sharp mind, but he now realized that Gilbert was just as dense as Yumiella. This was a hard fact to digest.

“So you gave each other fake names and believed you were total strangers...” Patrick summarized.

“Well, no. I didn’t use a fake name,” Gilbert corrected. “Think about it. How many people think of the margrave’s heir hearing the name ‘Gilbert’? The number of people who know my face are probably equal to that.”

“So Yumiella knew your name was Gilbert, and she still didn’t know who you were?”

“She didn’t seem to know... Are you saying there’s a possibility she knew my identity and was seeing how I—”

“No, that’s not possible,” Patrick interrupted. “She’s not good at subtle acting like that.”

Yumiella seemed to have been quite dense in this situation as well, even considering her usual denseness.

Yumiella’s the dense one for not realizing who Gilbert was. My brother isn’t that clumsy, Patrick told himself.

Gilbert continued to stare out towards Yumiella and Alicia in the distance, completely unaware that his younger brother’s trust in him was slowly dissolving.

“I’ve had a few conversations with that woman. If I’d known her identity, I probably couldn’t have spoken so calmly to her. If I take my assumptions and preconceptions out of consideration, when I spoke to her... Um, well... She was a bit strange, but, um...” There was a long pause. “Yumiella was a nice girl.”

“Gilbert...!” Patrick turned to his brother, realizing that it was the first time he’d said her name.

Gilbert’s usual high-strung expression was twisted into an even more intense grimace, but Patrick had seen every expression of his older brother’s since he

was a young boy, and he knew that this one was Gilbert's way of hiding his bashfulness.

For a lot of this conversation, he had been worried about how things would go, but it appeared his brother would be approving of his betrothal to Yumiella at last. Patrick let out a sigh of relief.

"Just so you know, I haven't given my approval of your marriage!" Gilbert insisted. "If that woman can't complete this assignment, I'm never going to approve of it, and I won't be attending the wedding, no matter what."

"What if Yumiella successfully loses?"

"If that happens... Well, I guess I'll have no choice but to bless your marriage to Yumiella... Why are you laughing?"

Patrick smiled. "Nothing, it's just like you to say that, Gilbert."

"Of course. Also, I've been thinking for a while that 'Gilbert' is a bit too stuffy, so you should just call me 'big brother' like you used—"

This conversation between the cynical older brother and the straightforward younger one was abruptly cut off.

At first, they felt a colossal wave of magical energy coming from the direction of the Lemlaestan army. They both looked towards the source. Patrick didn't even know why he bothered looking; he knew who the source was right away, but Gilbert needed some time to realize its identity.

Without thinking, Gilbert muttered, "What is *that*...?"

Chapter 8: The Hidden Boss Descends—the End of the World

It floated in the air as *it* slowly ascended. Wings sprouted from *its* back. This was an example of an extremely rare phenomenon in which magical energy—which was typically fluid, colorless, and shapeless—took a well-defined and solid form.

Each of the six black wings on either side of *it* undulated, continuously changing shape as they grew larger. The wings themselves were visible from a much greater distance than the human-shaped entity in the center was.

It had a ring floating above *its* head. The ring, black as the undulating wings, multiplied itself several times over into a pattern of concentric circles that looked a bit like Saturn's rings.

It was much too evil to be called an angel, but much too divine to call a devil. Still, calling *it* a god would be sacrilege.

It was surrounded by the Lemlaestan army, who stood mute and staring as *its* wings spread and its halo expanded ever outwards. No one was running—they instinctively knew that it was pointless to run, and they clung to this single clear fact in a maelstrom of incomprehensible circumstances.

No one screamed; there was no value in expelling precious air from their lungs or in raising their voices. No one spoke; everyone felt the same horror, so there was no need to put their thoughts into words. No one prepared a will; it was clear that the people they would leave behind were going to disappear as well. No one fought; the futility of such an action required no explanation.

It wasn't despair—resignation was closer to what they felt. No matter what action they might take, it would ultimately be pointless, and they had no choice but to accept the reality before them.

The area around *it* fell completely silent. As the Lemlaestan forces watched, *it* grew larger with every passing second. *Its* black wings spread upwards, while

the halo spread in every direction parallel to the ground, both wings and halo continuously expanding.

Once the twelve wings reached a certain height, they began to move differently, as if they were trying to engulf the planet. The black rings spread out, as if they intended to cover the skies of the whole world...

The black wings and the ever-expanding halo were eventually observable from every corner of the globe. This caused unrest to spread throughout the world. Those who had the knowledge or the wisdom to understand the nature of what *it* might be were dragged at once into the depths of despair.



It was fortunately cloudy in the Royal Capital of Valschein, which hid the wings from view. However, the thin, continuously spreading concentric rings were visible under the clouds.

While the expanding stripes rippling across the sky filled the citizens with anxiety, those in the Royal Palace were busy trying to understand what was actually happening. The initial reports sent out from various departments had reached the king. The weather specialist working for the kingdom believed that this was the first time such a phenomenon had occurred in documented history. Other researchers started combing through the kingdom's records, but there was little hope that any useful reference would be found.

This was the point at which the Archmage was called before the king. He hurried as quickly as his elderly body would allow and rushed to the king's side.

"It appears that there is a large wave of magical energy flowing from the west towards the east," the Archmage panted as he caught his breath. "I believe it's covering the entire sky. The source should be found somewhere to the west."

The king looked out the window of his office. It was true that the striped pattern in the sky seemed to arc towards the east and from the west.

"I see, so it's an expanding wave of magical energy," the king repeated. "There's been a report from outside the Royal Capital documenting a large object floating above the clouds. It's apparently shaped like a leaf or feather."

Could that, too, be related to the magical energy?”

The Archmage nodded. “I haven’t seen it myself, so I can’t say for sure, but it seems likely that it is.”

“Black magical energy...” the king mused. “I can’t help but think of that girl.”

“That’s impossible,” his magical adviser insisted. “Considering the scale of this phenomenon, it has to be coming from outside the kingdom. Even though that girl might be...somewhat irregular, she couldn’t do something of this scale.”

The elderly mage believed that the source of this phenomenon had to be something outside of human understanding—and that it was therefore something humanity could do nothing about. He had no idea what could have affected everything on such a scale. Had a god descended onto their world, or was this the beginning of the end of everything?

Just then, another man entered the office, a superior officer of the Knight’s Order, someone in charge of maintaining order. The king and Archmage deferred further discussion about a possible apocalypse so that the king could order the man to be cautious of any crimes that might occur in the midst of the chaos.

The Archmage stood there feeling a bit useless; he knew nothing of policing the populace. He turned to the window, studied the unsettling pattern in the sky, and trembled.



On a distant continent, night had already fallen, obfuscating the additional darkness of the spreading wings and halo. The first to notice the strange phenomenon was a blind master swordsman. The man spent every hour of every day in darkness, and now he felt something even darker.

“I see... So it’s going to end,” the swordsman mumbled.

“Master?” asked his apprentice. “Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. You should go to sleep.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll head to bed in preparation for tomorrow’s lesson! Good night!”

The swordsman’s unusually sharp ears listened as his apprentice’s heartbeat

slowed as he fell into sleep, still pondering his lesson plans for the next day.

“If tomorrow even comes...” the swordsman muttered darkly.



Perched on a certain church spire in a certain town, the god of darkness complained to the god of light as they sat together and watched as the world ended.

“I told you so!” the god of darkness exclaimed. “This is why I said we should kill her sooner rather than later! I warned you so many times!”

“Gods are beings that watch over humans,” the god of light reminded him. “It is not right for a god to kill a human. I will repeat myself as many times as I have to.”

“The fact that you still consider *that* to be a human after witnessing this terrifying situation makes me wonder if you’re all right in the head.”

“She *is* a human,” insisted the god of light. “She is a human, and I love all humans. Humans should resolve their own issues, no?”

Lemn let out a sigh, exasperated with this conversation that clearly was going nowhere. The situation had gotten so out of control that it would no longer do any good for gods to intervene. It was pointless to struggle, and he had no choice but to observe from the sidelines. The only other thing he could do was pin his hopes on humans, as Sanon suggested.

“I’m counting on you, mister,” Lemn grumbled.

“Considering how dire the situation is, why don’t you use his name?” Sanon asked.

“Shut up, Sanon! I could say the same thing to you. Considering how dire the situation is, why can’t you be a little more flexible with your principles?!”

“Shut your mouth, Lemn.”



The county of Dolkness was currently without their lord. Disastrous darkness filled the previously sunny skies, and the reactions to the crisis observable in

this one territory were a microcosm of the various responses across the world. Those working in the lord's estate were in a frenzy, trying to figure out what was going on. At the same time, fear and panic spread throughout the town. Among everyone in the county, there was only one person who was as calm as usual.

"Oh my, it seems that Yumiella has gotten into quite the mess once again," the girl muttered to herself as she looked blankly up at the sky.

"Lady Eleanora!" a maid called out to her. "What are you doing? We must get you to safety right—"

"Where would be safe from this?" Eleanora responded, disregarding the maid's warning and remaining by the window.

