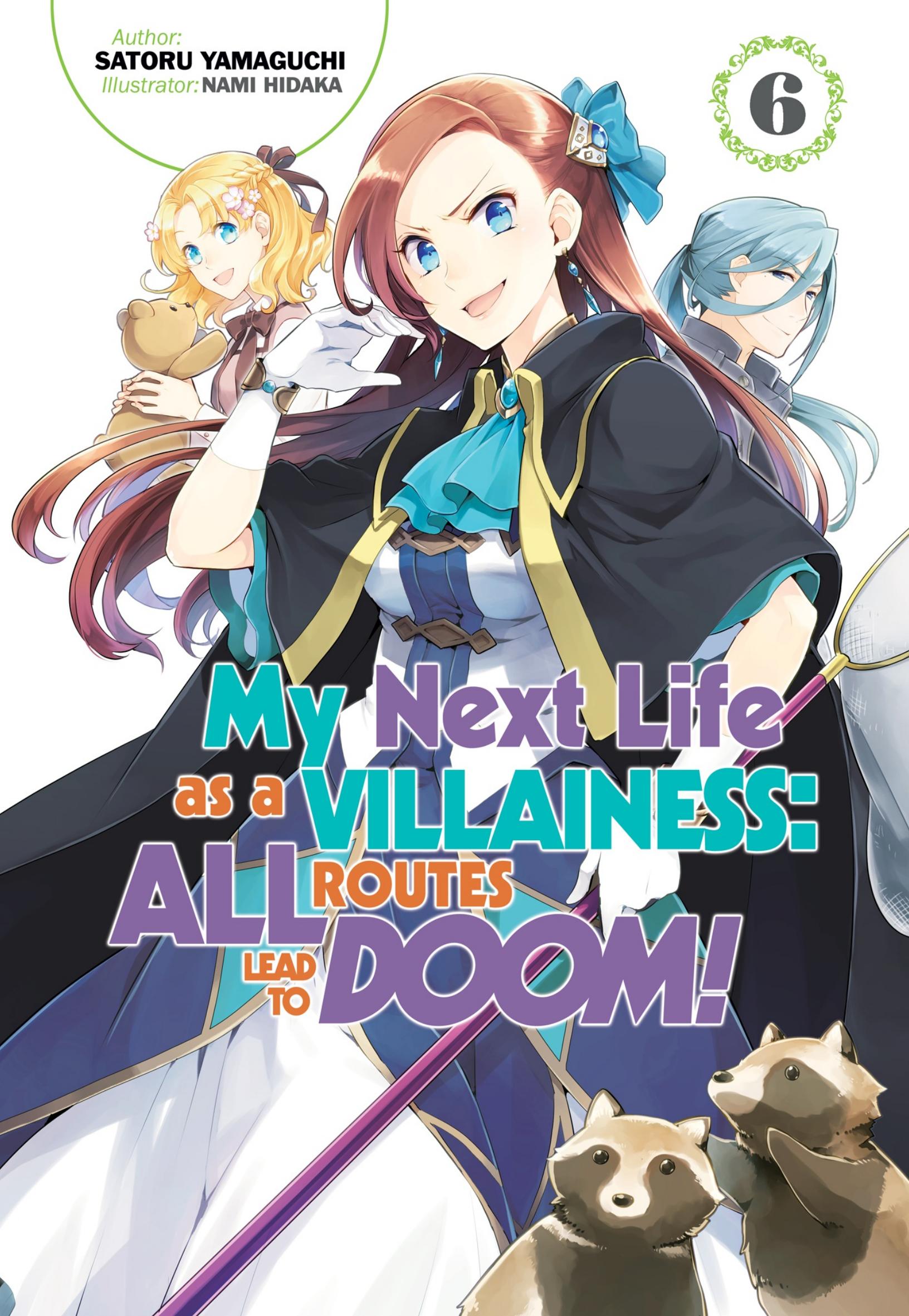


Author:
SATORU YAMAGUCHI
Illustrator: **NAMI HIDAKA**

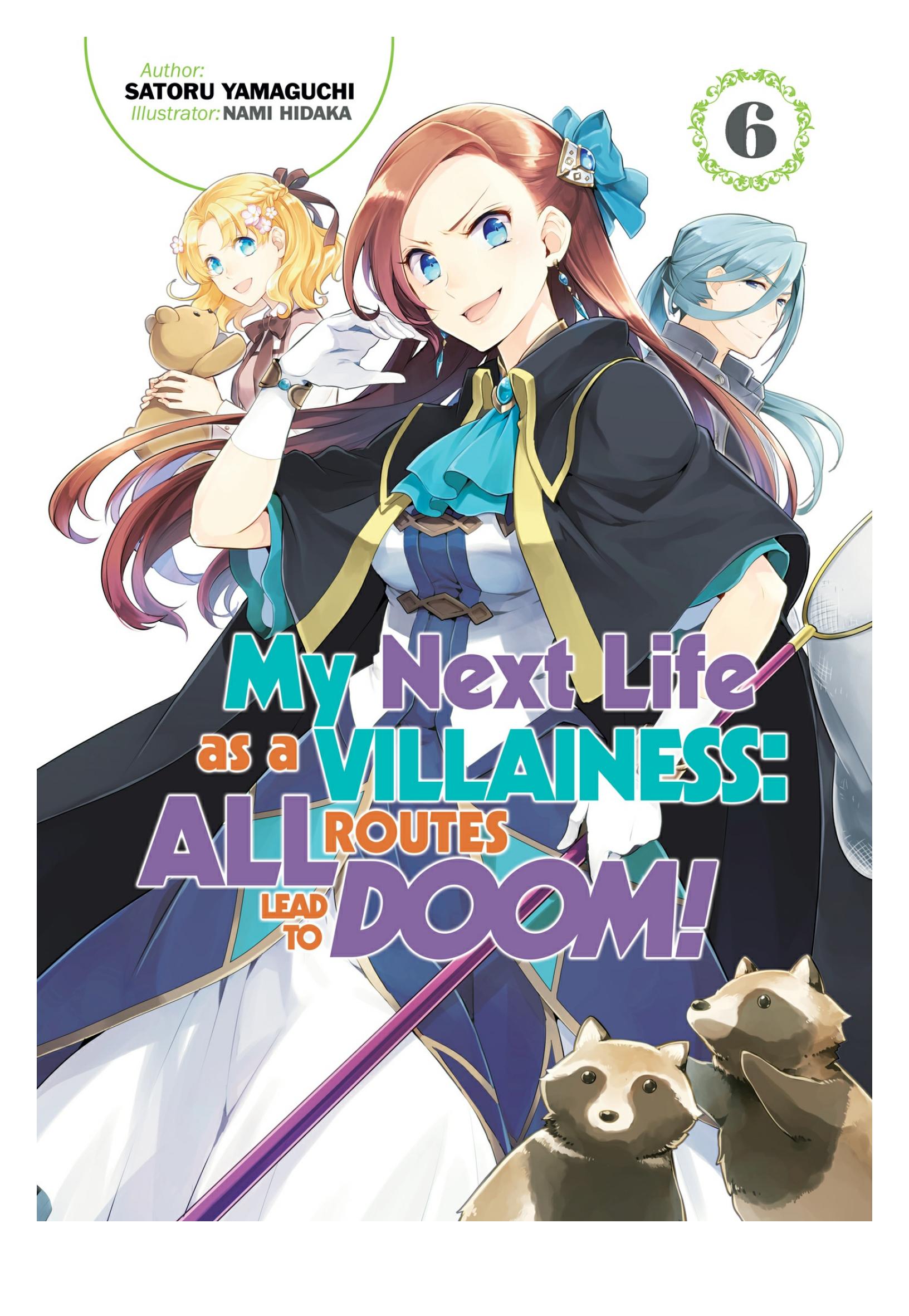
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My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Author:
SATORU YAMAGUCHI
Illustrator: **NAMI HIDAKA**

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My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!



KATARINA GOT A JOB AT THE MAGICAL MINISTRY!

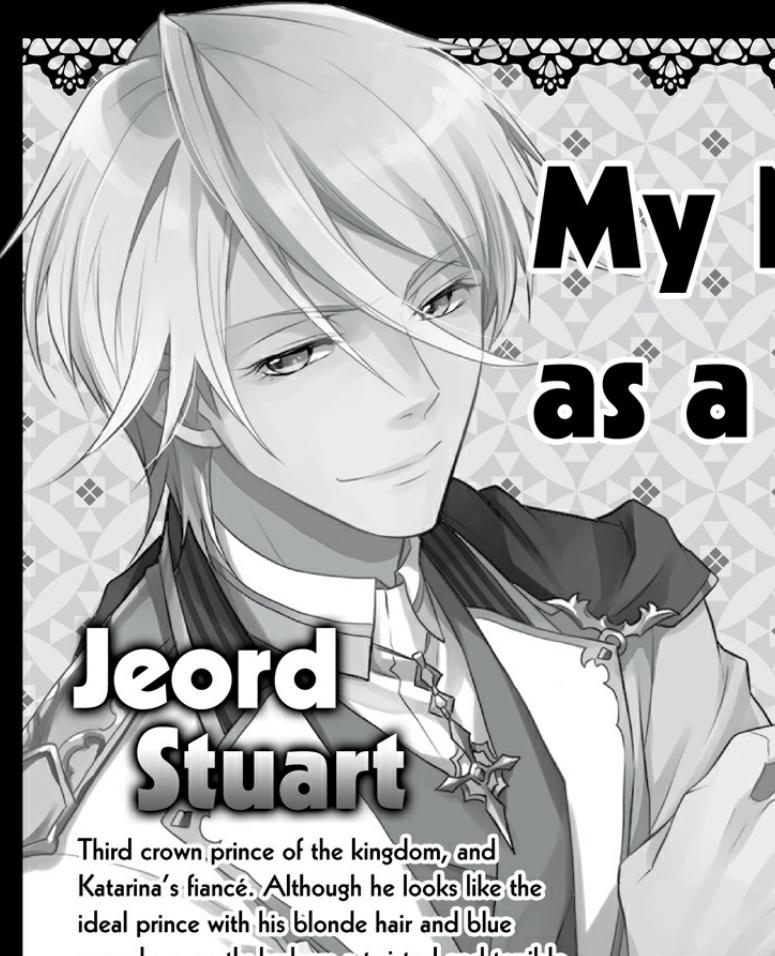
► SHE DID NOT LEVEL UP THOUGH.

EVENT UNLOCKED!
TANUKI IN THE
VILLAGE!

EMERGENCY QUEST: "TANUKI HUNT!"
JOIN FORCES WITH YOUR FRIENDS
AND DRIVE THE TANUKI AWAY
FROM THE CROPS!

CHOOSE ITEMS TO EQUIP:

► BUG-CATCHING NET	► DARK FAMILIAR
► POISONED MEAT	► MYSTERIOUS
► TEDDY BEAR	MAGNIFYING GLASS



My Next Life as a Villainess:

Jeord Stuart

Third crown prince of the kingdom, and Katarina's fiancé. Although he looks like the ideal prince with his blonde hair and blue eyes, he secretly harbors a twisted and terrible nature. He spends his days in boredom, never showing interest in anything, until he eventually meets Katarina. His magical element is fire.

Larna Smith

A very talented woman who holds a high position in the Magical Ministry.

Sora

A young man wielding the Dark Arts, in service to the Ministry. Fond of Katarina.

Raphael Wolt

A young man working at the Magical Ministry. A calm and capable person.

Alexander

A magical tool created by Larna. Physically appears to be a bear-shaped plush toy.

Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to work at the Magical Ministry.

Nathan Hart

A Ministry employee who people hardly notice, and who also gets lost a lot.



Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has particularly angled features — Katarina herself feels like it makes her look like a villainess. After her memories returned, she underwent a class change from spoiled noble lady to problem child. Although she is pure, forgetful, and often gets ahead of herself, she is an honest and straightforward girl. Possesses below-average academic and magical ability. Her magical element is earth.

Pochi

A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

Guy Henderson

A Ministry employee with macho looks and a maiden's heart. Goes by Laura.

Cyrus Lanchester

A serious and strict Ministry employee.

All Routes Lead to Doom!

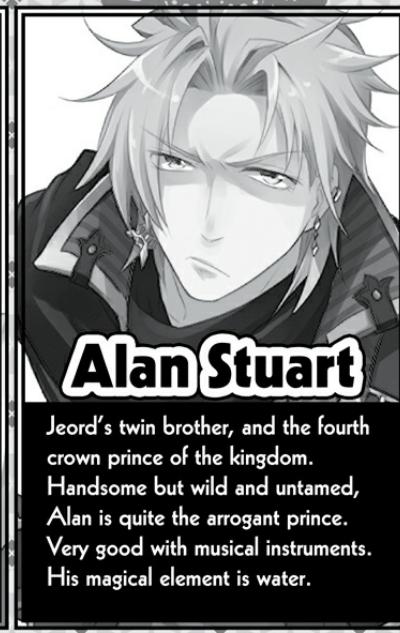
Character Introduction

**Nicol Ascrt**

Son of Royal Chancellor Ascrt. Possesses stunning beauty, much like that of a doll's. Loves his younger sister, Sophia, deeply. His magical element is wind.

**Keith Claes**

Katarina's adoptive brother, taken in by the Claes family due to his magical aptitude. Considerably handsome, and seen by others as sexy and charming. His magical element is earth.

**Alan Stuart**

Jeord's twin brother, and the fourth crown prince of the kingdom. Handsome but wild and untamed, Alan is quite the arrogant prince. Very good with musical instruments. His magical element is water.

**Sophia Ascrt**

Daughter of Royal Chancellor Ascrt, and Nicol's younger sister. Faced discrimination due to her white hair and red eyes. A calm and peaceful girl.

**Maria Campbell**

A commoner, but also a rare "Wielder of Light" — a girl blessed with Light Magic. The original protagonist of *Fortune Lover*, she is very hardworking and loves baking snacks of all kinds.

**Mary Hunt**

Fourth daughter of Marquis Hunt, and Alan's fiancée. A lovable and beautiful young girl, she is also known as the "noble lady amongst noble ladies" in high society.

Milidiana Claes

Katarina's mother, and wife of Duke Claes. Has very angled features, much like her daughter.

Anne Shelley

Katarina's personal maid. Has been by her side since Katarina was eight years old.

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Chapter 1: Graduating From the Academy of Magic

Prince Jeord, president of the student council, stood on the podium as representative of all the students graduating that year.

Just as last year, the blonde prince with blue eyes was met with blushing and sighing by the female students. This time, his speech was even accompanied by some crying.

This was the academy's graduation ceremony, and I, Katarina Claes, was one of the graduating students.

I had only spent two years here, but I had made a lot of memories in that short span. While looking at my fiancé smiling from the podium, I thought of all that had happened during my stay at the academy, and of all my efforts before entering it. The entrance ceremony had made me so nervous...

When I was eight years old, I hit my head and regained the memories of my previous life. There I used to have an average family and unapologetically otaku hobbies... until I was killed, still young, by an unfortunate accident.

Next thing I knew, I had become Katarina Claes, a duke's daughter.

I was pleased to find that my silky brown hair and (slightly menacingly slanted) blue eyes made me prettier than the average, roundish face I had in my previous life... until I realized that it belonged to the evil antagonist of *Fortune Lover*, the otome game I had been playing the day before my death.

In the game, Katarina was engaged to Prince Jeord, and she did everything she could to hinder the romance between him and the protagonist. If the player managed to get to the Good End, the villainess would be exiled out of the country, and, should they fail and get the Bad End, she would be killed. Doomed either way.

In order to avoid said doom, I started taking all possible countermeasures back when I was eight, and, a few years later, I anxiously entered the academy. I then met Maria — the aforementioned protagonist — and became friends with

her, enjoying two very eventful years that led unexpectedly to the game's most uneventful ending: the Friendship Ending.

All the measures I had taken to fight doom proved useless. The toy snakes I had made with Grandpa Tom to throw at Jeord, the training with the sword, the farming to survive as a commoner — all useless. Not that I'm complaining that everything went well.

And the school festival... that was so much fun! Lots of stores had brought food stands offering all different types of snacks. Well, I also got kidnapped, but it was still fun.

What was *not* fun was the disappearance of my adopted brother, Keith. At first I was scared that he had left home because he was fed up with me, but that proved wrong, and in the end we managed to get him back to safety.

And that's not even half of the stuff that happened to me. Any other student's stay would look boring in comparison.

However, after today's ceremony and the party in the academy's garden, my stay would be over too.

Since the two prince twins were graduating this year, there would also be another party at the castle later on... so many events to attend.

The party at the academy would probably be similar to last year's... but what about the one at the castle? Would they have the usual luxurious buffet? I was already looking forward to it.

I knew I should probably restrain myself at the buffet here so that I could enjoy the one later to the fullest! But I had to at least try out the delicious food available here.

I should choose what I eat carefully. Of course they're going to bring out some fine meat, so steak and roast beef are no brainers. But I can't pass on the fish, either... so I have to count in the carpaccio, and, for desserts, at the very least cake and jelly and...

“...ister... Big Sister...”

“Ah! Keith? What's the matter?”

My brother was looking at me with an appalled expression.

“You were thinking out loud...”

“Oh my, I spoke all that stuff about my memories at the academy?”

“You only spoke about food...”

“...” I was pretty sure that I was recollecting memories ’til halfway through... I wonder what happened there.

“Just wait a bit longer; the ceremony is almost over,” he said, handing me a piece of candy. He must have thought that I was hungry... I wasn’t, but I did the polite thing and ate the candy anyway.

Why did he even have candy on him to begin with? He always gave me something to eat whenever I felt hungry... maybe he had all sorts of food on him.

His flaxen hair and blue eyes made him look wild and handsome, but carrying food around was something I associated with the old men from my previous life. That made me a bit sad.

I was thinking about that while eating the candy that Keith had given me when I looked back at the podium. Jeord had stepped down, his place taken by a first-year student who was congratulating the ones graduating. It really looked like the ceremony was almost over.

My academy life, that felt so short, yet so long, had come to an end. I had felt this very melancholy a few times before... in another life.

But hey, this candy really is good. I should ask Keith if he has any more on him.

The ceremony had ended. In this world, there was no line of graduates receiving their diplomas by the school head one by one, no long speeches by guests, and no student choir. Just the congratulations of a few people, and that was it.

The party right after that, however, was incredible. In my previous life the most popular students were also surrounded by fans as they graduated, but it had nothing on this. It was particularly bad for the student council members, so

much so that Jeord was completely lost among the crowd of admirers.

Maybe because I also was in the student council, I got people swarming around me too. “I’ve always been your fan!” or “I’ve looked up to you all this time!” or “I’ll never forget you!” they’d say, handing me flowers. I wasn’t sure whether they had confused me with someone else or if they just meant those compliments for the council as a whole.

Unlike me, Maria, Mary, and Sophia were surrounded by boys as well as girls. *Why?* That made me a bit envious, but I still appreciated all the girls blushing around me, and I accepted their flowers with a smile.

I was just starting to get tired of smiling when the crowd dissipated a bit, and two younger girls stepped up to me.

“Lady Katarina, you had quite the following today!” said Fray Landoor, who was to become the new student council president. Her beautiful face, framed by black hair and highlighted by her blue eyes, always showed a smile. She was a talented and charming girl.

“Not as much as the other members, though,” said Ginger Tucker, the soon-to-be vice president. Unlike Fray, she had brown hair and eyes, and was not particularly beautiful, but she was incredibly smart. She was a serious, even cold girl, but she was a good person deep inside. A bit of a *tsundere*, one might say.

“Why do you have to say that?! I am so sorry, Lady Katarina!” said Fray, bowing her head.

What Ginger had said was true and, at least to me, not really offensive, but it was always like this for these two. Ginger didn’t really choose her words carefully, and Fray would always step in to apologize before the situation escalated. They’d been close friends ever since they joined the academy.

“And I also wanted to give you this. You already got a lot, but...” said Fray, handing me a flower bouquet as gorgeous as one would expect such a talented girl to choose.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting it. Then Ginger started looking into a bag and took something out of it, handing it to me. She had gotten me something different from the usual flowers.

“I... I thought you might like this more than flowers, so...”

It was a beautifully wrapped assortment of my favorite sweets!

“Thank you so much! I love it!”

She was right: sweets are better than flowers. They taste good and fill you up.

Ginger joined me in smiling, and Fray started grinning.

“She was so intent on finding something that would make you happy, and she searched a lot of confectionery shops...”

“S-Stop! She doesn’t need to hear that!” interrupted Ginger, angry and blushing, as cute as ever.

I got sad at the idea that this would be the last time I got to see the antics of these two, but then I remembered that they would probably be at the castle party, since all student council members had been invited.

“Are you two going to attend the party at the castle?” I asked them.

“Yes, I will attend, but Ginger will not,” replied Fray.

“What? Why not?!”

“I am sorry that I cannot... but I have no dress and accessories befitting such a luxurious party,” explained Ginger matter-of-factly.

Indeed, some time ago I had heard that she was the daughter of a countryside baron who was not that much richer than a commoner. That would explain why she couldn’t afford a dress fancy enough to be worn at the castle.

As a duke’s daughter I had never had any problem of the sort, but being invited to a party wasn’t the only requirement to attend it.

Fray looked angrily at Ginger. “I offered to lend her one of my dresses, but she won’t accept it!”

“I could never wear one of your dresses,” she replied.

A look at Fray’s figure was enough to prove that point. She was blessed with the body of a model, and a dress made for her probably wouldn’t fit anyone else.

“Then we can have it fixed!”

“Our sizes are so different that fixing it would not be enough. We would need to have it remade from scratch,” she said. But then I got an idea.

“Then I’ll just give you one of my dresses!”

“What?! Lady Katarina’s dress?!” said Ginger with her eyes suddenly shining.

“Sure! Our sizes shouldn’t be that different,” I said, proud of my idea.

Unless her clothes were skillfully hiding her real proportions, she looked like she could fit my dresses without even needing to fix them.

“B-But... that’s... I could not...” she mumbled.

Fray intervened by saying, “You should take her offer! When are you going to get another chance to wear the dress of the person you look up to so much?”

“Wh-What are you t-talking about?!” said Ginger, blushing.

“Well, after the party, come to Claes Manor so that we can get you dressed up,” I told her, to which she blushed even further before nodding with a quiet “yes.”

Now all the council members would be at the party, and the more the merrier. I was already looking forward to seeing everyone when I heard a voice from behind.

“Katarina! Did I hear something about you lending a dress?”

It was my friend Mary. She had been surrounded by a crowd even larger than the one around me... how had she made her way here?

And for some reason this popular and beautiful girl, with her reddish brown hair and eyes, was now breathing heavily, her face contorted with excitement.

“...Yes, Ginger said that she had no dress for the castle party, so I told her that I would lend her one...” I said, overpowered by Mary’s enthusiasm.

“I want one too! Please lend me a dress!” she interrupted me.

“You already have a dress, don’t you?” I said, puzzled. She was the daughter of a marquess and was engaged to a prince... there was no way that she had trouble affording a dress, unlike Ginger. And I was sure I’d heard her talking

about the new dress she had bought specifically for the party at the castle.

“That has nothing to do with this!”

“I’m not sure I understand...”

Oh no... my friend is going mad...

“Please! Lend me one as well! It’s not fair that only Ginger should have one!”

Yes, she’s definitely losing it. What happened to her during the ceremony?

“...But our sizes are different, and you wouldn’t...”

“That’s not fair! If Mary gets one, I want one too!” interjected Sophia out of nowhere. Her red eyes were sparkling and her white, shiny hair was ruffled. Just like Mary, she looked a bit too enthusiastic to be her usual, elegant self.

They must all be too excited because of the ceremony...

And then, possibly because Sophia and Mary were talking so loudly, the other students who had given me flowers and were still within hearing range had joined the choir of “give me one too!”

Unable to understand what was going on, I found myself in the middle of a chaotic battle between female students.

My friends then came to my rescue, and the battlefield went calm as we all went back home to prepare for that night’s party at the castle.

I managed to convince Mary and the others to give up borrowing a dress, so only Ginger came home with me. I wished I could have helped her choose the dress, but since I myself was busy preparing, I had to ask the maids to do it.

Actually it wasn’t so much that I was busy; the really busy ones were the servants, who would brush my hair, do my makeup, and even dress me up. They were kind... but also strict.

“Young miss, you have eaten too much. Your stomach is bulging. I will tie up the dress tighter, so please hold your breath.”

“...Please don’t make it any tighter...”

“Young miss, please stay still as I pull your hair straight.”

“...Please don’t pull it like that...”

I just stood there, defenseless, while they did as they pleased, ignoring my requests... Being a duke’s daughter didn’t count for much when my mother had specifically ordered all the servants to be strict with me.

After they succeeded in turning this villainess into a proper lady, I made for the carriage which would bring me all the way to the castle. Ginger and Keith, who had already finished preparing, were waiting there.

As I had expected, my dress perfectly fit Ginger, who the servants had prettied-up as they had done with me.

“I’m so glad that it fit you! It looks wonderful on you!” I said, making her blush.

“You have all of my gratitude. This is nothing short of an honor... I do not care about the others’ envy anymore,” she said running a hand along the dress.

“You’re welcome... Wait, what do you mean by ‘envy’?” I asked her.

But Keith interrupted, saying “Hurry up and get on the carriage, we don’t have that much time,” and we swiftly did as he said.

“You seem to have a lot of luggage with you. Are you going to change clothes during the party?” asked Ginger after the carriage had started moving, noticing that I had more baggage than one would need to just attend a party.

Some high-ranking nobles did change dresses in the middle of a party, but I was planning to do no such thing. All that I cared about was the buffet — I had no time to waste on clothing.

“No, I just brought my pajamas, other things I’ll need for the night, and fresh clothes for tomorrow.”

“Night? Are you going to stay the night at the castle?!”

“Yes, as a celebration of sorts for graduating,” I replied, and Ginger’s face, for some reason, turned bright red.

“...I see. So, you and Jeord are finally going to...” She was mumbling so quietly that I couldn’t catch what she said.

“What?” I asked, but Keith, with inexplicable enthusiasm, barged in the conversation.

“That’s not the case! The whole student council is going to stay the night!”

“Oh, really? I thought...” said Ginger, embarrassed, lowering her face.

“The only thing that will happen tonight is a tea party with Big Sister, Mary, and others.”

“Yes! The other girls and I are going to have so much fun. I’m already looking forward to it.”

Before graduating, we had made plans to stay the night in the castle’s guest rooms after today’s party because, after leaving the academy, we wouldn’t have as many chances to see each other. *A pajama party with all the girls... That’s bound to be fun!*

“That sounds so fun...”

“Doesn’t it? I bought a new pajama set for the occasion, and I also brought snacks and tea!” I said, prompting Keith to complain.

“There does seem to be too much luggage... make sure not to eat too much, Big Sister.”

“Don’t worry!”

“And at night, always stay close to Mary and the others. Make sure not to walk around alone.”

“I get it, I get it. I wouldn’t want to get lost in the castle.”

“It’s not about losing yourself... You really don’t get it, do you...?”

“I am sorry to interrupt you, but we are almost there,” said Ginger as the castle’s gates showed themselves through the carriage window.

“Just make sure not to walk around alone,” repeated Keith just before we joined the party at the castle.

Jeord, who had probably been informed that we were arriving, was standing at the entrance, waiting for us, and greeted me saying “Welcome, my princess.”

If anyone but him had delivered a line that cheesy, I would have probably cringed in reply. He offered me his hand and I placed mine onto it like a proper lady, making him smile.

A few months ago I found out that Jeord was in love with me, and, at first, just his squeezing my hand like this was enough to make my heart race... I'd now gotten used to it, if only slightly. It didn't leave me completely unfazed, but at least I managed to look calm as I returned his smile.

I knew I could do it!

Jeord went on to escort me to the party as usual, but since he was the host tonight, he would probably have lots of guests to greet. His trademark smile was there, but his face looked tired.

“Jeord... are you okay?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s just that... you look a bit tired,” I said.

After looking surprised for a second, his expression turned into a genuine, real smile. “You’re incredible... You read me like a book,” he said, pulling me closer towards him.

“I am happy to see you are concerned about me,” he continued, whispering into my ear, “but I am fine. As long as my beloved is with me, I will never get tired.”

“Ah?!”

He had taken me by surprise, and I froze still, blushing. Romantic whispering directly into my ear was a bit too much...

I was still opening and closing my mouth like a fish out of water when Jeord was called for by some guest that wanted to greet him.

“I will invite you to dance later, so wait for me and do not dance with anyone else,” he said with his usual smile as he left.

Being a prince must be tough... Jeord was so busy that he could only meet me for a moment at the entrance. As we were engaged, his first dance would

probably be with me, but after that he would have to dance with lady after lady.

As soon as Jeord left us, Mary, who was, like me, engaged to one of the hosts, came to greet us. Her fiancé Alan, just like his brother Jeord, was busy greeting guests, leaving her without an escort. That being said, her speed in approaching me was still impressive.

“Katarina! You look even more wonderful than usual!” she said with a smile, looking gorgeous in the dress that she had prepared for the occasion. “Did you prepare for our tea party later tonight?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Of course! I bought new pajamas and brought my favorite sweets and teas.”

“I too bought new pajamas just for today!”

“I brought a few of my favorite romance novels.”

“Sophia!”

The voice that had surprised me came from my friend, who had just come into the party donning a very cute dress.

“Good evening Katarina, Mary,” she said with an elegant bow. Her brother and escort for the night, Nicol, looked as handsome as ever standing by her side. So handsome that his hair and eyes, despite being black, seemed to be sparkling.

“I have been looking forward to today’s sleepover for so long now,” she added as a hint of red appeared on her white porcelain skin.

“You’re a guest at the castle, so make sure to behave like a lady,” Nicol told her.

“You’re also staying the night, right, Nicol?” I asked him. I was sure I’d heard something about that a few days ago.

“Yes... making Sophia stay here without me would make me worry too much,” he said in a very older-brotherly fashion.

“You really care about Sophia, don’t you? By the way, Keith will also stay the night.”

My mother had also been worried about letting me stay the night alone, so my brother was to accompany me. I was supposed to be the older sibling, though...

"Then that makes all of us! Tonight, the whole student council will be staying the night at the castle," said Sophia, beaming.

If we had Nicol and Keith, that would indeed be all of us, since Jeord and Alan lived in the castle to begin with.

"We girls are going to enjoy each other's company, but are you boys going to stay in separate rooms?"

Considering that they were all staying in the same castle, that sounded a bit lonely.

"Why don't you also have a party together?" I said, convinced I had just made a wonderful proposal. *A party made exclusively of handsome boys? What could be better than that?*

"What are you talking about, Big Sister? There is no way we would do that," came in a reply from behind me. It had been spoken by Keith, whose expression was displeased.

After finding that we were all chatting together, he had somehow escaped all the ladies that were trying to get his attention so that he could join us.

"Why not, Keith? You could stay up and chat amongst yourselves 'til morning. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"There would be nothing wonderful about that... The last thing we'd want to do is chat with each other. Don't you agree, Nicol?"

"Chatting amongst ourselves..." mumbled Nicol, who actually sounded excited at the idea.

Keith looked extremely surprised by this reaction, and Sophia blushed once again, saying "Boys talking into the night would open up the door to a new world of romance!"

Nicol's excitement probably came from a place more pure than that of his sister... he likely just wanted to talk about guy stuff. Lately, Sophia had said that

she had started reading some new subgenres of romance novels... But I decided not to think too much about that.

Just as things started to get confusing, Fray and Ginger, with an exhausted Maria between them, joined us.

“We went to save Maria from the boys,” said Ginger, explaining that because she had no escort, a lot of boys had jumped at the opportunity, to her dismay.

As expected of *Fortune Lover*’s protagonist Maria, the top-tier beauty with blonde hair and clear blue eyes. Being beautiful looked like more trouble than it was worth.

“That hardly surprises me. We should have found you an escort... Sorry, Maria,” said Nicol after Ginger’s explanation, but Maria shook her head.

“I had heard that I would not need anyone to escort me to attend today’s party, so I refused all the kind offers to do so that I received. I should have accepted...”

It turned out that a lot of boys had asked Maria to let them escort her tonight, but she didn’t know any of them well enough to accept. *Hm... was Maria always this popular?*

She also received a lot of dresses as presents, but, for the same reason, she asked the Magical Ministry to give her one to wear at the party.

“There were several which fit perfectly, but that just made it worse...”

I understood how she felt... getting a perfectly fitting dress from someone who you don’t know very well was a bit scary. How would they even know your size? *But that means that the very people who sent her those dresses are here right now! She could be in danger!*



“By the way, while coming here I heard that Ginger had her dress lent her by Lady Katarina... I am so envious...”

“Me too! I would have loved to borrow one from her myself!”

