

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. On the left, a young man with dark hair and purple eyes stands with his arms crossed, wearing a dark blue military-style uniform with gold embroidery and a brown satchel. He is looking towards the right. On the right, a goblin maiden with long, flowing white hair and green skin is shown from the waist up, wearing a purple dress with gold trim and a white lace collar. She is holding a needle and thread, appearing to be sewing or mending something. The scene is set outdoors with soft, pastel-colored flowers and foliage in the background. A large, stylized number '1' is in the top left corner.

1

Using a
Past Life to
Keep a Joyful
Wife

THE REINCARNATOR
AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Author
Shinten-Shinchi

Illustrator
Tokima

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. On the left, a young man with dark hair and purple eyes stands in a dark, ornate military-style uniform with gold embroidery. He has a brown satchel slung over his shoulder. On the right, a goblin maiden with long, flowing white hair and green skin is shown from the waist up. She wears a purple dress with a white lace collar and a white headpiece adorned with flowers. She is holding a small, glowing object in her hands. The scene is set outdoors with a large, arched window or doorway in the background, through which a bright, sunny day is visible. Pink petals are falling around the characters. In the top left corner, a large white number '1' is inside a blue circle. A diamond-shaped text box is on the left side, and the title is at the bottom in three separate boxes. The author and illustrator names are at the very bottom.


1

Using a
Past Life to
Keep a Joyful
Wife

THE REINCARNATOR
AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Author
Shinten-Shinchi

Illustrator
Tokima



"Please marry me.
I promise I'll make you
happy, so please don't
give up on your own
happiness."


**Ginorious
Adolni**



**Anastasia
Sevensworth**


THE REINCARNATOR
AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S
HAPPILY EVER AFTER


Using a
Past Life to
Keep a Joyful
Wife




Gino **faced** deadly monsters to
find a flower to **give** to Ana.

“I can’t believe you were able to cut
right through the winged wolf with a
single slash!”




Sensing Ana was in **danger**,
Gino used body **fortification** magic and stealth
magic as he ran through town at **full speed**.



“My mother-in-law smiled like a kid who’d successfully pulled off a prank. She now truly looked as if she were in her midtwenties.”

Gino used his previous life’s knowledge to start up a magic lotion business to get the funding to find a cure for Ana’s condition.

Jennifer
Sevensworth



Gino **knows** all about
how **wonderful** Ana is!

“Ana is talented.
You’ve all simply failed
to realize that.”

C O N T E N T S



Chapter 1: A Marriage Talk with Status Disparity Between the Premier Ducal Family and the Destitute Viscount

Chapter 2: The First Step to Change

Chapter 3: Her Curse and First Ring

Chapter 4: Ginorious Wants to Make His Fiancée Shine, and a Kidnapping Incident

Chapter 5: The Embroidery Contest and the Friend Who Loves Embroidery

Chapter 6: Ginorious Protects His Fiancée from a Group of Spiteful Girls

Chapter 7: Mutual Feelings

Chapter 8: A Mother's Love, a Daughter's Feelings

Afterword



Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Chapter 1: A Marriage Talk with Status Disparity Between the Premier Ducal Family and the Destitute Viscount Family](#)
4. [Chapter 2: The First Step to Change](#)
5. [Chapter 3: Her Curse and First Ring](#)
6. [Chapter 4: Ginorious Wants to Make His Fiancée Shine, and a Kidnapping Incident](#)
7. [Chapter 5: The Embroidery Contest and the Friend Who Loves Embroidery](#)
8. [Chapter 6: Ginorious Protects His Fiancée from a Group of Spiteful Girls](#)
9. [Chapter 7: Mutual Feelings](#)
10. [Chapter 8: A Mother's Love, a Daughter's Feelings](#)
11. [Afterword](#)
12. [Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)
13. [About J-Novel Club](#)
14. [Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: A Marriage Talk with Status Disparity Between the Premier Ducal Family and the Destitute Viscount Family

Ginorious

“My goodness. I had no idea the head of the up-and-coming Rurban Trading Company was still a child.”

These were the first words said to me by the manager of a trading company who was meant to be presenting a large trade deal to me—the entire reason I’d decided to attend this merchants’ party.

“It’s true that at sixteen years old, I’m still considered a child. However, I don’t believe that will have any negative effects on this deal,” I said.

“My apologies, but I’ll need to put our trade on hold.” He sighed before walking away.

As rude as he was, I didn’t feel at all angry. Why would I when I could read him like a book? He was anticipating that by shifting the blame onto me for why this huge deal was about to fall through, I’d panic and scramble to compromise.

It was an effective strategy when dealing with younger people, who tended to be more emotionally volatile and easy to bait into seeing red, rendering them incapable of making levelheaded decisions. Unfortunately for him, this tactic had no effect on me—someone who had the memories of all eighty-two years of his previous life. I’d seen my fair share of unreasonable events after living as long as I had. This game of his was nothing to me.

Once I began chatting with the other traders, another merchant by the name of Tom came up to me.

“Are you sure about that, Mr. Adolni, sir? That’d be a shame considering the large amount I’m offering with this trade. I think you should go after him and

talk things through.”

For the record, Tom was in cahoots with the guy who’d walked away. The risk in upsetting the person you wanted to do business with was losing their business permanently. That’s where the “smooth talker” came into play. Tom’s job was to smooth things over and convince me to chase after the guy who’d left. When I did, he’d apologize for his rudeness and overly praise me for my maturity. This was all part of the setup—to create a situation where I’d want to compromise with the original merchant.

Both of them were in their forties, which in my eyes was still very young. The very act of hiring a “smooth talker”—a cliché—made it easy to discern his true intentions. He wanted this deal to go through. By deliberately upsetting the person he wanted to trade with, though, he ran the risk of having it backfire on him. His willingness to employ such a high-risk strategy stemmed from his vitality, courtesy of his youth.

“Oh, I see. You have reservations about doing business with a kid like me as well?” I asked.

“Of course. You’re still quite young,” Tom replied.

My full name was Ginorious Adolni, and I was the fourth son of a destitute viscount. The customs of this country dictated that the eldest son take over as head of the family; therefore, there’d never been a chance that the sun would shine on me in that regard. Furthermore, our family hadn’t exactly ever been in a position where they could focus their attention on anyone but my eldest brother, the heir. From the start, it had only ever been a matter of time before I lost my status as a noble.

For those in my situation, it was typical to choose the path of knighthood and achieve status that way, loath to falling down the social hierarchy. I, however, had chosen the commoner’s path, even choosing to be a merchant.

Once I had decided on my vocation, it was best that I start training as soon as possible. There was no age restriction on conducting business in this country, so I’d been preparing to live my life independently since I was around ten years old by running my own merchant company.

I’d been negotiating with adults and doing business since that young age.

These men weren't the first people to try this trick on me, nor were they even the second. If they'd done their homework, they would've immediately found out how I dealt with guys like them. *The reason you two lost is because you couldn't even bother to investigate me.*

"I'd now like to introduce the Rurban Trading Company's new product," I announced to everyone gathered there.

These words were the signal to have a mirror brought in. It was a single pane of glass with a plate of silver on one side—the exact same as mirrors of the world I'd come from. I knew how to make them thanks to what I'd learned in high school in Japan. I was fortunate that it was such a standard lesson, as we'd learned about it from a chemistry class experiment.

Up until now, these merchants had only known about metal-based mirrors that needed to be polished enough to be reflective. The vivid reflectiveness of the glass mirror elicited sounds of surprise from everyone.

New products typically sold very well wholesale before they were distributed for commercial sales. And at a party filled with merchants, every single person there knew they couldn't let this opportunity escape them, so they madly flocked to me. What had once been a social gathering became a room to conduct business with me.

This was precisely the reason I'd chosen to become a merchant instead of a knight. The knowledge from my past life was best put to use in this way.

I'd borrowed money from my father in order to start my company. It wasn't much though—maybe enough to afford a single horse-drawn carriage. But that was the kind of paltry amount expected of a poor noble. Six years later, my business had grown large enough to have locations in essentially every major city in the nation, becoming a second-tier company. It was all thanks to the unfair advantage I had from my previous life's experience.

"I'm sorry about our earlier interaction. Let's start our negotiations again."

The merchant and his "smooth-talking" collaborator who'd underestimated me because of my young age had approached me once more. *Well, allow me to give you a taste of your own medicine. It behooves me as your senior in life to*

teach you that, for high-risk methods, you need to do your homework first.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’ll have to ask that you return at another time,” I said.

“Wh-Why?!”

The surprise was palpable in Tom’s voice. He must not have thought that even he’d be denied the opportunity to buy from me.

“Didn’t the two of you say you had reservations about trading with a child like me?” I asked. “I understand your unease, and to be honest, I have doubts of my own. After all, who knows when you’ll pull out this reason again to suddenly cancel our business? I prefer to go for trades that come with a guarantee of stability.”

I left them with those words and then moved on to talk with the other merchants. As I did, the two of them backed away with bitter expressions.

After everyone had placed their orders, the duo approached me once more, apologized, and proposed a new contract that included large concessions. That’s why I decided to use their trick against them. I praised them for their magnanimity that allowed them to apologize to a child, and proposed further compromises on their end. Though both of their expressions soured, they most likely realized that since I’d given them a taste of their own medicine, I’d been reading their every move.

It’s okay. People learn from their mistakes. You two are still young. I’m sure this experience will nourish your growth. We wrapped up our negotiations, and now we were chatting after coming to an amicable-enough agreement.

“Of course, I plan on getting married. It’s absolutely necessary if one wants to obtain happiness,” I said.

“I think you might be wrong there. You don’t need to get married to be happy.”

“Tom’s right. There are a bunch of people who are unhappy after getting married.”

These two are still young, so they don’t know about the crushing loneliness

that comes from living by yourself at an old age. As someone who used to be infamous in their area for being repulsive, I'd ended up being unable to marry and had lived as a lonely old man.

It was the same painful pattern of solitude everyday—eating by myself and then eventually sleeping without talking to anyone even once. I had no desire to experience that ever again.

My biggest failure in my past life was how I'd given up on marriage due to women being repulsed by me as if I'd been a bug. This time, though, I wouldn't give up no matter what. I'd keep holding out for a miracle no matter how much women hated me. *I will get married.*

"For some reason, it seems that your stance on marriage is the one thing you won't budge on."

"It's surprising how fixated you are despite being so young."

The two men didn't share the same opinion as me. *I guess my desire to get married really might be greater than most people's.*

"At any rate, I plan to immediately register with a matchmaker as soon as I'm of age. With the advice of a professional, even I might be able to get married."

"A matchmaker? So let me get this straight. On the one hand, you say you don't want to give up on marriage, but on the other hand, you've given up on finding love on your own?"

Unfortunately, I had to excuse myself in the middle of our discussion when a servant from my household came to tell me that my father had summoned me immediately. *It must be pretty urgent. I need to get back home pronto.*

As I was leaving the venue, a number of young women started calling out to me.

"Would you like to have a cup of tea with me?" one asked.

"Oh, sorry, but there's an urgent matter that I need to attend to at home," I said quickly, practically fleeing back to my house.

My reaction to women's unexpected attention had been like this for as long as I could remember. I'd get nervous, and then run if I could.

I had an abundance of life experience due to retaining my past life's memories; that being said, I still had zero experience with women. They had found me repulsive in my past life, so I'd naturally distanced myself from them, and since I'd done that for so many decades, I reflexively ended up repeating my tendencies in this life as well. As a result, I'd had next to no personal conversations with women in this life either.

It was just like how, even though it might be common to assume that one would naturally become more open-minded and a better leader as one grew older, that was absolutely not the case. In actuality, the exceptional leadership of elders was usually a result of long, painstaking experience managing subordinates, and it was their continuous perseverance that made them flexible. There were simply some things one couldn't learn without experience, no matter how many years you lived.

Fortunately for me, the necessity to interact with women while doing business was minimal, since this was a country where women were expected to stay home and men to go out and work. Since there weren't many female merchants, I could continue working without having to flounder through interactions with women in a professional setting.



"The Sevensworth family?!" my older sister and mother exclaimed simultaneously.

During our postdinner tea, my father began speaking about an arranged marriage for me. The fact that it was with the daughter of the premier duke despite us being a poor viscount family was such a mismatch that no one could hold back their surprise.

This was the reason I'd been called back so suddenly. Father had been completely caught off guard by marriage talks with a hugely powerful noble family.

My oldest brother, my father's heir, wasn't present. He was busy reviewing the territory's security forces and organizing an emergency summons to clear out monsters. It was all in preparation for our country's only premier noble visiting. As a result, our territory had been thrown into a panic.

“That’s right. We just received a letter expressing their interest in a marriage deal. Your partner will be the lady Anastasia Sevensworth. She’s their only daughter and the apple of their eye.”

“W-Wait! This doesn’t make any sense! Why is Gino getting a marriage proposal from an incredible family that’s completely out of his league?!” my older sister demanded, slamming the table, her reddish-brown eyes widening.

A typical daughter of a noble family wouldn’t talk like this, nor would they slam the table, but this was completely on-brand for my sister. She wasn’t exactly very ladylike to begin with.

“They’re a premier ducal family, and they only have one daughter, so if they’re having someone marry into their family, they want to be sure that person is not only brilliant, but also someone they can trust to take the reins. Gino is famous in high society for his great success with his merchant company and his wisdom in running a territory. He’s also the same age as their daughter. He’s the perfect candidate for her.”

Having proved my worth with my success as a merchant, I’d been asked for my opinions on running the territory. After following my suggestions for improvements, the territory was on the mend despite having been on the verge of collapse. This world was very behind in terms of technology compared to Japan. Even the knowledge I’d vaguely gleaned from reading the newspapers in Japan was enough to be revolutionary in this world.

“But you said Gino’s allowed to pick his own wife since he has no choice but to become a commoner!” my sister practically snapped at my father.

“I did. However, this is a request from the premier duke. It goes without saying that he has no right to refuse. I do feel bad for this turning into a situation where we can’t respect Gino’s will, though,” he replied with a grim expression.

I feel bad about how angry my sister’s gotten and how sorry my father feels, but honestly, I’m perfectly okay accepting this sudden change to my life plan. I’d been subjected to all kinds of unfair treatment in my previous life. After all that, I had no inclination at all to fight against the unreasonableness of someone in power anymore. I’d already learned that it was wise to accept their will and

make the best of the situation from there.

“But even so, he has to marry *the* Goblin Maiden?!”

Suddenly, I was met with this unfamiliar term that came out of my sister’s mouth, so I turned to my father to inquire.

“Oh, you don’t know, do you, Gino?” he replied. “I suppose you were set on becoming a commoner, so you’ve had no interest in any high society gossip,” he muttered before launching into an explanation without letting me get a single word in.

According to him, the epithet had come about because her appearance resembled a goblin’s. Her looks were apparently famously appalling in high society, which made it difficult for her family to find a marriage partner. Evidently, the Sevensworths had been sending marriage proposals to every exceptional, well-known young man in order from highest status to lowest, and now they’d reached our family.

It all finally made sense. No matter how much I was praised for being a prodigy, never in my wildest dreams would I think that a premier duke would want his daughter to marry the fourth son of a viscount. I’d been thinking there had to be a reason he’d want to ignore the difference in our statuses.

He who married the daughter of the Sevensworth family would eventually become their family head. The ultimate responsibility that came with being the head of a powerful family demanded high capability.

There were those exceptional enough to take over as heads of great houses, but they were few in number and and high in demand. Thus, they were easily able to secure decent social standing and beautiful wives on their own merits.

Were one of them to wed the Sevensworth daughter, it would mean marrying a hideous woman despite potentially inheriting a dukedom, and marrying into the family would make extramarital affairs risky. For these reasons, no exceptional candidates had even entertained marriage talks. But this kind of thinking didn’t really make too much sense to me, so I decided to press my father further.

“I told you she’s the same age as you, right?” he answered. “That means the

prospective husbands that her family has been trying to set her up with are also young like you—teenagers. At your age, it's normal to think that it's better to have a beautiful woman by your side while you're young rather than to marry into a family early in order to inherit the highest possible status when you're middle-aged. I know that's how I felt when I was young, and I'm sure you can echo that sentiment too, right?"

Well, no, actually, but I'm not going to try and argue. Of course, there were some people who'd prioritize obtaining the ducal status over the looks of their spouse. But those kinds of people who plotted to ascend the ranks through marriage were always lacking the qualities that would enable them to obtain status any other way. In those cases, such schemers wouldn't be able to slip past the scrutiny of the Sevensworth family.

They were a pillar of this country and a powerful family that supported many citizens and industries in this vast territory. They couldn't afford to have a successor who was anything less than exceptional.

"Listen carefully. Keep comments about their daughter's appearance to yourself. Let me repeat that—you absolutely cannot show even the tiniest hint of disapproval of her appearance on your face. Keep your mouth shut. If you upset her in any way, it'll be child's play for them to wipe out our family." Father impressed these points upon me.

If he's repeating himself, he must be very on edge.

"Hey, Gino, are you sure this is okay with you? You do know that if you marry into their family, you absolutely can't cheat on her, right? If you accept, you won't be allowed to fall in love with anyone except the Goblin Maiden for the rest of your life."

"That's fine. Appearances don't matter to me."

I couldn't care less about someone's looks. The reason behind this was simple: I'd been repulsive in my last life. During our school dances, none of the girls ever took my hand. Whenever I picked up something that a girl had dropped, she'd cry like I'd burned it to bits and then throw it into the trash can.

"I hear there's a really disgusting guy at your school."

“Oh yeah, totally. Over there.”

I'd been able to hear their conversation, but lacked the courage to turn to face them. There'd also been girls with gaudy makeup that made them look tan who would point and laugh at me.

“Whoa, that's freaky!”

“Oh, holy crap! What is that?! Ew! It looked at me!”

One day I went to a brothel, thinking that maybe that way I could at least have an experience with a woman, but the girl I'd asked for suddenly fell ill and canceled on me. That shattered my heart and I never attempted to enter a brothel ever again.

That's why I didn't care about appearances. I'd been discriminated against because of my appearance until my dying breath. It was precisely because I understood this hardship that I couldn't treat anyone differently because of their looks, nor did I want to.

But I hadn't always been like that. Despite how I was now, at first, when I'd still been young in my previous life, I used to find my eyes drawn to beautiful girls. Every time I caught myself doing that, I fell into a state of self-loathing.

By only looking at attractive women, I was changing the way I treated people based on their appearances. I was the same as those people who'd shown contempt for me while going gaga over handsome guys. Somewhere along the way of rinsing and repeating this self-loathing for decades, I found that I didn't care about looks at all anymore.

Even as I was now, I could understand when someone was objectively beautiful and should be categorized as such. That being said, their beauty didn't make me feel any extra emotions toward them. This was the result of my changing myself over the course of a few decades. I wouldn't let myself be like those who ridiculed me. I used that conviction to press forward and become who I am today.



“Huh?! Seriously?! Are you sure you’re not just pushing yourself for the sake of our family?!” my sister exclaimed.

“I’m not. Appearances truly don’t matter to me.”

“I guess that *is* part of who you are. As your mother, I worry about how you barely react whenever a cute, blushing girl approaches you.” In contrast to my sister’s surprise, my mother was more accepting.

“Hmph. Do what you want, then,” my sister said, folding her arms and tossing her head to the side. “For the record...if appearances aren’t important to you, then what *do* you look for in a wife? Spill,” she asked in an annoyed tone, side-eyeing me with her face still turned away.

I didn’t have an answer I could readily give. It had never even occurred to me to put conditions on the kinds of girls I liked, since all I’d ever earned from them was their disgust. *Hm, what do I want from a woman?*

Thinking back to my previous life, I’d died alone without ever being able to marry. That life of solitude had been painful. During the lantern festivals, all my friends would enjoy being surrounded by their children and grandkids. Meanwhile, I’d be alone, eating mochi and watching a TV special by myself.

It’d become difficult to get around, so I couldn’t make trips to visit my friends, which consequently increased the time I spent alone. It’d been difficult to spend my days without talking to anyone, and I’d stopped thinking that I wanted to live a long life.

“It can’t be helped. This is just how my life is,” I used to mutter to myself—a bad habit of mine.

I tried to tell myself that in an attempt to accept the sad state of my life, but ultimately, I never succeeded, even at the very end.

I wanted someone to talk to, even if it was just a word. I didn’t want the store attendants who were obligated to talk to me in their customer-service voice. I wanted kind, considerate words. That’d been my wish as someone who’d been plagued by solitude, and those feelings only became stronger with each passing of the seasons. I was done with my pitiful life of loneliness in my old age. I wanted a kind, gentle person who would peacefully drink tea every day even

when they were old. *Yeah. That's the kind of person I want.*

"Well...I guess I'd like a wife I can peacefully drink tea with even when we're older. That's the condition," I said.

"Huh?!"

Everyone voiced their surprise at the same time. Leave it to a family to be so perfectly in sync.

"Are you serious?! You're only sixteen, but you're already thinking of old age? I always knew you were a weirdo, but this exceeds my wildest expectations."

"Uh, honey, do you think that our son is thinking more realistically about aging than we are?"

"Hm... Even I haven't given much thought to my golden years, and yet my youngest has these kinds of thoughts? It's surprising..."

"Hmph! Whatever! If you're fine with it, then I won't say any more!"

"Ow!" I exclaimed as my sister smacked me on the head after she stood up and passed by me.

"Bring me some kind of present next time!" she said before going back to her room.

Her red hair bounced as she walked away. I couldn't help but think she seemed lonely.



We received notice that a carriage from the Sevensworth family had arrived at our gate. Everybody from our household waited in the entrance hall. We could hear the carriage coming to a stop just outside. Our servants opened the heavy wooden double doors, and in came three members of the Sevensworth family.

My first impression of them was that they were indeed nobility—they exuded dignity and elegance. First, the duke and his wife introduced themselves, and then a woman with silky silver hair and eyes the color of grass spoke.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm the eldest daughter of the

Sevensworth family, Anastasia,” she said, curtsying.

Her curtsy was so graceful, enough to leave me in awe. *So this is the woman who I’m going to be engaged to? I’ve never seen anyone as pure, kind, and gentle as her.*

The outfits the duke’s family had arrived in weren’t too flashy, likely due to being travel attire, however their clothing was especially reserved, even by high-class standards. That said, while the travel dress Anastasia wore might have seemed simple at first, it was made of premium materials that were extremely expensive, and it was adorned with sizable jewels. The embroidery was also very high-quality. I tended to notice these kinds of things as a merchant and could tell the rough value with just a glance. The price tag of her clothes really made me feel the difference in our respective houses’ wealth.

After introducing ourselves, we chatted a little, falling into the normal conversation topic of those meeting for the first time: the weather. Her responses were kind and gentle. I got the same refined feeling from her as I would from a finely crafted piece of merchandise. *This marriage might be an unexpected stroke of good fortune for me.*

Our guests from the Sevensworth family were exhausted, so they retired to their rooms for a rest. We decided that the marriage talks would begin once they were refreshed. After they were gone, my sister came to me.

“Are you really okay with *her*?” she asked in a worried tone.

I guess she’s concerned about Lady Anastasia’s appearance. She’d been wearing a dress that covered her neck, leaving only her face exposed. There were rocklike bumps on her face, her ears were sharp, and her skin was green.

Goblins were a type of monster in this world. They had sharp ears and noses, green skin, and hard lumps on their bodies. It was these features that had earned her the nickname “Goblin Maiden.”

“Well, I’m sure her appearance is due to a curse of some sort. But the same blood of her handsome parents runs through her veins, so once the curse is lifted, she’ll become beautiful,” Davy, my older brother and heir to the family, said as if he was trying to console me, patting my head with his large hand.

“I don’t have a problem with how she is now,” I said. “As I’ve said before, I don’t care about appearances at all. If anything, her gentleness makes me think that she’ll be a great wife,” I said, fixing my hair after my brother had ruffled it up.

Though I’d merely spoken my true feelings, both my sister and brother looked at me with pity.

“Allow me to introduce myself once more. I’m the eldest daughter of the Sevensworth family, Anastasia. It’s an honor to meet you, and I’m grateful for your hospitality,” Lady Anastasia said, displaying a wonderful curtsy.

Marriage talks between us were beginning. Currently, she was wearing a high-necked dress and long sleeves. The skirt of her dress was layered with lace, as was the current fashion trend, and she wore a pink overskirt. Wearing white and pink was the standard for marriage talks and thus very commonplace. But even still, the grandness of her gown was unusual. The dress she was wearing, with countless large gems sewn into it, could have paid for this mansion many times over.

Once I saw her necklace, I froze. *Wait, is that Purest Love?* It was the very same gem that had been sold in an auction not too long ago and had become a big talking point even among merchants who didn’t deal in gems.

For rubies, the more red and uniform the color was, the more expensive they were. The ruby known as “Purest Love” was large, but the red was not so deep and the inside of it had uneven tones of crimson. Usually, this would mean the bid price wouldn’t be as high as a ruby that size typically warranted, but the crimson tones perfectly formed the shape of a rose, as if it’d been crafted that way by a veteran lapidarist. The fact that this miracle of an artistic product had been achieved without any human interference resulted in it selling for an astronomical price.

Her introduction had ended while I’d been staring at her necklace, and she sat down on the brand-new sofa that we’d bought specifically for this day that obviously didn’t match our ancient drawing room.

Anastasia’s and my parents were there with us as well. We were seated in

between our respective families facing each other. When the tea was served, my father urged them to try it, which led to the duke opening up a pleasant conversation. Perhaps the duke and his family were used to dealing with lower nobles who'd freeze up in front of them due to nerves, but he was a skilled talker able to loosen up and relax the very nervous family he was visiting. The duke took the lead on the conversation, and eventually, we were able to talk naturally without any tension.

From the conversation, I could tell that they deeply cherished their daughter, Lady Anastasia, and that she felt a strong sense of admiration and love for them as well. It was surprising. In contrast to our poor noble family who hadn't even had enough money to hire a wet nurse while the children were young enough, I'd expected that there'd be more distance between parent and child in higher noble families who'd leave most of the child-rearing to their nanny.

Lady Anastasia had her hands folded in her lap, and she sat with her back straight. She'd laugh at her father's jokes, even if they weren't funny, and would patiently wait without making a single sign of annoyance as my nervous mother tried to force her words out. Despite being just sixteen years old, she was already in charge of several public institutions in the Sevensworth territory such as orphanages.

There were many types of noblewomen. There were those who wouldn't even go near territory politics, and others who would assist their husbands with work. Lady Anastasia seemed to be the type who cooperated in territory politics. I couldn't be more grateful for that fact.

Unlike the aristocrats from my past life who lived off the taxes they collected, the nobles of this world were far busier due to not only managing their territories but also running their own businesses. It'd be extremely helpful if she could lend a hand.

She could speak on the same level as adults when it came to national politics and foreign trade since she'd already been involved in them before. She was also very familiar with music and art. Just from the small amount of conversation we'd had, I could tell that she was very highly educated. Plus, she didn't try to laud her knowledge over others, but instead spoke in a way as to not make the other person feel uncomfortable. The fact that she gave

thoughtful answers while still elegantly drinking tea was a testament to how she was truly the daughter of a duke.

But there was one thing that nagged at the back of my mind. When Lady Anastasia wasn't participating in the conversation, she wore a gloomy expression. It made me think that she was forcing herself to act cheerful.

"All right. How about we leave the young ones to get to know each other?" the duke said, prompting both sets of parents to head out together.

Now it was just Lady Anastasia alone with me in the room. The shadow on her face grew darker and she seemed more downcast. I couldn't help but remember my previous life. Even girls who were all smiles would make looks of disgust due to my repulsiveness. Even if I tried smiling at them, every last girl's expression would sour. After experiencing that over and over, I became someone who didn't smile very much.

Though I hadn't experienced that in this world, I was in a very important situation, facing marriage. Would I be rejected by a woman in this important stage of my life? *No, I need to stop thinking so pessimistically. Giving up here will just be me repeating my past life. It's not every day that a good match like this comes along. Even if these marriage talks fall apart, I'm going to make sure I've at least done everything I can. Even if I can't get married this time, it'll be good practice for my next talks. My entire focus in this life is marriage. I will not live out my old days alone again.*

"Would you perhaps like to take a stroll around the garden?" I asked. "It's not nearly as impressive as the Sevensworth's grounds; however, this is the perfect time to see the shethes. I don't believe these flowers grow in the royal capital."

"Oh my, shethes? I'd very much like to see them!" she said, her face filled with surprise and then a smile.

I offered my hand in order to escort her.

"Th-Thank you," she said.

After being a noble in this world for many years at this point, even I could escort ladies. Lady Anastasia was deeply involved in noble society, much more

than me, so being escorted shouldn't have fazed her at all...or so I thought. I noticed that she became flustered when I offered her my hand.

A graceful woman suddenly showing an adorable side like this made my face relax into a smile before I realized it. As I took her hand, I noticed that she was wearing something that resembled a braided bracelet. Though everything else she wore was very high-class, this was made of cheap string that commoners would use. The weaving was rough and the dye job was inconsistent. It wasn't something that I could imagine a professional making. I had questions, but I didn't voice them. After all, it was something that'd been hidden under her dress sleeve. As a gentleman, it behooved me to not say anything even if I saw it, just as if it had been underwear that I'd glimpsed.

"Oh my! What is this flower called?! I've never seen it before!" Lady Anastasia exclaimed.

"It's called the 'white-violet Gemini starflower.' It's not native to this country, but I obtained these seeds, so I tried growing them as a test, hoping that if they could grow in our country's soil so I could sell them. I would've been more confident in showing you these if there were more, but so far, this is as many as I can make bloom."

The white-violet Gemini starflower had a similar star shape to the balloon flower from my previous life. Though balloon flowers had five petals, this flower had six. It was a two-tone flower with the inner part of it being white while the outer part was purple. Unlike the balloon flower, the purple and white weren't mixed, but distinctly separate. The flower got its name from this separation; it looked like it was a purple flower with a white flower blossoming on the inside.

Lady Anastasia listened to my explanation with a gentle smile. Including my past life, this was the first time I'd spent such a long time alone with a woman besides my family. I'd no idea that speaking with women could be this much fun!

She truly was cute as she crouched down with a smile to look at the flowers. Despite being a dignified woman with perfect movements, her showing me this kind of cuteness really gripped my heart.

It felt like her loveliness had increased since our first introduction. *What is this emotion called? Is it possible that I'm elated? In any case, there's no doubt that I'm enjoying being with her.*

"Please wait. Allow me to get that," I said, quickly picking up the rock that she'd begun reaching for in the corner of the flower bed.

Everything she was wearing was frighteningly expensive. I couldn't have the lace on her sleeves or her white gloves get any dirt on them. I wiped the dirt off the rock with my handkerchief and then held it out for her to see.

"It has an uncommon color," she remarked.

It was true that bright blue feldspars weren't very common. But even so, it was still nothing more than a pretty stone. One could probably find something similar if they searched the river for an hour. Still, it was surprising that the daughter of a duke would take interest in this.

"Do you like minerals?" I asked.

"Not exactly. I've recently befriended a young servant boy and he enjoys them."

"If it'd please you, I'd be honored to gift you this stone. Would you like to take it as a souvenir for him?"

"Oh my, that would be wonderful!"

She explained that a few days before heading to the Adolni territory, she'd gone to visit a servant boy who'd broken his leg. When she'd asked him if he'd like a souvenir from her trip, he'd asked for an uncommon rock. That was why she was so happy when I proposed she take the mineral.

Live-in servants stayed in the same houses as the nobles they served. Since they were allowed to live in the house rent-free, they revered the families they served just like the regular servants. But for young children who didn't yet understand differences in status, there were instances where they'd be too casual with the children of the noble families. The boy who liked collecting rocks was one such individual.

"Why do you look like that?" the kid had apparently asked Lady Anastasia.

The boy's mother, who'd had her head lowered as she stood next to him, must've felt her heart stop.

"It's the kind of curse I have. I'm sorry. Are you frightened?" Lady Anastasia had asked, crouching down to be on eye level with him.

Most children were scared of her appearance and stayed away from her, but sometimes there'd be curious kids who'd call out to her. She liked children, so she would always be gentle with the ones who approached her.

I'm sure of it. I've hit the jackpot with this marriage talk. She is a wonderful person! The only problem left is whether I've earned her displeasure or not. I need to do my best to make sure that this marriage goes through!

After walking down the garden's small path, we reached a short flight of steps leading downward. I took the hand that she had placed on my forearm with my other hand, turned my body to the side, and guided her down the steps.

This was the basics of escort etiquette regarding stairs. The skirts of the noble women in this world were puffy and long enough to hide their ankles, so they couldn't see their feet at all. It was no issue when escorting a lady on flat ground because all the man would do was offer his elbow for her to hold, but since stairs came with a risk of falling, he had to go down first and hold the lady's hand to help her descend.

I'd thought I was doing the entire "gentleman escorting a lady" business by the book, but when I took her hand, she made an expression of surprise and her face turned slightly red before she thanked me. Her cute reaction really stood out, especially when she usually conducted herself with such grace. As soon as I noticed myself starting to smile, I panicked and pushed it down. I didn't want her to be creeped out by me grinning here. I needed to make sure my feelings were kept close to my chest.

During our walk, when there was a break in our conversation, Lady Anastasia brought something up as if she'd been waiting for this opportunity.

"Sir Ginorious? I'd like to speak with you about something," she said.

"Let's talk over there. I'll have tea prepared."

There was a white gazebo not too far from the shethes flowers, which were in

full bloom. I guided her there, and we sat opposite one another. After a servant brought our tea, I made sure nobody else was around to overhear us.

“What would you like to discuss with me?” I asked.

“I’d like to apologize. This marriage talk is something that my father decided on his own. I’ll speak with my father and come up with some excuse. Please allow me some time to do so.”

Anastasia

“What’s the matter? Why are you crying?” mother had asked as I read a novel on a sofa in our family’s library.

It was only then that I realized my mother was right next to me.

“I was merely touched by the book I’m reading,” I said, wiping away my tears with a handkerchief.

“What’s it about?” she asked.

“Mary Anto and Lance Axel.”

“Oh, so a tragic love story?”

“No, it’s not tragic. The reason I was moved to tears is because I was expecting it to end in tragedy but it didn’t.”

Historically speaking, while Lance had gone to war, Mary had lost her life during a conflict in the royal court. But the story I’d been reading had a different ending. In this, Lance had learned that Mary was set to be executed under suspicion of conspiracy and he recklessly led a charge into the enemy in order to end the war and get back home as soon as possible. By some miracle, he was able to return home and rescue Mary, all while pushing through the heavy injuries he’d sustained. It was such a wonderful tale of love that it had unexpectedly made me cry. *How wonderful it must be to be loved this deeply by a man.*

“You like alternate history stories, huh?” mother asked.

“I prefer gentle fairy tales to harsh reality. Why don’t you sit with me?” I

offered so we could continue speaking.

I asked a servant to bring tea and began pleasantly chatting with my mother on the library sofa.

Sometime during our casual chat, mother brought up the main reason she'd come. "We have a new potential suitor we'd like you to meet."

"Oh...another one?"

"Yes. Another one. We want you to get married and be happy," she said.

I don't think I'll achieve happiness through marriage, mother. I'd long since earned the displeasure of men for my hideous appearance. I doubted marriage would change that. I doubted that living with a man who was repulsed by me would end in either of us being happy.

"Are you planning on breaking things off again, Ana?" mother asked. "It's fine if you end things because you don't like him in the end, but I'd at least like you to meet him."

"Ana" was a nickname of mine. My full name was Anastasia Sevensworth, and I was the daughter and only child of the premier duke.

"I know you and father worked hard to put this marriage talk together, so I will meet with him. However, I truly think it'd be better if you adopted someone to be the house's successor rather than finding someone willing to marry me."

For someone marrying into our household, the authority that my parents would hold over my potential fiancé would be great. Considering their social standing, he'd have a difficult time being unfaithful. However, that would only be true while my parents were alive.

As time passed and they grew older, at a certain point, the power dynamics between my potential husband and parents would switch. When they did, if my potential husband cheated and created a scandal by having an illegitimate child, it would cause problems for our entire household. That was why, if things were inevitably going to turn out that way, I felt it'd be better for my parents to adopt a successor instead.

"It'll be all right. After enough time together, love is sure to blossom. After all,

you're such a sweet girl!"

I could tell that these words from my mother were purely to console me.

From a young age, I'd always been surrounded by marriage. All the people around me were married, and all the picture books I'd read had ended with the prince and the heroine marrying each other. So naturally, I'd had the vague assumption that I'd get married too when I was an adult. I didn't believe that anymore, though.

When marriage talks entered the part where I was left alone with my potential groom, I'd ask them if they truly wished to have these talks with me. They'd always graciously answer me with their harsh, unfiltered thoughts.

"Do you think I want to be having these marriage talks with you? Of course not! As if there were any guy in this world who'd want a monster like you as their wife!"

"As if looking at you weren't enough, the fact that I'd have to touch you only brings me pain."

"If I ever brought you to a party, everyone would look at me with pity. They'd talk about how pitiful a man I was for marrying the 'Goblin Maiden.' Do you seriously believe I want to go through that miserable experience?!"

From their perspectives, they'd only participated in these marriage talks because they hadn't had a choice, and they'd hoped that it'd just naturally fall apart. Up until now, that was how it had always been with no exceptions. None of my suitors had truly wished to marry me, so I'd made sure that all the talks had fallen through so as to prevent a potential scandal of an illegitimate child. Despite how it may have looked, I was thinking about the good of our household in my own way.

Life is cruel. Marriage is a happiness that I'm not destined to have. It can't be helped. This is just how my life is. I'd whisper that to my heart. I'd convince myself to give up, and it would make things a little more bearable.

"The next suitor you'll be meeting is the same age as you—sixteen. From what I've seen from the report, at least, he seems to be much more handsome than the other men you've met until now. The women around him seem to

secretly call him the ‘Black Ice Flower Prince.’ His merchant company even has its own fan club.”

The black ice flower was a type of rare plant that only grew in frigid climates. Both its stem and leaves were black, and it produced exceptionally beautiful flowers that were a light purple and see-through, like ice. It was used just like roses often were to refer to someone being attractive.

According to my mother, my potential suitor started the Rurban Trading Company when he’d been around ten years old and had been running it ever since. His company had a location in the royal capital as well, so I was familiar with it. He dealt in many types of uncommon items such as guitars and yo-yos, and I’d even purchased some of them. It was a fairly large company, so it’d never occurred to me that its founder could be someone my age.

After hearing about him from my mother, I was absolutely convinced that these marriage talks would not succeed. In addition to being excellent enough to pass my parents’ inspection, he was so handsome that those around him yearned for him. It was completely possible that he was looking for someone beautiful to be his spouse. There was no chance that he’d want to marry someone hideous like myself.

“For these marriage talks, we’re going directly to their house to speak with them. It’ll take a few days, so make sure to pack properly,” mother said.

When I pressed her a little further, I found out that it was father’s idea to go there in order to show our house’s sincerity about this marriage proposal. I couldn’t believe it. A duke going this far for a viscount was essentially coercion. But even excluding that, my suitor was no doubt going to be very discontented with my appearance just like all those before him, and now, he was going to be even more discontented after essentially being coerced into this meeting by the power of my father.

There isn’t a doubt in my mind. These marriage talks aren’t going to work out either. I’m sure that when I ask him for his true thoughts, he will be fairly combative. I’m already beginning to feel melancholic.



After our carriage arrived at the Adolni estate, we were guided inside by their

servants. Waiting to greet us in the entrance hall was the Adolni family.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m the fourth son, Ginorious. It’s an honor to meet you,” a young man politely said, introducing himself.

After that, I was surprised when he began talking about the weather. Up until now, the suitors hadn’t tried to pursue any conversation beyond what was absolutely necessary. This was my first time encountering someone taking the initiative to speak to me.

Even after chatting with him for a little bit, I saw no signs of him being repulsed by me. *I suppose this is to be expected of someone who matured quickly enough to form their own company despite being so young. He’s a master at hiding his true thoughts.*

Since he ran a merchant company, I’d imagined him to be someone who frequently smiled; however, he was the exact opposite. He was mostly expressionless. He had the aura of an engineer rather than a merchant—if someone had told me he worked in an intellectual field that dealt with numbers, I would have believed it more readily than his being in the sales trade.

He was tall with black hair, and he was very handsome with his calm expression and violet eyes. I completely understood why he had his own fan club. The origin of his nickname as the Black Ice Flower Prince also made sense considering the colors of his hair and eyes, as well as his disposition. It fit him perfectly.

Hm? He’s wearing a ring. That’s rare for men. His black, metal ring had a light purple stone on it that had the shape of a ten-pointed star—or a flower with ten petals. *It’s in the style of the black ice flower. This might be the origin of his nickname.* It was a wide man’s ring that matched his icelike beauty. *He’s both exceptionally talented and handsome. I’m even more certain now. He has no desire to marry me*

After our families finished our introductions, we all sat on the sofas in the drawing room, and it was finally time to begin the marriage talks. As was customary, we started off with our parents having a pleasant chat with each other.

This was inevitably when my suitors' displeasure would begin to show through, and it was normal for them to not speak with me at all by this point. But Sir Ginorious wasn't like them. He was very considerate. Even when the topic shifted toward something I wasn't familiar with, such as managing the Adolni territory, he made sure to explain things to me so I wouldn't be bored. In the times when I was only listening and not participating, he'd speak to me to try and include me in the conversation.

"You're a very exceptional person, Ginorious. You're so well-versed in managing a territory despite only being sixteen years of age," mother said, a satisfied look on her face.

It looks like she's very pleased with Sir Ginorious.

"Lady Anastasia's equally as impressive," he said. "Though she might not be jumping into the conversation very often, it's clear she understands the subject well. I think she's a wonderful lady for how humble she is to not flaunt her knowledge despite being so intelligent."

"Oh my. What a charmer!" mother said.

She was in a great mood after Sir Ginorious complimented me. I couldn't help but look down, my face becoming hot with embarrassment. In my previous marriage talks, men had avoided even speaking to me. Though he was simply being affable, I'd never thought I'd receive a compliment from my suitor.

He was not only considerate to those around him, but he really was a wonderful person for even giving an ugly woman like me lip service. *It really feels good being treated like a human and not a goblin.* Before I knew it, I was smiling.

"All right. How about we leave the young ones to get to know each other?" father said, leaving the room with my mother and Sir Ginorious's parents.

Now, it was just the two of us.

"Would you perhaps like to take a stroll around the garden? It's not nearly as impressive as the Sevensworth's grounds; however, this is the perfect time to see the shethes. I don't believe these flowers grow in the royal capital."

I was taken aback. All the suitors before this might've been able to hide their

displeasure while our families were present, but that act would disappear the instant we were alone. In the best-case scenario, they'd simply sit in silence, but others would criticize how they'd basically been coerced into marriage talks by the authority of my parents, while still others would verbally attack me.

I was prepared for any harsh words he might have for me, and I planned to apologize profusely as usual. However, contrary to my expectations, Sir Ginorious invited me to view the garden in order to prevent me from becoming bored.

He offered his hand to escort me. It'd been so sudden that I panicked. In all the marriage talks until now, there'd been many times that a potential suitor and I had been made to walk around a garden, but none of them had ever tried to escort me. They'd adopt a sulky attitude and walk in front while I silently followed them. It had always been a very painful experience, and I'd expected this time to be no different.

He's such a wonderful person for being kind even to someone hideous like me. But that's precisely why I need to make sure these marriage talks stop here. I want a wonderful man like him to find happiness with a wonderful woman.

As Sir Ginorious escorted me through the garden, we came across a fork in the path.

"The path to the right leads to a pond. It might be a little embarrassing to show to someone from the Sevensworth family, though, since it's nothing too impressive. The left path has some unusual flowers. Unfortunately, there aren't that many, so it might not be anything deserving of showing to you. Which would you prefer?" he asked.

I wasn't used to men being so considerate, going as far as to ask me for my preference, so I was at a loss.