"You have a point..." The realization caused the maid to freeze up in fear.

"This is undoubtedly the work of Yumiella, so there's no use being afraid of it," Eleanora said comfortingly.

"I guess it *is* related to Lady Yumiella after all. I thought the world might be ending, but..." The maid looked determined. "I need to trust Lady Yumiella."

Well, the world *was* going to end—at the very least, it would if things continued the way they were going. Eleanora had already drawn this conclusion, and she almost opened her mouth to express her honest thoughts, but then she realized that there was no point in making the maid's anxiety worse.

Eleanora believed in Yumiella. She also believed that Yumiella could easily destroy a world or two just to prove her own strength. Still, Eleanora didn't panic. She thought instead of someone who believed in Yumiella just as much as she did.

"There's probably no use in *me* trying to think of a solution. I hope Sir Patrick is able to stop her..."



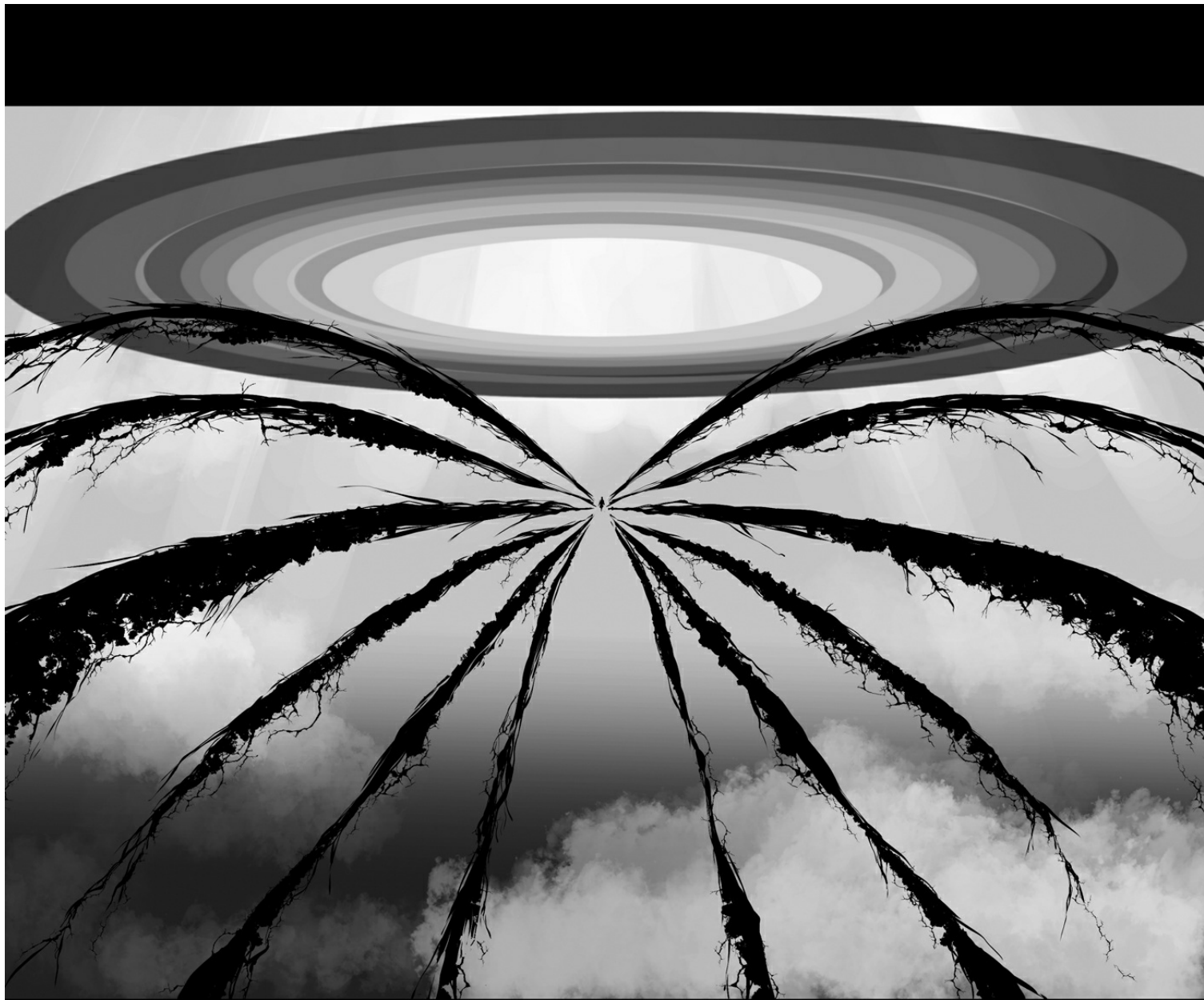
Back at the battlefield directly under *it*, the Lemlaestan soldiers continued to stare, dumbfounded, at the source of the phenomenon. The people of the

world who only had to look at the effects of *it* were fortunate; the soldiers, on the other hand, had to live through it.

There was no sound at the center of the end of the world. In the silence, Patrick Ashbatten's voice rang with clarion volume as he called *its* name.

"Yumiella!" *It* didn't respond to his voice. "Yumiella, can you hear me?! It's me! It's Patrick!"

Patrick wove through the frozen Lemlaestan soldiers and ran towards *it*. Some realized that he was part of the margrave's family upon hearing his name, but they didn't react—despite the fact that Patrick was technically their enemy, he was nothing compared to the horror spread out across the sky. All they did was look after him with expressions of pity towards him and his obviously futile efforts.



Patrick conjured a burst of wind and flew off the ground, unable to bear the lack of response from *it* any longer. He used his magic to rapidly close the distance between himself and the floating being.

“What’s wrong?!” he cried. “If you’re really that against it, we don’t have to have a wedding—”

As he hit the halfway mark between the ground and *it*, huge globs of a jet-black, muddy substance started to rain down on the earth below. The sky was suddenly full of it.

Patrick instinctively felt that it was imperative to not let the mud brush against him even in the slightest. Just managing to dodge it took every ounce of power that he had. As he twisted and turned, avoiding getting hit, he was forced back down onto the ground.

He looked up, and from the ground he could see that, of course, the mud was coming from *it*. The black, sticky muck was continuously spilling out from the twelve wings on *its* back. The mud made an unsettling plopping sound as it hit the ground, but to his surprise, it hadn’t yet seemed to have hit any people.

Patrick expected the growing puddles of mud to sink into the earth, but the substance behaved strangely. The countless blobs all moved as if they had minds of their own.

He kept thinking of these masses as “mud” because that’s what they most resembled, but perhaps they were more like some kind of slime—the only thing was, they moved much too abnormally to be slimes.

Each blob continued to change form. They stretched upwards before sinking back to the ground, then stretched horizontally before collapsing back towards the center. It seemed like they had a specific shape they were trying to achieve as they wiggled around.

“This is...” Patrick’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Maybe I won’t be able to do something this time.”

The scene before him was even more horrific than Patrick imagined hell could be, and he began to truly feel as if the world was going to end. After all, if Yumiella wanted to, she could easily catalyze the end of days.

Despite the overwhelming despair of the situation, he leaped up towards the sky once more, heading for *it*.

“Yumiella! I’m going to keep trying, no matter how many—” Patrick once again found himself facing towards the ground, only this time it was because he was suddenly unable to ascend. “What’s going on...?”

Patrick had been propelling himself upwards using wind magic, and he had managed to achieve a significant height, but now he found himself suddenly falling. It didn’t feel as if a force had pushed him back. He definitely felt like he was heading upwards, yet for some reason he found himself hurtling towards the ground at full force before he knew it.

Now earthbound, Patrick picked up a pebble and threw it into the air. The pebble headed straight up before suddenly flying sideways for a short distance. Then the pebble moved up, right, down, then right again... It didn’t seem like there was any pattern to its movement as it zoomed through the air in zigzags, at times drawing arcs, before it slowly lost momentum.

As the pebble slowed down, it fell downwards and stopped, hovering right in front of Patrick’s face. After a second, the pebble began to accelerate once again, ascending in fits and starts and flying around in an irregular pattern. After tracing this unpredictable flight path for a moment, it finally fell in front of him, only this time it bounced off the ground several times before it stopped moving. The pebble’s final movements were the only ones that seemed to obey the standard laws of physics.

“Is this space warped?” Patrick wondered aloud.

Perhaps from the rock’s perspective, it *had* just flown straight up before falling due to the force of gravity. However, if Patrick’s hypothesis was correct and the space around him had indeed warped into a chaotic mess, this would explain both the rock’s movements and his own unceremonious crash landing.

In order to reach Yumiella, he had to somehow navigate the twisted space around them. Upon realizing this hopeless fact, Patrick stared blankly up at the sky.

“What do I do...?”

If the space was warped, that meant that even light couldn't directly reach the earth, which meant that Yumiella might not even be where she seemed to be positioned. The light would bend according to the warps in space, causing a deceptive optical illusion.

As Patrick stood there, filled with despair, he heard a listless voice behind him.

"It's over," it said numbly. "Let's just give up."