“Lady Mary, you already have a dress. There was no need for you to borrow one from my sister.”

Right now, there may be some ill-intentioned boy trying to get closer to Maria! I have to keep my eyes peeled!

“That has nothing to do with it, Master Keith. I wanted to wear Lady Katarina’s dress.”

“...You have made that obvious enough... My sister is not even listening to us anymore, though...”

Did that boy look towards us? He’s suspicious... That one, too! I have to protect Maria!

“She’s so busy sending menacing glances around the hall that she has completely forgotten that we are here.”

“Big Sister... Oh, thank you for the explanation, Ginger.”

That guy’s suspicious as well! We’re surrounded by enemies!

My dress was dirty.

It wasn’t anything as flashy as somebody throwing wine on me like I’d seen in the soap operas of my previous world.

I had been so busy protecting Maria from boys and keeping potential threats away that I had spilled some food from the buffet on myself. To me it was but an honorable wound received while protecting my friend, but Keith sighed when he saw it.

I couldn’t leave it like that, so I decided to go into another room and have a servant expertly clean my dress. Someone else would have to protect Maria in the meantime.

“Keith, make sure to protect Maria with your life,” I said.

“Big Sister, make sure to behave, and come back as soon as you’re done,” he replied.

I was the older sister here... but he treated me like a child.

After going into the other room, the servant used water and a sort of cleaning powder to make my dress look like new, and she even dried it with something that looked like a hairdryer. There was no trace of meat sauce left. *Impressive.*

I complimented the servant, a plump lady, on her cleaning abilities, but she smiled and modestly said that it was nothing. She then started accompanying me back to the party. But while we were still in the hallway, she was called for by another young lady who had dirtied her dress. I reassured her that I knew the way to the hall and could go there myself. After all, I just had to go straight through the hallway. I couldn’t have gotten lost if I tried.

On my way back, I heard a “woof” behind me. It was Pochi, the Dark Familiar that usually stayed inside my shadow.

“Pochi! Go back in the shadow! You can’t come out now!”

Usually he was a good boy, but today he was probably excited because of the unfamiliar location. He wagged his tail and ran off down another hallway.

As a creature of darkness he didn’t eat and wouldn’t dirty up the place, but I still couldn’t let a dog run free in the castle. I worriedly ran after him.

When I finally managed to reach Pochi, I was in a dark corridor I had never seen before. I had no idea how to get back to the party hall, so I just moved in the direction of the only light I could see.

“Woof!” said Pochi, currently in my arms. I followed his eyes and found a woman standing in the hallway.

“Wah!” I screamed in surprise.

A woman standing silently in a dark corridor... *Is this a horror movie? This is too scary...* I thought, frozen with fear.

“Guests are not allowed to go any further,” she said with a young, thankfully unghostlike voice.

“I... got lost... could you tell me the way back to the party hall?”

“I see... go back that way, and then...” She politely gave me directions.

I thanked her and started making my way back to the party, feeling slightly bad for having been terrified of someone so nice.

Now that I think of it, why was she standing there all alone? I thought, and looked back at her. Except she wasn’t there anymore.

I felt a chill run down my spine and ran back to the hall.

It was time for dancing, and Jeord had been looking for me. “I was worried. I could not find you anywhere.”

“I’m sorry, I left the hall for a bit.”

He did get slightly angry, but we left it at that. That was a relief, because I was too scared to talk about the disappearing woman in the dark corridor. Having Jeord next to me, however, took the fear away.

“I know that you just came back, but would you care to dance?” he asked, giving me his hand.

It was customary at parties like this to have your first dance with your fiancé, so I accepted and started dancing to the music, collecting envious stares from the ladies around us. With a dancer as good as Jeord taking the lead, even someone like me could manage to look somewhat elegant.

A handsome prince, perfect in everything he did... It was no surprise that all the girls blushed looking at him. In my previous life I had been one of those girls, staring at Jeord through the screen, but I’d never expected that he’d really fall in love with *me*, the game’s villainess.

I still had trouble believing it. I wasn’t anywhere near fit for someone like him. *After all, I’m...*

“Katarina, is something the matter? Are you tired?” asked Jeord, interrupting my train of thought. He was so good at leading that I didn’t even have to think about dancing.

“Oh, no, I was just thinking about stuff,” I said, and he frowned slightly.

“Thinking of other things while you are dancing with me... That makes me sad. I wish you would think of me,” he whispered so sweetly that I felt weak in the knees. *Please, Jeord. This is going to kill me one day.*

“Would you like to continue with the next song?” he asked after the song was over, but Keith, who was waiting nearby, informed him with a smile that there was another lady waiting for him.

The lady in question, who was now staring at Jeord with starry eyes, was an important guest, so the prince had no choice but to appease her. He gave Keith a scary smile, then told me that he’d be back soon, and approached that lady. The next song started, and I accepted Keith’s offer to dance.

“Big Sister, why did it take you so long to get your dress cleaned? I was worried you wouldn’t come back,” he told me while elegantly leading our dance.

Unlike Jeord, he knew that I was away for a long time, so I had to explain to him that I was trying to go back to the hall by myself when Pochi led me astray.

“Pochi ran away? He usually always listens to you... why would he do that?” he asked with a questioning expression.

“Wasn’t he just excited about being at a big party?”

“That’s just you, Big Sister...” Keith replied. Rude, but not wrong. “I’m impressed that you found your way back through this huge castle, though,” he continued.

Should I tell him about the woman in the dark hallway? I thought to myself, but the whole thing was so creepy that I just said, “I just have a good survival instinct.”

“That’s really like you, I guess,” he said, convinced.

I expected him to say something like “*Don’t you mean womanly intuition?*”, but he just agreed with me...

“By the way, didn’t Jeord tell you anything?” he asked me, changing the subject.

“What do you mean?”

“Like... to come to his room tonight, or anything like that.”

“Why would he say that? We’re planning to have a tea party between us girls tonight... you wanted to do a boys’ party, as well?”

So Keith wanted to have a tea party with the other boys?!

“I don’t... That’s not it... It’s just that Jeord could go after you tonight.”

Jeord... go after me?!

“He’s still planning to kill me?! I thought we were over that!”

Fortune Lover’s plot was over, so I thought that I wouldn’t have to be scared of the Bad Ends anymore... Was I wrong? That would mean that when Jeord told me that he liked me, he was lying...

“Nobody said he’s after your life! And what do you mean *still*? He’s never been out to kill you! I really don’t get you...”

Keith got mad at me, but what did he know of the perils of living as a villainess...? I gave him an offended stare, and he sighed in response.

“He’s after you to do... you know... things that couples do,” he went on, with his voice becoming smaller and his face redder.

Things that couples do... I reflected upon those words. In my past life I had never known romance, but even then I understood that Keith wasn’t talking about dancing.

Is he talking about that?! The things that Mother and Father do after their kids are asleep?! I could feel my face burning with embarrassment.

“...You don’t mean...!”

“He’s approaching you that overtly, so it wouldn’t be surprising if he thought of doing such things tonight,” he replied as I panicked.

His approach really was overt, but... *No way...*

That would make *Fortune Lover* an R18 game! But it was a game for all ages, and in my previous life I had died before I could turn 18, so I had never played R18 games... Of course I was curious about that kind of thing, but I knew nothing about it... Just a kiss was enough to shock me, so anything more than

that would be...

“Keith, what should I do?” I asked, worried sick and on the verge of tears. For some reason, he froze in place and blushed.

“W-Well, just don’t go walking around alone, and if he tells you to go to his room for sweets or anything, refuse! Stay with Mary, Sophia, and Maria at all times! Got it?”

“...Yes.”

I'll do as he says. I'm not ready for any R18 developments yet.

We were standing still as we spoke, and the song was close to ending. Once it did, we were surrounded by an army of ladies intent on reaching the handsome, still unengaged heir to a duke, Keith, pushing me away in the meantime.

They screamed “Dance with me!” and “No, me!” like carnivore animals before their prey. I could still see him among his fans, but, lacking the courage to fight all of them to get back to him, I elected to root for him from afar.

As I was trying to go back to the buffet, I noticed that a lot of girls were blushing and sighing while all staring at the same place. I followed their gazes, and... *Just as I thought.*

A certain someone was there, walking towards me.

“Would you like to dance with me?” he asked, producing a smile that made even more girls sigh and that made my heart skip a beat as well.

However, thanks to the immunity I had developed over the years, I managed to keep my cool and say “It would be my pleasure,” like a proper lady, taking Nicol’s hand.

A lot of people stared while I danced with Jeord or Keith, but in Nicol’s case they weren’t only girls, but boys as well... and they looked truly captivated. In particular, there was one man whose eyes were burning holes into Nicol’s face.

Hasn’t he noticed? Is he in danger, just like Maria?

“Nicol... there’s a man, over there, who’s been staring at you very intensely this whole time...” I said, just to be sure.

“Oh, him? He is always like that, but he is not dangerous. He just sometimes takes my used tableware and things like that.”

“Huh?!”

How is that not dangerous?! That's totally creepy! He's a stalker!

“He poses no threat,” said Nicol, noticing my shock.

This shocked me even more... *What in the world do threatening people do then?* I couldn't bring myself to ask him that, so I changed the subject to break the awkward silence.

“I heard from Sophia that you had been secretly looking for a fiancée,” I said.

I knew I was the one who had brought up the staring man in the first place, but the whole stalker thing was just too scary. Thankfully, Nicol seemed to understand that and didn't go back to that topic.

“I tried to keep it a secret from her so that I would be spared her comments... but she found out anyway.”

“...Her comments?”

I could see why he wouldn't want that, but we were talking about Sophia... She loved her brother so much that she'd never let him find a fiancée without her approval. She would probably even accompany him to the matchmaking dates.

“And when she did find out, she was furious that I had hidden it from her, and she is still upset.”

“I can't blame her... I would be upset too if my brother kept something so important a secret from me,” I said, imagining how I'd feel if Keith started looking for a fiancée without telling me.

“You have a point...” he replied. Nicol was smart, but sometimes he seemed to miss obvious things.

“Anyway, how did the matchmaking go?” I asked him excitedly. Nicol, despite not being engaged yet, was extremely popular. It would take him no time to find a fiancée, and a wonderful one at that.

“Not well,” he replied.

“What?!” Even someone as charming and beloved as him could have trouble finding a partner?

Handsome (eerily so), heir to an earl, talented, kind, smart (if sometimes slow), gentlemanly... He didn’t have any big flaw that I could think of, so I thought that the ladies would be fighting for him. Why hadn’t things gone well?

Maybe finding a fiancée is harder than I thought. Do they have to fight to the death to decide engagements?

“We do no such thing, and it is not even that hard to begin with,” said Nicol.

“Wait, did I say that out loud?”

“Yes.”

I was sure I’d only thought that... I must be more careful. Anyway... why didn’t it go well for him, then?

“Because I was not yet ready to find a partner.”

He replied to my thought again!

“...Did I say that out loud again?”

“No, but it showed on your face.”

Am I that easy to read? I worried, making Nicol smile.

“I will have to decide what to do eventually... but not right now,” he whispered.

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but more importantly, his usual charming aura hit me even stronger than usual and... before I knew it, I was eating salad at the buffet.

...Huh? I was dancing with Nicol, then there was some man staring at him, and then... what happened? How did I come here? Why am I eating salad?

Nicol’s handsomeness was scary indeed. I had to be careful, or I’d become just like that man who collects Nicol’s tableware.

Feeling tired, I went from the salad corner to the meat one. *I need some*

protein!

Oh, this looks nice. And this! This must be good.

As expected of a party at the castle, there was delicious meat as far as the eye could see. I couldn't eat all the dishes, so I planned to choose the tastiest-looking ones and limit myself to those. But they all looked tasty... so I ended up putting a bit of everything on my plate.

"What's with all that meat? Are you going to eat all of that?" I heard someone say.

"Alan! What are you doing here?"

As today's host, he was supposed to be busy greeting guests. What was he doing near the buffet?

"I just got tired and snuck here to rest for a while," he said. He really did look tired. Being a prince must be tough.

"Eat this, then!" I said, offering him my plate. I thought that some food might give him some energy.

"...I definitely don't need all that," he refused.

"Your mood will get worse if you don't eat something!" I insisted.

"That only applies to babies and to yourself," he said, quite rudely.

Fine. I'll eat it myself, then. And I'll do it in front of him, and if he asks for some, I won't give him any. That'll teach him!

I started eating, and... *Wow, it's really tasty. Delicious. This steak is so juicy... This one just melts in your mouth...*

Knowing that I could eat as much as I wanted of all this delicious food made me so happy.

Munch munch munch.

Munch munch munch munch munch munch munch munch.

"Mpfh... Gahahahah!" I heard Alan laugh next to me all of a sudden.

What happened?!

“Alan...? Wh-What’s wrong?”

“You should see yourself eating! It’s as if you’ve never had food before! Hahahaha!”

He was amused by how wholeheartedly I was enjoying the meal... But I didn’t know what was so funny about that. He kept laughing and laughing, and I couldn’t really go back to eating. If only he’d eaten it himself, he’d know how good this meat was. He’d be eating it like that too. That gave me an idea.

I stabbed a piece of meat with a fork and shoved it inside Alan’s mouth, which was still open and laughing.

“...Hmgff! Wgfh!”

At first he stared at me without moving, but I reached close to his face and told him, “I’m sure you’ll like it, Alan,” at which point he finally started chewing it silently. Maybe it was because of all his laughing, but his face looked a bit red.

“Isn’t it delicious?” I asked once he was done.

“Yeah...” he replied coldly. But after knowing him for all these years, I could tell from his face that he was actually really pleased.

What did I tell you? This meat’s delicious. You’d go crazy for it yourself.

“This one’s tasty, too!”

I put a piece of a different dish on the fork, because I wanted Alan to see how good the buffet’s offerings were.

“L-Lady Katarina! P-Please do that to me too!” said a panting Mary, who had come running from somewhere and was now out of breath.

“Mary! Are you okay?!” I asked, worried about her.

“Y-Yes! I was just a bit hungry.”

“Of course! You’ve been dancing for so long! Don’t worry, I’ll go get you something to eat!”

“What?! No! Please, Lady Katarina, let me eat from that fork, too...”

“That’s not fair, Mary!” said Sophia, who had appeared from nowhere. “I want that too!”

“Sophia, where’s Nicol?” I asked her. He was Sophia’s escort, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, a man about the same age as my father invited him to the terrace...” she said with a smile.

That’s no smiling matter! This could be dangerous! That man could be the one who was staring at him! And even if it were someone else, it could still be dangerous...

Sophia, noticing that I was shaking, comforted me with her beautiful smile. “He probably just wants to discuss some business matters with my brother. Either way, he’s used to this kind of thing, so there is nothing to worry about.”

Used to this kind of thing? What does that even mean? He’s used to stalkers? Oh well, if his sister says that it’s fine, then she’s probably right.

As I was busy worrying about Nicol, Mary started talking with Alan.

“Prince Alan, what exactly are you doing here?”

Is it me or does she sound kind of angry?

“Oh, I was just resting... I was tired...” he replied, seemingly nervous.

“Indeed, you must be tired. However, I suggest that you go back now. There was a servant looking for you,” said Mary, who was smiling but somehow still sounded very forceful.

The prince reluctantly agreed and went back to the middle of the party.

“Mary, Sophia, are you two done with greetings and dancing?” I asked the two of my friends who had remained there.

“Yes, I am quite done.”

“Me too, yes.”

Perfect. “Let’s eat together!” I proposed. “We can share each other’s plates!” If we did that, we’d all be able to eat a larger variety of dishes. To be honest, I was having trouble choosing what to eat.

“Of course!” they said in unison.

The three of us, later joined by Maria, who had to dodge quite a few boys

along her way (I had to scare away a couple of flirty guys who were trying to approach her), had fun eating and chatting together.

Jeord, who had told me he would be back soon, was so busy that he barely managed to show his face before he was called for again by the servants.

I was relieved that I didn't have to deal with any invitations to do those things that Keith was talking about...

Nicol came back safely, although he did look tired. Once the party was almost finished, that man from before — the one that had stared at Nicol while we were dancing — was sneakily taking some used glasses, trying to bring them out of the castle. I pretended not to see anything.

So the party came to an end. I did get lost in the hallways, but, other than that, it all went smoothly.

As soon as the party ended, we were escorted to the rooms where we would stay the night. They were gorgeous, as expected of the castle's guest rooms.

It was finally time for the long-awaited girls' party!

I was planning to prepare in my room and then meet with everyone else in Mary's room to chat until morning. I had my maid Anne pretty me up, help me with my bags, and change into my new pajamas, but I was so excited that I finished preparing way before the time we were supposed to meet.

But waiting in my room would be too boring, so I should go for a walk inside the castle...

And risk getting lost? Better not.

If I met Jeord there was the risk that he'd invite me to do adult stuff with him, and Keith had told me not to walk around alone to begin with.

In that case...!

“I’m going to the room next door!”

“The room next door? But young miss, that’s...”

Before Anne could finish voicing her complaints, I had already barged out of the room, knocking on the door of the one next to mine.

“Who is it...?”

“Keith, it’s me, your sister. I’ve come to hang out!” I said, entering the room as soon as I heard Keith’s reply. As we were siblings, our rooms were close together.

“Big Sister? What’s wrong?” he asked, surprised by my visit.

“It was too early to go to Mary’s room, so I thought I’d come and show you my new pajamas,” I said, taking off the gown that Anne had made me wear to walk in the hallways. I had fallen in love at first sight with these cute pajamas. The light, pastel colors reminded me of spring.

“Aren’t they cute?” I asked Keith while spinning around so he could see better. His face turned dark in reply. “Do I look weird?”

Anne thought they were cute too, but what’s with that face? Maybe someone with a villainous face like mine looks weird when wearing something cute?

“No, they’re cute all right.”

“Thank you!” I said, relieved.

“That’s not the problem...” he sighed. “As you can see, my maid has gone back to her room.”

“Huh? I guess she has.” Indeed, Keith’s maid was not there.

“Which means that it’s only the two of us in my room right now.”

“Yes... and?” I had come without Anne, so obviously there was no one else with us.

“Ahh...” Keith sighed. “You really don’t get it.”

He suddenly grabbed my arm and threw me on the bed. He did it gently enough that it didn’t hurt at all, but I was so confused by the situation that I started getting nervous. And then, he stood up by my side, looming over me.

“Have you forgotten that I declared my love to you?”

That’s right! After the kidnapping thing, Keith did say that! I hadn’t forgotten it or anything, but...

“But you acted the same as always after that, so I thought that maybe it was a

dream..."

Keith's face looked troubled now. "I know that you're not used to this kind of thing, so I tried not to trouble you."

That was true; I was so unused to that kind of thing that Jeord's romantic behavior always made me jittery.

"...Thank you," I said, grateful that he'd worry so much about me.

"But if you're going to write my confession off as a dream, then I won't restrain myself anymore."

"What?!"

"You should realize that I am a man... Big Sister, how naive can you be?" he said, inching closer to my face. "I told you to be careful. If you come to a man's room alone, and at night to boot... you can't complain about whatever happens to you."

After being told that, I finally realized that this position we were in was... bad. I was lying down, with Keith hovering over my face... *This is just like those scenes in manga or games! Oh no, oh no... What am I going to do?!*

So confused that I was unable to move, I watched Keith's handsome features get closer and closer. His eyes had a fierce passion that I had never seen in them. They scared me a little, so I closed mine.

Smack!

I heard a cute sound and felt something soft on my forehead. Unsure of what had happened, I slowly opened my eyes and saw Keith, standing away from me, frowning.

"K-K-Keith?"

"I have enough self control to stop at that... but if it were Jeord, it could have been much worse. Try to remember that you're a woman, I beg you," he said, putting my gown back on me and sending me outside of the room.

I stood there, processing what had just happened, and ended up being late to the meeting with the other girls.

“...Lady Katarina, Lady Katarina!” Someone was calling out to me.

“Uhm? What’s the matter, Mary?” I hurriedly replied.

“Do you not feel well?”

“No, it’s just that... between the graduation ceremony and the party after that, I’m tired.”

That was no lie — between the preparations and the actual parties, I had been busy since morning. However, the main reason why I was spacing out was what had happened with Keith... I was used to being scolded by him, but this was... different. And I’d never seen his eyes light up like that.

“Are you okay? Do you want some sweets?”

“We also have tea and juice,” said my kind friends. I thanked them and gratefully accepted their offerings.

I had been looking forward to this party for so long, and it could be the last time we all met together like this. *I’m going to have as much fun as possible!*

“Oh, this is delicious! Thank you, I feel better already,” I said, making my friends smile.

Mary, Maria, Sophia, and I were in Mary’s guest room, with snacks and tea, ready to talk until the sun went up. As I had always wanted to do a pajama party, I had suggested that we all wear pajamas. Now each girl was wearing sleepwear that reflected their tastes, and they all looked so cute!

“Indeed, today was so busy that I have little energy left,” said Sophia agreeing to what I had said before.

“Yes. For me it was even more exhausting, because it was the first time I have attended such a party.”

“Oh, that’s right! You’ve never been to a party except those at the academy, right, Maria?”

As a commoner, she never had the opportunity to join the nobles’ gatherings until now. And to think that her first party would be one so huge! Poor thing.

“I have not... Everyone has so kindly taught me about the proper etiquette,

but I'm scared that I may have committed a faux pas..." she said with a worried expression.

"Not at all, you were wonderful. You were so perfect that I could hardly believe it was your first party," said Mary.

If Mary, who was looked up to as the ideal young noblewoman, said that, then she must have done really well.

Even to me, Maria had completely looked the part of a noble girl today. I just didn't have enough confidence to praise her, since Mother and Keith reminded me at every opportunity that I wouldn't know ladylikeness if it bit me in the face.

"I am so happy that you would say that. More people than I had expected came to greet me, so I was very busy all the way through."

"The crowd surrounding you really was incredible..."

For some inscrutable reason, the other main game characters never became more than friends with Maria. But, as expected of the protagonist, she was always stupidly popular with the boys, and today was no exception. She was cute and a good cook... What more could one want in a girl? If I were a boy, I'd probably ask her out on a date too.

"But you didn't dance with anyone, right?" asked Mary.

"What?! Really?" I asked Maria, surprised. I had been too busy getting lost to see it myself, but it turned out that she really hadn't danced with anyone.

"...I was not confident that I could dance well enough," she said, embarrassed. Unlike us nobles, she hadn't been taking dance lessons since when she was a kid.

"I'm terrible at dancing, but it's not that big of a deal. I just leave it to the lead and it looks decent enough..." *Even if I'm daydreaming while doing it*, that is.

"Katarina usually dances with Prince Jeord or Keith, who are extremely good dancers... but she is right in that following the man's lead is usually enough. You also attended the dance lessons at the academy, right, Maria?"

"Yes, but... dancing with someone I do not know is still scary," she said as her

eyebrows went down in a frown. She had a point.

“You are right. I wouldn’t want to be led in a dance by someone I don’t know, either,” Mary agreed.

“But what if it were a gorgeous man? Would it not be wonderful to dance together?” said Sophia, with passion in her eyes and too many romance novels in her head.

“A gorgeous man...” repeated Maria, pensively.

Now that I thought about it, I had never asked Maria what kind of man she’d be attracted to. “What kind of man is your type, Maria?”

“My... type?” she said. After thinking for a while, she said “Someone who smiles a lot, is always positive, and enjoys eating the sweets that I bake.”

I had expected her to say something like “I have never thought about it” or something, but her reply was surprisingly specific.

“Oh... is that so...?” I asked.

“Me too! I like positive people who always smile! And with brown hair and blue eyes!” said Mary, just as specific.

Doesn’t your fiancé have silver hair? What’s the poor prince to do?

“What about you, Katarina?” she asked me.

“Me?”

To be honest, until recently, I never had any experience with boys either in this or my previous life... I did like some fictional characters, but no real ones.

“I’ve never thought about it in that much detail... What about you, Sophia?” I asked, feeling left behind and finding refuge in my friend.

“Oh, I would love to meet the fallen prince of a former kingdom, who...” And so she went off, enjoying her novel-like fantasies and making me feel relieved.

Having asked her the question myself, I listened to her ramblings until the end, when the topic became the romance novel she’d gotten into lately. She then took some books out and started talking about them, careful not to spoil any important plot points.

Our conversation then went on to the popular sweet shops, antiques, and many other topics, to seemingly no end.

Ah, tonight is the most fun I've ever had.



What have I done... I sighed, alone in the dark hallway.

Well, knowing that it was too late for that, I was now regretting what I had done to my sister Katarina.

But isn't it Katarina's fault? If a girl comes alone to a man's room at night and takes off her gown, wearing nothing but her nightdress, am I to blame for falling to the temptation?

If anything, I felt like congratulating myself for being able to stop at what I did. Had Jeord been in my place, he wouldn't have stopped at appetizers, but eaten all the way to dessert...

I just hoped that this wouldn't make Katarina scared of me... I would be sad if she started avoiding me.

Not being seen as a man was harsh. But being seen as a man and avoided because of it would also be harsh. I felt like I was asking for too much.

For nine long years I had hidden the feelings I'd had for her since I was eight years old inside my heart, where they grew stronger and stronger. Recently I had finally found the courage to show them to her... but I didn't know what to do next.

Should I act like Jeord and approach her without restraint, prepared to be avoided by her if it came to that? *But would I even be able to do anything like that?*

That whole situation in my room had really tested me, so I'd ended up pursuing her actively... but normally, I could never do such a thing. After all, if I were able to, I wouldn't have spent nine years longing for her in silence.

I sighed again, and heard a voice call to me from behind.

"Hey Keith, you're here too?"

It was the familiar voice of Prince Alan, followed by Nicol. Despite being approached so suddenly, I was expecting them to come by at some point, so I wasn't particularly surprised.

"Mary asked me to help her, just to be safe," Alan said almost apologetically.

"I was asked by Sophia. Everything should be fine if we stay here," said Nicol.

"Yes... you cannot go anywhere without passing by here. This should be fine."

Mary had chosen to stay in that peripheral guest room for this very reason.

I looked at the hallway stretching in front of me and saw someone approaching. *Is it him? I don't think anyone else would come here at this time of the night...*

As expected, I saw a head of blond hair approaching. It *was* Jeord, after all.

"Oh, Keith, Alan, and Nicol too. What could you all be doing in such a place?" he asked, with an obviously fake smile on his lips and a look of contempt in his eyes.

As I was thinking about how to respond, Nicol beat me to it.

"We were arranging a boys' party. What about you, Jeord?" he said.

I was surprised both at the speed of his reply and at the fact that he still hadn't forgotten about the *boys' party* affair.

"A boys' party? That sounds quite diverting. Now, if you will, I must pass through. Please step aside," said Jeord.

"The only room in that direction is Mary's," I told him, as if he didn't know that already.

"That is exactly where I am headed."

This scoundrel plans to go directly to Katarina!

While I was shocked by how bold and unashamed Jeord could be, Alan intervened. "The girls are having a tea party inside Mary's room, and she asked me not to let anyone go there."

"Alan... you really do whatever she commands, don't you? Wouldn't this be the perfect chance for you to advance your relationship with your fiancée?"

said Jeord condescendingly.

“We like our relationship exactly the way it is,” Alan replied offhandedly.

Seeing that we were not going to let him pass, Jeord sighed. “Oh well, I expected this to happen from the moment Mary said that she wanted to stay in that room. And to think, I had worked so hard to free some time for tonight,” he said.

“You have free time tonight?” Nicol asked, suddenly interested.

“Yes. I prepared so that I would be free to enjoy time with my fiancée tonight.”

As the former student council president, Jeord had been very busy even after graduation with documents and other bureaucratic tasks (which were probably pushed onto him by Mary). *All in all, he's got his troubles to deal with as well, I was thinking* before being shocked by Nicol's proposal.

“If that's the case, let's all do a boys' party.”

What?! What are you saying, Nicol?

His expression was as neutral as always, but his eyes were sparkling... Jeord, predictably, also seemed very suspicious. His brother, however, seemed less averse to the idea.

“Huh? A boys' party, you say?”

Are you serious?

“It's a party for boys to chat about a variety of topics until morning,” explained Nicol.

“Sounds fun! Let's do it!”

He was serious.

“Very well! Then we shall all go to my room!” said a very excited Nicol. And so, all the boys present — including me — were made to participate.

You two guys may seem excited (apart from Nicol's usual lack of expression) but look at Jeord's face... He couldn't be more annoyed.

However, completely ignoring how unenthusiastic he was, Jeord — together

with me — was forcibly dragged into Nicol's room. I considered sneaking back to my room, but he sent me a gaze which, while silent, made the prince's thoughts quite clear: *If you don't suffer through this with me, you will regret it.*

I therefore reluctantly elected to follow the others to this "boys' party" where Nicol, having lost his usual coldness, chatted happily with a similarly exuberant Alan. Meanwhile, Jeord was so glaringly annoyed as to make my stomach hurt just by looking at him.

Ah, tonight is the least fun I've ever had.



Our girls' party was lots of fun, but after all we had been through that day we were so tired that, one after the other, we got sleepy.

I couldn't hold out much longer either. I felt my head getting heavier. *I... must sleep...*

The pink walls, the black table, the metal-framed bed with azure duvets and blue cushions... it was a familiar sight.

This bedroom belonged to Acchan, my friend.

Oh, I used to go play at her place all the time in my previous life!

"This is a sequel to the game she was playing, so I'll have to go tell her once I've finished it."

This is Acchan's voice! It's been so long since I've heard it! But where is she? I can't see her.

But then I looked at the mirror in front of me, and saw... *Acchan? Looking back at me? But that would mean that... I'm Acchan?!*

Even if I tried, I couldn't move my body. It was as if my consciousness was trapped inside her body. I then realized that this was a dream of my previous life, and decided to enjoy the nostalgic memories.

I saw Acchan put a disc in her computer and start playing a game.

A game? Now that's nostalgic. I wonder what it is. I looked on excitedly as the

opening cutscene started playing. And there was...

Maria?

I could see the character I knew so well in my current life.

So she's playing Fortune Lover? It feels so weird to see it as a game after I've lived inside it.

Just as I thought that, the game's title appeared on the screen: *Fortune Lover II.*

Did I just see a "II"?! What's that supposed to mean?! I started panicking as the cutscene still played.

Jeord, Alan, Nicol, Raphael, Sora, and two other male characters I had never seen before flashed through the screen.

This isn't the game I played before dying, is it? Was it so popular that it got a sequel...?

The title screen popped up, reading once again "*Fortune Lover II*," this time with a subtitle: "*Love at the Magical Ministry.*"

I saw Acchan click on the "continue" button, showing that she had already been playing before. And so... the game started.

Among many familiar faces, a male character I didn't know appeared on the screen. *Is he a new character from the sequel? Was the sequel released after I died?*

Acchan was clicking through the text and occasionally choosing dialogue options, and, looking at her, my initial shock eventually faded. The reason for this was that I realized that Katarina could have nothing to do with *FL2*, having been exiled out of the country at the end of *FL1*. She couldn't be in the game. There could be no doom for her. All was well.

Knowing that, I could enjoy watching my friend play. Now that I thought about it, the first game had received a lot of preorders, so maybe it wasn't that surprising that it would get a sequel.

Judging from the subtitle, this one was probably about Maria's romantic troubles at her workplace. There was a really grown-up-looking character called

Cyrus, charmingly mature.

And also a younger one called Dewey who looked cute and endearing. Since all the original characters were the same age as the protagonist, they probably added older and younger romanceable options in the sequel.

Sora's coming back too... I wonder what role he'll play. I took mental note of the men in the game so that if Maria fell in love with any of them, I could help her along.

A new character, a female one, appeared on the screen. Instead of the name, the game just showed three question marks, and she had a hood covering her face. Just as I was wondering who this new character was, Acchan spoke up.

"Oh, is it that villainess again? Her name isn't shown yet, but I'm sure it's Jeord's fiancée from the prequel, Katarina."

She... what?!

"After all she suffered, she's still here to ruin people's lives in the sequel? Sheesh, she doesn't know when to stop."

What do you mean?! Suffered? Ruin people's lives? What's happening?!

"I'm sure this time she won't get off with just being exiled."

You mean... death?! No! Have mercy! Don't treat poor Katarina like this! Let Katarina... Let Katarina...

"...stay out of the plot!!!" I shouted while waking up in a room that didn't look like mine.

Where...? I asked myself, looking around, only to see my friends staring at me in surprise. I finally remembered that I was staying at the castle, and that yesterday we had stayed up late having a girls' party. And then I had that dream...

"L-Lady Katarina, are you alright?" asked a worried Sophia, who was standing next to me. Her eyes still looked sleepy, so I figured that I must have woken her up with my scream.