"In that case, I think I'd like to see the flowers," I said.

"Then let's continue down the left path. Do you like flowers?"

"Yes. I look at the flowers in our garden every day."

"I'm sure the garden of the Sevensworth family must be very beautiful. What kind of flowers bloom around this time?"

He continued amicably conversing with me as we walked around the garden. Even though we were alone, he was still kind and brought up topics we could talk about. He was making great efforts to entertain me.

“Huh?” Just then, a sound of surprise escaped my mouth.

For an instant, he’d disappeared out of my field of view, and then he reappeared, crouched down in front of me. I very slightly lost my balance as the arm I’d been resting my hand on vanished all of a sudden.

“That was close...” he said with a look of relief.

When he stood up again, he held his hand out to me. In it was my necklace. Looking closer, I realized the fastener had broken. It appeared that Sir Ginorious had caught my necklace before it hit the ground. *Wow, he moved so quickly. For a second it looked like his ring glowed, but perhaps that was just the light reflecting off of it?*

Oh. This fastener uses mana. Mana fasteners were often used with high-quality products. But for some reason whenever I wore accessories with mana fasteners, it didn’t take too long before they broke. The servant in charge of my jewelry had recently changed, so most likely they’d ordered an expensive necklace with a mana fastener, not knowing about my condition.

“This is a fairly expensive necklace, is it not? It’d be terrible if it were to be damaged. Despite being in the middle of escorting you, I rudely moved away to catch it, and for that I apologize.”

“Oh, not at all! You’ve no need to apologize, especially since you caught my necklace. If anything, I should be thanking you!”

I was certainly glad the necklace I’d received from my father hadn’t been damaged, but this necklace was nothing more than one of the countless pieces of formal wear that I owned. I was in no short supply of them, so breaking this one wouldn’t have been that big a problem.

But more importantly, I couldn’t have been more over the moon about how thoughtful he was. It was unbelievable how kind he was being to a hideous woman like me. *My heart feels so warm.*

This was the first time that I’d ever had fun during the part of the marriage

talks where it was just me and the suitor. As we continued our stroll, his kindness continued too and I realized it wasn't just in marriage talks that this was the first time I'd been treated kindly. It was the first time I'd been treated kindly by a man, ever.

"Oh my." I couldn't stop my sound of astonishment as I was pulled from my thoughts.

Off the pathway were tens of shethes trees, lined up and dyed in purple. In the royal capital, there were trees called sakoora that produced pink flowers. The shethes trees, which were blooming profusely, reminded me of the sakoora tree in full bloom, just purple instead of pink.

Blooming under the majority of shethes trees were lisianthuses, which were producing flowers of emerald. It was almost like their placement had been fated with how perfectly they complimented the shethes.

I walked side by side with Sir Ginorious by the trees. The rays of sunlight that shone through the purple tree canopy made the emerald of the lisianthuses glow, and the wind that caressed our cheeks carried the fleeting sweetness of the flowers. Simply being able to experience this made coming here worth it. That's just how wonderful the scenery was.

"Sir Ginorious? I'd like to speak with you about something," I said after looking for a break in our conversation.

Looking at the beautiful flowers with the kind Sir Ginorious was incredibly enjoyable. However, this was the end of that time. I needed to break apart these marriage talks.

"Let's speak over there. I'll have tea prepared," he said, guiding me to a nearby white gazebo illuminated by the rays of sun flitting through a blooming shethes tree.

Ginorious

"What would you like to speak to me about?" I asked.

"I'd like to apologize. This marriage talk is something that my father decided on his own. I'll speak with my father and come up with some excuse. Please

allow me some time to do so,” Lady Anastasia said, standing up. She then raised her skirt slightly while lowering her body and her head.

Her bow was so graceful, I couldn’t help but be stricken. Bowing while keeping one’s back straight was a show of respect, but going any farther down and lowering one’s head was etiquette for an apology, and this was a deep show of one.

“Are you referring to ending marriage talks between the two of us...?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I tried my best not to let it show, but I couldn’t tell if I was successfully hiding my disappointment. *I guess...I really am not good enough.* I was nearing a century’s worth of time without ever having a girlfriend, or any intimate relationships at all with women for that matter. It made sense that after all that time I wouldn’t simply be able to suddenly woo a woman. *I guess she may not mind having a surface-level relationship with me, but she’s not interested in choosing me as her life partner. No. Wait. That’s not the only possibility.* She’d been forcefully brought here for a political marriage. She might’ve already been interested in someone else.

“Do you already have someone special?” I asked.

“Of course not. I have no one like that.”

She shot that idea down very quickly... “So the fault lies with me... I’m terribly sorry. I’m not very experienced when it comes to women.”

“Not at all. That’s not the case whatsoever.”

“You don’t have to sugarcoat it. I’m well aware that I’m inexperienced with women. For future reference, would you mind telling me my faults? I’d like to know where I fall short.”

I was going to use this failure to make my future attempts a success. That was why I wanted to know what went wrong. *I want to get married this time around no matter what.*

“You misunderstand. You’ve no faults to speak of. Where would you get that idea from?” she asked.

She's not able to put her finger on where I could improve? At this rate, my next marriage talks and the ones after that will fall apart every time. Oh no... Am I going to die alone in this life as well? I don't want that!

"It might be strange for me to be the one saying this, however, my parents love me very much. If we were to get married and you had a mistress, my parents would use everything in their power to destroy you. This is especially true for my mother, who is the younger sister of His Majesty, and he especially dotes on her. My mother wields tremendous power. If you were to have relations with another lady, you'd need to wait until enough time passes for the power dynamic to flip between you and my parents. At the very least, you'd need to wait twenty years for when His Majesty steps down, otherwise my mother will always have power."

Where is this all coming from? Why would I ever be unfaithful? In my past life, I'd known a good number of people who'd cheated on their spouses, but none of them ever found happiness that way. In the first place, the very idea of deepening your bond with a rotten person who'd lay their hands on someone who was not theirs and sacrifice people's trust in you to attain happiness was flawed, to say the least. I want to live a quiet life when I'm old. I have absolutely no plan to do anything as foolish as that.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," I said. "I have no intention of being unfaithful."

"That's even more reason for you not to marry me. At your young age, you already run a successful business, and even my father says you possess an outstanding talent for managing lands. Meeting you today, I have learned that you are very handsome, skilled at speaking, and a very kind person who's thoughtful and considerate. Add to that your sincerity to be faithful to your spouse, then there must be many who are interested in you. It would be a tragedy for someone as great as you to be married to a woman like me."

Hm? A tragedy? Is she burdened by some kind of problem?

"Um, pardon me," I started. "I understand that this might be a difficult topic to discuss, but are there any problems plaguing you? If it's okay, I'd like to help resolve any issues you might be facing."

In response, Lady Anastasia looked surprised. It seemed that we still weren't on the same page at all.

"I greatly appreciate your offer; however, this is one problem that can't be solved," she giggled. "My troubles are with my appearance. You don't wish to get married to a hideous woman like myself, do you? My parents also possess an incredible amount of power. If we got married, you wouldn't be able to run to another woman. Wouldn't that constitute an unhappy marriage for a man?"

I finally understand. This entire time, she's been concerned about her appearance. I couldn't have cared less about that. I was much more concerned with whether women would find *me* physically repulsive than something as trifling as their looks. That was why I hadn't once considered that she'd be worried about her appearance until this moment.

"I believe it'd be best for my parents to adopt an heir. I know they haven't given up on me marrying, but I'm sure they will in about ten years and begin looking for an heir. There's no need for you to lend our family your gifts. Time solves everything."

No, what does that really solve? Sure, it might fix the problem of inheritance. However, what would it do for Lady Anastasia? How did she plan to find happiness in that situation? All that awaited her down that path was a life of solitude when she reached old age.

Oh. Maybe she's the type of person who doesn't look for happiness in marriage. But I really can't recommend that way of thinking. Japan had the highest population of single individuals in the world. There'd been plenty of people around me who never got married, but none of them had lived happily in their later years.

I had a friend who didn't get married and instead found meaning through his work, but he lost his purpose for living when he reached the mandatory retirement age. The amount of time between retirement and death was around the same as it took for an infant to become an adult. Losing his reason to live and spending such a long time alone destroyed him.

I had another friend who'd shifted his reason for living toward volunteering around the area he lived in. But the older and more debilitated he became, the

less he was able to do volunteer work. His new purpose fell apart when he became the very person that people would volunteer to help. As a result, he'd also had a tough time living out his old age alone.

Two of my friends who'd been close to each other had come up with the idea of living together and livening up their days that way, but even then they couldn't find happiness. People at that age weren't very flexible in their thinking, so there'd been no chance of them getting along living together. They'd fight over the smallest, most trivial things like leaving the toilet seat up. Ultimately, they sold the place and lived separately.

The reason that old couples could still get along was because they'd lived together during the years when they'd been flexible in their thinking. By navigating each other's quirks, they were able to slowly adjust to each other's values and styles.

In my opinion, in order to avoid a lonely life in one's older years, it was absolutely necessary to marry someone with a good personality. There were probably people who wouldn't agree, but at the very least, this was what I believed.

"Do you believe you won't achieve happiness through marriage?" I asked.

"Happiness through...marriage? I've never considered it. With my appearance, I gave up on marriage long ago," she said with a sad smile.

Seeing that made my chest tighten as if it were being squeezed. "Let me rephrase. What do you need to become happy?"

We'd just met each other today. I couldn't pry any deeper. I was already crossing the line of what would be considered rude at our current stage of familiarity. But even though I knew that, an unknown emotion was gripping my heart, making it impossible for me to hold back.

"Achieving normal happiness will most likely be...difficult for me," she said sadly, dropping her gaze to the table, her expression distorted as if she was trying to put up a strong front. "It can't be helped. I believe this is just how my life is," she said, smiling. It was a sad smile, as if someone had her heart in a vice.

Her words were the exact same as the ones I would whisper to myself in my past life. *Oh, I see. She's the same as I once was. It's the same as when people wouldn't even treat me as a human, just because I was ugly.* This smile she wore wasn't that of a duke's daughter, but the same sad smile I used to wear in my previous life. I was familiar with this smile—as if you'd given up on everything. Suddenly, something overwhelmingly hot like magma began surging deep inside my chest.

"Don't give up..." I said.

"Huh?"

"Please don't give up! What does it matter if your face isn't perfect?! Your skin is just a little different from others'! That's it! Why would you give up on everything just because of that?! Don't give up! Don't give up on becoming happy! It's okay for you to become happy! It's okay for you to wish to be happy! Don't laugh as if you've given up on everything! Your life's just starting!" I couldn't hold myself back anymore. I grabbed her by the shoulders, my eyes filled with tears, and passionately lectured her.

I'd had nothing but time to think about everything as I lived my later years by myself. Every day I'd lived in regret, thinking about how I could've done better at different points in my life and wondering if that would've changed how miserably I'd turned out.

She was like the young version of me that I would think about with such regret. I was essentially trying to encourage my younger self from my past life through her. I stopped speaking formally in the latter half of my diatribe because I suddenly began seeing myself sitting there. Though I realized that, I couldn't stop my emotions from pouring out.

She didn't yet know the pain of continual loneliness or how long that pain lasted for. She was at the same point in her life where she couldn't know the pain of living out one's later years alone. If I didn't stop her now from walking down this difficult path without knowing what it led to, I'd definitely regret it.

To begin with, physical appearance didn't matter at all to me. Beauty eventually faded and the time one spent without their beauty was much longer than with it. In the broad scope of things, beauty was fleeting, and something

like that wasn't what I was interested in.

When I'd been agonizing over my solitude in my past life, what I'd wanted was for someone to be by my side. Whoever that was didn't need to be beautiful. I wanted someone kind. I wanted someone who was genuinely kind. If I could marry Lady Anastasia, I was certain I'd obtain that. I had no reason to turn down this marriage. If anything, I didn't want to let this opportunity slip through my fingers.

However, the strongest feeling in my heart right now wasn't one of calculated gain. From the bottom of my heart, I yearned to save her. I was well aware that it might've been presumptuous for a guy like me—someone who'd lived a century without ever having a girlfriend—to want to save a woman from loneliness, but even so, these conceited thoughts of mine weren't a lie or fabrication, but my genuine feelings.

Driven forward by these powerful emotions, I knelt and kissed the back of her hand. "Please marry me. I promise I'll make you happy, so please don't give up on your own happiness."

Her face became increasingly red. "I-I-I'm so pleased to hear these words, but...are you...?"

I could see in her eyes that she was faltering, and her voice was shaking with worry for me. Even so, she didn't have to worry at all. There wasn't a better match for me in the world than her. But more importantly, I couldn't leave her alone.

"I want *you*. Please." This haughty desire of mine bubbled up and came out as those words as I pleaded with her. *I want to save her.*

"Y-Yes..." she replied in a whisper reminiscent of someone with a high fever muttering deliriously.

"Thank you."

Seeing my past self in her, I got caught up in the moment and hugged her. *Oh, that's right. In my past life, I wanted to be embraced by someone.*

I heard someone loudly clearing their throat. When I looked in the direction of

its origin, I saw that it had been the duke himself, but he wasn't alone. His wife was there too, along with my parents, the servants, and even guards. The guards were ready to take me down at any given moment. Judging by the situation, it seemed that everyone had been watching everything unfold and then had jumped out in a panic when I'd begun yelling. It was an extremely unusual situation for voices to be raised in a discussion between nobles.

I quickly moved away from Lady Anastasia and sat back in my seat. Realizing that everyone had seen me hug her made Lady Anastasia turn as red as a rose and hide her face behind her hands. *This isn't good... Proper noble etiquette dictates that the only place you're able to touch on a woman's body is the palm of her hand, even if you're engaged. And that's only if she permits you to.* Such acts like grabbing a woman's shoulders and hugging her were considered shameless even with her permission. It was such a violation of manners to do this to a woman you're meeting for the first time—and without even asking—that it wouldn't be surprising if the entire household were punished. It certainly wasn't something that the fourth son of a viscount would get away with doing to the daughter of a duke.

"I ask that you court her with *modesty*," the duke said to me, anger in his eyes.

"Yes, sir! My deepest apologies!" I said before doing the ultimate bow of remorse. All I could do was apologize profusely.

"Oh, what's the harm? I'm sure his passionate advances pleased Ana," his wife said, trying to smooth things over.

Though it seemed that the duke was fuming, his wife didn't seem to be upset at all.

Anastasia

"Don't give up..."

"Huh?"

"Please don't give up! What does it matter if your face isn't perfect?! Your skin is just a little different from others'! That's it! Why would you give up on

everything just because of that?! Don't give up! Don't give up on becoming happy! It's okay for you to become happy! It's okay for you to wish to be happy! Don't laugh as if you've given up on everything! Your life's just starting!"

Sir Ginorious suddenly stood up and grabbed my shoulders and said this with tears in his eyes. The phrase "scream of the soul" came to mind. It was as if his words carried the weight of many years of pain, but how could that be when he was but a sixteen-year-old son of a viscount? He shouldn't have had any painful experiences like that. But even so, his words were like those of someone who'd endured pain for close to their entire life—a scream wanting to protect the dignity of his humanity. The force of his words wasn't something a young girl like me could carelessly brush off.

I've...given up? I suppose that's true. I've long since given up on the possibility of getting married and becoming happy. In the next moment, he knelt, took my hand, and lowered his lips to it. *H-Huh?! I-Is he...?! This is what men do when they propose, right?! No. There's no way! I must be jumping to conclusions! There's absolutely no way I'd ever be proposed to! It's not possible!*

"Please marry me. I promise I'll make you happy, so please don't give up on your own happiness."

He gazed at me, an enormous amount of fire behind his eyes. They made me understand that he truly and sincerely wished for my happiness. Meeting a wonderful man, marrying him, and becoming happy was a fairy tale that I'd dreamed of when I was young and still didn't know the harshness of reality. It should've been something that solely existed for me in the form of delusions, not real life.

But even so, that didn't change the fact that a man who was kinder and more handsome than any other I'd met up until now was earnestly on one knee, asking me with a serious look in his eyes to marry him. *I...can't believe this.*

His words of proposal replayed in my head. They echoed around my mind as it went blank. *Can I become...happy? Is it really okay for me to not give up on becoming happy?* This might have been my first and last chance. There might not be anyone else who'd ever genuinely propose to me. This was an unexpected joy, but what about for him? Would our marriage not cause him to

be unhappy?

“I-I-I’m so pleased to hear these words, but...are you...”

I tried to squeeze out the words, but couldn’t stop my voice from shaking.

“I want *you*. Please.” The combination of the intense gaze from his beautiful eyes and the fiery emotion in his words made my head feel like it was going to boil over.

“Y-Yes...”

Hearing my answer, he shot an almost blinding smile at me. This was my first time seeing him genuinely smile. It was so beautiful and kind, it threatened to melt me.

Huh?! As soon as he stood up, he embraced me. Wh-Wh-What do I do?! Wh-What should I do in this situation?! This was my first time ever being hugged by a man. My head was all jumbled up and I couldn’t even move.

Then, I heard someone clearing their throat, leading to the shocking revelation that both of our families, guards, and even the servants had been watching us. My face felt as if fire was about to burst from it from the realization that they’d seen me be proposed to *and* embraced.

“Oh, what’s the harm? I’m sure his passionate advances pleased Ana,” mother said.

Oh...they really did see everything. Mother, please drop the subject. I’m so embarrassed, I could die.

Ginorious

Our stroll around the garden came to an abrupt end at the stern-faced duke’s words. Lady Anastasia and I returned to the timeworn drawing room with our parents to talk. I noticed that from time to time during our conversation, she’d glance at me, so I tried to look at her at the same time so our eyes would meet. When we did, she’d turn red and look down. *She’s so cute.* I couldn’t help but smile.

She was so cute, I found myself continuing to gaze at her. Noticing my stare,

she glanced at me and this time made a face of surprise. Then she turned even redder and looked down again. *Jeez, how can she be so adorable?!*

But I quickly averted my eyes, noticing that the duke was looking at me with a very sour expression, in great contrast to his wife, who was beaming. My engagement to Lady Anastasia became official during our conversation, so we began exchanging official documents. From my family's side, I wasn't very worried about receiving approval, because the minute we'd received the proposition from the duke, it was basically guaranteed that we'd agree.

The biggest effect this had on my house was my needing to be adopted into a different house first. The status difference between a duke and a viscount was great, making it necessary for me to change houses so I'd be of a sufficiently high social standing when we announced our engagement. Since it was already decided which family I'd be adopted into, the only thing left was the administrative paperwork.

Once I was brought into that family, I'd live in a mansion in the royal capital's noble district. It was just one of the many mansions that their family possessed. The duke also happened to be this country's prime minister, which really showed with how smooth the arrangements were.

The plan was for me to only go to the royal capital after being fully adopted, but since the adoption paperwork would take longer than the actual engagement paperwork, I'd have some time before having to move. During that time, I'd have to make sure I completed various tasks such as moving my company's headquarters to the royal capital.

Anastasia

Our stroll around the garden was cut short after father scolded us, and now we'd all returned to the drawing room. The scene of Sir Ginorious proposing to me replayed many times in my head. Every time it did, I'd become embarrassed and in order to hide my face, which had most likely turned red, I'd look down.

Does someone this wonderful truly desire me? Am I still in reality? I can't believe I've been proposed to by such a handsome and intelligent person. Only a short while ago, I'd assumed he'd say exceptionally harsh things to me, leaving

me depressed, but I never expected things to have turned out this way. *It's like a dream. Though I'm sitting on this sofa, I'm so light that none of this feels real.* Though I knew it was improper of me to do so, I couldn't help but shift my gaze toward Sir Ginorious. Every time I saw his handsome face, I'd think that this really wasn't a dream.

Hm? I could've sworn that his ring was a light purple color, but it's black. Am I remembering incorrectly? Oh! Realizing that our eyes had met, I immediately looked away in embarrassment. Gazing at a man was a very immodest thing for a lady to do, and I didn't want him to think of me as immodest. But even so, I couldn't help but be interested in him, and I felt my eyes naturally gravitating toward him.

Eep! Our eyes met once more. For some reason, he was gently smiling while gazing at me. I'd had the impression that he was more the calm and collected type who didn't smile often, so having him smile at me made my heart almost beat out of my chest.

Wh-Why are you smiling when you look at me? What is the meaning behind that smile? But more importantly, that smile is really bad for my heart. When his cool, calm, and handsome face melts into a gentle smile, it's too wonderful and I can't stop my heart from racing!

I realized that my head had been filled exclusively with thoughts of him for a while now. *Now that I think about it, I think I read in a book once that love is when your head is filled with thoughts of someone. No way...is this love?! Is it really possible for me to have fallen in love with not just a man, but someone I only met today?!*

Eventually, it became time for our family to leave. Simply being able to steal glances at Sir Ginorious made my heart full. It was a very nice feeling. However, thinking about how I wouldn't be able to see him for a little bit depressed me.

Why is the thought of not being able to see his face affecting me so? Am I truly in love? I'd read about love at first sight from romance novels, but that was usually restricted to falling in love the instant you laid eyes on someone. The first time I saw him, I didn't have these feelings, though.

“I’ll write you,” Sir Ginorious said to me with an expressionless face before I got into the carriage to leave.

As soon as he said that, the melancholic cloud in my heart was blown away and replaced with pure joy.

“I-I will too!”

Why is talking to him so embarrassing for me? I was able to talk normally with him not too long ago, but now, I’m so awkward, I can’t even look him in the face when I speak. It was as if I’d become a different person after he proposed to me. I’d become so shy that even my voice had gotten softer.

“Please take good care of my daughter, Ginorious,” mother giggled.

“Yes, I will! I look forward to the many years to come.”

“M-Me too,” I stammered.

I’d been looking down to hide my embarrassment, but then as soon as I heard his words, I frantically responded. But it seemed that his words had been addressed toward my mother, and I’d butted into their conversation. *Oh...how embarrassing. Why can’t I act more dignified like a proper lady? I don’t want him to see me like this!*

“He’s a wonderful person, isn’t he, Ana?” mother asked with a happy expression as we rode in the carriage.

I couldn’t respond. I couldn’t help but remember how he’d embraced me after proposing and how everyone had been present to see. Now even my ears felt hot, not just my face. Seeing me like this, mother began to snicker.

“However, no matter how capable he is, I won’t give the dukeship to someone who can’t make Ana happy. Aren’t we rushing things by already signing the official proposal? Perhaps we should wait and see if he’s really the kind of man she’d like to be with,” father said, displeased.

It seemed that during the time that my mind had been filled with thoughts of Sir Ginorious, mother had already pushed away father’s opinion and made him

sign the official proposal.

“It’ll be fine. You saw his proposal, didn’t you? I’ve no doubt he’s truly wishing for her happiness from the bottom of his heart. How many years have we been feeling out other nobles? You *have* to know how sincere he was being, right?”

“I do. That’s why I signed...” father said.

“If you understand, then you know that you need to start his training to become your successor as soon as possible, don’t you?”

“I do, but...”

It seems that everyone did hear every last word of the proposal. Oh how I wish I could crawl into a hole and disappear...

Chapter 2: The First Step to Change

Ginorious

"I've never seen a fresh black ice flower before. I hope I've the opportunity to see one someday."

This was what was written in Lady Anastasia's letter. *I want to show her a black ice flower in bloom, but how?*

"Hey, Gino? How many times have you read that letter now?"

Though I'd been sure I was alone here in the garden, sitting at the table and drinking tea while reading my letter from Lady Anastasia, I was suddenly called out to by my sister. Looking up, I saw not only her but my brother Davy as well sitting across from me.

"Oh? When did the two of you get here?" I asked.

"Just a little while ago. You didn't notice because you've been so absorbed in that letter. So how many times have you read it? I'm pretty sure that's the same envelope and stationary I saw yesterday," my sister said.

"I've only read it about twelve times..." I said, looking away while putting the letter back into the envelope, slightly embarrassed.

Since the day of our marriage talks, I'd been exchanging letters with Lady Anastasia. I'd always reread the ones she sent me like this. Even including my previous life, this was my first time corresponding with a woman. It really put me in high spirits.

"Well, I never thought I'd see the day you'd act like this, Gino," Davy said, chuckling.

"Seriously, it's really shocking. Up until now, no matter how cute the girls flirting with you were, you never reacted at all. It's crazy to see that same blockhead acting like this now," my sister added.

“Girls flirting with me? When has that ever happened?” I asked.

“Huh? You seriously never noticed?! What about the daughter of Viscount Jones, Lady Helena? She asked you so many times to go out with her! It was clear as day that she was interested in you!”

Inviting someone to spend time with you for nonbusiness purposes was a tactic commonly used in high society to maintain friendly relations. The Jones family was one that our family was deeply involved with because of our territory’s specialty: medicinal tea. When she invited me to do things with her, she was merely thinking about the relationship between our families. It’d have been a bother to her if I assumed that she actually wanted to go out with me and not due to high-society pleasantries. As such, I’d always avoided making any specific plans with her.

My sister let out a long, exasperated sigh. “She wanted to spend time with you because she liked *you*. It had nothing to do with our family relationship. Why do you interpret all conversations as some kind of business transaction?”

“Don’t be so hard on him—he can’t help it. Gino’s been reading adult-level books ever since he was a kid and he never really played with others his age. Plus he’s been dealing with business exclusively ever since making his own company. He may speak with women during his trades sometimes, but in general, he’s probably never really hung out with girls.”

“Now that you mention it, yeah. Despite having good looks and being interested in girls, I’ve never gotten the sense that he’s had a girlfriend. Heh heh. Lady Anastasia is starting to intrigue me, if she can change Gino this much. I’m worried about leaving him in her care too, so maybe I should try writing her a letter sometime.”

“No! Absolutely not!” Davy said firmly.

He must have been afraid of what could happen if our eccentric sister slipped up with her unconventional behavior in front of other nobles.

“Well, fine, I won’t... Hmm. Gino, now that I think about it, there are some girls like Lady Helena who you can talk to normally, but others who you run away from as soon as they approach you, right?”

“I’m capable of spending time with women if it’s for business, but I’m not good at small talk. Also, I don’t run away; I’m just trying to keep the small talk as minimal as possible.”

Since girls found my appearance even more repulsive than a cockroach’s in my past life, I tended to naturally avoid women. When checking out from a store, I’d always choose the line with a male cashier. At cafés, I’d sit wherever there weren’t women around. My conversations with women went about the same; I’d keep them to a minimum and only ever really talk as much as necessary.

“Listen, you can’t call ending a conversation in a matter of seconds *not* running away. So is the reason you’re able to speak with Lady Helena so easily because you thought it was for business?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I could speak with women and correspond with them if it was for work. All I needed to do was use the appropriate set business phrases as the situation demanded.

“Don’t tell me speaking with Lady Anastasia is just an extension of work for you too, is it?” *It...might be. I have no idea because I’ve never had conversations with women that haven’t been business-related.* “Listen, Gino,” my sister continued. “You absolutely cannot treat Lady Anastasia as you would someone you’re doing business with. Don’t use set phrases. *Actually* spend time with her.”

“But the set phrases in business are used in order to avoid upsetting anyone. Won’t I just make her hate me if I don’t use them?”

“Do you talk to us in business phrases?”

“Well, no, but...”

“See? You’ll be fine. Just speak to her like you speak to us, and you’ll be golden.”

“Exactly. You might be a little bit of an oddball, but you’ve got kindness in spades. Have more confidence in yourself,” Davy said, ruffling my hair.

It was true that I had no problems speaking with the women in my family. But in both my previous and current lives, those were the *only* women I'd been able to freely talk to. Aside from them, I'd only ever spoken to women the bare minimum necessary for work. In the end, I wasn't too different from those kinds of guys with "mother complexes" who only really had experience speaking with their mothers and could never simply have a smooth conversation with a girl. It was a considerably difficult task.

"Gino, there's no need to show her everything inside you. People gradually get closer over time. All you need to do is slowly but surely open your heart," Davy said.

"How, specifically? I feel like I have essentially no idea what to do..."

"Hm, well... How about being honest about whatever kind of fond feelings you have for her? There isn't a person alive who'd dislike being told what someone likes about them, so start there and clearly tell her what you like about her."

"N-No way! I can't profess my love!"

"You're jumping pretty quickly from telling her what you *like* about her to a love confession," Davy chuckled.

My face felt hot after he pointed this out.

My sister began grinning. "Heh. There's no need to force yourself to say heavy things from the start. You just have to say things like you wish you could see her, or that you look forward to her next letter. Just stuff like that. These are all common social phrases, so it should be fine for you, right?"

True, but even so, that's still difficult for me...

"You just have to try your best," she continued. "If you keep interacting with her as if you're doing business, she's gonna end up hating you."

"Sh-She's gonna hate me?!"

There was no doubt this was the truth. After all, a woman, my sister, had said it. *This isn't good. I need to first put my all into conveying my fondness for Lady Anastasia!*

After that, my sister gave me the advice to interpret every invitation as if they were asking me out for real. She also taught me about the special noble custom of giving an “Oath Flower” to your betrothed.

“Sheesh, you’re a handful,” she said, poking my cheek, but her smile seemed somewhat lonely.

Anastasia

My correspondence with Sir Ginorious had begun. Every time I read his letters, I’d always be surprised by his logical thinking, wide range of knowledge, and deep wisdom. His letters overflowed with the quality of his character as well as his sincerity and kindness. They were wonderful. But what surprised me most was the depth of his broad-mindedness. It really made me wonder if we were truly the same age. I’d felt on multiple occasions that it was as if I were being doted on by someone older.

It also seemed that he had a good relationship with his family, especially his older sister. I’d find myself laughing when I read his stories about her. I’d also been surprised that he said his ideal woman was someone who he could peacefully drink tea with at an old age. He possessed a very unique personality, but I found that endearing.

Reading his letters was always so enjoyable, I’d immediately read them upon their arrival. I’d read them many times whenever I found a free moment. Every time I did, a warmth would spread through my chest and I’d become very happy. I’d always want to read his next letter as soon as possible, so I’d send my response quickly with express delivery. When I did, he’d respond with express delivery as well. No matter how many times I swiftly sent him a reply, he’d send one back just as fast. *Does he look forward to these letters as well? If he has the same feelings I do...I’ll be so, so happy!*

One day when I received a new letter from him, I once again rushed to my room to open it. When I did, I couldn’t stop my eyes from widening with surprise as I gasped. Up until now, the phrasing he used had been similar to what one would use in a businesslike relationship. It’d kept an appropriate,

polite distance. Suddenly, his words had changed to passionate ones.

"I had a dream about you yesterday. Even if it was but a dream, I was so happy to be able to see you."

"I want to see you as soon as possible, even if it's a mere second sooner."

"I wish our relationship could be official already."

I could tell how hot my face was getting as my eyes passed over his words. My heartbeat became so loud that it surprised even me. It was impossible to simply sit in silence, and the result was a high-pitched squeal.

"M-Milady?!"

Though it was immodest of me, I dived onto my bed and rolled around on it while releasing something resembling a scream. Bridgette, my personal attendant, let out a sound of surprise, but I didn't have the capacity to react to her. I had a feeling that if I didn't do this, I'd lose myself.



The subsequent letters I received from Sir Ginorious were all increasingly passionate. He wrote words that made me happy, but it was certain he was merely following social etiquette and saying whatever would please his fiancée. *Right, I can't forget. This is simply polite courtship practice.* Even though I told myself this, I couldn't suppress the happiness I felt every time I read his letters. I wanted to jump for joy.

Maybe... Maybe he actually does feel this way about me? But I couldn't let myself misinterpret things. Still, even though I told myself that, I couldn't help but get my hopes up. If I thought about it, there hadn't been a single man who'd given me such attention or acted this kindly toward me. I was more than likely simply unaccustomed to this treatment.

The mere arrival of a letter from him was enough to make my heart pound and my face go red. The days of me rolling around on my bed while reading his letters into the depths of night didn't stop.

When I'd remember his words during the day, I couldn't help but smile and feel my face get hot from the embarrassment and happiness. Every day became incredibly enjoyable. But my happiness didn't last forever. Sir Ginorious eventually became unable to write further letters to me.

I'd received a letter that he'd be absent for a little while due to business. He must've been quite busy since he had a company to run. I understood that, but even so, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

I was a woman as hideous as a goblin. It wouldn't be surprising if his feelings toward me changed and he asked to call off our engagement. Even I felt that it couldn't be helped if he felt that way. It was only natural for humans to desire a human partner, not a monster. *Will he come to the engagement ceremony? If he doesn't...* Suddenly, my days lost their joy, transforming into depressing slogs where I imagined the cruel future.

Ginorious

ROOOOOAR!

The monster bellowed as it leaped at my throat. It resembled the spotted

hyena—a type of animal I’d seen in the zoo in my past life. In response to it leaping at me, I swept around to its side and brought the sword I’d raised high down on its neck. It couldn’t avoid my attack while in midair, so I was able to strike it without any resistance. After losing its head, the monster crumpled to the ground and slid several meters away with the momentum of its jump.

“H-How did you do that?! You moved to the side of the monster in an instant! Sir? I saw your ring sparkle, but is it an Artifact? Even if it is, I can’t believe you were able to cut right through the winged wolf’s thick bones with a single slash!” an adventurer in their late teens asked with amazement.

It seemed the monster I’d killed had been the last one in the area. After finishing off the ones he’d been fighting, this guy must’ve come over to observe my battle.

“Ow! What’d you do that for?!” he exclaimed.

The color of the party leader’s face changed as he ran over and punched the young adventurer.

“You idiot,” he hissed. “Do you have a death wish?!”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” the young adventurer asked in a normal voice.

“Quiet!” the party leader whispered. “Keep your voice down! Listen, even if you see a noble use something mysterious like an Artifact, you absolutely *have* to pretend you didn’t see. *Absolutely!* These kinds of things are their house secrets that they keep even from other nobles! Mere commoners like us who take an interest in those things don’t live long lives!”

The young adventurer went pale and began fervently nodding at what the older adventurer had said.

You know I could hear everything you said, right? I know you were trying to whisper, but with how emotional you were being, you weren’t exactly being quiet.

I was currently on a mountain near the royal capital with the adventurers I’d hired for security in order to find a black ice flower. It seemed it was a custom of nobles to present their fiancée with an Oath Flower when they got engaged.

Since my plans had always been to become a commoner, I wasn't very well-versed in noble customs like these. Thus, my sister had laid out exactly what I needed to do. Even in this country, black ice flowers were sold in towns in the northern region during winter. But these flowers could never last the journey to the shops near the warm royal capital. Since they were plants that grew in frigid climates, the heat during the week that it took to travel from the north to the royal capital was enough to ruin them.

Though many people were charmed by the black ice flowers, they'd have to make a trip in the winter to a town that had them. But for Lady Anastasia, who wasn't too fond of far excursions, she'd never traveled to a northern town. As such, she'd yet to see the flower blooming in person.

In one of her letters, she'd mentioned that she wanted to see a black ice flower in bloom, and I wanted to grant that wish. That was the reason I chose the black ice flower as my Oath Flower.



Today was my engagement ceremony with Lady Anastasia. Two months had passed since our marriage meeting, and my name had changed from Ginorious Adolni to Ginorious Valvalier. I was no longer the fourth son of a viscount, but the second son of a marquess's household.

An engagement ceremony was not a marriage ceremony. There weren't any vows, nor was there a kiss. After all, in the eyes of the law and faith, we weren't married yet, so there was to be no physical contact between us until after we were married.

Our families stood across from and greeted one another. All we were doing today was signing papers in front of the priest. But even so, I was happy! The simple act of signing an oath, just that little thing made me want to dance for joy. I was finally about to accomplish what I hadn't been able to in my past life—I was getting married!

After being reincarnated, I'd firmly resolved to avoid dying alone as an old man this time around. Before my engagement to Lady Anastasia, when I'd planned instead to become a commoner, I'd had every intention of registering with a matchmaker as soon as I was of age. I'd thought that, with the advice of

a matchmaker, even a guy like me could find someone. I'd been ready for unfavorable conditions, but contrary to my wildest dreams, my fiancée was an unbelievably wonderful woman! It was a miracle of amazing proportions. *Finally! Finally, I have the ticket to a happy life in my older years! Man, I can't wait to be old! I want to be old as soon as possible!*

After we finished all the preparations, Lady Anastasia greeted me once more with an elegant curtsy. *Oh wow... She's really going to be my life partner?* It didn't feel real at all, so I couldn't help but stare at her. Not hearing a word from me after she spoke, she tilted her head. That was enough to make me snap out of it and frantically return her greeting.

During all my excitement, the ceremony had flown by and was now over. From now on, I would live at the Valvalier household and go to the duke's estate every day. Though the adoption itself was, on paper, enough to make my engagement possible, that alone wasn't a good enough deal for the Valvalier household whose name I was borrowing.

The reason their household agreed to adopt me was because they wanted a connection with me, the future head of the ducal family. That was why I'd need to deepen bonds with their family as well, while also going to the duke's house every day to learn how to run the territory.

My new adoptive parents as well as my new older brother, the heir to the Valvalier family, were all very warm people. I got the feeling that we would get along. They also had two daughters younger than me. Unlike my older sister, they were very well-mannered and wouldn't do anything like run in the hallways. It was very possible that they wouldn't like the idea of having to live with a stranger out of the blue like this, so I was a little worried in the beginning about whether we'd get along. Fortunately, though, they adored me. Unlike my unladylike older sister and my free-spirited, outgoing little sister in my previous life, these two were very calm and dignified. Having little sisters like this was a first for me.

Anastasia

"Please allow me to reintroduce myself. I'm the second son of the Valvalier

household, Ginorious. I look forward to spending our lives together,” Sir Ginorious said with a graceful bow after mine.

I remembered that one of his letters had stated he was focusing on manners and mannerisms over the past two months, but he’d truly become more graceful than before. It was an obvious difference.

We were currently in the midst of the engagement ceremony, and all those involved were gathered in the church on our mansion’s grounds. It was my first time seeing him in a while, and he looked very wonderful in the high-quality formal wear befitting a marquess that he was wearing. He was somehow even more handsome than when I’d first met him.

In the majestically built church, the cool, calm face of Sir Ginorious being caressed by the sunlight filtered through the stained glass could have been a painting. Before I knew it, I was stricken by his beauty.

We’d finished signing the documents with the priest as the witness not too long ago. With this, Sir Ginorious and I had become officially engaged. I could hardly believe that I had truly been able to become engaged to such a wonderful man.

Though I’d been emotionally all over the place while we’d had regular letter correspondence, during the period where he’d stopped, I was able to regain my composure. Though I’d accepted his proposal after being swept away in the moment, and had stayed swept away as we made the subsequent arrangements, I couldn’t help but wonder if it was truly all right for him to be engaged to me. Wouldn’t a woman like me only cause Sir Ginorious to be unhappy? If he escorted me at social gatherings, I had no doubt that he’d be met with many hardships. Though this worry had been on my mind, I hadn’t been able to ask him.

“Learning your duties as successor is important, but make sure you take good care of Ana too, okay?” mother said to Sir Ginorious.

“Of course. I intend to treasure her with all my being.”

Hearing his words made my heart skip a beat. I knew that this was mere courteousness; however, my heart couldn’t help but beat faster. *It would be nice if that’s how he truly feels, though...* I knew that I had dreamlike hopes and

tried to deny that part of me.

The reason I couldn't ask him if he was truly okay with me had to do with these kind words of his. Every time I heard them, my heartbeat would run out of control. Simply by being present, he had the power to make my heart beat so intensely.

By becoming the adopted son of the Valvalier family, he'd undergo education on how to be a greater noble while also receiving training on how to succeed our household, all while running his own business. I had no doubt that he'd lead a very busy life. Even today, he had plans to meet with father and learn about running the ducal household while helping father with his work. Starting today, Sir Ginorious would be at our house every day.

"I've prepared a seat for you during afternoon tea. Make sure you don't get too absorbed in your work to spend time with Ana, okay?" mother said.

Usually this invitation would need to come from me, his fiancée, but mother stepped in to help and invited him on my behalf.

"It would be my honor. I look forward to having tea with Lady Anastasia."

Those words made my heart beat quickly again. *I'm really engaged to this beautiful man and I can have tea with him?* I was so embarrassed that I looked down to hide my face, which had gotten so hot. I had no doubt that I'd become bright red.

When afternoon came around, it was time for tea with Sir Ginorious.

"Listen closely, Ana. You have a goal today: make him stop speaking so formally. You two are engaged now. Isn't it strange for him to talk to you so formally? You're the one with the higher social standing, so if you don't give him permission to be more casual you, he'll keep this up forever. So do your best to get him to stop, okay?"

Mother had given me this order prior to my afternoon tea with Sir Ginorious. Currently, he was sitting on the sofa in front of me. The room we were having tea in was the twelfth drawing room and was named the "Sapphire Lotus" room. Out of the large window, one could see the red autumn leaves. I spoke with him while we gazed at them.

I tried looking for an opportunity to bring up my request for him to speak more casually to me, but I found it difficult to actually say. Thinking about it, this was the first time I had been trying to get closer to a man. On the other hand, I was quite used to distancing myself from them.

“Shut up, ugly.”

“Yuck. Stay away!”

Every time I attempted to bring it up, the words and faces of disgust from past men would flash through my mind, and it'd deflate any courage I'd worked up. I was a hideous woman who incurred the displeasure of men simply with my presence. It was difficult to imagine that Sir Ginorious would truly want a relationship where he spoke casually with me. Due to the difference in our statuses, a request from me would almost be like an order. If forcing him to do something he didn't want to do made him hate me, then I... All I could do was think of the possible miserable outcomes that awaited if I asked him to speak more casually.

We continued our talk, all the while with me being unable to say what I wanted to. Then, the servant whom Sir Ginorious had asked to bring something returned with an object wrapped in a red cloth, which he put down on the table. The red cloth had the Valvalier crest embroidered in gold thread. Sir Ginorious stood up and then proceeded to bow politely.

“Lady Anastasia Sevensworth. Our relationship has blossomed, and today I had the fortune of being betrothed to you. Now I'd like to present you with a flower as a display of my sincerity.”

Huh? I-Is this the speech one gives when presenting an Oath Flower?! The Oath Flower was supposed to be proof that there was love in the engagement and was one type of pledge for nobles. Nobles weren't ones to make vows so easily, so those who married for strictly strategic purposes wouldn't make this particular one. A number of people that I'd met over the years had done this ritual as a way to demonstrate their genuine bonds with their intended.

“S-S-Sir G-Ginorious Valvalier, o-our relationship has blossomed, and today I've had the fortune of becoming betrothed to you. As a display of my sincerity, I accept your feelings for me,” I said, frantically standing up and returning his

words.

I'd lost my composure, resulting in my voice shaking. We'd only met once during our marriage talks, so I never imagined he'd present me with an Oath Flower. I wasn't sure why he was doing this. *Were those passionate words in his letters his true feelings?* I couldn't make heads or tails of anything.

"Thank you very much. Please, enjoy," he said, taking off the red cloth, revealing a large lanternlike object.

It had a black metal frame and glass panes in it, which were fogged up, so I couldn't really tell what was inside. When he opened the glass door, cold air poured out.

"I-Is this... Could this possibly be a black ice flower?!"

Inside the refrigeration magic tool was a single black ice flower in bloom. The stem and petals were the same color as his hair. Its ten translucent petals were the same violet as his eyes. It was my first time seeing a live black ice flower, and it was almost as if I were looking at Sir Ginorious himself—cool and beautiful. *This is such a wonderful Oath Flower!* My chest was filled with a mysterious joy I'd never experienced before.

"Um, how did you manage to transport the black ice flower all the way to the royal capital?" I asked.

I was confused by a number of things regarding this, so I decided to ask. It was true that the black ice flower was sold in the northern territories; however, it wasn't the season where they could be purchased yet. And beyond that, bringing a flower in bloom was impossible. He also couldn't have possibly gone all the way there and back during the period that he'd stopped sending me letters. The very fact that there was a black ice flower here in front of me was strange.