Patrick turned. "Oh, it's you, Alicia." He'd forgotten that the girl was here and not still confined in the Royal Palace.

"Wait, I feel like I've seen you somewhere before..." Alicia said, looking at him with eyes devoid of feeling. "I guess it doesn't matter at this point."

"Oh, right. You're the last one that spoke to her before *that* happened to Yumiella. What caused it?"

"It's my fault, but soon enough there won't be anyone to condemn me for it, and it's too late for regret, and the sky is black..." Alicia let out a sigh. "I guess there's no point in me going to another continent anymore either, ha ha." Her laugh was hollow.

Alicia didn't seem like she was doing all right, but Patrick didn't have time to worry about her; just as she'd said, there was no doubt that she was the cause of all this. Patrick believed that whatever she'd done held the key to getting everyone out of this situation.

"What did you do to her? What did you say to her?" he demanded. "Yumiella's generally a mild-mannered... Well, maybe that's not the best description of her. Either way, you must've done something pretty intense for her to transform into *that*."

Mild-mannered or not, he had no doubt that Yumiella was at least a generally stable person. If she had been someone who became violent whenever her mood changed, Valschein would have burned to the ground long ago.

With all that said, Patrick was curious as to what Alicia could have done to have incurred Yumiella's wrath to this extent. The light mage finally responded, explaining the extent of the taboo she had committed.

“I told her that I thought I could beat her if she’s really level 13. After all, I have the advantage when it comes to our elements... I even called her a small fry.” She looked miserably up at the sky. “I was wrong to think I could beat her.”

“Oh,” Patrick said, understanding dawning on him. He’d finally figured it out.

The truth was, he’d had a feeling that this might have been the cause of all this. After all, Yumiella had ended up in a similar situation the other day, and the trigger had been Lemn’s taunts about her level. Her level was, of course, actually much higher; 13 was just the lower two digits of whatever her full level really was. However, being taunted as ‘a small fry’ who was only level 13 seemed to be unbearable torture for Yumiella.

It was admittedly a ridiculous reason, but that didn’t change the fact that this terrifying phenomenon needed to be stopped.

“I thought it might be something along those lines,” Patrick said after letting out a deep, melancholic sigh. He fixed Alicia with a steely gaze. “I’ll have you know that Yumiella is strong!” he declared as loudly as he could, projecting with his diaphragm. Still, he didn’t know if his voice was reaching Yumiella.

She hadn’t seen him since she’d run away from home, saying that she was going to the moon. If she’d noticed that he was here, she might have reacted, but nothing like that had happened. She probably wasn’t even aware of his presence.

Patrick scanned his surroundings. It didn’t seem like he was getting anywhere on his own. If Ryuu or Eleanora were here, the situation could maybe take a turn for the better, but neither of them were present. Even if he were to call them over, by the time they got here, the world would have already ended.

The only allies Patrick had right now were Alicia, who was just standing there staring blankly, and the Lemlaestan soldiers, who appeared to be doing the same. Though there were hundreds of people around him, they didn’t seem like they would be of any use.

Still...

“I guess they’ll have to do their best,” Patrick muttered. He let out a sigh before continuing in a louder voice. “Listen up! I’m Patrick Ashbatten! That

thing up there in the sky is my fiancée! I'm going to undo what's happened to her! I need your help!" He used his wind magic as he spoke, amplifying his voice so that he could deliver his message to the entire army.

Though his message reverberated throughout the battlefield, not a single soldier reacted to it—no one even glanced at him. Patrick was left as the only one yelling up at the sky.

"Yumiella is strong! She's the strongest in the world! Yumiella is the most powerful person in the entire world!"

Patrick's words seemed to have some effect because the bizarre blobs of mud wriggling around on the ground stopped moving. Though they didn't seem capable of communicating with humans in the slightest, they all became still, as if they were listening to him.

The unbelievable sight of the mud creatures falling still at last caused a reaction among the Lemlaestans. They all looked at each other, trying to confirm that they were all seeing the same thing. Patrick called out to the soldiers once more, using this opportunity to push them into action.

"Yumiella lost control after being told she was weak!" he explained at volume. "If we all praise her strength, she'll return to normal!"

At least I think she should, Patrick thought. He wasn't sure about this, but he didn't want the soldiers to feel his unease, so he declared his belief confidently in an attempt to trick even himself into believing it. "Everyone, raise your voices! If our words reach Yumiella, the world will continue to exist!"

Patrick had prepared himself for the idea that the end of the world might still arrive, but he didn't let the soldiers see that. He still firmly believed that disaster could be averted. He believed in his heart that Yumiella would return. There was no way that Yumiella wanted the world to end—even through all the despair he felt, Patrick had no trouble believing that.

"Let's save the world!" Patrick exclaimed.

As his voice traveled through the air, the Lemlaestan forces began reacting. Though they had initially pitied him for his stubborn refusal to give up, they were now curious as to how he could display so much confidence. Why was he

so sure that they could save the world after seeing what was undoubtedly a sign of the end-times? When they turned to look at him, encouraged by his words, what they saw were Patrick's emerald-green eyes glimmering radiantly with hope.

This spark of hope spread throughout the entire Lemlaestan army. It was a terribly small glow compared to the darkness covering the skies, but this was the sort of light that could save the world.

As those around him began to once again feel hope, one Lemlaestan soldier found that he couldn't stop shaking. Until moments ago, he had completely given up to the point that he felt almost at ease. But now that he knew there was hope they might survive, that meant that the world might continue, but he also might still die. *I don't want to die! I want to live!* he exclaimed in his heart.

Individual desires to live, wishes to protect the world in which their loved ones resided, and the egotistical urge to play a part in saving the world were some of the varied motivations in the soldiers' hearts. These thoughts manifested into one phrase.

"Yumiella is the strongest!" one soldier exclaimed.

"Yumiella is the strongest! Yumiella is the strongest!" multiple soldiers chanted in unison.

It was a simple phrase, and it was unclear who had yelled it first. The Lemlaestan soldiers continued to scream until their throats gave out, thinking of their love for this world and all its people.

The blobs of mud, fallen still, began to change. Though they had been abnormally solid, now they began to lose their form and slowly spread out across the ground.

The sky also began to change. The wings that were spread out above them began slowly folding downwards.

Though these were visible changes, it wasn't clear if the situation had taken a turn for the better or for the worse.

"Yumiella is the strongest! Yumiella is the strongest!" they continued to chant. Everyone's hearts and words worked in unison. "Yumiella is the

strongest! Yumiella is the strongest! Yumiella is the strongest!”

And then...the world was saved.

The strange mud disappeared, evaporating away as if it had never existed. The wings that covered the skies dissipated into the air as if they were unraveling. The black rings faded away, and warm sunlight shone down.

Patrick watched as the soldiers from the neighboring kingdom cheered and shouted, tears streaming down their faces. He appeared to be the only person present who had remained composed.

What even is this ridiculous situation? he thought. *Why am I doing this?*

After examining the situation objectively, Patrick had to admit that he felt a bit embarrassed, but he reminded himself that this had been the only way to turn Yumiella back to normal.

“Yumiella is stronger than anyone in the world!” Patrick exclaimed once more for good measure. “She’s number one in the world! There hasn’t ever been anyone stronger than Yumiella, nor will there be in the future!”

“Come on, I don’t think I’m *that* strong...but that’s also hard to deny,” Yumiella said with a bashful smile. The darkness was gone, and there she stood under the sunny sky.



“Come on, I don’t think I’m *that* strong...but that’s also hard to deny,” I said to Patrick with a smile.

Before I knew it, everything around me seemed to devolve into chaos. The incredibly loud chants of “Yumiella is the strongest!” didn’t stop. In fact, they seemed to be getting even louder and more vigorous. Before, it had seemed like they had been screaming desperately, but now they sounded like cries of joy.

“Yumiella is the strongest! Yumiella is the strongest!” the soldiers cheered.

Wait, wait, hold on. It’s true that I’m as strong as the ultimate creature of destruction, but it’s kind of embarrassing to have a crowd chanting it. I didn’t

even realize it, but Alicia's still here too. I give up on understanding her.

If a third party were to look in on this situation, they might believe that I was forcing the soldiers to praise me, or perhaps they would think this was some kind of ritual to worship a god of destruction.

In contrast to the sea of Lemlaestan soldiers spread out before me, Patrick was standing right in front of me. He wasn't participating in this strange ritual. I had probably just imagined hearing his voice in the crowd. Patrick would never shout something silly like "Yumiella is the strongest!"

Patrick just stood there, silently staring at me. I had been planning on coming up with an excuse later for running away from home, so I had no idea what to say to him either.

I'll just follow my gut and start by saying...

"Um, so... I didn't make it to the moon."

That was definitely the wrong thing to start with. Couldn't you think of something better to say? He's mad, isn't he?

Patrick slowly made his way towards me and then suddenly threw his arms around me in a tight embrace.

"I'm glad... I'm so glad..."

Huh? What is this? What's going on?

I stood there, completely confused and stiff as a statue as he held me.