"I-It's nothing, I just had a bad dream. Did I wake you up? I'm sorry."

"No, no, actually it was time we woke up anyway, so that was good timing," she replied with a smile.

"You must have been so tired that you had nightmares," Mary added kindly.

"There are still a few days until we start working at the Ministry, so please take your time to rest," said Maria.

Right... the Ministry. Fortune Lover II: Love at the Magical Ministry... That's the title of the game from my dream.

I reassured myself that it was just a dream. As Mary said, it was probably just brought on by tiredness.

I'll just forget about it.

After having breakfast with the other girls, we greeted Jeord and Alan and then went back to our respective homes. For some reason, Jeord looked very angry and Keith looked absolutely destroyed. Maybe he hadn't slept well? Or did he have nightmares like me?

On the carriage home, he apologized to me all of a sudden. "Big Sister... About last night... I'm sorry."

"Last night? Did something happen? More importantly, I had the worst dream. I woke up screaming! I must have been really tired. You know, like, when..."

I kept talking, but Keith's face now looked even worse.

"I can't believe she'd forget it in a single night... *A dream*, that's what it was to her..." he muttered.

Meanwhile, I kept thinking to myself that my nightly vision was only a nightmare I'd had because I was tired, and nothing more. I had to believe that if I wanted to stay sane.

Then again, it had felt so real...

Even if it wasn't a dream, the existence of a sequel to *Fortune Lover* set at the Magical Ministry wasn't a problem...

What was a problem was Katarina coming back. And what was an even bigger problem was the possibility of a fate even worse than exile... *Please! Stop it!*

After all my efforts to prevent those Catastrophic Bad Ends, you want to tell me that there are even more?!

It was just a dream... Nothing but a dream. A very realistic one, yes, but nothing more. I must have been tired and anxious about the start of my new job, that's it. Couldn't be anything else.

However, in order to keep my cool, I had to chant it to myself over and over...

“It was just a dream... just a dream... just a dream...”

Chapter 2: To the Magical Ministry

Telling myself that it had all been a dream had worked so well that I now wondered why I was so scared in the first place.

A few days later, it was time to start working at the Magical Ministry. Wearing the uniform with its cloak was enough to make me excited. It was just like the wizards I had seen in the manga and movies of my previous life.

After the entrance ceremony, all newcomers would have to go through orientation so that they could settle in at the Ministry.

I'm an adult now! I'll do my best! I thought to myself on my way there.

The Ministry itself was located near the academy, so it was familiar to me, but seeing the fifty or so newcomers gathered into the auditorium for the entrance ceremony made it seem so imposing. All the recruits from other branches of the Ministry were there, so that could explain why there were so many of us.

I was nervous being among all these people, but then I heard two familiar voices.

“Good morning, Lady Katarina.”

“Good morning, Lady Claes.”

It was Maria and Sora. The two had met by coincidence while coming here, and they had come to greet me. Despite having worked unofficially at the Ministry for a while, they were both going to attend the ceremony with me and all other newcomers.

Seeing two faces I knew made me feel relieved. Although I wasn't as close with Sora as I was with Maria, he was also my friend, and we'd traveled together when Keith was kidnapped. Since the ceremony hadn't begun yet anyway, I started chatting with them.

“When did you two meet up?”

“I ran into some trouble while coming here, and Sora helped me. Then we

went the rest of the way together.”

“Yeah, some nasty fellow had laid eyes on her, so I made him get lost.”

So Sora helped Maria get rid of the man that was troubling her, and then they came to the Ministry together... That really sounded like a scripted event in an otome game. The boy saves the girl, and then they find out that they work at the same place.

The blue-haired and blue-eyed Sora was one of the boys that the protagonist could choose to hook up with in the game from my dream, so that would make sense.

No! It would make no sense! Because it was just a dream! Not reality! Just an incredibly realistic dream! I should stop thinking so much about it.

I shook my head to get all my weird ideas about *FL2* out of it.

“Lady Katarina, is something the matter?” asked Maria, wondering why I did that.

“Oh, it’s nothing... I’m just a bit nervous.”

“Me too. Starting today, I will be an official member of the Ministry,” she said with an anxious expression on her face.

When she looked like this, she really triggered one’s protective instinct... *I shall protect you from any danger!* I wanted to tell her... but, unfortunately, there were only so many dangers that my Dirt Bump could protect people from. And saying something like that would be even weirder after considering that I was quite anxious myself.

“Let’s do our best, together!” I told her, shaking her hand.

She blushed and nodded, saying a very cute “Yes!”

Only the game’s protagonist could be so lovely while doing something so trivial. Even Sora, standing next to us, murmured “Look at her go, charming people left and right.”

He’s so right! Maria was so cute that she always ended up charming everyone.

After all the newcomers gathered into the auditorium, the higher-ups entered, silencing the whole room. I recognized Larna Smith, Raphael's boss, who had helped us during Keith's disappearance. Around her were other people... probably the heads of the various departments.

I looked through each one of them to make sure that the men I had seen in my dream weren't amongst them. *Of course it was just a dream, but, you know... just to be safe.* I was relieved to find out that, luckily enough, I knew none of their faces.

As everyone was now finally there, the ceremony started. Except for the higher-ups, there were no chairs for the people in the auditorium (including the newcomers and the other employees), so we'd have to listen to the speeches and such standing up. Since that's exactly what happened at the entrance and graduation ceremonies at the academy, I had already suspected that it would be like this. Oh well.

Everyone was probably used to standing up for so long because of the balls, where you couldn't sit to eat, so we were probably safe from accidents like the one in my previous life where a girl passed out during the school's entrance ceremony because the headmaster's speech was too long.

Still... I'd appreciate a short speech. The one at the academy ceremony had been really brief, so maybe this would be too.

I don't really like listening to people while standing up... I wish they'd at least let us sit down on the floor. That would probably be difficult too, in this outfit... If only I had my PE uniform. Or at least my farming clothes...

I kept myself busy thinking things like that while one speech succeeded the other, until, at last, the single most important person in the country walked up to the podium.

"From now on, you are all going to become part of the Magical Ministry, one of, if not *the* most important organization in the whole kingdom," said the King of Sorcié.

As a duke's daughter I had greeted him a couple of times, but the king still felt like someone that I had little to do with. At the academy it was his advisors giving the speeches, but he had come himself for the Magical Ministry, the

entity that had the most power after him.

He looked very young despite having kids more than 20 years old, but he also had the regal presence one would expect of a king. His silver hair and blue eyes were the same as Alan's, but his face looked more like Jeord's. One thing was certain: he was just as handsome as his sons.

Thinking that such a chance doesn't come often, I was staring at him intently... when our eyes met and he sent me a telling look.

Uh, uh, e-excuse me, wh-what? What does this mean?

I was a bit scared, but then I heard another newcomer, standing beside me, saying "My eyes just met the king's!" to a friend.

Oh, that's just like the idol concerts back in my previous life, then. They look around the crowd and everyone thinks that they are staring at them. Whew, I got scared for a second there.

After the king spoke, the ceremony ended and the bosses left, relieving most of the tension in the room.

"Well, it is over then. Now our older colleagues will show us around, I believe," said Maria, who now looked much more relaxed.

"Will they come to meet us here?"

"Yes, a few of them will come from each department to introduce themselves," said Sora, who had been working at the Ministry for a while.

Older colleagues introducing themselves... None of the newcomers looked like the new characters I saw in my dream, but I hadn't met the people who already worked here yet. I waited for them to come, secretly anxious.

Around a dozen of them walked into the room... but none of their faces looked familiar. I was extremely relieved upon finding out that my dream the other night was, after all, really nothing but a dream.

The newcomers were then split up in groups of seven or eight and they were shown around the various departments. Being in the same group as Maria and Sora, who were standing next to me, gave me courage. Sora actually knew the Ministry well enough already, but he had decided to join the tour anyway to

rekindle his enthusiasm as a newcomer.

“Welcome, everyone. I’m Nix Cornish, and I will be showing you around,” said the Ministry employee who would be leading our group.

His words weren’t particularly weird, but he had said them without looking at us and while stroking his hair, which was styled really strangely, with the bangs longer on one side. His clothes, too, were different from everyone else’s. They were sparkly and fluttery, and the opening on the chest was *very* deep... *Did he fix it himself?*

As I stared at him, a woman employee who was nearby said, “Don’t worry too much about him. He’s just a narcissist and a bit of a weirdo.”

Now, to be exact, it wasn’t the woman employee who said that. It was the raccoon-shaped puppet in her hand.

“By the way, my name is Lisa Norman,” continued the puppet, while the real Lisa Norman’s lips barely moved at all. She was a great ventriloquist. Her expression hadn’t changed one bit during the whole thing, either... *Is she trying to break the ice with us?*

“Who are you calling a weirdo, Lisa? Everyone, this is Lisa Norman, my weirdo colleague who only speaks through puppets,” Cornish told us, seeing our confusion.

What do you mean, she only speaks through puppets? I was baffled.

It seemed that she wasn’t trying to break the ice with her ventriloquism, but that, for her, it was an everyday thing. *This already makes two weirdos... Do they allow normal people into the Magical Ministry?*

I tried looking at the employees who were showing the other groups around, but there were no custom-fixed uniforms or puppets, and everyone’s speech sounded normal. We probably just happened to get the two weirdest ones, but that was a relief. *I don’t think I’d stay sane if everyone was that weird.*

But, as we newcomers were obviously in no position to complain about older employees being weird, we just went through the Ministry tour guided by this strange pair.

“This library, the pride of our Ministry, is said to be the most comprehensive in the whole kingdom,” said Cornish, our narcissistic guide. He wasn’t saying anything out of the ordinary, but the fact that he ran his hand through his hair every single time he spoke was really distracting.

All the groups being guided through the Ministry started from different rooms, so we wouldn’t be crowded into the same place at the same time, and ours started at the library. Apparently, it was generally restricted to Ministry employees. When we stepped inside, the only thing I could think about was how huge it was. It wasn’t only large, but very tall too. Rows of shelves ran up to the towering ceiling, filled with a breathtaking number of books.

“Here you will find all the books ever written about magic,” said the raccoon puppet... that is, Ms. Norman. She really never spoke without her puppet, and she was extraordinarily good at it, too; her mouth never seemed to move at all.

“Basically, all books are free for you to read. If you want to borrow one, just get permission from the librarian,” said Cornish, gesturing toward a girl sitting behind a counter and sending her a wink, making her visibly wince in response.

“You can also ask her if you want to know about the location of a particular book,” said the raccoon— said Ms. Norman, ignoring Cornish’s flamboyant gesturing.

Looking at the huge shelves covering the walls, I thought that just finding a specific book would indeed be quite the feat. There were more books than I could ever count.

“Say, Maria, since they have all these books...” I quietly said to Maria, who was standing next to me. However the reply came from Sora, who was standing on the other side.

“They have none of the romance novels you love so much,” he whispered so that only I could hear.

“How did you know I wanted to ask that? Can you read minds?”

“You’re just too predictable,” he said with a grin.

...Am I? Well, if they didn’t have any romance novels, this mountain of books didn’t really interest me. *If only there was a library this big, but only for*

romance novels!

Our two guides went on to explain what kind of book was in which section, but it was all too complex for me to stand a chance at remembering it. *Okay! I'll just ask the librarian if I ever need anything!*

After that, we were shown around the various departments, starting from the one closest to the library: the Biomagic Research Department.

"Here, we perform research on magic animals and plants," Cornish explained. He then knocked on the door, and loudly called to those inside. "Hey, I'm guiding the newcomers... Can I come in right now?"

A series of weird noises came from inside, followed by the voice of a woman. "N-Not right now, wait... wait a second, will you?"

We heard another round of undecipherable noises, and the woman then opened the door from the inside.

"S-Sorry to keep you waiting! Here... please... come inside," she said, with her face covered in sweat and her hair all mussed up.

What had happened, and what were those noises? Once inside the room, we saw papers scattered all over the place, broken tableware, and general chaos. A group of people, probably the employees belonging to this department, were busy collecting the things that were on the ground and sweeping away all the broken stuff.

Was there a storm or something in here? While we newcomers were astounded by the state of affairs, Cornish didn't look the least bit surprised.

"You never get a break, huh?" he said.

"...I really don't. I wish I could do something about it," said the woman from before, sighing.

So this mayhem wasn't anything peculiar... But what caused it in the first place? I stared curiously at her and the other employees.

"I'm really sorry, everyone. We were trying to conduct an experiment and took it out of its cage, but it got out of hand..." said the woman, and then a man

walked in from a door on the other side of the room.

Seeing the man, with long hair kept in a ponytail and big round glasses, the faces of all other employees changed to bitter expressions.

“Boss, how many times has it been this month alone? Have you no sense of responsibility?!” the woman said to the man, who was apparently the head of the department. Her voice sounded much sharper than when she had spoken to us. She was obviously mad.

However, the target of her anger wasn’t fazed at all. “Oh, sorry, sorry. I got distracted for a second and it all went awry,” he said nonchalantly.

Wow. How can he stay that cool while getting scolded like that?

As it turned out, this man had taken something out of its cage, and that something was the reason the room was now in this state. I couldn’t help but wonder what that *something* was.

I looked at him, and our eyes met. He seemed to only then notice that we were there. “Who are all those people?” he asked the woman.

Clearly annoyed at how he didn’t feel sorry in the least about what he had done, the woman looked at him sideways while replying. “They are the newcomers, and they are visiting our department.”

“Oh, that’s right, today was the entrance ceremony. I’d completely forgotten that.”

“That does not surprise me... I tried calling for you, but you would not reply, so I went to the ceremony in your stead,” the woman said with a bone-chilling stare.

“Oh, really? Thank you,” the man said before turning to us. “So, let me introduce myself. I’m Hector Delius, the head of the Biomagic Research Department. Welcome to the Magical Ministry, everyone,” he said with a smile.

Knowing that this Hector Delius was the most important person within the department made me feel anxious at the possibility of being sent here. Delius, on the other hand, was the opposite of anxious and looked excited to have visitors.

“Since you’re here, I’ll show you the rooms in the back!” he said enthusiastically, but the woman from before started to panic.

“N-No, we can’t do that! It just got out of its cage and turned the place into a battlefield! What will the newcomers think if they see our department in this state?!”

“Don’t worry, we put it back in its cage! It’s safe now. Okay, everyone, follow me,” he said, casually guiding us to a room in the back. We were scared, but in no position to decline, so we followed Delius through the door he had come out of earlier.

When I saw what was behind it, I let out a surprised and impressed “Wow!”

Much larger than the previous one, which only had a few tables in it, this room had rows of cages and little huts containing all kinds of animals I had never seen before. Unicorns, winged rabbits, half-horse half-fish chimeras... they all looked like creatures out of a fairy tale.

I was still amazed at the sight before me when Delius started bragging about it.

“I know, it’s incredible. We’ve collected these rare species from all over the world, relying on all kinds of methods and connections. Cute, aren’t they?”

“Y-Yes.” I wasn’t so sure about *cute*, but they really were incredible. I’d never seen creatures like these.

When I was first reborn into this world, at first, I expected to encounter fantastic animals like the ones in front of me now, but I only ever saw dogs, cats, and other normal animals. I was so busy avoiding my Catastrophic Bad Ends that I never bothered to research the local fauna, and I started assuming that it was the same as in my previous life... But I was wrong, and I was deeply moved by this revelation.

“This is amazing,” I said in awe.

“I know, right?!” replied Delius with flames in his eyes.

I had inadvertently set him off, triggering a series of passionate speeches about his treasured pets.

“And this one, you see,” he went on explaining about another creature that nobody had asked him about, leaving no time to be interrupted.

We still have to see the rest of the Ministry, and we have limited time... If he keeps on with his tirade, we'll be here all night... I thought before the woman stopped him.

“Mr. Delius, please stop. They have other things to see,” she said coldly.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I got a bit worked up,” he said, seemingly snapping out of it before continuing. “Okay then, just one more...” He produced a potted plant, and started explaining. “Lately this has become increasingly rare, and...”

“Please stop already! You will make the newcomers think that this is the second-to-least-popular department!” she said angrily, forcefully dragging Delius out of the room.

Second-to-least-popular...? So what's the one that people want to go to the least?

Our visit to the Biomagic Research Department ended as the department head was removed from our sight.

Cornish and Ms. Norman were leading us to our next stop in the tour when we were stopped by an incredibly handsome man.

“Are you guiding the newcomers? Perfect timing,” he asked our guides. He had deep brown hair, and, under his frameless glasses, he had penetrating green eyes that made him look handsome *and* smart.

“Yes, we are. Can we help you?” Cornish replied.

“Very much so,” replied the handsome man. “One of the newcomers was late to the ceremony and I had to go back to get him, but now I’m running behind schedule and have to get back to work... Would you mind guiding him together with your group?”

Someone was late to the entrance ceremony? That's such a shame. I wonder what happened. And this handsome guy here... where have I seen him? He looks familiar... Why?

I was looking at him, trying to figure out who he could be. Maybe noticing my

stare, he introduced himself.

“I wasn’t at the entrance ceremony, so this is my first time meeting all of you. I am Cyrus Lanchester, head of the Magic Powers Department. It’s a pleasure,” he said, pushing his glasses up his nose with a serious expression. It reminded me of something I’d already seen.

It was a scene in *Fortune Lover II*.

A smart-looking handsome guy with brown hair, green eyes, and frameless glasses, with the name “Cyrus Lanchester” written below him...

I had managed to convince myself that it was just a dream and almost forgot all about it... but those memories now resurfaced at once.

I-Is FL2 really happening?!

I was frozen with shock.

“I leave him in your care, then,” said Cyrus, leading the late newcomer to our group.

This boy had orange hair and beautiful blue eyes, making for a very handsome figure himself. He was very short, even shorter than me or Maria. So short, in fact, that we hadn’t been able to see him while he was standing behind Cyrus. Essentially, he looked like just a child.

I heard Maria’s quiet “Huh?” of surprise, and I saw everyone else in the group look puzzled as well. They were probably shocked to see that he looked so young.

I was shocked too... but not for the same reason as them.

I was shocked because I had known that he would be here — I had already seen him, though only through a screen.

“I am Dewey Percy. I am thirteen years old, but I have already graduated school and passed the Ministry’s exam,” said the boy with a hint of impertinence in his voice, looking exactly like the character I had seen in my dream.

Noooooooooooooo! This can’t be true! Did the sequel really start?! Was that dream a vision of the future?! I thought to myself in horror before

hearing the voice of Delius, the head of the department we had just visited.

“No, wait! Elizabeth, wait right there!”

I then felt my right shoulder get heavy. *What?!*

I looked at my shoulder, and perched there was a monkey that had escaped from a cage in the Biomagic lab, with the potted plant that Delius was talking about in its hands.



Monkeys now? Can't I get some rest? And isn't this plant supposed to be rare or something? What is even happening? I thought, but my confusion was cleared up soon enough.

"Elizabeth... it would be *really* bad if you yanked that out..." Delius said, moments before the monkey yanked the plant out of the pot.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEK!" I heard the pot above my shoulder scream. But it wasn't the pot... it was the plant inside it. Its root, now out of the soil, had a face on it, and this face looked like Munch's *Scream*.

I think I saw one of these in a movie once... what were they called... madeleines? So is being killed by a magic plant one of the Catastrophic Bad Ends in FL2? I despaired.

"Oh, sorry," Delius nonchalantly intervened. "You'll lose consciousness if they scream directly into your ear, but they're not dangerous."

Just lose consciousness? That's not so bad, I guess, was the last thing I thought before passing out.

The pink walls, the black table, the metal-frame bed with azure duvets and blue cushions... This was Acchan's bedroom...

Is it that dream again?!

"Hmm... I'm not making any progress," said Acchan... but her voice felt as if it came from my own mouth. My consciousness was inside of her body, just like last time. Once again, all that I could do was look on as she played *Fortune Lover II*.

"Maybe I'll check out the gallery..."

Tired from not being able to make any progress in the game, Acchan opened the gallery, a collection of still images from the best scenes in the game.

I used to do the same in my previous life.

In my first dream Acchan had just started playing the game. But once she opened the gallery, almost full with pictures, I saw that she had come quite a long way since then.

Being stared in the eye by Cyrus Lanchester, hugging Dewey Percy, being sensually pushed against a wall by Sora... they all were exciting pictures like these. *Oh, this is wonderful. I wish that were me.*

I was enjoying the gallery with Acchan when... *Uhm? What are they doing there?* My friends Mary and Sophia, who weren't supposed to be in the Magical Ministry, appeared in some of the pictures.

I could understand seeing Jeord and other love interests from the prequel coming back for *FL2*, as well as my father and other noblemen who had to go to the Ministry for work, becoming possible targets for the heroine to romance. But those two girls had no business at the Ministry... so what were they doing in those pictures?

Acchan reached down to get a drink, and, through her eyes, I saw *FL2*'s manual lying spread out, explaining that Mary and Sophia had come back in the sequel as either rivals or friends. That would explain why they appeared in the Ministry.

"Almost all the characters from the first game are in the sequel, now that I think about it," said Acchan, giving voice to what I was thinking myself.

Some games change most characters for their sequel, but in *Fortune Lover*, they just added a couple of new ones while keeping the old roster intact.

"Is that why Katarina's coming back again? Did they think that it would be unfair to leave only her out?" Acchan said to herself.

I wouldn't have minded being left out. Actually, I wish they had done exactly that. Why did they feel the need to bring me back? Hadn't I been the villainess for long enough in the original game?

"She really has too much screen time, though. She gives me trouble in pretty much every route..."

What?! In every route?! Please, Acchan, I need to know more about that!

"Do the game's staff like her that much?"

If they did, why would they give me all of these Catastrophic Bad Ends?! More importantly, I need to know where and when Katarina appears in the story!

"They gave her a really sad ending, though..."

Sad? What happens to Katarina? Does she get killed? Please, Acchan, just...

"...Let me know more!" I screamed, waking up in an unfamiliar place which wasn't either my home or the school dormitory.

Huh? I looked around me and saw my friends looking at me, perplexed.

"L-Lady Katarina, are you alright?" asked a nervous Sophia, who was next to me.

What is Sophia doing here? Where even am I?

Seeing how confused I was, Mary explained it to me.

"Lady Katarina, you lost consciousness after hearing the scream of the plant that the monkey pulled out of the soil, and you were brought to this infirmary," she said.

So this is the Magical Ministry's infirmary...

I now remembered how I'd passed out after that monkey yanked the plant out of its pot. *That stupid monkey... but now that I think about it, wasn't it all the department head's fault?*

"I remembered passing out, but why are you here?" I asked.

Sophia and Mary weren't employed at the Ministry. And as I looked around, I found that Jeord, Alan, Keith, and even Nicol were all there.

"I asked my father to let me help with menial tasks here at the Ministry. I think that this will teach me a lot about being an adult," said Sophia. Her father loved her so much that it didn't come as a surprise that he'd let her do whatever she wanted.

"I also threatened my father into letting me help here, along with Sophia," said Mary. *Did I just hear the word "threaten"? I must have misheard.*

"The two of us are here for similar reasons," said Keith.

Nicol nodded and added, "We will help with work at the Ministry, which will give us valuable experience."

"My brother and I, as royal family, will be performing research at the Ministry in the hope that it benefits our future studies," said Jeord.

"What he said," agreed Alan.

I'd thought that after graduating from the Academy, I wouldn't be able to see my friends anymore. However, be it for studying, gaining experience, or whatever else, they all ended up at the Ministry with me. That, of course, made me very happy... but it was exactly like the dream I just had.

It seemed that *Fortune Lover II* had really begun. What I saw wasn't a dream, but a vision of the real future. *Well, not really real, since it's a game, but...*

I thought about having to become the villainess once again, risking exile if not execution... and that was enough to make me dizzy. I held my head in my hands and gazed down in despair. Everyone got worried about me, and it was decided that I'd be going home for the day.

While I was on my way out, I was stopped by the woman employee from the Biomagic Research Department, who had dragged Delius and the monkey (not that I care, but its name was Elizabeth) to apologize to me.

"This is the first time I've seen the effects of that plant on a human, and they were stronger than I thought! How did it feel?" asked Delius, obviously not very sorry at all for what happened, enraging the woman next to him.

Of course, the monkey didn't show any remorse at all. While Delius was busy being scolded by his subordinate, it started eating the bananas that my friends had brought me to eat once I woke up.

I looked at this weird scene, suddenly scared about my future at the Ministry.

After arriving home, accompanied by Keith, I went to my room to rest by myself for a while. I needed to think about the events of that day. That dream turned out to be real, and all of my friends would be working at the Ministry...

I threw myself on the bed and sighed. *FL2 has already started, hasn't it? We met the new characters in a first encounter event...*

The fact that Maria, who was currently single, could find love at the Ministry

was a wonderful thing... except for the fact that it entailed Katarina coming back as villainess...

Why'd you come back after being exiled?! You idiot! Just enjoy your life as a peasant abroad, tending to the fields! I mentally got mad at the game's Katarina, but that just made me sadder.

After all this effort to overcome doom, here came new routes and new catastrophes. I have the worst luck. But I've survived all of this! I can't be defeated now! I have to think of something!

It's time for a Bad End Avoidance Strategy Meeting!

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

We shall henceforth start the meeting to discuss possible solutions to the new Bad Ends awaiting Katarina Claes.

“Does anyone have any suggestions?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Katarina Claes, please go ahead.”

“We could pretend to have a terrible stomachache and refuse to go to the Ministry until the end of the game.”

“That's a wonderful plan! But we are not a child anymore! We could never make that work. And we also don't know how long we should wait until the game is over.”

“...You have a point.”

“Could we not just avoid all of the love interests?”

“All of them? That's impossible!”

“We don't want to hinder our beloved Maria, do we? So would the Bad Ends be triggered anyway?”

“I believe so. After all, at the academy we didn't hinder or bully anyone, but

the ‘dining hall trial event’ was triggered anyway.”

“We cannot let our guard down.”

“And this time we don’t even know when and how doom will come.”

“Indeed. We don’t know which ends lead to death and which, if any, only to exile.”

“We have too little information! We haven’t even played the new game!”

“But how can we get more information? We can’t buy the game in this world...”

“We have to have that dream again. If we keep watching Acchan play the game, we’ll gather a lot of useful information!”

“That’s true!”

“You’re right!”

“Then it’s decided. We must have that dream again. The order for today is to sleep well.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

It was thus decided that I would sleep. I would just have to sleep and have that dream again.

Perfect! Sleepy time!

Why? I asked myself, with my head in my hands, two days after the entrance ceremony at the Ministry.

Having realized that *FL2* was going to take place at my workplace, and that it had new Catastrophic Bad Ends to bring with it, I had planned a new strategy to avoid them.

I would just need to sleep well and gather information in my dreams again... but no matter how much I slept, the dream I had in the castle and then in the

Ministry's infirmary didn't come back to me. I had just wasted a day of vacation by sleeping too much.

At least sleeping a lot meant that I felt full of energy and my skin looked shinier than usual, but I had made no progress in avoiding the Bad Ends.

Tomorrow I'll have to go to work at the Ministry... What can I do?

I bit into a cookie while despairing about my current situation. My friends and the servants had brought me snacks while I rested, probably worried that I was sleeping for so long. They were really delicious. I needed to ask them where they bought...

No time for that! What am I going to do now? Was that even a dream? Was it a vision sent to me by a merciful god to save me from danger?

I thought that I just needed to sleep, but that had obviously not been enough. Then I thought that maybe the problem was *where* I was sleeping, so I tried napping in the garden and in the dining room. Not only did that not work, but I also got scolded by Mother.

Ugh... What should I do?

I thought about it long and hard, but thinking had never been my forte. My brain's getting tired... so I'll take a break! I'll read the romance novel that Sophia lent me during the tea party at the castle the other day.

While coming back home, I had even insisted on bringing in the bag I'd put the book in myself, instead of letting my maid do it. However, I had been so shocked by my nightmare that I'd forgotten it at the castle, and in a hallway no less.

Thankfully, someone had found it and had given it to one of the castle's servants. They'd held onto it because nobody was able to tell who it belonged to, as it only contained sweets and books. I had actually forgotten about it for a while because of the shock of *FL2* and everything. Jeord then happened to look at the bag, realized that it was mine, and brought it back to me.

I was so relieved... I couldn't have forgiven myself if I'd lost a book lent to me by a friend. *Now that I have it back with me, I might as well read it*, I thought, and opened it.

This looked like an average romance novel involving a man and a woman. Lately Sophia was into more *particular* genres, such as romance between men — what we used to call “BL” in my previous world — and her recommendations would sometimes include those.

I used to be an otaku, but not a fujoshi... I couldn’t say I wasn’t interested in boy-on-boy romance *at all*, but it always felt like a dangerous rabbit hole to fall into...

Hey, this novel is so interesting. The hero is nice, and... huh? What is this?

A folded piece of paper fell out of the book. *Was Sophia using it as a bookmark?*

I took the piece of paper and casually unfolded it, revealing that it wasn’t blank, as I had first thought.

Fortune Lover II

A new tale of love at the Magical Ministry! The cast of characters from the original game have grown up and returned, standing alongside the new characters.

- The story:

The protagonist, a commoner girl who can use Light Magic, graduates from the Academy of Magic at the age of 17. She goes on to work at the Magical Ministry, the most important organization in the kingdom. There she will meet strict superiors, weird colleagues, and difficult work, all the while looking for love.

- The characters:

(Protagonist)

Maria Campbell: A lowborn girl and one of the few Light Magic users in the country. A positive, energetic person.

(New love interests)

Cyrus Lanchester: A strict and sober superior. Good at this job, but not so good at speaking to women. A very powerful magic user and Ministry executive.

Dewey Percey: A child prodigy who graduated from the Academy of Magic early by skipping grades, and is now working at the Ministry. He cannot use magic, and instead entered the Ministry on account of his knowledge. His family is very poor, and he learned most of what he knows by himself. A hardworking tsundere and a bit of an airhead.

Sora (orphan with no surname): Came to know Maria through a certain incident and is now staying at the Ministry. An orphan with a casual attitude and a Dark Magic user.

The old love interests are back along with the old rival characters, and befriending them or gaining their approval will be vital to progress through the game.

The main hurdle in finding success with the new love interests will be fighting a mysterious girl who has come to hinder the protagonist. It is later revealed that this girl is Katarina Claes, who was exiled from the kingdom in the previous game.

Katarina holds a grudge against the protagonist for having caused her exile, and she becomes a Dark Magic user to sneak back into the country and into the Ministry, looking for revenge against Maria.

In order to obtain the Happy End, the protagonist must overcome the threat of Katarina and reveal her identity to the authorities together with the love interests, resulting in the villainess being thrown in jail. Should the protagonist fail, Katarina and Maria will kill each other in a duel, and the love interests will fall prey to Dark Magic.

This... This is a report on Fortune Lover II!

Why is this inside the book?! And how come all routes lead to doom for Katarina once again?!

Jail with the Happy End and a double-death-duel with the Bad End... Give poor Katarina some rest! Do the developers hate her? If they liked her, they would never have her face all this pain!

At least in the prequel, exile was an option... Even now, if I were exiled, I could just get by with my trusty hoe! Why is there no exile in this game?! Bring back the exile! Exile forever!

But no matter how much I wailed about it, what wasn't in the game just wasn't in the game. *If I keep looking back at my past, I'll never go forward to my future! It said so in a manga I once read!*

I had to calm down and use the information at hand to avoid these new Catastrophic Bad Ends.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

With the new information at our disposal, we shall henceforth start another meeting to discuss possible solutions to the Bad Ends.

“Oh, come on! More doom?”

“And we can only choose between jail and death?!”

“...Please, everybody...”

“And Katarina’s involved in the storylines of all three new love interests! It’s even worse than before!”

“...Everybody, let’s calm d...”

“And *Dark Magic*?! Is it about Pochi? It must be about him! This is too scary!”

“Is that why he liked me so much? Was it all because of the game? What am I going to do?!”

“I SAID, CALM DOWN!”

“...Yes...”

“...Yes...”

“There’s no point in losing our cool here! Let’s get some good ideas out! Got it?”

“...Yes...”

“...Yes...”

“M-May I speak?”

“Yes, Katarina Claes, you may.”

“I suggest we research jail, and whether it is possible to escape from it.”

“Should we practice picking locks?”

“Would a year be enough for that? Wouldn’t it be better to find a way to get exiled?”

“That could be true. Maybe we should bribe some officials. We must prepare enough snacks for that.”

“Good idea. And what about fighting off the new love interests?”

“This time around we have no clue...”

“We could search for their weaknesses, like snakes are for Jeord.”

“Oh, that’s very good. We should spy on them.”

“It seems that we’ll be fighting with Dark Magic or something, so maybe we should teach Pochi some tricks? Not just playing fetch and stuff like that, more like growling to scare people off and such...”