"I went to Mount Mihirnahmi to get it," Sir Ginorious said. "It's not too far from the royal capital. The peak of the mountain is colder than the northern territories, so the black ice flowers bloom there earlier than in other places."

"Wh-What?! Why would you put yourself in such danger?!"

"Because you wrote in your letter that you wanted to see a real-life black ice

flower.”

Never would I have expected that he’d venture all the way to a dangerous area filled with monsters simply because of something I’d written without too much thought in my letter. I never expected things would end up like this. I had no desire for Sir Ginorious to put himself in any danger. I needed to be firm here so that he didn’t do anything like this ever again...or at least that’s what I thought I should do, but the shock was too much. I couldn’t muster any words.

He’d remembered something a hideous woman like me had casually written, and then for the sake of that woman, he’d put himself in danger to get a black ice flower. He was the first man who’d ever done something like this for me. I was so overwhelmed with appreciation that I couldn’t speak properly.

“A-Are you truly happy being betrothed to me? Y-You don’t hate a woman like myself?” I asked nervously, my voice trembling.

I couldn’t help but ask him this. The hope I gained from the black ice flower overrode my unease.

“This flower is my answer.”

His words delivered another shock to me. Despite being mature, not showing his smile too often, and possessing beauty like an ice sculpture, that very same Sir Ginorious was suddenly red in the face and making an incredibly adorable expression. The stark difference was enough to make me want to squeal. My mind threatened to go completely blank.

“I-I’m so happy...” I said in a voice so soft, it might have disappeared into the air.

I became bashful as well. *It’s so embarrassing, but...I’m so, so happy. He truly does want to marry me. It’s like I’m in a dream. No, I can’t get too wrapped up in this. I need to put my foot down and tell him firmly to never put himself in danger again.*

“Um...please don’t do anything dangerous like that again. There’s no need to go that far for someone like me.”

I was somehow able to squeeze these words out while sitting back down on the sofa. *Oh, that wasn’t very well said. I’m so flustered, I couldn’t be as firm as I*

meant to be. I'll send him a letter once my emotions are more settled.

"I apologize for causing you worry. I won't climb mountains to pick black ice flowers anymore. However, I beseech you to not say 'someone like me.' Lady Anastasia, you should ask more from me."

"Just this black ice flower is more than enough."

"It's not nearly enough. I think you still haven't begun believing in your own happiness."

"That...may be true."

It was possible that my hesitation to ask him to stop speaking formally was a part of my giving up too. When I'd stopped receiving letters from him, I'd all too quickly accepted the fact that things had once again not worked out. I'd completely believed that it was more natural for men to discard me than to care for me. Even now, despite being betrothed, I couldn't picture a future where we built a happy family.

"I might have faced monsters in order to get to the black ice flower, but it wasn't simply for your sake. It was for mine as well."

"For...yours?" I asked.

"Yes. I wished to see your smile. In order to grant this wish of mine, I went to the mountain. I'm greedy, so I want to see you smile more. That's why you should wish for more from me."

This is truly the first time anyone has been so kind to me. I was practically on the verge of tears, but I did everything I could to hold them back. When cruel words would bring me to tears, all the men who'd said those words would make displeased faces. My tears irritated men.

"Lady Anastasia, please don't give up on your happiness," he repeated.

Hearing him say this reminded me of his powerful words from our marriage talks.

"Don't give up! Don't give up on becoming happy! It's okay for you to become happy! It's okay for you to wish to be happy! Don't laugh as if you've given up on everything! Your life's just starting!"

“Don’t give up on your happiness.” These were wonderful words that echoed within me. If I didn’t give up, I could become happy. *This might be an opportunity for me to change. Perhaps I’ll make these wonderful words a compass for my heart and try my best from today onward. After all, even I would like that for myself if it’s really possible. It might be extremely difficult, but I get the feeling that I might be able to achieve happiness if it’s by the side of this kind man.*

“Um, Sir Ginorious, I have a request. Now that we’re betrothed, may I ask that you stop speaking so formally with me? I’d like you to refrain from calling me ‘Lady’ as well.”

This was the first step in not giving up on happiness. To others, this may not have seemed like that big of a step to take, but for me it was the first step toward changing myself. It was the first time that I moved closer to a man. I felt like, even if it was from just one word, something inside me was changing.

“Got it. I’ll stop speaking so formally with you.”

Though it’d taken me all this time to be able to request this of him, he’d easily accepted. More importantly, he was already speaking more casually.

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Suddenly, I felt like the distance between us had closed, and I was beginning to feel embarrassed. Thinking about how my face had surely turned red, I looked down to hide it.

“I’ve got a request for you too. Do you mind?” he asked.

“O-Of course not. What is it?”

“Could you maybe call me ‘Gino’?”

H-Huh?! H-He wants me to call him by a nickname already?! A noble daughter calling a man outside of her family by a nickname was not normal. You used a nickname for someone outside of the family only if you were in a relationship with them. As thus, calling him by a nickname would put our secret relationship on full display. In other words... Th-This is a confession of love...

“Go ahead, call me ‘Gino,’” he said.

N-No! I-I can't do that so suddenly! Wait, I just decided not to give up on my happiness! That's right. I can't retreat. I need to struggle forward! I internally wailed at the steep hill I was about to climb, but I was determined to do my best.

"Sir...G-Gino."

Agh! For the first time in my life, I've shown affection for a man! My face is hot! This is so very, very embarrassing! I can't look up! I sat there with my head lowered and my eyes shut. Suddenly, I felt my hand being taken from where it had been resting in my lap. I couldn't help but look up with surprise. *Wh-Whaaat?!* Just a moment ago, Sir Ginorious had been sitting across from me, but now he was sitting next to me and holding my left hand with both of his.

"Thank you! I'm so happy! Can I call you Ana?"

Sir Ginorious's smile was like the midsummer sun. *Eeep! H-He's so close! You're too close! Please don't shine your bright smile at me from this distance! Why are you holding my hand?!* My heart had begun to pound so loudly that I thought my head was going to boil over, sending me into a panic.

"Y-Yes..." I eventually stammered, unable to think straight, ultimately agreeing to his proposition.

"Oh, Ana. My Ana. I look forward to our life together."

"My Ana"? Are these possibly the same kind of adoring words that lovers say to each other?! I thought this only happened in romance novels! Why am I receiving these words? Why is he still holding my hand? Is this possibly a dream? My head's gotten so hot, I'm feeling lightheaded. I think I've reached my limit! My heart's about to explode! I'm going to lose my mind! I haven't had time to recover from one shock to the next!

"Milady, I've brought fresh tea," Bridgette called out, prompting Sir Ginorious to move away from me and back to his seat.

Bridgette had defused the situation, allowing me to regain my composure. *That was very dangerous... I guess having tea with your fiancé is a difficult situation to keep your sanity in.*

Sir Gino... That night, when I was in bed, I called out to him in my mind. I suddenly began rolling around from embarrassment and giddiness. I was so glad that I was using the words he'd said—to not give up on my happiness—to navigate forward and do my best. Though I was now engaged, I'd never expected to ever achieve mutual love with a man. However, now that I'd resolved to not give up, I was beginning to feel as if at the end of this long road lay a happy future.

It seems that with just a little bit of courage, people can change. By just changing slightly, the world seemed so much more full of color. I'd continue by linking together my small instances of courage and aim to be happy.

Seeing the refrigeration magic tool that I'd left next to my bed, I remembered what mother had told me.

"For most refrigeration magic tools, you can cool things down, but you can't adjust the temperature. So, it shouldn't be possible to keep a black ice flower alive in it. That's the reason you can't bring them back from the northern territories. But that refrigeration magic tool has adjustable temperature functions and is able to keep the flower at an ideal temperature. It's an extremely rare magic tool. If he went through all the trouble of preparing this, he must really treasure you."

Remembering this made my face grow hot. *She didn't have to say that with father around, though.* Using a cloth to wipe away the condensation on the glass revealed the black ice flower inside. It was very beautiful in the candlelight.

Chapter 3: Her Curse and First Ring

Ginorious

I was currently on my way to the Sevensworth's library to look up something at the order of the duke. I'd also received permission to take a bit of a break and read, since I was already making the trip.

The buildings on their estate weren't limited to just a church and theater; the Sevensworths even had their own library. It was a similarly stand-alone building on the mansion grounds and filled with an incredible number of books. Though the Valvalier house had a wonderful library of its own, it didn't have nearly the selection of the huge, three-story building the Sevensworths had.

As I entered the library, I saw Ana sitting at a desk close to the window, not too far from the entrance. With how cold it was getting, she'd most likely chosen the spot because the sun was shining.

The books in this world used parchment, and since the pages would warp if they absorbed moisture, it was normal for them to be bound by wooden slabs. Usually, as protection, the corners of the wood would be fixed with metal, making them heavier than books from my previous life. Ana was currently reading a book, resting it on top of the desk.

She'd written in her letters that one of her hobbies was reading. Watching her bathed in the sunlight as she focused on her book while sitting in the chilly, hushed library made it clear to me how much she enjoyed reading. She looked even more mature than usual as she kept her back straight while silently looking down at her book, enveloped by the soft rays of the sun.

It also made me happy to be able to see a new side of her. I was enjoying myself so much that I didn't call out to her, but that didn't stop the servant standing near Ana from alerting her to my presence. When she looked up and saw me, a smile spread across her face as she shut her book.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you," I said.

“Oh, no, I didn’t expect to be able to see you at this time of day. I’m so happy!”

At her urging, I took the seat across from her while the servant prepared tea.

“What were you reading?” I asked.

“Embroidery techniques from the previous dynasty.”

That sounds like something only an enthusiast would read. “Oh, that’s right, you did mention in one of your letters that you liked embroidery.”

The hobbies she’d mentioned were reading, embroidery, and drawing. She apparently also liked playing a two-stringed instrument that resembled a violin.

“Though my skill isn’t at a level to boast about, I enjoy it,” she said.

“Would you mind showing me some of the things you’ve made?”

“I’m truly not trying to be humble, but I’m not at a point where my work is presentable. However, if you don’t mind, then...”

Though she seemed unsure of what to do, Ana smiled as she promised to show me her embroidery.

After my lesson for the day on being the duke’s successor ended, I was guided to Ana’s embroidery room by a servant. Like many noble women, the women of the Adolni household did embroidery; however, neither my mother nor sister had a specific room for it, instead working in the living room or their own quarters. A dedicated embroidery room was just one of the luxuries of the Sevensworth mansion.

When I entered the room, Ana was seated on the sofa, gazing at the autumn leaves while drinking her tea. I sat across from her and joined in looking at them. The room we were in now had spectacular scenery to admire. In general, the rooms were set up so that the view of the Sevensworth family garden completely changed depending on which room you were looking at it from, in order to keep things fresh.

After drinking tea for a bit, I had her give me a tour. Though this was called the “embroidery room,” it wasn’t a single room but a series of adjoining

chambers. The one we'd had tea in was specifically for resting and taking breaks. As we entered the room with the embroidery tools, I couldn't help but be surprised by how many there were. It was like I'd entered a sewing shop.

It was about as big as a gymnasium from my previous world and had all sorts of shelves with paraphernalia sorted on them. That being said, there were about ten times the number of tools here than in any stores in the city.

Plus, the only one who used this room was Ana. My soon-to-be mother-in-law had her own room for embroidery. *I guess that much is to be expected of the Sevensworth family.*

As a sidenote, ever since I became formally betrothed to Ana, her mother had told me to call her "mother." On the other hand, the duke was very firm that I was not to call him "father" until Ana and I were officially married.

Next, Ana took me into the display room for the finished embroidery, which was equally impressive. It was almost like a museum with how big the space was and how the works were all framed.

"Amazing! Did you make all of these?" I asked with surprise as I looked at the displayed embroideries.

These definitely weren't at a level that she should be embarrassed to display them. "Humble" didn't even begin to describe how much she'd downplayed her skills. In my previous world, needlework wasn't valued too highly artistically and was treated more as a craft than art, but the embroidery in this world was as magnificent as sculptures or paintings.

Nobles tended to love art, which meant there was a lot of opportunity for merchants to deal in fine art in an aristocratic country like this one. I could also tell the rough value of art at a glance, and I knew that the works I was looking at now were all first-class products. It was obvious to me from the expensive fabric and thread used, to the color decisions that evoked a pleasant sense of harmony, to the precise techniques used to construct them so expertly.

"These are all amazing. This one here uses the white-violet Gemini starflower as the motif, right?"

"Yes, that's right. They're a memory of the flowers that I saw at your family's

mansion. I've grown very fond of them."

She treasures our meeting so much that she made an embroidery based off it?! I want to jump for joy! Also, I should make a mental note that she likes the white-violet Gemini starflower. I felt a little closer to Ana now that I knew what kind of flower she liked.

There were a good number of embroideries here that were at a student's level, but the majority of them well exceeded that. Ana's face turned red, most likely embarrassed by the string of compliments I was giving her. *She's so adorable.* Before I knew it, I could feel myself smiling.

"If it's okay with you...I'd like to give you an embroidered handkerchief," she said.

"Really?! Yes, please! I'd love that!"

I felt bad for urging her to give me one as a result of my barrage of compliments, but I couldn't help how badly I wanted this. I wanted something she'd made even if it was a pattern depicting a worm fainting in agony.

"I-It makes me happy that you want it so much." It seemed that Ana was a little overpowered by my enthusiasm. "What kind of pattern would you like?"

"How about a design of the church we got engaged in? I'd like some kind of memento of our betrothal."

"A-Are you sure?! That makes me so happy!" Her smile was like a flower in bloom.

After that, we continued to view her works.

"Wow, you really have quite the collection. Did you make all of them?" I asked.

"Because of how I look, ever since I was young, I've hardly left the mansion. And since I'm only ever at home, I've had more time than most to focus on my hobbies."

"I didn't mean to remind you of that. Sorry."

"Oh, please don't feel bad. It doesn't bother me at all."

I could tell by her gentle smile that she wasn't lying. *Oh, what a wonderful person!* After we looked at all her embroidery, she took me back to the sitting area, and we had tea once again.

"Are you sure you're okay talking about me this much? You're not bored?" she asked.

It seemed that I still wasn't good at having conversations with women. I kept finding new sides of her, which made me happy, which in turn urged me to keep asking her questions about herself. As a result, I'd created a situation where she felt the need to ask me that.

"Not at all," I said. "Your favorite drink, the kinds of hats you like, your favorite shoes, what makes you happy, what makes you sad, the things you dislike—I want to know everything about you. I want to learn more things about you that nobody else knows," I said, being honest about my feelings.

Just as my older sister had advised me to, I needed to put my best foot forward in voicing my true feelings as much as possible. But I'd realized that simply doing that wasn't enough. I shouldn't focus only on my feelings; I needed to prioritize her feelings and pick out topics that she would enjoy.

"I'm sorry for badgering you with questions. I couldn't stop myself from trying to get closer to you."

I wasn't sure why I wanted to know her so badly, but I didn't think I could find logic in my actions. All that was there was a deep and powerful desire to know more about her. With all the life experience I'd accumulated, I had confidence in my ability to control my emotions. But even so, when it came to Ana, I lost that control. Were feelings toward the opposite sex just impulsive and difficult to control?

"Are you okay?" I asked after some time. "Your face is red. Do you have a fever?"

"U-Uh...I'm very happy that you're showing such an interest in me, and...it's making my heart race."

My goodness! She's so adorable! It took everything in me not to hug her.

Anastasia

I once again found myself with a fever. It was the first fever I'd gotten since Sir Gino had begun coming here daily. Every morning, I'd look forward to greeting him in the entrance hall and happily walking together to my father's office, but I was stopped by the servants today. So, with no choice, I slept and tried to get better as soon as possible. *I will greet him tomorrow without fail!*

I awoke to the wet cloth that'd been on my forehead being changed out for a new one.

"Ana..." The one who called my name was Sir Gino. "How are you feeling? Better?" he asked, leaning in closer out of worry.

Why are you here? Unable to comprehend this as reality, I stared at him for a little bit, but after some time passed, I was able to finally process that this wasn't a dream.

"You don't need to worry. This happens all the time. It's nothing too dire," I said, smiling to put him at ease.

"You must be thirsty. Would you like some fruit-infused water?" he asked, wrapping his arm around my back and sitting me up.

"S-S-Sir Gino?!"

I internally squealed. *Am I really not still dreaming?!* Sir Gino was currently holding my shoulders. Through his arm, I could feel his body heat. Though his face was very close to mine, I was worried that if I looked right at him, I might faint. Since I'd been in bed, I'd yet to change out of my sleepwear... *Wait. Wait! I'm still in my bed! We're not married yet! He shouldn't be touching me while I'm in bed! Wh-Wh-What should I do?!*

"Can you drink?" he asked, holding the cup up to me, but I was in no state of mind to reply.

"All right, milady, I've brought a new cushion for you. Please use this," Bridgette said, bringing a backrest.

I panicked and moved away from Sir Gino. My heart was beating so hard, I

was frightened that it might explode. Just now, I'd been imagining shameless things unbecoming of a lady, and I hoped Sir Gino hadn't noticed.

Though I obviously understood that people had no way of knowing what was going on inside another person's mind, I felt as if my thoughts had leaked into him through where he touched me, and I was very worried. If he had noticed, then...as a noble lady, I'd have no choice but to drink a goblet of poison.

As Bridgette wiped the sweat from my face, I drank the cold fruit-infused water in order to calm down. Though the warmth and manly strength from his arm was a constant thought in my head, I did my absolute best to push those thoughts out. I was so embarrassed, I couldn't even look at him. The blood that'd rushed to my head made me feel dizzy. *I have to be careful or I might faint.*

"Are...you hungry?" he asked. "I heard that you haven't eaten lunch yet."

Thanks to his question, I was somehow able to stop my anxious thoughts.

"A little..." Though I'd been worried that my nervousness would prevent me from saying anything, I was somehow able to reply.

I took deep breaths between sips of water, which allowed me to somewhat regain my composure. But even so, my heart was beating quickly.

"How long have you been here, Sir Gino?" I asked.

"Maybe for about three hours?"

"Three hours?! You must've been so bored!"

I was surprised. He wasn't even a servant, but he waited by my side for three whole hours? He didn't seem to have brought a book or anything either. I felt so bad.

"Not at all. I was able to gaze at your face as you slept. Besides, I was so worried and couldn't calm down, so I didn't have a chance to feel bored."

"My...face?"

Really? Did he truly simply look at my face as I slept? I don't even have makeup on. My face isn't even beautiful... Oh, if I'd known he'd come here, I would have at least put on makeup before I slept. I didn't drool at all, did I? I

was worried about a lot of different things, but I didn't have the courage to ask him. Now a different kind of embarrassment was strongly building up inside me.

After that, Sir Gino told me about his day. At first, I might have been a little on edge, but before I knew it, I'd become completely entranced in happily speaking with him.

"Okay, now say 'ah,'" he said, lifting a spoonful of the okahyu that Bridgette had brought over.

"Pardon?" I wasn't familiar with what he was asking.

"I mean you should open your mouth wide so I can feed you," he said, bringing the spoon close to my mouth.

"P-Pardon?"

I never expected Sir Gino's intentions to be to feed me himself. Even our servants would never go so far to take care of me. My face grew hot from the idea that he wanted to do this much.

I couldn't keep him waiting forever, so I steeled my will and put the spoon he was holding in my mouth. *Am I eating gracefully? It's quite embarrassing to have him stare at me while I eat.* He continued to feed me, and when I glanced at him, I could see he was gently smiling. *Is there anything wrong with the way I'm eating? Should I open my mouth less wide? But also, he truly has a picturesque smile. It makes my heart beat faster.*

"Sir Gino?" Unable to endure the mysterious smile he was showing me, I decided to call out to him.

"Hm? Oh, sorry. I was entranced by how cute you are."

"C-Cute?! M-Me?!"

What is he saying?! A hideous woman like me is cute? Up until now, there'd never been a single man who'd called me that, not even out of mere courtesy. Sure, my father said it, but that was out of his feelings as a father, so he didn't count. *This must be some kind of mistake.*

"Sorry, that kind of just slipped out..." Sir Gino said, looking away, his face now red.

It's not a mistake. He truly was saying those words to me. Now I was beginning to become embarrassed. This was the first time I'd been called cute, so this was also the first time feeling the resulting emotions. I was embarrassed, but giddy and very happy.

"I was simply taken off guard...but I'm very glad. Thank you very much," I said.

"I haven't said it out loud until now, but I've always thought you were cute."

"You...have?" I still couldn't really believe this was how he felt, so I couldn't help but question him.

"I have. You're cute when you smile, you're cute when you get surprised, you're cute when you're dressed up, and you're cute in your natural state with your hair down like now. I want to see more and more sides of you."

His purple eyes were filled with sincerity. I could tell that he wasn't lying or joking whatsoever. But after him calling me cute multiple times in a row, I was further embarrassed. Both my face and ears were burning.

"Oh, you're so cute! I just want to hug you!"

Huh?! What are you saying?! I'm in bed! Imagining him hugging me while I was in bed was enough to make me want to scream. *No! I need to stop with these fantasies! I'm being too shameless!*

Bridgette loudly cleared her throat, making Sir Gino sit back. But I was still unable to regain my calm and was desperately trying to pretend I was fine. If I lost my focus, his words would repeat over and over in my mind and I'd only become more flustered.

But still... "cute"? I had no idea that being called cute by the one you're in love with could make you so happy. Seeing my hideous appearance would usually evoke displeasure, which was why I'd always tried to wear clothes and hairstyles that didn't make me stand out.

But Sir Gino complimented my appearance, calling me cute. If he, the person who'd seen many sides of me, was saying this, then...perhaps I could be a little courageous and dress up just a little. Though he'd probably said it without too much thought behind it, that small, simple word gave me more courage than he could ever imagine.

Ginorious

One day, I was visiting the duke's mansion as I usually did, but Ana wasn't there to greet me. Apparently she was resting in bed due to a fever. From what I heard, this wasn't too uncommon and had something to do with her curse. I couldn't stop myself from worrying.

If someone like my older sister—the picture of health—caught a cold, I wouldn't worry too much, but Ana was different because she'd been cursed. I didn't know too much about it, and without any information, I had no clue if her fever would go down or if it was life-threatening. Not knowing made me fraught with worry. I kept thinking about the worst-case scenario, making it hard for me to focus on my work. When my mother-in-law saw the state I was in, she excused me for the day and allowed me to go to Ana's room.

Her room was dark from the thick, lavish curtains. Inside the room was a luxurious canopy bed with ornate carvings on it. I sat down in the chair next to her bed and took over taking care of Ana from the attendant.

In order to tend to and observe her, the intricately embroidered canopy had been opened, making it easy to see her reddened face as she silently slept on top of a large, fluffy white pillow with the covers pulled up to her neck. Seeing her like this made me feel uneasy, sending my heart into distress.

Usually she was so full of life, so I'd never truly felt that she was cursed. The most I'd ever thought was that she simply had a slightly different appearance from everyone else. But seeing her bedridden like this made it painfully clear that she'd indeed been cursed.

After about three hours of me regularly changing the damp cloth on her forehead, she awoke.

"You don't need to worry. This happens all the time. It's nothing too dire," she said with a smile, most likely because I'd been unable to hide how worried I was.

"You must be thirsty. Would you like some fruit-infused water?"

She nodded, so I pulled back her blanket a little and slipped my arm under her

shoulders to help her sit up.

“S-S-Sir Gino?!”

Ana was taken by surprise, but getting her to drink something was more important because of the fluids she’d lost from sweating. Dehydration was a fearsome condition that could occasionally result in death. When I offered her the cup of water, she looked down, not attempting to take it from me.

Her untied hair was hanging loose, so it was hard to see her face. Before I knew it, her attendant had appeared right next to us and put a cushion behind Ana that she could lean back into. Ana practically snatched the cup away from me and jumped out of my arms to lean against the cushion.

After that, we chatted, and all the while, I monitored her temperature. It seemed that her fever was going down and she wasn’t having any difficulties speaking, which put me at ease. Not too much later, her attendant brought Ana an easy-to-digest meal called okahyu, which consisted of various grains that had been boiled until they became a gruel.

“Okay, now say ‘ah,’” I said after receiving the bowl of okahyu from the attendant and bringing a spoonful of it in a silver spoon to her mouth.

“Pardon?”

“I mean you should open your mouth wide so I can feed you.”

Though she seemed unsure of how to react, she eventually blushed and put the spoon in her mouth. Even her neck turned red as she began to eat. I couldn’t help but smile after seeing this.



“Sir Gino?” she asked.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I was entranced by how cute you are.”

“C-Cute?! M-Me?!”

Her eyes sprang open from surprise. I was surprised as well, but for a different reason. It'd just dawned on me that this was the first time that I'd called a girl cute, and I hadn't even consciously meant to. In my past life, if I'd ever tried to do that, I'd have been met with a strong rejection response, so I'd intentionally avoided ever complimenting a woman on her beauty. But despite that, I'd just called Ana cute. Ever since we first met, I'd thought she was a charming person. Those feelings had grown stronger by the day until they overflowed today.

“Sorry, that kind of just slipped out...”

I wanted to apologize for making her feel disgusted. But also, I couldn't believe how embarrassing it was to compliment the person I was in love with.

“I was simply taken off guard...but I'm very happy. Thank you very much.” Her face turned red and she smiled shyly. She looked very happy as she said this.

She liked it! I was over the moon by this, leading me to tell her that I'd always thought she was cute and that I wanted to see more of her cute side. Perhaps she wasn't too used to being complimented, but she turned as red as an apple. *Ah, she's so cute! I want to hug her!*

Though I'd meant this as an internal thought, I inadvertently voiced my desires out loud. As soon as I did, her attendant loudly cleared her throat, making me regain my cool. *That was close. Even if we are betrothed, hugging her while she's in bed is a big problem.*

This attendant in particular usually stood out of sight so as not to disturb us, but today, she was posted right in front of me, wearing a stern expression. I endured her sharp stare while continuing to feed Ana the okahyu. Though Ana was embarrassed, she continued to eat, soothing my soul. We spent more of this happy time together chatting, and I couldn't help but smile.

“Hm?”

“Is there something the matter?” she asked.

“Oh, no. Nothing.”

My surprise had leaked out in the form of an inquisitive noise. After Ana was done with her meal, I'd given the bowl and spoon back to her attendant, and it was then that I caught a glimpse of my ring. Though it was usually a light purple color, it had turned black. I didn't have the resolve to explain the complicated circumstances surrounding this ring just yet, so instead, I pretended as if nothing had happened.

As soon as Ana had gotten sick, they'd called her primary physician, but she'd been unable to come immediately because of prior work obligations. But today, a day later, she was able to come. In order to hear about Ana's curse, I asked to take a break from my studies to speak with her.

In my past life, curses had been imaginary spells that you'd cast on those you hated, but in this world, curses were not only real, but common. Here, being cursed was about as commonplace as chronic migraines in my previous world. There were a lot of different curses, though, so they were separated into different categories by their afflictions, each with their own names.

As soon as I'd learned that curses were real, it sank in that I really was in a different world. But I hadn't thought any further about it after that. There hadn't been any people affected by curses around me, so I didn't consider them a problem I had to be concerned about. Even after meeting Ana, I didn't give curses too much thought. I figured that her appearance was just a result of her being a little different from others, and decided it wasn't a problem I should concern myself with. But if this curse was making Ana sick, then I wanted to know more about it. Staying ignorant was frightening. It scared me to think that I could lose her.

“So, what would you like to know?”

We were currently sitting in the fifteenth drawing room, named “Diopside.” Sitting across from me was a stout, middle-aged woman by the name of Susanna Welker. She was the wife of Viscount Welker, the head of a family that had historically been the physicians for the Sevensworth household. It was

common for higher noble families to take an entire family of doctors as their vassals and assign them as their primary physicians.

“I’d like to know about Ana’s curse,” I said.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know much about that. The only thing that’s clear is that it’s congenital, it affects her appearance, and that every few months, she gets a fever. We aren’t able to make heads or tails of it with modern medicine.”

“That’s as much as you know?!”

“That’s right. It’s a curse nobody’s ever seen before. We don’t even have a name for it.”

I was shaken by her response. I’d heard it was an uncommon curse, but I didn’t think it wouldn’t even have a name.

“Then what about lifting the curse?”

“It goes without saying that we don’t know how to do that. Even for known curses, it’s uncommon for there to be a method to lift them that’s been discovered. Given that nobody else has been afflicted by this curse, the prospects of finding a way become even more grim.”

“Is there any chance that...this curse could put her life in danger?”

“All the fevers she’s gotten until now have gone away within a few days. Based on that, I think there’s a high chance that this pattern will continue. However, there’s no way to be absolutely sure. It’s possible that things might...change in the future.”

I’d already thought this might be the case, and now she was giving the exact answer I’d expected. If modern medicine couldn’t do anything, then I had no choice but to try and figure something out with my knowledge. I’d have to do some reading, but right now I had a specialist sitting right across from me. I could have her give me the broad strokes of things.

“To begin with, what exactly is a curse? I know the church emphasizes that it’s a trial given to people, but...” I asked.

“From a medical standpoint, we aren’t able to agree with the church’s opinion. Medically speaking, though we can confirm the symptoms of curses,

we aren't even able to confirm their causes, meaning we have no way to immediately treat them."

This was a lot different than I'd expected. This wasn't what we'd call a curse in my past life. This sounded more like an unexplainable chronic illness.

"So the reason nobody knows how to lift curses is because nobody understands the principles by which curses form?"

"Precisely. Even if we don't know what causes them, there have been some cases where we were able to find a way to lift certain ones by pure chance. But these are few and far between. Most curses remain untreatable. Because they're something that humans can't solve with their own methods, the church asserts that they're trials given by god. As a doctor, I'm unable to agree with what the church is saying, but it's true that both modern medicine and modern magic are ineffective against curses."

"But there have been cases where the way to lift the curse has been found?"

"Indeed. Take the Bambino Curse for example. The way to lift it was discovered approximately one year after the afflicted woman was married. The resulting research showed that the family she'd married into regularly drank a medicinal tea using the ortiz herb, which consequently lifted the curse. Now, we prescribe boiling the ortiz herb and drinking it as a treatment method."

This is similar to the way we dealt with chronic diseases back in my previous life. There were some people who would get cured from regularly taking herbal medicines for prolonged periods of time. Is it possible that "curses" are simply unidentified illnesses?

"That reminds me, I don't think I've really heard of illnesses related to mana," I said.

"You have a very interesting and out-of-the-box imagination. It's almost like you come from a different world altogether," she said, smiling.

Though I didn't let it show on my face, I was internally panicking because she'd hit the nail on the head.

"First, let me preface my answer by saying that all families that specialize in either magic or medicine have hidden techniques they don't publicly reveal.

That's why, at the very least as far as I know, there aren't any illnesses that stem from mana."

I see. So that's the kind of world this is. "By the way, I heard from one of Lady Anastasia's servants that the mana clasps in her accessories immediately break."

Then, I suddenly remembered how my ring had changed colors. The first time it'd happened had been when Ana and I met for the first time. The second time had been yesterday when I'd visited her in her room. *Oh! Maybe...*

By this world's medical standards, Ana's "curse" couldn't be lifted. But maybe I could do it! If I was able to use my past life's knowledge, I might be able to pull it off. I couldn't wait a second longer, so I immediately rushed to my room in the Valvalier house.

After returning to the Valvalier house, I took my ring out of the safe I kept it in and examined it. The inset stone, which was supposed to be a light purple, was completely black.

Though I usually wore this ring every day, today I'd left it in my room. It was because the stone had turned black and the ring wasn't functioning properly. The ring was a magic tool that allowed its user to speed up time.

By pouring primordial mana into the inner part of the ring, the user could hasten their time flow by a maximum of twenty times their normal speed. The longest they could use this effect was five seconds. Using it in rapid succession wasn't possible, so they would have to wait a certain amount of time to be able to use it again.

If the wielder tried to use it for more than five seconds or consecutively, the purple color of the magic stone would turn white from the excessive stress and break. Once that happened, it would be impossible to use again.

Since the majority of the houses that specialized in magic held their technology close to their chests, I had no clear idea about what the criteria for magic technology in this world was. But, looking at how horse-drawn carriages were the main transportation method, it was clear that magic to control space-time wasn't possible. This ring, which could alter time, was a technology that far

surpassed this world's.

The reason I had such an amazing magic tool in my possession was because I'd made it myself. In my past life, I'd been a normal Japanese white-collar worker. By using the skills I'd learned while I'd been a golem engineer, I made myself this ring for my own protection. Compared to this world, the Japan that I'd lived in had been much more technologically advanced with magic.

I locked my door and shut the curtains before using analytical magic on my ring on the table. This was basic engineering magic. In my past life, I'd graduated from a science college, so this was a spell that anyone from there could've used. When my ring began malfunctioning, I'd tossed it into the safe, thinking I'd investigate it when I was bored, but now I did so with haste.

"I was right!" I exclaimed.

Dr. Welker said that illnesses related to mana didn't exist in this world, but that wasn't true! They did! Mana-related diseases existed! Aside from the times where casters would knowingly output mana in order to activate magic or magic tools, mana didn't typically flow out of the body. If mana did leak out, or if its circulation wasn't fluid, it would affect the body. That's what mana-related diseases were.

In my past life, mana-related diseases had been all over the place, but this world hadn't even heard of them. I hadn't once thought of that as strange because I'd been under the strong assumption that I was simply in a different world. But in reality, it was no different in this regard.

But even so, they weren't aware of mana-related illnesses because their magic technology hadn't been developed, so they couldn't even diagnose it. Because medicine wasn't able to identify the problem as an illness, they classified it as a curse.

The reason the stone in my ring had turned black was because a highly dense mana had come into contact with it. Since this world's magic technology was so far behind, there was no way they had mana reactors, meaning that extremely dense mana was rare. But despite that, my ring had turned black twice now: during my first meeting with Ana and yesterday, when I visited her room. When helping her drink water, I'd held her shoulder with my right hand, which was

coincidentally the one I'd worn the ring on.

Though I usually wore the ring on my left index finger, I'd jammed my finger, so I'd worn it on my right hand yesterday. The only time it changed colors had been when I touched Ana.

If Ana was someone with extremely dense mana, then she might've been unknowingly leaking it due to her mana-related illness. That would explain why the stone in my ring had turned black. At the same time, it also pointed to a surprising possibility. As someone with very dense mana, she was potentially a hatchling Magic Monarch. If that was the case, then I had a feeling I knew what "curse" she had: severe hypermana syndrome. Or at least, I was pretty sure that's what it was called. It was a type of mana-related disease that people with massive amounts of mana, enough to become Magic Monarchs, contracted.

I remembered watching a docudrama about a woman who became a Magic Monarch. Her skin turned a greenish color and became hard and uneven, and she even grew two horns on her head.

Abnormalities in one's blood or mana flow could alter one's appearance. Long ago, in the world I'd come from, there'd been people who'd had horns or sharp tails, people who had wings like bats. They'd all been condemned as demons or monsters. It wasn't until the modern day that it was discovered that changes to one's mana or blood flow could affect the body in such a way.

What specifically happened varied between people, but the physical effects of severe hypermana syndrome were most likely the same as what'd happened to the woman in the show. Ana's stonelike lumps and green skin were very similar.

If this was possibly the same severe hypermana syndrome, then it would make sense why there hadn't been any previous cases of this extremely rare curse. Even in my previous world, it was an extremely rare condition. After all, it was something that only people with Magic Monarch amounts of mana could be afflicted with. Only maybe one out of a hundred million people possessed that much mana. And even then, among those rare people, it wasn't common for them to contract it either.

I want to test this theory further. Oh, I know. I'll look into her mana capacity. The only problem with that, though, was that this world didn't know how to

measure someone's mana capacity. The technology was either being kept secret or simply hadn't been developed yet. I had no clue which of these possibilities it was, though.

Even so, I knew how to measure it. In my previous life, I'd been taught during an experiment in high school how to make litmur mana test strips to measure mana levels and one's magic affinity. The materials needed to do so had been simple to acquire, which was precisely why it'd been standard for high schoolers to do. Fortunately, this world was similar, so the materials should be easy to get.

"All I need to do is put this paper in my mouth?" Ana asked, sitting perfectly straight, demonstrating beautiful posture, as she sat on the couch in the drawing room. Her eyes were fixed on the litmur mana test strip I'd brought.

During my teatime with Ana, I'd brought a prototype of my "new product" for her to try, but it was actually a mana capacity tester.

"Oh? It turned pitch-black," she remarked.

"Wow! I knew it! That's amazing! That's really amazing, Ana!" My voice echoed around the very spacious twenty-fifth drawing room, called the "Chalcedony."

I was so excited, I couldn't help but leap to my feet and shout. Ana, unsure of what I was so excited about, seemed confused. The way litmur mana test strips worked was that the more mana one had, the darker the color became. The color the strip turned represented their mana's affinity. However, very rarely, there were people who couldn't be measured by this test—Magic Monarchs and hatchlings.

For someone with too much mana, it became extremely difficult for the test to discern the color of their affinity, making the strip turn out dark, thus the pitch-black color she got. This helped me confirm that Ana was indeed a one-in-a-hundred-million Magic Monarch hatchling. Her mana wasn't simply *close* to the amount of a Magic Monarch but in the same tier as one. The only ones capable of changing the color of the strip to black were Magic Monarchs and hatchlings.

If this had been in my past life, she'd be flooded by journalists and be on the front page of the newspaper. Her image would be on TV for breaking news and special news programs. A Magic Monarch was a transcendent being that had enough power to turn an entire continent into a sea of flames. The entire eyes of the world would be on anyone who was identified as one.

It was impossible to imagine that there were any others nearby with extremely high-density mana, so there was no doubt that my ring changed colors in reaction to Ana. And because she was unconsciously pouring her mana out, she'd been afflicted by a mana-related illness.

I was relieved because it was extremely possible that the curse's identity was actually the severe hypermana syndrome. Though I only had surface-level knowledge of it from the docudrama I'd watched, I knew at the very least that it shouldn't be something one could die of immediately.

That being said, I wanted more information. I'd changed the stone in my ring for a new one, and I now tried touching Ana's hand, but the stone didn't change colors. It didn't appear that she was releasing mana there. In that case, the source of her mana leak might be her back or shoulders.

However, I stopped myself after feeling someone's strong intent to kill me, the source of which was Ana's personal attendant. She was glaring at me with an incredibly fierce expression. *Maybe persistently touching Ana's hand isn't a good idea? I should stop my investigation here.*

But even so, I'd never imagined that Ana could be a Magic Monarch hatchling. This world seemed to be very underdeveloped in regard to magic. If I taught Ana magic technology from the world I'd come from, she would easily stand at the top of this world's mages. But I had no intention of teaching her magic yet.

In my old world, Magic Monarchs were the ultimate weapons. For a world with underdeveloped technology, having even one Magic Monarch would be enough to turn a country into a great empire that covered the entire continent. If Ana were to live as a mage, there was no way that those in power wouldn't try to use her overwhelming power. Ana would most likely be forced to live her life as a weapon. For someone with a kind heart like Ana, it'd be a tragedy if she were forced to become a strategic weapon.

There was no way that Ana would feel proud about killing immense numbers of enemies, or about blowing an entire city away without even a trace left of the people who lived there. If any of that happened, she'd be left deeply scarred.

That was why I wouldn't teach her magic. If I did, I'd have to take every possible precaution to make sure nobody knew about it, and the time for that wasn't now. Besides, I needed to prepare myself mentally first as well. If I were to teach her magic, I'd need to explain to her how I, someone who was not born to a magic-specialist family, could use magic. I still didn't have the courage to do that.

There wasn't a young woman alive who would choose to have an old man as their spouse. I had no clue how she'd react if she knew that my soul was that of an old man. Ana was a gentle and quiet person. I doubted she'd use harsh words with me if she found out, but that was precisely why even a simple shadow on her face would be fatal to me.

For the time being, it was more important to focus on my current plan. Going forward, I needed to coat all magic tools in antimana coating. I was very familiar with it since the first golem I'd been tasked with making was one that was capable of working inside mana reactors.

Of course, a coating capable of withstanding mana attacks from Mana Monarchs was something that didn't exist in my past life either. But even so, if it was just unstable mana that was naturally leaking out of her body, then my knowledge would more than suffice to help me whip something together.

With that, I decided my research path from now on. I was going to focus on the severe hypermana syndrome. I knew now that Ana was a Magic Monarch hatchling, but that knowledge alone didn't help solve anything. If anything, despite identifying the affliction she had, there was nothing I could do immediately to heal her.

In my past life, all mana-related afflictions, including severe hypermana syndrome, had set treatments. Unfortunately, I hadn't specialized in healing magic. I'd been a golem engineer. Medicine was completely out of my area of expertise.

That being said, if I kept focusing my research on the severe hypermana syndrome, I might be able to discover a treatment method. There might be a day where Ana could live her life comfortably.

In order to perform my research, I bought a used single-floor home geared toward commoners. It wasn't too far away from my company's headquarters, was made of sturdy stone, and didn't have many windows, which made it perfect for keeping my work confidential.

I was worried about people probing into my business, so I went to a company in town that would lend me their name to use for my laboratory. In this world, there were businesses like real estate agents that dealt in lending their names. I didn't directly meet the person I was dealing with, nor did I give them my name. I bribed family members of employees from my company a hefty sum to go on my behalf and get use of the lender's name. I couldn't be too careful—especially since I was doing research on magic.



I was now in the greenhouse with Ana and her mother.

"Oh my, is this for me?" her mother asked as I presented her with a bottle of lotion I'd developed.

"Yes. I'd be honored if you used it," I said.

If I wanted to lift Ana's curse, then I needed to come up with a way to treat it, but I was a novice when it came to medicine. I'd no doubt need to go through much trial and error, and to do that, I'd need a decent amount of funding. That being said, I couldn't exactly use the money from my business.

Even if I did come up with a treatment for this rare disease, which didn't even have a name here, there weren't many people who could benefit from it. The return on investment would be abysmal. My employees counted on our business's success for their livelihoods, so as the owner, I had to make profitable investments for their sake and the business's sake as well.

As such, it was necessary for me to finance my research with my own personal funds, and in order to make more money, I decided to recreate a basic lotion from my previous world. Though it was true that I was a bit out of my

element since my area of expertise had been as a golem engineer, I at least knew the basic components of lotions and the magic they were imbued with.

I'd worked on all kinds of golems—golems that could apply your makeup even when you were asleep as long as you set a timer, golems that could remove your makeup and do your skincare routine even if you were passed out drunk on your doorstep. These were all very popular. In order to ensure that the golems were able to properly store a lotion for long periods of time, golem engineers needed to understand its composition as well as its magical properties.

"Thank you for the gift, but do you have any for Ana?" her mother asked with confusion as she sat across the marble table ornately garnished with gold. Ana also looked at me with a conflicted expression.

"The reason I gave you this lotion is because of its special antiaging properties. Using it will make your skin ten years young—" I stopped my explanation from the sudden sound of a chair falling to the ground.

It seemed my mother-in-law had stood up from her chair so suddenly, she'd knocked it over. It was extremely rare, uncouth behavior from someone who was not only the daughter of royalty but also the wife of a duke. Even Ana's eyes had widened with surprise.

"I graciously accept," she said, very quickly skirting around the table to snatch the bottle from my hand while Ana and I were stunned by her actions.

All I could do was watch, still taken off guard. She hadn't run exactly—her posture and movements had all been perfectly elegant. She'd kept her back and head straight to the point that she would've been able to balance a book on it. But she'd also moved with an unusual smoothness and speed as if skating across ice.

"So, I actually have two favors to ask," I said once she returned to her seat. "The first is, if people take notice of you looking younger, I'd like it if you could talk about this lotion. But, it'd be difficult for me to handle a huge flood of orders, so please keep who you got it from a secret."

"Oh, that's it? Easily done," she said.