Maybe he was really sad without me around. I can't believe he'd get so emotional after not seeing me for only a few days. You might be a little too dependent on me, Patrick. I don't mind it, though. I didn't think being dependent was a good thing, but I guess your boyfriend being dependent on you is a different story...

"I'm so glad. I thought the world was going to end," Patrick said.

Oh, this isn't dependency. What does he mean by the world ending? Looks like something big was happening behind the scenes.

That's when I remembered that we were right in the middle of enemy

territory. This wasn't a movie, so it wasn't likely that the Lemlaestans would patiently wait for us to retreat. They'd likely find their chance to attack as soon as possible.

I didn't want to be free of his embrace just yet, but I pushed Patrick aside and scanned the area. I first noticed Alicia. She was bawling, tears streaming down her face as she watched our reunion.

"Being alive is so wonderful..." she said between sobs.

She's just soaking in the joy of being alive. What the heck?

I still couldn't grasp what was going on, but I hadn't forgotten my objective—I had to pretend I had lost. In order to carry out my mission, I placed my hand on my chest like I was in pain.

"Urgh... The effects of the sealing instrument... I have no choice but to retreat..." I groaned.

"Yumiella is the strongest! Yumiella is the strongest!" the soldiers continued to cheer.

No one's listening. Seriously, what is up with that chant? Is it trending or something? I'd hate it if "Yumiella is the strongest" became the biggest meme of the year, or if it gained traction as a hashtag on social media or something. I'd be so embarrassed that I wouldn't be able to go outside. I really hope no one tweets it.

I was completely lost as to what I should do, so I turned to Patrick for help.

"What should I do? I need to lose... Oh, your brother actually told me to lose," I explained. "If we win too much, it'll only build resentment—"

"I know about the assignment my brother gave you," he assured me.

Oh, he must've come here because he got Gilbert's letter. That makes things easier for me.

With Patrick's help, I'd surely be able to carry out the plan. It might be cheating, but I had been supposed to execute this mission after I'd received a letter back in Dolkness County; Gilbert had sent it there, not knowing that I had been the person to crash into his house all along. Since I had lost my initial

opportunity to get Patrick's advice back home, Gilbert had no right to complain about me getting his help in this unexpected situation.

"What should I do now?" I asked again. "You must have a good idea of how to deal with this, right?"

Patrick would surely know the best way to handle this situation. I believed in my fiancé from the bottom of the heart.

Patrick let out a chuckle before he said, "It's pointless. You should give up." He swiftly and confidently declared that it was impossible. I hadn't expected that.

I can't do anything, huh? Well, if Patrick says so, it probably is pointless.

"Oh, I see."

"Let's go home," he said. "Everyone's waiting for you."

And so, we started heading back towards Ashbatten, walking right through the middle of the Lemlaestan forces, who parted to let us pass with no resistance at all.

We eventually made it out of enemy territory, and we continued walking together in the direction of Patrick's home as the sun began to set.

"I'm sorry..." I said finally.

"It's fine," Patrick responded.

"It's not. I'm going to reflect on my actions and make sure that I actually make it to the moon next time."

He sighed. "You're not sorry at all, are you?"

Oh, thank god. Patrick was being so nice that I was starting to get worried. It's uncomfortable for him to not chastise me at least a little when I've done something that he has a right to be angry about.

But now that I'd heard one of his admonishments, which I'd missed so much, I apologized again.

"I'm sorry for running away. It was a bit too selfish of me to want to cancel

the wedding.”

“I’m sorry too. I know that you’re not fond of those kinds of events, but I didn’t even try to stop it from becoming such a large-scale celebration.”

“I’m also sorry I couldn’t lose properly. It was my one opportunity to get Gilbert to approve of our marriage.”

“It’s fine. I’ll convince my brother somehow.”

Though he was now acting a bit more like his usual self, he was still being kinder than usual. I looked over to him as he walked alongside me, and I saw a peaceful look on his face.

“Why are you being so nice today?” I asked.

“After seeing *that*, I thought you might never come home,” he explained. “I’m just happy to see you’re safe and to have you back.”

“*That...?*” I looked at him quizzically. “Oh, you must mean when I got sealed away. I would never stay trapped by something like that. You should know that.”

“No, it was after that...”

“Um, did something happen? I think I might’ve spaced out or something. I don’t really remember.”

“It’s fine if you don’t remember,” Patrick said with an incredibly exhausted expression.

After I got sealed away, I talked to Alicia, and then... Oh, I think I checked my level? I don’t remember much past that.

We slowly climbed up a small hill. I wasn’t sure what had happened during the blank part of my memory, but Patrick certainly seemed to know about whatever it was.

Just as I was about to ask him about it, a voice called out to me.

“Excuse me.”

Someone’s behind us? I wonder if someone from the Lemlaestan army followed after us.

I turned around and saw Alicia and a man who was holding her arms as if he was keeping her from running away.

Oh wait, I know this person.

“Huh? Commander Adolphe?”

“It’s been a while,” he greeted me. “I apologize for the trouble the Knight’s Order caused for you by mistake.”

Just as I thought, it was Adolphe, the commander of the Knight’s Order. This was my first time seeing him since the first time I had met with the king. I’d seen him around after that, but I’d never spoken to him again until now.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m here to bring her back,” he told us, nodding at Alicia. “I was also watching *that* from a distance.”

What is he talking about...? The sealing?

I decided to interpret his words as an apology for not helping me.

Alicia’s expression was lifeless, which was surprising, considering that not long ago she’d seemed to be intensely experiencing the joys of being alive... She seemed to be really unstable. It made me worry for her.

“I guess my life of no freedom will resume...” she said with a sulky sigh.

“You don’t seem to regret your actions at all,” Commander Adolphe observed, clearly exasperated.

Alicia suddenly became defiant. “Can I stop leveling up now? You saw all that too, didn’t you? There’s obviously no point in training.”

“Well... I suppose that’s true,” Adolphe admitted. “If I had been ordered to do so, I was planning on taking her on, but... I’ll advise His Majesty that there isn’t a point in continuing with that contingency plan once we return to the Royal Capital.”

I wonder what they’re talking about. Also, what’s this about Alicia level grinding while she was in confinement? She gets free food and shelter, and she gets to level grind? That sounds like the height of happiness. I have no idea why

she's complaining about not having freedom or whatever.

"You should keep leveling up," I said encouragingly.

"Oh, it's not what you think!" Alicia said in a rush. "I wasn't training to take you down or anything! I was being forced!"

Oh right, she's never liked level grinding. I wonder why. She really is weird.

"So that's how she was able to flee your custody," Patrick chimed in. It was so sudden that it caught me by surprise. "I assume that someone from Lemlaesta came into contact with her in the dungeons."

"I'm truly sorry for this," Commander Adolphe said. "I apologize once again on His Majesty's behalf. I'll also suggest that coming up with any combative countermeasure is useless." Commander Adolphe bowed deeply before he dragged Alicia with him in the opposite direction.

I wonder what he was apologizing for. Also, how did Patrick understand how Alicia fled Valschein?

I wanted to ask the questions that were on my mind, but I kept them to myself once I saw the person waiting for us at the top of the hill. It was Patrick's older brother Gilbert.

I had failed. I had ruined the plan that he had come up with. He was probably going to nag and insult me. Possibly he would even laugh at me as he shared his disapproval of our marriage.

To my surprise, Gilbert met us with a solemn look and bowed deeply.

"I apologize," he said. "I misunderstood things!"

"Gilbert?!" Patrick exclaimed. He seemed to be just as surprised as I was.

What's with this sudden change of heart?

"This entire time, I thought that some horrible woman had you in her claws, but that's not it at all, is it? I'm proud of you, Patrick."

"What do you mean...?" Patrick asked.

I was glad that we were able to correct Gilbert's misguided perception of me. I was a bit irritated at him calling me a horrible woman, but that was almost ten

seconds in the past, so I could put that behind me. His misunderstanding must have been that he'd thought I was a bad person, which meant that he now understood that I was a proper lady who possessed both wit and beauty.

"I understand after seeing all that," Gilbert explained. "You're not just wanting to marry any strange woman, are you?"

"Yes, Yumiella may be strange in some ways, but—"

"I'm sorry that my lack of perception kept me from realizing what you're doing. You're protecting the world, aren't you?"

"The world...? Huh?" Patrick seemed baffled.

"All this time, you've been protecting the world from that idiot, haven't you? There's no need for you to sacrifice yourself like this, but...there's nothing I can do, is there? If the world will be at peace because of your betrothal, then..." Gilbert shook his head. "No, this isn't right. A world that exists upon the back of one man's sacrifice isn't just!" Patrick's brother looked like he was going to burst into tears at any moment, but his expression suddenly changed into one of anger as he turned to face me. "Yumiella Dolkness, I won't give up! I'll wait for my opportunity to strike, like a snake hidden in the grass, and one day, I'll free Patrick from your clutches!"

"Sure," I said with a sigh.



“Um, Gilbert, I truly love Yumiella—”

“It’s okay,” Gilbert said, cutting Patrick off once again. “I’m your older brother. I understand the true feelings in your heart. I see right through you, so you just wait. Your big brother will do something about it. It’s my responsibility as the eldest of this family.”