“Yes, that sounds good. We should maybe start by teaching him how to sit.”

“Okay, so, to sum it all up... Lock picking for escaping jail. Trying to get exiled. Finding the weaknesses of the new characters. Teaching tricks to Pochi. Anything else?”

“I don’t think so. Well, we have a lot to work on!”

“We can do it!”

“Having something practical to work towards really gives you hope.”

“Very well. We may get busy with work at the Ministry, but let’s do our best and overcome doom!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

Hence finished the meeting of the Katarinas. It was already late at night. Relieved that I had found some practical solutions to work towards, I fell asleep.

I forgot to think about why that note on the game was in Sophia's book, and, despite having slept almost all day long, I fell into a deep and pleasant slumber.

Chapter 3: The Test and the Borrowing of Magical Tools

Feeling well-rested after a good night's sleep, I started preparing for work at the Ministry. I was so glad that I had found a plan to avoid doom! I could finally focus on doing my best as a working adult.

I would do my work as I was told, all while looking for the weaknesses of the new love interests and teaching new tricks to Pochi. *Go, Katarina, go! And thank you, mysterious book note!*

Everything was explained so clearly. The person who wrote it must have been really smart... *Hm, wait a second, who wrote it?*

The note was in the book I'd borrowed from Sophia, so was it her? Or was it Jeord, who returned the book to me? Or maybe it was the person who found my bag in the hallway...

But the game was something from my previous life, and nobody in this world was supposed to know about it. Yesterday I had been so happy about finding the information I was longing for that I hadn't paid any mind to it, but now, I realized just how mysterious it all was.

Why was it in the book? Who wrote it? I decided that I would start by asking Sophia, who gave me the book, and Jeord, who returned it to me after I lost it.

I put the note back in the book, the book in my bag, the bag on my shoulder, and I made for the Magical Ministry.

At the entrance, a notice posted on the bulletin board read "All newcomers must go to the auditorium where the entrance ceremony was held."

Are they going to announce which department each one of us will be going to? We had been guided through a tour of the Ministry, but we still didn't know anything about our assignments.

If possible, I wanted to avoid the Biomagic Research Department... The work looked hard, and I didn't want to pass out again. But that was supposed to be the *second* most disliked department. I wondered about the first. If people wanted to go there less than to the Biomagic Department, it must have been hell.

I entered the auditorium and found that most of the newcomers had already gathered in there. I was one of the last ones to enter, so I stood quite far from the podium. I tried looking for Maria and Sora, but they weren't there. As for my other friends, they were supposed to be at the Ministry, but they weren't newcomers *proper*, so maybe they wouldn't be there.

Hadn't those two come yet? Or were they all the way in the front? I tried moving towards the podium to look for them, and accidentally bumped into someone. I was looking forward and didn't see them at all.

"I'm sorry!" I apologized.

"No problem," they replied, turning to face me.

I had already seen that boy with orange hair and blue eyes. He was Dewey Percy, one of the new love interests in *FL2* that I had met during the tour the other day.

Up close, he really was dashingly handsome. All the girls into younger boys must have gone crazy about him while playing the game.

However, as soon as our eyes met, his beautiful face suddenly turned into a hateful expression.

He looked so peaceful until seeing me! Why is he looking at me as if I were his sworn enemy? I was supposed to antagonize him in the game, but in real life we just met!

Why? Why?!

While I was still shocked, Dewey turned away from me before walking off.

What just happened? Had I already angered him somehow, without even realizing it? If he started holding a grudge against me before I could find out his weakness, he would prove a formidable foe in the battle against doom.

I'll have to focus on teaching tricks to Pochi. For example I could teach him to warn me when an enemy comes close, giving me time to escape. And who could teach me how to pick locks, something that I absolutely needed to learn to get out of jail? Maybe Sora? I had to ask him, and then I could practice in my room at home. If I needed any tools, like a piece of wire or something, I'd just ask Grandpa Tom.

“Lady Katarina!” someone called out to me.

Surprised, I turned around and found Maria smiling at me. I also noticed that everyone was starting to walk out.

Huh? What happened here?

“We are in the same test group! I am so glad!” said Maria with a lovely smile, but I had no idea what was going on.

Test? Same test group?

“Er, you see, Maria, I actually don’t have the best grasp on the situation right now. Would you mind explaining it to me?”

She looked surprised at first, but then smiled again and kindly agreed, as expected of (my waifu) Maria.

As it turned out, one of the higher-ups had said that we would need to take an examination to decide what department we would be sent to.

I really didn’t hear any of that. Or maybe I just didn’t listen.

Each newcomer’s preferences were accounted for in choosing their department, but apparently, this test was performed every year to test their actual skills and make a final decision.

We were divided into test groups and had to complete some simple tasks. The names of those belonging to each group were just posted on a notice board near the front of the auditorium, and Maria and I had ended up in the same one. I felt lucky to be in the same group as my friend despite this huge number of people.

“I’m glad to be in the same group as you, too! How many other people will there be with us?” I asked Maria. Surely it wouldn’t just be the two of us.

“Actually I was so excited about being together with Lady Katarina that I forgot to check the names of the other members...” she said, blushing. She was so cute it was baffling. She was so excited that she just ran back here... I was so happy.

“Let’s go check together then!”

“Yes!”

We walked together to the front of the auditorium. Near “Maria Campbell” and “Katarina Claes,” the notice read “Sora Smith.”

“Sora Smith?”

“That would be me,” said the blue-eyed handsome boy behind me.

“I thought that’d be you! So your surname is ‘Smith’?”

I was sure that he was supposed not to have a surname, being an orphan and all.

“Ms. Larna just gave me a random surname to make sure I wouldn’t be asked any annoying questions here at the Ministry,” he explained casually.

Not having a surname would make him stand out, sure... but just using a surname given to him without any second thought was incredible. And Larna “randomly” giving her own to a subordinate was even more incredible. Not that I cared so much about my own surname, but still...

Anyway, since it was me, Maria, and Sora, I smiled happily. “We’re all already friends in this group! That’s a relief,” I said. I didn’t know what kind of task we’d have to perform, but doing it with my friends would certainly be easier.

“You are also friends with the fourth member?” Sora asked.

What?

I looked back at the notice, and sure enough, under “Maria Campbell,” “Katarina Claes,” and “Sora Smith,” there was a fourth name.

Dewey Percy.

That was the name of one of the love interests of *FL2*, specifically the one that had glared at me just a few minutes ago. Could the fact that we were in the

same group mean that this test was a scripted event in the game? Not that I could run away, either way.

Each group was instructed on where to wait for further orders, and I made my way there while fighting the fear of incoming doom.

Dewey was already there. He didn't give me the hate-stare this time, maybe because Maria and Sora were there as well, but he was clearly avoiding looking at me and I could feel the tension in the air. Maria, kind as always, tried to talk to Dewey — who was still keeping his distance — but it didn't go well.

This really made me nervous about how things would unfold. We were awkwardly waiting when someone called us from behind.

"Are you group number two?"

"Yes," we all replied in unison, turning around to look and... freezing in shock.

The person in front of us was very, very peculiar. Hip-length black hair, beautifully braided with big ribbons. A uniform customized much more than Cornish's, full of ribbons and frills, barely even resembling a uniform at all. Makeup thick enough to rival the garishness of the uniform. Eyes surrounded by glitter and with long, probably fake, eyelashes. Blood-red lipstick.

A look like that would have been shock-worthy on anybody... but it was even more shocking to see it on a man. A musclebound man with blue beard, at that.

I got the feeling that the Cornish and Norman had only been a warm-up to the craziness.

I just looked at him, unsure of what I should say.

"Hello! I will be watching over your test today. My name is Guy Henderson, but that's not cute enough, so I go by Laura. Please call me that!" he... she said, throwing her head to one side in a cutesy gesture.

She sounded and behaved like the epitome of girliness, but she looked like a middle-aged macho...

"And, together with me... Oh, he isn't here. Where did Nathan go?" said Henderson (I couldn't bring myself to call her Laura) before starting to look for someone.

Even newcomers from other test groups were staring at her... which was completely understandable. I looked at the examiners for other groups, but I saw no frilly uniforms nor crossdressing bodybuilders. *Did we just get the weird one again?*

"I'm here. Right here," said a feeble voice coming from somewhere near me, interrupting my thoughts.

I hadn't noticed that there was someone so close to me, so I let out a little shout of surprise.

"Nathan, you big dummy, always hiding yourself! Look, you scared one of the newcomers!" said Handerson, looking at a man that was her polar opposite.

S-Since when was he here? I never noticed him...

His uniform wasn't customized in any way, and he was wearing it neatly and properly. He was tall and had long bangs and large, thick glasses. That was all I could say about him. He was remarkably unremarkable.

"I wasn't hiding. The people around just don't notice me," he said with a frown before introducing himself to us. "I'm Nathan Hart. Together with Guy, I'll be your examiner for today," he said calmly.

What a normal person! I was overcome with relief. After seeing all those weird Ministry employees, meeting a person this undistinguished — if a bit hard to notice — was very refreshing. He slightly eased the bewilderment I'd felt from meeting Handerson.

However...

"Now we'll give you more details about the test, so follow me to the room that was assigned to your group," he said, and started walking.

Uh? Wait, where did he go? We lost sight of him a few moments after he moved towards the crowd.

"Ahh, we've lost him again, haven't we now?" said Handerson, who by contrast was someone who would be very hard to lose sight of. "He's a good boy, Nathan, but he's really easy to lose track of. And he also always gets lost..." she said, putting her hands to her cheeks.

I stared at her and her cute gesture, now sure that “normal colleagues” was not a benefit I would enjoy in this workplace.

A girly macho, a disappearing man, and a handsome boy who seemed to hate me for no reason. The path ahead of me was a thorny one...

Handerson led us to our destination, and Hart reappeared after a while, winded despite the short distance.

“I’m sorry! We couldn’t find you, so we thought we’d wait for you here,” said Handerson.

“Don’t worry, it happens all the time,” replied Hart, frowning. “I’m sorry myself.” He looked like a good — though a bit sorrowful — person.

“Okay, now we’ll explain today’s examination,” said Handerson after we were all together.

“The Ministry has a list of easy missions that even you little birds can be expected to complete. We chose one that we thought would be appropriate for you.”

“The four of you in group number two will have to cooperate to complete this mission, and we will examine your performance,” said Hart.

I was nervous, but it didn’t sound too difficult now that I had heard the details. That was a relief.

“And now, we’ll announce what the mission is,” Handerson said as he took out a piece of paper. “Some creatures have been appearing around a village and harassing its people. You’ll have to take care of that.”

Oh! It sounds just like a quest from an RPG! If it was enough for the Ministry to have to intervene, they couldn’t be your everyday creatures... They were probably the kind of animal that was researched in the Biomagic Department.

Could it be unicorns? No, unicorns wouldn’t harass villagers... Maybe it’s one of those plants, the... the things... the madeleines... I seriously hope it isn’t... I hate them...

What if it was a dragon?! That would be cool!

“By the way, what kind of creature is this?” I asked Hart, unable to contain my

curiosity.

“Tanuki,” he replied.

Hm? Did I hear that right? Did he really say “tanuki”? The brown little mammals that eat crops? No, that wouldn’t make any sense. This is the Magical Ministry.

“...What exactly is a tanuki?” I asked, thinking that maybe they were different creatures that just happened to be called the same thing as the “tanuki” back in my world.

“What? You’ve never seen a tanuki? They’re little brown animals that live in farming villages and ruin their crops...” explained Handerson, surprised.

...That’s a tanuki alright. Nothing magical or mysterious about it. Why does the Ministry have to deal with them? Couldn’t the villagers just set up traps or something? Why does the most powerful organization in the kingdom have to fight tanuki?!

“Excuse me, but... why does the Ministry have to take care of tanuki? Can the villagers not do it themselves?” said Dewey, taking the words out of my mouth.

Thank you. That’s a question I’m dying to hear answered.

Hart replied with a troubled expression. “They tried, but there were so many that they had to ask for our help.” He paused for a second and then went on speaking. “And also... a lot of newcomers have idealized, unrealistic ideas about what the work at the Ministry is. We often have to deal with things that are, well, underwhelming. The Ministry has a lot of branches and quite a few employees, so it has to perform all kinds of menial tasks.”

Menial tasks... I wasn’t exactly planning to become Ministry Employee of the Year of anything, but after hearing about how powerful of an organization it was, I had higher expectations than “menial tasks”...

Handerson, probably seeing how surprised I looked, tried to explain things further to calm me down. “But our mission today is one that we’ve specifically chosen to be easy! You see, none of you darlings have powerful offensive magic.”

Indeed, Maria only had Light Magic, which was a healing power, Sora had Fire Magic, but it was weak, I had to keep my Dark Familiar secret because he was a spawn of darkness and so I could only use my Dirt Bump, and Dewey didn't even have any magic at all. We all had our unique talents, but offensive magic was not one of them. That made the tanuki thing make a lot more sense.

"...How were the groups decided in the first place?" asked Dewey coldly. "Certainly not on the basis of magic ability balance, nor on age... So, what were the criteria?" he said before glancing at me.

"Members for each group were selected completely randomly. Why? Is there a problem?" replied Hart.

"...No, sir," said Dewey, looking like there were, in fact, a ton of problems.

For some reason, he looked mad at me. FL2's plot hadn't started yet, so we had barely interacted at all so far... I had to find out the reason behind his hatred for me.

"Now, let me give you some more details about today's mission," said Hart.

He explained that the village was in the country, near one of the peripheral branches of the Ministry. Given its location, that branch had to deal with a lot more trivial matters than the main branch in the capital. They would normally be able to solve the problem themselves, but they had their hands full with other tasks, and so they'd asked for the HQ to help.

The HQ, thinking that it would be a perfect test for the newcomers, accepted. I knew that starting out with a difficult mission would be problematic, but at the same time, I still felt disappointed.

"The task itself is not particularly challenging, but the location is rather far. If we left today, we probably would not arrive before night. We will leave tomorrow early in the morning, and we may have to stay there for a few nights, so make sure to be prepared," said Hart.

Oh, so it wasn't near enough that we could just go, get rid of a couple of tanuki, and come back. Staying the night someplace far away sounded fun, though!

After the explanation, Handerson stood up and smiled. "Since none of you

have strong offensive magic at your disposal, the higher-ups will lend you magical tools. Let's go to the Magical Tool Laboratory's warehouse."

Magical tools?! Now that's cool! And they would be helpful to compensate for our lack of offensive magic (even if we were up against... tanuki).

Hart and Henderson then guided us to the warehouse where the magical tools were stored. The first thing that jumped into my mind when I heard the term "magical tools" was the kind of things I'd read about in the books of my previous life: magic wands, cloaks that make you invisible, watches that let you travel through time... My excitement, however, vanished as soon as we entered the warehouse.

What is this... junk?

Before us was a collection of weird items, large and small, amassed randomly and covered in dust. Rather than a warehouse, it looked like a dump. All the others seemed as surprised as me while they looked at the junk— at the magical tools in front of them.

Again, Henderson sensed our shock and intervened. "We build a lot of tools at the Ministry, but not all prototypes turn out successfully, and a lot of them are stored here. But some of them *do* work."

...Doesn't that mean that most of them don't work? She just made the warehouse look even worse...

"Could you show us some of the tools as an example?" asked Maria tentatively, and Henderson picked up a small tool lying close to her.

"This allows you to communicate over long distances. It's still a prototype, but the results so far aren't half bad," she said proudly.

That sounded like a telephone. A marvelous tool indeed.

"That sounds wonderful. Can it be used from anywhere?" asked Maria, excited by the magic telephone.

"Well, not quite. You must be outside, and you must be standing on a place high up enough," explained Henderson, visibly frustrated by the question.

"High up...? How high, exactly?" asked Dewey, interested in spite of

Handerson's disappointed expression.

"The roof of a three-story building, I'd say. Since we're going to the country, that could be hard..."

There were some tall buildings here in the capital, but not many outside of it. The magic telephone suddenly didn't seem as useful.

"Then it would probably be useless for this mission. What other tools are there?" asked Dewey relentlessly. He looked like a cute little boy, but inside he was very cold...

"This is always cold, so it's perfect on hot days," said Handerson, giving Maria something that looked like a stone around as big as her palm.

"Oh, it's true! It really feels cold!" said Maria.

"It's only spring now, and it doesn't look like this would help on our mission," said Dewey, colder than any stone.

He had a point... It wasn't summer, and it probably wouldn't help against our (tanuki) foes.

Still not discouraged, Handerson went on to show us "the stone that is always warm," "the handkerchief that always has a light, pleasant scent," "the hand fan that cools you a lot just by waving it a little bit," "the bag where you can store food smells to retrieve them later," and more.

They all were interesting tools in their own right... but none of them looked particularly useful for our mission.

"We have lots of things here... mountains of them. But most of them are still prototypes, so we can't use them..." said Handerson, as if trying to defend herself. "Oh well," she said, now apparently fed up, "just take whatever you like. If you're lucky, it'll come in handy during the mission."

Way to give us all the responsibility.

It was then that I realized that Hart wasn't there. Actually, I realized that I didn't know whether he had even made it here with us. Did he get lost again while coming here? He was so easy to forget about that it was scary.

And now, with no advice from either Hart or Handerson to rely on, we all

started silently rummaging through the junk.

Hm... Just looking at the tools wasn't enough to tell what their function was. I found something that looked like a broom... I wonder what this does.

"Excuse me, Ms. Henderson, what kind of tool is this?"

"Oh, just call me Laura. That's an auto-cleaning broom."

"So it really is just a broom. But auto-cleaning sounds really useful."

"Yes, well, unfortunately it cannot recognize dirt, so it just sweeps left and right, and it usually just makes a bigger mess than before."

"..."

Can you even call it auto-cleaning then?

I kept showing Henderson tools and asking her what they were for, but none of them turned out to be particularly useful. They were interesting, yes, but I wouldn't bring them with me on a mission.

Dewey had already lost interest in searching and was sitting in a corner, reading a book. That boy had no regard for authority.

If the tools were smaller then I could at least bring a couple of them with me, but most of them were impractically big.

I must find something small and possibly useful... Oh? What's that? I saw something shiny on top of a pile of other tools. Could it be a magical girl's wand? If I have to get something useless, it might as well be something useless but cool-looking.

I got closer to inspect it, and it was... *A handheld mirror? No, wait, a magnifying glass?*

The small instrument (which, to be honest, wasn't very cool-looking) was a magnifying glass like the ones I had used as a child in my previous life, without even a decorative handle or anything. However, looking through it didn't make things appear bigger... yet another tool I had no idea what to use for.

"Ms. Hander— Ms. Laura, what is this one for?"

“Oh? Let me see, my dear.”

Maybe because I called her Laura, Handerson replied with a huge smile. It wouldn’t be easy, but I decided to just call her Laura from then on.

Laura took the tool and looked at it, puzzled. “The boss was researching this personally, so I’m not so sure, but... I think this thingie was supposed to glow in the dark...”

So it’s... a flashlight? I thought I had finally found something useful, but Laura said that it was barely enough to see right in front of where you held it... Again, useless.

I kept showing and asking, but I only found more useless stuff. I thought that not borrowing anything would be rude, though, so I took the magnifying glass that (barely) lit up and the bag where you could store food fragrances to (barely) smell them later. Maybe I would find myself hungry and in the dark at some point.

Maria and Sora also borrowed some tools, but Dewey — so ungrateful! — did not. We then went back home to prepare for the next morning, when we would meet at the Ministry to make for the village together.



“So, Laura, what do you think of the newcomers?” my superior asked me.

“They have all searched through the warehouse and picked out some tools to take. Dewey Percy just said that he didn’t need any though,” I told her.

“Hahaha! I know he looks cute, but inside he’s quite a cold boy,” she replied.

My superior, Larna Smith, was the head of the Magical Tool Department.

“I don’t want to sound like Dewey, but I think that anyone would have trouble choosing tools from that pile of old prototypes. Why did you not give them proper tools?” I asked her.

Our department had another warehouse where we stored actually useful, complete tools, but Larna instructed us to guide the newcomers to the old warehouse, which only contained prototypes and failed experiments. I trusted my boss to be cunning enough to have some plan in mind, but I was afraid that

the newcomers would think less of our department.

However, her reply was unexpected. “I wouldn’t want newbies to go and break our good tools. And they’ll also test our prototypes for us in the meantime.”

“I... see...” I had thought too deeply about it...

“And, by the way, there’s more than meets the eye in the old warehouse,” Larna said with a telling expression. “Some of those tools may be very useful in the hands of the right person.”

“The right person?” I repeated, dubious that there was anything more than junk, I mean *prototypes*, in that warehouse.

“Yes. For example, what did Maria Campbell choose?”

“She chose the... I think it was the ring that increases magic powers,” I said, and Larna’s eyes lit up as she smiled.

“Ohoho, she chose *that*? Even better than planned...”

“But if I remember correctly, that ring barely had any power at all... it was basically just a lucky charm.” *Which is why we keep it stored with all that other junk in the first place.* Surely Larna was aware of this.

“For normal people, or rather, for normal magic powers, it’s just a pretty accessory. But for some of them, it will probably prove incredibly powerful. We just stored it with all the prototypes because the magic powers it would react to were so rare that we never managed to test it.”

“By magic powers, do you mean...”

“Yes. Light Magic.”

Her words made a shiver run down my spine. Maria had unknowingly chosen the one item that would be useful to her out of all that useless junk...

“As expected of Maria Campbell, a girl chosen by destiny. This is so interesting... I really hope that she’ll come to our department.”

As a beautiful girl who, despite her lowborn origins, wielded Light Magic, many thought of her as a “chosen girl,” and what happened today made me

think that there could be some truth to that. She seemed to have something unique inside her. But...

"I don't think such a talented girl would come to our department," I said.

After all, we were just the Magical Tool Department. Maria excelled in both magic and academics, so it was unlikely that she would want to join us.

"And what did Sora and Katarina choose?" asked Larna, who seemingly had not even heard my pessimistic remark. She was a really good boss, but if I had to say anything negative about her, it was that once something caught her interest, she couldn't think about anything else.

She never changes...

"Sora took the staff that keeps magic fire burning for a little bit, and Katarina the bag that stores food smells."

"Wahaha! Really? Sora's fine, but Katarina's choice is just too funny!" she replied, laughing uncontrollably.

Well... I had to contain my laughter too when I saw what Katarina had chosen. One of my colleagues had actually built that when he was so overworked that he couldn't think straight anymore. Of course, having no real application, the bag was just thrown into the old warehouse.

And to think that Katarina would go and choose that, looking so satisfied about her choice... I was impressed that I had managed not to laugh.

"Ms. Claes seems nothing like the rumors make her out to be," I said, making Larna grin.

"By rumors, do you mean that she's a spoiled kid who just got into the Ministry through her connections?"

"Yes. Many people say that that is the case. But after meeting her today, I am not so sure."

"Oh? How did she seem to you?"

"She didn't seem spoiled or entitled... and, she didn't even look like a duke's daughter at all. She was really... peculiar," I said honestly, prompting another one of Larna's bouts of laughter.

Katarina Claes, daughter of Duke Claes and fiancée of Prince Jeord. Hearing that a person such as her would come to work at the Ministry had surprised everyone.

We all had our theories, but eventually we started believing that she just came here to mess around and kill time until her marriage, which obviously left us thinking of her in a bad light.

I cannot say that I thought highly of her, either... but after meeting her, I realized that the rumors didn't hold true at all. She was nothing like any other young noblewoman I'd met so far, and her weirdness had me laughing right from the start. I was actually looking forward to going on a mission with her.

The smell-bag was so funny that I'd almost forgotten, but she had taken another tool with her. "Now that I think about it, Katarina also took that other tool, the one that looks like a mirror and lights up."

Upon hearing this, Larna, who had been laughing all this time, suddenly turned serious. "You mean the one I built recently?"

"Yes, that one," I replied, slightly taken aback by her reaction.

"I was wondering where that went... So it was in that warehouse! And Katarina took it..."

Her expression now started worrying me, so I asked her, "Does it do anything other than just light up?"

"Well... for most people, no."

Apparently, just as the ring that Maria took, it only showed its true power to certain people who used it.

"Should I take it back from her?"

"If she's just taking it with her, it shouldn't be dangerous..."

She thought about it for a while and then kept talking.

"I have a bad feeling about that tool being chosen by Katarina... This mission may take longer than we originally expected. Should anything happen, contact me immediately, got it?" she told me gravely.

"Yes ma'am," I said with a nod.

If the rumors weren't true, then there had to be another explanation as to why Katarina was here at the Ministry. Something troubling enough to turn someone as carefree as Larna serious.

I thought that the examination would be extremely simple, and that there was absolutely no risk of anything dangerous happening... but it now seemed like I'd have to reconsider that.

I'll just work out before sleeping to put myself in the right mindset...

"And, by the way, where's Nathan?" asked Larna.

"Lost, as usual," I replied.

Nathan Hart, the colleague that would be performing the examination alongside me, was an incredibly talented and diligent man... but he was so inconspicuous that you'd forget about him as soon as he was out of sight, and he always ended up getting lost.

"I know that the examiners are chosen at random, but I wonder if it isn't dangerous to have Nathan on an outdoor mission... Maybe you should strap him onto a leash or something."

"...I know..."

Knowing that the mission I had to share with Nathan could turn out to be dangerous, I started to feel anxious about it.



I was excited at the thought that, tomorrow, I would be on my first mission — well, examination — for the Ministry. And since we would have to stay the night, I had to prepare properly. Clothing was easy, as I just needed my pajamas and uniform... but what else would I need?

Snacks for the trip to and from and the mission location, snacks to eat after lunch, snacks in case I got hungry at night... If I had all that, I figured I'd be fine. Oh, and the magic tools I borrowed, too.

"I'm going to ace that mission!" I shouted while standing on top of my bed.

"Please stop doing that, young miss. It is not befitting," said Anne, who was in the room with me and shooting me a cold stare. "Will she be alright by herself? I must ask Lady Maria to take care of her tomorrow..." she murmured to herself, sounding like a mother worried about her child's first school trip.

But I was an adult now. Usually Anne helped me pack up for trips (doing, arguably, most of the work for me), but this time I prepared myself. However, now she asked to take a look at my luggage.

"What are these snacks for?"

"To eat during the trip there."

"And what are these snacks for?"

"To eat after lunch."

"And these ones?"

"To eat at night if I get hungry."

"There are too many snacks. You do not need so many," she said, removing more than half of my provisions from my luggage.

Oh, my poor, poor snacks...

"There does not seem to be any comb or mirror in here."

"I figured I wouldn't need them."

"Young miss... you are an adult now. A lady. You are expected to take care of your appearance. Your mother has told you that time and again, has she not?"

"...Okay, I'll bring them..."

Going through my luggage, Anne took out and put in things as she saw fit, ending up doing, once again, most of the work for me. *Even after I tried to do it all myself...*

After we were done with my bags, the sun had already set. I was worried that I'd be so nervous about the next day's trip that I'd spend the night awake, but, maybe because I was so tired after my day at the Ministry, I fell asleep the second I lay on the bed.

Anne woke me up the next morning, and thus began the day of my first

mission.

Chapter 4: Fighting the Tanuki

The weather was perfect, making me feel optimistic about the examination.

Keith, who wouldn't be going to the Ministry today since he had to help Father with his work, came to the garden to greet me before I left.

"Be very careful, Big Sister," he said, for the hundredth time since yesterday.

"Don't worry. It's just like a little field trip to the country. There's nothing dangerous about it! You're too anxious, Keith."

"It's not that I'm too anxious, the problem is that you get yourself into trouble too often. Make sure not to go anywhere weird and not to talk to weird people. Even if they offer you snacks! Got it?"

I was slightly offended that he spoke to me as if I were a grade schooler, but I knew that talking back to him would just make the whole thing drag on longer, so I just agreed.

"Okay. I'll be careful," I told him.

I left the mansion (while Keith was still muttering "Be careful!"), and went to the Ministry. When I got there, the others on my team were already waiting. Sora looked aloof and carefree as usual, but Maria looked a bit nervous, and Dewey seemed to be as annoyed as he had been yesterday.

I greeted all of them, and then our (unique) examiners arrived on the scene.

"Are you all set, boys and girls? We're going to leave very soon!"

Handerson (Laura?) was acting like the friendly boy (girl?) hosting one of the children shows from my previous life. Her makeup was perfect despite it being this early in the morning, and her uniform looked different from yesterday, with new frills and ribbons. *How many does she own?*

For some reason she had a rope in her hand, and to the other end of the rope was tied... Nathan Hart.

What? Why are these two connected by a rope?! I asked myself.

Laura, seeing me staring, explained. “This is just so Nathan doesn’t get lost! We aren’t into any weird things!”

I wasn’t really thinking of that, but still... didn’t her get-up count as a weird thing to be into, according to her criteria?

Hart, by the way, just stood there silently with a sad look in his eyes. After seeing how easily he got lost yesterday, I agreed that we needed some measure to keep track of him, but... the rope tied around his waist just made him look like an oversized pet.

“Now let’s stop wasting time and go,” Laura said, guiding us to the carriage that had been prepared for us.

This carriage was much larger than the one we had used when going to rescue Keith. Maria, Dewey, Laura, Hart, and I could all ride comfortably on it. *Hm?*

“Wait, where’s Sora?” I asked, realizing that he wasn’t with us.

“Oh, he’ll be driving. We asked for a carriage, but we forgot to ask for a driver! Whoopsie! I wouldn’t know how to do it, and letting Nathan do it would risk us getting lost. Thankfully, Sora offered to do it,” Laura replied.

I later heard that yesterday evening, when the carriage had arrived, Laura realized that she had forgotten to ask the Ministry to prepare a driver for her. Since he just happened to be there at the right time, poor Sora could do nothing but offer to help.

The fact that she would forget the driver was surprising enough, but what surprised me the most was that she wasn’t able to drive a carriage. Apart from the makeup and clothing, she looked like the type who was good at that kind of thing...

And Hart would get lost even in a carriage? I thought while looking at the man who was lowering his head apologetically.

After waking up to such fine weather, I’d been feeling good about the mission. But now, seeing my examiners, I was having second thoughts. The carriage started moving, and I wasn’t feeling so safe anymore.

At first we were all silent (mostly because we didn't know what to talk about, given this unique crowd), but after a while, Laura started talking.

"Maria, you cutiepie, your skin looks so smooth. Do you use any special treatments?" she asked all of a sudden, going with a girly topic right off the bat.

Both Maria and I were a bit shocked, but my friend somehow managed to reply.

"No... nothing in particular."

"What?! That's not fair! I wish I could have that porcelain skin without putting any effort into it!" Laura said, pouting. Her mannerisms — and only those — were really cute.

Then again, the fact that Maria's skin was as beautiful as it was without any treatment was surprising to me too... *That's a game protagonist for you.*

Every day after I finished my bath, Anne would cover my face in lotions and creams (I certainly wouldn't do that myself). Because of that my skin wasn't half bad, though not as smooth and shiny as Maria's.

"Dewey, love, are you using something to make your hair so fluffy?" Laura asked, smiling at Dewey, whose face was as still as if carved in stone.

...Did she just call him "love"?

"I'm not using anything," he replied, but she didn't seem to be offended at the coldness of his reply, just pouting while shouting "That's not fair!" as she had with Maria, before finally looking at me.

Oh, first skin and then hair... What is she going to ask me about? Unfortunately I don't even know what kind of treatment I use on anything, since Anne's in charge of all that stuff. Or rather, Anne's forcing me to use all of that stuff. How am I even going to reply?

"Katarina, my dear..."

I should probably just tell her that I'll ask my maid when we're back home.

"...What kind of sweets do you like?"

"..."

That question was so unexpected that I froze still for a moment. After all my worrying, her question had nothing to do with cosmetics. *But wait a second, why am I the only one being asked about sweets? She even asked Dewey, who's a boy, about his hair... Don't leave me out of it, c'mon! Praise my hair, or my skin, or something! Of course those two are much prettier, but I am putting — Anne is putting so much effort into my looks! Why sweets?*

“...Sweets? Why would you ask that?” I asked, confused.

“Hm... You just look like someone who likes sweets,” she said, bending her head sideways. Again, her mannerisms — and only those — were really cute.

But what did that even mean? I did like sweets, that was true. I periodically checked the snacks that the servants at the mansion bought to make sure that they tasted good, I went around town to look for good bakeries, and I considered myself a connoisseur of all things sugary. Did all of that just... show from my face?

“Don’t you like sweets, honey?” she asked with yet another cute gesture.

“...I do like them...”

“Just as I thought! Do you have any recommendations?”

“Recommendations? Well... What type are we talking about?”

“Let’s see...”