“The second is in regard to the sale of the lotion. It’s a very rare product, so I don’t intend to sell huge quantities of it. With that being said, I was wondering if you might help decide on a vendor to sell it through.”

Honestly, it wasn’t impossible to mass-produce these, but I was deliberately choosing not to. It was much easier to sell products in small quantities at a high price, and since I was the only person in charge of the entire production process, I didn’t want the headache of having to think about mass production.

“Oh, well that’s quite a generous proposition, but you’re a member of House Valvalier. It’s only right that you ask Lady Valvalier first.”

It was exactly moments like these that made me feel that my mother-in-law was a trustworthy person. She actually thought about my position before her own profit. *It’s really nothing short of good fortune that I get to be her son-in-law.* Ana was also very honest, virtuous, and noble. These traits were ones that she’d inherited from her mother and became even more sublime and wonderful in her.

“I’ve consulted with my mother at the Valvalier family, and it was her thinking that this operation would be most successful in your hands. She said that it’d more than suffice for her to simply receive a portion of the products.”

“If that’s the case, I gladly accept your proposal! To confirm, you’re okay with me selling it for the highest possible price, right?”

“Actually, I’d like it if you could sell it in a way that it’d be profitable to the Sevensworth family. I’ll leave it to you to decide how many bottles I should make, taking into account the number of those in your faction.”

“Oh, are you sure? Knowing you, I’m assuming that if you’ve given me a present but not Ana, you plan to use the funds you earn to buy something for her. Am I wrong?”

She’s sharp. She read me like a book. I wanted to keep this a secret from Ana because I’m not sure if this is going to work out, but...

“You’re right. However, I don’t expect there to be any problems in regard to funds. My gift to Ana requires more than just money.”

Ana’s eyes widened with surprise after hearing my words, and then she

looked down, blushing with a smile. *Oh gosh, she's so adorable!*

Ana's mother shot a side glance at her and grinned. "In that case, I couldn't be happier. I feel bad that I'm the only one reaping the benefits, though."

"Oh, it's quite all right. I want to be a source of strength for the Sevensworths as well."

And with that, I succeeded in having my mother-in-law handle the promotion and selling of the lotion.

The following morning when Ana greeted me at the entrance of the mansion, I was about to head toward the duke's office as usual before she called out to me.

"Oh, today you'll be going to Emerald," she said happily while leading me to the fourth drawing room. Inside, we sat with the duke for a short time, before —

"Jenny?! Is that you?!"

"M-Mother?!"

"Jenny" was the nickname of my mother-in-law, Jennifer Sevensworth. Seeing the change in her appearance when she opened the door caused the duke to shoot up from the sofa. Ana gaped—a truly cute reaction of surprise. My mother-in-law grinned like a kid who'd successfully pulled off a prank. She truly looked as if she were in her mid-twenties.

She'd gathered us here as part of her plan to show us how much she'd changed. Every now and then, she'd show her playful side. She was a charming woman in her own right.

The lotion I'd given her was the same kind of magic one that'd been sold back in my previous life, and had been imbued with properties that would make the user appear younger. Since I'd been worried about side effects, I'd made sure that the one I made used the exact same imbue magic. It was safer that way since those products had already gone through various trials before hitting store shelves.

It was the exact same product from my past life, which meant that it also followed the same strict regulations in its production. Though it allowed you to look ten to fifteen years younger, anything more potent was restricted by law. Apparently, the user's appearance would revert after not using it for a few days. All products with more permanent effects were restricted.

"This lotion is fantastic, Gino," my mother-in-law said. "I especially adore how ruthless it is in how it returns you to your original appearance if you cease using it. Are you sure it's okay for me to sell it in a way that it benefits the Sevensworths?"

"Of course," I said.

"Then that's just what I'll do. I must say that Lady Valvalier's very wise. With a product this potent, it's true that the only one capable of protecting you would be me. I'm glad that you have such a wonderful new mother."

In fact, that'd been the exact worry my adoptive mother from the Valvaliers had. She was nothing more than the wife of a marquess, and thus she foresaw that she'd eventually be unable to dodge the question of who was making this and how, especially if asked by people of higher status than her, like the wife of a duke, or the queen.

In that regard, my mother-in-law wouldn't have any problems. Her brother was not only the king but also very much doted on her. Plus, her mother, the previous queen, doted on her greatly as the youngest, so it wouldn't be a problem for my mother-in-law to turn down requests from the current queen. But also, the queen and the king's concubine also feared her.

Consequently, after leaving everything to my mother-in-law, the lotion I'd made sold at an exorbitant price—much higher than even my highest estimations. I was surprised by how you could essentially buy a baron's mansion with the money you'd spend on just one bottle.

After experiencing the rejuvenating effects once, it seemed that the price tag didn't matter anymore. The fixation women had on reclaiming their youthful looks was truly a frightening phenomenon to behold. The money I was getting each month from the sales was quickly building up to rival the national budget.

It got to the point where I started fearing getting the money. In terms of funding, I had more than enough, so I decided to only take half of the profits and leave the other half for my mother-in-law's share.

I'd also begun asking my mother-in-law to accept not just money but valuable information as payment. If customers provided worthwhile information, then they were able to purchase the lotion with it. She was over the moon with this idea. Though she may have been a beauty who was kind and protective, she was also an unimaginably clever person. She understood even more than I did the importance of information.

In order to get their hands on the lotion, repeat purchasers continued to enter her faction, making it blow up in size. As a result, any opposing factions were on the verge of collapse. In high society, she was known as Her Majesty. As a reminder, this country already had a real king and queen, but even despite that, she'd earned this nickname.

Now that I think about it, I haven't sent my sister any gifts. Up until now, anytime I'd earned a big profit or seen a product I thought she would like, I'd send her a gift. Recently, I'd been busy, so I hadn't had the opportunity to send her one for a while.

Though I'd been writing my family letters, my sister had been sending me the most letters. *She's worrying about me so much. I should definitely get her something.* I had a lot of money, so I was confident I could get her something big.

Maybe I should give her a jewel worth multiple times that of the Adolni mansion... Never mind. She might misunderstand and think I stole from the Sevensworth family and she'd come all the way to the royal capital to reprimand me. I can't try to blow her mind with something overly lavish. I need to give her something rare that matches her tastes.



While I was helping with the duke's work, he instructed me to fetch some documents from the library. When I asked if it'd be okay if I looked for some books while I was there, he said I could have a small break to browse. He also said that I was allowed to borrow anything I wanted.

After locating the documents he'd asked for, I began looking around for any kind of texts related to curses. As I headed toward the room where all the curse-related texts should be kept, I noticed that Ana's personal attendant was in the room for books about aristocratic history.

"Please refrain from being loud," she said softly after spotting me.

Even when she was helping Ana, it was almost unnatural how little sound she made, and this time was no different. If I hadn't been paying attention, I wouldn't have noticed her at all. Her name was Bridgette Audran. Since she was always with Ana, I'd gotten used to speaking with her too.

I assumed that wherever she was, Ana wasn't too far away, so I silently entered the room. Inside, Ana was fast asleep on a desk. There was a blanket draped around her, most likely courtesy of Bridgette.

"Recently, she's been working until late at night, and it's exhausted her. Please allow her to rest for a little."

Judging by how fast asleep she is, she must be pretty tired out. I glanced at the desk and saw several books and papers. I gasped as I saw what she'd been writing, and I picked up the papers to examine them more closely.

"This is..."

I was currently getting education from the Valvaliers regarding high nobles. I was learning things that I wouldn't have needed to know if I'd become a commoner, such as language and law. However, it was all required knowledge if I was to live as a noble, so I had to refamiliarize myself with it once again, and study it properly this time. One of the topics I needed to learn was aristocrat history.

Fortunately, Ana had been helping me with my studies. Any given noble family's history was at least an entire book long. Older noble families could have more than ten volumes. Ana was going through those books and summarizing them into notes for me. Thanks to that, I was able to study very efficiently.

The papers on the desk were a continuation of the notes I'd received the other day. Bridgette had said that Ana had stayed up late working on these.

However, Ana didn't just help by giving me notes. She also helped me study gestures and manners. She worked herself hard for my sake, but never let me see. She never showed any displeasure and would simply give a gentle smile. She was truly a wonderful person. I felt the corners of my eyes get hot. I didn't want to disturb her sleep, so I invited Bridgette to talk outside the room.

"Are those notes for me?" I asked once we were in the hallway, a little bit away from the door.

"Yes, they are."

"Would you mind helping me make her stop?"

"Why...?" she asked, glaring at me with her sharp, ice-blue eyes.

I could hear anger in her voice. Most likely, she couldn't forgive me for tossing aside Ana's generosity.

"I don't want Ana to suffer. Working herself to the bone like this isn't something I can accept."

Bridgette's expression softened, and she seemed somewhat satisfied. "In that case, it would be best if you got passing marks on your aristocrat history as soon as possible. Despite how she may seem, she is a very strong-willed person. If she knows doing something would help you, I fear that others telling her to stop wouldn't work whatsoever. If you'd like to stop her, your only option is to immediately get passing marks."

"What if I asked her to stop?"

"That would be even more meaningless. All that would accomplish is her ceasing to give them to you in person and instead anonymously send them to the Valvalier estate. *Surely* you already knew that's what would happen, though, right?"

Bridgette grinned, basically declaring that she knew Ana better than me in a condescending tone. Despite our marked height difference, Bridgette straightened her limbs and leaned back in triumph, seemingly in an attempt to look down on me. Her competitiveness over Ana lit a fire underneath me. *I don't want to lose to you. I want to know Ana better.* I could feel these emotions welling up inside me.

But Bridgette was right. I wouldn't put it past Ana to continue sending me notes even if I asked her to stop, if she thought it benefited me. So ultimately, I decided to borrow books on both curses and aristocrat history before leaving for the day. *I need to work harder on my history.*

The following day, I fell asleep while waiting for Ana. As a way to apologize and also thank her for all her help, I invited her to the lake. I knew that Ana didn't really like leaving the mansion because of the stares she'd get, but she'd also once said that she'd never been on a boat before and would like to try one day. The nearby port was quite busy, but I knew that the lake at the edge of the royal capital would have fewer people, making it the perfect place to take her.

"You remembered what I said about wanting to go on a boat? That makes me so happy," Ana said, smiling like a flower blossoming in the spring.

That sight alone was more than enough of a reward.



The reason Ana got fevers so often was because her internal mana flow—in other words, her mana production—was unstable. As much as I wanted to help her stabilize it naturally, basic treatment was impossible for me as a novice in the field of medicine.

But even so, when it came to making an instrument capable of stabilizing her mana flow, then even I could do that. In my past life, there was a product called a pippue reiki ball that did exactly that. The principles behind the mana flow adjustment were so simple that it was something elementary schoolers would learn about. The effects would only help relieve the symptoms, not the root cause, but it should be better than nothing.

It worked better the longer you had it on you, so it was best to make it into something she could carry for a long time, which was how I landed on making it a ring. The only problem was that I didn't know her ring size, so I enlisted the help of Bridgette.

"Under what circumstances do you plan on giving her the ring?" she asked as we sat in her personal break room.

“Hm? I was planning on giving it to her the next time I saw her after completing it, or something.”

It might not be extremely effective, but it's still a health tool. The earlier the better. In response, Bridgette let out a long, heavy sigh.

“Sir Ginorious, you truly understand nothing! Absolutely nothing!” she said, broadly shaking her head.

Her ice-blue eyes were focused with disdain on this failure of a man in front of her. Perhaps she'd stopped handling me with kid gloves because we'd gotten closer recently.

“Please listen carefully. This will be the first time that she'll be receiving a ring from a man. Ever. I've served her from a young age, so you can trust me—I know everything there is to know about her. *Please* tell me that it is not your intention to have her precious first memory of receiving a ring be in the entrance of this mansion!”

Urgh. Hearing her say that she knows everything about Ana makes me want to argue, but she must be trying to say that she can tell how things will play out. It's clear as day that she's trying to prove her superiority to me in this regard.

Okay, sure, Bridgette's spent more time with Ana than I have, but...still! I bet I care about Ana the same or even more than her! But competing over this wasn't important right now. What was important was making a memory for Ana. As vexing as it was, Bridgette was right. This was going to be her first time getting a ring from a guy. I had to do everything in my power to make sure it was a good, lasting memory.

It was only after putting this much thought into Ana's experience that a certain fact dawned on me. *Wait...I'm giving a ring to a girl!* All this time, I'd only been thinking about lifting the curse on Ana, so in my mind, giving the ring to Ana was the same as giving someone something for their health. But I forgot one important thing—the shape of this magic tool was a ring.

I'm giving a ring to a girl? Me? In my past life, I'd lived eighty-two years, and in this world, sixteen. Combined, I'd lived for approximately an entire century, and in that long span of time, not once had I ever given a girl a ring. When it came to doing something for the first time, it only became harder to do the

more time passed. I couldn't imagine pulling this off with absolutely zero experience. I could tell that my face was getting hot, and my head felt like it was boiling over, making it impossible to even think straight.

"Sir Ginorious...don't tell me you've lost your nerve," Bridgette said, looking at me as one would a piece of trash.

"W-Well..." I was at a loss for words as she saw right through me. I'd begun wondering if this was a challenge I was actually capable of overcoming.

"I understand that since you've absolutely no experience, you're embarrassed that this will be the first time giving a woman a ring. However, if you overcome your embarrassment, I'm sure you'll make her very happy. Don't you wish to see her smile?"

Are you kidding? Of course I do! But is it really possible for me of all people to give a woman as wonderful as her a ring? I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone for her sake. But no matter how hard I tried, I was only human, and humans had undeniable limits.

"Pathetic... Get it together! You're a man, aren't you?!"

"Y-Yeah..."

I ended up promising to give Ana a ring, giving in to the sheer pressure Bridgette had exerted. *Well, now I don't have a choice. This is going to be quite a hurdle to clear, but all I can do is try.*

"By the way, you've made plans to go to the lake with her, right?" Bridgette asked.

"Yeah."

"What would you think about giving her the ring while visiting that scenic lake?"

"Oh, that's a good idea."

It seemed that it was much wiser to ask Bridgette, a girl, for her opinion than for me—a guy with absolutely no idea how to handle women—to plan this myself. *Okay, let's give Ana the ring at the lake. This is going to be a moment she'll never forget, so I can't afford to mess this up. I'll need to visit that spot at*

least five times before we go there for real.

I had to make sure that there was no danger of her tripping or getting stung by bees. I'd get rid of any rocks she could stumble over and any bee hives. It'd also be bad if her clothes snagged on branches, so I'd have to cut any that were too long. *When should I go check things out?* I also wanted to make sure we avoided any groups of tourists. *I'm going to have to check the reservations of all the lodgings in the royal capital...*

"Also, when you give her the ring, I ask that you clearly convey your feelings for her," Bridgette added.

"W-Wait, what?!"

"By the way you reacted, I can only assume that you were intending on handing the ring to her without saying a single word."

"Well..."

Truth be told, I haven't even thought about how I'm going to give her the ring. But based on my personality, I wouldn't put it past me to silently hand it to her.

"Listen carefully, it's normal for a great noble to present accessories such as rings with a love song."

"A-A love song?!"

"Incredible..." she sighed. "You truly, *truly* are ignorant. Yes, a song. You will present her with a song that you make up impromptu, expressing your feelings toward her while likening her to the sun or a rose. It goes without saying that you should make sure that the song sounds original. You must use lyrics that incorporate the current season, scenery, or things like her dress. You must also sing very passionately, with the full weight of your emotions in it. Of course, as a noble, you must have a certain degree of grace when you present her with the ring. That's where the passionate song comes into play."

Uh...isn't this a little over-the-top?! Could I really think of a love song incorporating the scenery and her dress on the spot in the midst of my extreme nervousness? Even if I could come up with something, it'd be impossible to sing in tune and on rhythm under the pressure.

“Oh...I can tell by your expression that this won't be possible for you. I thought as much. This is something that sons of greater noble families are capable of with their extended experience with noble ladies. This truly might not be something you can do.”

Of course it isn't! When has a beginner attempting to do something advanced ever worked out? It'd be like making a five-year-old run an entire country by themselves.

“Then keep it simple. You can at least tell her sweet nothings, can't you?” I tried visualizing it and... *No. I really don't think I can do that either.* “Oh...that won't work either? You can't even do something that simple? Didn't *you* propose to *her*?”

At that time, Ana had overlapped with my past self. My feelings toward myself that had built up all these years had exploded and I'd lost complete control of myself. That was the only reason I'd been able to propose to her like that.

I wasn't like that anymore. Despite how much of my past self I saw in her, I knew now that she was her own person. I wasn't going to look at her and see myself anymore. When I looked at her, she was the only one I saw. Besides, my feelings for Ana had become too big. To me, she wasn't simply a cute girl anymore.

I was a guy who'd failed to have any kind of relationship with women in my past life. The only reason I was able to become betrothed to Ana was because I'd lucked into a strategic marriage. Thinking about it like that, it certainly felt like this relationship was nothing but luck. I'd never won a woman's heart by my own strength. There was little chance that Ana would fall in love with such a pathetic guy like me. If I confessed my love for her...I could imagine her simply awkwardly smiling in response. *No way can I do this! I do not want to face that cruel reality whatsoever! I want to stay in this dreamlike present! I don't want to hear her answer!*

“How about this, what kind of confession *is* an incompetent man such as yourself capable of?”

Wow...she really has stopped holding her tongue around me. If I were being

blunt, I'd label Bridgette's attitude toward me as extremely rude. But so long as it was in a private setting like this, her behavior was within the bounds of what was permissible toward other people. Personal attendants of high nobles had great authority. Their masters, who were so high up on the social ladder, would sometimes even listen to their opinions. Punishing a personal attendant of such status ran the risk of greatly displeasing their master, which no one wanted to do.

Bridgette was a prime example. If she were ever to be punished, Ana would be sad, and if someone made her cry, they'd earn the ire of her doting parents. Her father, the duke, was one of the leaders of the country, and her mother was the sister of His Majesty. No matter how great a noble you were, there was no avoiding confrontation if you upset Ana's parents.

If anything, it was easier to interact with Bridgette with her straightforward attitude rather than her reserved one. I was already used to treating people equally thanks to my past life. It was easier to talk when there was no difference in social standing.

After that, I received more strict instructions from Bridgette.

"I'm only giving you this advice for *her* sake. I don't want to be doing this, do you understand? Despite that, I'm trying my hardest. You had better not disappoint her, okay? Just don't."

Most likely Bridgette didn't like the very fact that Ana and I were getting closer, but even so, she was doing her best for Ana's sake. That was proof that her loyalty to Ana was genuine.

Anastasia

I'm going with Sir Gino to the lake today. Though we meet almost daily, excluding our first meeting at his family's home, we've only really ever spent time together inside this mansion. Our walks had always been in the gardens on our estate grounds, and so had the plays and musicals we'd watched over the passing months. We'd even watched orchestral performances in the mansion.

I'd had trouble sleeping because I was so excited about our outing today, but

I'd still woken up early this morning. Thus, I decided to use this extra time to put more effort into my preparation for the day.

Our destination was the sole lake within the royal capital walls. Since we'd be outside, I decided on a dress with a skirt that wasn't too frilly. If it was too voluminous, then I'd be unable to see my feet, making it hard to see where I was walking and making me more prone to tripping. I wasn't going to allow myself to make a mistake like tripping in front of Sir Gino.

Considering that the ground wouldn't be in the best condition, I decided it'd be best to wear boots. Lastly, I picked out a hat in order to avoid any potential sunburn. I'd put a lot of effort into choosing my hat and dress this time and made sure that they were both cute.

I knew that when anyone saw my hideousness, they became repulsed. That was why whenever I went outside the estate, I'd always do my best to choose clothes that wouldn't draw attention. As such, this was the first time I'd gone out of my way to pick a cute outfit. My heart was beating wildly as if I were going on an amazing adventure.

"Morning, Ana. That dress looks really cute on you. The necklace you picked out is also exquisite. Your hat's adorable too," Sir Gino said.

I feel like I could jump for joy. Is this what it feels like to be complimented on one's outfit choices? Sir Gino was wearing a different outfit from his usual noble attire. It consisted of black pants and a dark brown coat. It was the same kind of clothes that noblemen would wear when they went hunting. Considering his well-toned body, the style fit him extremely well.

When the carriage reached the lake, we first went for a walk, slowly taking in the sights of the lake in the springtime. We chatted as we walked, my hand on his arm as I gazed upon this refreshing new scenery. Even though all we were doing was walking and talking, my heart was beating so hard just from knowing he was right next to me.

After that, though it was a little early, we decided to have lunch. Our plan was to find a place where we could set up a table, but if that didn't work, we'd lay out a picnic blanket.

"I think that might be a good place," Sir Gino said, pointing to a spot under a

shady tree with a good view of the lake.

Even better, it was possible to set up a table there, making it the perfect place to have lunch. *Wow, what good luck! It'd be one thing if we were regulars to this area, but I'd expect it to be quite hard for people visiting a place for the first time to find a spot this perfect. We even found it in barely any time at all.* It was as if he'd known about this place beforehand and had led us here. But that couldn't be possible. He was a very busy person and certainly had no time for sightseeing.

Enjoying a meal while gazing at the shimmering lake and feeling the refreshing spring breeze blowing off it was exquisite. The scenery here was quite picturesque, but Sir Gino was an even more beautiful sight as he sat in the shade of the tree. His calm profile as he gazed upon the surface of the lake was almost like a perfectly and painstakingly constructed piece of art. As the leaves rustled in the wind, the shadows danced over Sir Gino, making his sleek black hair glisten. I was captivated before I knew it.

It was then that Sir Gino's eyes and mine met. Instead of looking away, he stared right into my eyes, a gentle smile forming on his lips. Becoming embarrassed, I couldn't help but glance away.

After we finished our meal, it was finally time to board the boat. Due to my appearance, I'd always avoided outings like this with everything I had. As such, it was my first time at a lake and riding a boat as well. I boarded it with help from Sir Gino.

The lake was so clear that I could see the bottom of it. I could tell that there was white sand, and it was easy to see the fish swimming around. It was a strange feeling to know that I was on the surface of the water while the fish were beneath me.

"It's a little windy today. You should wear this," Sir Gino said, taking off his coat and draping it around my shoulders.

Though at first I tried to refuse because I didn't want him to be cold, he said the rowing kept his muscles warm. I could feel his warmth from the coat, making me struggle against my quickening heartbeat as I thanked him.

"Oh my! A turtle!" I exclaimed.

I've never seen a wild turtle before! Especially not one that large! I bet I could sit on it! It's amazing! I can't believe it!

"Sir Gino! The turtle looked this way! Our eyes met!"

In response, Sir Gino simply smiled. Suddenly, I realized I was leaning over the side of the boat while making a commotion—something that was extremely unladylike. I frantically straightened my back and planted my feet firmly in front of myself in an attempt to fix my posture, but I couldn't get over how childish I'd just acted.

I looked down to try to hide how red I'd surely gotten, but after a few glances, I realized that Sir Gino was still smiling gently at me. *Oh, how embarrassing!*

"You're adorable," he said with a chuckle.

Now I'm embarrassed for a completely different reason! After that, Sir Gino began a new topic, restarting our conversation as we sat in the boat. It was just the two of us, only our voices and the calm sound of water being moved by the oars. It was very peaceful and very enjoyable.

Suddenly, there was a strong wind, knocking my hat into the air. *Oh no! That's the hat that Sir Gino complimented! This was the first time I tried so hard on my outfit and that's the precious hat that I picked out! I can't let it fall into the water!*

"Ah!"

"Huh?!"

Oh noooo! I've really done it now! Before I knew it, I'd used the rope dart that I'd concealed in my sleeve to catch my hat and return it to my hand. *What should I do?! Using one of these to retrieve my hat is the ultimate failure of ladylike conduct!*

"Wh-What was that...?" Sir Gino asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

I hung my head in embarrassment and glanced at him. "M-My deepest apologies. I've acted in a very unladylike fashion."

"No, that doesn't bother me at all... I'm more curious about that concealed weapon you have. Could I possibly take a look?"

“It’s called a rope dart. If you’d like to see it, then...here you go.”

I took the bracelet off my arm and presented the device to him. The device had a dart about five celchimeters in length and a metal bracelet with a string attached to it. The bracelet would fit to the arm and then, once the user was used to it, they could immediately pull back the dart that they’d thrown.

After examining it for a little bit, Sir Gino returned it to me. It was embarrassing, so I quickly reequipped and concealed it.

“I’m impressed. First, you were able to react quickly enough to stop your hat from touching the water despite it being so close to doing so. But you also were so precise in ensuring that you threaded the dart through the loop of the hat’s ribbon. You’re so skilled! When did you start learning how to use that?”

It seems that he’s...impressed? He doesn’t seem the least bit displeased. That’s a relief, especially after that horrible display from me. I was afraid that he’d be disappointed in me after that.

“When I was young, I tried copying Bridgette after watching her practice. The adult servants would always report to my mother whenever they saw me trying, so Bridgette and I made sure to only do it in secret. For her, learning how to use it might’ve been part of her job, but for me, it was a fun game trying to hit targets.”

“It’s something servants have to learn?” he asked.

It was indeed. Sometimes during my breaks, I’d see servants practicing in inconspicuous areas. Whenever I asked them about it, they’d say that it was their duty as our house’s servants to learn how to use the rope dart.

“Is the rope dart something that your father gave you?” Sir Gino asked.

“No, this is a gift from Bridgette. She told me to immediately stab the windpipe of any man who was inappropriate with me at school or any other location where she’s not able to accompany me.”

“W-Wow...how in-character of her.”

Now with our conversation flowing once again, I began to recount memories of Bridgette to Sir Gino. Though these were all stories unbefitting of a lady, he

didn't seem at all displeased. If anything, he commended me. He was such an open-minded and kind man.

It felt like we'd gotten a lot closer all at once after he accepted a part of me that I couldn't publicly disclose. Though I'd thought I'd made a mistake by impulsively firing my rope dart, it might've actually been an unexpectedly huge success. I felt a lot closer to him than before.

After our boat ride, we changed to horses. We had one of the many knights guarding our carriage lend us his horse since he had no need of it just then, and we put a two-person saddle on it. The rear seat was made for ladies, so it was fashioned in a way that I could sit sidesaddle. Since overall, it was a saddle for nobles, there was some distance between the two seats, making it hard to touch one another. Even so, I was closer to Sir Gino's back than I'd ever been, and I could hear my heart beating out of my chest.

"Let's walk a bit," he said, dismounting from the horse after we'd ridden for a little while.

He escorted me off the horse and led me into the nearby forest—a place that'd be difficult for horses to enter. Any branches that would have caught onto my clothes had been cleanly cut away. Looking at the thicker branches, it seemed that they'd been cut recently. *Wow, there's someone who maintains the sightseeing path all the way out here?*

"Oh my!"

When we exited the forest, we came upon a field of sweet pea flowers. The way the blooming flowers spread out reminded me of a purple carpet. Past the field, the sun was glistening off the surface of the lake. The gentle spring breeze brought the sweet scent of flowers, making the atmosphere oh-so wonderful. Sir Gino had guided me as if he'd known where this was. But how? Had he noticed it from when we were on the boat?

"Ana!" he suddenly screamed, startling me. I could tell that he was very nervous. "This...for you..." he said, presenting a wooden box to me.

"This is...for me?"

"Yeah..."

Th-This is my first time getting a present from a man! I don't believe there's any kind of holiday or celebration today, though. I never thought a day would come when I received a present out of the blue despite there being no occasion to do so.

Then I remembered his words urging me not to give up on my happiness. By using those words to push myself forward I'd become someone different, and I felt so happy that I'd put in the effort.

"Th-Thank you very much. May I open it?" I asked.

It was only proper manners to ask for permission before opening a present from my fiancé.

"Yeah..." he said, looking away.

When I opened the box, I found a ring inside. It was a platinum ring with a six-petaled flower motif and an embedded gem. The flower was two colors. The inner part of it was emerald and the outer part was a gem with a shade of purple I'd never seen.

"Oh my, this is the white-violet Gemini starflower!" I recognized it immediately. Though the colors were different, I could never forget this flower when it was the one he'd shown me in the garden during our marriage talks.

"You...said you liked this flower, right?"

"Y-You remembered?! I'm so happy!" *I'd said that in passing, but he actually remembered? I'm so overjoyed!*

"Th-The ring...it represents m-my...feelings..." Sir Gino said, still looking away.

Each petal of the white-violet Gemini starflower was separated into two colors, making it almost look like there were two discrete blossoms, one blooming inside the other, due to how perfectly the colors were separated. From the way the outer purple of the flower looked as if it was protecting the inner flower from when it first bloomed until it withered, it could be interpreted in the language of flowers as "eternal, unchanging love."

The actual flower was white on the inside and purple on the outside, but this ring's gemstone made for a green inner flower instead of white. The inside color

was the same as my eyes, while the outside color was the same purple as his.

Then I understood what he meant by his “feelings.” *Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! Wh-Wh-Wh-What am I supposed to do in this situation?!* I found myself looking down out of embarrassment. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest and my face felt like it was going to burst into flames. I didn’t know it was possible to get this flustered. My head was such a mess that I had no idea what to do.

When I peeked at him, I noticed that he was still turned away, and he was red to his ears. *Oh, it seems I’m not the only one embarrassed.* Seeing him react like this made me feel a little calmer.

“Th-Th-Thank you very much. This makes me s-so happy.”

Of course, that didn’t mean that I’d become completely calm. I couldn’t stop my voice from shaking, but I was still able to somehow thank him.

“Right...” he said softly, his face, which was still deeply flushed, still turned away.

I could feel that my face and ears were hot, so most likely I was just as flushed as him. As we stood in the field of flowers, bathed in their sweet scent, we stayed silent for a while, both of us completely red in the face.



“Eternal, unchanging love.” He’d made this ring with that motif and now I was wearing it. Every time I looked at it, I was so overwhelmed with joy that I wanted to roll around, but so embarrassed that I could feel my face getting red.

Ever since I put it on my finger, I’d find myself gazing at it over and over and over. Then, I found myself blushing after thinking about him in a similar fashion, over and over and over again. Though he had a cool-as-ice beauty, rarely smiled, and had a very mature air about him, he’d had such an adorable expression.

It’d thrown me into confusion to the point that it’d taken me everything I could to keep my sanity. My mind went blank when I looked at him. But when I thought back on it, I couldn’t help but be so overjoyed that he’d made that expression when gifting me the ring, my love for him threatened to burst out of my chest.

Plus, this ring was something that he’d made himself! The intricacy of the design and the careful finishing of it was as if it’d been made by a veteran craftsman. Sir Gino must’ve dedicated much of his time to have made this. On the one hand, I felt very guilty for all the time he’d spent for my sake, but on the other hand, I was so touched, I could feel the warmth radiating around my heart.

As I lay on the sofa, a smile surfaced on my face as I stared at it. For some reason, Bridgette was wearing a satisfied expression. It was as if she’d accomplished a mission of some sort.

Chapter 4: Ginorious Wants to Make His Fiancée Shine, and a Kidnapping Incident

Ginorious

“Your tutors have informed me that both your education and conduct as a member of the Valvalier family have reached satisfactory levels.”

After approximately a year and two months since Ana and I became engaged, I finally received these words from my adoptive father of the Valvalier house. It was embarrassing to recall how poor my manners had been when I’d first arrived. For example, I hadn’t even known that noble women could only use nicknames with their family members and spouses.

Many commoners called everyone, not just their family, by their informal names. In the heat of the moment, I’d used my commoner’s mentality and suggested that Ana and I use nicknames with each other. When I learned how wrong I’d been to do that, I broke out into a cold sweat.

Immediately upon learning the error of my ways, I went to Ana to check to see if she secretly disliked it.

“*I...don’t dislike it,*” she’d said, her face turning red up to her ears. It’d been such an incredibly cute reaction.

“Are you listening? I’ve already submitted an application for you to attend school. The transfer exam is next month,” my adoptive father said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Up until now, I hadn’t gone to school because the cost of tuition was designed for greater nobles, and was far too much for a viscount’s fourth son. But now that I was betrothed to Ana, I’d become a greater noble, making it necessary for me to graduate with a diploma. Now I’d go to school with Ana. My expectations swelled at the thought. I’d be able to walk around school with my fiancée. In my past life, that would’ve been nothing short of an impossible fantasy but now,

that dreamlike experience was waiting for me. How could I *not* get excited?

That being said, I still had some things I was worried about. In this world, I'd focused on gaining knowledge from a young age, and after I started my company, I poured all my focus solely into it. As a result, I had very limited experience interacting with others my age, and I wasn't confident I could hit it off with my peers. But by far, my biggest worry was regarding the other ladies attending the school. Aside from Ana and my family, I still had little experience conversing with girls. I had absolutely no confidence that I could speak with them.

Before I could enter the school, I had to take an exam. Though commoners could be denied enrollment for lack of academic talent, nobles couldn't be turned away. Even so, they still needed to be sorted into the right class, so an exam was needed.

There weren't many like me who were enrolling in the high school halfway through the year, so I was the only one there when I took the transfer exam. I put a decent amount of effort into it. In order to be in the same elite class as Ana, I needed to do outstandingly well on it. Plus, Ana had helped me study, so I needed to show some results for her sake as well.

About a week later, I got a message from the school, and as expected, I'd passed. Since I had to be given an orientation on my first day, I went to the school early in the morning, before classes were scheduled to begin.

"I'm so glad that we're getting an exceptional student like yourself. This is yours until the next periodic exam," an old lady with white hair tied behind her head said as she handed me something.

She was the teacher of the elite class, Professor Kendall, and she'd given me a brooch on a pure gold chain with a crest carved into it of the sun lion. Since this was the royal school, that was likely why they used the sun lion—the crest of the royal family.

"This brooch is worn by whoever has the highest grades in their year. It's a rule here that they must always wear it while on campus grounds."

The transfer exam was set so that it always occurred on the same day as one of the periodic exams. The transfer exam covered a wide range of topics, but there were some questions that were exactly the same as the ones on the regular exam. So when they announced the grade rankings for both tests, I'd ended up placing first.

"I should also mention that this school works on a merit system. Essentially, the hierarchy here is determined not by your family name but by your grades," Professor Kendall explained.

"That's surprising. I'd have expected it to match the system used in the real world," I remarked.

"Between you and me, that's how it was until last year when the school became the stage of a quarrel regarding the royal succession."

"Are you sure it's okay for you to be telling me that?"

"Pretty much everyone knows even if we can't publicly talk about it. Back then, we had to continuously change our system due to external pressures. It was a huge problem—like being caught in a storm." A look of utter annoyance crossed her face at the memory.

Since this was a royal academy, the goal of the establishment should've been to prepare its students to best serve the royal family once they graduated. Adjustments due to the changing demands of the royal family were to be expected, but it must've been a great ordeal for the teachers to keep up with the constant updates.

Professor Kendall continued to explain what had happened. Apparently, up until His Highness, the first prince, enrolled, the school had essentially been a microcosm of regular society. The crown prince had also entered the school two years after him.

The crown prince was the queen's biological son, while the first prince was the son of the king's concubine. In regard to their grades, the first prince had stellar marks, while the crown prince fell a little short. In light of that, the king's concubine changed the system to be merit-based in an attempt to highlight how excellent the first prince was.

Overall, her plan succeeded. Up until the first prince graduated, he stayed in the elite class. In contrast, while the crown prince had started in Class A, he'd fallen to Class C by the time he graduated. This only served to increase the fervor of those who called for the first prince to take the crown prince's right to succession.

"This brooch is a part of the school's meritocracy," Professor Kendall said.

The school tried a lot of different ideas in order to employ a merit-based system despite the real world functioning on class. The grade rankings were one such example of the school's efforts, but so was the brooch. The student wearing it would stand out and have special rights granted to them. Even the uniforms we wore were another part of the merit-based system. Noble students were normally able to identify someone's social standing with a simple glance based on their clothes, so the uniforms helped deter that.

For the record, even though everyone was separated by their grades, the elite class still consisted exclusively of higher nobility. Commoners were only in classes as high as Class B. It was probably the difference in their tuition.

After Professor Kendall finished her explanation of the school, she began laying out my options for classes I could take. As long as students took the required courses, they could graduate, and since higher nobles all received extensive education growing up, it was normal for them to not take any electives. Ana was no exception.

However, all the practical classes that were purely optional seemed incredibly interesting. With just the required classes, I would have a light enough class load that I wouldn't need to go to school every day. I also didn't have the burden of my aristocrat studies from the Valvalier family anymore.

I probably should've used this free time to focus on my training in the Sevensworth family, but I succumbed to temptation and signed up for "Changes of Agricultural History and Culinary Culture of Neighboring Countries," "Cultural History of Slums," "Practicality of Covert Infiltration and Its Countermeasures," among other classes.

"Don't think you've won. *I'm* going to take first on the next exam."

As we gathered our books after the first class of my first day, I received this form of a greeting from a not-too-tall, baby-faced boy with dark blue hair. His blue eyes behind black-rimmed glasses couldn't hide their animosity toward me. His name was Hugo Fibass, and from the time he'd started at this school in elementary up until now, he'd always been at the top of his class.

"Yeah, you might," I said, genuinely believing that he could.

The only reason my grades were so good now was due to my memories from my past life. Unlike me, who was basically cheating, he was using legitimate methods to earn his place at the top of our class. He was much more naturally intelligent than me.

"Seriously, Hugo? That's not how you talk to someone you're meeting for the first time." From behind Hugo, who was currently glaring daggers at me, a boy with down-slanting eyes and lightly tanned skin appeared.

He had a cheerful aura about him, which seemed to have no effect on Hugo because he promptly snorted and stormed off.

"You're good with informal introductions, right? We're classmates, after all. Nice to meet you, I'm Anthony, the eldest son of Count Treves. Feel free to call me by my first name," the guy who'd told Hugo off said with a friendly smile. "Don't be too hard on Hugo. He's got a strong fixation on that brooch."

The only word that came to my mind in this situation was "young." *Am I really going to be able to fit in with these young men?*

"Listen up everyone, I'm thinking we should have a welcome party for our new transfer student, but is there anyone who wants to organize it?" Anthony asked the rest of the class in a loud voice.

Though he had droopy eyes, a kind demeanor, and wasn't especially tall, the fact that he could easily address the room like that was proof of him being from a military noble family. In my past life, he would've been categorized as a jock.

Among the sons of military nobles, there were many who were large and had light skin, but as a member of the Treves clan, he wasn't especially large nor fair-skinned. He had a uniquely embroidered cloth wrapped around his forehead, which was another characteristic of his family.

“Can’t *you* just do it like always?” someone asked.

“Yeah, we can trust things to get done right if you do it,” someone agreed.

Well, it seems that Anthony Treves is the glue that holds the class together. But what is this nagging in the back of my head?

The nagging became a full-blown red flag after the next class.

“Lady Anastasia, we’ll leave the cleanup to you. Thank you,” a daughter of a count said, dumping this menial work onto Ana.

“All right,” she agreed.

Though thorough cleaning of the facilities was done by the servants, as a part of our education, tidying up small things such as learning materials was left to the students. Nobody seemed to have batted an eye as the work fell to Ana. In fact, nobody seemed to even notice as they began their preparations to move to the next class. Ana didn’t let out a single complaint and began tidying up as if it was her rightful job.

It was a strange sight already when thinking about it through the lens of our society’s class hierarchy, but it was strange even through the lens of the school’s merit system. Ana’s grades were about in the middle of the ranking, and there were plenty of people here who had worse grades than her. Despite that, those people didn’t seem to even try to help her clean.

It was also strange that Anthony was the de facto class leader. An earl was not nearly as powerful as a duke. To add to that, Hugo had better grades than him, so why was Anthony running the class? *What’s going on here?*

“Sir Valvalier, are you ready to go to the next class?” a girl asked me.

“I think I’m going to help tidy up,” I said.

“What?! But you’re wearing the brooch!” she said, apparently shocked by my answer.

Regardless of her reaction, I went to help Ana. *Why should Ana be forced to clean up by herself? What’s so strange about me helping her? This is all so weird.* But nobody seemed to object, as if this was simply normal at the school.

I wanted to say something to my classmates, who seemed to have adopted a dismissive attitude toward Ana, because it didn't sit well with me, but I decided to not be confrontational until I had a complete grasp on the situation. After all, it seemed so commonplace to them. For now, I could at least tell that Ana did not have a great standing in the school. At this point, the most I could do to protect her was help her clean, but I had no intention of letting that be the case forever. I needed to see the entire picture and then think of a drastic method to protect my fiancée.

"Something on your mind?" Anthony called out to me as I was still mulling over the situation.

The boys were currently on our way to the training grounds for our swordsmanship lessons. Anthony must've been concerned seeing me, a new student, not in the brightest of spirits. *What a nice guy. Well, this is perfect timing. I'm sure he knows the answer to why Ana's being made to do all the work.* So, I decided to ask him.

"I thought this school works on a merit-based system," I said after laying out what I'd observed.

"Right...you're not wrong there. Her status as the duke's daughter doesn't really matter too much here. But this doesn't really have much to do with her grades either."

"There's a factor outside of grades?" I asked.

"For guys, their prowess with a blade and their looks also matter. For girls...looks are a pretty big—like, really big—factor. Girls who are fun to talk to or aren't shy are more popular with the guys too. Oh, it's kind of like your brooch. It's clear proof that you stand above everyone else, and everyone can see it at a glance. Having other extra skills also helps."

I see. So it starts with grades, but after that, their ranking depends on popularity. It's pretty much the same kind of hierarchy we had in my past life's school, where one's appearance, charisma, confidence, and special abilities are all factors in someone's judgment of you.

After school ended, Ana and I made our way back to the Sevensworth mansion by carriage. I had more lessons planned with the duke, but all that was on my mind was Ana as I looked at her sitting across from me. Her school uniform was focused on functionality and was more plain than what noble ladies typically wore, but the plainness really emphasized Ana's pureness. *Seriously, she looks good in whatever she wears.*

As we rode in the carriage, I casually changed our conversation to talk about how she was being made to tidy up after everyone.

"It's embarrassing, but...I believe my standing in our class is the lowest. I believe it stems from my inability to contribute much to group reports or discussions."

That's not it. School hierarchies are always determined by the values of the students. These kids with absolutely no real-world experience have no clue what really makes someone valuable. As Anthony had said, girls with good looks, or who were outgoing and enjoyable to speak with, stood at the top. Things like kindness and strong mental fortitude were all inner traits that weren't in the scope of what they judged. Theirs were nothing more than shallow, childish assessments of others. The reason Ana had the lowest standing in our class was due to her reserved personality and...as much as I didn't want to say it, her appearance.

"But even so, I'd like to be even the smallest bit of help to our class, so I take the initiative to tidy up the classrooms and do other small jobs like that."

She really is such a wonderful girl. I genuinely felt that. Despite being looked down on by her classmates, she didn't fuss at all, but instead thought about what she could do to help them. In my past life, I'd also been at the bottom of my school's hierarchy, but I'd never thought about doing anything to help the people who looked down on me. It was precisely because I had that experience that I could really understand just how uniquely beautiful her heart was. A girl this wonderful did not deserve to be treated this way by her classmates. Ana didn't really seem too concerned about her place in the class, and didn't seem to really seek to improve it at all. So this desire to rectify the situation was nothing more than my own selfish desire. That's what drove me to try and better her standing.



When I went to the Sevensworth mansion the following day, I was greeted at the entrance by not just Ana but her parents too. Ana being there was nothing new, but it was rare for both the duke and his wife to meet me as well.

“I heard all about how you got full marks on every subject and how you’ve been asked to be an in-school research assistant while you’re attending. I had no idea you were so brilliant,” the duke said.

“I didn’t either. It makes me so happy to know that Ana will have such an intelligent man by her side,” my mother-in-law agreed.

It seemed they’d come to congratulate me. *I guess it is polite to congratulate someone in person when you hear that something good happened to them. They didn’t have to go out of their way just for my exam grade, though. They’re so polite.*

“It’s all thanks to you, Ana. Thanks to you helping with my studies, I was able to work extra hard for your sake,” I said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it—the proper etiquette for gentlemen to thank and show respect to women they were close with.