And so, this encounter between the Ashbatten brothers ended with yet another misunderstanding between them.

Epilogue

Two weeks had passed since the commotion caused by my runaway episode had died down. I was taking a stroll down the streets of one of the towns in Dolkness County with Patrick at my side. Winter was approaching, which made the mornings cold, but the chill had given way to a warm afternoon.

Our plan had been to spend the morning together and then return before noon, but we'd had an unexpected guest whose presence had pushed back our plans, and so our morning stroll had been extended into the afternoon.

"I didn't expect Linus to show up," I remarked.

"That disguise of his was incredible," Patrick agreed.

Our surprise guest had been Linus, the agent from Lemlaesta. A man who'd appeared to be a stout merchant had shown up at the estate, but to my surprise, he had transformed into a thin young man before our very eyes. He could've just sent a messenger who wasn't known by sight in Valschein, but Linus was a dutiful man, and he'd insisted on coming himself since he felt responsible for putting me in danger in the first place. He'd traveled all this way to update us on the current state of Lemlaestan affairs.

"I don't really care how Lemlaesta is doing," I admitted, "but I guess it's good that things worked out in favor of Linus and his faction."

"I'm not so sure about that," Patrick responded. "Lemlaesta's power in terms of magi-technology is now cemented on the international stage, so I'm uncertain how to feel about that in terms of what it means for the Kingdom of Valschein."

Linus and the other members of the first prince's faction had succeeded in fulfilling many of their goals. It had pretty much been decided that the next king of Lemlaesta would be the first prince. Of course, he'd promised to continue supporting the First Armory, Lemlaesta's premiere magical-instrument research facility. The original plan had been for the first prince's faction to achieve an

obvious victory over the Ashbatten Mark, thus allowing them to gain an advantage in the succession conflict, but they'd actually retreated from the battle without winning anything. Apparently, they'd just straight-up lied about their victory.

"I still can't believe they said that they were the ones who stopped the rampage of a god of destruction..." I muttered.

Even if they were going to lie, couldn't they have come up with something a little more plausible?

Despite the ridiculous nature of their story, the first prince's propaganda campaign had been very successful within Lemlaesta. The faction had also used a natural phenomenon, which had coincidentally occurred at the same time, to bolster their story and add to its credibility.

Two weeks ago, right before I had returned home from Lemlaesta, there had apparently been some kind of abnormal weather occurrence. I could only say "apparently" because I'd missed the whole thing and hadn't seen it for myself. I was a bit disappointed that I hadn't had the chance to see this rare natural phenomenon.

Regardless, Lemlaesta had been able to point to the abnormal weather as their basis for declaring that they'd stopped a god of destruction right before it descended onto the planet.

Hold on, Patrick hasn't responded to me, I thought. I turned to look at Patrick and noticed that he was grimacing.

"Is something wrong, Patrick?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. What were we talking about?"

"About how there was actually no god of destruction."

"Linus is from an enemy kingdom, but he's someone we can trust..." Patrick responded after a short pause. "It's rare to get candid news from Lemlaesta like we did from him."

Excuse me, I was talking about a god of destruction? I guess he's ignoring it because it's so ridiculous, he doesn't want to even entertain the thought of it.

Still, I feel like he was listening intently when we were talking about Linus.

I agreed with Patrick that Linus was trustworthy, but something had seemed strange about Linus's report.

"He told us some really unnecessary rumors, though, like those urban legends," I mused.

"You mean like the one about the woman who showed up at a blacksmith's shop and crushed a sword in her fist?" Patrick asked.

"Yeah, that one. What was the point of telling us about a trending fictional story from a neighboring kingdom?"

Linus had included some oddly off-topic information when he was updating us on how things were going in Lemlaesta. The incident with the blacksmith, for instance, was a side-story that had nothing to do with the main plot, yet he went out of his way to include it in his report.

I don't think Patrick knows yet... He wasn't actually there, so he shouldn't be able to make the connection that the bizarre, sword-crushing woman was, in fact, me.

He gave me a sidelong glance. "That was you, wasn't it?"

"No..." I tried to deny it.

Patrick shrugged. "I'm assuming that Linus told us about that incident since stories about what you did while you were there spread throughout the kingdom. There's no way that was anyone but you. The timing is right too."

There was a long pause before I reluctantly admitted, "Yes, it was me."

"It's one thing to do that here, but... No, actually, you shouldn't be doing that anywhere... Why did you do something that would make you stand out like that in a foreign kingdom?" He sounded a bit upset.

All I have to say to that is that I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Patrick. Still, I didn't realize that Linus knew that it was me in those stories. Speaking of unknown identities...

I decided to change the subject, since it seemed like Patrick might continue nagging me otherwise.

“Oh yeah, when I met Linus in the Lemlaestan Royal Capital, he didn’t tell me that Gilbert was your older brother. Isn’t that strange?”

“I think most people would have realized who he was. His name is Gilbert, and he looks a bit like me. I don’t think Linus ever considered the possibility that you two thought you were strangers.”

“Oh, I see. I just thought Linus was a little ditzy.”

Patrick rolled his eyes. “In this particular case, you’re the ditzy one,” he teased.

“Hey,” I protested. “You could say the same about Gilbert. He didn’t realize who I was until I said my name.”

“You’re right; my brother’s a pretty severe case too.”

That brother of his still had some very basic misunderstandings about our relationship. He thought that Patrick was stopping me from destroying the world by making me his girlfriend and subduing me, which was, of course, wildly incorrect.

The one who destroyed a world is 2, who’s living happily in a parallel world. The Yumiella right here right now has never once plotted to destroy the world. Man, my life is really plagued by people’s misconceptions about me.

In the end, my relationship with Gilbert had gotten worse instead of better—at this point, it was probably the worst it could be.

“He’s still attending the wedding, though, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, looks like he took this whole situation too far acting on his own, and he ended up getting pretty severely chewed out.”

Dealing with the recent incident with Lemlaesta had been a task assigned to Gilbert by his father, but the margrave felt that his eldest son had taken it too far when he’d involved me in his plan. And so the margrave had severely chewed him out, his eccentric mother had eccentrically scolded him, and even his beloved younger brother had complained to him about his behavior... Eventually, Gilbert had apologized to me with bitter tears, and he’d promised to attend our wedding.

It was clear as day that he wasn't happy about it, but if one looked only at the results, one could say our problem was solved. Still, regardless of the status of Gilbert's attendance, the wedding continued to be an annoyance to me. After all, it was only a few days ago that the wedding cake had been proved a lie.

I know Patrick doesn't really like formal ceremonies that much either. I wonder why he's being so stubborn about the wedding. Is it because it's considered common sense to have one, or is it because it's a social obligation? I've been assuming that it was one of those two possibilities, but maybe there's a different reason he insists on having the wedding.

"Why do you want to have a wedding so badly, Patrick?" I asked him. "Is there any benefit to you?"

"A benefit...?" He blinked at me. "Is it not enough that marrying you would make me happy?"

"We could get married without the ceremony," I pointed out.

"Then... It's nice because I get to see you in a wedding dress."

A wedding dress...

After we humans had lost most of our body hair through evolution, we'd invented clothing so we could regulate our temperature and protect our skin. Depending on the local climate and weather patterns, styles of clothing differed wildly, but generally, the ability to move freely in a given outfit was an important consideration regardless of other factors.

As for wedding dresses, they offered what was absolutely the least degree of freedom of movement, to the point that they didn't even deserve to be called "clothes." In fact, wedding dresses were more an item of restraint than they were clothing.

With all that said, it was obvious why I found Patrick strange for wanting to see me in a wedding dress.

Suddenly it hit me. "Oh, I get it now..."

"You're thinking something weird, aren't you," Patrick said with an exasperated sigh.

I'd figured out the truth, though. In the kinds of mobile games that featured beautiful girls, there were seasonal gachas that ran for a limited time. During the summer, for instance, characters might be in swimsuits, and in the winter, they would be in Santa-themed outfits. School uniforms and traditional Japanese clothes were also common specialty costumes. The existing characters would don these outfits, and at times, they might appear in the gacha as separate characters with better abilities than their original forms.

In these games, the costume changes were the most important part. In other words, it was in a man's nature to enjoy seeing a girl in clothes different from those she usually wore.

Out of all the various costumes he could have a fetish for, Patrick apparently liked wedding dresses.

"I have a question for you, Sir Patrick."

"What's with the sudden formality?"

"Out of the following, which would you like me to wear: a sailor uniform, a swimsuit, a Santa-themed outfit, a shrine maiden costume, or a wedding dress...?" He looked at me blankly, so I encouraged him, "Go on, pick one!"

"I don't know what half of those are."

It was going to be difficult to explain them since I didn't have any of the actual outfits on hand, but I was confident in my ability to describe things. It would be an easy task to give him a mostly accurate understanding using only my words.

"Sailor uniforms were originally worn by the navy," I began. "Their most distinctive feature is a square collar that drapes down in the back. You pull it up behind your head to create a sound-reflective surface that helps you to hear others better when you're on a ship at sea."

"So it has a large collar? I wouldn't want you to wear such a weird outfit."