And that is how our discussion of sweets, which went on for quite a while, began. I wasn’t that good at talking about romance or makeup or other similar things, but when it came to food, I could keep at it for hours. I knew everything from the luxury patisseries that served the royal family to the small mom-and-pop bakeries. We even talked about Maria’s homemade treats, involving her in the discussion as well.

“And those cream puffs, you know, the shells are so soft that...” I said, just before my stomach growled loudly... All this talking about delicious things had made me hungry.

Hearing my tummy’s embarrassing sound, Laura giggled and then suggested that we stop for lunch in the nearby town. I wholeheartedly agreed, and

noticed that I had been so enthralled in our conversation that I hadn't noticed how much time had passed.

I wasn't feeling anxious about the mission anymore, and even Maria no longer had the nervous expression she'd had at first. Dewey, however, looked as aloof as always.

Laura called out to Sora, who was driving the carriage, to tell him that we would stop for lunch.

Since we were so far away from the capital, the town that we stopped at was pretty small. But we were able to find a small tavern, probably family owned, which was just large enough to serve all of us. They only offered a few dishes, but they tasted good.

"Oh, this is so good!"

The bread was soft, the lettuce fresh, and the bacon crunchy. All of these textures, together, made for an incredibly tasty sandwich. I could go for another one... or two... or three...

I asked for seconds, and Dewey glared at me.

"Do you want one too? Here, take it," I offered, thinking that he was envious and wanted to try out one for himself.

"N-No, thank you. Lady Claes... you don't seem to disdain the cuisine of such places..." he murmured.

"What do you mean 'such places'? It's delicious!" I said, unsure of what he meant.

"I see..." he replied, taking his eyes away from me.

What was that all about?

I had spent almost half a day together with Dewey, and this was probably our first exchange. He looked like he hated me, and, if that was the level of conversations we were going to have, I would probably never find out the reason why. Well, he actually didn't speak with anyone else either...

Since I'd realized that he was one of the main characters in FL2, I wanted to

get friendlier with him so that I could get some useful information. But our eyes didn't meet for the remainder of the lunch.

I wanted to get another sandwich, but Sora and Maria stopped me because we were running late. The old man in charge of the restaurant noticed how sad this had made me, and wrapped up a sandwich for me to eat later, saying that he was happy to see me enjoy the food that he made that much.

I thanked him from the bottom of my heart and left, ready to go back to the carriage... when something happened.

"Let's get back on the road now," said Laura, and we started to follow her when suddenly she jolted in terror.

"Wh-What happened?!" I asked her.

She looked at me with her blue eyes and said, "...I forgot to hold onto the rope... I was holding onto it as we went into the restaurant, but..."

Her voice was filled with nothing less than desperation, and her hand, in fact, wasn't holding onto anything. We all tried looking around, but Hart wasn't there.

It was like one of those scenes in manga where everybody is so silent that you can hear the wind blowing... Laura, however, got her cool back, and started giving orders clearly and efficiently.

"He can't have gone that far. You two look over there, and you two over to that side. I'll go and retrace our steps. If we split up, we should find him in no time!"

We all did as we were told, but... why did she have to pair us like this?

A passing glance at my teammate's annoyed expression was enough to make me feel awkward. Laura had split us up depending on who was closer to what, so Maria ended up being paired with Sora and I with... Dewey.

Ugh... this is going to be so bad. I really hope we find him soon.

How did he manage to get lost after walking this little, and in a place with so few people around? I almost wanted to praise him for his talent at getting lost.

Is he trying to play hide-and-seek? If so, he could be hidden in some weird

place.

I tried opening the garbage can near the restaurant, but he wasn't in there.

"I... don't think he would be in a place like that," said Dewey, appalled, and I quickly put the lid back onto the garbage can.

We went back to searching for Hart, silently keeping to ourselves... But that wouldn't do. Even after finding our lost examiner, we would have to perform a mission together... and we certainly couldn't collaborate like this.

This was the perfect chance to find out why Dewey hated me so much!

"S-Say, Dewey..." I asked shortly before realizing that I hadn't thought about how to actually ask him at all.

"Is there, like, uhm, anything you hate about me?"

All I managed to do was straight out ask him what I wanted to know. *And if he replied "everything"? That'd be the end of it...*

While I regretted not having planned a better way to get information out of him before opening my mouth, he looked at me, bringing his eyebrows together in a visibly troubled look.

"That's..." He stopped for a second, then sighed loudly. "...I come from a destitute family, and I had to start working while I was still a child. I asked to be sent to a free school near my house, and I had to promise that I would keep working while doing that. I put my soul into my studies so that I could overcome poverty one day. My efforts were rewarded, and I graduated while skipping grades, eventually managing to reach a job in the most powerful organization in the kingdom — the Ministry."

Of course I already knew all of this from reading that mysterious note, but hearing it straight from the source made it sound all the more intense.

"Work was hard, and I barely had any time left to study during the day, so I would often do it at night instead of sleeping. But I wanted to escape that sad state, and I kept going without looking back... That is why I'm here at the Ministry... But what about you, Lady Claes? How did you get into the Ministry?" he asked me, his blue eyes flaming.

"W-Well, I..."

I got into the Ministry because I owned a Familiar of Darkness, but that was top-secret. And the reason why I accepted the job was that I was too scared to marry Jeord right now, and this seemed like a good way to delay the marriage... But after hearing Dewey's story, I could never tell him honestly. Now, I finally understood his feelings...

Dewey grinned at my lack of a reply. "Why would a duke's daughter, without any particular magical skill nor outstanding results in a test, ever work at the Ministry?" he said, choosing his words to be as mean as possible.

So that's why he hates me...

"I have come here to work using the best of my abilities," he said, and then started searching for Hart once again.

I have come here to work using the best of my abilities too, I thought... but I couldn't say it. After all, I had just chosen the Ministry as a place to run away to, and had managed to get in without any effort.

If I had shed blood and tears to get a job and then found someone there who wasn't diligent about what she did and who got her position without even trying, that'd make me mad too. I'd turn sour.

I was reborn into this world as the daughter of a duke, and enjoyed all the benefits that came with that (as well as the doom, but that's another story). Maybe that had made me too arrogant.

In my previous life I had been the daughter of an office worker dad and a part-time housewife mom, and I couldn't take money for granted. I remembered going to the convenience store near my house and seeing a rich kid buying the premium ice cream, while I had to settle for the cheapest ice pop...

But now, not only did I eat all the sweets that I wanted, even getting seconds, but I even asked my servants to tell me when the bakery had any new products. Maybe luxury had turned me arrogant... at this rate, I would fall into doom like the Katarina in *Fortune Lover*.

I reflected that I had never thought about the comfort that being reborn had

put me into. That was when Sora appeared, coming to tell us that they had found Hart.

After finding Hart, we went back onto the carriage and left for our destination. Laura kept talking to her fellow examiner, presumably scolding him for getting lost, but I was so shocked about what Dewey had said that I barely listened at all.

Maybe I really was spoiled and entitled... and that would explain why I still had to contend with the Catastrophic Bad Ends.

I tried to organize my thoughts in the only way I knew how: holding a meeting inside my head.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

“Huff... huff... P-Please, everyone, sit down.”

“Huff... No, Ms. Claes, wait, we’re still missing someone.”

“Huff... You’re right... We still aren’t ready.”

“I agree. This meeting was so sudden that we couldn’t prepare in time!”

“I also feel that there have been too many meetings lately. We’re busy people! We can’t just spend all our time in meetings. I’m afraid we can’t do this today. Meeting adjourned!”

And so, the meeting of the Katarinas ended prematurely...

“Wait! Ms. Claes! Please! That won’t do! Let’s have a meeting, even a short one! Ah, Ms. Secretary, where are you going?! This is important to all of us!”

“...You have a point. It’s a drag, but I guess we have to do it. Oh well, what was today’s agenda again? Deciding what to eat for dinner?”

“Not exactly... We must discuss whether or not Katarina Claes is really entitled and spoiled.”

“Hm... Lately she’s been eating sweets all day, eating even Keith’s share, and

even asking Maria to cook more for her... She does sound entitled."

"Indeed. And after graduating from the academy, she has been eating so much that Anne was complaining about her dresses getting too tight. We have to do something about this."

"A spoiled glutton... That's not how a young noblewoman should be."

"At this rate, she's risking a catastrophe regardless of the Bad Ends..."

"It cannot go on like this."

"We really have to do something."

"Mm... What if we ate less sweets?"

"Would that solve the problem?"

"I don't think so..."

"If Katarina is risking really becoming a villainess, she has to repent and mend her ways."

"Oh, that is a wonderful idea! But how?"

"I don't know."

"..."

"...I remember that our grandma in our previous life used to say something like 'When you don't know what you should do, concentrate on doing the things that you must do, one at a time. Eventually, you'll see the answer.'"

"Words of wisdom!"

"For the time being, let's do what Grandma suggested."

"It sounds really deep, so we might as well try it."

"So the first thing we must do is... get rid of the tanuki and finish this examination!"

"Yes. Let's concentrate on the tanuki for now."

"Yes."

"Yes."

The emergency meeting of the Katarinas thus agreed on a course of action.

“By the way, about that grandma... She was the one really into soap operas who was always talking about hot actors, right? Where would she find words of wisdom like those?”

“I think she heard it, in fact, from a hot actor in a soap opera.”

“...Let’s just not think too much about that.”

Just as the meeting finished, and we decided that we would focus on getting rid of the tanuki, the carriage reached its destination.

I was expecting the branch office of the Magical Ministry to be of a size worthy of its name, but it was hardly bigger than a large-ish shop back in the capital. Inside, old men and women were sitting together at a table enjoying tea. This probably doubled as a meeting place for the elderly...

“Oh? Y’all don’t look familiar. Where’s y’all from?” one of them asked us.

“Hello. We have been sent here from the capital,” Laura replied for all of us.

“They make ‘em different back in the capital! Look at how sparkly that fella is!” commented one of them.

To these old country folks, a buff man covered in makeup and wearing a frilly skirt was just “how people are in the capital...”

The atmosphere here reminded me pleasantly of my previous life. I was enjoying the sight of these men and women leisurely drinking tea inside the Ministry when a man who looked like an actual employee noticed us. He stood up from his seat and froze with shock as soon as he saw Laura, probably knowing that was not “how people are in the capital.”

However, showing the composure expected of a Ministry employee, he eventually got his cool back and welcomed us.

“That must have been a long trip! Thank you for coming all the way here,” he said before showing us some free seats and serving us tea, along with some sort of berries. “These are a local specialty. Help yourself.” He sounded like a kind person.

“Oh, thank you,” I said, eating one. *Unfortunately I don’t know what kind, but, yup. It’s a berry alright.*

We ate berries silently for a while, and then the man in charge of this Ministry branch walked into the room.

After taking a look at Laura, being surprised, and quickly regaining his cool, this middle-aged man — with a plump face that just screamed “nice person” — greeted us with the same exact words as his subordinate.

“That must have been a long trip! Thank you for coming all the way here!” After hearing about the examination from Laura and Hart, the man nodded with a smile. “Yes, headquarters contacted me about it. Thank you for helping us out.”

Hart then asked him to elaborate on the situation.

“We usually just set traps all over the place, and that is enough... but this year there are just too many of them,” he said with a sigh.

“Just how many?”

“Around three times as much as an average year. It’s probably because of what happened to the forest.”

“The forest where the tanuki used to live?”

“Yes. Someone from outside the village went into the forest, maybe to hunt or something, and made a mess out of it. So now the tanukis have all run out of it and into the fields. It’s not the first time this happens, mind you, but this year it’s so bad that we had to send people into the forest to fix it up.”

He explained to us that, during this time of the year, the villagers relied on what they gathered from the forest more than on what they could harvest from the fields. Since the village’s well-being depended on the forest, they had to prioritize that.

“So your people are busy there, and you cannot get rid of the tanuki yourselves.”

“Exactly. Which is why we asked headquarters for support,” he said with a tired expression on his face. The situation must have been worse than we

imagined.

“Do you know who that outsider could be?”

“Unfortunately, we have no idea. All we can do is get the forest back to normal as soon as we can.”

“I see...”

After we had heard the explanation, the younger employee guided us to the fields that had been ravaged by the tanuki.

As someone who tended to fields myself, I should have been impressed at how large the one in front of me was, but...

“This is terrible...” I blurted out.

“Yes it is. All the farmers are distraught about it,” the Ministry employee said sadly.

The field was extensive, but all of its produce had been either ripped or bitten into, leaving nothing to be harvested. All the neatly aligned ridges were full of holes, probably made by the tanuki’s feet.

“They have tried putting sturdy nets over the plants, patrolling the fields at night, and all other sorts of countermeasures, but there are so many of those pests that it is a lost cause...” he explained, looking distraught.

I remembered that Grandma, in my previous life, used to put nets on the plants too... was that to keep the tanuki away? She had vehemently insisted that I didn’t help her (because I’d make the plants wilt), so I never noticed...

I had built fields both in Claes Manor’s and in the academy’s gardens, but there were no tanuki there, so I didn’t need to take any special measures.

I should probably use this as a learning experience in case I’m eventually exiled and have to live as a farmer.

The field in front of me looked terrible, but the culprits didn’t seem to be around.

“There are no tanuki anywhere, though.”

“Yes. They mostly come at night.”

Oh, of course. They’re nocturnal animals.

“Now that we have seen what they have caused, let’s come back at night to see how many of them there are,” said Hart after assessing the field’s condition. “For the time being, let’s go to our lodgings and discuss strategies,” he continued, and we did as he said.

The village was too small to have an inn, so we were all going to stay at the village chief’s house. Obviously it was much smaller than the manor I was used to, but the small countryside building felt cozy and nostalgic to me.

There were enough rooms for the men and women to sleep apart, so Hart, Sora, and Dewey were in a room, Maria and I were in another, and Laura was alone, in yet another room. The village chief’s wife probably couldn’t tell Laura’s gender, so she put her in a different room to not risk offending her.

I felt sorry that we were imposing so much and taking up three whole rooms, but to be honest, I didn’t think I’d be able to relax sleeping in the same room as Laura, and not only because she was my superior.

After bringing our luggage to our bedrooms, we all gathered in the living room to discuss the mission.

“Now you will all put your heads together and decide how to get rid of the tanuki. The two of us will only be observing, and will not intervene unless the situation becomes dangerous. You will need to plan for the mission and put that plan into action, all by yourselves... And Guy, we’re indoors, you don’t need to keep me tied to a rope...” said Hart, first talking to us and then to Laura, who was still holding tightly onto the rope tied to his waist.

“But I wouldn’t want you getting lost...”

“I am not going to get lost inside a stranger’s home...” he said, and was finally freed from the rope. “Now, discuss your plans,” he continued, and, together with Laura, started silently staring at us.

As the examiners had so obviously removed themselves from the meeting, we examinees turned to each other.

The only solution I had come up with was to trap the tanuki in cages and bring them back to the forest, but after seeing the scale of the damage they'd done in that field, I was sure that we weren't talking about just a couple of animals here...

"I think that all we can do is make a lot of traps and try to catch them," said Sora, the oldest in the group.

"I was thinking the exact same thing," I quickly agreed, since his idea was pretty much the same as mine.

"The damage on the field hints at a very large number of tanuki. I do not think it would be feasible to make that many traps," Dewey said coldly.

He had a point; if each trap could only catch one animal, we would need *a lot* of traps.

"What if we built traps that can catch multiple tanuki at once?" I suggested.

"And how would you do that? Do you have a specific schematic in mind?" he replied quickly, staring at me sideways and making me retreat in shame.

"So, do you have any ideas, Percy?" Sora asked him.

"We could just spread some trap-feed," he replied calmly.

"Trap-feed?"

"Yes. Tanuki feed with delayed-onset poison in it. If the poison acted immediately, the one who ate the feed would die on the spot, and the others would realize that it was a trap. But if the poison only kills them after a certain amount of time, they could even bring that feed back to their den, effectively killing all of them at once," he explained nonchalantly, as if it were nothing.

"That sounds too extreme... and the poison could also be dangerous for humans and cattle," said Sora.

"Then we would just need to use a poison that poses little harm to humans and inform all farmers of our plan, giving them an antidote in case their cattle accidentally eat the poison," Dewey replied without a second thought. He probably had it all planned from the start. "I believe that this is the fastest solution."

I couldn't deny that this would probably be fast, but...

"...But the tanuki came into the village because their habitat in the forest was compromised, right? It was humans who chased them out of their home... I don't think they deserve being poisoned and killed," I said, feeling compassion for the poor animals, but Dewey looked at me with contempt.

"So are you suggesting that we catch them one by one and bring them back to the forest? Do you have any idea how much time that would take? This is not the time to feel mercy for animals. Kindness cannot solve all of your problems, much less the problems of this village."

He was right that I had no better suggestions, and I couldn't argue with his point. I was clenching my fist, unable to reply.

"Percy, you don't need to put it so strongly..." said Sora.

"I also believe that poison is too dangerous to justify using it from the start," Maria followed. Her voice wasn't loud, but it sounded calm and fearless.

"May I hear your suggestion then, Miss Campbell?" Dewey replied immediately.

"I do not have any practical ideas yet, but if we go to look at the field tonight, we will come up with something. There is no need to risk a dangerous solution so early," she said, looking straight into Dewey's eyes with the powerful stance of someone who would not retreat.

He remained silent, probably because he was so impressed by the strength of her words.

In the end, our meeting didn't result in any actionable plan, but we decided that we would discuss our options again after checking the fields.

We all went to our rooms to wait until night time, and I went into mine together with Maria. I started thinking about what Dewey had told me about kindness not being enough to solve all problems. He was right... but I didn't want to poison those poor animals.

"I'm sorry, Lady Katarina," said Maria all of a sudden, lowering her head.

“Huh? What’s the matter, Maria?”

“Earlier, with Dewey. I am sorry he was so rude to you.”

“Well, that’s... Why would you apologize for him, anyway?”

“You see, Dewey and I grew up in the same town,” she said with a slightly troubled expression.

I didn’t know that! There was no mention of this surprising fact in the game itself or in the note I found in the book.

“Are you two childhood friends or something?”

The good old trope of falling in love with a childhood friend was very common in otome games, so that would have made sense. It wasn’t in FL, but maybe they used it for FL2. They didn’t really look like friends, but now that I thought of it in this light, I realized that Maria trying so hard to talk with Dewey wasn’t just because of her kindness — it was because she wanted to talk with her friend after being apart for so long. He didn’t really seem to be responsive to that, though.

“No, we lived in the same town, but our houses were quite far from each other. And he is much younger than me to begin with, so we did not know each other so well.”

We were 18 years old and Dewey was 13, making for a 5-year difference. For children that is very substantial, especially if they don’t live close by.

“...But I remember seeing how hard-working of a boy he was... I believe he used to have a warmer personality, but he had to go through so much adversity all on his own that he gradually became aloof, and now he treats everyone coldly,” Maria recalled sadly. Apparently that note hadn’t detailed all the hardships that Dewey had to go through.

This all started to sound like an otome game. Two childhood friends (well, she said that they weren’t, but still), one of which is a boy who goes through a lot of difficulties and slowly turns cold. The girl worries about him and eventually falls in love with him... *No! This can’t be! Maria, my waifu, taken by another man?!*

But she was the protagonist of a romance game after all, so I had to expect

that she would fall in love with someone...

Maria, unaware of how much I was worrying about her being stolen from me now, kept on talking. “To me he’s more than a stranger... I also know how hard it is, having to fight on your own for so long...”

D-Did she really fall for Dewey already?!

“So, Maria, do you... What do you think of him?”

Don’t tell me you love him!

“I... really want him to open up his heart and learn how to rely on people more.”

Phew... This isn’t love, at least not yet. She’s just worried about him.

“Don’t worry, Maria. I’m sure that you’ll be able to help him. You’re the kindest, most wonderful girl I know,” I said, taking her hand in mine.

“Lady Katarina... I am so happy to have come to know you. I love you,” she said, slightly blushing after being complimented, and with her voice full of gratitude.

Having a girl this pretty blush while telling me that she “loves” me made me feel... weird. I knew that she was talking about love between two friends, but if I were a man, I would have gone crazy.

I was reflecting on that when, all of a sudden, something hit my head from behind.

“Wh-What?!”

Bewildered, I protected my head with my hands and looked around. Just beside me, there was a pillow.

It must have been this pillow... but why? Did it just fly into my head?

I was very confused, and I also started feeling someone staring at me. I turned around and saw...

“Why is this bear here?!”

Maria followed my gaze and noticed who was behind me. “You’re here? I told you to wait at home!” she said, surprised.

It was the magic (sentient) teddy bear that used to ride on Maria's shoulder all the time back at the academy. Larna lent it to us, and it helped us find Keith when he was kidnapped. It was during that journey that it became attached to Maria and started following her around everywhere. It didn't come with her to the Ministry, so it had been a while since I'd last seen it.

Pochi, hearing my surprised voice, came out of my shadow for just a second, looked at the magic plushie that had caused me to scream, and then, unimpressed, went back into hiding. He probably wasn't interested in bears.

"You can't just follow me like this!" Maria said, and the teddy bear looked sad at being scolded... However, when its eyes met mine, if only for a moment, I could tell that its sad expression had turned into a mocking one.

It's not really feeling bad about being scolded... and it's trying to make a fool out of me, as usual.

"I am sorry, Lady Katarina. He sneaked in my bag and followed me because he was lonely," Maria said.

"Don't worry, Maria, it's okay," I said with the kindest smile I could muster, just before giving a "try anything funny and you'll regret it" look at the bear.

The bear, in response, sent me a "right back at you" look.

You cheeky bear...

Our two-girl room was now a two-girl-one-animal room... well, two-animal if we counted Pochi, who was still hiding inside my shadow.

Maria and I decided to lie down on our beds for a while, since we would have to go out to the fields during the night.

The bear smoothly sneaked into Maria's bed, and, as she patted its head, it looked at me as if to say "Envious, are you?"

You awful bear...

I briefly considered calling out Pochi to annoy the bear, but that would have kept Maria from getting any rest, so I decided against it. I started thinking of ways to get back at that dreadful animal, and, before I knew it, I was completely asleep.

Later, Maria woke me up and said that it was time. I prepared in a hurry and went to the living room, where the others were waiting. Maria told the bear to stay in her room because it was dangerous outside, and it reluctantly obeyed.

“You’re going to wait here alone,” I taunted it, and immediately another pillow came flying my way.

You vicious bear...

I had to admit that throwing a pillow with those tiny arms was impressive, though.

Sora, Dewey, Hart, and Laura were already in the living room, ready to go. They were all wearing their uniforms except for Laura, who was wearing something that looked like a nightdress. Was she planning to wear something different each time we saw her? That would explain why she had brought so much luggage with her...

We made for the Ministry branch office, and since getting lost at night would be even more dangerous than during the day, Hart was now tied to two ropes.

Once there, a Ministry employee guided us to the field we had visited earlier. We had a lantern, but the dark road was making me feel uneasy, so I tried taking out the magnifying glass that I had borrowed from the Ministry. Just as I was told, its light was so feeble that it was completely useless, so I put it back into my pocket. I kept walking on the dark road, thinking of how convenient having a flashlight from my old world would be right now.

We finally reached the field, and we froze in our tracks... because what was in front of us was too shocking to keep on walking.

“Wh-What?!”

Hours earlier, the only things on the field were a few farmers. Now there were so many animals — not only tanuki, but also rabbits, foxes, squirrels, and more — rummaging through it. The field was so crowded that we couldn’t even take a step onto it.

The animals didn’t approach us. Naturally, being wild animals, they were wary of people. I got the feeling that getting any closer to them could be dangerous.

“W-Were they not supposed to just be tanuki?!” said a visibly shaken Hart to the Ministry employee.

“Y-Yes... Even last night, there were only tanuki...” he replied, shaken as well.

“I wonder what could have caused this to happen in a single day,” said Laura suspiciously. “Did something happen in the forest?”

“We checked it today, in the afternoon, and nothing had changed...” the employee replied.

“Something could still have happened between when you checked and now. We should go and check it,” Laura said.

“That is far from advisable. The forest is too dangerous at night,” the employee replied, shaking his head.

“Umm... Then all we can do is retreat for the time being and go check on the forest tomorrow. There are way too many animals for this to be normal. What do you say, Nathan?”

“I agree. It could be dangerous if we let the newcomers deal with things as they are. Let us get some rest for the night and investigate once the sun rises.”

“Yes, let’s get back before we stumble upon a dangerous animal,” said Laura, prompting us to start walking.

After a few steps, I felt a weird chill run down my spine. Immediately after, I heard Pochi growl from inside my shadow.

“Pochi, quiet,” I said under my breath, and he stopped. I was supposed to keep his existence a secret, and he had almost risked being found out.

“Anything the matter?” asked Hart, who had heard me, but thankfully not Pochi.

“N-No, nothing.”

I was so busy thinking about Pochi and worrying that he would growl again that I completely forgot about that chill from earlier, and I didn’t even notice that there was something wrong with Maria, who was walking right beside me.

We walked faster coming back from the field than when we’d headed

towards it, so we quickly reached the village chief's house.

"Everyone, go back to your rooms and sleep. We will go look at the forest tomorrow," Hart said, and we all made for our beds.

"Hahhh, I'm so tired," I said, feeling this hard day of work taking its toll on me as I spread out onto the bed. "It turned out to be more problematic than we expected, huh?" I said to Maria, who was sitting on the bed on the opposite side of the room.

"...Yes," she replied with a weak voice that was very unlike her.

I turned around to look at her. Even in the poor lighting, I could tell that her face was unnaturally pale.

"Maria! What's wrong? Are you okay?" I asked her, sitting up and seeing that the bear was already by her side, looking at me as if to say "How could you take so long to notice?"

Her hand felt cold to the touch. We had been walking side by side all the way from the field, but I hadn't noticed how sick she looked.

"...I am fine," she said, with a voice so feeble that it was obvious that she wasn't fine at all.

"Should I call for Laura or Hart to get you some medicine?" I suggested, sure that the examiners would have something ready in case anything happened to us.

"Thank you... But I am fine, really," she said, stopping me.

"But..."

"I am just not used to the air around here... I am sure that I will get better if I just sit still for a while."

"What? The air?"

"Yes... The air around here feels... strange."

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean, but this wasn't the best time to shower her with questions, so I just made her some hot tea and started

rubbing her back.

After a while, color started coming back to her face and her hands warmed up. "Thank you. I am feeling better now," she said with her usual smile.

"You said the air feels strange... what did you mean by that?"

"I cannot explain it well... It just feels heavy, like it did inside the mansion where Master Keith had been kidnapped."

That mansion had felt weird because a Familiar of Darkness had been summoned inside it, so that made me think of something.

"Are you saying that someone's using Dark Magic around here?"

"...I cannot tell for sure. Sora looked unfazed..."

Sora, who had become somewhat of a Dark Magic user, was also able to sense it just like Maria could thanks to her Light Magic. But he didn't look troubled and, if he was, he didn't say anything. And he wasn't the type to hide something like that from us.

"...I will try to confirm it tomorrow. For now, I cannot say."

"Don't push yourself too hard, Maria."

Of course, if Dark Magic really had anything to do with this, it would be a serious matter, but... Maria looked so pale just minutes ago...

"I don't want you trying too hard and feeling sick again. We're all here for you, so you can rely on us," I told her, holding onto her warm hand.

Maria, like a stereotypical otome game protagonist, tended to shoulder all of her problems by herself. But she was my friend, and I didn't want to see her suffer.

"Just rely on us, okay?"

I wasn't exactly proud of it, but I relied on people all the time. Anne helped me get up and dressed, and she had even prepared my luggage for this trip.

Seeming moved by the strength of my words, Maria nodded. The color had returned to her face, so much so that her cheeks were starting to look red. That must have been because of the hot tea. I was glad that she felt better.

“Now let’s sleep. We have to rest before tomorrow,” I said, standing up from her bed to get back to mine, when I felt something lightly tapping my butt. It was the bear.

I looked at it, curious why it’d do that, but it just looked away. *What was that?*

I made sure that Maria had gone to sleep, and then I did the same. By that point I was so tired that I fell asleep the second I touched the bed.

I was dreaming of being at an all-you-can-eat sweets buffet. I kept stuffing my mouth with food, but, no matter how much I ate, more appeared. I was happy at first, but there was so much that I could never eat all of it, and I started getting nervous.

The sweets kept increasing and increasing until the whole room was completely full of them, and I started suffocating amidst a sea of marshmallows. The marshmallows were hitting my face one after the other...

Stop! I can’t breathe! I thought right before waking up and seeing a soft round thing hitting my face. Upon closer inspection, I realized that Maria’s bear was standing on top of me and hitting me with its squishy little arm.

So that’s why I was being hit by marshmallows in my dream...

Outside the window the sun was starting to rise, meaning that it was way too early to get up. *Why would you wake me up, you heinous—*

The bear was pointing at the bed on the other side of the room, where Maria was supposed to be sleeping. I say “supposed to be” because her bed was empty.

Where had she gone at this hour of the morning? I looked at the bear for answers, but it shook its head. It had probably just noticed Maria’s absence and woken me up immediately after.

Normally I would just shrug it off, thinking that she’d gone to the bathroom or something. But after seeing how she looked yesterday I was worried that she could have felt sick on her way there, so I went to look for her.

The bear jumped onto my shoulder, something that it’d never normally do... *It*

must be worried about Maria. Okay, you can ride on my shoulder. But just this once, okay?

I tried going to the bathroom, but Maria wasn't there. *Where is she? Maybe she passed out somewhere! But where?* I was looking around for ideas, and my eyes met the bear's. It moved its arm to tell me where to go.

Why is the bear giving me orders now?! I thought for a second, but then I remembered that this insufferable bear was actually a wonderful magical tool made to search for people. The "insufferable" was so strong in my memory that I had forgotten about the "wonderful" part.

"Okay, just tell me where to go," I said as I moved in the direction that it was pointing at.

It brought me outside of the house, behind it, and to a tree near the garden. Under that tree, sure enough, was Maria.

"Mar—"

I almost called out to her, but I stopped when I saw that there was someone else standing beside her... Dewey. The two of them were staring at each other with deep, serious expressions. It wasn't the kind of meeting that you could barge into screaming "G'morning, buddies!"

I was trying to stop the bear from running to Maria when I heard someone's voice behind me.

"What's going on?"

I turned around, and Sora was standing there, watchful.

"S-Sora! Why are you here?" I asked him.

"I should ask you the same thing. What are you doing up so early?"

I explained why I had woken up so early (or rather, why I had been *woken up* so early) and had gone looking for Maria.

"I see... Well, you found her. Why don't you go and talk to her?" he said.

"Th-They look so serious! I can't just go in between them like that..."

They were still looking at each other and apparently discussing something,

but they were so far away that I couldn't hear what they said.

"Do you want to know what they're talking about?" asked Sora.

"Yes," I told him honestly.

Sora took something out of his pocket and put it against my ear.

"So, what is it?" I clearly heard Dewey saying.

I looked at the thing on my ear, surprised, and I saw that it looked like a megaphone. *This thing is probably the reason why I can hear their conversation from this far away... but what is it?*

Sora was grinning like a kid when he moved it away from my ear and asked me, "So? Did it work?"

"Yes, I could hear everything... What is this?"

"It's a magical tool that lets you hear sounds from afar. It only works if you're close enough to see what's going on, though."

"Was this in the warehouse?"

It would have surprised me if this useful tool had been amongst all of that junk, and I didn't remember Sora bringing anything like this out.

"Oh no, a colleague from my department lent it to me after I asked for something better than all that useless stuff in the warehouse," Sora explained casually.

I wish I could get better tools too, but I'd never have the courage to outright ask a colleague for something like that...

"I thought this could come in handy for the mission, but who knew it'd make itself useful at a time like this? You want to listen to them, right? Go ahead," he said before handing me the megaphone, completely oblivious to how shocked I was at his brashness towards colleagues.

Anyway, I really wanted to listen, so I gratefully accepted the megaphone and put the small end on my ear, pointing the wide end towards Maria and Dewey.

"I just thought that you were being too hard on yourself, Dewey."

"What would you know about that? You barely even know me! Leave me

alone!" Dewey's voice had lost any hint of calmness.

Their conversation sounded like something straight out of an otome game. Was this a scripted scene with Dewey? Was this when they're supposed to fall in love with each other?

"What do you think of this?" I asked Sora, but he just gave a blank stare in return.

Oh, that's right. He can't hear them. I have to do something about that...

I grabbed Sora and pulled him so that his face was right in front of mine. "Can you hear too now?"

"...I can, but being this close is kind of..."

"*Shhh!* This is where it gets good! Listen!"



Sora and I went on listening while facing each other.

“...I was just like you...” Maria said.

I sneaked a sideways glance at her and saw that her head was drooping.