I straightened to see that her face was becoming increasingly red.

“I’d like to give you a dress,” I said.

“You...would?” she asked.

“Yes. Now that I’m a student, I’ll need to begin attending parties, and I’d like to go to them with you.”

In the school calendar, I saw that at the beginning of the upcoming year, there was a party scheduled.

“Of course! I’d be happy to accompany you,” Ana said with a brilliant smile.

I was so happy that I clutched her hands without thinking. “Thank you! Then for your dress and accessories, is it okay if they’re all in my color? I want to dress you in my colors from head to toe!”

“O-Okay...”

“There’s no need to go that far! Release my daughter’s hands this instant!” the duke said, forcibly removing my hands from hers.

“But wouldn’t it be bad if Ana gets swarmed by undesirable boys?” Ana’s mother said.

Parties were an opportunity to mingle with other students from different classes and grades, making it a place to kindle romantic connections. If Ana began attending parties with me, it’d only be natural for guys to approach her; after all, she was such a wonderful girl. I wouldn’t be surprised if after talking to her a little bit, they realized she was the best lady on the planet. I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Um, rather than me, I believe Sir Gino is the one we should be worried about,” Ana countered.

“Oh, you have a point. Those who are shrewd enough might be able to tell he’s connected to the new lotion. There might be some women who try to seduce him to steal it from him,” my mother-in-law agreed.

She then explained that the Sevensworth family’s covert operatives had been dealing with a surprising number of spies from other families skulking around my trading company, who apparently even had plans to try and seduce me for information.

I glanced at Ana and was surprised to see that she’d gone pale out of shock from what her mother had just said. Seeing her like that made intense emotions well up in me. I didn’t want her to ever make that kind of expression. I wanted her to smile. I wanted to protect her. I was filled with only these thoughts.

“Sorry to make you worry. I’ll always be faithful to you, please rest assured,” I said.

Before I knew it, I was hugging Ana, spurred on by the emotion that burst from inside. At first, she looked up at me with an expression of surprise before the fact that she was in my arms slowly dawned on her. With each passing moment, her eyes welled up with emotion and her face changed from pale to red.

“What do you think you’re doing, you scoundrel!”

I was forcibly ripped away by the duke and dragged by my collar to his study. Most likely as a punishment, I was made to work until the dead of night without any food. Usually, I'd feel like passing out, but I couldn't get the softness and warmth I'd felt from Ana when I'd hugged her out of my head. I felt like I was walking on clouds.

About a week later, I was invited by Ana to have tea with her because she had something she wanted to discuss with me. Today, we were having tea in the sixth drawing room, Coral.

Despite her being the one to invite me, she'd yet to say a word. She looked down, the look on her face as if she was at her wit's end while she tightly squeezed her hands on her lap.

"W-Would it possibly be acceptable for me to...g-give you formal wear as a p-present?"

What's this now?! She wants to give me a present?!

"Of course! That makes me so happy, Ana!"

"Stay where you are, Sir Ginorious!"

"Urk!"

I was so touched, I sprung out of my seat to hug Ana, but Bridgette who'd been standing by behind me quickly came between us. She used the palm of her hand to push me by my solar plexus, stopping me from going any farther. Perhaps as a result of Bridgette and I becoming closer, she would now employ brute force to keep me off of Ana.

But even so, I couldn't help but wonder *how* she could stop me. Bridgette wasn't exactly large or muscular. In contrast, I was tall and overall had a larger body than her. Regardless, she'd been able to quickly come between me and Ana. It was also strange how I hadn't been able to hear her footsteps at all.

"S-So...!" After this outburst Ana fell silent again and she looked down, her previous expression returning. Now her hands were shaking. It was obvious that she was trying to say something out of her comfort zone.

“W-Would it be a bother...if you dressed in my colors...?” she asked.

“Not at all, I’d be over the moon! I’m serious! I really want to be dressed in your colors, Ana!”

“O-Oh, is that so? I’m so happy you feel that way!”

“Isn’t it normal for a betrothed couple? I wouldn’t expect this to be something to be so happy about,” I said.

“Just because two people are betrothed, it doesn’t automatically mean they would wear each other’s colors...” Ana replied.

This is news to me. At some of the merchant parties I’d attended, there’d been people who’d brought along their fiancées, and most of them had worn each other’s colors. As a result, I’d come to think that it was only natural to do so. Perhaps it was different for merchants, who typically married for love, compared to nobles, who mostly had strategic marriages. *Maybe I messed up again like when I called her by her nickname.*

“And then...I also look like this,” Ana said with a smile.

It was a sad smile, enough to make my chest tighten with pain as I knew the meaning all too well.

“*Sorry, but I don’t wanna walk with you,*” A friend from my past life had said to me.

Though he’d liked coming over to my house to hang out, he didn’t want to walk around with me. Apparently, he didn’t want the embarrassment that came with being thought of as a friend of the repulsive guy.

Ana must’ve thought that being dressed in her colors wasn’t something I’d want since it’d emphasize the fact that the two of us were engaged. It’d been about a week since I’d asked if I could give her a dress. Ana must’ve spent this entire week worrying about asking if I could wear her colors in return.

It was ill-mannered to demand or order someone to give you a present. Taking proper etiquette into consideration, I hadn’t asked Ana to get me anything, but if I’d known that it would make her fret so much, I would have brazenly requested something. The cause behind this sad smile of hers was

none other than my own failure.

I need to show her how much I want to wear her colors. I don't want to ever make her smile sadly like that again!

"I'm happy to wear any color of yours, whether it's the silver of your hair or the grassy greens of your eyes! Make sure it's on there! Oh, I know! How about I wear all silver or all green? Or maybe green and silver stripes?!"

"Huh? I-I don't know..."

"Sir Ginorious, surely you don't intend to escort her looking as if you were some kind of street performer, do you?" Bridgette said, her eyes a frigid blizzard as she looked at me.

Anastasia

Sir Gino had earned the Sun Lion brooch. Furthermore, he'd gotten full marks in every subject—an impressive feat. Even beyond the initial exam, regardless of the class, our professors always praised him highly. By far, though, he was most impressive at mathematics.

There was an unsolvable mathematical problem called the elephant conjecture, but he'd been able to do a proof for it during the exam. As a result, he'd sent waves throughout the entire school.

"That doesn't have a proof?! I messed up... I didn't expect there to be a problem without a proof on the test..." Sir Gino had said after I told him how much the school was talking about it.

To be honest, I felt as if he'd been surprised by the wrong part of what I'd told him. As an aside, these kinds of mathematical questions without proofs sometimes appeared on tests as a way to gauge the student's ability by looking at their approach.

Many of the professors had approached Sir Gino to join as a research assistant—a position that made them functionally a teacher's aide while still being a student. Being selected for this position by even one professor was a great honor, but Sir Gino had been approached by many. It was an astonishing display of his genius. However, Sir Gino turned them all down since he had a lot

on his plate in running his company and becoming my father's successor.

Sir Gino now had a special authority no other student had due to the Sun Lion brooch—a symbol of him being the top of our year. Using that authority, the first thing he did was change his seat to be right next to mine. It made me very happy because it gave me more chances to speak with him; however, it wasn't without its downsides.

Even now, many of the ladies in our class were gathered around his desk, fervently inviting him to spend time with them. Though I didn't really want to hear their conversation, with our seats right next to each other, I couldn't help but overhear everything.

Each time this happened, I became even more frightened that one day he might accept their invitation. My mother's fears had been confirmed: Sir Gino was extremely popular with the ladies of our school. This unease of mine was something I definitely couldn't admit to him. I was sure that he'd find me irritating if I did. What if he came to dislike me?

Before I knew it, class had started for the day. The structure of today's class had us doing group work where we'd split up and have each group report their research findings before debating our results with everyone else. I couldn't help but feel down about it. There wasn't anyone who I could invite to work with me in a group. I'd always ended up assigned to whatever group needed one more person after everyone else was already teamed up.

As everyone stood up to find a group, I sat at my desk as usual with my head ducked, waiting for everyone else to pick their partners. But when I glanced over at Sir Gino, I found that many students were clustered around asking him to join them. However, I couldn't really see him since they'd basically formed a wall between us.

I'm not surprised. The teachers have already explained how exceptional and brilliant he is. Having him in your group gives you a very high possibility of yours being the best in the class. Though there were so many gathered around him, none of them came to invite me to their group. Our desks being next to each other made it all the easier to see the striking difference between the two of us. It made me really feel how unsuited I was for him.

As I wallowed in how unsatisfactory of a person I was, Sir Gino pushed through the people to get to me.

“Ana, would you be in my group?”

Despite all the exceptional students, despite all the beautiful ladies that had invited him, he’d pushed past all of them to stand in front of me and say those words.

“I-I think my skills may be lacking...”

Sir Gino was a new student here; he might not understand the merit system fully yet. By only pairing with people you were friendly with, you were almost certainly doomed to get poor grades and fall to the bottom standings of the school. For group work, you weren’t supposed to choose your friends, but those who were competent. Even betrothed couples in the classroom didn’t choose each other if there were others more talented. It would be best for him if he chose someone more suited to his skill level.

“No, I want you. Please be in my group.” *Wh-Why is he holding my hand?! Everyone’s watching! This is very embarrassing!* “Please say yes.”

Though he was simply inviting me to work on a class project, as he squeezed my hand, I couldn’t help but smile, my heartbeat quickening as I did nothing more than look at him. It was very embarrassing...as if he were trying to woo me in front of the entire class.

“O-Okay...”

My head was in danger of boiling over and I couldn’t think straight, so I accepted his invitation, being swayed by his fervor. The decision of the groups continued while I was still in a state of confusion and futilely attempting to calm my heart. By the time I realized I’d automatically agreed, our group had been formed.

As everyone went toward their respective groups, Sir Gino came to me. “Ana, whenever we have group work in the future, will you be in mine? I want to be with you as much as possible.”

“Don’t you know my grades, Sir Gino?”

“Of course, I do. I also know your true capabilities.”

Huh? What does he mean by that? I don't know anything of the sort.

“Just wait a little, you'll understand soon. There's nothing wrong with your abilities. So please work with me as much as possible.”

“Are you sure you're okay with me?”

“Yes, I want you. Even if you weren't very capable, I'd still want you.”

“You'd do that despite the school's merit system?”

“I understand the system very well. Even if you didn't have any skills, I'd do everything I could to make up for that with my own. As long as you produce results, anything goes in this system.”

He's...not wrong. Results are everything. Despite having only just enrolled, Sir Gino had already grasped the essence of the school's merit-based system. It was as if he'd lived a long time in a world set up this way. *However, if he's saying all of this, then I will accept his invitation. After all, I want to be with him too.*

“Well...in that case, I look forward to working with you.”

“Thank you, Ana. I promise you won't regret it!” he said, squeezing my hand.

Seeing this, a group of military nobles' sons wolf-whistled in unison. Out of embarrassment, I quickly pulled my hand away from his.

After that day, group work was no longer a melancholic experience but a very enjoyable one. Everyone had high expectations for Sir Gino and so he became our group leader. Despite this being his first experience in the school, he took the leadership role. *I need to do my best too. Even if only a little, I want to be of some use to Sir Gino. No, that's aiming too high. First, I need to make sure that I don't hold him back.*

Ginorious

“Sir Gino, I'd like you to rethink this,” Ana said, putting me in an awkward spot as we sat in the twenty-second drawing room, “Black Spinel.”

I'd been looking for a way to lift Ana's curse ever since her fever, and now I'd gotten word of a miracle drug that could supposedly cure any skin disease. I learned that the doctor who sold it was located in the town of Middlewegler.

I'd sent someone to go buy it, but the doctor pretended as if he didn't have any left. It turned out he harbored some kind of great hatred toward nobles and merchants, and only dealt directly with commoners he was acquainted with.

Middlewegler was about a day's carriage ride from the royal capital, so I planned to travel and visit the doctor myself. Though I doubted he would agree to a long-term trade agreement, at the very least, if I went in person and humbly bowed my head, I thought he might sell it to me.

But Ana was against my plan. Due to the doctor's dislike of nobles, bringing guards or servants would only worsen things. My best chance of success would be in going alone, but he lived in the slums, which were large and not especially safe. As such, Ana wouldn't allow me to go without guards.

I felt that she was worrying too much. I'd gone to such neighborhoods many times before by myself. During the course of business, it was important to find temporary workers who could help out with simple tasks, and the best place to find cheap labor was the slums. I also had my own magic tool for protection, so I should've been fairly safe even in the rougher neighborhoods.

"In that case, please take Bridgette with you as an escort. If she's the only one accompanying you, she'll appear more as a friend than a guard," Ana suggested after Bridgette whispered something into her ear.

It was true that Bridgette with her small and seemingly dainty frame didn't look like a guard. Personal attendants like her were supposed to be the final shield between danger and their masters, though, so most of them did know defensive techniques. Bridgette was most likely no exception.

"How skilled are you in self-defense? Do you have experience with practical training?" I asked.

"I might not be as skilled as the head butler or the head maid; however, if I use my hidden skill, I can defeat either of them. Of course, I also have practical experience," Bridgette said dispassionately, her expression not changing in the slightest.

She can put up a good fight against the senior servants? The head butler and head maid were quite up in years, so I couldn't imagine them posing a great challenge. *Well, in that case, I probably can't expect too much from her as a guard, but that's okay. I'm at least confident that I'll be able to defend us both if need be.* The important thing here was that she had practical experience, because if she didn't, there was the possibility that she could pass out from fear if we were confronted by a ruffian. In this scenario, it'd just be the two of us, so the only one who could take her to a safe location or protect her would be me. It'd mean I'd probably have to carry her, which would be most inappropriate, so I wanted to avoid that situation at all costs. At any rate, it didn't seem like she'd pass out or anything if we got into trouble, so that wasn't a worry. And so, my trip with Bridgette was finalized.

Currently, I was sitting with Bridgette in a carriage to Middlewegler. Though up until now I'd had many opportunities to speak with her since she was always with Ana, we were currently talking a lot more than usual. Naturally, the center of our conversation was a topic we were both familiar with: Ana.

"I've been serving her from a young age. I know absolutely everything about her," Bridgette said in a cocky tone.

It was obvious that she was trying to prove her superiority to me. *Urgh. I hate this, but at the same time, I can't deny that the stories Bridgette proudly tells of Ana when she was young are very, very interesting.* I wanted to hear more. Perhaps she was enjoying how I was visibly grinding my teeth in frustration, because her lips became even looser and she happily spoke about a certain night during a thunderstorm.

It was summertime and Ana had seen lightning strike nearby. She quickly ran under the sheets out of fear. The continuous booms from the thunder had also put Bridgette close to tears, but she was on the job. As Ana's personal attendant, it was her duty to stay by her mistress's side. But Ana saw Bridgette crying and trembling, so she invited her to huddle under the covers with her. The two of them trembled under the covers next to each other until the storm passed.

Due to her age, Bridgette hadn't been a full-fledged personal attendant yet

but an attendant in training. The two of them had ended up falling asleep as they waited out the storm. At the time, Ana had an official attendant who discovered Bridgette not only sleeping on the job but in her mistress's bed no less, and she really gave her an earful.

Guarding their master was also a part of a personal attendant's job, so falling asleep, especially while being wrapped up in the blankets and completely heedless of her surroundings, was a great violation of her duties. But even so, Ana defended Bridgette, and her kindness touched Bridgette's heart.

This was obviously not a story that painted Bridgette in a flattering light, and if this were any other time, I imagined she'd have kept it to herself. It seemed that Bridgette's desire to brag about how much Ana treasured her won out over any potential embarrassment.

My heart felt warm from hearing about Ana. She truly was kind and lovely. But also, I felt an extreme sense of envy for Bridgette to have been raised with Ana as if they were sisters. But looking at Bridgette as she cheekily recounted their episodes together, a certain thought suddenly crossed my mind. At a certain point, I'd become able to speak with Bridgette comfortably. Aside from my family and the ones who would soon become that, she was about the only one I could speak normally to. For someone like me who had a hard time with women, this was invaluable to me.

After arriving in Middlewegler, our plan was to stay one night in a nice hotel, and then head to the doctor's home in the morning. There were a lot of stone houses in the town, but once we entered the slums, it was completely different.

There were dwellings that were best described as adjoining huts, which were formerly military barracks. There were many paltry dwellings that'd been slapped together using whatever wood was around. This had once been a military plaza, but it was now no longer in use and was occupied by the poor. However, they'd expanded past the plaza, and the entire area they covered was now the slums. The stone-paved plaza now reeked with the smell of human excrement.

Recruitment of laborers began early in the morning at dawn, and those who

got work would go to the work sites immediately. At this time of day when the sun was out, those remaining here were mostly the ones who had no will or ability to work. There were even people who simply did nothing more than sit on the side of the street and drink. Overall, there were a lot of types here that you wouldn't see in nicer neighborhoods.

I felt bad for dragging Bridgette, the daughter of a viscount, here, so thinking about how rough this must be on her, I apologized.

"It's fine. I was raised in a similar place," she responded.

You were? You, the daughter of a viscount, lived in a slum? Bridgette then explained that she wasn't the biological daughter of her father, Viscount Aldran, and that she used to live on the streets before he took her in. *That's very surprising.* Of course, I didn't press any further. It didn't seem like the kind of story one should ask simply out of curiosity.

We were following a map I'd gotten from the people I'd initially sent to get the medicine. As we entered an empty alleyway, a gang of men who looked like they were waiting between two huts swarmed out.

"Wanna pass through? Cough up the fee," one of the guys said, smirking.

"How much?" I asked.

"Lemme think... Leave the girl and everything you got on you," he said, carefully checking out Bridgette with a skeevy chuckle.

I wouldn't have minded tossing them some coins if it meant staying out of trouble, but I wasn't about to hand over Bridgette.

"I refuse."

"Huh?! I don't think you understand what's goin' on here! Lemme teach you!" he bellowed, running at me.

He tried to grab me by the collar, but in that instant, he disappeared, and in the next moment, there was a loud sound followed by a hole appearing in one of the huts. It was a surprising scene. The muscular man who was over 190 celchimeters tall had been blown away and sent flying several meters through the wall of a hut, and the one who'd done it had been Bridgette.



It was like watching someone being hit by a car! *I know this technique! That's Tetsuzanko—the Iron Mountain Lean.* It was a powerful enough hit that it could break through stone tablets. *Wait, was that the Earthquake Foot?! I've seen that in fighting games back in my previous life! Hold up, was that the one-inch punch too?!*

It was a very strange sight. Bridgette hadn't thrown a punch at the man but had instead merely placed her palm against his abdomen. But even so, in the next moment, he'd flown away like a soccer ball. As I watched in astonishment, Bridgette took out the other thugs and sent them flying one after another like popcorn. There were some who tried to flee, but Bridgette got behind them in an instant and took them out as well. *Good thinking by her to not let any of them escape. They'd just call for reinforcements, making it more troublesome.*

Bridgette was a thin, petite woman so I'd thought she'd use a fighting style that made up for her lack of physical strength. Though she'd said she could use self-defense, I hadn't thought it'd be enough to defeat big men like these.

Oh how wrong I was. She's not powerless at all. She has enough strength to make it look like each one of these guys was hit by a car. I'd thought she wouldn't be able to win against a man, but here she was, sending twelve or so fully grown men flying without even giving them a chance to run.

Not even half a minute had passed before all of them lay defeated. All I could do was stare.

"Apologies for the wait. Let's be off," Bridgette said, expressionless.

I couldn't believe this. She hadn't even broken a sweat! She wasn't even out of breath! Bridgette had been the one to urge Ana into having me bring her along. She'd said that she was skilled when it came to back-alley negotiations, and now I was beginning to suspect that by "negotiations" she meant physical altercations. After leaving some money for repairs to each of the huts that had been damaged, I followed after Bridgette.

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"They're techniques passed down through the Aldran family."

In my past life, Western magecraft and Eastern qigong had been combined to

cause a magic revolution, creating the fundamentals of modern magic. It became a fundamental technique of our civilization and was taught in school. As a result, every Japanese person knew about it. But what we'd learned had been chi in the context of using it to make magic more efficient. Chi at its base was nothing more than Eastern magic.

What Bridgette had shown was an application of pure chi without mana. It was a completely different application than what I knew. Most likely what she'd done would've been called wugong in my past life.

By the time my generation came around, all of Japan had been completely westernized. There was no longer even a shadow of Eastern culture, and wugong only really appeared in manga or games. But in this world, it was a secret technique passed down in noble houses.

"When you instantly appeared behind that bald guy, was that Yoga Teleport?"

"Huh? Yoga what? That was Shadow Step. It deceives your opponent into seeing a fake movement, masking your true one. It only seems like I moved in an instant."

Oh, so it's essentially a type of illusion? You can do that much just with chi? Body fortification magic had been popular when it came to wugong, but it seemed it could do much more than that. There was clearly a lot more to wugong than met the eye.

The reason that techniques from Eastern culture, such as wugong, lost favor in Japan was because, ever since cultural enlightenment, Western culture was hailed as the future, while Eastern culture was written off as a relic.

There weren't many who argued against this viewpoint. However, those that did asserted that the technology in Western culture was simply different, not superior. Though this was my first time seeing real-life wugong, I was beginning to get the feeling that those people were right, especially after witnessing a technique I couldn't even comprehend. Up until now, I'd thought that I had a leg up over everyone due to my past-life knowledge of magic technology, but it seemed I'd need to change my thinking. I couldn't let my guard down if there were techniques in this world I didn't know about.

After walking a bit, we reached our destination. Even for the slums, this hut

was one of the shabbier ones. There was no sign or anything, making it hard to believe that medicine was sold here.

The doctor himself had tribal-style tattoos on his face, which in other places would make him stand out, but not here. For commoners, it was a common punishment to be given tattoos on your face if you committed a crime. It wasn't that rare for people to try to hide those criminal tattoos by covering them with others.

"Heh heh. Sorry, but I'm all out."

As expected, he refused to sell me the drug, but I had a plan to convince him. The first step was to keep my head bowed. *This is all going according to plan.*

"Why's a nice noble like you want medicine made by a shady guy like me?" The doctor laughed again.

Looks like the cat's out of the bag. I'd of course changed into more appropriate clothes and had tried to be careful about my mannerisms, making sure to seem more like a commoner. But even if he knew I was a noble, it was still okay. I had already put together a backup plan.

"This makes things easier if you know we're not commoners. Would you like to make a trade with me?" Bridgette said from her position behind me.

"Heh heh. A trade, huh?"

"Indeed. You're a deserter spy," she declared.

"Me? A deserter?" He cackled. "Where'd you get that from?"

"You've been trying to study my body language for a while now, but you're unable to. Your muscles convey that you are the slightest bit nervous and perhaps even panicking. Though you're conversing as if you're unaffected, you've been wary of me this entire time. The proof is the weapon you're clutching in your hand."

How do you know what he's holding when his hand's under the table? I don't see any traces of her activating a detection magic. This must be part of wugong. Wow, there's so much depth to it.

"Controlling your breathing like you are to appear relaxed is a special skill of

spies. And the weapon you have is a sickle and chain—a weapon that typically only spies use.”

It seems he can't interpret Bridgette's body language at all, but she can interpret his. She wouldn't be able to call him out otherwise. It appears that Bridgette is more skilled than he is.

The doctor had no words in response. His relaxed smile turned into a sharp expression as he glared at her.

“If you were an active spy in the middle of a mission, then you’d pretend to be a vulnerable layman to your dying breath. If your mission was to infiltrate this town, then you’d prioritize that over your own life. However, you’ve been wary of me in order to protect yourself. *That’s* your mission. In other words, there’s nothing to prioritize over your own life, right? If a spy is not on a mission yet living in a place like this, then the only logical conclusion is that they’re a deserter. If you’re knowledgeable about medicine, then you’re also knowledgeable about poisons. Judging by your breathing, it’s the same technique they use in the kingdom of Thorsdale. I’m sure it wouldn’t take long at all to discover who you are if we asked poison experts there.” Bridgette finished with a bright smile.

In response, the man became visibly panicked. Spies would sometimes fulfill shady operations for noble families, and the ones who tried to flee while knowing these dark secrets were hunted down in order to shut them up permanently. If his pursuers knew where he was, he’d be dead before he knew it.

It made sense why he avoided doing business with nobles and merchants. What he had was a very highly rated miracle drug. If the nobles got hold of it, it’d easily become a huge talking point in high society. The more well-known it became, the more danger he’d be in of his pursuers getting wind of him as well. The tattoos on his face were most likely a type of disguise. Nobody likely expected him to go that far, so as soon as they saw his tattoos, they’d write him off as a commoner.

“So...what are you trading?” he asked.

“Please sell us the medicine. If you do, we will pretend we didn’t see you.

Deal?”

“Deal...”

Bridgette ended up solving the entire situation by herself. It turned out that when she’d said she was good at these back-alley deals, she hadn’t just meant the physical aspects after all.

When we returned to the royal capital, we gave the medicine immediately to Ana’s primary physician, Dr. Welker, for her to look into whether or not it might have any effect on Ana’s curse. Fast forward to today where we were about to hear the results in the twenty-ninth drawing room, named the “Black Agate.”

“I’d heard this was a miracle drug...but it truly is. It’s of very high quality and is effective against a wide variety of skin ailments.”

“Will it be effective against Ana’s curse too?”

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem that it will have any effect on it. This type of medicine is called a salve, and we’ve already tried a great number of salves from all around the world.”

Oh, it’s a salve? I guess that makes it a flexible type of medicine, which could be how it earned its reputation as a miracle drug. At any rate, this seemed like another bust. I needed to continue looking for a way to lift Ana’s curse so she could live healthily.



During our history class, we had group work again. Though in my past life, our classes had been mostly lectures, this school had mostly group work and debates. Our group had five people including me and Ana, and it was all girls except for me. It was as if I’d been thrown into a den of girls, and to be honest, it was fairly uncomfortable. But it’d been Ana who’d wanted these group members.

“We did it! We’re first place! Perhaps an expected result with you, Sir Valvalier. You truly prove your worthiness of the Sun Lion brooch.”

Her name was Lily Gastonieu, and she was the daughter of an earl. She had brown hair, honey-colored eyes, and freckles. Right now her lips, bright red from her lipstick, were curved into a smile. I honestly didn't like her very much due to her and her friends' horrible attitude toward Ana. As much as I didn't want to use vulgar words, I was severely tempted to call her all sorts of rude names. That was how much I disliked her.

The theme of our presentation before this had been the history of bureaucracy, and we'd ended in second place. This time around, our theme was the history of economics. As a merchant, I took the lead, and we ended in first place.

Even in regard to economics, this world was fairly primitive. They didn't even understand how the price of items could be affected by the balance of supply and demand. By simply mixing in a little bit of my knowledge from my past life, I ended up making our presentation revolutionary.

"We'll have a total of three coins now thanks to you," a different girl in our group, another daughter of an earl, said.

The reports we presented were ranked by our professors and coins were given out respectively. First place got two coins and second place got one, and these could be given to professors to boost our grades. However, when placing first as a group, the group as a whole still only received two coins.

Last time, our group got second place, earning one coin. Now with the two we'd earned from placing first, we had a total of three. However, there were five people in our group. In short, we didn't have enough coins for everyone.

In this situation, the recipients of the coins were decided among the students. It'd mean that those at the top of the school hierarchy were almost surely going to monopolize all the coins, which set off alarm bells based on my experiences from my past life.

However, in this school, nobody complained about this distribution method. Since they were going to live as nobles, they'd inevitably encounter situations where they'd need to negotiate with others. Negotiating with other students was practice for the future.

"If we get first again, then we'll have enough coins for everyone, however,

accomplishing that may be difficult,” one of my groupmates said.

“Indeed,” agreed another. “With both Sir Hugo and Sir Anthony in the same group, our chances are slim.”

Hugo Fibass was the very same student who’d approached me on my first day and declared that he’d get his top spot back from me. His family specialized in education, so it’d make the next project regarding military history difficult for him. Additionally, Anthony Treves was the son of an earl, and after growing up in his military family, he was well-versed in military affairs. I had no doubt that their group would be hard to beat this time.

“How disappointing, Lady Anastasia. You weren’t able to receive a coin this time either,” Lady Gastonieu said, sneering at Ana.

Why are you treating her like this?! It’s true that she wasn’t in charge of anything too flashy, but the one who organized the huge amount of information into easy-to-use notes was Ana! In terms of sheer amount of work, Ana did the most! I couldn’t understand why Lady Gastonieu was getting a coin despite barely contributing anything while Ana, the person who contributed the most, didn’t get one! Plus, this girl was the one who’d pushed all the tedious work onto her in the first place!

I felt like I was going to begin yelling, so I did everything I could to hold myself back and calm down. If I became emotional, nothing would go right. If I wanted to raise Ana’s standing, then I needed to deal with everything as calmly as possible.

“There’s no helping it. It’s quite rare for everyone in the group to get a coin,” Ana said as if she wasn’t bothered at all.

In the meantime, I was doing my best to not let it show how infuriated I was. It took everything I had to keep my anger contained to just my trembling fist. Since Ana had accepted the state of things, there wasn’t much I could do.

“Okay, okay, let’s stop with the pessimism, shall we? If we get first on the next assignment, then we’ll each have a coin. Let’s all do our best so that Lady Anastasia can get a coin as well,” another one of our groupmates, the daughter of Marquess Elphic, said.

She didn't bully Ana, but even so, she thought it to be completely natural that Ana be the last one to get a coin. It was the class's so-called natural order. *How completely unfair!* Everyone understood the mechanics of a merit-based system due to how the school worked; however, this country's hierarchy was based on status, meaning those raised here had no true concept of equality. Since they thought it was only natural that having a higher status made them superior, they treated those lower than them even worse than people had in my past life.

I resolved to make sure our group got first place in the next project. If we had five coins, then it'd solve our current problem. Though this was simply putting off the problem for another time, I couldn't think of an effective enough way to change the situation, which meant that waiting was the most optimal choice.

Initially, I was thinking of pulling my punches out of fear of crushing the pride of the students from military families if I did too well. However, if all that did was cause Ana to feel bad, then I was going to pull out all the stops. The only other thing I needed to do was come up with a way for Ana's hard work to be undeniable. I couldn't bear to see her continuing to be treated like this.

After class ended for the day, I went to the library to borrow references for our assignment. In this world, books were very expensive. Usually it cost money to borrow them, but not for greater nobles, meaning I could take as many as I liked.

After picking out some books concerning the subject at hand, I went to the poetry section and picked out one collection. It was a book that Ana had talked to me about. Though I had no interest in poetry, I was extremely curious about the things that Ana was interested in.

"Oh, Sir Valvalier! Whatcha up to?" Lady Kate, a commoner, said to me, forgoing the expected proper greeting.

Though we were in different classes, our curriculum was the same. She was interested in becoming a merchant, so after learning that I ran my own company, she'd got closer to me to network.

Since nobles mostly focused on the education from their respective houses, they only stayed at school to take the required classes. I was the only one taking

extra electives, and thus I was constantly surrounded by commoners whose names I didn't know. There were a lot of discussions and group projects in this school, so when we split up into groups, she'd approached me with the motive of making connections.

"I'm borrowing some books," I said.

I could see her trying to peek at the books I was holding, so I automatically hid them. It'd be embarrassing to have someone see the girly title of the book I had: *The Girl on the Bed of Flowers Dreams of First Love*.

Seeing my reaction, Kate began snickering. "Oh, I get it. So dirty books?"

"This school doesn't have those!"

"Hm, you sure about that? Lemme see!"

Suddenly, another girl frantically came in and apologized politely like a noble, before pulling Lady Kate, who'd been getting in my face, away somewhere. She was Lady Kate's twin, Lady Lyla. In this merit-based school, as long as you were talented, even commoners could wield the same strength as nobles. But since the tuition was very expensive, most of the commoners only enrolled in high school. Since they also lived a life where status hierarchy was drilled into them, there were no commoners who would treat nobles casually...except for Lady Kate. Her twin sister must have been worried that her family would be in danger from the impoliteness Lady Kate showed. Unlike her twin sister, who was a free spirit, Lady Lyla had been raised to inherit their family's business, and was overall much more put together.

"Owww! Lyla, don't pull me by the hair!"

Kate was a very boisterous girl, but she was also one of the rare ones I could actually hold a conversation with. Her uninhibited personality and friendliness reminded me of my little sister from my past life. As a result, I could speak with her without breaking into a nasty sweat.

For the record, I never read any kind of dirty books. After all, one's vitality was necessary for strengthening one's chi and mana. Since even before ancient times, many religions strictly taught celibacy, but the logic behind that was proved in modern magic.

If sages wanted to produce miracles—or in other words, if one wanted to be a mage—celibacy was the shortest path to it. Fortunately, outside of the event of achieving enlightenment, acquiring magic simply required patience. I didn't need to be patient about anything at this point, but in my case, looking at lewd content only evoked a desire to vomit, so I didn't want to look at those kinds of things in the first place.

Anastasia

"I think the sleeping incense you received from Gino is a magic drug," mother said as we sat in the seventh drawing room, the Chrysoberyl.

We'd made sure to be alone as we had tea together.

"I suspected as much," I said.

My job for our group was to summarize all of the information from the materials we gathered. Though I was merely writing the gist of the literature into notes, the more of it I could summarize, the greater an advantage our group would have. This was my first time working together with Sir Gino, so I wanted to put all I had into it. As a result, I'd been staying up late into the night almost every day.

"You're exhausted from working late recently, aren't you? So...here's something to help," he'd said.

Though nobody else in our class had noticed my exhaustion, Sir Gino had. He'd even given me this sleeping incense as a present. His consideration toward me really made me feel warm and fuzzy inside. However, in regard to the medicine, its effects were abnormal. I could fall asleep in under five minutes after inhaling it, and despite not even sleeping half of what I did on a good day, I woke up without any exhaustion as if I'd had a full night's sleep. I'd feel utterly refreshed. My mother had experienced the same effects and seemed convinced that it was a magic drug.

"The lotion also makes me wonder how he developed it... I think he must have some kind of Artifact that allows him to create various types of magic drugs," mother said.

Across the world, there were dungeons from which magic tools called Artifacts were occasionally excavated. Many of them were very mysterious and impossible to reproduce with our modern technology.

The lotion he'd made had an antiaging effect that modern methods couldn't hope to achieve. As such, it was our family's suspicion that he'd created it by using an Artifact. Now with this sleeping incense, it'd stand to reason that his Artifact could produce multiple types of magic drugs.

"I'm sure you know, but you mustn't mention this sleeping incense to anyone. You can't even let them get a hint of its existence. Be very careful."

"Of course, mother."

Artifacts were so rare, they didn't even have a price tag, so they were mostly kept either in the royal treasury or the treasuries of greater nobles. If it was revealed that someone had one, they were liable to be targeted, which was why it was common courtesy to pretend like you didn't know if you found out someone did. There were criminal organizations who would buy information about the whereabouts of Artifacts, and one of the dangers was this information slipping to them through the loose lips of servants or their families who didn't understand the gravity of what they were sharing. It was dangerous to even talk about while inside your own home.

Even in the Sevensworth household, nobody spoke about their suspicions about how Sir Gino was making the lotion. After all, that was precious information that could have an effect on his very life.

"What should I do about this product?" I asked.

Though not as much as an Artifact itself, magic drugs could be sold at a quite high price as well. It didn't feel right to be using it simply to stay awake in class because I hadn't gotten enough sleep. Even a small bottle of the lotion that Sir Gino made would sell for enough to be able to buy a lesser noble's estate. Only mother or Lady Valvalier could use something like that on their entire body every day.

"You should use it. He made it for you," mother said. "It's proper manners to use the gift your fiancé gives you."

“Yes, that’s proper etiquette, however I believe it’s extremely expensive.”

“That just shows how much he loves you. Taking into account the refrigerating magic tool he used for you and now this incense, he *really* loves you.”

I looked down out of embarrassment due to her preposterous words.

Sir Gino was a very mysterious person, and that didn’t just apply to his magic drug creation. Even during our marriage talks, there’d been a point in time where it had been as if he’d completely disappeared. It was normal for our family to not ask about or even mention Artifacts, but I wished to know more about him. *That’s right. Perhaps I can ask his family members at the Adolni estate. I’d much like to hear about him when he was young.*

“You’d like to write my sister? I’ll ask her if that’s all right,” Sir Gino said, helping me begin correspondence with his older sister, Lady Viviana.

Though at first she was very reserved when writing me due to the difference in our status, she let me refer to her as my big sister. The contents of our letters were of course about Sir Gino. Though he didn’t like to boast about it, I wrote about how he’d entered our school with full marks in all subjects, how he held the top grades in our year and had earned the Sun Lion brooch, and how he’d caused quite the commotion in school after he’d solved an unsolvable problem. All of this he hadn’t shared with his family at all, so she was considerably surprised when she heard about it.

Sir Gino had told me she was quite an uninhibited individual, but I could also tell it from her letters. I laughed very hard when she recounted the story of how her father had given her a big lecture when she’d caught a three-meter-long giant catfish in a nearby river and brought it home on a cart. Though I’d begun this correspondence with the intention of getting to know Sir Gino better, I enjoyed getting closer to my future sister-in-law as well.

Ginorious

“We did it! We’ve placed first once again!”

“Placing first twice in a row is certainly something only Sir Valvalier could accomplish!”

The same girls in my group were once again celebrating because, even though the topic this time around had been military history, we’d taken first place. With this, we’d accumulated five coins—one for each member of our group.

For the most part, magic technologies were secrets of the various noble houses, so our presentation had been on how modern military formations would change from close-order formations to skirmish types if all magic technology became public information, because the technology would advance much more quickly as a result.

Close orders were characterized by either a V or a fish-scale formation. In contrast to these, which required large numbers of soldiers, skirmish formations operated with smaller numbers and had each soldier acting on their own.

In the modern day, geometrical close-order formations were king. Our group’s presentation was on demonstrating how these current tactics would eventually become obsolete. It likely had quite an impact on those with military backgrounds.

Our presentation had been fairly convincing too. I’d used my knowledge of history from my past life, where magic had rapidly developed as a result of magic technology patents being acknowledged. This had an effect on military formations, making them evolve from close orders to skirmishes over time.

“Thank you very much, Sir Gino,” Ana said in a soft voice as the other members boisterously celebrated.

“For what?”

“Thanks to you working so hard, our group now has five coins. It seems even I’ll be able to have one now. It’s truly been quite some time since I’ve received a coin through group work.”

Ana seemed genuinely happy. Simply being able to see this smile of hers made all my efforts worth it. Since we were in the same group, I was planning

on giving Ana a coin even if we only had three. Despite that, the rest of our groupmates—and even Ana herself—considered her to be at the bottom of the class and therefore the last one who should get a coin.

“Ana, you helped out a lot. I know how much work you did.”

Since she took the time to summarize all of the materials, it saved me a lot of time from having to pore over everything. It was greatly thanks to her and the sheer number of documents she’d summarized for us that our thesis had gotten done so efficiently and had been so convincing.

“The reason we have five coins now is due in great part to your contributions, Sir Valvalier. Perhaps you should receive a second coin instead of Lady Anastasia getting one,” Lady Gastonieu suggested as I spoke with Ana.

She was one of the girls who bullied Ana.

“Tru...” Ana began to agree, but my immediate protest drowned her out.

“Not at all!”

Did you even see how happy Ana was?! You little... Because of how agitated my tone had become all of a sudden, everyone turned toward me. Though I’d tried to say it calmly, I couldn’t stop the emotion in my voice. But nothing good came of being emotional. I’d learned that to a painful point in my past life, so I took several deep breaths to calm down.

“The one who helped summarize the majority of the materials was Ana. She contributed more than enough to deserve a coin,” I said to Lady Gastonieu in a more composed tone.

“That may be true, but that’s a job anyone can do, is it not?” she responded.

“Maybe so, but it doesn’t change how demanding a job it is. Without her hard work, there’s no chance we would have been able to create our thesis as we did.”

“Did I hear this right? Is Lady Anastasia going to receive a coin? That’s quite strange considering they’re meant for people with talent.” During our conversation, another girl from a different group had come over.

She had blonde hair and reddish eyes accompanied by a stern face. She was

the daughter of Marquess Florro, and she was the leader of the clique that Lady Gastonieu belonged to. She sat at the top of the biggest group of girls, so despite not having the best grades, she was at the top of the school hierarchy—most likely second or so in terms of the ladies.

Her house was in charge of staffing agencies and even employed the servants at this school. As a daughter from a premier household, the servants were especially polite with her. She essentially ruled the school with how the majority of the noble ladies and servants alike were under her thumb.

“I disagree,” I said. “She is talented. You’ve all simply failed to realize that.” I moved forward, defending Ana.

“Oh, is that so? What types of talents does she possess?” Lady Gastonieu asked through a snicker, joining Lady Florro’s side.

I have something prepared, but I’m not sure if I should really do this now. Ana herself doesn’t feel as if she’s in a difficult position. I’m the one who can’t endure her being treated this way. My selfishness might drag Ana into trouble. It might be better for me to only do this after talking to her at length. These were all rational thoughts I was having, but I was also at my limit. I couldn’t take her being insulted like this any longer. It was a hundred times more unpleasant than being insulted myself.

“All right. I’ll show you just how much Ana contributed,” I said to them before pulling out some papers from my bag and heading to the podium.

When I reached the front of the classroom, I spread the papers out and used the metal fasteners at the top of the board to hang them. The blackboards in this world were made of wood and coated with lacquer-based paint, so magnets couldn’t be used on them.

“If I could have a moment of everyone’s time, I’d like you all to take a look at this chart,” I called out to the class after completing my preparations.

I’d posted on the board a chart that showed who in our group had helped summarize the materials for our thesis. The members were each assigned a color so it was easy to see at a glance how much each one contributed. We’d used a total of forty-one references for our thesis despite even ten normally being considered a large amount.

“Huh? Thirty-two books? She read all of those?”

“That’s not possible. No person could go through that many books.”

Murmurs erupted across the class as they saw the amount that Ana had summarized. Out of the forty-one books we’d used, thirty-two of them had been done by her. I’d done six, and Lady Elphic, who’d assisted with organizing the presentation, had helped with three.

Neither Lady Gastonieu nor Lady Veitz—the two in our group who most bullied Ana—had summarized even a single book. They disliked doing work that took effort with little recognition to show for it, so they pushed it all onto Ana. I’d wanted to stop them, but Ana had already accepted without a word of resistance. Since she’d agreed, I couldn’t argue.

“The ones who are highly praised during group work are those who present the project and the ones who help put everything together. Of course, it depends on some negotiation, but typically the coins—a symbol of one’s value—go to the people in these positions. However, there are students who aren’t in any of the flashier roles who contribute just as much, if not more. I’d like to propose to the professors that we implement an informative program to show students the importance of those who do the research, so their efforts behind the scenes are not missed.”

Our professor wore a thoughtful expression as I said this. “Could I confirm something? It’s difficult to believe that one person could summarize thirty-two volumes on their own. How were you able to do that?” our professor asked not me but Ana.

Suddenly all eyes fell onto her. “W-Well... Um... There were many books that I’d already read by sheer coincidence. For the majority of them, by simply reading the beginning, I was able to remember their contents, so I basically went by memory.”

The classroom began buzzing at what Ana had said. This wasn’t something a typical student was capable of. Even I’d been surprised when I’d found out.

“Would you mind if I test you to see if you truly memorized these books?”

“P-Please go ahead,” Ana said, agreeing.

Our professor instructed Ana to stand at the podium before beginning. “I’ll ask you a question regarding *A Strategic Analysis of Redkriev’s War Tactics*. In chapter three, what did he say about the efficacy of General Fanneil’s tactics?” he asked without even needing to look at the book.

Our professors were expected to be at this level. They were all authorities on their respective subjects and were very familiar with the materials written on them. The abnormally high cost of tuition was to provide these national authorities with appropriate ongoing research fees.