"A Santa-themed outfit is one based on what Santa Claus wears," I went on. "Santa Claus is an old man who sneaks into children's homes during this particular holiday that I hate. Also, he's completely red from head to toe."

"Is he a criminal?! And why is he red?! Is this a horror story?"

“A shrine maiden wears a more traditional-looking outfit,” I continued. “If you wear it left-front...or rather, if you mix up the order of which side of the collar wraps around on top, you die. Now that I’m thinking about it, I don’t actually know which side of the collar is left-front.”

“What kind of curse is that? Clothing that has a fifty percent chance of killing you sounds bad.”

“You know what swimsuits and wedding dresses are, right?”

“Yeah, but...” Patrick shook his head in wonder. “The rest all sound crazy.”

I don’t think sailor uniforms or shrine maiden costumes are that crazy...

Since I had so thoroughly explained things, if Patrick wasn’t understanding, then it was because his own comprehension skills were lacking.

I repeated the options and asked again which he’d like to see me wear. He answered as if the choice were an obvious one.

“Out of those options, I guess I’d naturally go with the wedding dress.”

“I knew it!” I gloated. “I was right all along.”

“What are you talking about?”

Despite having just exposed his niche fetish to the world, Patrick didn’t seem to be appreciating the gravity of this admission.

I see, so he likes wedding dresses. I guess he’s the type who would keep drawing the gacha until he went bankrupt if they released a limited-time-only five-star Yumiella (Wedding Dress ver.). Sure, if you want to see it that badly, I guess I’ll have to give you a five-star guarantee draw.

“I guess we have to have the wedding, then, so you can see me in a wedding dress.”

“I’m happy to hear that, but I feel like you’re misunderstanding something here.”

“I’m not,” I insisted.

I wonder how he’ll react to seeing me in a wedding dress. Maybe his love will overflow to the point that something crazy happens. Specifically, he’ll... Wait,

no! It's too embarrassing!

Now that I had these thoughts running through my mind, I was starting to get excited about the wedding.

We drew closer to the estate as we chatted. I'd lately been going out on my own and coming home on my own too, so it was fun to have company for a change.

Today, Patrick and I had gone out on our kind of date—in other words, we'd headed into a dungeon together.

I turned to look at my fiancé. "Oh right, I wanted to ask, why did you come with me today? Your level isn't going to go up any more, so there's no point in you going dungeon crawling, is there?"

"I just had a bad feeling..." He shrugged. "Though, seeing how you were today, it seems like I didn't need to worry at all."

"What kind of reason is that?"

For the past two weeks, I'd been going dungeon crawling every day. Normally I'd be scolded for having nothing but my level on my mind, but it was actually Patrick's recommendation that I go out.

Patrick thought that it might be a good idea for me to level up to the point that the lower two digits of my level were in the nineties, because it would invite fewer questions if my level looked high when someone happened to see my level assessment on a crystal with only a two-digit display.

As for myself, I didn't care whether the lower two digits were 13 or 99, but if it meant that I got to go dungeon crawling every day without sneaking around, then there was no reason to squander this opportunity.

"You're assessing your level every day, right?" Patrick asked. "You must be close to 90."

I thought for a moment before responding, "Yeah, I think it'll happen soon." It terrified me that Patrick was so spot-on in his estimate, but I maintained a calm facade. He didn't seem to notice and continued our conversation.

“After that, you’ll have to return to your regular work as the lord.”

“Yeah, and as the lord of Dolkness County, I also need to figure out if the abnormal weather affected any of the citizens.”

“Oh, *that*.” Patrick looked uncomfortable.

I was incredibly interested in the abnormal weather that had occurred two weeks ago, the same weather that had been referenced in the first prince of Lemlaesta’s propaganda campaign. Apparently, a black pattern had spread across the entire sky, one that had been visible to the whole world. I believed that it had to have been some kind of astronomical event, like a solar eclipse.

It was standard for people to theorize that the end of the world was coming when things like solar eclipses occurred or Halley’s comet appeared... So of course supernatural stories had spread through word of mouth about how the end of days had begun or that the phenomenon was the aftershock of an evil being descending onto the planet.

Man, I’m really sad I didn’t get to see it. From what I’ve heard, there was a pattern like Saturn’s rings in the sky.

“You got to see it, right? I’m so jealous.” I sighed. “I wonder if it’ll happen again.”

“I pray it never happens again.”

That’s fair, since we can’t say definitively if it’s affected crops or not. That’s why it needs to be researched...

Since the phenomenon had occurred all across the world, I would likely be able to get information from elsewhere even if I didn’t actually put in the work to research it myself, but it still didn’t feel right to sit around and do nothing about the incident.

Still, I don’t know what would be the best way to investigate it.

I considered the pros and cons of different research methods, but my thoughts were interrupted when we arrived at the estate.

Patrick turned down the hallway. “I’ll be right back,” he said over his shoulder. “I need to do some light blade maintenance.”

“Okay.”

After Patrick and I returned home and went our separate ways, I continued to think about the mysterious natural phenomenon. I kept hoping it would happen again, and I looked up at the sky through the window. Suddenly, Eleanora appeared behind me.

“What’s wrong, Yumiella? Is there something in the sky?”

“You saw it too, right, Lady Eleanora? I was hoping the thing from the other day would show up again...”

“What?! You’re going to do that *again*?!”

“Again...?” I looked at her in confusion before I realized what she must have meant. “Oh, no, I wasn’t talking about running away from home. I meant the black stripes that were in the sky.”

How unlucky of me. It looks like I’m the only one who didn’t get to see it. Everyone else did, and I’m the only one left out, I thought, sulking by the window.

“I don’t want to see that thing ever again,” Eleanora said decisively, puffing her cheeks, her mouth a thin line of displeasure. “I’ll have you know I was terribly worried about you!”

“I wonder what caused it.” I sighed wistfully. “Everyone else got to see it but me. I’m out of the loop.”

“Rather than out of the loop, I would say you were at the center of it... So I believe it would have been difficult for you to observe it.”

“Huh...? I feel like Patrick said something similar to me before, something about how it was impossible for me to see it. Why is that?”

“Oh, well...” Eleanora considered. “I believe it’s like how you can’t see your own face when you’re asleep.”

In a world without cameras, it was, of course, impossible to observe your own face as you slept. In other words...? At this point, I had asked various people close to me about this incident, and it felt like everyone was hiding something

from me.

I've been wondering this for a while, but was the root of the phenomenon actually...me?

"Did I do something again?" I asked.

"Of course not!" Eleanora exclaimed, a little too hastily. "You can't grow wings, can you?"

"Wings...? This is the first time I'm hearing of wings."

There was a short pause, and then Eleanora burst out with enthusiasm, "Oh, Ryuu's wings are just so lovely!"

Ryuu consumed my thoughts at once. "Aren't they?! It's so cute when he's working so hard to flap them!" Ryuu's wings were so very cute when they were folded up, but they were equally adorable when they were flapping around.

Wait... What were we talking about? Um, something black... Oh, Ryuu's wings are black.

Eleanora suddenly grabbed my arm and interrupted my train of thought.

"Anyway! There are three whole carriages here," she gushed, switching to full-on gossip mode. "I've heard that they're all full of gifts. There's a veritable *mountain* of dresses. I also saw a magical instrument used to keep things cold, so there must be some fancy sweets as well."

"Who are they from?"

"The largest carriage had the royal family's seal on it."

So it all must be from the king. There's three carriages' worth of stuff? It's going to be such a pain to bring everything in. But why is he sending gifts? Is it to apologize for letting Alicia escape?

"I'm assuming a messenger will come later with a catalog of everything that was sent here."

"Would you like to go see what they sent before that arrives?" Eleanora asked eagerly.

"Sure, but you have to take the dresses, Lady Eleanora."

When Eleanora had left her father's ducal estate, she had only brought with her a few dresses and some accessories, and she hadn't purchased anything new since. I wanted to spoil her, so I kept telling her she could buy whatever she wanted, but despite being a bit of a prima donna, she wouldn't budge on her resolution to not impose on me unduly. This would be a chance to finally get Eleanora a new dress.

"I-I couldn't," she demurred. "These are gifts for you, Yumiella. They're not mine to wear. They're probably too long for me anyway."

"I think there will be plenty that will fit you perfectly, Lady Eleanora."

"Even so, it isn't right... But I guess if you're not going to wear them, it would be a shame to let them go to waste..."

The royal family was well aware that I had no interest in dresses, so it was probably fine to consider the dresses as gifts for Eleanora.

Though she was making an effort to seem outwardly reluctant, she couldn't hide her excitement.

"Let's go look at them together," I said, and we headed off to the servants' entrance at once.

"I'm glad I'll be getting to spend more time with you, Yumiella," Eleanora said. "You've been so busy ever since you got back. You're working to raise your level to 90, was it? How far along are you?"

I'd hidden my actual progress from Patrick, but I figured it was fine to tell Eleanora.

"When I checked yesterday, it said 98."

"What?! Um, Yumiella? It's going to return to 1 after 99, is it not?"