“I thought that I had to do everything on my own... I can’t leave you alone, Dewey, because you’re just like what I used to be.”

Spoken like a true otome game protagonist... Add the slightly teary eyes she sometimes shows and you’ve got yourself enough to make anyone, including Dewey, fall in love...

As expected, Dewey, who had been so motivated to contradict her, just fell silent at her words.

“You don’t have to do this alone. You can rely on us,” she said, grabbing his hand.

We weren’t close enough to see his expression, but I could tell well enough that Dewey’s cheeks had turned red.

He’s fallen for her. O, Maria, you incredible heroine! Best waifu!

I had to share my excitement with someone.

“Geheheh, we just witnessed the very moment someone fell in love! Maria really can’t help it, huh?” I said, looking at Sora.

He didn’t seem to agree, and instead looked perplexed.

“...Coming from you, that’s... Nevermind. Can you let me go now? This is starting to get hard to bear.”

“Oh, sorry. Did it hurt?”

I noticed that I’d been so thrilled that I had grabbed onto his shoulder, and was still holding onto it very firmly. So rude of me.

“It’s not that it *hurts*, but...”

“Look, they’re coming back! Let’s go back before they see that we’ve been snooping!”

I ran towards the house while pulling Sora with me.

"By the way, why were you out there?" I asked him.

"I had just woken up and was going to the bathroom, but then I saw you walking around alone and followed you."

"Oh, I see."

This explained why his timing had been that perfect... He was following me. But then, this meant that...

"Did you follow me because you were worried about me?"

"Well... I... was worried that you'd cause some other trouble, y'know," he said, stumbling for words.

I was still grateful though. Say I went out alone and got lost... I could never make it back alone.

"Thank you, Sora. You're so kind," I told him, and for some reason that made him freeze still for a while before letting out a big sigh.

"Maria may be oblivious, but you're on another level... No wonder the prince worries so much."

"Huh?"

Maria? The prince? What's he talking about? I asked him for an explanation, but he just grinned and told me to go rest in my room before the mission.

I went back to my room and thought about whether I should ask Maria about Dewey when she came back.

That was one romantic scene, though... My heart throbs just thinking back at it! The teary Maria and the blushing Dewey, staring at each other against the rising sun... It really looked like a picture from an otome game... Hm? What's this feeling of déjà-vu?

Ahh! It was exactly the same as one of the pictures from that dream!

I saw that scene with Maria and Dewey in one of the still pictures in the FL2 gallery that Acchan was looking at...

That could only mean that this very examination was also an event in the game, and that means that doom could be waiting for me around every corner!

I have to be careful, I told myself while ducking under the still-warm blankets.

I have to be careful, and watchful, and... Going back to bed after waking up feels so good... so good that I feel my eyelids getting heavy...



When I, Maria Campbell, walked through the fields that night, they were entirely different than when I had seen them during the day.

There was an incredible number of animals, and the air around them was so heavy that I felt like I could drown in it. I was so uncomfortable that I had to cover my mouth with my hand, but the others that were with me seemed unfazed.

In the past, when I was the only one able to feel how stagnant the air was, it had been caused by Dark Magic. Could that be the case this time too? I peeked at Sora, who, like me, was able to identify Dark Magic. If that really was the cause for this weird atmosphere, then he would react to it too... but he did not seem to notice anything.

Perhaps this had nothing to do with magic, and I had just been tired or ill. While I kept thinking to myself, the investigation was postponed to the next day, and we went back to our lodging for the night.

As soon as I came back to my room, the tension I had been feeling was released at once, and I started feeling even worse. I sat down on the bed to catch my breath.

“It turned out to be more problematic than we expected, huh?” asked Katarina.

I could only muster a feeble sound to reply to her. She immediately noticed and came close to me, asking me if I was okay. I thought that I would start feeling better after a while, and told her I was.

“Should I call for Laura or Hart to get you some medicine?” she asked me, concerned.

I declined and explained what had happened, struggling for words as I still felt

ill.

Katarina kindly prepared me some hot tea. Drinking it, I noticed how cold my body had become. After making the tea, she started rubbing my back. I do not know whether it was because of her warm touch, but I instantly felt better. Warmth was returning to my body.

“Thank you. I am feeling better now,” I told her, and she gave me a pleasant smile of relief. She then asked me to explain more about what I had felt in the fields, and I, now feeling much better thanks to her, obliged.

“I cannot explain it well... It just feels heavy, like it did inside the mansion where Master Keith had been kidnapped.”

“Are you saying that someone’s using Dark Magic around here?”

“...I cannot tell for sure. Sora looked unfazed...”

I was sure that if he had felt anything, he would have told me about it.

“...I will try to confirm it tomorrow. For now, I cannot say.”

If Dark Magic was really involved, I had to be sure of it, and then report it to the examiners... feeling ill and becoming useless again was not an option.

I must try harder next time! I thought to myself.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Maria,” Katarina said, looking worried.

What did she mean? It was possible that we were dealing with Dark Magic, so I had to give it all my best.

“I don’t want you trying too hard and feeling sick again. We’re all here for you, so you can rely on us,” she said, holding my hand. “Just rely on us, okay?” she continued with a smile.

I felt my face become red, and I replied with an embarrassed nod. Her smile became even more beautiful, filling my chest with a pleasant, warm feeling.

Now more than ever, I realized how much I loved Katarina Claes, the kind but strong girl who had changed my life — or rather, who was still changing my life, day after day. I wanted to be with her for as long as possible.

“Now let’s sleep. We have to rest before tomorrow,” she said, and I went to

bed feeling so elated that the pain I had been in moments ago now felt like a dream.

My bear was starting to feel lonely after being neglected as I talked with Katarina, so I hugged him close to my chest and happily fell asleep.

My sleep was so pleasant that I woke up earlier than usual, but I didn't feel like going back to sleep a second time. The sun shone through the window, showing a morning too beautiful to be spent in bed. Surely it wouldn't be a problem if I just took a stroll in the garden.

I got up, taking care not to wake up Katarina and the bear. The air outdoors was so fresh that I felt like strolling a bit farther while taking it in. The birds had already woken up too, and were singing cheerfully.

"What a wonderful morning!"

I looked around to make sure that nobody was there so I could take a nice walk by myself, but I noticed someone not far from the house.

It was Dewey Percy, the boy who I used to know from my old hometown, although I had rarely spoken with him. To be exact, I used to avoid him. When I first tried to talk to him, years ago, he had sent me off abruptly.

"What would a chosen one, a Light Magic user, want to do with me? Leave me alone," he had said.

After being treated like a nuisance in that way, I certainly did not look forward to more interactions with him... but now, I finally understood him.

Dewey's family was very poor, so much so that even the children had to work and could not attend school regularly. The other kids would make fun of them, and Dewey was doing his best not to let that influence him.

Back then, I used to protect myself by shutting other people out, and all that I could think about was myself. But now I could understand, and I had Katarina to thank for it.

And now that I knew how he felt, I felt worried about how he had become... he was even more stubborn than he used to be, and his face always looked

bleak.

Just looking at him, walking alone, reminded me of myself when I had just entered the academy and was trying to take on everything on my own. I had to help him. I had tried to speak with him several times after our reunion at the Ministry, but with very poor results.

This time probably would not be that much different... but still, I went after him. He stopped under a tree behind the house, and I gathered my courage and spoke to him.

“Good morning, Dewey.”

Noticing me, he first looked surprised, and then annoyed. “What are you doing here, Campbell?” he asked coldly.

“I was just strolling, taking in this beautiful morning, and then I saw you. I was wondering what you were doing.”

“You mean you followed me?” he asked, even more coldly than before.

I couldn’t let that get to me. “...Yes. I just wanted to talk a little bit.”

“About what?”

He sounded as if I was bothering him so much that he wanted to run away immediately.

“Well, you know, we grew up in the same town, but we’ve never talked much. I thought it would be fun to get to know each other.”

“What need is there for that? Is there any point in befriending your coworkers?”

“I think that maybe, if one is feeling down, or stressed about something, it can help to have someone to talk about it with.”

It was only the two of us now, and I had managed to draw a longer response from him than I usually did, so I tried to be as open as I could.

“I have no such problem. Please leave me alone. If that was what you wanted to talk about, there is no need for further discussion.”

“But lately you’ve been looking so much more tired than you used to...”

“If you are not going to leave, I will. Goodbye,” he said, turning around, but I grabbed his sleeve and stopped him.

“I just think that you’re being too hard on yourself, Dewey,” I told him. I had to let him know — I would not have another opportunity any time soon.

“What would you know about that? You barely even know me! Leave me alone!” he said, even stronger than before, shaking off my hand.

But his face did not look cold anymore... It was sad.

Of course. Being alone is hard, and it is sad.

“...I was just like you... I thought that I had to do everything on my own... I can’t leave you alone, Dewey, because you’re just like how I used to be,” I said, holding onto his hand, just as Katarina had done for me the day before. This time, he did not shake it off, and just stared at me silently. “You don’t have to do this alone. You can rely on us.”

Katarina had given me these wonderful words, and now I passed them onto Dewey. He looked at me, and, without a word, he nodded. His expression didn’t look as bothered anymore.

As usual, Katarina was incredible. Her words had reached into Dewey’s heart. I was so happy that I couldn’t contain a smile, and he awkwardly followed suit.

We then went back to the house together.

“Say, Campbell...”

“Just call me Maria. You don’t need to be formal with me.”

“Y-Yes... So, Maria...” he said, and I couldn’t resist giggling.

“Well, I wanted to ask you... why are you friends with Lady Claes?”

“You mean Lady Katarina?”

“Yes. This may be rude to say, but you two have very different ranks, and I heard that she is not that powerful of a magic user. I do not even know why she is in the Ministry to begin with.”

It turned out that Dewey did not think well of Katarina, and that made me sad, as I loved her so much. I could easily talk about how wonderful she was for

a whole hour (not that that would be nearly enough), but then he might think that I was only being respectful because of her high rank. Before talking with her, all I had known about her was that she was the daughter of a duke, and the air of nobility around her made me feel uncomfortable.

“She’s amazing. Just talk to her and you’ll realize it,” I said. That would be enough.

“...Really?” Dewey asked doubtfully, but I was sure that, eventually, he too would come to love Katarina. How could he not?

We then went back to our own rooms, and I saw Katarina sleeping peacefully in her bed. Seeing her face was enough to make me happy.



This is weird.

I remembered feeling very anxious about the possibility of impending doom, but I had somehow fallen asleep and stayed like that for quite some time.

Maria had tried to wake me up, but she was so kind in doing it that it ended up taking very long, and, when I was finally out of bed, I had to hurry up and prepare to meet the others. When Anne woke me up at home, she would just violently take all my blankets off...

Unfortunately, I didn’t even have time to ask Maria about Dewey.

We ate a light breakfast at the village chief’s house and then made for the Ministry’s building to report about what we had seen yesterday and to coordinate our actions with the local employees.

On our way there, I told Sora what Maria had felt in the air yesterday. I wanted to tell Hart and Laura too, but Larna was very strict in telling me that Dark Magic is a sensitive topic that should not be discussed with anyone willy-nilly, so I hesitated.

Sora confirmed that he hadn’t felt anything out of the ordinary, but that he would try to pay more attention just in case. I told that to Maria, reminding her not to push herself too hard.

At the Ministry branch office, the employees were sitting around a table with

preoccupied looks on their faces. They explained that the employee that had come with us yesterday had already reported on the situation and on how dire it seemed to be.

They even told us that now the animals — possibly because so many of them had come down into the village and no longer had places to hide — weren't going back to the forest during the day anymore, which could be a serious hindrance to the farmers. Our examination had now become too serious for newcomers to deal with. The problem had to be fixed as soon as possible.

Of course, going back home because the examination had become impossible wouldn't be very responsible, so it was decided that we would stay and help.

"As you said, Henderson, we also believed that something could have happened in the forest, so we sent a man to investigate," said the branch director, wiping the sweat off of his face.

"That's the most reasonable thing to do. If the reason for the animals gathering is not in the fields, for example some kind of chemical attracting them, then something must be going on in the forest," Laura said while passing a hand through her hair, which was decorated, as usual, with a cute ribbon.

"Yes. Nobody has been using any weird chemicals, nor planting any unusual crops. Also, the animals are not gathering in any one specific spot... Most of the animals are in the fields nearest to the forest, so they are probably running away from whatever happened there," the branch director was saying when another employee barged into the room.

"Director! It's terrible! The forest..."

He was probably the one who had gone to investigate. He stopped, surprised by our presence, but his superior asked him for details and he started talking.

"The forest itself was just like it was yesterday. It did not look any worse. But... there were no animals. None at all. Usually there are birds flying around and squirrels in the trees, but it is completely silent now," he explained.

It had all started with more tanuki than usual coming down into the village, but the situation had degenerated into something much bigger...

This meant that we had to go investigate the forest ourselves, together with

the Ministry branch employees. Some of the villagers also came to help us, as the forest, while not particularly deep, was very wide.

I was worried about Maria feeling sick again once we were in there, but she said, "The air does feel slightly heavy, but nowhere near yesterday."

Sora, despite being able to sense Dark Magic as well, didn't seem to feel anything out of the ordinary.

"When we went to rescue Keith, I thought that my power to sense this kind of thing was as powerful as Maria's, even if we sensed it in different ways. Did her magic get more powerful all of a sudden? Or did mine get weaker?"

Sora's magic could have gotten worse, I figured, but it was more likely that Maria's had gotten better, since it would be normal for a game protagonist to become stronger in the sequel.

We started our inspection of the forest. We were told that it would be dangerous to walk around alone since we weren't sure what was going on, so we were divided into groups. I ended up with Sora and a Ministry employee, since the two just happened to be near me at the time.

I was concerned about Maria not being in the same group as me, but since she would be with Dewey and a bulky Ministry employee, I figured that she'd be fine. I told her to call out to me for help if anything bad happened, just in case, and then the groups all entered the forest and parted ways.

"There really isn't a single animal around... it's so quiet it's giving me the creeps."

"Absolutely true," the middle-aged employee in my group said, looking around.

He looked like a kind, amicable person, but his chubby, relaxed appearance suggested that he wouldn't be too useful if anything went wrong... on the contrary, we'd probably have to protect him. The huge guy in Maria's group, on the other hand...

Well, I wasn't exactly the best fighter around either, so I wasn't one to talk. My magic powers amounted to Dirt Bump, and I didn't fare much better with swords and knives.

All in all, the one we'd have to rely on was Sora. He'd probably have a hard time protecting both me and this other guy... If push came to shove, I'd have to bring Pochi out and make him bark. I started regretting not having taught him any tricks yet.

"...rina? Lady Katarina?"

"Ah! Yes?"

Sora had been calling out to me with a preoccupied look on his face.

"This is no time to spaz out," he scolded me.

"I'm sorry..."

"If Dark Magic really is involved, this could be dangerous. Stay alert," he warned me under his breath.

He was right. I had to be careful. I started looking around, taking in every last detail...

"I don't know, it all looks normal to me..." is all I could say. Apart from the lack of animals, there was nothing off. It was just a... standard forest.

Back during the Keith kidnapping, the atmosphere in that mansion was so thick that even I could feel that evil was afoot. This time, however, everything felt normal.

Maybe it would have been different if we were surrounded by scary wilting trees, but all the plants were green and lush, and you could easily imagine the heroine coming here to pick flowers. No obvious evil here.

"I cannot find anything suspicious either," Sora said, carefully choosing his words. He probably meant that he didn't feel any Dark Magic.

"It looks as it always does..." said our puzzled Ministry companion, who had been to this same forest several times. "Maybe the problem is in another area," he said with his shoulders slumped, maybe out of disappointment.

But not finding anything out of the ordinary was no reason to be disappointed! Though I did see him get all worked up about something big finally happening in his boring countryside life before we'd set out... so that explained his reaction.

What he meant by “another area,” by the way, is that we had divided the forest into four areas (east, west, south, north) to make it easier to search, and we were currently in the east one, while Maria’s group, for example, was in the north one.

I wondered if she was okay. If this whole incident was an event in the game, then it was likely that something would happen in the area that the heroine was searching, and that worried me a lot.

However, I had to follow the orders, so I kept searching the east area.

Sora probably noticed how troubled I looked, because he said, “Calm down. And don’t stray too far away, or I won’t be able to protect you if anything happens.”

That sounded like he was worrying about me, so I thanked him with a grateful smile... and he gave me a light bonk on the head with his fist.

Now that we had seen that there was nothing wrong with our area, I suggested to the other two that we go looking for Maria, since I was still worried about her.

“This area seems fine, so we should go check the other ones! We may be able to help the other groups if they need us to.”

Sora probably understood how I felt (possibly because I’d looked nervous this whole time), and he promptly agreed.

“You are right! They might need our help!” said the other Ministry employee excitedly, and we went back to the forest’s entrance.

The people who were keeping guard there were surprised to see us. “Are you finished?” they asked.

“There was no trouble in our area, so we came back to help with the other ones,” I explained, seeing the other man in our group lagging, short of breath, behind me and Sora. He was drenched in sweat... *Maybe we should have taken it a little easier. Sorry.*

However, seeing how tired he was helped the sentries understand how serious we were about helping the other groups.

"We have not received any report of trouble from the other groups either, so rest here for a while, please."

Thankfully, it seemed that all the other groups, including Maria's, were fine. That made me feel slightly relieved. Now that the worry was out of my head, I noticed that I was thirsty. Hurrying all the way here had made me sweat quite a bit, if not as much as our soaked teammate.

I got some water from the sentries, and after giving some to our Ministry companion, I drank some myself. I felt so refreshed as the cool water poured down my throat.

Ah, delicious. Maybe I'll have another glass, I was thinking to myself when a man came running our way out of the forest.

"Hey! Hey! We got trouble!"

The relaxed atmosphere turned cold in an instant. What had happened?

"What's wrong?" asked one of the sentries.

"The west area group..." said the running man with a terrified face.

"What? Did they find something?"

"No... it's... someone got lost!"

"Did they find a lost child or something?! But we barred entry into the forest!"

"That's not it! The Ministry employee that was in that group got lost!"

The sentry was at a loss for words, and the man from our group was just standing still with his mouth open in disbelief. Sora and I felt awkward.

Nathan Hart came all the way from the capital just to get lost in the forest... and during this emergency mission of all times...

"Unnghh, I'm so sorry! I let the rope slip! It's all my fault..." said Laura with tears in her eyes. It could have looked endearing, except for the fact that she was huge and musclebound...

Sora and I immediately ran to meet the West area group, only to find our

examiner wailing. “It’s not your fault,” I said to comfort her, but I was worried about what we were going to do next.

Since the trouble in the fields still had to be dealt with, we told the villagers and other Ministry employees that they could continue investigating the forest, but would we be able to find Hart? The forest, while not huge, wasn’t exactly small either, and I honestly wasn’t so sure we could succeed.

And of course we couldn’t just leave without him. I asked Laura if there was any possibility that he would find the way out of the forest on his own, and she promptly replied that it was utterly impossible.

We started searching the area in which Hart had gotten lost, but there was no sign of him. *Why do we have to look for a lost colleague in a forest? And with a Dark Magic user potentially lurking around, at that,* I thought, sighing.

“Oh, there you are,” we heard someone say. It was Maria, accompanied by Dewey. The two had finished investigating their own area and had come here to offer some much needed help. I was relieved that nothing bad had happened to Maria.

“We heard about Hart... did you find him?”

“Not at all. We don’t even know if he’s still in the west area. The worst thing about Nathan is that he can walk really fast,” said Laura, putting a hand to her face as she sighed.

“I cannot promise that it will work, but there is something that I would like to try. Do you have anything that belongs to him?”

“To Nathan? Well, all of his stuff is at the village chief’s house where we’re staying.”

“Could I go back there to retrieve some of it?”

“Sure, I guess. But why?”

“I just so happen to have a plush bear with me who is really good at finding people,” said Maria with a troubled smile.

Why, of course! The bear was originally a magical tool to search for people! Maria quickly explained about the bear to Laura and Dewey, and we went

back to the village chief's house to borrow something that belonged to Hart.

We first went to the room where Maria and I were staying to get the bear, who was relaxing on the bed. We then went to Hart's room and, while feeling guilty about it, looked through his luggage. *I'm sorry, but this is an emergency...*

We found a small towel which we could easily bring with us and let the bear smell it. Technically the bear was "sensing the person's aura" or something, but it just looked like it was sniffing.

Maybe even Pochi could be able to find people by smelling for them... I should teach him to do it.

The bear raised one its short arms and pointed at where it thought Hart was, and we went in that direction. It worked for Maria this morning, so it might work this time too.

Following the bear's arm we found ourselves near the forest, which was to be expected, and then we were guided into the west area.

"Oh, so he hasn't moved that much. Maybe he finally learned how easy it can be to get lost if you wander around aimlessly in such a place," said Laura, relieved.

Hart sure was being treated like a... *No, I shouldn't think anything bad about my seniors. That would be rude.* But we had searched the west area quite thoroughly earlier. Just where was he hiding?

"Hm? Was this cave here all along?"

The bear had pointed us in the direction of a cave in the middle of the forest which I hadn't noticed before.

"Maybe we just didn't see it, considering it's this deep into the trees..." said Laura, confused.

The weirdest thing was that, despite its location, it was a really large cave... *How could we miss it?*

I was still wondering that to myself while Maria called out to us in a stern voice.

"That place is dangerous."

“You can’t mean...”

Is she talking about Dark Magic?

Maria read my expression and nodded, her face darkened. I looked at Sora to see if he was feeling anything, but he shook his head with a confused expression.

“Dangerous? What do you mean?” asked Laura, who wasn’t in on the Dark Magic thing.

“My Light Magic allows me to perceive dangerous powers, and I can sense them being at work there.”

“What dangerous powers?”

“I do not have permission to say more...” said Maria, troubled, following Larna’s instructions.

“Okay, I won’t ask any further,” replied Laura, surprisingly easily persuaded. Despite her flamboyant looks, she was a reasonable type.

“If it’s dangerous as you say, then we shouldn’t enter it... but your teddy is pointing towards it,” she added with her shoulder drooped.

I looked at the bear, and it was definitely pointing towards the cave, meaning that Hart was in there...

“If it’s a dangerous place, that’s all the more reason to get Nathan out of it as soon as possible,” she rightly said. We couldn’t risk leaving him alone in that cave.

“I wish I could just tell all of you to wait for me here, but going alone doesn’t sound very enticing... Will any of you come with me?” Laura asked.

“I will. I can sense those evil powers and I can heal light wounds with my magic,” Maria immediately replied.

“I’ll come with too. I’ve overcome my fair share of danger in life, and I’ll probably be able to help,” said Sora, raising his hand.

So, those remaining outside of the cave, would be...

I glanced at Dewey, who instantly looked elsewhere. This was going to be

awkward, and I also didn't want to stay here, worrying about them while I was doing nothing.

"I will be coming too!"

"I'll come too!" we both said simultaneously. We were probably thinking the same exact thing.

In the end, we all went inside together. At least that made me feel safer.

We stepped into the cave. The ceiling had enough holes in it for enough sunlight to shine through. It wasn't dark or scary — actually, it was shiny and beautiful. But this was no time to appreciate the landscape, not after Maria had said that she could feel Dark Magic.

The cave was very wide and full of branching paths, so Sora, who was probably used to this kind of exploration, started marking our path so we could get back outside safely. If I'd gone in alone, I never would have thought of it... And the person we were looking for was a genius at getting lost, so he'd never make it out of the cave by himself.

After a while, Sora whispered something into my ear. "I've started feeling the darkness too... we must be close."

I looked at Maria, and her face was even bleaker than before. Maybe Hart was kidnapped by a Dark Magic user... that would be trouble. *I hope he's safe...*

"Ahh!" Laura screamed all of a sudden, before starting to run.

We ran after her until she stopped.

"N-Nathan! We've finally found you!" she said, grabbing her colleague with one of her thick arms.

Hart looked really surprised — who wouldn't be, if a femininely-dressed macho grabbed them all of a sudden? — but quickly understood what had happened.

"I am sorry... I must have caused you a lot of trouble," he said, lowering his head.

"You have! Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?!" said Laura, tying him with the rope. He realized that he was in no position to complain this

time. "Why did you come into this cave? I know that you have no sense of direction, but isn't this a bit too much?" Laura asked him.

"I knew that this wasn't the way out of the forest, obviously," he explained, a bit offended.

Laura, meanwhile, stared at him coldly... as if doubting that.

"Ahem..." he continued, slightly awkwardly. "After losing you people, I ran into someone suspicious and followed him here."

"Someone suspicious?"

"Yes, there was a man walking alone through the forest. I sneaked after him and he eventually entered this cave, where, unfortunately, I lost him," he said, sounding proud of his achievement.

"So what you're telling me is that you got lost in the forest, followed someone to this cave, lost him, and then got lost again inside the cave?" said Laura, and now, as he nodded, he didn't look so proud anymore.

"Mm... Maybe we should look for this person, but we can't risk getting lost in here," she continued, and I agreed with her. Of course I wanted to investigate the suspicious man, but I'd rather not get lost inside a cave.

"I do not know whether that will lead us to him, but I can sense the dangerous aura becoming stronger. I could probably pinpoint its origin if we went further into the cave," said Maria with a serious gaze. Maybe the man that Hart had seen was a Dark Magic user.

The two examiners, after hearing what Maria said, looked at each other.

"I can look after two of them, I'd say," said Laura.

"I can protect another one," said Hart. "Can you look after yourself, Sora?"

"Yes, as long as it's just me."

"Good," said Laura with a smile, "then it's decided. I'll take care of you, Maria, and you, Katarina. Don't stray from me, got it?"

"Dewey, you come with me," said Hart.

Dewey looked displeased, maybe because he had to be protected just like me

and Maria.

“Make sure he doesn’t get lost,” Laura told him, giving him the rope that was connected to Hart, and Dewey hesitantly nodded.

We then started venturing deeper into the cave.

“Don’t do anything dangerous, and stay behind me at all times. And if anything happens, just run away, okay?” Laura whispered to us while we walked, and we nodded in agreement. “I may not look it, but I’m quite strong. Just leave it to me,” she then said, apparently unaware of how ridiculously strong she looked.

We walked through a narrow tunnel that forced us to walk into a single line, and then entered the large open space beyond it, which was darker than the rest of the cave.

“I think it is coming from there,” said Maria under her breath.

Laura led us into the open space, and we looked around while staying hidden behind a rock formation. I imagined that the place would be full of bad people scheming terrible things, like when Keith was kidnapped, but there didn’t seem to be anybody in this large area.

“There’s someone,” said Laura.

Following her gaze, I saw that there was indeed a man standing there. He seemed to be alone. *Or is there someone else hidden from sight?* We moved a little closer to him, but we still couldn’t see anybody else lurking.

The man wasn’t particularly tall or short, fat or skinny... he was very average. However, his face looked so distressed that we could easily tell how upset he was despite the distance.

“I think he’s alone, and he doesn’t look that strong, at least physically. Magic prowess being a different issue...” said Laura.

“He is likely to possess very strong magic. Coming in contact could be very dangerous,” said Maria, referring to how Dark Magic users could control people by touching them.

“So we’re fine as long as we don’t come in contact with him?”

“...Yes.”

“Okay. Wait here, all of you,” said Laura before launching herself towards the man.

“Wait!” I screamed, meaning to run after her, but Hart stopped me.

“Worry not. Guy is an incredibly talented magic user. They even call her ‘the flame witch’ at the Ministry.”

I was surprised to find out that people referred to her as “witch” and not “wizard,” but more importantly, I was surprised to know that she was hiding that much power. *I’m sorry for thinking that you were just a weird macho...*

Fast like the wind, she reached the man and stopped in front of him. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?” she asked him.

Anyone would be surprised if a macho in girls’ clothes spoke to them all of a sudden... but the man didn’t even flinch. All he did was start muttering something to himself while staring into the distance.

Wow, this is even more suspicious than I thought. Is he on something?

Laura looked at him, confused. “Are you... alright?” she asked, but the man, once again, did nothing but mutter to himself.

Laura gave up and came back to us, her head hanging low. “This isn’t going anywhere... He’s so out of it that he won’t even look at me. I don’t see anyone accompanying him, and it’s too dangerous to leave him here alone. We have to bring him back to the Ministry with us.”

“I can feel a dangerous magic aura coming from that man... If we are bringing him back, I will do it,” said Maria.

“You say it’s dangerous and you think I’ll let you do it?” Laura said, but Maria shook her head.

“I wield Light Magic, so his magic cannot affect me. There is no problem. Please let me do it.”

She really was immune to Dark Magic, but that man looked like trouble regardless.

"If that's the case, you and I will do it together. I assume I can't touch him, but if anything happens, I'll be there to protect you," said Laura coolly before leaving the hiding spot behind the rock. She was probably thinking the same thing I was.

Maria nodded and followed her.

"Dewey, you still have Nathan's rope, right? Let's tie that guy up with it," Laura said.

"Y-Yes," replied Dewey, and stood up to give it to her.

Whooooosh!

A gust of wind, so intense that I had to close my eyes, came from the direction that Laura and Maria were headed towards, accompanied by a deafening noise. The wind felt so strong even with the rock in front of us — if we hadn't been behind cover, we probably would have been blown away.

Wait, what about Dewey, Laura, and Maria?! I tried looking past the rock to make sure that they were safe, but the wind was kicking so much dust into the air that I couldn't see anything... and I couldn't hear anything either. *I hope they're okay...*

I waited, worried, and eventually the wind subsided.

"Are you guys alright?" I asked, jumping out from behind the rock, but they weren't where I expected them to be.

Once the dust fell back onto the ground, I realized that they'd been blown away, Dewey and Maria to the right, and Laura to the left.

"Are you alright?" I asked again in both directions.

"Yes."

"Yes!"

"Yes," all of them replied in turn. *Phew, they're fine.*

I looked at where the wind had come from. In the spot where the suspicious man had been standing, the dust was still dancing in the air.

What happened there? Was it an explosion or something? I stared, trying to

find out what had happened, until the dust settled.

I saw a large figure standing in place of the man.

What's that?

I squinted, and eventually managed to make it out. I held my breath and my eyebrows raised in shock.

It was... a dragon.

Before my very eyes was a beast that didn't even exist in my previous life. It looked just like the dragons in movies or manga: long neck, scale-covered body, and bat-like wings. The only unexpected thing was that it wasn't green, but black.

“...Wow.”

The unicorn I'd seen at the Biomagic Department in the Ministry was impressive, sure, but it had nothing on this huge, menacing creature. I never expected the day to come when I could say this, but I was sitting, frozen, staring at the dragon.

Sora and the others who were hiding with me, as well as those who'd been blown away by the wind, were also looking at it.

“What the...”

That reaction had probably been Sora's, but everyone's expression was just as surprised. Was it the first time they'd all seen a dragon? Maybe they were very rare, even in this world.

“...Let's run,” said Hart, standing up and looking terrified.

Run? Why?

I was waiting, confused, when Sora grabbed my hand. “Pull yourself together! This is dangerous!” he scolded me.

Oh, yeah, dangerous. I kind of understood what he said, so I stood up. Maria, Dewey, and Laura had also stood up, and they were coming towards us.

“Let's go back to the entrance! Follow me!” said Hart — who wasn't tied to the rope anymore — before starting to run.

But the entrance is in the opposite direction...

“Not at a time like this! That idiot!” said Sora, loudly clicking his tongue with annoyance. “Get out of here, I’ll catch up to you later,” he told me before going after Hart.

I did as he said and started running, but I heard a loud sound behind me. I looked back and saw the dragon moving, making its way (smoothly, despite its huge body) towards the three that had been blown away by the wind and that were now trying to get back to where I was.

And then, it swung its huge arm towards Maria.

No!!! I tried to run and save her, but I could tell that I wouldn’t make it in time.

I was the closest one to her, so there was no way that Laura, who was at the opposite corner of the cave, would be able to help her. Nor could Hart and Sora, who’d gone off running.

“Maria!” I shouted. At the same time, I saw a small figure jump in front of Maria, pushing her away. That figure was hit squarely by the dragon’s arm and flew through the air, and then smashed into a large rock.

“Dewey!” This time it was Maria who screamed.

Dewey, who had saved Maria, was lying motionless on the ground. When Maria ran to him and lifted him up, he let out a small painful moan, which at least meant that he was still alive.

A faint light, probably created by Maria’s healing Light Magic, now shrouded the two, but it was too far away for me to tell clearly what was going on. I had to move closer...

The dragon started moving again, aiming for Maria and Dewey.

Wh-Why?!

Maria had noticed, but she didn’t move. Actually, she *couldn’t* move, because she had to bring the motionless Dewey with her. She hugged him as if to protect him and then stared the dragon in the eye.

I have to do something! If I don’t, they’ll both be...