“Um... Though General Fanneil employed the flying geese formation during the Redkriev campaign...” Ana proceeded to answer the professor’s question without any faults, albeit while ducking her head and speaking in a soft voice.

She was undoubtedly nervous from being suddenly forced to stand at the podium with everyone’s eyes on her. Presenting to the whole class hadn’t been my intention when I’d made this chart. I’d made it to show our professors in the faculty room. It was documentation designed to highlight the importance of those who did the background work.

The allotment of coins was decided by students, but if everyone knew the importance of the behind-the-scenes roles, then even if Ana was assigned these roles, she’d have a leg to stand on during negotiations.

The reason I’d ended up posting it on our classroom’s blackboard instead had been due to my own anger, and as a result I’d ended up putting Ana in the spotlight. I couldn’t have been sorrier about that. I squeezed her hand, wanting to cheer her on even just a little. This was about the most I could do.

Seeing this, some of the girls in the class squealed while the military jocks wolf-whistled. This made Ana turn bright red and pull her hand away from mine. Though she’d been able to answer everything without any difficulties up until then, she suddenly couldn’t speak, making our teacher wryly smile.

How can I be such a useless guy?! I meant to help her and all I’ve done is impede her. Though I’d sabotaged her partway through, she’d still perfectly answered our professor’s question. Even our classmates were surprised.

“I’m very impressed. This is truly amazing. It’s true; it’s a waste to have your talent in the shadows.”

Our professor recognized Ana's skills and promised to bring the topic up in a meeting so students would be more aware of the effort made in the less forward-facing roles. The main basis of one's standing in our school was their grades, so the higher one's grades were, the higher their ranking would be. Ana, with her reserved, kind personality, would always take the more unwanted roles, but with this, her grades would go up and her position should rise accordingly.

Even so, this wasn't enough yet. As a result of the succession conflict not too long ago, there were quite a few problems in regard to grade evaluation. Ana was a victim caught in the aftermath of that conflict, and I needed to fix that.

After classes ended for the day and the professor left the classroom, Lady Florro stood up and glared maliciously at Ana.

"She must be cheating!" she declared. "This is Lady Anastasia we're talking about! We should all search for proof that she cheated!"

Ana? Cheat? You little... I couldn't restrain the fury bursting from inside me. But I couldn't very well use violence against a noble lady. It would also be wise for me to avoid arguing with her, since Ana would no doubt try to defuse the situation so I didn't get on the bad side of my classmates. Even if I argued, Ana would intervene before I had a chance to even discredit their claims.

That's why, instead, I released a "demon's aura." In this world, this was a term for nothing more than releasing a fearsome aura. However, it had a different meaning in my previous life. In addition to mana, humans had chi, which could change depending on their emotional state, such as being furious, murderous, or malevolent. In my previous life, releasing a "demon's aura" meant that your very chi was being filled with your emotion and mixing with your mana, and that you were attacking your opponent with that combination.

In my previous life, a fusion between Western magic and Eastern chi was the foundation of modern magic, and this technique had been discovered during early explorations of it. It was a primitive technique that had been used in the early years of the modern era of my previous world, though the name it was called was inconsistent over the decades—chi blast, killing intent, haki, death

sight. I mixed my mana with my anger-filled chi and sent it flying at Lady Florro.

“Eek!” she screamed, recoiling.



In this world, they didn't even know about the existence of chi, never mind the method of combining it with mana. Since they weren't even aware of how to defend themselves against it, the demon's aura was very effective.

"Lady Lalah? Is there something the matter?" Lady Gastonieu asked her, confused.

It wasn't just her who was confused. Since Lady Florro had screamed so suddenly and her face was taut with fright as she looked at me, the whole class regarded her with confusion. I couldn't blame them either. Mana mixed with chi like this didn't have an element and was thus colorless, transparent, and undetectable. Even if I raised the intensity of the aura I was firing at her, nobody else would notice.

"S-Sir Valvalier... H-He's attempting to kill me..." she said as she continued shakily moving away.

"Huh?!" everyone exclaimed at her unexpected claim.

All I'd done was glance over to ensure my aim was right; I hadn't even glared at her. Not seeing me do anything to harm her or indicate that I meant her harm made it difficult for anyone to understand what she was saying.

"Lady Lalah, are you all right?"

The rest of our classmates burst into chatter.

"Lady Lalah, come to your senses! Even if he did somehow want to kill you, he's not so foolish as to use violence against you in a classroom with all of us here."

"Lady Lalah, you must be exhausted. Perhaps you should rest for the day."

The other girls in her social group said, trying to calm her. It seemed that I'd been successful in distracting them from their ridiculous claim of Ana cheating.

"Hey, congrats on first place," Anthony said, approaching me and Ana.

"We've had classes together for a while, but I never knew how amazing you were, Lady Anastasia. Why would you hide that?"

"My deepest apologies. I figured it'd be best not to stand out too much."

I really understood where she was coming from. In my school in my previous life, I'd always feared standing out. If someone in the upper echelons did something impressive, they'd get a simple "wow!" but if anyone from the third tier did, they'd be accused of not knowing their place, even if they were careful to not behave any differently. For those at the bottom of the class, standing out was equivalent to making your school life even worse.

"Playing it humble, huh? So then why did you decide to use your full skills this time around?" he asked.

"W-Well..." Ana glanced at me before looking down, her face red.

"Oh? It's because Ginorious over here was the lead of the project, huh? You gave this project your all for your beloved fiancé, is that it?"

Ana couldn't say anything in response and continued to look down, her ears turning red too now. *What?! Ana did all that for me despite knowing that it could put her in a worse position?!*

"Ana, is that true?" I asked, squeezing her hand.

Ana looked up with surprise at having her hand scooped up, but then immediately looked down out of embarrassment.

"Y-Yes..." she said in a voice as loud as a mosquito.

"Thank you so much! You're truly the best girl in the world!"

The noble ladies squealed in reaction while the boys whistled again. I immediately realized my mistake. My intense emotions had gotten the better of me and I'd once again embraced Ana without thinking. I frantically separated myself from her, but when I did, I saw that Ana's face was bright red and her eyes were spinning. *I always seem to mess up when Ana's involved. The emotions that burst from within me are too strong, and I lose control of myself. I'm so sorry, Ana.*

"You know...you're pretty mature in most areas, but you're like a child when it comes to courtship. You're worse than a middle schooler in front of their first love," Anthony laughed.

People couldn't improve without experience. No matter how much

experience I had with business talks, I couldn't whisper sweet nothings to women. No matter how many business letters I wrote, I wouldn't be able to suddenly write love letters. Though I had a wealth of experience due to how long I'd lived, when it came to romance, I had less experience than a kid in middle school. Anthony had seen right through me and I had no words to counter with, so I simply looked away to try and hide the fact that he was spot-on.



Today was the day they announced the results of our finals and there was currently a swarm of students around the bulletin board, waiting for the results to be posted. Among them were Ana and myself.

"It'll be all right. I'm sure you'll be first again, Sir Gino."

"You think so?"

"Of course. I know how hard you worked."

I hadn't been successful at hiding my nerves, so Ana was considerate and tried changing the topic to keep my mind off of things. It didn't seem like she was all too nervous herself, perhaps because she didn't care too much about her ranking.

"Oh, looks like they're posting the results. Let's move closer," Anthony said as several of the school servants came out and affixed a huge panel onto the bulletin board, sized perfectly to fit the space. They fixed it in place with metal fasteners.

"You did it, Sir Gino, you're first!" Ana said excitedly.

"Yes! Second!" I exclaimed.

"Huh?" the two of us looked at each other, not really having heard the other since we'd spoken at the same time.

"You're first, Sir Gino," she said, tilting her head and looking up at the results.

"Oh, right, I am. But that doesn't matter. Ana, you're second!"

"Huh?!"

It seemed that in her hurry to check first place, that'd been the only thing she'd seen. What I'd been worried about the most hadn't been my ranking, but that of Ana's. I couldn't help but marvel at how far her grades had improved. Up until now, she'd been around fifteenth, which put her in about the middle of our elite class. But this time she'd gotten second. Hugo, who was bright and well-known, had been holding the second spot ever since I'd taken first, so the fact that she'd beaten him was proof of her magnificent grades.

"I-I really am..." Ana said as she gazed at the results, mouth agape.

Her reaction was adorable. "Congrats, Ana. It was worth it changing the question types," I said.

As part of the merit system, the school awarded the Sun Lion brooch to the person who scored highest on the periodic tests, and with that brooch came certain privileges. One of those privileges was making changes to a class's curriculum and assignments. Of course, you still needed final approval from the professors, so you couldn't do anything too outlandish. I'd used my power to change the format of the test questions.

"Huh? So you did all of that for..."

"Yep. Of course I did it for you, Ana. The scoring for tests in this format is much more objective, so even for you who's quite timid, you won't be at a disadvantage. Well, I guess overall I changed it for everyone's sake, but the reason I thought of this in the first place was because I wanted your abilities to be fairly assessed."

When she'd shown me her past answer sheets, I'd thought that her answers were graded a lot lower than their quality deserved. I also had experience in my past life with being graded much lower than I should've been.

As an ugly guy, I'd been valued a lot less than handsome guys who produce the same results as me. It was only when my results were above average that I was finally treated and valued like a normal person. As a result, before I knew it, I'd fallen into the habit of working twice as hard as others.

Discrimination based on looks was especially harsh for women. Even if someone couldn't do their work right, as long as they were young and pretty, they'd be valued much more than someone who was talented but old or ugly.

Even if they kept making the same mistakes, if they were beautiful, they'd just laugh and be forgiven. Meanwhile, the ugly would be yelled at. Sometimes the only ones who recognized this unfair treatment were people like me who didn't care too much about looks. Even the ones who were being discriminated against often didn't realize it was happening.

When I'd thought about it, I'd wondered if Ana was also being subjected to an unfair evaluation, so I decided to introduce fill-in-the-blank questions and multiple-choice, the grading for those being much more objective.

Of course there were variations between different subjects, but between fifty to seventy percent of the questions across all subjects were changed. By reducing the amount of essay and oral questions, I reduced the possibility for one's grading to be influenced by subjective feelings, meaning the student's looks or their closeness with the professor wouldn't affect the results as much.

In addition, as someone who was more of an indoor person and had read many books, Ana had an extremely large amount of knowledge. Fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice focused more on the amount of knowledge the test taker had rather than how they expressed their ideas, which was more in Ana's favor.

For good measure, as a former entrance exam warrior, I found the necessary words for Ana to memorize and taught them to her. Compared to my classmates who'd only ever experienced essay and oral questions, they weren't familiar with the study method of memorizing key words. With all these requirements fulfilled, none of these students could get a higher grade than Ana.

"I see. Objective grading. You thought it could be changed now?" Ana asked.

"That's right."

The reason they'd been so fixated on essay and oral questions had been because of the succession struggle. The concubine mother of the first prince had introduced the idea of a meritocracy in order to show the difference in skill between her son and the crown prince. At the same time, she implemented a strict check system so grades couldn't be warped by Her Majesty's influence.

It was said that the first prince's mother's aim was to have the crown prince

fall to a class for struggling students. The students in these classes were labeled as those who didn't have the talents necessary to work in the royal court. It typically referred to any class below Class D. Though the academy's main goal was to help raise individuals to serve the royal court, it was also a social place for young nobles. As such, there was also a class for those who were not planning on working in the court, which focused on social interaction more than academics.

If the crown prince fell into one such class, it was more than possible that the successor to the crown would be changed from him to the first prince. In order to skirt this plan, Her Majesty changed the tests to be essay and oral questions.

With this, even if the crown prince received marks that should have placed him in a lower class, the professors would surely find some kind of excuse to give the crown prince extra points to avoid it. Even if they weren't trying to play favorites, they couldn't help but unconsciously worry about incurring the wrath of Her Majesty. With essay and oral questions, it was easy to award more points than one may have deserved. Just as Her Majesty planned, her son just barely stayed in Class C and was able to graduate.

Since both princes were out of school now, it was no longer the stage for their succession struggle. When Ana said the system could "be changed now," she was referring to how it couldn't have been done until last year, when the crown prince graduated. If anyone had tried, Her Majesty would have almost certainly used everything at her disposal to stop it.

In addition to the change in question format, there was an announcement regarding the overall grade rankings. This included not only the test scores but the ones we earned from classwork as well. It came as no surprise to me that Ana had gotten second in this regard too. Since she was always in the same group as me, Ana had received a lot of coins. I'd fully expected her to get second the minute I saw her placement on the final.

Anastasia

"P-Please return it to me."

After the test results were posted, the next class was embroidery. Though I'd

been on my way to the classroom, Lady Lalah and her friends had stolen my tools along the way. She'd constantly bullied me in a similar fashion ever since elementary school. In recent years, these aggressions had reduced in frequency; however, ever since I'd received that first coin, she'd resumed.

"Excuse me. The behavior of you ladies is very unpleasant. Would you mind not horsing around with someone else's embroidery tools? They're sacred and should be treated as such. Return them this instant." The one who'd said this was Lady Ekatarina Byron.

She was the daughter of a duke, just like me. She was tall, well-endowed, and had long, slightly wavy black hair. All of this made her a very beautiful girl.

"What does this have to do with you, Lady Ekatarina?"

"Are you possibly hard of hearing? Return her embroidery tools," she said, sharply glaring at Lady Lalah.

Frightened by her, Lady Lalah returned my tools and quickly scurried off toward the classroom. Lady Ekatarina had been at the top of the embroidery class for quite some time. This amount of authority she exerted was to be expected. She was very strong-willed and ruled at the top of our elite class as a lone wolf. She also had good grades and always placed third, right after Sir Gino and Sir Hugo...although this time she'd placed fourth because I'd unfortunately taken second place.

Suddenly my body tensed up. With her almond-shaped, deep blue eyes, she was one of the few true beauties at our school. Currently, she was pointing those beautiful eyes at me, giving me a sharp glare. *I-Is she possibly upset that I placed second?! Wh-What should I do?!*

"I'd...like to congratulate you on placing second."

"Th-Thank you very much."

"However, I won't lose next time. Be prepared for that."

After saying that, she left for the embroidery classroom. *Phew. That was frightening. Having higher grades comes with its own set of problems.*

Ginorious

After geography ended, I began tidying up the classroom with Ana.

“Lady Anastasia, allow us to assist you as well.”

In the next moment, several of our female classmates jumped in to help. Despite her grades improving, she still took the initiative to clean up after class ended. She was the same as usual; however, the attitude toward her from our classmates had obviously changed, and now there were students like these helping her clean.

In the center of their circle, Ana smiled as they had their girl talk. Though someone friendly like Anthony might’ve been able to easily join their conversation, it was impossible for me. All I could do was watch from afar, gazing at her smile as I continued cleaning. I was happy that Ana had more people around her now, but I also felt lonely. The times when it was just the two of us chatting as we worked started to feel nostalgic.



Among the required subjects for students, there were some that didn’t appear on the scheduled exams. For guys, it was swordsmanship, and for girls, it was embroidery. These classes were separated by gender.

“What a shabby piece of work as usual.”

“Heh heh heh. Oh, you’re right. It doesn’t look like something a person of greater nobility created.”

“P-Please give it back.”

As I headed to the changing room for our swordsmanship class, I heard Lady Florro and her group. When Ana took out her embroidery to submit it, they’d snatched it from her, opened it up, and began laughing at it.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

Blood immediately rushed to my head and I rushed over and snatched Ana’s embroidery back. She was higher in the school hierarchy now, but even so, there were people who still bullied her just as they’d done before—this Florro girl and her friends. Their bullying of Ana had nothing to do with grades.

“Oh? I was simply stating the truth, though.”

“You little—”

“P-Please stop, Sir Gino!” Ana pleaded, stopping me by tugging at my sleeve.

If this is what she wants, then I have no choice but to stop here. I took deep breaths, quelling the rage that had made my fists tremble. As I calmed down, the Florro girl and her group left for the embroidery room.

“It can’t be helped. Their assessments are the truth.”

At first, I thought that couldn’t possibly be true, but even though the embroidery I was holding shared similarities with the ones I’d seen in her personal embroidery room, it wasn’t the same. The stitches were evenly spaced as if measured by a machine. Overall, it was so precise that it didn’t seem like something a human had done. But the techniques used were nothing more than the basic ones. They didn’t display any of the high-level skills seen in the works she had at home.

The composition was also different. The embroidery she’d shown me before had put her heart on full display. They were all gentle, kind, peaceful designs. But this embroidery was done as if copied from a reference book. It was as if she’d followed the instructions to a T, but it lacked any of her personality.

In my previous life, embroidery was a technical art and its value lay mostly in its level of precision. However, in this country, embroidery was purely artistic. The creativity used in making an embroidery work was much more valuable than the techniques used. Anything that copied template designs was not valued highly and was considered student-level.

“Are you hiding your skill? Why would you do that?” I asked.

“I don’t want to stand out too much.”

Oh... I see... I hadn’t been able to tolerate others looking down on Ana anymore and had worked to raise her position in the school hierarchy. But this wasn’t aligned with what Ana wanted. Though I was aware that this had been my own selfish desire, I’d thought that she wouldn’t have minded her position being improved. But I’d been wrong. Ana still didn’t want to stand out.

“Please don’t apologize. I genuinely appreciate what you’ve done for me from the bottom of my heart,” Ana said.

“Really...?”

“Yes. Thanks to you, I’m able to speak with my classmates more, and my grades have improved. Even with class projects, I’d always had difficulty finding a group to join, but now there are many people who want to join me because they’re interested in working with you. Thanks to that, I’ve been able to speak with others even more. Ever since you came, it’s like the very world I live in has changed. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you.” Ana gave me a gentle, warm smile.

It was like the sun in spring. Since these words seemed to be her genuine thoughts, for the time being, I could rest assured.



Our school had a two-semester system where the school year began in the fourth month, ended in the seventh, and then resumed in the eleventh month before ending in the second month of the following calendar year. I’d transferred into the high school in the second semester, and now it was coming to a close and we were heading into a long vacation.

Our school going on break also marked the end of the social season. Since there was a pause in socializing and politics, the ducal family had no more reason to stay in the royal capital, so they returned to their primary residence in the territory they presided over. I went with them as well, as part of my education on territory governing.

Though I’d been surprised by the lavishness of their mansion in the royal capital, their mansion in their home territory was even more impressive, to the point that it felt wrong to call it a mere mansion. It was a huge palace. I was utterly surprised when I saw it for the first time.

From when I first arrived, I was very busy. Since the engagement period was long for upper nobility, that time was used to cram in my education as the duke’s successor. As a matter of course, work would pile up here while the duke was away in the royal capital, and then when he returned, he’d tackle the mountain of work to be done with regard to his territory-governing duties. It

was his usual business cycle.

One day, after ending my meeting with the local merchant's association, I was walking back toward the territory's capital with my guards and retainers.

"That which you see is the flag of the seven-headed dragon. Our pride, our crest. Gather 'round this flag, ye braves!"

The drunks were singing this, shoulder to shoulder. They'd really gotten deep into the bottle despite it still being the afternoon. The seven-headed dragon they spoke of was the crest of the Sevensworth family. About 150 years ago, this had been the Sevensworth Kingdom, and even now, it remained that in spirit if not in name. In order to avoid the worst possible situation of war between their countries, the head of the Sevensworth family at the time had agreed to become the vassals of the Luchizua Kingdom. Despite a century and a half having passed since they changed from an independent country to a territory, the majority of the people living there considered themselves as citizens of not the Luchizua Kingdom but the Sevensworth "Kingdom" still. The song the men were singing was the territory song, which had previously been their national anthem.

In reality, this territory's land was very unique. As a result of choosing to become a vassal instead of fighting despite possessing a powerful military, they were given special privileges that other nobles didn't possess. They were allowed to do coronations in public and, according to a contract, the royal family couldn't treat the Sevensworth family unjustly.

As a former independent country, they possessed vast lands compared to the others in the kingdom. They also had mining, fertile lands for grain production, and even their own port. The capital of the territory, Sevensniah, was also just as prosperous as the royal capital. But that wasn't the only large city that the territory had.

I might have bitten off more than I could chew by becoming the duke's successor. With the sheer size of this territory, I wasn't confident I could truly manage all of it. Listening to the song that the drunks were singing, I realized that I was essentially going to be managing an entire country, and started to

become worried.

As I walked, another set of singing voices soon reached my ears. “Let the rain of love pour on us. Our princess is the mistress of the rain. The princess of the Sevensworths. O people of the seven-headed dragon, you are blessed. Our princess, our lovely princess, our beautiful town, and our lovely princess.”

Oh, this song’s about Ana! Along the main road, there were troubadours. Hearing their song, I stopped. *She’s loved enough by the people to have a song made about her?! That’s my Ana!* After listening till the end, I was so satisfied by it, I dropped a gold coin into their hat as a tip. Upon seeing it, their eyes widened with surprise.

As this happened, a carriage bearing the crest of the seven-headed dragon passed by. The design of the crest was slightly different depending on the bearer or the use, and this carriage had Ana’s crest on it. In other words, this was her carriage.

Oh, right, she said she had plans to go out today. She hadn’t mentioned where she was going, so naturally I was curious. *I guess she has business somewhere down there?* That was as far as I thought before I stopped in my tracks.

Past here were the slums. But would Ana, the daughter of the duke, really have business there? There were other possible reasons she might have to go that way, such as her using it as a shortcut, but there weren’t any places on the other side I could think of where a duke’s daughter was likely to visit. No matter how I looked at it, Ana’s carriage traveling to the slums wasn’t normal.

Could it be that she’s not going there of her own will? Suddenly, I broke out into a sweat. *Oh no. Has she been kidnapped?!*

“That damn driver. Did they bribe him?!” My sudden outburst caused the guards and retainers to look at me with surprise. “It’s an emergency! I need to go!”

“Where?!”

“Please wait! What should we do?!”

The servants and guards frantically called out to me, but I didn’t have time to

explain. *I'm not holding back. I'm going after her with everything I got!* I ran at full strength, using body fortification magic to further increase my speed. The guards desperately tried to catch up to me, but with their heavy armor, they had no chance of keeping up.

As I ran, I tried thinking of the possible destinations of the carriage. If they were kidnapping her, then I doubted they'd stay here in the territory's capital. As soon as the Sevensworths caught wind of the kidnapping, they'd immediately seal off the city and have the guards comb the area, leaving no stone unturned.

The people of this territory thought of themselves as citizens of the Sevensworth Kingdom, making Ana their princess. If they learned that she'd been kidnapped by another territory or country, then the people would consider this an affront to their homeland. They had a very strong sense of national pride, so I had no doubt they'd cooperate with the search.

It was hard enough to evade detection by the guards, but evading the eyes of the townspeople on top of that would be impossible. They'd want to get out of the capital as quickly as possible. If I kept going straight down this path, I'd reach the city walls. More than likely, that was the direction the carriage was going as well. If this had been the city center, it would have been too crowded to use body fortification at its full potential, but right now I was in an emptier area a little ways away, so I didn't have to hold back.

At the same time, I used stealth magic. It was the kind of magic from my past life that hikers would use when bird-watching. I couldn't let these kidnappers realize that they had a tail, otherwise they'd use her as a hostage and I wouldn't be able to do anything, thus I needed to conceal myself. In addition, it'd be way too conspicuous if people saw someone running faster than a carriage. I accelerated all at once and hurried toward the gate.

"What?! Are you sure?!" I basically screamed at the guard at the gate despite trying to simply ask him this question.

"Y-Yes. The last carriage that passed through here was two hours ago."

That's not possible! That's before I even spotted Ana's carriage! If none have

passed since, it couldn't even be a case of them switching out carriages to be more inconspicuous. Does that mean the kidnappers are still here?! That means they have to still be in the slums! Dammit! How could I have misjudged something so important?! I immediately turned heel and sprinted back the way I'd come.

There it is! I found Ana's carriage in the slums. When I did, I had to desperately fight back the urge to break down the door of the building it was parked next to. *Calm down, Ginorious! Nothing good comes from letting yourself be controlled by your emotions! You can't afford to make any mistakes! Calm yourself!* I took deep breath after deep breath.

I decided that my first move would be to carefully infiltrate the building and see what was happening. It'd be bad for me to recklessly rush in if Ana was being held hostage. It'd put me in a position where I'd have no choice but to give in to their demands. To make sure they couldn't use her as a shield, I had to catch them off guard. The first step was to assess the situation without being detected. I had to start from there. *I'm going to save Ana no matter what it takes! Even if that means trading my life to do so!*

I recast my stealth magic to ensure that it didn't expire during my infiltration. With my body concealed and my footsteps masked, I slowly headed toward the building. With the stealth spell, I was practically a ghost, but even so, I made sure not to make any noise with my steps. It was possible that the kidnappers had some kind of countermeasure against stealth magic. It was fairly unlikely given how primitive this world was, but the possibility wasn't zero. I couldn't take any chances since Ana's life was at stake.

When I reached the carriage, it didn't seem that the driver noticed me at all. He was just leisurely reclined in his seat. Though his nonchalant attitude despite being a traitor infuriated me, I didn't have time to pay him any attention. I slowly made my way past the gate and heard voices from the garden. *I'll go there first.*

"It's an...orphanage?"

There was a picnic blanket spread out and sitting in the center of it was a woman in a dress, wearing a mask and reading a book aloud, surrounded by smiling children. There was no doubt that the woman was Ana. *It looks like the kids are drinking juice.* All of them had wooden cups in their hands and were carefully sipping from them as they listened to her read.



The tension in my body vanished and I fell to my knees. The fatigue from running everywhere caught up to me all at once and I couldn't even muster the strength to stand. I collapsed to the ground and simply watched Ana with the children. Tears naturally began pouring out of my eyes.

Thank goodness... Truly... She really is an irreplaceable person to me. I felt that very strongly at that moment. The budget allotted for orphanages was very small due to embezzlement and other problems, and the kids were the ones hurt most by that. The most certain way to avoid that situation was to have nobles visit these facilities themselves and speak with the children.

Though routine inspections were one way to uncover such misdeeds, if the children had a good relationship with a noble and talked with them often, the chances of the children telling them about any misappropriation of funds would be higher. There weren't many who would boldly commit a crime so easy to discern, so these visits to the orphanages had a significant deterrent effect.

We'd learned about this in our classes as well, however, I'd never heard of a noble lady actually visiting an orphanage in this kind of neighborhood before. Usually, the ladies hated the commoners in the slums. Aside from the ones who went to school with nobles and had connections with them, most commoners had no idea about noble etiquette. They'd chew with their mouths open and slurp their drinks, and people from the slums especially went for long times without bathing, so many of them had an odor. Normal noble ladies wouldn't be able to handle that.

That's why I had never thought Ana herself would be visiting an orphanage in the slums. Most likely, the mask she had on was out of consideration for the children, to ensure that they wouldn't be scared of her. She'd even made it so that it was a friendly design that would make it easy to approach her and she'd be able to listen to them about any problems they had at the orphanage.

She's going this far for the people? What a wonderful girl! Listening to her gentle voice as she read made me think I was listening to love in human form. There weren't any of the nuns who ran the orphanage monitoring Ana and the children. They wouldn't leave the children to someone they didn't know, so they must already know how trustworthy Ana was. It was possible that

someone had let it slip about Ana's deeds here, which made it back to the troubadours from before, who'd turned it into a song.

As I watched her as if in a daze, someone suddenly appeared between me and Ana.

"Who's there...? Huh?! Sir Ginorious?!" Bridgette exclaimed from the position she'd leaped into to defend Ana.

Oh, right. The stealth spell must've worn off. From their perspective, some random, suspicious person had suddenly appeared near Ana, so they'd quickly formed a defensive formation around her. Most likely the reason that there were covert agents instead of knights was in order to not frighten the children. It was her own little consideration.

On a sidenote, Bridgette had moved into the defensive formation impressively quickly. The lack of doubt in her movements coupled with how perfectly synced she was with the rest of the agents showed how much training they'd done together.

"Huh?! Sir Gino?! What are you doing here?! Why are you drenched in sweat? Did something happen?" Ana asked, surprise in her voice as she peeked through a crack in the covert agents' formation around her.

Her right hand was casually raised in front of her left shoulder. Though I didn't see her throwing dart, she was most likely poised to throw one. *That's a duke's daughter for you. She's received an education on what to do when she's in danger.*

"Well, it's a long story..."

As I was at a loss as to how to explain this embarrassing situation, one of the children piped up.

"Hey, bear-lady, is this guy your fiancé?"

It seems that's her name here. Probably because her mask is like a bear.

"Yes, that's right," Ana said.

"Whoa!"

"That's so cool! Congrats bear-lady!"

“You should thank us. The charm we gave you worked out!”

“Charm?” I asked.

“Yeah, I dyed the red string.”

“I did the green one!”

“Ooh, ooh! Me too! I gathered the bhrana stems.”

The children boasted. But their explanations left much to be desired, so I asked Ana for further information. According to her, after the kids had learned about her streak of failed marriage talks, they’d made her a charm for good luck. Colored strings were much more expensive than normal ones, and it was difficult for these children to afford them, so instead, they bought undyed string and dyed them on their own, then braided them together themselves.

Oh, right. Now that I think about it, I remember her wearing a cheap-looking bracelet when we first met. So it was a present from these kids? Wow, she’s so loved by them, not that I’m too surprised.

The children were very excited about the fiancé of the “bear-lady” appearing, and it wasn’t really possible to talk to Ana with them clamoring over me, so I asked that we be left alone. The numerous covert agents helped out by playing with the children.

Anastasia

During the winter break, my family returned to the Sevensworth territory. As a member of the family, I had a responsibility to fulfill my aristocratic duties, and so, I did all I could to assist with the governance of the territory.

Today I was helping to inspect the orphanage. In order to truly know the goings-on there, the best method was seeing the children in person, and to avoid frightening them, I had Bridgette help me put on my usual mask in the carriage. It was a cloth mask, tightly fastened with strings around the back of my head so it wouldn’t come undone even if the children tugged on it.

“Hey! It’s the bear-lady!”

“It really is!”

The children rushed over the minute they saw me. *They're so adorable!* As I spoke with them, I checked in on their living situation. I asked if any of them had been scolded by the nuns or the orphanage director recently, what they'd had for dinner last night, and many more innocuous questions like that. Through these questions, I could determine how they were being treated. Judging by their answers and the way they were grinning from ear to ear while playing, I was confident that there weren't any huge problems at this facility.

"Hey, bear-lady, can you read to us?" a young girl asked, tugging on the skirt of my dress.

"Of course. You know what? The weather's nice, so how about we lay a blanket down outside and I'll read to you all? I've prepared juice for everybody as well."

Books were quite expensive, so there weren't any at the orphanage. Such being the case, I'd always bring a book from the estate that I thought they'd enjoy, and they'd always greatly look forward to me reading to them. The idea of juice while listening to a story made them bounce up and down in excitement.

"Wow!"

"It's so soft!"

The children exclaimed as they rolled around on the thick picnic blanket we'd laid out. *Children truly can have fun with anything. So cute!* Then, they huddled around me as I read them a fairy tale, but before we reached the end, a large number of my family's covert agents suddenly formed a circle around us.

"Who's there...? Huh?! Sir Ginorious?!" Bridgette started in a tense, challenging tone but ended in one of surprise.

Huh?! Sir Gino?! I peeked through a gap in the formation and saw him collapsed on the ground, exhausted. He was drenched in sweat as if he'd fallen into a lake.

The children and I paused our story so I could speak with Sir Gino. Apparently he'd mistakenly thought I'd been kidnapped and had given frantic chase,

searching all over the streets for me.

“It’s...my fault, then,” I said.

When he’d asked me this morning about my plans for the day, I’d not been honest with him, which had resulted in this situation.

“Pardon me, milady. As insolent as it may be of me, since you won’t scold him, I will say a few words in your place,” Bridgette said, stepping up from behind me.

Bridgette knew it was rude for servants to interrupt a conversation between nobles, however, when it came to Sir Gino, she was often sharp with him. He didn’t seem to mind one bit, though. If anything, he seemed to prefer her acting more casually. Sometimes he’d even invite her into the conversation. They were surprisingly friendly with one another.

“First, I commend you for going to this degree out of concern for milady’s safety. However, why in the world would you leave your guards behind and run around the slums by yourself? Are you such a fool that it didn’t occur to you that going around this neighborhood in your noble attire, which easily identifies you as someone wealthy, is dangerous? Though it’s true that the slums here are much safer compared to others, they aren’t so safe that nobles can prance around them without a worry in their mind. If anything happened to you, milady would be heartbroken. It’d behoove you to take her feelings into consideration more.”

“Sorry... I couldn’t think straight when I thought she’d been abducted.”

I couldn’t be certain since I was an only child, but the way Bridgette was reprimanding him with her arms folded seemed exactly how an older sister would scold their younger brother.

“I’m very sorry,” I said to Sir Gino after sensing that Bridgette’s lecture had wound down.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for, Ana,” he said.

“But this all came to be because I wasn’t honest about my destination for the day.”

“No, you bear no responsibility at all. Bridgette is completely right to scold me. I’m in the wrong here. If something similar happens in the future, I promise to ask the agents and knights to help search for you instead of running off on my own. This time, I...I was so panicked, I completely lost my head.”

Bridgette had admonished him for going off on his own without contacting the covert agents or the knights, and Sir Gino accepted that his judgment had been poor. *What a humble man!*

“By the way, why didn’t you tell me where you were going? There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. If anything, inspecting an orphanage is something to be proud of.”

“I couldn’t help but worry you’d think poorly of me...”

“Why would I do that?”

We’d learned even in school that talking directly with the children was the most effective way to inspect institutions such as orphanages. So when I was a child, I did just as I’d learned and visited an orphanage in person. Since I thought that everyone did the same, I’d talked about it in class in elementary school. However, it turned out that even though it was talked about often, most noble ladies didn’t actually make these visits personally, so I was the only one who’d done so.

That day I’d been called a do-gooder only out for attention, which had left me in very low spirits. Ever since, I’d never mentioned my visits to the orphanages again. Though I knew that Sir Gino was not the kind of person to think those kinds of things, I still couldn’t help but be hesitant to say anything. The possibility of him falling out of love with me had flashed through my mind, making me unable to be truthful with him.

“It’s not your fault, Ana. You’re not able to trust me yet because I haven’t proved myself to be dependable yet. I’m going to do my best to earn your trust,” he said.

Instead of blaming me for my own shortcomings, he’d interpreted this all as his own failure. *He truly is a very kind person. He’s a wonderful man who deserves someone much better than me.* Sir Gino took my hand and pressed his lips against the back of it.

“Let me say this clearly once more. No matter what happens, I will always be on your side. Period. Even if you become a mass murderer, I swear on my family name, Ginorious Valvalier, that I will be your ally.”

“On your family name?!”

I was very taken aback. At first, I couldn’t understand why he kissed my hand as he said it either, but then the reason finally dawned on me. This was the proper etiquette for making a formal promise.

“That’s right. On the Valvalier name. No matter what, I’ll be there for you. No matter what kind of huge crime you commit, I will never hate you or leave your side. That’s why you don’t have to push yourself to be anything that you’re not. You can just be yourself.” A gentle smile filled his face as he emphasized his point.

His smile was so warm that it felt as if my heart was going to melt. For nobles, swearing on one’s family name was not something one did lightly. It was proof of how greatly he treasured me. *I can’t believe how small of a person I am, trying to hide things from someone who treats me this well. I truly am not a good match for this man—inside or out. I’m vastly inferior to him in both regards.*

He’d sincerely thought about me for my sake. Now, I needed to return his sincerity with my own. I wouldn’t insult him by trying to put up a facade anymore. Even if he became disillusioned with the real me, I needed to talk to him without hiding anything.

It went without saying that I didn’t want him to fall out of love with me. Therefore, I needed to put more effort into conducting myself properly. *I really need to mature. I may not be able to do anything about the way I look, but I can at least change myself on the inside to become someone worthy of him.* I lightly lifted up the skirt of my dress and gave a low curtsy—a way to show one’s deepest gratitude.

“Sir Gino, I truly apologize. From here on out, I promise to tell you nothing but the truth and become someone worthy of you. I swear it on my family name, Anastasia Sevensworth.”

“Ana, you really are the best girl in the world!”

“Stop there, Sir Ginorious!”

“Guh!”

Sir Gino had begun to close in on me, both arms spread wide, but Bridgette came between us without a sound, stopping him with a palm strike to his solar plexus. *That kind of strike must cause considerable pain, does it not? She truly has stopped acting reserved around him.*

“Don’t get near milady with your sweaty clothes. Are you *trying* to get her sick?”

“Sorry. Ana was so cute, I lost myself.”

C-Cute? Me?! My heart’s racing from him suddenly saying that in this serious situation.

“Also, Ana, there’s no need to feel bad about them calling you a do-gooder. It’s actually a compliment.”

“It is?”

“People use that as a word to describe people doing good deeds with ease, which is something that they themselves are incapable of. It’s a pitiful word of spite. If someone says that to you, you should hear it not as them calling you a do-gooder but as you doing something really good. It pretty much means the same thing.”

His face made it clear he was being very serious. He’d also said this with very charming gestures. I couldn’t help but find it all funny, and a giggle escaped my mouth.

“Bear-lady, what about the rest of the story?” a small girl called from a distance.

I resumed reading to them, and as I did, I couldn’t help but think about how he’d used the hypothetical situation of my becoming a mass murderer to emphasize his vow. His resolve had been clearly reflected in his violet eyes, and he’d even sworn on his family name. There was no mistaking it for a joke.

Could it be that in the worst possible scenario, he thinks I could become a criminal? I don’t possess the courage to do something so fearsome. In the first

place, I don't have the strength for something like that. Even so, Sir Gino had even accounted for that impossible situation. Sir Gino... He'd truly remain by my side even if that happened? By swearing on his family name, it shows that his feelings are already that strong. I wasn't able to hold back my tears anymore. Fortunately, I was wearing a mask, so nobody noticed. I did my best to cover my shaky voice and I continued to read the book to the children.

Chapter 5: The Embroidery Contest and the Friend Who Loves Embroidery

Ginorious

It was spring now and the new school year had begun. Both Ana and I had managed to remain in the elite class, so we were still in classes together. She hadn't come early with me today, though, because she wasn't taking "Infiltration Practices and Countermeasures for Spies" like I was.

Currently, I was gazing at an embroidered handkerchief I'd pulled out of my jacket's inner pocket as I sat by myself in the school's garden gazebo. It was my treasure—a present from Ana. When she'd asked me what kind of design I wanted, I'd asked for the church where we'd gotten officially engaged. I'd wanted something that would steep me in memories of that day, bringing me back to that moment. As such, I was staring at the embroidered likeness of the Sevensworth's estate church.

The realistic design was so accurate that it easily evoked memories of that time, thrilling me. As I looked at this embroidery that had been made carefully and with extremely high skill, I couldn't help but smile from the joy of Ana having worked so hard on it for my sake.

"Th-That handkerchief!"

Suddenly, I heard someone behind me, prompting me to turn around with surprise. Standing there was Lady Byron from our class. She seemed very eager to inspect the handkerchief, so I allowed her to look at it as long as she didn't touch it.

"This is amazing...truly amazing. To be able to subtly change between the number and color of these incredibly fine threads is extraordinary. What accurate craftsmanship... The trees in the background use the needle spray technique! It mixes various long and short threads that face different directions,

and though it may seem chaotic, it's actually made very orderly... I see. The orderliness is so that it changes colors depending on the angle. I can't believe the last dynasty's techniques were used so flawlessly..."

Lady Byron muttered to herself while examining Ana's embroidery until finally, she just smiled. *Yeah, that's right! Ana's amazing! It feels great to hear her be praised.* Lady Byron had been ranked first in embroidery for quite a while, and more often than not, she could be seen working on her projects during breaks. It was precisely because she enjoyed it that she could understand Ana's impressive skills.

"Where did you buy this from?" she asked.

"I got it as a gift."

"Oh my! From whom?"

Crap! I was so happy that I accidentally let that slip. Ana doesn't want to stand out. If it gets out that her embroidery skills vastly surpass what's normal for a student, she'll definitely get a lot of attention. I need to give a noncommittal response and glaze over this.

"Hey, Ginorious, wait long? Good day, Lady Ekatarina. It's rare to see the two of you together," Anthony said, approaching us.

"Oh, Sir Anthony. What brings you here?"

"I just got out of 'Defeating Monster Groups Solo.' Ginorious and I have class at the same time, but mine is hands-on so we have to change clothes after. He usually waits so we can eat lunch together. What are you doing here? It's rare to see you at school at this hour."

"I came early because I had a question for our embroidery professor."

"Sorry I'm late!"

In the distance, we heard the loud voice of a large boy with red hair who was running over. His name was Justin Ryan and he was a military noble that Anthony was friends with. Though he didn't know the meaning of speaking formally, he was still a noble, and the son of an earl at that. Apparently, military families were not too strict about politeness with one's words.

“You’re starin’ at that handkerchief again, Ginorious? Wow, you never change.”

“Sir Justin, you know about this handkerchief?!”

“Yeah, it’s the present you got from Lady Anastasia, right?” he asked me. “I know all about it. He’s so proud of it, he’ll talk your ear off.”

“Lady Anastasia?! Don’t tell me she’s the one who embroidered this!”

“Let’s talk over food, I’m starving. Wanna join us, Lady Ekatarina?”

“Yes, I’d like to hear more about the handkerchief.”

I...really messed up. There’s no way to gloss over this with Lady Byron now.

Anastasia

Sir Gino had his practical classes today so he’d had to come early, but mine began in the afternoon, so I was currently heading to the classroom by myself after stepping out of the carriage. On my way there, I saw Lady Ekatarina silently standing in the hallway, glaring at me.

“You really had me fooled, Lady Anastasia...”

“Wh-What? Did I do something to offend you?”

“I saw the handkerchief with a church on it that you embroidered for Sir Valvalier. You *did* make that for him, didn’t you?”

I had indeed embroidered a handkerchief for Sir Gino, and when I’d asked him what kind of design he wanted, he’d requested the church on our estate grounds where we’d formally become engaged. If it had been a generic church, I would have had reference material to assist with the design; however, I didn’t have anything for our specific church, meaning I’d had to make the design from scratch. *Is that what she’s talking about?* I’d practically jumped for joy when he’d said he wanted the design as a token of the memory. As a result, I’d tried my absolute best to get it right.

“D-Did Sir Gino use the handkerchief I gave him?” I asked, unable to hold back my hopes.

If she'd seen it, then that must mean that he'd brought it to school. In other words, he was using the handkerchief. I'd never seen him use it, so I'd thought that he didn't like it at all. Given my grades in embroidery, I thought that maybe it was only to be expected. Even so, I'd be happy if he used it even once.

"No, he hasn't used it at all," she said.

"Huh?"

"He doesn't want to use it as a handkerchief because he's scared of getting it dirty. He keeps it close to his person to keep it safe, but apparently he'll take it out whenever he has a chance to gaze at it."

"Huh?!"

That's how he's using it? I'm so embarrassed! But also...I'm very happy!

"The embroidery on the handkerchief was absolutely splendid. It's almost as if it's made by a completely different person compared to the pieces you submit for class. Why aren't you using your full skills at school? Is it because you believe we're not worth competing against?"

"Th-That's not the case whatsoever!"

It seemed like she was quite angry. *This is frightening. She's a very prideful person, so if she thinks I was holding back, she'll take it as a direct affront.*

"So then why?" she asked.

"Well...I don't wish to stand out."

"And why's that?"

"Well... Um..."

I'm at a loss. I don't like standing out because I don't want to be bullied. However, Lady Ekatarina is a very virtuous person. If she thinks I'm admitting to being bullied, it may sour her mood even further.

"Let me change the question then. You've now the second best grades in our class. If you prefer to not stand out, then why did you do that and hold back only in embroidery?"

"W-Well..."