"It would be 0, not 1, because the number after 99 is 100," I corrected her.

"Oh my, things are getting...totally crazy!" Eleanora cried, pressing her hand against her mouth in shock, obviously flustered. I'd noticed that her word choices had been getting a bit modern these days.

Oh, right. I haven't assessed my level since I got back from the dungeon.

I'd been trying to make a habit of checking as soon as I returned, but perhaps it was my innate laziness that caused me to continuously forget. I quickly pulled out the crystal.

"I should be 99 today."

Ever since my level cap had been unlocked, I had once again started to properly grind, but the speed at which I was leveling up hadn't changed too much. It was standard for the experience requirements for a level-up to increase as your level did, but that didn't seem to be the case for me.

The fact that I went from 13 to 98 in the past two weeks was so incredible that I wanted to congratulate myself on my performance. I would soon be a Yumiella who was level 99 again...or at least who *appeared* to be 99.

Eleanora looked at the crystal and then immediately began running in the opposite direction.

"Sir Patrick! Where are you?! Something terrible is going to happen!"

Eleanora's overreacting like usual, but it's not unpleasant. The sound of her voice makes things feel peaceful. I hope today, tomorrow, and every day moving forwards is just as peaceful as this moment.

With that wish in mind, I peeked at the display on the crystal. What appeared were the digits 00.

"Sir Patrick! It's an emergency!" Eleanora yelled.

"What happened?!" Patrick's voice rang down the hall. "Did Yumiella do something?!"

"She's about to complete a cycle! She said she was already at 98 yesterday!"

"How? That's so fast!"

I stared at the 00 on the crystal.

Huh, so It's not just 0, but 00. Eleanora's level was displayed as 01, so I guess I ought to have expected this to be the case. Still, there isn't anyone who's level 0, so I might be the first person in the world to see this. I need to show this rare occurrence to everyone else.

I looked up and saw Patrick and Eleanora both standing before me.

“You’re strong, Yumiella,” Patrick said. “I know this. Because your level cap was unlocked, this number isn’t actually a zero. You know that, right?”

“You’re the strongest in the world, Yumiella!” Eleanora chimed in.

What’s up with them? I’ve gotten enough praise for my strength over the course of events the other day, so I’d prefer if they didn’t compliment me in such a forced way. What’s more important right now is the novelty of the display reading “00.”

“Look at this!” I exclaimed, waving the level-assessment crystal at Patrick. “Isn’t this rare?”

“Huh?” Patrick said, looking stumped as he gazed at the 00.

00 really looks cool. Sounds even cooler when you read it as “double zero.”

The two of them seemed utterly bewildered, and I had no idea why they had been in such a panic just moments ago.

“I thought that if your level hit zero, then you would go cra—I mean, be really hurt and upset, but I guess I didn’t need to worry about it,” Patrick explained at last.

“You think that it’s better if my last two digits are closer to 99, don’t you?”

“Well, if you consider the possibility that you might use an assessment instrument in front of someone else, being in the nineties would probably be better, but it would be a pain to level back up from here...”

I see, so it isn’t good to appear weak after all. I guess I have no choice.

I had accomplished my true goal, something I’d been so keen to do that I’d even gone through the trouble of hiding my level from Patrick to see it through.

“It’s fine,” I said, the corners of my mouth twitching upwards. “I’ll just level up again!”

“You...” Patrick sputtered. “Did you do this on purpose...?”

“Oh my, you really are something, Yumiella,” Eleanora said admiringly.

Upon realizing that this had all been part of my plan, Patrick stood there, his

eyes wide with shock, but Eleanora simply let out a sigh of exasperation.

“His Majesty has sent us some gifts. You should join us to go look at them, Patrick,” she said firmly, guiding him down the hall.

I lingered behind, savoring my victory. Now it was clear: even if I were to pass 99 and end up at zero again, I could just level grind *even more*. My level grinding journey was just getting started...

Afterword

Hello! It's been a while. I'm Satori Tanabata. It's been some time since the last volume was released, so thank you for picking up this fourth volume.

I was planning on providing all of you with an apology in writing to make up for the delay in the release of volume four, but I don't think it would be any fun for you to read walls of groveling text. That's why I'd like to talk about something more fun... So let's talk about jealousy instead!

Well, rather than "jealousy," maybe this is best described as a story of frustration. I'm not trying to describe the thick, muddy feeling that comes with a deep grudge, but rather a light, determined feeling, like the way someone might feel when facing their rival.

I've always loved novels, manga, and anime, and so I've read/watched many things. Whenever I found something I liked, it would genuinely fill me with joy, and it was so much fun. But recently, I've started to feel frustrated when I find something I like. The reason for this is clear: it's because I started writing novels myself.

Of course, it's not like every piece of media I consume fills me with frustration. There are actually more stories that don't fill me with frustration than ones that do. Stories from a different genre, for example, like science fiction or shonen manga, are works I can genuinely enjoy.

The ones that make me feel the most frustrated are stories in a similar genre to *Villainess Level 99*. It's like how a daifuku might get jealous of a dorayaki, which are both Japanese sweets, but it wouldn't get jealous of a beef bowl, since that's a savory dish. Even though they're all food, beef bowls exist in a different realm, so they're not of concern to the daifuku, whereas other desserts are.

You might be thinking that I'm talking about other villainess stories when I say stories similar to *Villainess Level 99*, but that's not the case. Even if they're

villainess stories, the lovey-dovey romance ones make me giggle and go, “Whoa...it’s so sweet,” and the stories that focus more on politics really impress me and make me go, “Wow, this author’s so knowledgeable.” Even within the genre of villainess stories, the content can be as different as Japanese sweets and Western sweets are. If I’m selling daifuku, then I can enjoy macarons and gâteau au chocolats without thinking anything other than, “Delicious.”

The ones that make me frustrated are the ones with female protagonists that are heavy on the comedy. It’s not just novels either—if there’s a manga with those elements, I end up feeling frustrated. This ends up being applicable to quite a few villainess stories.

I get frustrated seeing the plots that other authors come up with, and thinking about how I could never write something as interesting... Still, I love traditional Japanese sweets, so I eat everything I can get my hands on.

I keep eating various sweets, like manju and dango, while repeatedly yelling, “Delicious! Yummy! Tasty! ...But I’m sad,” as I continue to make my daifuku. That’s the kind of weirdo I am.

All kinds of desserts have their own strengths, and no one can say one kind is objectively better than the others. Every dessert is one of a kind—they’re all different, and they’re all great. As I continued peacefully and naively kneading the mochi for my daifuku, something appeared before me: the strawberry daifuku.

The strawberry daifuku inherits the elements of the standard daifuku, but it’s equipped with the unique weapon of “strawberry.” It’s definitely better than a conventional daifuku. This strawberry daifuku is the comic adaptation of *Villainess Level 99*.

“Come on, it’s just a daifuku with a strawberry—the same story but with art for everything, right? The mochi skin and red bean paste are the same as the daifuku—the story is exactly the same,” was what I told myself. But I took a bite, and I was completely blown away. It was so delicious that even the regular daifuku part tasted better. The tartness of the strawberry really enhanced the sweetness of the red bean paste.

I was so frustrated. It was one thing to lose because of the strawberry, but it

felt like my red bean paste was inferior as well. The red bean paste in the strawberry daifuku is just a little different from mine—specifically, Alicia is a really good girl in the adaptation. I want *that* red bean paste, not mine!

I wanted to recreate that delicious variety of red bean paste, the comic version of Alicia, but I ended up with something different, and that's what led to this volume. I'm sure you know this after reading the story, but I'm not sure how this happened...

Also, the strawberry daifuku—I mean, the first volume of the comic adaptation—is currently out. Yumiella in chibi form is adorable and squishy-looking (like a daifuku), so I hope you'll grab a copy if you haven't already. It pains me to say this, but it's an irrefutable fact that the strawberry daifuku is delicious, so I recommend it with every fiber of my being.

Anyway... The way I phrased things makes it sound like the comic adaptation was what made me write Alicia back in, but I actually wanted Alicia to show up again for reasons completely unrelated to the manga. I regret how I handled Alicia in the first volume. She didn't become a total villain like the Demon Lord or the god of evil, but she didn't get tossed into the Yumiella Comedy Realm like the duke did either, so I feel like her arc ended up being half-baked.

With Alicia's reappearance, I feel like she was able to change and grow(?) while also providing some comedy to the story. I don't think I have any more regrets about her, but I can't say for sure...

And so, such was the tale of how one daifuku maker who's jealous of other traditional Japanese sweets agonized over the deliciousness of the strawberry daifuku, which the maker had one-sidedly decided was their rival. My goal is to one day obtain the power of whipped cream and use it to make a whipped cream daifuku.

As with the previous volumes, Tea provided the illustrations for volume four. The art near the beginning of the volume that illustrates the point in the story in which Yumiella is broken is amazing.

I apologize for putting my thanks to everyone at the end. To my two editors, for whom I'm always causing trouble; to the illustrator, Tea; to the proofreaders; to everyone involved in the publishing of this book; and to everyone who continues to support this series—I truly thank you.