I grabbed a small rock from the ground and threw it at the dragon. I was pretty good at throwing things after all those years of training with toy snakes, and my rock hit its target. I actually felt a bit proud that this talent had come in handy at a time like this.

I was afraid that the scales covering its body would be too hard for a single rock to matter, but it noticed me and looked away from Maria.

Perfect! I threw another rock (again, skillfully) at the dragon and shouted at the top of my lungs. “Hey you! Over here!”

Either because of the rocks or because I had shouted, the dragon did indeed start moving towards me, as smoothly as a snake. I knew I had to distract it from Maria and Dewey, but I had no idea what to do after that... so I just ran away.

“Lady Katarina!” Maria shouted.

I was a fast runner, but I was no match for a dragon, and I soon found myself cornered against a wall. I picked up a stick from the ground and held it like a sword, but I realized that wouldn’t help much. At least if I’d had a proper sword, I could have made use of all those fencing lessons...

Anyway, with a wall behind me and a dragon in front of me, I was in a very tight spot. *Am I going to be doomed before even dealing with the routes in FL2?*

I felt something warm in my pocket. *Hm? I’ve felt something like this before. It was that mirror back then...* Now all I had in my pocket was a magnifying glass, but why was it so hot? Maybe it had caught the sunlight and it was going to burn my clothes... that would be a serious problem.

“*Call my name,*” I heard a voice call out all of a sudden. I didn’t know that voice, but it sounded familiar for some reason.

“*Call me.*”

Who are you?

“*Call me, and I will save you, Master.*”

Oh, I know who you are.

I wasn’t sure why, but I understood who that voice belonged to.

I did it. I called his name...

“Pochi!”

My shadow started waving around, and out of it came... not Pochi, but the largest black dog I'd ever seen, around the same size as the dragon.

WH-WHAT?!

The giant dog looked at my shocked face and wagged its tail, just like...

“P-Pochi? Is that you?”

“Woof!” he said happily.

This frightening beast was Pochi, the Dark Familiar pup who lived inside of my shadow.

“Pochi... why'd you become so big? How are we going to play in the garden like this?” I asked him as he kept wagging its tail. He looked terrifying, but inside he was the same Pochi as always.

The dragon, which we had both completely forgotten about, roared, and we remembered what a dangerous situation we were in. Being able to play in the garden should have been the last of my concerns. If we didn't do something, we wouldn't even get to see our garden ever again.

The dragon, maybe offended at being ignored, raised its arm to swing it down as it had previously done to Maria. Pochi swiftly jumped in front of me and bit the dragon's arm, making it cry with pain and back away.

Whoa, great job, Pochi!

He was growling menacingly at the dragon, who, with the pride befitting a beast its size, showed its fangs and roared in return before running towards him.

“Pochi! Look out!” I screamed, but he calmly dodged the dragon's bite, jumping to the side.

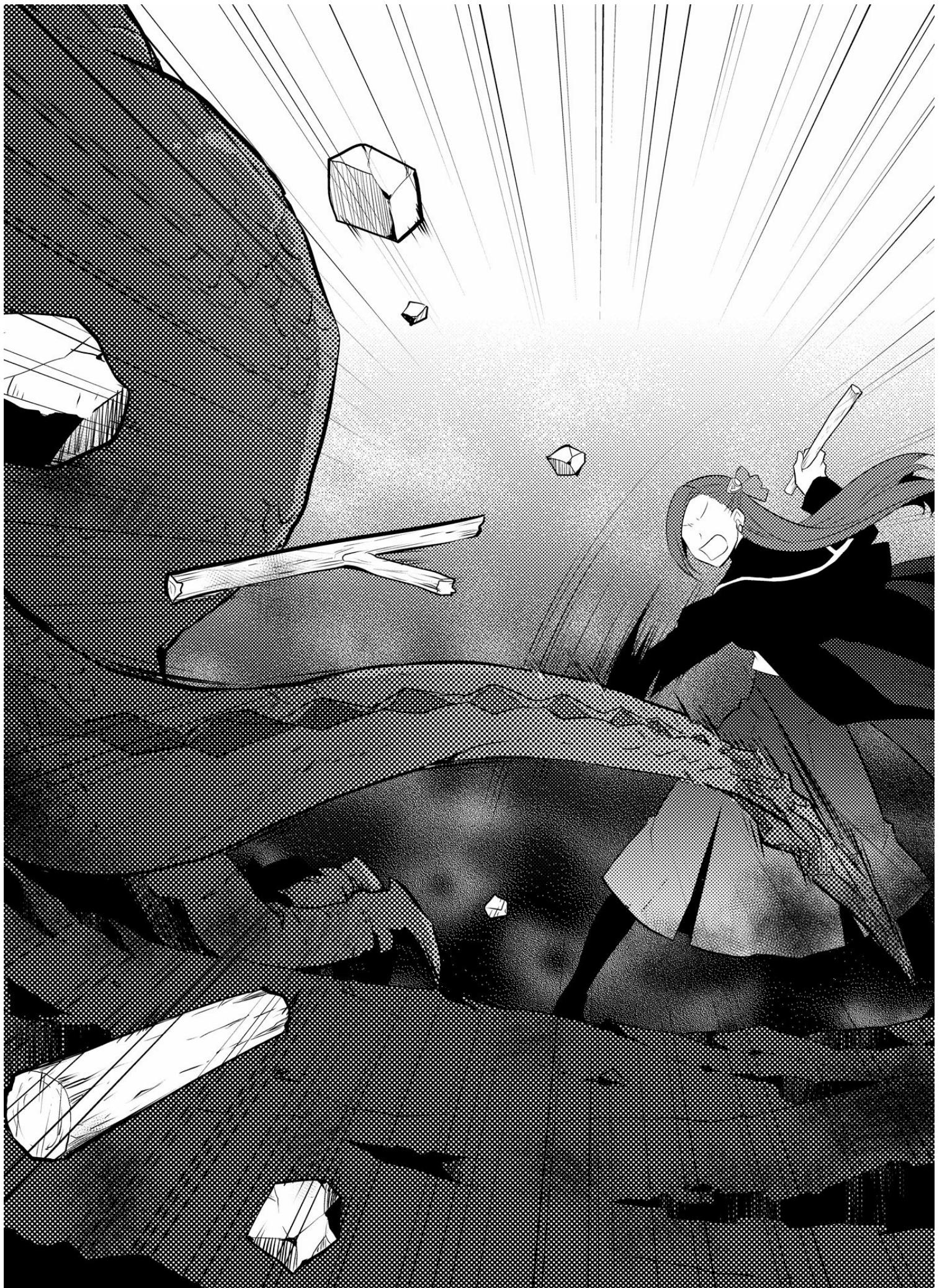
Before I could feel any relief at the avoided attack, the dragon went in for a second bite, which Pochi dodged as well, but then it hit him from behind with its huge tail.

“P-Pochi!”

I ran towards Pochi, who was growling and grimacing, and the dragon showed its fangs again. He tried to dodge, but this time he was too injured to move quickly enough. The dragon scratched him, and Pochi writhed with pain.

I have to help Pochi before the dragon kills him...

I started throwing rock after rock at it.



“Stop! Stop hurting Pochi!” I shouted while throwing rocks, sticks, and just about anything I could find on the floor. I managed to catch the dragon’s attention, and it turned towards me.

Pochi took advantage of that and jumped incredibly fast at the dragon, biting its neck in a powerful critical hit. Even when the dragon fell onto the ground after letting out a deafening roar, Pochi kept biting, as if to finish it. Still on the floor, it twisted its body around a few times until it finally stopped moving at all.

Yes! Pochi won! He defeated the dragon!

“Pochi! You were awesome!”

He turned towards me and wagged its tail side to side with the same happy face he made when we were playing fetch at home, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. I patted his nose and told him that he was a good boy.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, and looked at where he’d been hit by the dragon’s tail, but there was no wound to be seen. He started jumping around, probably to show me that he was fine. I was so, so glad.

“You were so cool, Pochi! Really great!” I complimented him while still patting his nose. I’d usually hold him in my arms and pet him all over, but now he was definitely too big for that.

Will he be able to get back to his usual size? Will he even be able to hide in my shadow anymore? If he can’t do that, then I’ll have to keep him in the garden... Mother complained enough about the vegetable field, so this won’t make her happy... She’d probably tell me that I can’t keep him... What would I do then?

While I was busy thinking about this, I noticed smoke coming out of the dragon on the floor. *I-Is it going to explode?!* I thought, but the smoke quickly vanished, and the dragon with it. *What? Where did it go? Why did it disappear? Can dragons just disappear?*

That was surprising enough, but when I looked back at Pochi, I realized that he’d also gone back to his normal puppy-size.

I have no idea what’s going on anymore... is it some kind of trick?!
Disappearing dragons, shrinking dogs... how does this even work? ...Well, magic

does exist in this world, so I guess it all makes sense.

“Oh, Pochi, I’m so glad you went back to normal! We’ll still be able to play in the garden!” I was so relieved that I wouldn’t need to build a house in the garden for Pochi, and he could still live in my shadow.

I patted his little head as he breathed with his tongue sticking out and his tail swinging from side to side. I noticed he was looking at my hand, which was still holding one of the sticks I’d grabbed to throw at the dragon.

“Do you want to play? Okay, try to catch it!” I said. I pulled my arm back, preparing for the throw, when someone grabbed it.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you while you’re having so much fun,” said Laura, who had appeared behind me all of a sudden, short of breath and with a troubled expression. “There are a ton of things that I’d like to ask you, but first... are you hurt?”

“No, I’m not.”

Pochi had protected me from the dragon, and I had come out of it without a scratch. And even Pochi himself, despite his fight just now, looked fine too. I checked him after he went back to his normal size, but I couldn’t find any wounds. Another thing to write off as a mystery of magic.

“That’s good. Now, Maria and Dewey...”

“Right! Maria and Dewey!”

Forget about throwing sticks!

I ran towards them, and Maria, with a pale face, asked me whether I was wounded. I told her I wasn’t, and her face instantly changed to show her relief.

“What about Dewey?” asked Laura, looking at him. He was being held by Maria, his eyes closed but visibly still breathing.

Maria let Dewey go and pushed him into Laura’s arms. “I used my Light Magic to heal him, but the blow was so strong that he lost consciousness, and it would be better if a doctor took a look at him.”

“Okay. As soon as we’re out of here, we’re bringing him to one,” Laura said, taking Dewey into her big, strong arms.

Maria, however, was looking down uneasily. He'd gotten hurt trying to protect her, so that would make it even worse if anything serious had happened to him.

Maria finally stopped looking at Dewey, raised her head, and walked towards me.

Hm? Does she need something from me?

She stopped in front of me, looking into my eyes and glaring. "I apologize in advance for being rude," she said, bowing her head.

It was the first time Maria had ever looked at me like that, so I was surprised.

Wh-What? Why? I asked myself, confused, and Maria, as angry as I'd never seen before, started scolding me.

"Why did you lure the dragon your way?! You could have died! Did you even think about what could happen?! I bet not!"

"I... I didn't, but... I mean, you two were in danger, so I just... I just went and did it without thinking about it too hard..."

I tried to excuse what I had done, but Maria's expression turned even angrier.

"I am thankful that you tried to save us. But to use yourself as bait... If anything had happened to you, I... I..." Tears were now falling from Maria's wide eyes.

"M-Maria!"

"If anything had happened to you because of me... How could I..." she kept saying, crying. She must have been so worried about me...

"I'm sorry I made you worry. I won't do dangerous stuff anymore," I said, sorry for what I had done, and I hugged her.

"...Please do not," she said, blushing and hugging me back.

She was shivering and shedding tears, so I gently stroked her back. I felt terrible that I'd made her worry about me.

Maria eventually calmed down and stopped crying and shaking.

"Oh, you're awake," said a deep, manly voice besides us.

“Waaah?!” replied a different, terrified voice.

We turned to look, and saw that Dewey had just woken up in Laura’s arms.

The first thing he saw upon waking up was the face of a huge, muscular woman staring at him... I’d have screamed too.

Maria, who had regained her composure, left my hug and walked towards Dewey.

“Dewey, are you alright? Does it hurt anywhere?” she asked, and he jumped up and out of Laura’s arms.

“I’m perfectly fine!” he said, flailing his body around.

He really looks okay. I’m glad.

Maria was relieved at seeing that he wasn’t hurt. “Thank you for saving me, but don’t do anything dangerous anymore, okay?” she said, stroking his head. Dewey’s face instantly flushed red.

Hehe, look at him. He’s completely fallen for her. This must be his first crush! Ahh, it’s too cute!

“Excuse me... can we leave already? We have caught the suspicious man,” said Hart, who had just come back after getting lost.

Behind him was Sora, holding the rope connected to Hart in his hand and carrying the suspicious man on his back.

“Uh? Is it okay to touch him, Sora?” asked Laura, surprised, remembering that Maria had warned her against that.

“He is unconscious, so I think there is no problem,” said Sora.

“Yes,” added Maria, “his aura is not as threatening anymore. It should be safe.”

“Fine then,” said Laura, reassured.

“We should leave before we run into anything else,” Hart pointed out, walking in the complete opposite direction to where the entrance was.

“This way,” said Sora, pulling on his rope. *Who’s examining who, again?*

“Dewey, if you can’t move well I can always carry you,” Laura kindly said to Dewey.

“Thank you, but I can move on my own,” he replied coldly.

Maybe waking up to Laura’s stare had been hard on him... He seemed to have no intention of being carried around.

While we were walking out of the cave, Sora also scolded me under his breath, calling me a “reckless idiot” and gently smacking me on the back of my head. He didn’t put it kindly, but his expression really looked worried, so I just apologized.

“Don’t ever do that again!” he said while giving me a noogie.

I had made so many people worry... *I’ll have to be more careful from now on.*

The cave wasn’t exactly dark, but when we stepped out into the forest, it was bright enough to feel dazzling.

“Oh? There are birds,” I said, noticing them flying over my head. There were none when we’d gone inside the cave. *I wonder why...*

“Maybe,” said Maria, “the animals had left the forest because of that dark aura I felt. It has almost disappeared completely now, so that could explain why the animals are back.”

“It disappeared? When?” asked Laura.

“When that large creature did. Maybe the aura was emanating from it.”

“I wonder if the animals left the forest for fear of that creature.”

“That seems likely,” said Maria.

They were right. We went back to the village, and, after a while, the animals started going back to their old habitat in the forest. At Hart’s suggestion, I sent Pochi after the few who had taken a liking to the crops and didn’t want to go back, and he quickly drove them back into the forest.

Hart also wrote a report on what had happened, lifting that responsibility from the rest of us, since we couldn’t properly explain all the things that had happened involving Dark Magic. He wasn’t very useful on the field (if anything,

he was a burden), but when it came to administrative work, he was an outright genius.

Cleaning up after the mission would normally have taken several days and multiple people, but he managed to do all of it alone and in less than a day, giving out all the appropriate instructions and quickly finishing all the work we needed taken care of.

And so, a few days later, we were back at the Ministry.

Chapter 5: Starting Life at the Ministry

“...and this is how we completed the mission, Miss Larna.”

After hearing the report of my subordinate Guy Henderson through the new, improved version of the magic communication tool, it took a good amount of effort on my part not to laugh.

“This was no joke. It was a serious, dire situation,” she told me angrily, realizing how much fun I was having.

“I mean... she tried to fend off a gigantic creature with rocks and sticks... That’s just too funny...” I said. Unable to resist any longer, finally burst out laughing. I had heard the rumors about Katarina Claes being a *unique* noblewoman for a long time, but she just never stopped being entertaining.

“Well,” Laura said, irritated that I was still laughing, “the report is over. I will give you more details once we are back at the Ministry. And I expect some explanations about these newcomers.” She switched off the communication tool.

Laura (and Nathan Hart, who was also on that mission) ended up seeing Katarina use her Dark Familiar. I’d have to explain her involvement with Dark Magic once they came back.

Laura was one of the most physically and magically skilled employees in the whole Ministry, and Nathan was one of the smartest. They had been chosen as examiners for that group for this very reason: the Ministry couldn’t risk anything bad happening to a precious Light Magic user and a duke’s daughter.

However, they had come to know about Dark Magic, so I owed them an explanation. I looked at the transcript of Laura’s report that I’d written down.

“I’ll have to investigate this as soon as possible...”

I immediately went to ask for the help of someone close to me who was very good at this kind of thing.

A few days later, while I was organizing some documents in my room in the Ministry, I heard someone knock on the door.

“Come in.”

The man who walked in normally had silver hair, but today his hair was dyed a darker color and he was wearing unusually plain clothes as a disguise.

He was Jeffrey Stuart, first born of the king and fiancé of Susanna Randall, which was my public identity.

“Hi Larna. I’ve come to give you some news about the investigation you asked me to conduct,” Jeffrey told me with his usual giddy smile.

“Thank you, but why come all the way here yourself? Couldn’t you just send me the report?”

“My lovely little brothers are going to be at the Ministry today, so I thought I’d come here to see them, and that just made it faster to bring you the report myself. That’s all,” he said, grinning.

He was affectionate towards his brothers to the point of perversion. Coming to the Ministry just to look at them was part of it, but he also had their portraits hung up in his room, and even asked me to create magical tools that he could use to spy on them.

“...Oh.”

“My brothers, really, you know, they just...”

Oh no, he’s going to start one of his speeches about how wonderful his brothers are!

“Can you tell me about the investigation first?”

Jeffrey looked a bit disappointed, but he took out something that looked like a report and started reading it.

“Let’s see... the creature that attacked your subordinates seems to be a ‘dragon.’ I went to the Biomagic Department to confirm it with Delius, and he treated me to an hour-long explanation.”

If someone as knowledgeable about animals as Delius said that it was a

dragon, then it had to be true.

“A dragon, huh? I’ve seen them in books, but I didn’t think they really existed... My subordinates told me that it disappeared into smoke. Do you know anything about that?”

None of the books I knew talked about dragons disappearing like that.

“Well, about that... This is just my theory, but I believe that this ‘dragon’ creature was very similar to the Dark Familiar belonging to Miss Katarina Claes.”

“A Dark Familiar? But it was huge.”

“Miss Katarina’s familiar also became huge at one point, so maybe they can change size at will.”

He had a point — that was possible.

“And then there’s the unconscious man that your people brought back... His debilitated condition was very similar to that of Thomas, the boy who kidnapped his stepbrother, Keith Claes.”

“He was the one whose vitality had been sucked out to power Dark Magic, right?”

“Right. He has no wounds, no discernible illness, and we’re giving him food and medicine, but he just keeps getting weaker. The doctor has no idea what’s going on. And also, a woman resembling Sara, the Dark Magic user involved in Keith’s kidnapping, has been witnessed around the forest. I think it’s safe to assume that the dragon creature was created through Dark Magic. The forest was probably disturbed in the process, making the animals run away.”

Jeffrey’s theory seemed sound.

“Yes, but we have no proof,” I said. “If only that man would wake up, then he could help.”

“That could be difficult. We couldn’t save Thomas, either.”

Despite our best efforts, Thomas had lost his life after being captured.

“So much for Sara’s Dark Familiar, though, as it was defeated by Katarina’s,” Jeffrey said, giggling.

Katarina had called out her Dark Familiar dog and defeated the dragon. According to my subordinates, who had seen the beast's last moment, it had stopped breathing shortly after its neck was bitten.

"That Miss Katarina's really incredible," Jeffrey commented. "Not only did she tame a Dark Familiar, but she also made it turn giant and used it to fight..."

I agreed wholeheartedly. "She said that her puppy had just gotten bigger, but all the others said that it was more like a huge, terrifying wolf." Hart and Henderson had been taken aback at seeing how Katarina had petted that giant monster.

"A huge wolf? I'd like to see that. But when did it gain that ability? This is the first time, isn't it?"

All that Katarina's familiar had been able to do so far was play fetch in the garden, and we didn't know if he had any powers, or how to use them.

"I think it's because of Katarina's magical tool."

"What magical tool?"

"I let all the examinees borrow some tools from the warehouse before going on the mission. I had built a tool to act like the one that Katarina accidentally bought some time ago, the one that can influence Dark Magic. And, by coincidence, she took that one with her. I only built that on a whim, but I think it really worked."

Katarina had even said that she could feel it warm up inside her pocket before hearing the familiar's voice, so it was very likely that the tool had something to do with the dog's newfound power.

"Oh, that's incredible. I also heard that Miss Maria Campbell had a tool with her which amplifies Light Magic..."

"Yes, and her powers were all the stronger for it."

"The coincidences never end. And what happened to that tool?"

"I let those two have them. There aren't many people who can use them anyway."

"So their powers will stay as strong as they were during that mission. That's

wonderful. But to think that they'd both just so happen to choose the one tool that amplifies their own powers..." he said, and then thought to himself for a moment before speaking again. "Was it really a coincidence?" he asked with a serious expression which, for him, was really rare.

I didn't know how to reply, because I, too, had thought that it had all played out too well to be sheer coincidence. I felt like we were being involved in a very eerie incident.



After passing an incredibly difficult test, I, Dewey Percy, started working at the Magical Ministry in the spring.

I left the house that I had lived in since I was born to go and live in the Ministry's dormitory. While I intended to send part of my (presumably lofty) salary back to my home, I had no plan to go back there. That place held no good memories for me.

It was a poor household, probably the poorest in town. My terrible parents gave birth to child after child, sending them to work while they enjoyed themselves. My siblings were the only breadwinners, and since they were so busy working, they couldn't even go to the cheapest of schools and never even learned to read or write. In turn, this limited their career prospects, cursing them to a life of low-income occupations.

And what little they did earn, my parents would take to use for their own entertainment. We worked hard, but we could only afford to cover ourselves in rags and were constantly made fools of.

My siblings had come to accept that this reality was inescapable, but I had not. I remembered hearing the rumors about Maria Campbell, a girl from this town who, in addition to being smart, wielded Light Magic. Her talents had basically already secured her a future at the Magical Ministry.

I had heard about the "Magical Ministry" before, but I wasn't so sure about what it actually was, so I did some research and found out that it was the country's most prestigious organization. I imagined that it would offer pay to match. If I could work there, I would be able to escape my life of poverty.

However, the only way to be hired there would be to either be a talented magic user or to pass a difficult examination. Since I could not use magic, I was left with only the latter.

I asked my siblings to let me go to school, promising that I would keep working as normal. Between working and studying, I barely had any time left to sleep.

My clothes were little more than dirty rags, and my books were old and battered used copies that I had had to beg for. At school I was insulted and bullied for this, but I did not give up and kept applying myself.

One day, the girl I had heard so much about — Maria Campbell — came to talk to me.

“Hi! You’re a really diligent boy, aren’t you?”

She said something to that effect.

A Light Magic user, gifted from birth... The two of us were nothing alike. She had probably approached me out of pity, but I coldly sent her away.

“What would a chosen one, a Light Magic user, want to do with me? Leave me alone,” I said.

I did not want the fleeting sympathy of the privileged, because I would feel hurt and betrayed after expecting more and receiving none. I was the only one looking out for myself.

All my efforts bore fruit, and I was able to graduate school and take (and pass) the Ministry’s examination earlier than planned.

And then my life changed.

I had prepared thoroughly for the entrance ceremony, studying how to properly speak and behave around superiors. However, on my way there I met a group of people who, resenting me for having entered the Ministry at such a young age, picked a fight with me. As a result I did not make it in time for the ceremony, and only reached the Ministry during the tour of the premises.

In any case, I was now in the Ministry, and my new life there had started. I could barely contain my excitement as I passed through the building’s gate.

My excitement was, however, quickly spoiled by seeing the very girl I had so coldly rejected years prior — Maria. She reminded me of the old life which I had left behind, making me extremely uncomfortable. I wanted nothing to do with her, but she looked at me as if she wanted to say something.

I ignored her, because there was nothing that I wanted to talk about with her, neither now nor later. Unfortunately, when we were sorted for the examination, we ended up being in the same group. The way she looked at me, obviously wanting to start a conversation, was very annoying. And there was someone else even more annoying in the group.

Katarina Claes, daughter of Duke Claes. When I heard about her rank I started wondering why she would want to work at the Ministry, since I had been taught that noble women, once they were of age, would get married and stay in the house without working.

Surely there would be some important reason — for example, she maybe had incredible magic powers. But she did not. The rumors said that she was just here to pass the time until marriage.

I had spent so much time and effort to come here, but she had entered the Ministry on a whim, owing her success only to her rank. That was infuriating, and I could not help but hate her.

I never thought that I would have to travel in a group with those two people. With Katarina around, Maria's stare was even more difficult to stand.

During the mission, I was expecting her to bother everyone by acting like an arrogant, spoiled aristocrat.

Before reaching our objective, we had to stop for lunch in a small “mom and pop” restaurant. The place was not dirty and the food was not bad, but it was not exactly fit for a duchess.

I imagined that Katarina would complain about the down-to-earth cuisine we were served, but she ate it with delight while praising it profusely. I stared at her, shocked, and for some unfathomable reason, she offered me some of her bread from her plate.

I refused, and voiced my surprise at how she was enjoying the food. However,

she just said that she loved this kind of cuisine. Maybe she was not the kind of noble I thought she would be...

After cleaning her plate, she had to be stopped by Maria and Sora from ordering seconds, and the restaurant's owner even gave her some more food to take with her.

The more time we spent together, the less she seemed like what I imagined her to be.

So what if she isn't that arrogant and is kind to commoners? She is the kind of person to work at the Magical Ministry just to kill time! I told myself this every time the image I had of her in my mind started to falter.

Later, when we happened to be alone, she asked me what I had against her, and I unwittingly spoke the — offensive — truth. Even if she was friendly with commoners, that was no tone to use with a noble. Only after I was finished speaking did I realize that I had risked being severely punished for what I had said, but it was too late.

I waited for Katarina's response like a prisoner waiting for judgment... but Katarina did not reply, and just looked at me with a troubled face, making me feel very awkward.

After reaching the location for our mission, I proposed the most efficient solution, but nobody agreed with me. Katarina's carefree suggestion angered me, and I ended up voicing my complaints once again. And, like before, she replied only with an unsatisfactory silence.

We went to check the fields, and they were full of animals, many more than we had expected. Their eyes were full with fear... This fact lingered with me. I had trouble sleeping that night, and I woke up very early the following morning.

I went for a stroll to clear my mind, but I ran into the person that I least wanted to see — Maria Campbell.

She greeted me, and my face immediately betrayed how annoyed I was. I asked her what she was doing there, doing my best to convey that I wanted to be left alone, but she was unfazed.

"I was just strolling, taking in this beautiful morning, and then I saw you. I was

wondering what you were doing,” she said.

She admitted to having followed me, and then said that she wanted to talk. I could not stand the way she looked at me anymore. I wanted her to state her business and leave as soon as possible.

“Well, you know, we grew up in the same town, but we’ve never talked much. I thought it would be fun to get to know each other,” she proposed.

That was absurd and unnecessary. I had to fight on my own, and nobody would ever lend me their help.

“I think that maybe, if one is feeling down, or stressed about something, it can help to have someone to talk about it with,” she said.

“I have no such problem. Please leave me alone. If that was what you wanted to talk about, there is no need for further discussion,” I replied.

Stop looking at me like that.

“But lately you’ve been looking so much more tired than you used to...”

Shut up! What do you care?!

I made to leave, and she tried to stop me by grabbing my sleeve. I shook her hand off without a second thought.

“What would you know about that? You barely even know me! Leave me alone!”

She knows nothing! I always struggled, and nobody ever helped me. Everyone only insulted and bullied me, and I was left on my own. Ever since I was a child, I would have to hug myself and cry alone. That was how lonely I was. Life has taught me that I am alone. Nobody will help me. As if someone who was born with the gift of Light Magic could understand that! Leave me alone!

I rebuffed all she said... but she grabbed my hand again.

“...I was just like you...” she mumbled.

A Light Magic user? Just like me? That cannot be right, I thought, but her stare was so intense that I realized that she could not be lying.

“I thought that I had to do everything on my own... I can’t leave you alone,

Dewey,” she said, holding onto my hand. Her hand felt so warm... It was the first time someone had touched me so kindly.

“You don’t have to do this alone. You can rely on us,” she told me with a gentle smile.

For all my life, no matter how much I was struggling, nobody had ever helped me. My parents only thought of me as a tool, my brothers were too busy staying alive, and everyone else, far from lending me a hand, would just make fun of me. Even when I could not stand that lonely, tough life anymore and tried to rely on people, they would turn their backs on me. That was why I had sworn to live alone, without relying on anybody.

“*Leave me alone*” is what I’d said... but I did not want to be left alone. I wanted someone to be kind to me. And it was only then, in that moment, that I realized that.

The warmth from Maria’s hand ran through my body, melting away the layer of ice that had kept me apart from the rest of the world.

It was so simple. A warm touch, a few kind words, a gentle smile. This was enough to open what I had kept closed for so long, and it felt so pleasant, so good.

I cannot let anyone think less of me. Everyone is an enemy. I am alone...

All these words, one after the other, melted away.

I looked at Maria’s eyes, and being stared at did not feel unpleasant or annoying anymore. It felt good. We then went back to the house together, but there was something I had wanted to ask her.

“Say, Campbell...”

“Just call me Maria. You don’t need to be formal with me.”

“Y-Yes... So, Maria...” I said, blushing, and she giggled with a gentle smile.

“Why are you friends with Lady Claes?”

The two of them had looked friendly with each other during the trip, and I did not understand why a commoner, and a powerful Light Magic user at that, would befriend a girl like Katarina Claes.

“You mean Lady Katarina?”

“Yes. This may be rude to say, but you two have very different ranks, and I heard that she is not that powerful of a magic user. I do not even know why she is in the Ministry to begin with.”

I could not outright say that she “came to the Ministry as a pastime” to someone who seemed to be her friend.

“She’s amazing. Just talk to her and you’ll realize it,” she said with a mysterious smile.

“...Really?”

That was not a very satisfying answer, but I could not argue with that smile... and it did not take long for me to understand what she meant.

I put myself in harm’s way to protect Maria from a beast the likes of which I had never seen before.

I was close to losing consciousness after hitting my head, and I saw Maria come running towards me. She took me in her arms, despite the monster threatening to attack her.

I had tried to protect her, but ended up endangering her all the more... I was ashamed of myself. I told her to leave me there and run away, but she did not listen.

I prayed inside my heart that someone would save her, and it was then that I heard a voice.

“Hey you! Over here!” shouted Katarina while throwing rocks at the beast.

She was trying to lure it towards herself to save us. I was shocked that she would put herself in such danger for us, a couple of lowly commoners... I could not lie to myself anymore. She was not that bad of a person.

Maybe I had known that for much longer, realizing that she treated everyone as her equal, and that she was not arrogant in the least — if anything, she was extremely kind. My envy for her privileged lifestyle had clouded my vision.

She’s amazing... Maria’s words from earlier that day resonated in my mind

just as I lost consciousness.

I woke up only to find myself (much to my dismay) in Handerson's arms. I was told that the fight was over, and that Katarina had slain the beast.

The story about her joining the Ministry to kill time until marriage was nothing but a rumor. She had just been hiding her true skills... After all, Maria would never compliment her like that if that was not the case.

Katarina was not only kind, but tremendously powerful as well.

And so, I made peace with the fact that I would have to rethink my prejudices towards her.



The problem at the village had been solved, all necessary clean-up had been done, and we were ready to go back to the Ministry.

"I regret misunderstanding you. Please forgive my insolent behavior so far," said Dewey bowing deeply.

After avoiding so much as looking me in the eye for so long, Dewey now approached me with a preoccupied expression, telling me about the "wonderful personality he'd refused to acknowledge" and the "incredible powers he'd failed to recognize."

...I didn't even know who he was talking about. Not really sure what was going on, I just nodded and agreed with him, and his expression became more relaxed.

However, that only lasted for a second, and now he looked embarrassed. "I-If you have forgiven me, I would like to ask you to... teach me your ways," he said, bowing again.

I had no idea what he was going on about, but I could guess that he didn't hate me anymore and wanted to make peace, which made me very happy.

"Of course! Let's be friends," I said briskly.

"Thank you! I will do my best," he said with a really cute smile, made even more powerful by the fact that, so far, I'd only seen his annoyed expression.

Just as charming as you'd expect an otome game's love interest to be. I wasn't into younger boys, but I felt like I was in danger of falling for him.

Anyway, I was really glad we were on friendlier terms now, as that could help me find new solutions to avoid doom. Doing as my grandmother in my previous life had told me was the right decision.

Now I can focus my energy on fighting the Catastrophic Bad Ends!

The trip home was really pleasant, since I was able to speak to a nice, smiling Dewey.

We reached the Magical Ministry in the evening, and I was surprised to find all of my friends there. They said that they knew we would be coming back today, and had all come here to welcome us back. The fact that they had come both to see me off and welcome me back made me really happy.