When taking the exam, it wasn't as if I'd been aiming to rank highly. In my mind, I'd simply been taking it as I normally would. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected to get second place. However, she was a prideful person. She'd always placed above me in the grade rankings previously, so I had no clue how to say this without upsetting her.

"If you don't wish to talk about it, then I won't press any further. However, could you at least tell me why you don't want to tell me? Why are you always so fidgety?"

"I-I'm truly sorry."

"What are you doing?!"

When I bowed my head to Lady Ekatarina, who'd been standing there with her arms folded as she glared at me, Sir Gino stormed over and stood between us as if to shield me from her.

"It's getting late, so I was worried. Lady Byron, I ask that you cease these accusations of Ana!"

"I-I didn't..."

"I-It's a misunderstanding," I stammered.

"Ana, you don't look well. You can explain later—for now, let's leave for the sake of your health."

Sir Gino took my hand and guided me to the classroom. As soon as we entered the room, a number of students called out to him, so I didn't have an opportunity to clear up his misunderstanding before class began.

During class, I couldn't help but think about what'd happened with Lady Ekatarina. *I think I'm in the wrong... This entire time, I've been holding back in order to not stand out, but I never thought it'd bring displeasure to others. I need to apologize for not considering the feelings of others sufficiently.*

Ginorious

"I'd like to request you mediate a reconciliation between myself and Lady Anastasia."

The minute classes ended, I was told this by Lady Byron. I knew that this was in reference to the incident with Ana earlier today, so I agreed and had her accompany me back to the gazebo in the school garden.

“Let’s start with you telling me exactly why you were harassing her,” I said.

“I was doing nothing of the sort.”

“Don’t play dumb. When I came over, you were glaring at her and she had her head down.”

“I wasn’t glaring. That’s...just how my eyes look.”

Ah... I’m very familiar with one’s natural appearance getting them into trouble from my past life. Once, when I’d been watching an advertisement in the train station, a policeman came over and questioned me under suspicion of being a possible deviant. It was a woman who’d called him over, accusing me of having been checking her out when I’d simply been looking at the ad. I hadn’t even noticed her standing in front of it.

I suddenly felt very sympathetic toward Lady Byron. I couldn’t help but see my past self in her. As she explained the situation, I learned that after seeing the handkerchief, she could tell the passion that’d gone into the work, which was overflowing with sincerity. She wanted nothing more than to speak with the one who’d made it. Learning that it’d been Ana had dejected her because it meant that Ana had been holding back her true skills in her embroidery projects.

“It’s an insult to embroidery for someone to hold their skills back. I was furious that someone who’d put so much effort into that work would try to hide their talents, and I ended up speaking in an accusatory tone toward Lady Anastasia. It wasn’t my intention to come off that way; I wanted to speak to her calmly.”

She explained that she wanted to start over and apologize to Ana. More often than not, whenever girls at our school got into arguments, they’d go to Lady Byron to help them reconcile. Part of it was because she was at the top of the school hierarchy, but also because she was skilled at finding points to compromise on while staying impartial. Though she was strong-willed and intimidating, she was an honorable person who was always able to come up

with a fair judgment.

Taking her personality into consideration, she wasn't one to cause Ana trouble out of jealousy. It was very likely that her explanation was the truth, so when I got back to the classroom, I listened to Ana's account of the events to confirm things. After hearing her side of the story, it was clear that I'd been under a huge misconception, so I rushed to apologize to Lady Byron. Though I thought that she'd want to immediately apologize to Ana, she wished to make a formal apology, prompting Ana to tilt her head while agreeing to invite her to the Sevensworth estate. Though I wasn't good at fitting in with girl talk, I agreed to join them as the mediator. On the off chance that there was a possibility for Ana to be harmed, I needed to take responsibility to mitigate it.

Anastasia

"I, Ekatarina Byron, extend my deepest apologies to you."

"I, Anastasia Sevensworth, extend my deepest apologies to you as well."

We were currently sitting in the Sevensworth mansion's fourteenth drawing room, called the Hauyne, and Lady Ekatarina and I were apologizing to each other. For most conflicts at school, it was a rule that apologies be simple and exclude any gifts or visits since incidents such as being impolite happened on a daily basis. If students had to make a formal apology for every little incursion, things would get out of control fast. As such, it was normal for students to provide a simple apology on the spot whenever they caused a problem at school; however, Lady Ekatarina had insisted, so she arrived at our estate and brought a gift of apology.

"The reason I asked to do this formally was so I could speak with you at length, Lady Anastasia. I swear that I will accept whatever you say no matter what. So I'd like it if you could tell me what is truly on your mind."

The reason Lady Ekatarina said this was because I'd been honest that I was worried I'd upset her if I told her the reason I hadn't answered any of her questions previously.

"I understand. I will be truthful with my circumstances," I said.

“In that case, allow me to ask this. The design on the handkerchief you made for your fiancé is something you came up with on your own, and yet all the projects you submit use textbook designs. It’s been that way for as long as I can remember, but when did you start doing that?”

“I...don’t remember exactly, but I believe it was sometime after the second grade.”

“What about using advanced techniques like the ones in the handkerchief but only using very simple stitchwork for class?”

“I don’t remember that precisely either, but I believe it was around the same time.”

“That won’t do. That’s far too long a period of time. Lady Anastasia, if you continue your embroidery while holding back, your work will eventually become warped, and I’m not only talking about the work you complete. The very concept of embroidery will become warped for you. Not putting your everything into your work is an affront to the art, and that will come back to you.”

“I...see.”

It was a difficult topic, so I didn’t completely understand, but if Lady Ekatarina, who was very passionate about embroidery, said so, then it must be true.

“What caused you to hold back in the first place?”

What...was it? Oh, I remember now. Back then, I’d embroidered a handkerchief with a design I made myself. I was very proud of it; however, bringing it to school had been a mistake. The design I’d done had been a young girl surrounded by flowers.

“Oh? Is this cute little girl in the middle supposed to be you, Lady Anastasia?”

“Oh dear, have you possibly never looked in a mirror?”

A girl in my class had taken my handkerchief away and then many of the other girls pointed their makeup mirrors at me, resulting in everyone in the class laughing at me. After that, I decided to always go for the safe options and

designs that came from books instead of making my own. *Now that I think about it, Lady Ekatarina had come to my defense back then too.*

“Stop this instant! How ungraceful!” she’d yelled, snatching back the handkerchief.

“I see. So that was the incident leading you to hide your true skills,” Lady Ekatarina said, after hearing my explanation.

“Yes... I was frightened that I’d become isolated if I worked with my full skills.”

“Ana, it’s impossible for you to be isolated at the school anymore. I’ll always be by your side,” Sir Gino said.

That’s right. I have him now. I will never be alone again. Despite there being no reason to fear this result anymore, I still tried to stay unnoticed. At a certain point, it’d become a habit. Sir Gino’s words replayed in my head about how he’d always be on my side no matter what. It was truly, truly reassuring. Just recalling it gave me so much strength. He’d sworn on his family name, but even so, I feared being alone. But by giving in to that, I was trampling on the oath he’d sworn to me.

“I shall be your ally as well. Please cease warping your embroidery as a form of self-protection.”

Is that what I’ve been doing? By not standing out, I’ve been trying to protect myself? I can’t believe it. I need to change. A woman whose entire head is filled with thoughts of self-preservation is no match for Sir Gino. I need to become someone worthy of him even if it’s just mentally.

“I truly apologize. I was in the wrong. I will never fear being alone at school again. From now on, I promise to always use my full skills,” I declared.

This was one step toward changing myself. After hearing my promise, Lady Ekatarina moved on to the true reason she’d wanted to visit: to talk about embroidery. Though she was usually not one for many words, she spoke a lot when it came to this. It was a topic I very much enjoyed as well, so we had a very fruitful conversation. As things progressed, we ended up going to my display room so I could show her my works.

“You’ve made this many?!” Lady Ekatarina said with surprise.

“Yeah! Ana’s amazing, isn’t she?” Sir Gino said, proud for some reason.

This was the first time I was showing my work to anyone from school. Having Lady Ekatarina, the person at the top of our grade for embroidery, praise me this much was...most likely simply her being courteous, but even so, it was very embarrassing.

“L-Lady Anastasia, I’d...like to invite you for tea.”

Though she was usually so bold with her words and actions, she’d said this in a very soft voice. Usually she’d look people straight in the eye while speaking, but right now her eyes were aimed at the ground. I found this so cute, I couldn’t help but giggle.

“That makes me so happy! I’d love to join you for tea! What is the occasion?”

“After seeing all of your works, I’ve realized something. Though your work shows some timidity, it also shows how much you’ve held back in class, and how serious and sincere of a person you are. I can also tell how much passion you have for embroidery. It’s hard to believe that someone who’s poured this much effort into their work is the same age as me.”

“You’re exaggerating,” I said.

“This isn’t me being courteous. I think this from the bottom of my heart. You should have more confidence!”

“She’s right, Ana. You’re a wonderful girl. You should be more confident,” Sir Gino added.

But that being said, I’d never expected my personality to be deciphered through my embroidery. That was very much like Lady Ekatarina to do. Her family was one that specialized in textile arts, and they were said to see people for who they really were through their craft, but maybe this was what that meant.

“S-So with that said, I-I’d like to be your...your f-friend. The occasion of the tea party will be a way to deepen our bond.”

F-Friend?! This is my first time having a tea party with a friend!

“Th-That makes me so happy! So incredibly happy! I look forward to our

everlasting friendship!”

“Yes, me too...”

Lady Ekatarina was usually someone who kept a straight back and was so intimidating that others feared her. However, her face was currently red and pointed downward. It was like looking at a completely different person.

“Now that you’ve agreed to put your best foot forward from here on, I’d like you to demonstrate your impressive skill this very instant! After all, we’re friends! Is that all right with you?” Lady Ekatarina said quickly while gripping my hands.

Was she always this excitable a person? Maybe she truly is a different person entirely. “Y-Yes, I don’t mind.”

“In that case, I have the perfect idea for an event! If it’s okay with you, please allow me to plan it,” Sir Gino said, just as excited as Lady Ekatarina.

Ginorious

“Wow. Interesting idea!” Anthony said, an amused look on his face, the moment I stepped foot inside the classroom.

We’d just returned after the school assembly, where an embroidery contest had been announced.

Using my special privileges from the Sun Lion brooch, I decided to arrange something special for the embroidery class. Instead of simply submitting a project for their next assignment, they’d instead participate in an embroidery contest.

Overall, what they’d be doing wouldn’t change all too much; they’d still be using what they learned from their studies to work on their embroidery at home and then present their creations to their professors, who would grade them. The only difference was that, just this time, their pieces would be displayed first for the whole school to see so students could vote for their favorites, and the professors would take those votes into account when grading them.

Usually when the students worked on embroidery, they had certain themes they needed to follow, but I changed that too. For this contest only, they were free to embroider any design they wanted.

“Never thought an event like this would happen,” a large guy with red hair cheerfully said, lightly tapping his fist against my chest.

It was Anthony’s friend Justin Ryan, and like most of the military sons, the way he expressed his excitement was much more physical.

Looking at what past possessors of the brooch had used their authority for, they’d done things like install a square gazebo in the inner garden or change the leaves used for tea in the lounges. Aside from me changing the structure of our tests, there wasn’t any precedent of students using their authority to do anything that affected the majority of students academically. The very idea of an embroidery contest was a first for the school.

It went without saying that I’d come up with this idea for Ana’s benefit. Becoming second in our class had drastically changed her ranking in the school hierarchy, but even so, she still lacked confidence and had a very low opinion of herself. She still lacked the awareness that she was the greatest girl in the world.

From a merchant’s perspective, her embroidery skill was magnificent, and she’d even earned the praise of Lady Byron, who was very passionate about embroidery. I was almost a hundred percent certain that Ana would place highly in the competition. If her work got a lot of attention and praise for its display of skill, it’d help boost her confidence. This was the entire reason that I’d put this plan together.

“I’m surprised you came up with a plan like this.”

“I completely agree! I can’t believe that the prizes are the rights to have tailored dresses from Dol Gahba, Chan Nael, or Herr Mays. Those are the prizes of dreams!”

“It’s difficult to believe this is a school event! As expected of you, Sir Valvalier!”

The military sons weren’t the only ones excited; even girls I barely interacted

with were coming up to me. In order to give Ana more confidence, it'd be best if the event got as much attention as possible to maximize the amount of praise she could receive. In order to garner interest, I made the prizes quite extravagant. All the dresses came from storied clothing shops that were very popular with noble women. Due to how well regarded they were by those in high society, having a custom piece by them was seen as a lavish prize even by greater nobles.

Though I was able to create this contest, I didn't have the authority to increase the budget to accommodate the cost of such high-quality dresses. This was resolved with the help of my mother-in-law, who arranged for other nobles to donate the prize money as a type of sponsorship. Part of Anthony and the others' surprise came from the fact that, not only was this kind of event a first for our school, but it was also the first time that a school event had received sponsorship from outside nobles.

"How'd you pull this off? These stores have waiting lists several years long."

It was true that they were incredibly popular and most people had to wait years for their orders. That being said, as stores that made clothes geared toward nobles—the trendsetters in fashion for polite society—they couldn't afford to earn the ire of any higher nobles. Receiving a poor review from any of these ladies would essentially be a death sentence. I knew that all stores like these made sure that, if need be, they had the ability to complete rush orders for VIPs, so despite having extremely long wait lists, they had the resources to make these dresses.

To be clear, I hadn't been able to simply march into these stores and get them to agree. My success only happened after I'd visited them a million times, bowed my head, and been rejected. The only reason that I'd succeeded was because my mother-in-law, who loved surprises, had suddenly popped into the store on purpose.

"I'd like a dress."

"It'd be our pleasure! How many would you like?"

The very same owner who wouldn't budge with me had suddenly folded like a chair for my mother-in-law.

“First you changed our test questions, and now a contest. You’ve done so much!” the daughter of Marquess Grimardy said nonchalantly.

She was also the fiancée of the first prince, whose role as the spare successor to His Majesty was coming to a close. He was waiting for her to graduate before getting married, when he would step down from his position and marry into her family. He was about five years older than her, but this was simply how strategic marriages went. Truth be told, it wasn’t even unusual for there to be a ten-year difference.

“I’m so envious. There’s so many new things to try taking on,” she said with an elegant smile in a slow, laid-back tone.

From what I could tell, there wasn’t any disdain or passive-aggression in her voice. She was simply saying what was on her mind.

“Why don’t you try challenging something yourself?”

“Well, I’m a woman, so...” she said with a smile, slowly shaking her head.

The Grimardy family was one of the oldest families in the country, with a lot of history. There were many noble daughters like her from old houses, and it was a given that they’d be married off. They were all too used to having everything in their lives decided for them. They often weren’t even allowed to choose their own hairstyles. It wasn’t simply them having given up; they didn’t even question it because it was all they’d ever known.

Before, I used to pity them for not having any choices in life, but I’d recently changed my point of view, realizing that I was being self-righteous in my thinking. After all, another given of their lives was not having to work or want for anything.

Nowadays, men were expected to take over their families, and women were supposed to run the household and keep everything peaceful. This had become the ideal of nobles for the past few decades. However, girls from the older noble families didn’t share these values at all and instead lived their lives carefree without worrying about being homemakers.

In a historical novel I’d read in my previous life, the noblewoman who continued living in luxury while her house fell into destitution was depicted as

vile. Back then, I thought that it was ridiculous for the head of the family to allow such exorbitant spending from his wife and daughter.

However, my opinion changed after living in this world. Living in luxury came with the trade-off of having absolutely no say in anything. To be able to live wanting for nothing was their right. If I were the head of a household, I would probably allow my wife and daughter to spend as much as they liked.

The reason my thinking changed was that I didn't feel pity for these kinds of women at all. My feelings of pity stemmed from the values I'd been taught in the world I'd come from; however, that kind of thinking didn't apply here. This country was made up of all different types of regions and cultures. As people who used to reign freely over their country, the Sevensworth family had a longer noble history than most, and even though they were now a part of the Luchizua Kingdom, they kept their values from when they were autonomous. Many families were unique in their own ways, like how the Byron household would have tea in their garden even during a blizzard, or how the inheritance in Anthony's house went not to the eldest child but to the most capable.

In a country like this with many different families with varying values, it would be presumptuous of me to carelessly feel sorry for them. Pitying them meant denying their traditions and consequently their families. Denying someone's history could easily lead to strife between houses, resulting in many casualties. After all, nobles cared a great deal about their family's prestige.

Anastasia

When he told me about his idea for the embroidery contest, he said that he'd only go forward if I was okay with it. He left the decision to me, and of course, I asked him to proceed. After all, this was the first time that a student with the brooch had ever used their authority to put together an event like this. As the organizer, people would begin to regard Sir Gino even more highly.

"Wow. Interesting idea!"

"It's difficult to believe this is a school event! As expected of you, Sir Valvalier!"

Upon returning to the classroom after the contest's announcement, he was showered with praise by our classmates. It was just as I expected. I couldn't help but smile. Seeing him being praised by everyone made me happy as well.

"I won't lose, Lady Anastasia," Lady Ekatarina said to me with a sharp gaze.

"I doubt I'll be a worthy opponent for you."

Lady Ekatarina had always had the best grades for embroidery, ever since elementary school. In contrast, I was in the bottom-middle. I knew how this would turn out without even having to participate.

"Don't tell me you intend to continue hiding your skill. Did you forget your promise to use your full abilities?"

"O-Of course, I won't be holding back!"

"Good. Let's have a clean, fair match."

"A-Agreed."

"Lady Anastasia, you should have more confidence. Confidence, confidence, confidence, and more confidence!"

Since I'd promised to use my full skills in this competition, I knew I needed to come up with a design from scratch rather than use a sample. Doing this would earn me more artistic points. However, I was still unsure of what I should do specifically.

Up until now, I'd always created original designs for what I made as a hobby. However, in order to make those designs, there'd always been a strong inspiration behind them. Since they were for my own personal pleasure, there were no restrictions on what I made, but it wasn't out of some uncontrollable desire to embroider just for the sake of it. This was the first time I'd be making something under these conditions.

"What kind of design do you think I should do, Bridgette?" I asked.

"Any design will be wonderful! Even a single stitch from you would have astronomical value!"

That...wasn't helpful. I'm almost surprised by how little her advice helps. Oh, I

know. I should consult Sir Gino! I'm sure he'll give me a very straightforward answer.

“Hm, what makes a good product? Well... Aside from the normal factors like technique and originality, it's best when the maker's earnest feelings are poured into it. I believe that a great work of art touches the heart of the viewer. In order to do that, the creator needs to make sure their work is filled as much as possible with their emotions,” Sir Gino said as we sat in the eighth drawing room, the Strawberry Quartz.

“My...feelings? How do I put them into my work?”

“The artists I've met have told me that it's about facing what's inside yourself. You need to express your thoughts and desires. Art is about digging deep and pulling from those feelings. In other words, it's all about facing who you are inside.”

“I see... I'll give it a try,” I said.

I sat on the sofa in my room and tried facing what was inside me as per Sir Gino's advice. *What do I currently desire? What feelings are inside me?* I found that my strongest emotions were the ones I had toward Sir Gino.

I was taken by his beauty from the moment we met, and was very excited to be engaged to someone who was not only so handsome but intelligent as well. In the beginning, my feelings toward him were not too different from those of a distant admirer, but now they were different. He wasn't far away like the stars in the sky. He was so close that I could feel the heat from his body. He was incredibly important to me. His kindness, sincerity, awkwardness, his unique way of thinking—I deeply treasured everything about him. I had no doubt that what I felt for him was love.

At the same time, though, I felt uneasy that Sir Gino might one day distance himself from me. Granted, it'd be difficult for Sir Gino to break off our engagement by himself, but it could be easier if he had the backing of a premier noble. If anyone found out that he was the producer of the lotion, for instance, they'd gladly take him into their family.

Even now, there were many ladies vying for Sir Gino's affection. Households were instructing their daughters to get close to him precisely because they perceived a chance of stealing him away. These girls were all beautiful, and there were plenty of them who genuinely had affection for Sir Gino and wanted to get closer to him even without this urging from their families. It all made me feel very uneasy. I couldn't help but be worried that Sir Gino might be swayed by any of these beauties who were much more attractive than me.

Please stay by my side forever, Sir Gino... I wished for this very strongly. This was the current, true state of my heart. I needed to put this into embroidery. I would do my absolute best to use all my knowledge, skills, experience, and emotions to give these feelings shape.

It felt like my mind was a sea of various ideas swimming around simultaneously, but eventually, inspiration struck me with a series of flashes like an explosion in my head, and I saw the design so clearly. *This is it! This is the shape that I want to give my feelings!*

The only problem was that it would be quite avant-garde. I had no clue how the school would react if I submitted this piece for the contest. However, since I'd promised to not hold anything back, I had no choice but to put forth an exemplary piece. I believed that my design fit the bill, but it was hard to know what others would think. *I'm not confident they'll feel the same way about it as I do.*

Then I remembered Lady Ekatarina's words about how I needed to have more confidence. *I think Sir Gino's told me something similar.* I then recalled his past words about how I was a wonderful girl and should have more confidence. The fact that both he and Lady Ekatarina had said essentially the same thing on separate occasions, must've meant that it was coming from a place of truth.

Up until now, I'd only submitted plain designs for my embroidery assignments. I'd always thought that it'd been because I was afraid of becoming a target for bullying, but that wasn't the only reason. I was now certain that it was because I fundamentally lacked confidence.

Both when I'd placed second in our finals and when the embroidery contest had been announced, Lady Ekatarina had declared that she would win against

me. She'd stood up straight and looked me right in the eye, strongly declaring this. To be honest, I'd been scared, but at the same time, I truly admired how gallant she was.

But what was I doing in comparison? I avoided being a presenter in group work in order to not stand out, and I shrank my shoulders and spoke softly whenever attention was focused on me. I couldn't bear the gazes of everyone, so I would look at the ground.

I wonder if Sir Gino would prefer a confident girl. Of course he would. Even from my perspective, a more confident girl would suit him. I could feel myself getting depressed, comparing myself to someone who was much more bold and confident. *No, I mustn't! I swore on my family name that I'd become someone well-suited for Sir Gino! This isn't the time for me to become weak-willed! I need to become someone who can be bold and brimming with confidence!*

Would...he like me more if I were like that? Suddenly I felt a fire burning in me. I didn't care what others thought—I would embroider the avant-garde design I'd thought up. I dived right into it. As I stitched, I continued conversing with my work—the product of what was inside of me. I asked what beauty meant to me and how I could express what was in my heart more clearly. By doing so, I was able to embroider exactly what was in my heart onto the cloth.

I was no longer worried about what my peers at school would think of my work. I only focused on giving shape to my overflowing passion. *This is so freeing. It's truly a pleasure to be able to embroider exactly as you wish with no restrictions.*

"Milady, you've gone quite some time without drinking anything. Perhaps it'd be best if you took a break?" Bridgette suggested, bringing over tea.

I agreed and took a break. I noticed that Bridgette seemed amused as she prepared the tea.

"Did something good happen?" I asked.

"It's been a while since I've seen you doing your embroidery so happily. More often than not, I've seen you wear a dark expression as you work, so I've been worried." *It's true that I've had a lot of fun working on my embroidery today.* "It seems you're being quite adventurous this time around. It's been a while since

you've taken creative risks like this. I feel like I'm seeing your embroidery for the first time again."

She's right. I've only submitted embroidery that wouldn't garner any attention for school assignments, but I didn't have to worry about anything like that for personal projects. Even so, I still found myself making plainer designs.

I hadn't noticed at all. However, I could tell that there was a huge difference in my work now that I wasn't worrying about what the people around me would think. If I continued to make plain pieces for school, eventually it'd affect my artistic style. If I continued to hold back, then the core of my embroidery would warp and my arrogance toward it would come back to bite me. That's what Lady Ekatarina had told me. *Could this be what she meant when she said that?*

"How long has it been? When you painted, the majority of your works were unique designs like this."

"Now that you mention it, I haven't really painted too much recently."

In the past, I used to paint whenever I had a spare moment, but these days, outside of lessons, I hadn't painted at all.

"In the past, you said that you'd prefer to work on embroidery rather than your art because if you embroidered something like a handkerchief and gave it as a present, it'd bring more joy to others."

Oh, that's true. It's strange, though. I'd increased my time doing embroidery to see everyone's faces light up with joy, so why was it that more often than not I wore dark expressions? Was it because I was making safer designs in line with the kind of things that others liked? No. The real reason I'd stopped painting to focus on embroidery had nothing to do with making people happy. It was because it was more convenient to do something like this where there were templates to work off of that'd help me stand out less.

When the idea that I couldn't let myself stand out had embedded itself into me, it never went away and forcefully influenced my artistic style. It'd been warped to this extent because I'd been thinking about nothing but self-preservation.

I will never hold back again. I declare it here once more. I will change myself in

order to not insult embroidery, which my friend Lady Ekatarina loves so much, and to become even a little bit more like someone who is a good match for Sir Gino.

Ginorious

“The embroidery contest begins now. As a reminder, forcing or encouraging anyone to vote for any of the pieces is forbidden. If we discover any individuals doing this, they will be immediately removed from the contest, and unable to vote, so please keep that in mind.”

The students received this warning in front of the great auditorium before the doors opened and they were allowed to enter by class ranking, starting with the elite class.

With students doing the evaluation, there were bound to be people who colluded to boost the rating of certain works. If that happened, the truly good pieces would lose out to the ones made by those with more influence. So in an attempt to avoid that, they removed the names from the pieces and instead assigned them all numbers. That way, no one could purposefully vote for any specific person.

The embroiderers themselves didn't even know what number they had been assigned, so telling others to vote for their specific number was impossible. And of course, everyone was being closely observed in the great auditorium to dissuade instructions on who to vote for as well.

There was another reason the pieces had been made to be anonymous. If others knew who made what, the impression the creator had on them would affect how those people voted. The embroidery of someone beautiful might be rated higher than the embroidery of someone not as conventionally good-looking. I'd learned firsthand in my past life that humans naturally had these kinds of tendencies.

Ultimately, there were a lot more entries than I'd expected. The embroidery students were required to participate, but everyone else only participated if they wanted to. The reason so many people had voluntarily joined had to do with the lavish prizes for the winners.

While walking around the auditorium, I noticed that a lot of students had stopped to look at a certain work. *I knew it.* I couldn't help but grin. Of course they were all stricken by Ana's embroidery. The main focus of it was the black ice flower, which had a black stem and light purple petals. Next to it were blooming imp weeds, which were flowers that kind of looked like the roots of wasabi plants. They were drawn small and depicted subtly so as to not detract from the main flowers.

Within a snowy scenery, there were two black ice flowers blooming, the sun shining on them like a spotlight. The snow directly around them had melted, and there was nothing else surrounding them besides snow. She'd made the embroidery using two-point perspective, which made it as realistic as a photograph.

The entire scene was framed by ivy that'd been very skillfully embroidered, not painted on. This was also very impressive. There were faintly different colored threads used to represent shadows, and despite the embroidery being a two-dimensional product, it almost looked like it was popping out.

All the techniques used were very high-level, but the essence of this piece didn't lie in the skill used to make it, but in the feelings it evoked. Just one glance was enough to leave a lasting impression—striking a strong fire in your soul. This was baked into the essence of the piece. I knew she was talented, but this was beyond what I'd expected. This was on an entirely new level, far above anything she displayed in her embroidery room. It was an overwhelmingly awe-striking piece.

"We will now announce the winners of the contest. In first place: entry number forty-three, titled 'Wish.'"

The winning embroidery had been placed in a golden frame on top of the podium to drum up the excitement of the students. As for the runner-ups, Lady Byron, who was already at the podium, had gotten second and seemed as if she was in agreement that she didn't get first.

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"Agreed."

“It’s only natural.”

The students said.

“The winning piece was made by Lady Anastasia Sevensworth. Lady Sevensworth, please come to the stage.”

“What?!”

“No way!”

“*She* made that?!”

I could hear the screams of surprise from the female students all the way from the stage. When Ana came to the stage, she was congratulated and given her prize.

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Though she was stiff as a board from nervousness, she was still very graceful in her movements, which were befitting of a duke’s daughter. It was probably muscle memory at this point. As I went to the edge of the stage, the embroidery instructor Professor Kendall walked to the center.

“Innovation comes to the embroidery world maybe once every few decades. Developing new techniques is simply that difficult. For those who put their all into their embroidery, I’m sure you understand that.”

Then, she looked at the students. While she was in charge of the elite class, she was also the assistant head of the entire embroidery department. She was brimming with majesty as she kept her perfect, graceful posture while projecting her voice across the auditorium. It was as if she were a different person from the sweet old lady we knew her as.

“Have you all looked at Ms. Anastasia Sevensworth’s piece? The base of the techniques she used is quite impressive. However, that’s not what should be drawing your attention. It used a technique that we’ve never seen before. *She* was able to accomplish this.” Ana was wearing a look of surprise. She hadn’t expected to be praised this thoroughly. “In recognition of her skill, I’d like to ask that Ms. Anastasia Sevensworth become a research assistant to all the embroidery professors.”

“Huh?!” Ana exclaimed in shock.

“What?!”

“Amazing!”

“No way!”

“That can’t be!”

Ana hadn’t been the only one to exclaim. The sounds of surprised students echoed across the auditorium. All our professors were authorities on the subjects they taught. Becoming their research assistants meant learning under the absolute best in their respective fields. In other words, it was the same as being accepted as their successors.

To add to that, *all* of the embroidery professors wished to have Ana as their research assistant. Professor Kendall’s words were proof that Ana’s superior skills had been recognized by all the embroidery authorities.

Usually, one could only become a research assistant after graduating. Across all fields, receiving that right while still being a student was something that happened only once a decade or so. For some subjects, it might’ve been once a century. In other words, Ana was a prodigy who would leave her mark on history.

I then recalled the words of the embroidery professors. After the student voting, the pieces were evaluated and graded by the professors, and I’d participated as a witness.



“As I expected. Number forty-three. There were an overwhelming number of votes for it.”

One of the professors had said this after seeing the results of the voting. I hadn’t expected there to be such a big gap between the entries. Number forty-three was Ana’s entry. The professors were grading the pieces without knowing who made them. In order to ensure that none of their prior impressions went into their evaluations, they would only find out after finishing the grading.

“This is a painting technique.”

“Indeed. Pointillism.”

Ana’s piece was once again put on top of the table and the professors began discussing it once more. Pointillism was a technique that used points of color to depict scenery and such. It was the same kind of principle as computer monitors using three different color dots to create images. To add to that, her embroidery wasn’t making points next to each other with no space between them, but instead, it kept the number of points to the bare minimum in order to fully emphasize the texture of the cloth. It was a technical marvel for her to have been able to retain the photolike qualities while reducing the number of stitches.

“It may be strange for me to say as a professor, but I’d like to be taught this technique.”

In this country, there were practically no noble women who painted. It’d only take the smallest stain to completely ruin their expensive dresses, and any woman who tried to learn painting would inevitably need to spend an exorbitant amount of money on their clothes.

Of course, it’d be fine if they wore clothes that were okay to get dirty while painting, but most noble ladies didn’t wear such clothes. If they got even the slightest stain on their dresses, they’d immediately change. Even if they were at home, they had to always be presentable and majestic even around their servants. However, Ana could paint without worrying about anything like that, which was one of her strengths.

I’d heard from her mother about how Ana had ended up learning how to paint. Since whenever she went outside she received nothing but harsh words, she’d hated leaving the house ever since she was young. Ana was the type of girl who’d doodle a lot on her study papers. Whenever she had a spare moment, she’d draw. Seeing this, her mother thought it’d be nice for her to learn how to paint because even if she stayed in the mansion, she at least wouldn’t be bored.

The Sevensworth family had a great amount of wealth, meaning that they had no trouble affording the cost of dresses. Ana’s mother was also interested in painting, so they learned together. The duke already knew how, so he would

often paint with them as well. Apparently, Ana really enjoyed the times when the three of them could paint together.

Her mother still deeply treasured the first painting that Ana had given her. When I got a chance to look at it, I saw that it was a picture of Ana, her mother, the duke, and Bridgette. In the picture, Ana was beaming as she held the hands of her parents. They hadn't been able to hold back their tears from seeing their happy daughter because until then, they'd been deeply hurt over all the difficult experiences she'd had to endure.

On a sidenote, Ana had only ruined her dresses when she was young. Now, both she and her mother had become very accustomed to painting, so they could happily wear the most expensive of dresses without ever having to worry about them getting dirty.

"Up until now, the best artists have been the male students, right?"

"I wonder if any male students would have entered this contest. I can only imagine the tongue-lashing they'd get from their fathers."

"But it's unusual for a female student to be this proficient at painting."

The theories of the professors continued. Though there may not have been any noble ladies who could paint, knights often could. That was most likely why they were beginning to think that Ana's piece had been done by a male student.

This world didn't have photography, which made painting a very important skill for knights since it allowed them to make sketches of suspects or depict the lay of the land they saw when they scouted. It was an indispensable skill for them.

In addition, noblewomen couldn't wear anything but the finest clothes, but knights were expected to be in dirty clothes for their training. Even if their clothes got paint on them, they didn't need to spend too much money to replace them.

That being said, knights couldn't embroider. Just as noblewomen needed to remain presentable, knights needed to act in a way that didn't besmirch their post as a knight. In this world, any guy who did embroidery would be ridiculed. They weren't allowed to have that as a hobby. The only ones who could paint

were men and the only ones who could do embroidery were women. The reason painting techniques hadn't been incorporated into embroidery was that there wasn't anyone who could do both.

"Mr. Valvalier, I know that we haven't received the final grade from the headmaster yet, but could you at least tell us if this embroidery was made by a male student?"

"No, it was a female student."

"We have a female student this proficient at painting?"

"Perhaps she's from a large merchant family?"

"For a daughter of a merchant, she has incredible skills. There aren't that many greater noble ladies who are this proficient."

"It's convenient that this entrant is a female student. I'm going to make her my research assistant and have her teach me this technique. Of course, it's not purely for my own benefit. This piece has heart to it. If she's this artistically gifted at this age, I have no doubt she'll be extremely successful when she's older."

A research assistant?! They were only worrying about her gender because they wanted to take her as their assistant?! Interaction between men and women was very strict in this country. Noble women couldn't be alone with men who weren't family. Research assistants would sometimes need to be alone with their professors and all of the embroidery teachers were female, so they could only take on female assistants.

"Oh, that's a wonderful idea! Perhaps I'll make her my research assistant as well. I'll ask for her to teach me while giving her all sorts of advice."

"In that case, I think I'll do the same."

"Hey, you can't all do it. I want her with me too!"

Another name for a research assistant was "disciple." Becoming the research assistant of many professors also meant being a disciple of all of them as well. But the problem was that these particular professors had every intention of becoming the "disciples" in this situation. Despite being at the top of the

embroidery world in this kingdom, with all the esteem that entailed, they didn't seem to have much pride about teaching versus being taught. I couldn't help but think that their hunger to learn new techniques had helped them climb to the top of the country. For noble families that specialized in embroidery, mastering it was always their primary goal, and it might not matter too much to them if they needed to discard their pride or honor to accomplish that.



"Ms. Anastasia, would you do us the honor of becoming our research assistant?"

While I was lost in my recollection, these words were said to Ana. Ana's eyes grew wide and she froze with surprise. *Sheesh, she's so cute even when she's surprised.* I couldn't help but smile. As I gazed at Ana's soothing visage, I realized she was looking at me for help, not knowing how to answer. I nodded, smiling, making her look of worry fade into one of determination.

"If you're okay with someone like me, I'd be more than happy to receive your instruction," Ana said, curtsying in a way that showed the highest level of gratitude.

You're misunderstanding something, Ana. You're not the one who's going to be taught. It's the other way around.

Anastasia

After the announcement of the contest winners, Sir Gino went to help with the cleanup, so I headed toward the classroom by myself. Somehow I'd placed first. Not only that, but I'd become a research assistant while still in high school. There was so much to be surprised by.

After the announcement, I spoke with the professors a little, and it was very interesting to hear about how they'd earnestly faced the world of art for the long years that they'd been in the industry. It was quite enjoyable speaking with them about embroidery. *Oh how wonderful it will be to receive instruction from those who have such a deep appreciation and respect for art!*

However, I couldn't help but wonder if this was truly okay. I hadn't been in my

right mind when I'd stood on that stage. My heart had been beating out of my chest from the stares of the students, and then I'd been completely stunned by the very unexpected invite to become their research assistant despite only being a high schooler. My head had been in such turmoil that I couldn't make a decision, and I'd naturally found myself looking at Sir Gino. He simply nodded at me with a smile, and I decided to trust his smile and accept the position.

Though I'd essentially put the decision into Sir Gino's hands, now that time had passed, I'd calmed down and could think more. Was it really acceptable for someone with unimpressive embroidery grades to have received an offer to become an in-school research assistant—an honor that labeled one as a prodigy?

As I walked down the hallway, I saw Lady Ekatarina. Though it seemed that she was glaring at me, now that we'd become friends, I knew that wasn't the case.

"Congratulations. It's truly impressive for you to have been accepted as a research assistant. Then again, perhaps this is to be expected of my friend. However, be warned, I'll catch up to you in no time," she said, congratulating me with a beautiful smile. There was no trace of any kind of negative emotions like jealousy. Though she had difficulty expressing herself, she was an honest and pleasant person. "A-Also, I have a request. Would you please teach me your techniques? I'll do anything."

"Of course, I don't mind! But you don't have to do anything for me. After all, we're friends."

"Yay! I'll invite you over for tea again! Please teach me then!"

She began jumping for joy like a kid in elementary school. She was very adorable, especially considering how different this was from her usual dignified demeanor.

"You truly are passionate about embroidery," I remarked.

"I have a dream, and to achieve it, I must be greedy and obtain as much knowledge and techniques as I can."

"Oh, what's your dream?"

“I’d like to revive the double-sided embroidery.”

Double-sided embroidery was just as the name implied: a technique that allowed for embroidery on both sides of the fabric. However, the design on each side would be different. It was a lost technique that was no longer used in modern day. Only records of its existence remained. Reviving a legend was a grand and wonderful dream, and the way she looked when she declared it with absolute confidence and determination was wonderful as well. Holding such a wonderful ambition and also being able to declare it were things I could never do.

“Congratulations! I never thought our class would have an in-school research assistant!”

“Very well done! My opinion of you’s completely changed.”

“I saw your work! It’s amazing!”

When I entered the classroom with Lady Ekatarina, Sir Justin, Sir Anthony, and other military sons came up to congratulate me. They were all friends with Sir Gino, so they’d been talking to me more as a result. The majority of the military sons were all outgoing, straightforward, and popular in the class. Receiving congratulations from them was something I’d never thought could happen in my life.

“Congratulations, Lady Anastasia!”

“I can’t believe it. An actual in-school research assistant in my class!”

Before, I barely spoke up during discussions and group work in an effort to not get in anyone’s way. However, Sir Gino would often give me opportunities to participate by asking me questions. Now, I could even participate in discussions. Now that I spoke more in class, I began speaking more outside of class too, which helped me get closer with others, and now they were congratulating me. Being congratulated by all these people was all thanks to Sir Gino.

Chapter 6: Ginorious Protects His Fiancée from a Group of Spiteful Girls

Ginorious

“Professor Anastasia, do you have a minute?”

“Y-Yes. How may I help?” Ana nervously replied as a couple of girls from a different class came up to her.

Though the official ceremony to make her position as an in-school research assistant wouldn’t be happening for a bit due to the palace officials still working out a schedule, Ana had already begun working as one.

In this school, it was a rule to only call those who taught you “professor.” For example, Professor Kendall was both the teacher of embroidery and also the one in charge of our elite class. However, the only ones who could call her professor were the ones in our class and the girls who took embroidery. Since the boys in other classes weren’t being taught directly by her, they called her Lady Kendall.

Though the job of a research assistant was to essentially be a professor’s aide, they also helped to teach. As such, those being taught by Ana called her professor. At the same time, Ana only took on students that were younger than her. It was her way of being considerate to those older or the same age as her since it’d no doubt be awkward for them to have her as a teacher.

At first, Ana was really thrown off by her students calling her “professor,” and it was absolutely adorable seeing her freak out over it. Even now, it still made her nervous, but she’d more or less gotten used to it.

Normally, you’d call professors by their last name, but for some reason, they called her Professor Ana instead of Professor Sevensworth. But it didn’t end there. They also interacted with her not as they would a professor but more like an upperclassman they were close with. At this moment in our classroom, there

was both a warm atmosphere coming from where Ana was talking to her students, and an aura of palpable rage in a different corner of the room, where the following words were being said to Lady Florro by a group of girls.

“We’re going to use the common room today. You don’t mind right, Lady Lalah?”

“That’s right. Apologies, but *we’re* using the room today.”

From what I could tell, they were arguing over who would use the common room. It ended with Lady Florro glaring in frustration as the other girls left. It seemed that Lady Florro and her group were unable to use the common room.

Recently, her place in the school hierarchy had plummeted. With Ana’s grades going up and her becoming an in-school research assistant on top of that, she’d shot up in rank. She also had Lady Byron as a friend—a very strong ally. Furthermore, she’d gotten close to Anthony and the others who were at the top of the class. In other words, Ana was at the center of why she’d fallen so low in the hierarchy.

Despite this, Lady Florro’s group continued to bully Ana, undeterred. As a result, they began to hemorrhage members who realized that staying in her group would make their own standing in the hierarchy fall. Though Lady Florro had once reigned at the top of the school with her large group, it was now in shambles. She’d fallen so far that she couldn’t even overcome the groups in the middle of the hierarchy.

Her meteoric fall had become a topic of gossip in our class, sparking conversation left and right. Through it all, Ana continued teaching her students embroidery. The only peaceful spot in the classroom was around her. Just looking at her soothed my soul.

“She only got her status by bullying Lady Anastasia. She’s getting her just deserts,” I heard a girl say.

Though I’d had no intention of joining their talks, since Ana’s name came up, I couldn’t help myself. I found out that Lady Florro had apparently expanded her group originally by picking on Ana, a shared target.

As someone who’d once been at the bottom of a school hierarchy, I could

understand the feelings of those that had joined her group. Whenever someone in the lower ranks saw someone getting bullied, they couldn't help but fear that they might be next. Even in my previous life, certain people would bully others to avoid becoming a target themselves.

Some may have reluctantly joined the bully because they were scared of standing up to them, while some may have joined, thinking that they could avoid being bullied if they sided with them. Overall, there were many reasons why they may have found themselves on the bullying side, but they all shared a common trait: self-preservation.

But honestly, if that was their objective, then distancing themselves from those kinds of people was best. Those who were bullies at their core would sometimes even bully those in their own group. But these students were still just children and had no way of knowing that.

Now that I think about it, Lady Florro's group had a good number of girls lower in the school hierarchy. These were most likely also the one's who'd left, both joining and leaving the group for their own self-preservation.

In general, school didn't always last until the end of the day. Today was one such day where classes ended before lunch.

"What's your schedule look like today?" I asked Ana as she packed up her things.

"I'll be meeting with the students I was speaking with earlier in the practice room to answer some questions they have. After that, I have a research meeting with Professor Kendall in her office. I believe I should be back home before dinner."

Now that she was an in-school research assistant, she was at the school quite often. Up until now, whenever I went to the Sevensworth mansion, I'd always be able to meet with Ana, but recently, she'd been out of the house more often than not. Truth be told, I was fairly sad about seeing her less, but I was also so happy seeing her live a fulfilling school life.

"What about you, Sir Gino?" she asked.

“After the three hours of sword training, I’ll be going to the Sevensworth mansion. I’ll probably be there a little after four.”

“You’ve been working quite hard at your swordsmanship training lately.”

“Yeah, I learned a hard lesson when I thought you’d been kidnapped. There’ll be times when I’ll need force to protect you.”

There were monsters in this world and plenty of people who walked around with blades. I had to get it in my head that this wasn’t Japan, where you’d get arrested for carrying even a pocketknife. In general, I realized I needed to revise what I considered common sense regarding public safety, because it didn’t fit this world. With that in mind, I decided to learn swordsmanship for real.