“Who are you?”

“Don’t think
about it too deeply...
Just pretend you’ve
suddenly gained a
younger sister.”

“So you must be in
some kind of trouble.
I have a younger
brother, but I don’t
have a younger sister,
nor do I want one.”

VILLAINESS
LEVEL 99

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

4

Patrick Ashbatten

The second-born son of the margrave
and Yumiella's fiancé.

Gilbert

An enigmatic young man Yumiella
meets in the neighboring kingdom
of Lemlaesta.

"All right,
let's destroy
the world."

"Calm down,
Yumiella."

When she
assesses her
level, it's
displayed as
a shocking...
level 13?!

"That would
just be taking
your anger out
on the world..."

Yumiella Dolkness

The villainess and hidden
boss of an otome game.

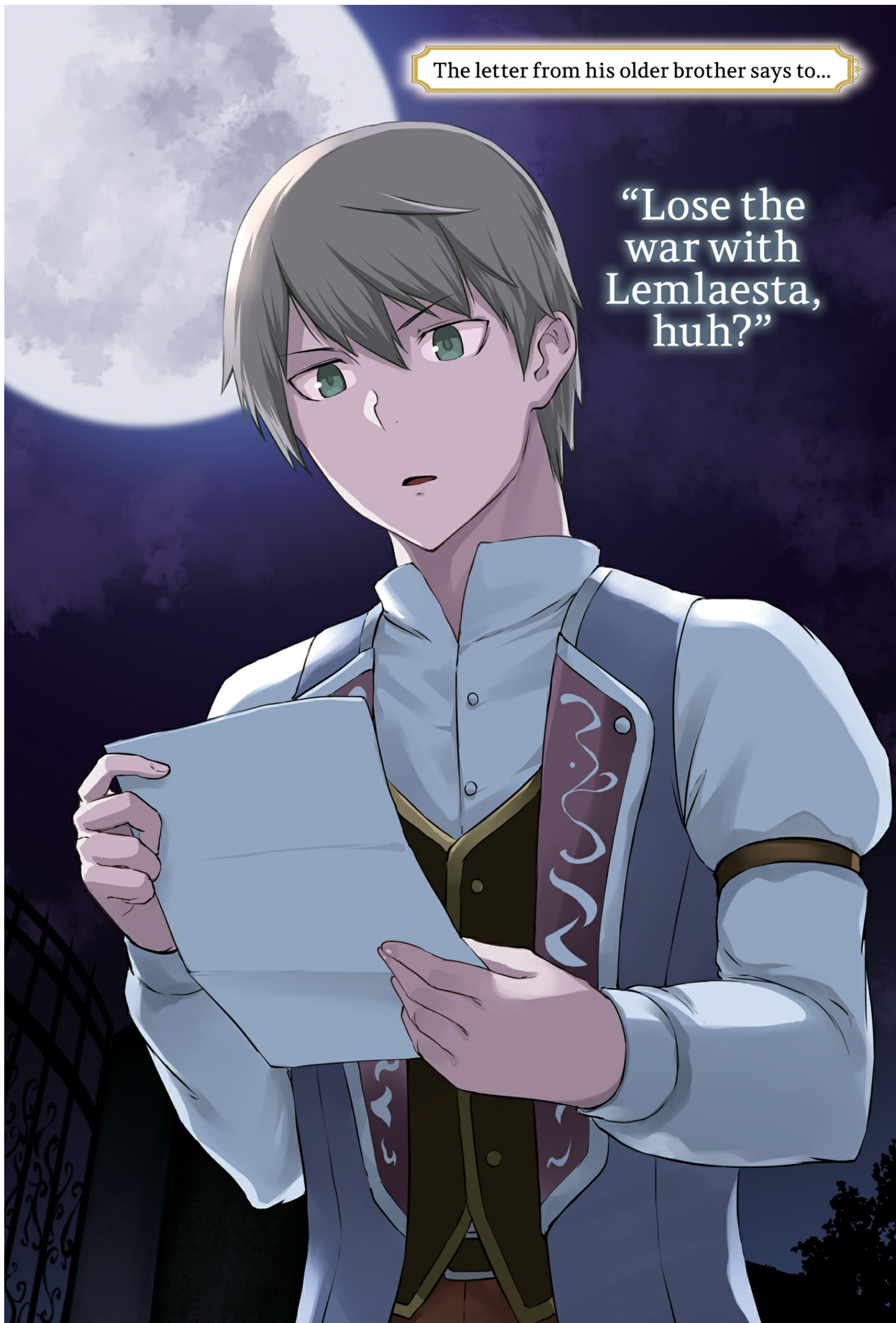
Eleanora Hillrose

The former duke's only daughter.
A pushy airhead.



The letter from his older brother says to...

“Lose the
war with
Lemlaesta,
huh?”



VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

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

4

SATORI TANABATA

ILLUST. TEA



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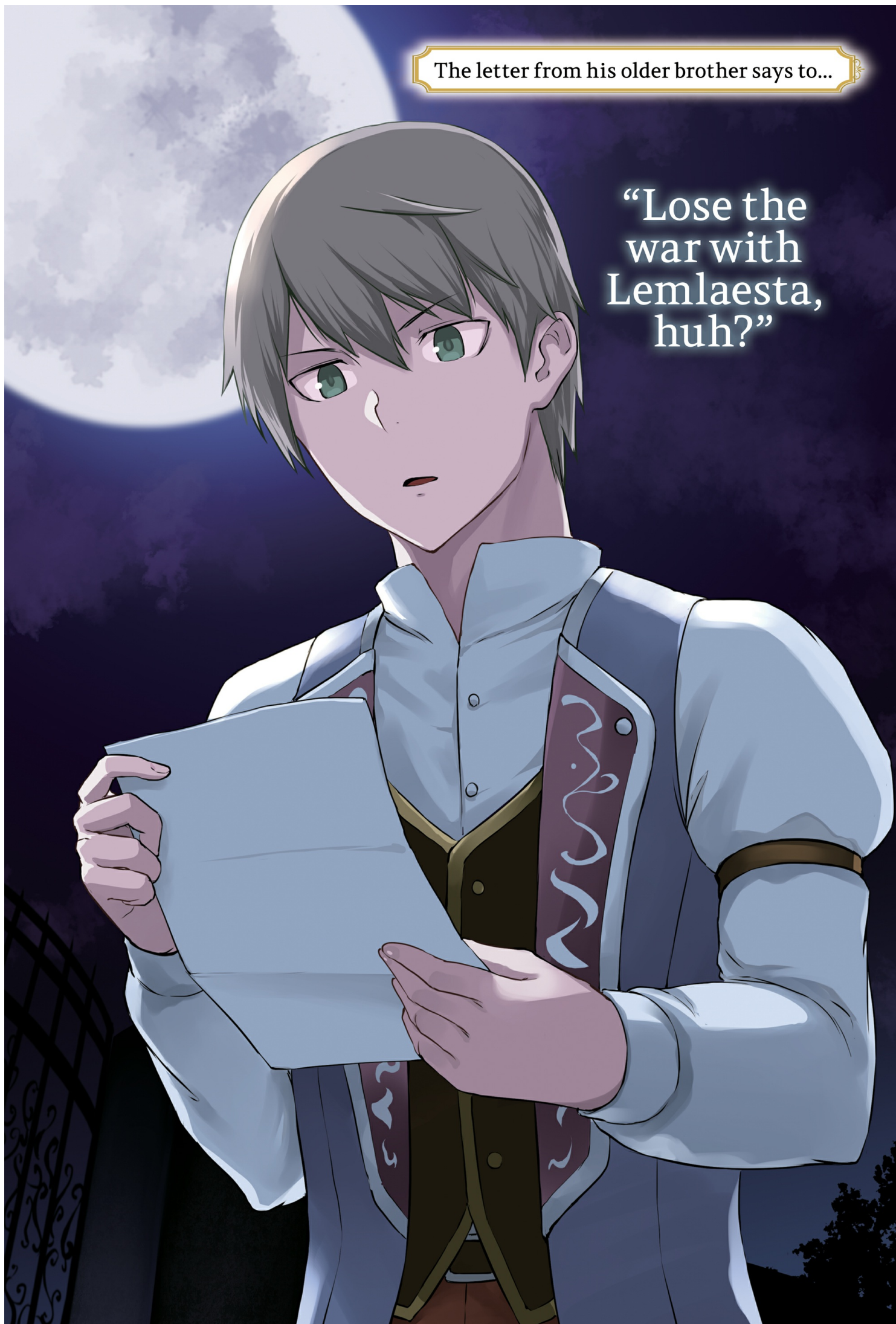


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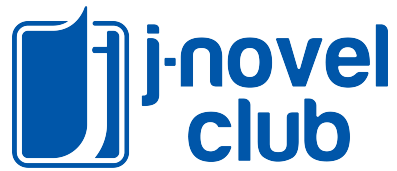
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Villainess Level 99: I May Be the Hidden Boss but I'm Not the Demon Lord Act
4

by Satori Tanabata

Translated by sachi salehi

Edited by Rachel L Kohler

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Illustrations by Tea

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