Our examination group then went to give our greetings and a simple report to our supervisor, which turned out to be Larna.

Laura and Hart remained there to give a more detailed report, and Sora said he had to go back to his own department. Dewey, who had been told to rest by the doctor, went back home. Maria and I went into an empty room to talk with the friends who had been waiting for us. The sun was almost set, but I wanted to catch up with them after being apart for so long.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” said Sophia.

“I have brought some medicine, just in case,” added Mary.

“Don’t worry, I don’t have a single scratch,” I said, rolling up my sleeves to show my arms and rolling up my skirt to show my legs.

“Big Sister! What are you doing?! Stop!”

“That’s not something a chick should do!”

Keith, troubled, and Alan, embarrassed, scolded me.

I just wanted to show my shins, it’s not like I’d roll my skirt up so much that they could see my underwear, I thought, but I decided that actually saying that would just make them even madder at me, so I just apologized.

“I am relieved that you are not wounded, but it surprises me that your first mission would involve staying the night in such a faraway place. What kind of mission was it?” Jeord asked me.

“At first we had to get rid of tanuki, and then we had to get rid of a dragon,” I replied proudly with my chest puffed out, waiting to be praised about how incredible that was... but nobody said anything.

Huh? Why?

“...I get the tanuki, but by dragon... do you mean the giant winged beast which looks like a lizard?” asked Nicol after a while. His face showed the usual emotionless expression, but his voice sounded confused.

“Hm? Yes. It was like a huge lizard with wings.”

I wonder if they don't know about dragons. After all, even the other people in my group were surprised to see one.

“Are they rare beasts?” I asked.

“Rare...? I'm surprised they even really exist...” Alan said in disbelief.

“I have seen them in books,” said Nicol, “but I also thought that they were fictional creatures.” I'd thought that dragons would be normal in this magic world, but apparently I was wrong.

“Unbelievable as it is, the worst part is that I can believe something like that happening to you... So, how did you defeat that dragon?” asked Keith, looking appalled.

“Oh, Pochi got huge and fought it. He went all *groarrr* and defeated the dragon.” I tried my best to explain how incredible Pochi's fight had been... but again, I received no answer.

“Katarina... Pochi is the Dark Familiar that lives inside your shadow, correct? What do you mean ‘got huge’?” asked Jeord, with a slightly concerned undertone to his smile.

“Apparently it was because of the magic tool I borrowed... He just became as big as the dragon all of a sudden.”

It turned out that the tool I had borrowed was a Dark Magic tool, and Pochi

had somehow reacted to it. I was told that I could keep it, since almost no one else could use it anyway, but I thought that I wouldn't be using it for the time being. I didn't want Mother to scold me about bringing a huge dog into the garden.

In the same way, Maria had borrowed a Light Magic tool, which was why she could sense Dark Magic so well, and she also kept it after the mission. My tool was a clumsy-looking magnifying glass that could only be used to turn Pochi bigger, while Maria's was a cute golden ring that increased magical powers, which felt kind of unfair. Maybe that was the difference between the protagonist and the villainess... I wished that at least my tool had been an accessory too.

"I think I understand. I think," said Jeord, looking resigned.

"If Pochi was the one to fight the dragon, that means that you weren't in danger, right?" asked Keith.

"Of course," I said.

"Of course not," Maria said at the exact same time.

"In order to protect me, Lady Katarina tried to lure the beast her way by throwing rocks at it. She was lucky that Pochi happened to save her, but she was in extreme danger the whole time. I know that she did it for me, but..." Maria explained, on the verge of tears.

Everyone's expression changed as they heard this. They asked Maria for more details, and she obliged, including the parts where I tried to fend off the dragon with a stick and when I went against it a second time to save Pochi. The more she talked, the darker everyone's faces became.

"Y-You see, Maria was in danger, so I just acted without thinking. But in the end we were all safe, so it's fine! Right?"

"Big Sister... how many times have I told you to stay safe?" said Keith, and everyone else followed with their own complaints.

I knew that I'd done something dangerous, so they were right in scolding me... I promised myself to be more careful going forward.

It was now night time, and I went back home with Keith for the first time in two days.



I was so tired from the mission that I fell asleep as soon as I reached my bed. The next morning, Anne struggled to wake me up just in time to go to the Ministry. She said she'd tried several times already, but that I just wouldn't wake up.

I prepared in a hurry and made for the Ministry, where I would finally find out which department I was going to be assigned to.

I wonder where I'll end up... I hope it's the same department as Maria.

Once I arrived, still excited, I was told to wait for the announcement in the auditorium from the other day. On my way there, I heard someone call out to me from behind.

“Good morning, Lady Katarina!” Sophia said gently. She was carrying some stuff around.

“Good morning! Are you helping out today too?”

Sophia had also been helping out at the Ministry yesterday as she waited for me to return. I'd heard that she wouldn't be coming here every day, but I was happy that I could see my friend two days in a row.

“Yes. I came along with my brother, who had some business to take care of here. I am very glad to be able to see you for two consecutive days, Lady Katarina!”

“Me too. Back at the academy we'd see each other every day, but now that we can't, it's kind of lonely!” I said, and Sophia nodded in agreement.

“I was thinking the very same thing! Please come to my home to visit when you are not working. I will give you the most wonderful novel recommendations!”

“Thank you!”

That sounded like a great idea. I wanted to borrow a new romance novel from her... *Hm... Sophia... Romance novels... I think I'm forgetting about something... That's right! The note about the game! The one in the book!*

Right after finding something so unbelievable, I had been planning to ask Sophia, who was the owner of the book, about it. I was so busy that I'd

forgotten to, but now was the perfect chance! Thankfully, I had the note with me. I rummaged through my bag and took it out.

“Sophia, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“What could that be?”

“I found a note between the pages of the book you lent me. Do you know anything about it?” I asked, showing her the note. She stared at it for a while, confused.

“Excuse me, but... are these letters?”

“Huh?”

“Is it a foreign language?” she asked, tilting her head to one side and looking puzzled.

I took another look at the note and realized that it wasn’t written in this world’s language, but in the same Japanese I used to read and write in my previous life. I was only able to read it because I had the memories of that world with me...

What a twist. The fact that the note was written in Japanese meant that it was written by someone else who came from Japan... Did anyone else other than me reincarnate into the game?! Where were they?!

“Lady Katarina...?” Sophia asked me, with a concerned look on her face.

“S-Sorry, I was just confused about something. Anyway, you don’t know anything about this note?”

“Yes, this is the first time I have ever seen it.”

So, Sophia knew nothing about the note, but that didn’t tell me who had put it in the book. I had lost it and then found it later, which made everything even more complicated.

Was it the person who found the book in the castle? Was it the one who was holding onto it? But it had been held in a place where everyone could see it, so that meant that it could have been anyone. I decided that my next course of action would be asking Jeord, who had brought the book back to me.

“Lady Katarina, everybody is already here,” Maria, who was with Sora, called out to me from the auditorium.

After being almost late to begin with, my little detour to talk with Sophia had made me completely late. I needed to know more about the note, but I also had to go to the auditorium as soon as possible!

“Sophia, I’ll come to visit as soon as I have a free day!”

“Yes, please do.”

I hurried towards Sora and Maria. *I’ll ask Jeord and the servants at the castle about the note later.*

All the newcomers were neatly arranged inside the auditorium, so I joined them right before the announcement started. Representatives from the different departments started reading everyone’s names out loud.

“Magic and Magical Powers Research Department: Maria Campbell, Dewey Percy...”

Maria and Dewey will be in the same department, working under Cyrus...

After a while, my name was read too.

“Magic Tool Laboratory: Katarina Claes, Sora Smith...”

For some reason, all the people around me seemed to hold their breath for a second after hearing that. *I wonder why.*

Unfortunately I didn’t end up in the same department as Maria, but at least I was together with Sora, which made me feel a bit more confident.

After all the names had been read, the department directors came to greet the newcomers, and I saw Cyrus approach Maria.

Meanwhile, I was approached by Larna Smith.

“Hey, Miss Katarina. Welcome to my department,” she greeted me.

She had plain brown hair and blue eyes, but, as a master of disguise, that was but one of her many looks. *Ahh, so Larna is the director of the Magic Tool Laboratory.*

“You didn’t realize even though she lent you those magic tools?” Sora asked

under his breath, noticing my surprise.

He had a point. I followed him and Larna into the Magical Tool Laboratory office, which was located near the warehouse I'd visited a few days earlier.

"Please, please, come in," she said, and I excitedly stepped into what would be my new workplace.

"Oh, Katarina, sweetie, is that you?"

"So you ended up here."

"You're that girl from the first day!"

"Welcome."

I was welcomed by a crossdressing macho, a man who always managed to get lost, a flamboyant narcissist, and a woman who only talked through a puppet. As if those four weirdos weren't enough, there was a mad-scientist looking person holding a smoking beaker while smiling creepily, and another one who seemed to be curling a dumbbell up and down while working. That moving arm was all I could see peeking out from behind a pile of stacked-up documents. *Is that person going to be okay under all those papers?*

I stood there, frozen, and Sora whispered to me again.

"Miss Larna just goes around gathering all the weirdest people. That's why we ended up like this. This is the department that newcomers want to go to the least."

Oh, I remember the Biomagic Department being the second on that ranking... to think I've come to the one in first place...

"Sora's already joined us as an apprentice, so he knows the place. Katarina, these are going to be your new teammates. Everyone, this is Katarina Claes. Be nice to her!" Larna said, sounding like a teacher who was introducing a transfer student to her new grade school class.

Everyone responded with a "Welcome," but if I was going to be surrounded by people like these while trying to avoid doom... Honestly, I was a bit scared.

"I wonder if I'll be able to fit in with these... unique people," I muttered to myself, and Sora heard me.

"You won't have any problem... if anything, you're even more unique," he whispered back, but unfortunately I didn't hear him.

And so I started my new life, ready to face the many adversities that would come with it.

Jeord Stuart's Melancholy Tea-Time

"Hm... these tarts are delicious," I said while stuffing my mouth with the wonderful tarts that were in front of me on a table in one of the castle's guest rooms.

"I am glad you enjoy them. I bought them from a famous patisserie just for you, Katarina," said the golden-haired, blue-eyed, smiling prince sitting in front of me.

"*Nom nom nom...* Thank you very much. May I, uhm, partake of those cookies as well?" I asked, putting my sights on the next target while still thanking him for the tart.

"Of course. I have prepared all of these sweets for you, so you may eat however much you please," he said, still smiling. "However, why is everyone here? I recall inviting my fiancée for tea, and no one else," he continued, looking at Keith, Mary, Alan, Sophia, Nicol, and Maria, who were all sitting together with us.

"I have been instructed to accompany Big Sister whenever she goes out for tea," replied Keith with a smile.

"The more the merrier when having tea! Is that not so, Alan?" asked Mary, smiling as well.

"Yeah, definitely," said Alan, who had come here with her. For some reason, he seemed to be avoiding his brother's gaze.

"So Alan was the one who informed all of you..." mumbled Jeord with a menacing smile that made Alan shiver.

"Indeed, it is much more fun to have tea with lots of friends. However, I thought that you two, Jeord, Alan, were going to be busy preparing the party at the castle. I understand that there is not much time left," Nicol said to break the tension that had started forming in the room.

"We have taken care of the dresses and all information that had to be shared

about the special guests, so we actually do not have much left to do,” replied Jeord, still displaying his dark, scary smile.

“Oh, good then. I heard that it is going to be a big party, so I assumed that the preparations would be troublesome as well.”

“Yes, our oldest brother took things into his hands and decided to make the event exceptionally large,” Jeord explained, sounding annoyed.

That was understandable; the larger the party, the more burdensome it would be for those being celebrated. But I was looking forward to it — a castle party for the princes’ graduation meant one thing: delicious treats. I still remembered how good the buffet at their 15th birthday party was... *I can’t wait to see what dishes they have this time!*

“...and so we have been asking those who are coming from far away and those who are most close to us. What do you say, Katarina?”

“A-Ah, yes.”

I was so busy thinking of the buffet that I didn’t really hear what Jeord was saying, so I ended up replying without having a clue. Everyone seemed to get tense around me... *Wait, what happened?*

“Big Sister, were you listening?” asked Keith with a stern expression on his face.

“Well, I, uhm...”

“...As you can see, she did not really hear. So her answer does not count, Jeord.”

“Yes, it appears that she was slightly distracted. Let me repeat myself then, Katarina. Will you stay the night at the castle after the party? We will have the best snacks for the night and a wonderful breakfast waiting for you in the morning.”

“It shall be my pleasure!” I instantly replied to Jeord’s enticing proposal. The snacks and breakfast served at the castle... I couldn’t pass on that.

“...Then I will stay the night too. My family would not allow Katarina to stay at the castle by herself,” Keith said with a sigh.

That's true enough...

"There is no reason to worry, Keith. I, her fiancé, am at the castle. She would not be by herself."

"I appreciate the thought, but I cannot let that be."

"But you see, we need time together to deepen our bond."

Jeord and Keith kept talking to each other, both of them smiling.

"Deepening the bond between fiancés? That sounds wonderful," Mary joined them, smiling as well. "Alan, may I stay the night at the castle too? To deepen our bond, you know."

"Huh? What are you talking..."

"Oh, so I can? Thank you!"

"...Yeah," Alan said, nodding with an indecipherable expression.

"That must be nice..." Sophia said to herself.

"If all the others are going to stay, why don't we do the same ourselves? Father said that he would be so busy on that day that he'd have to spend the night at the castle, so I will ask whether we can stay too," said Nicol, who was, as always, looking out for his sister.

"Really? Thank you so much, Big Brother!" Sophia said with her eyes twinkling. He didn't show it on his face, but Nicol was obviously very pleased at Sophia's reaction.

So we're all going to stay at the castle together after all! Great! But wait...

"Of course, I will also ask for a room for you. Do not worry," Nicol said to Maria, who was looking disappointed.

That's Nicol for you. Always the thoughtful big brother.

I was already anticipating spending the night at the castle with all of us there.

"...So be it. You may all stay the night at the castle after the party," Jeord said with a sigh. Then he continued, "And once the party is over, you may all go to your rooms and rest, for I am sure you will be very tired."

“But Prince Jeord,” said Mary, “since we will all be together, it would be such a waste to go to sleep so early. Perhaps we should have a tea party amongst girls.”

“A pajama party! What a wonderful idea!” I said, and Mary gave me a confused stare.

“A pajama party? What would that be?”

That's... Hm, that's difficult to explain.

“It's a wonderful party where girls chat until morning,” I explained, and all of a sudden Mary, Sophia, and Maria were excitedly nodding in unison.

In my previous life I sometimes stayed over at my friend's place for (otaku) pajama parties, but I'd never done so in this world, so I was really looking forward to it.

We were already deciding what time to meet and what to bring with us when Jeord called out to Mary.

“Lady Mary, I remember you saying that you wanted to deepen your bond with Alan. If you have a party with the girls, what would be the point in staying the night?”

“Did I say that?” she said with a smile, dodging the question, but I didn't even hear that exchange.

Now that we had a pajama party to look forward to, I was even more excited about the party at the castle. I couldn't wait.



After seeing my fiancée, Katarina Claes, off, I was walking through the hallway on the way to my room. I was eager to give my little brother Alan a piece of my mind, but he was probably savvy enough to realize this and run off somewhere.

I was not in the mood to go after him, so I decided that it could wait. Even if he had not informed Mary about my plans, she would have likely found out about them from a different source.

More importantly, Keith was supposed to be accompanying his father the Duke on his official affairs, so why was he here with Katarina today? I made a

note to myself to investigate this.

Truly, things could not have turned out any worse.

I had invited Katarina for tea, looking forward to spending some time alone with her, and she had arrived with a whole battalion alongside her. That was enough to indicate that my plans would not go smoothly...

At least she would stay the night at the castle, so I only needed to find a way to be alone with her. I knew that it would prove difficult — not so much because of Katarina herself, but because of all the others who vehemently guarded her.

If anything, I was surprised at how defenseless she still was. She took very little convincing...

That could have been acceptable when we first met as eight-year-old children, but she was now a lady of eighteen. It was nigh unbelievable that she would so easily agree to stay the night at the home (well, the castle) of her fiancé.

Had I known nothing about her, I would have believed that she was extraordinarily enthusiastic about our relationship... but she had just accepted without thinking too much about it. She did not realize that she was a fine lady in the flower of her youth. If she was so forgiving to my invitations despite the heavy-handedness of my advances, I could barely imagine how oblivious she would be to other men. In particular, I was sure that her guard was completely down in regard to her adopted brother Keith, and that made me furious.

I wanted to make her mine without delay. I wanted to be the only one to enjoy her endearing obliviousness.

I had wanted to marry her as soon as we graduated from the academy, but, because of the circumstances at the time, I had to wait. This made me all the more anxious.

I was displaying my usual smile, but on the inside, I was agitated.

“And we should put something more shiny over there...” I heard someone say. It was Jeffrey, my oldest brother, joyfully preparing for the party.

Why he was so ecstatic about this, and why he would go to the trouble of directing the decorations, something that the servants were more than capable of doing on their own, was a complete mystery to me. However, staying there long enough to find out could mean that Jeffrey would see me, and that was the last thing I wanted, so I swiftly went past him.

Once I was at a safe distance, I started wallowing in my hate for that carefree, oblivious face of his. He was one of the reasons Katarina was not yet mine.

He had a fiancée, but he seemed in no hurry to marry her. Not that they disliked each other, at least as far as I could tell, but they were simply waiting, despite the many voices telling them to make haste so that he may succeed Father.

My second older brother was also refraining from marriage in a needless act of consideration towards his elder. It seemed that he was so close to his own fiancée, however, that he would have married her instantly had it not been for that.

And if I were to take the lead and be the first to marry, the people around me would include me in the competition for the crown. That would be terrible; if I had to worry about succeeding as king, I would be left with little time to enjoy with my Katarina.

I would be willing to struggle for the throne if she asked me to, but, quite to the contrary, she seemed to prefer the peaceful life of lower ranks, so much so that she talked about wanting to become a farmer... words that no other noble woman would ever utter. If I did become king, I could imagine her leaving to escape the responsibility. She was a very unique lady, but that was what I loved most about her.

I still did not know why Ian was waiting so long to marry. He said that he wanted to become king, but it did not seem like he meant it. I could never tell what he was thinking. And to think that my other older brother, Jeffrey, was so much more genuine and easy to read... I very much wanted him to hasten his pace and marry, even if it meant an empty marriage done only for show.

Lately the supporters of my two older brothers, weary of waiting for them to proceed, had started inciting me to consider becoming king. Sending them away

was increasingly bothersome. Between chasing them off, helping the next student council succeed ours after graduation, and preparing for the party, I was sick and tired of it all.

Thinking too much had made my head hurt. I felt a sharp pain in my forehead and placed a hand onto it. Now more than ever, I needed Katarina's innocent smile. I really wished I could have enjoyed it peacefully today, just the two of us...

"Jeord!"

Maybe because of what I had been thinking, I first believed that I was hallucinating. But sure enough...

"Jeord!" said that voice once again, and, as I turned around to look, I found that it came from the very person I was thinking about.

"I finally reached you... You walk too fast!" said Katarina, smiling as she tried to catch her breath.

"I thought you had gone home... What happened?"

I had seen her off all the way to the carriage, so why was she here? I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"I was already on my way home, but I forgot something. Since we were still close enough to the castle, I asked to come back."

What could have she forgotten? There was nothing left in the room where she was having tea. While I looked at her in confusion, she started searching her bag and finally took out a paper bag which she then offered to me.

"I wanted to give you this, but I forgot!"

"...Thank you," I said, taking the paper bag, which seemed to be full of tea leaves.

"It's a special tea that helps with tiredness, since lately you've been looking so exhausted. It works best when it's fresh, so I wanted you to have it today. Drink it as soon as you have the time, will you?" she said with a smile.

Katarina was thick. Extremely, unfathomably thick. When it came to love, she was so thick that it had me worried.

However, when it came to my being tired, or otherwise weak, she was surprisingly attentive. I had hidden my true self since I was a child, and could veil my weak, tired moments with a smile. I never showed that side of myself, pretending to always be fine.

Most people were tricked by that... but not Katarina.

And then she would show me her kindness, like she did right now, without even realizing how much that meant to me. She had asked for the carriage to come back to the castle, and then she had run all the way here — just to give me this tea. Looking at her still catching her breath filled me with more love than I could ever explain.

Before I had time to think about it, I had already grabbed her supple body from the shoulders and hugged it against my chest.

“P-Prince Jeord?!” she said in surprise, trying to get away.

“Please. Just a while longer,” I said, with a slightly hoarse voice, and she stopped moving. She was so receptive to changes in my well-being that she must have realized how much I needed this.

I relished in Katarina’s soft warmth as I basked in her kindness. The headache that had been vexing me until moments ago was now completely gone, as was all the tiredness I had been feeling.

Katarina started moving again, indicating that this hug was to finish. Years ago we could have hugged much longer, but now that she had finally started seeing me as a man, she would become too embarrassed after a while. It was a shame, but at least she saw me as a man.

I grudgingly let her go, but what she did next surprised me.

She grabbed me, hugged my head against her chest, and started caressing my hair while chanting something I did not understand.

“Pain, pain, go away! Come back another day!”



I was frozen at that unexplainable turn of events, but she eventually released me.

“Your head was hurting, right? This is a charm to make the pain go away.”

How did she know about my headache? And what was this charm I had never heard of? I was so confused I did not know how to respond.

“Jeord, your face is all red! Are you sure you don’t have a fever?” she said, moving a hand towards me.

“No, I am fine. I am completely fine,” I said instinctively, before putting a hand to my face and dropping my head, looking at the floor.

I was not one to show my face to others when it was red with embarrassment, which made me even more embarrassed. I started thinking of mathematical formulas and other unrelated, boring things to calm down.

“Thank you, Katarina. I feel much better now,” I finally managed to tell her with a smile.

“I haven’t done anything, really, but I’m glad!” she said, smiling back at me.

Ah, I want to take her to my room and never let her go...

“Big Sister, there you are. I had a hard time finding you since you were running around so fast. We should go back home before it becomes late, lest we make everyone worry,” said Keith, appearing out of nowhere as if he had heard my thoughts.

There it is, that noisy insect, come to buzz around Katarina with his stern face.

“You’re right. Well then, Prince Jeord, see you again,” Katarina said with an elegant bow.

“I will see you to the carriage again,” I said, taking her hand to escort her.

“Thank you, but she came back of her own accord, we would not want to impose that much,” Keith said, trying to take her from me.

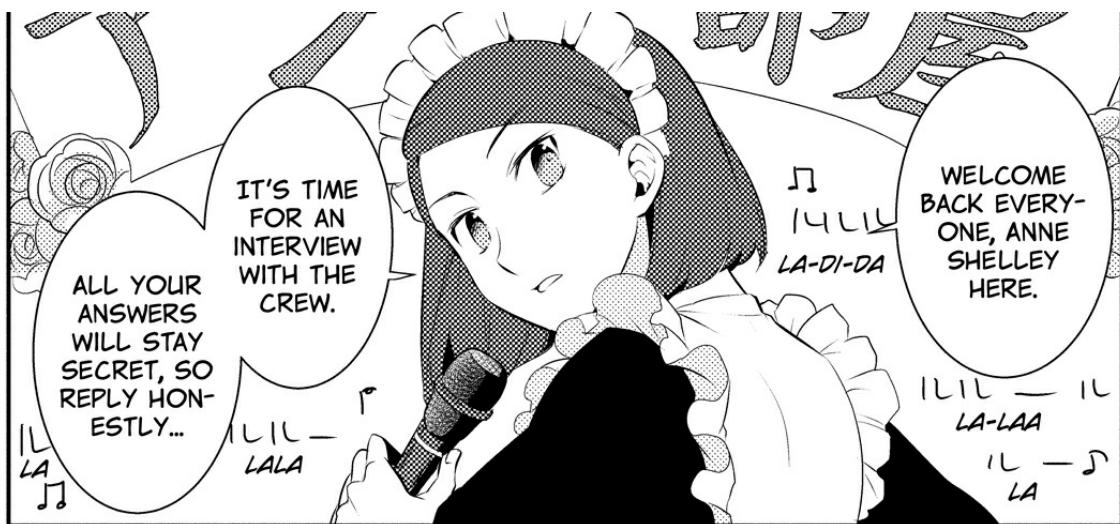
“Not at all; she came back for me, so it is my duty to escort her outside,” I said, silencing him and accompanying Katarina to her carriage.

He kept looking sideways at me, but I just put on my usual smile, with some

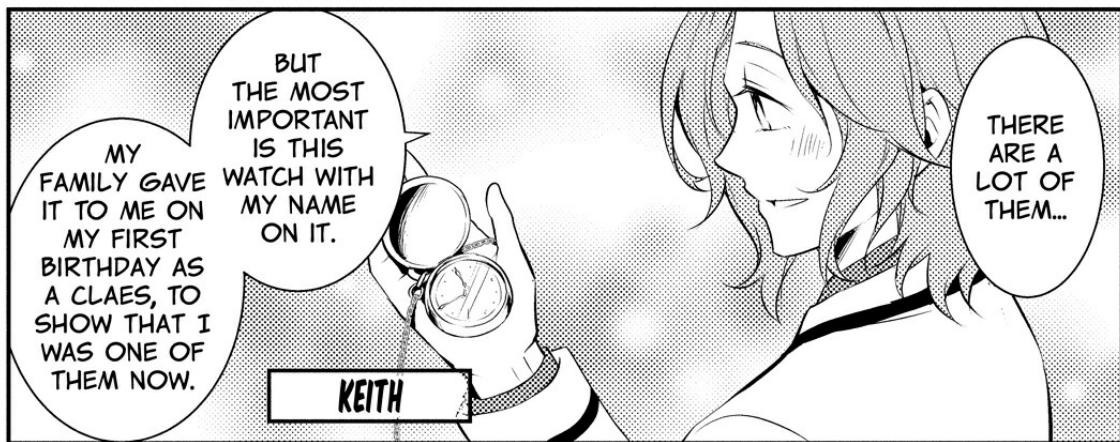
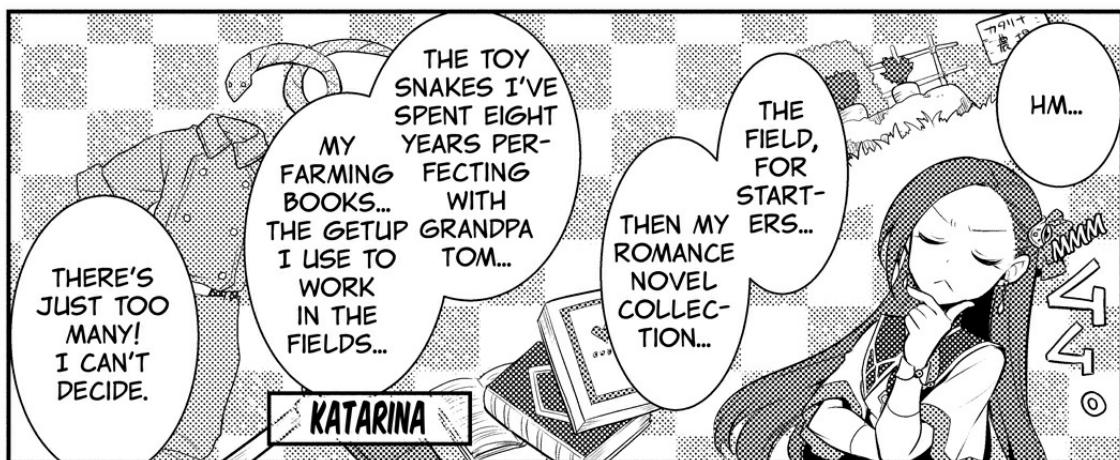
menace mixed in for good measure.

You are going to have her to yourself once you are home, let me at least have her as long as we are at the castle.

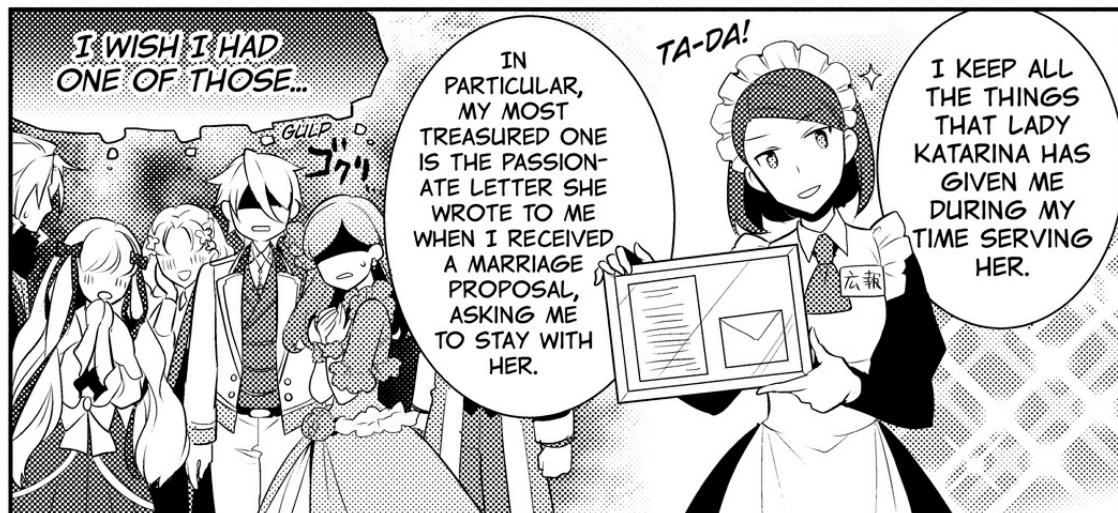
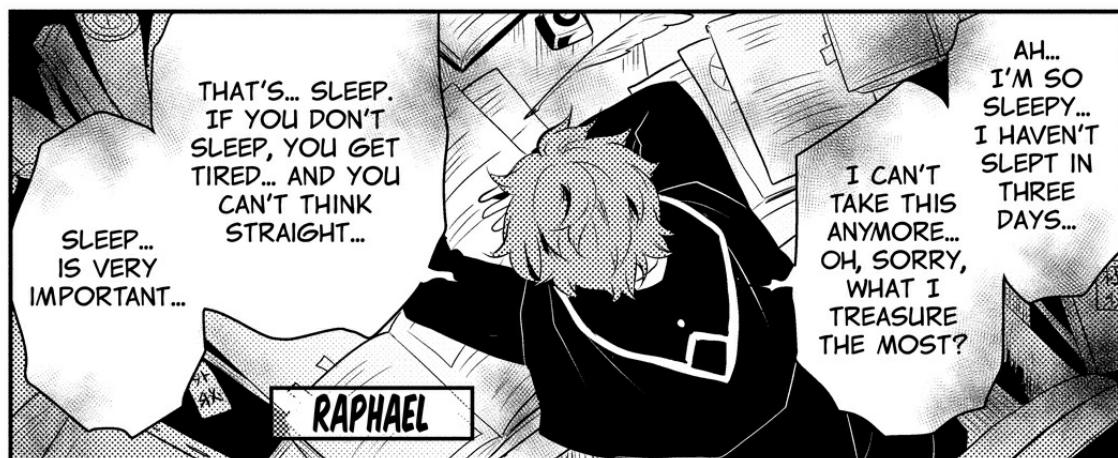
As I saw the carriage disappear into the distance, I swore to myself once again that, no matter how many people were against me, I would win Katarina over.



WHAT OBJECT DO YOU TREASURE THE MOST?







Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Satoru Yamaguchi.

My Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! has already reached its 6th volume. I never would have thought that I'd be able to publish so many volumes. This is all thanks to you, my readers.

In this volume, we see Katarina excited and nervous about her first ever job at the Magical Ministry, which also happens to be the setting for *Fortune Lover II*. Just as she had relaxed after avoiding the Bad Ends of the first game, here come new routes threatening her safety, and she does her best (despite panicking) to counter them.

Back in Katarina's previous world, a new otome game called *Fortune Lover II - Love at the Magical Ministry* came out, but she doesn't know anything about it, and so she goes to the Ministry unprepared.

There are a lot of new characters and new adventures waiting for Katarina in this new setting. Please look forward to them!

Once again, we have some wonderful illustrations to accompany the story. Thank you as always, Nami Hidaka!

And a few days after this very volume, Nami Hidaka's manga based on *My Next Life as a Villainess* is going to be published. In the manga young Katarina is very cute, and she becomes incredibly beautiful as she grows up. Please read it!

I would also like to thank my editor and all the other people that helped make this volume a reality. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Satoru Yamaguchi



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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 6

by Satoru Yamaguchi

Translated by Marco Godano Edited by Aimee Zink

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