“Y-You’re doing it to protect me?!”

“Of course.”

Ana’s face got visibly redder. “I-In that case, you don’t have to force yourself so much...”

“I’m not at all. I’m merely doing what I want to do.”

What I wanted was the absolute confidence that I could protect Ana. I was training for my own peace of mind. I wasn’t forcing myself whatsoever.

“Um...Professor Anastasia? We’ll be waiting in the practice room for you,” one of the students from earlier said apologetically.

“O-Oh, I’m so sorry! Let’s go together.”

“See? I told you not to butt in. Sometimes it’s more polite to just go without saying anything,” a different student said as if blaming the first girl for trying to follow the rules of etiquette.

This only made the first girl look more apologetic. I didn’t want Ana to keep her students waiting any longer, so we parted there.

After our sword training ended, I went with my classmates to get water.

“Oh, Ana!” I couldn’t help but say, surprised to see her there.

“Have you finished your training? You must be tired.” Ana smiled while she

said this, but there was something off. It was as if there was a shadow in her smile.

“Hey there, Lady Anastasia. You here on research assistant work?” Anthony asked.

“That’s right. I see you’re all with Sir Ginorious.”

“Yeah, we saw him training by himself not too long ago, so we joined in,” Anthony explained.

“After all, he’s the guy who beat *the* Lord Bloody. Can’t pass up a chance to spar with him, can we? That’s why we made sure we matched our schedules with him,” Justin said.

The man he’d referred to was the instructor I’d beaten after I’d transferred. He was a retired military officer and had earned the name “Lord Bloody” when he’d been actively serving. Apparently, even now, he was one of the best swordsmen in the country.

That being said, the people in this world couldn’t use body fortification magic. No matter how skilled they were with a sword, if they couldn’t use that, they were absolutely no match for me. Usually, I’d let it seem like they were putting up an even fight and have them win, but Ana had helped me prepare for the entrance exam, and had even prayed for my acceptance, so this time, I couldn’t let myself lose.

“As sons from military families, we can’t let Ginorious stay the number one swordsman forever. It’d look really bad for us. We’re gonna spar with him as much as possible and find a way to beat him.”

When I sparred with students, I’d lightly use body fortification magic. At first, I’d tried fighting them without it, but that only made them mad with how quickly I lost. Though my intention had been to fight them fairly, they’d interpreted that as me pulling my punches and insulting them.

“Well, at any rate, there’s a lot to learn. Even today, we practiced our sword stances for hours with no breaks at all. Our instructor wasn’t even there, but training this long without a break is pretty impossible. Ginorious is really a hard worker to be able to do that.”

He's not wrong. One thing I'm good at is working hard. In order for others to take someone as ugly as I'd been in my past life seriously, I'd had to work extra hard, and after decades of doing that, putting in the extra work had become natural to me.

"Well, we're gonna go on ahead," my classmates said, quickly downing their water before shuffling off to the locker room.

Now that it was just the two of us, I observed Ana again. Her expression wasn't the only thing that was off. To begin with, her being at the water station at all was strange. Anthony and the others would come here often, but that was because they were from military families. They were used to drinking rain water and from rivers during training, so they rarely waited for servants when they could get water themselves.

Most noble ladies would have their servants fetch water for them, but I didn't see any nearby. *Hm? I do see one servant standing in the distance. Is he not one of the ones in charge of getting water? Why's he standing so far away, anyway? Did Ana ask for space? But why? If she didn't want anyone around, at the very least, I'd expect her to not come here for water in the first place. What does this have to do with the shadow on her face, though?*

"Ana, did something happen?" I asked since we were alone.

"Well...yes. I swore to be honest with you, so I suppose I'll tell you," Ana said. I followed behind her, walking past the drinking area. "Were my feelings that apparent?"

Hiding one's emotions, especially negative ones, was normal practice for nobles; otherwise, it'd cause unpleasantness to those around them. It was also just good manners. Ana must have thought that since I'd figured out something was on her mind, she'd messed up and let her emotions show.

"Don't worry, you looked perfectly normal."

"Then how did you know?"

"Because I know you. I could tell immediately because it's you."

Ana had been perfectly good-mannered, with an entirely neutral expression. What had shown on her face had been as unnoticeable as a pebble on the side

of the road. But even pebbles could get into your shoes and make you take notice of them.

How easily you noticed changes in others depended on how much you cared about them. It had nothing to do with how obvious they were making it, so it wasn't Ana's fault at all. In order to make sure she didn't feel discouraged, I made sure to tell her this—the truth. Fortunately, my plan seemed to work, because after hearing my explanation, she blushed and looked down. *Sheesh, she's so adorable!*

Ana eventually guided me to the area where things were washed. Since it was in the same vicinity as the drinking water, it wasn't too far away, but this wasn't a place that nobles typically came. There, I saw a large stone with a trough carved deep into it for a sink.

“What happened?!” I exclaimed.

Ana's embroidery tools were in the sink and were stained pitch-black as if someone had tossed ink onto them. It was obvious that this was a result of some kind of bullying. I'd already known that she was being bullied, but she'd never given me the details of it, and I'd never pushed her to tell me, which was why I'd assumed that it was never bad enough to break the rules of the school. Never had I imagined it'd be this bad. I could feel my fist trembling with rage.

“I'm okay. This is nothing new. I thought things had calmed down now that we're in high school, but it looks like it's back to how it used to be.”

“How long ago? How long have you been enduring this for?”

“Well, this happened quite frequently back in elementary school. It happened less in middle school, but didn't stop altogether. However, it'd essentially died down in high school.”

“Why...” *Why does such a kind and pure girl have to go through this?!*

“There's no helping it. Not when I look like this,” Ana said with a sad smile.

Seeing her smile like that only poured fuel onto my rage. It took everything I could not to scream. It was only then that I realized I hadn't heard anything about the Sevensworth family ever taking action.

Since the school was a place where they urged the students to be independent, fundamentally, they didn't let any outsiders interfere. But that only applied when the students were following the rules. Fights, bullying, illicit relations—these were all against school rules, and many of these actions would get escalated to the families of the students.

There weren't any family conflicts regarding things like coin distribution, but that was because it was within the rules and had the goal of helping students learn how to be independent. However, bullying was different. If Ana had been enduring this for so long, then I had no clue why the Sevensworths hadn't interfered. How hadn't Lady Florro and her cronies been expelled?

"I've been keeping it a secret," Ana admitted.

"Why would you do that?"

"My mother believes it's her fault that I look like this. She feels great responsibility for it, so if I ever let her catch onto the fact that I'm being bullied, it'd certainly make her sad. I've made her sad many times until now and...I've no desire to do it anymore."

So it's all for her mother's sake? Most people would hate their mothers if they were in Ana's situation, but instead, she chose to endure it to spare her mother pain. You... You really are a wonderful girl.

"Sir Gino, please keep this a secret from my mother."

"I told you before, didn't I? I'm on your side. If that's what you want, I'll of course keep it a secret."

"Thank you very much," Ana said with a relieved smile.

"With that said, I'd like to do something about my embroidery tools as soon as possible. Typically, I leave all my purchases to the servants, so I don't have any money on me. If I ask them to buy me new ones, my mother will find out."

"In that case, you don't have to worry. I can buy you new ones through my company. If you don't mind, let's go there right now. If nothing there catches your fancy, we can go to a specialty shop."

"I'm so sorry for the trouble. I've put an unnecessary burden on you..."

“There’s nothing to apologize for. This isn’t a burden on me at all. Let’s go. We need to get this done before your meeting with Professor Kendall.”

Then, I escorted Ana to the carriages. As I did, her words of resignation regarding her looks echoed in my head. In order to push Ana up in the school hierarchy, I’d done a lot of different things, but it still wasn’t enough. In order to make Ana happy, I knew what I needed to do. *I need to break her curse.*

I immediately sprung into action to stop Ana being bullied. There were two places in the school where Ana kept her personal belongings. One was in her desk and the second was in the changing room, but I didn’t need to worry about the latter. It was regularly locked and everyone who entered or exited was recorded. Since it was a room filled with the dresses of noble women, the school made sure to keep a strict eye on it.

The problem to focus on was Ana’s desk. There were no locks on the desks. If we asked the school, it was possible to have one put on Ana’s, but that information would get back to her parents, as those kinds of fees for altering materials would show up on the monthly invoices to the families.

Besides, putting a lock on it probably wouldn’t do too much. After all, they could vandalize the desk itself too. What I needed was surveillance on the desk. But also, I needed to be by Ana’s side since she could also be personally targeted, and I obviously couldn’t be in two places at once.

I tried observing Lady Florro and her group, but even while keeping my eye on them as much as possible, Ana’s desk continued to be messed with. Even so, I couldn’t dismiss the possibility that Lady Florro and her group were involved. Even though it hadn’t been reported, she somehow knew that Ana’s personal effects were being tampered with, and she used that fact to laugh at Ana. I could only conclude that she was having someone else carry out the bullying.

Sometime during all this, Lady Byron also noticed what was happening and began lending me a hand. Even then, we couldn’t end the bullying. After all, the both of us couldn’t watch Ana’s desk at all hours of the day. We wouldn’t be able to take care of this by normal methods, so I decided to use some underhanded techniques by using my specialty in golem engineering to make a

golem perfect for this kind of situation.



Ana was at school, so it was just me and my mother-in-law at today's afternoon tea. She drank her tea with her usual grace and refinement as we sat in the nineteenth drawing room, Jade. Even so, she had a shadow across her face as a result of a rare fight with Ana.

"You're so horrible, mother. How could you not do this for Sir Gino?"

Ana had puffed her cheeks out when she'd said that during our teatime. It had been extremely adorable.

Apparently, Ana had heard that both the daughter of Baron Mariott and the crown prince who was interested in her had their eyes on me. It made her uneasy and she'd asked her mother to help me, but her mother refused, which was why she had gotten upset.

Right now, I wasn't part of the Sevensworth family. I was still a member of the Valvalier household, so my mother-in-law would be overstepping if she took action. Then again, even if I were part of the Sevensworth family, I doubted she'd protect me anyway. Knowing her, she'd use this opportunity as a way to help me grow rather than intervene.

Though Ana was quite mature for her age, she was still only seventeen. Most likely, she'd been doted on by her mother like this when she'd had trouble at school in the past. That side of Ana was incredibly cute to imagine.

"I'd be happy if she looked to be doted on. Seeing your children grow up is a happy thing, but an incredibly sad one too. Since I'm responsible for her personal growth, I can't tell her that I want her to let me spoil her. But in reality, I'd love nothing more than to do that."

In this country, mothers had a lot of authority in regard to how their children were raised. They had many more responsibilities than mothers in the world I'd come from, and it was even harder for them to ask their children to let themselves be doted on.

I honestly didn't understand the sentiment. I'd never gotten married, so I'd never experienced what it was like to be a parent. For the record, I'd also told

my mother-in-law that I didn't need her help with Ana. I needed to mature; otherwise, at this rate I wouldn't be worthy of standing next to Ana. I knew that Ana also understood the need to mature, so I was sure she'd try to patch things up with her mother when she came home.

"I'm thankful to you for telling Ana that you want to dance with her in the dress she received from Herr Mays."

"I did nothing more than speak my mind. You've nothing to thank me for."

"Even so, I'd like to thank you. In the past, Ana would never have worn a dress from them even if she won it as a prize. She'd always have a dark look on her face whenever she had to wear a dress worthy of our family's status. But that's not the case now. She's thinking about how she might receive compliments from you, and is very excited about having the dress made. She's changed quite a bit thanks to you. I'm very thankful for what you've done for her, especially after all I've put her through," she said with a sad smile.

She really blamed herself for Ana's curse, which was why she looked so heartbroken. This world wasn't aware of genetics, but they understood that children took on traits from their parents. Even so, it was a country-wide thing that whenever there were any problems, people would point fingers at the mother.

Even if I told her none of this was her fault, it probably wouldn't do anything to cheer her up, because she wouldn't believe it. People didn't readily accept opinions that conflicted with their core beliefs. That was why instead, I encouraged her by saying that she was doing a very good job.

"I don't think I've done anything too special. It's all been a series of trials and errors. I'm still learning the ropes of motherhood."

"You are?" She's been raising Ana for seventeen years. I don't think she's still in the learning phase of parenthood anymore.

"Taking care of a child changes depending on their age. I can't take the same approach with Ana now as I could when she was five, or ten. This is my first experience raising Ana at her current age. No matter how many years I've spent being her mother, it feels like I'm learning everything from the start." *It's very impressive of her to still be thinking so earnestly about Ana.* "By the way, I'm

sure that Ana's found herself in various troubles at school. I'd like it if you held yourself back and simply watched over her."

She'd made a broad statement instead of singling out the possibility of bullying since she didn't know about it for certain. I fully intended to respect Ana's wishes and keep it that way. Besides, it wasn't really my place to say anything about it right now. *I need to respond to her without revealing the truth.*

"When someone important to me is in trouble, I'm not sure why I should withhold my aid. Don't you feel the same way about Ana?"

"I do, but even if your child falls and starts to cry, you can either help them up or simply watch over them until they get up on their own. Of course, if it's something that a child can't handle themselves, I'll step in, but if it's something they can work through, I hold back my desire to help and instead stand back and silently watch. That's what a mother's love is."

I can't counter that. I could hear her deep love for Ana in her soft words. All I had in response were cheap protests, and using those to argue with her wasn't something I could do.

"Ana's changed so much since she became engaged to you, she's almost like a different person. Even now, she's trying so hard to grow, and that's why I'd like you to hold yourself back and watch over her. I'm sure that, knowing you and how you can do anything, you definitely have the capabilities to help her, but I'd like you to hold back until the very last second."

I couldn't help but think about my past life. My mental age was much higher than Ana's. Maybe interacting with Ana like her mother did—as a guardian—would be best. Up until now, I'd changed the format of the tests for her and even organized an embroidery contest, but I hadn't really been thinking about her growth. All I'd been thinking about was protecting her. I hadn't given it too much thought and just let my emotions dictate my actions. Was that really something an adult would do? Perhaps watching Ana mature from afar was what I was supposed to be doing.

Though her mother wished for her growth, I hadn't been thinking about it at all. I hadn't even thought it was necessary. I didn't see anything wrong with

how Ana was now. All I wanted was for her to smile from the bottom of her heart. That was enough for me. But perhaps that wasn't the right way for an adult to think about things...



"What are you doing?" I asked a girl who was in the middle of throwing a textbook into the trash can.

The plain-looking girl with black hair, brown eyes, and glasses jumped with surprise.

"Eep! I-I wasn't doing anything..."

It was written all over her face how flustered she was. Judging by how bad she was at hiding her emotions, she wasn't a greater noble. I walked past her and pulled out the textbook she'd tossed in the garbage. There was no doubt. It was Ana's. I glanced back at the girl, who'd gone pale as her teeth practically started chattering.

"This textbook you threw away belongs to Lady Anastasia Sevensworth. Did you know that?"

It'd be one thing if this had been my classmate, but this girl was from a different class altogether and didn't even know Ana. Since she didn't know her, I'd used Ana's full name.

"N-No it's not!"

"Oh really? Then whose is it?"

"M-Mine! It's my textbook!"

I took the book out of its cover and showed the back of it to the girl. "Explain this, then," I said.

The book cover had been hiding Ana's unique seven-headed dragon crest. I'd asked her to put the crest in a place where the cover would hide it.

The girl's eyes widened and she froze, gasping.

"In terms of what would happen publicly, at worst, throwing away Lady Anastasia Sevensworth's belongings might result in you getting expelled. Past

that, you can expect retaliation from the Sevensworth family. But if you're using the premier duke's crest without permission, that's a great crime punishable by the country. Do you understand that your entire family could be beheaded?"

It might be tempting for commoners to get the benefits of nobility by using their crests, but nobody did it because impersonating a noble would result in their entire family being severely punished. To nobles, nothing was more important than their family honor. Someone misusing their crest was a crime heavier than murder to them.

"P-Please don't tell anyone! I'll tell you the truth! It's not mine! It's Lady Sevensworth's!"

She immediately dropped to the floor and prostrated herself. Her head made a sound as it collided with the ground. It was the same way that people prostrated themselves in Japan and wasn't a method of apology employed by nobles here, only commoners. In order to get to the bottom of Ana's bullying, I'd made a black hornet golem and had it stand by on the ceiling above her desk. With this, I could observe it for twenty-four hours without any interruption.

In my past life, there'd be a huge commotion if a bee was seen on the ceiling, but schools in that world had ceilings that were only about three meters high and were pure white. Here, the ceilings were seven meters up and were painted like a church. A black wasp wouldn't stand out if it stayed camouflaged in a dark part of the painting, like the black of someone's hair. The ceiling was also so tall that it'd be hard to notice anything unless you were staring at it hard.

The golem I'd made had sensors to detect people, and I'd programmed it to activate invisibility magic when someone besides Ana stayed at her desk for more than five seconds, and then to follow them. When it began tracking a target, I'd get a signal. My golem had been trailing this girl.

"Let's start by asking why you're doing this."

"My family runs an iron manufacturer. Our sales suddenly shot up and we weren't able to meet the increase in demands with our current workforce, so we went to House Florro for assistance," the girl—Lady Veronica Hiller—began

explaining, her gaze fixed on the ground.

She was the daughter of a count whose iron-manufacturing business had recently taken off, expanding its scale explosively. As a result of his success, he'd been granted the status of baron.

The iron manufacturing in this world wasn't like my past life's industry where they had it automated. They had to use primitive tools and craftsmen. In order to increase production, they needed a great number of workers, and they had to be people with the special set of skills for manufacturing iron.

The business had expanded faster than they could train workers, so they were inevitably left understaffed. That's when Baron Hiller went to House Florro, who had a broad reach of staffing capabilities. They were also in charge of providing servants to the school. It was a no-brainer that they could easily help to resolve Baron Hiller's problem.

"The other day, Lady Florro ordered me to take something from the desk of Lady Sevensworth. I tried refusing, but she told me that she'd have her family pull the support they've been giving our family. If that happened, it'd be absolutely impossible for us to meet our quota. We'd lose faith from our regulars and it'd leave our family in ruins."

"Did it never occur to you that it might not be in your best interests to make an enemy of the Sevensworth family, who has large-scale mines and great influence over the circulation of iron itself?"

"O-Of course it did! That's why I tried to do this without being discovered... After all, it'd be over for my family if I was caught," she said, shivering in fear. "I'm begging you, please don't say anything. I'll do anything! Anything!"

"I have some conditions. But if you listen to me, I'll pretend I didn't see anything."

After I told her my conditions, she agreed to help me with my plan. There was a limit to the observational power I could employ with my golem. It couldn't help if they tried to mess with Ana directly or if they tried to drag her name through the mud with false rumors. In order to defend Ana against the various schemes out there, I needed to know their plans before they happened, so from now on, Lady Hiller would leak their plans to me. This was the most efficient

way of going about things.

After that, preventing the bullying became smoother by combining the information Lady Hiller leaked to me and the observations I got from my black wasp. Lady Florro and her group used lesser nobles as their pawns by blackmailing them into doing their dirty work. That's why whenever something similar happened to when Lady Hiller was commanded to do something, I appeared on the scene and convinced them to work for me instead. Now, all of them were pretending to obey their orders but not actually doing any of the bullying, and instead reporting to them that I'd gotten in the way and prevented them from carrying out their tasks. It was all going exactly as planned.

Anastasia

As I walked through the hallway, I looked through the window and saw Sir Gino sitting by himself in the garden. *The weather's nice, so I wonder if he was taking a stroll. I'll join him if that's what he's doing.* With that thought in mind, I went to the garden to find him. *Hm? I...don't see him. Perhaps he's farther inside?*

Suddenly, I saw something that made me hide. He was with another girl! *Who is that? Why are they deep within the garden? Is this some kind of tryst?* I could feel myself go pale and my fingers become cold. My body began to tremble with anxiety.

Sir Gino was an extremely loyal man. I was certain he wouldn't be unfaithful to me...unless he truly had feelings for her... *Stop! I can't think like this! A woman who is suspicious of every little thing is not worthy of Sir Gino! At the very least, I want to be someone whose mentality is worthy of him. I have to trust him.*

Currently I was wearing the ring he'd given me with the white-violet Gemini starflower motif. It carried the meaning of eternal love, and he'd made it so that it used the colors of our eyes instead of the actual colors of the flower.

I touched the ring and used it to reaffirm his feelings for me. The words he'd

said to me lay with this ring. Repeating them helped me calm down.

“Hm? What are you doing here, Lady Anastasia?”

I jumped from being suddenly called out to. I’d been so focused on secretly watching Sir Gino and the girl he was with that I hadn’t noticed Lady Ekatarina come up behind me. *When did she get here?*

“Oh, were you watching the two of them?” she asked.

“Yes...”

Peeping on others was a very uncouth activity. I could feel my face getting red with embarrassment.

“You seem very curious about what’s going on,” she said with a giggle. “Do you know who she is?”

“No. I’ve seen her before, but I don’t know her name.”

“That’s Baron Hiller’s daughter, Lady Veronica. She’s in Class B and only enrolled starting in high school.”

“Y-You know her?!”

“Yes, and I’m only telling you because I can tell this will spiral out of control if I don’t set the record straight.”

Lady Ekatarina proceeded to explain the situation. Apparently, the bullying against me hadn’t stopped, and Lady Hiller and others had done it all at Lady Lalah and her group’s command. Sir Gino had caught them all red-handed and stopped them from continuing. Now, they were all pretending to obey Lady Lalah’s orders, but behind her back, they were meeting with Sir Gino like this and telling him their plans. *Now that I think about it, my personal effects haven’t been taken or vandalized recently. So this is why? He’s been protecting me without me knowing...*

“By the way...why do you know about this?” I asked.

“I’m working with him.”

“Huh?! You too?!” *This is unbelievable. This entire time I’ve been completely unaware of them all protecting me.* “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sir Valvalier told me not to, saying if you knew that unrelated people were being threatened in connection to your bullying, it would surely lower your spirits. Then he was worried that you would take pity on Lady Veronica and the others and make it even easier for them to bully you.” *I don’t suppose he was wrong. Learning the truth, I am in lower spirits, and I am even considering making it easier for them.* “Overall, Sir Valvalier resolved everything on his own, so perhaps I don’t really have a right to say this, but...I’m not entirely pleased with how he handled this all.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s being overprotective. If I were in his shoes, I would start by explaining everything to you. I’d then let you decide how to deal with it and give you support as necessary.”

It was a very straightforward opinion. *She really does stay unbiased.*

“For now, I think I’ll apologize and thank Sir Gino and Lady Hiller.”

“I don’t think that’s wise. If you notice a man trying to work hard in the background for you, it’s good manners to pretend you saw nothing. Being able to keep that act up while quickly resolving things yourself is the hallmark of a noble lady.”

“That’s...true.”

“If you feel bad about making them work hard for your sake, then fight so they won’t have to.”

Lady Ekatarina said this with a kind but strict gaze. To those who didn’t know her well, she had the image of being strong-willed, fair, and noble. She was the type to voice her true thoughts, so to be honest, I used to be a little frightened of her, but it was different now that we were friends. After spending time with her, I could tell that she was an awkward but straightforward, delicate, very kind, beautiful person.

“By the way, why aren’t you being more confident? I know you haven’t been officially appointed as a research assistant yet—not until the ceremony—but you still are, for all intents and purposes, an in-school research assistant. I understand why you’d been unconfident before, but you’re now firmly a step

above where you used to be.”

“You’re right. Not too long ago, I wasn’t even aware that I lacked confidence. However, recently, I’ve been trying my best, using you as an example. Even so...I’m still very lacking.”

“Of course, I know how hard you’ve been working. You’re even trying to speak up in class more and you’ve begun turning down the more unfair requests from our classmates. However, you haven’t changed in regard to Lady Lalah and her group’s treatment of you. You’re still just accepting it. Why is that?”

“I’ve...been bullied by them for so long. I find it hard to deal with them.”

“I don’t understand. They’re not the only ones who’ve treated you poorly. Even so, you’ve been able to deal with the other noble ladies. So why is it that you can’t talk back to specifically Lady Lalah?”

I took a moment to think about this. Back in elementary school, I’d been ridiculed by everyone. However, most of those people had matured and they’d stopped treating me in the same poor way. The same went for Lady Lalah and her group. Though there were still instances of them making fun of me, it wasn’t nearly as horrible as it had been in the past. Their attitude toward me had changed just like everyone else’s. Even so, why was it that I couldn’t stand up to only them?

Was it because they were more aggressive than others? No. Ever since I’d begun doing embroidery seriously, the time to self-reflect had increased, which was precisely when I’d realized something. Back in elementary school, there were many who laughed at how I looked. However, they all grew up, and now in high school, there weren’t any who made fun of me for my appearance. The only time it was ever directly commented on was during my marriage talks.

But regardless, Lady Lalah and her group still made fun of my appearance. No matter how hard I worked, I couldn’t change the way I looked. Having something that I couldn’t change as the source of ridicule made me feel absolutely helpless. No matter how hard I worked, it’d be useless. No matter how hard I fought back, I’d still be at the bottom of the hierarchy for my hideous looks. It forced me to face the possibility that I was unsuited to stand at

Sir Gino's side.

The reason I couldn't fight back against Lady Lalah's group was that I was afraid of them picking on me for my appearance. It was a huge weak point for me that made me feel extremely inferior. *How do I overcome it?* Studying could help you overcome poor grades. Practice could help you move more elegantly. But what was there to do about one's appearance?

"Get yourself together. A noble lady is one who can walk through a storm and maintain a calm smile. Even if a strong wind knocks a tree down in front of you, being a noble lady means being able to do something about it on your own. Lady Anastasia, you should face your bullying head-on."

I don't have any idea what I'd do or if I even could do anything if a tree fell in front of me... The training of ladies at the Byron estate was famous for being strict. They even had tea and picnics in their gardens during thunderstorms or blizzards. Her words really had a different weight to them since she actually walked the walk. Though this was very much her unique way of speaking, she was completely correct. To stop making so much trouble for Sir Gino and Lady Ekatarina, I needed to change.

Since Lady Ekatarina was waiting to meet with Sir Gino as well, she left me, and I took her advice and left so he wouldn't notice I'd been watching. As I walked back to the classroom, I couldn't even enjoy the flowers on the way. I was in low spirits and couldn't help but look at the ground.

Lady Ekatarina's words echoed in my head about how I needed to stand up to my bullies. Endurance was a virtue of ladies. Enduring bullying should've been the correct way to deal with this, or at least that's what I'd thought until now. However, it was because I thought that way that I was causing trouble for Sir Gino and Lady Ekatarina.

Thinking about it, I had no doubt that mother, father, and the servants at our house would be happy if I acted with the dignity of a lady of the Sevensworth household. That should've been obvious, but I'd been averting my eyes from the truth. I'd been using endurance being a virtue as an excuse. Merely enduring being bullied wasn't a virtue. It was just running away from an

unwanted reality. It was me being weak.

I needed to become stronger. I needed to overcome my feelings of inferiority over my appearance. I needed to face my bullies head-on. I would become someone that my parents, our servants, and Lady Ekatarina could be proud of. Though there was nothing I could do about the way I looked, at the very least, I wanted to become a lady worthy of Sir Gino on the inside.

Chapter 7: Mutual Feelings

Ginorious

I was currently sitting on a sofa in the lobby of the Sevensworth's entrance hall, waiting for Ana. Today was the ceremony that would make her appointment as a research assistant official.

"Sir Gino." Ana smiled shyly as she came down the stairs. "Wh-What do you think? It's not too flashy, is it?"

She was wearing a dress reminiscent of a twelve-layered ceremonial kimono from my past world—many thin layers stacked on top of one another and all tied together with an orange sash. The elegant curves of the wide sleeves also resembled a kimono.

It might not have been immediately apparent, but all the fabrics used were very intricately embroidered. Though the large jewels around her neck certainly grabbed the eye, there were countless small inlaid jewels as well, all brightly glistening with each step she took.

Usually she'd wear her hair up for parties, but today, it was down and adorned with a kumihimo of bright, vibrant colors. Since she'd be the center of attention for the ceremony, she most likely wanted to use her hair to hide the bumps on her face. It might've been an eccentric hairstyle for a party, but it very much suited her boldly unconventional dress.

The outermost layer of her outfit was purple, the color of my eyes, and the one right beneath it was black like my hair. *Wow, she's really wearing my colors! The greatest girl in the world is dressed in my colors. Heh heh. What a wonderful day today is.*

"This is certainly a Herr Mays design. It's so innovative, and it looks great on you. You look beautiful!"

"Thank you very much. This is uncharted territory for me, so that really makes

me happy,” Ana replied, looking down sheepishly but with a smile.

She’s cute. So cute!

“You look wonderful today. Very lovely,” Ana’s mother said to her.

Hearing this, surprise flashed across Ana’s face before she thanked her. Ana’s parents rarely commented on her appearance, so it was unexpected for her mother to say anything about it.

“Wearing a dress from Herr Mays, and smiling so happily...” Ana’s mother marveled to herself in a low voice that sounded like she was holding back tears.

Ana usually hated to wear these kinds of dresses because she didn’t want to bring attention to herself, so her mother must’ve been happy that she was not only wearing this dress that was guaranteed to get looks, but that she was even smiling while doing it.

She wasn’t ashamed of Ana, though. She’d accepted Ana’s curse, but couldn’t stop blaming herself for it. That was why she reacted this way and spoke softly to herself with relief and joy.

Before the ceremony, Ana, her mother, and I drank some tea on the sofa in the entrance hall while chatting. It went without saying that our topic still revolved around Ana’s dress, and I of course took every opportunity to compliment her. She was incredibly cute as she got increasingly red in the face.

Ana’s mother wouldn’t miss her daughter’s big moment for the world, so she’d be joining us in the great auditorium later. Her father wanted nothing more than to do the same, but it wasn’t easy to take time off from his important position as a chancellor, so he very tearfully decided not to attend.

“Oh my, is that the dress you won from the contest?”

“It’s incredible!”

As expected, a dress from Herr Mays garnered a lot of attention. As soon as we entered the venue for the preparty, the girls in our class immediately swarmed Ana.

There were no watches in this world. The great church had the technology to

precisely tell the time so people would know exactly when prayer took place, but outside of that, nobody knew the precise time at any given moment. Even the noble houses used the church's bell to adjust their water clocks, which used dripping water to determine how much time had passed in the day.

It was expected that even if all the attendees were notified of the ceremony's start time, everyone's arrival would vary, so there was always a preparty to keep the ones who came early from being bored.

As part of our school's merit-based system, regardless of what family we came from, we were all "students," which put us equally at the lowest status while we remained at school. As such, students would arrive at the preparty early and then enjoy talking with one another while waiting for those of higher status to arrive. There was still time before the ceremony was scheduled to begin, so the only ones here were students.

A circle of girls from our class had formed around Ana, and they were enthusiastically talking about dresses. When I first came to the school, Ana barely talked to any of the other girls, but recently, that had changed and they were chatting much more frequently. After being selected as an in-school research assistant, she'd become someone that everybody looked up to. Excluding Lady Florro and her group, nobody looked down on her anymore.

There was a group of younger students who were watching us from afar. Most likely they were waiting for the conversation to end so they could greet Ana. Noticing them glancing over at us, the girls casually moved away to allow them access to Ana.

"So this is the dress everyone's talking about? It's gorgeous! It's such a beautiful fit on you, Professor Anastasia."

"Could I have you look at my embroidery piece again later, Professor Anastasia? I followed your instructions and it went very well! Even my father praised me and promised to buy me earrings as a present!"

"Professor Anastasia, I'd like to make my fiancé a tie. Could you teach me how? Oh, you might know him, actually."

Ana was now swarmed by the girls she taught. It felt like they were talking with a close upperclassman rather than their teacher. It was business as usual.

Eventually, a hush settled over the venue before chatter filled it once again. To my surprise, it seemed that my mother-in-law had arrived. Though there wasn't a strict order, in general, it was good manners for those of higher status to arrive late. My mother-in-law, the wife of the premier duke, appearing now must mean that the ceremony was beginning soon.

After locating her daughter, she went over to Ana, and a crowd of people surrounded them as they talked. *Wow, that's the power of my mother-in-law with her status...* They rushed to her like ants to sugar.

"Oh my, you're as lovely as ever."

"Truly, you're practically glowing."

My mother-in-law was already praised heavily for her beauty at these kinds of functions, but the compliments only became more frequent with the lotion I'd given her. They were most likely trying to curry favor with her like they would with Her Highness.

Ana stood next to her mother with a smile plastered on her face, but I could tell she wasn't in high spirits. It only made sense since she was standing there while everyone sang the praises of her mother's beauty and now only complimented Ana's dress as an aside at best. I needed to separate the two of them for Ana's sake. The ceremony was starting soon, so I offered to guide my mother-in-law to the great auditorium.

There, I took a seat next to my mother-in-law. If I left her by herself, she'd no doubt be crowded by people once again, so I decided to sit with her for the duration of the ceremony. Since Ana was going to be onstage, we sat in the wings during the proceedings.

"Thank you for earlier. I wasn't sure if I could get out of that."

As I thought. She doesn't appreciate brown-nosing. "This is pretty much what happens whenever I go out with Ana. That's why she doesn't really like going places with me. I...really put her in painful situations," she said with a pained smile.

It was easy to see how responsible she felt for all the horrible experiences Ana

had to endure because of the way she looked. It was only made worse by the fact that, in contrast, people would celebrate my mother-in-law's beauty with Ana right there.

"For the first time in thirteen years, our school has an in-school research assistant: Lady Anastasia Sevensworth from the elite class. She earned this honor by winning the embroidery contest last month..."

The headmaster opened the ceremony as they stood at the podium. After that, a few of the other higher-ups gave their congratulations as well, and then finally, the ceremony began. As Ana stood with the embroidery professors in the center of the stage, she lowered her head respectfully and offered her right palm to them. Each professor split a small shortbread in two, and placed one half in Ana's hand. Then, the teachers and she ate their respective halves, signifying that they were now teacher and disciple. Thunderous applause echoed across the auditorium.

Ana then turned toward the audience and bowed her head once more before reciting the speech she'd memorized. Not too long ago, Ana would always speak softly with her head down when she did presentations in class, but now, she was standing up straight and speaking with an elegant smile. Her gentle voice carried across the entire auditorium. She'd really matured into a wonderful lady before my very eyes. Seeing the majesty and grace overflowing from Ana's smile made her mother dab a handkerchief around her teary eyes.

The ceremony wasn't over just yet. The first part was for Ana to be recognized as a research assistant to these professors by the public. Now, it was time for them to announce to the gods Ana's new position. This part of the ceremony would take place within the school's church, and the only ones who would be present were Ana, the professors, the headmaster, and the witness—a high-ranking priest. I planned to go home with Ana when she was done, so my mother-in-law left first now that the public portion of the ceremony had concluded.

"Lady Anastasia, you are getting quite full of yourself."

As I was escorting my mother-in-law to the carriage, I heard a familiar voice. I hurried over to the source and saw Ana surrounded by Lady Florro and her flunkies at the rear entrance of the great auditorium leading to the backstage area. *They really jumped in the second I stepped away to bully Ana. No you don't!*

“Wait!” Just as I moved to intervene, I was stopped by my mother-in-law, and she pulled me into the shadow of a tree. There, the two of us watched Ana. “From the look in her eye, she’s trying to do something about this by herself. Let’s just watch over her for a little.”

Lady Florro and the rest of her group were hurling rapid insults. If this were the usual Ana, she’d get a frightened look in her eyes and look down, but not today. Though she was trembling, she didn’t look away. Her mouth moved as if she was trying to say something.

“I’ve already asked you three times to withdraw as a research assistant, so why did you even come today?”

“Precisely! You achieved this status through unscrupulous methods. It’s pure hubris to have shown your face here.”

What do you think you’re accusing her of?! She won fair and square! She poured everything she had into that piece!

“Calm down. Not yet.”

I was ready to fly out in a rage but was once again held back by my mother-in-law. Though there were a lot of people by the main entrance of the great auditorium, the back entrance was practically deserted. Ana was completely alone without any allies, and they’d used that to gang up on her. Their objective must’ve been to stop the next part of the ceremony.

Without the prayer portion being completed, Ana wouldn’t be able to become an official research assistant. A high-ranking priest had come for the ceremony. A no-show at this point, with so many important people being invited, would reflect very poorly on the professors and even cast doubt on their ability to appoint new research assistants.

If I hadn’t chosen to walk my mother-in-law to her carriage, I might not have

come this way, meaning I might not have found out about Lady Florro's scheme. I hadn't thought she'd pull a stunt like this when so many important people from around the country had come to our school. This was on me for being so naive.

"Do you not own a mirror? Do you really think someone hideous like you deserves the honor of being a research assistant?"

"If you were beautiful like your mother, then we'd have no objections. Honestly, how do you look so different despite being blood-related? Oh, maybe you're not?"

"Your mother is the ideal wife of the Sevensworth family. She's perfect in every regard except the fact that she gave birth to you. The only blemish on an otherwise perfect person is you."

"Absolutely. You must torment your mother every day with that face of yours."

Bringing up her mother was a low blow. It was the same kind of bad-mouthing as calling someone's mama a whore or a slut. Attacking one's mother was an effective form of hurting someone.

The same went for attacking Ana's appearance. They targeted her weak points and tried to deeply hurt her. It took every last fiber of my being to hold myself back. After decades of enduring people talking about my looks, I'd become numb to it, but I couldn't stomach anyone bad-mouthing Ana for hers. It infuriated me. The humiliation I'd endured all those long years rushed back in a wave of anger, and if it leaked out even the slightest bit, it'd become a torrential rage.

I was somehow able to calm myself by looking at my mother-in-law, who was hanging her head with a pained expression. It only made sense for their words to cut deeply since she blamed herself for Ana's curse.

"I-I've never resented my mother! N-Not once!" Ana yelled, still shaking and on the verge of tears. "D-Despite how I look, my mother loves me with all her heart! I-I'm so glad to be my mother's daughter! I thank her for giving birth to me!"

“You *thank* her? Even with that horrible face of yours? Aha ha ha! I know you’re trying to put up a brave front, but this is too much!”

“I-I thank her from the bottom of my heart! I’d want to be born to my mother again even if it meant being born again with this appearance!”

These were her true thoughts, and they cut straight through to my heart. I could tell by the sincerity in her voice that she wasn’t lying. I had no doubt that Ana had endured many horrible things in her life due to her looks. But even so, her kindness persevered. As someone who’d lived a life where their face repulsed others, I knew just how amazing a feat this was. There was a great difference between her and me, especially since I’d said horrible things to my mother back then.

My mother-in-law couldn’t hold back her tears any longer. She looked ready to fall to her knees at any moment, but she kept her hand on the tree to support herself as she broke down. It was rare to see her get so emotional. Ana had said everything so wholeheartedly, and it echoed deep within her mother’s heart.

“This all must be very tough on you, and I have a great solution to make it all go away. Simply withdraw from being a research assistant. Do that, and all the hurt will go away.”

“Absolutely! Simply declare to the professors that you wish to withdraw your name from consideration.”

“I-I-I refuse,” Ana said.

My eyes widened with surprise. Ana hated rocking the boat, but here she was putting her foot down with Lady Florro and her lackeys. She stood her ground and clearly stated her refusal. I hadn’t been surprised that she’d stood up to them when they insulted her mother. That was very in character for her. But she’d never once clearly rejected someone else’s demands.

“What did you say?! Are you trying to defy us?!”

They were outraged by this unexpected rebellion. They tried yelling at her more to intimidate her, but Ana stood her ground. She might have been trembling, but she didn’t lower her gaze, instead glaring right back at them all.

I knew how hard it was to stand up to your bullies. The type of bullying that these girls employed came with the understanding that you wouldn't be hurt if you complied. It was especially difficult to break free of, where they'd bully you into submission. I hadn't been able to cope with it in my past life. It'd been much easier to comply, so I ended up being swept down the path of obedience.

"I-I won't change my mind no matter what you say. I-I definitely w-won't withdraw!"

Ana was trying her best. She'd been bullied from a young age over her appearance, the majority of her marriage talks had fallen apart because of it, and she was desperately fighting to regain the pride she'd lost. She wasn't faltering despite being hurt by their words; she was valiantly fighting. I could feel my eyes getting warm, watching her bravely fight her best.

"S-Sir Gino, m-my parents, my attendants—I need to become stronger for all of the people who treasure me dearly. Th-That's why I will never fall victim to anyone's unreasonable whims again. I-I will absolutely not w-withdraw!"

Ana's eyes glistened with tears but were filled with life as she said these genuine words from deep within her. I couldn't help but be surprised. What was fueling her to fight back wasn't a survival instinct from having been cornered. It was for the sake of those who thought fondly of her. She'd resolved to become stronger for their sake.

Objectively, those two things might not have been too different. It was the minute difference of one's disposition, the slightest shift in intention. But that very small difference was the difference in the way they'd experienced life. If your thoughts were warped after losing to your poor fortune, you'd only be able to think about yourself and produce words for your own self-preservation. It'd be impossible to think about others like Ana did. That little difference in thought was made over a long period of time. The way Ana had gone about things was something that was only possible due to her kindness.

"I-If you continue to ask unreasonable things of me, I-I will report you to the professors!"

"Hm? Can *you* do that? All you've ever done is hide in your house."

"I-It's true that's how I've been until now, but I-I've changed. F-From now on,

I will a-absolutely report you to the professors!”

What happened? I thought Ana had kept her bullying a secret because she didn't want to worry her mother. But now she's saying that she'll report it?! Though nobles kept many secrets by nature, Ana didn't outright lie. Her declaring this meant that she was serious.

The only reason Lady Florro and the rest had been able to bully her as much as they did was because Ana had hidden it. If she reported it to the school, they wouldn't be able to keep it up. *She's solved her bullying problem all by herself!*

“You're going this far to defy me? Do you know how much I've been through because of you?” Lady Florro ground out, her hand trembling.

She'd created her faction by bullying Ana. However with Ana's standing shooting up, that'd all fallen apart, and she was burning with anger over a result for which she only had herself to blame. Lady Florro's face twisted with hatred, but then suddenly, she smiled as if it had all simply disappeared.

Anastasia

“Lady Anastasia, do you remember having marriage talks with my cousin? You haven't forgotten what he said, have you?”

Just a minute ago, she'd been fuming, but suddenly Lady Lalah was speaking in an amused tone. Though facing someone who was smiling should have been more reassuring, for some reason, I was more frightened than before.

“Do you think I want to be having these marriage talks with you? Of course not! Do you really think there's any guy in this world who'd want a monster like you as their wife?”

Those were the words her cousin had said to me. I could never forget. I'd been the recipient of many harsh comments, and no matter how many times I heard them, I never got used to that treatment. I remembered every last word that'd been said to me.

“He was right. You're a monster. The value of a woman lies in her beauty, and you've the face of a monster. You're absolutely worthless as a woman. Aha ha ha!”

I'd felt before that I had no value as a woman. Those with beauty had higher standings in the school than those with smarts. Beauty held great value with women, so it only made sense that I had the lowest possible value in that regard.

Though I'd resolved myself to stand up to her, that resolve was crumbling. I always felt like this when someone ridiculed my appearance. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't change the way I looked. I couldn't help but think it was a wasted effort to try to improve at anything when in the end, I'd still be at the bottom due to this one simple fact. It hurt so much that I wanted to run away.

"It seems that you've gotten a big head from your betrothal with Sir Valvalier, but I think you've finally returned to reality. Lady Anastasia, it's a universal truth that men want beautiful women. There is no exception, including Sir Valvalier."

"But...he said...he wants me..."

I began wishing for support and found myself touching the ring on my finger, confirming that it was real. It was the present Sir Gino had given to me, expressing eternal love in the language of flowers.

"How naive!" she cackled. "There are absolutely no exceptions. He's only human, and this desire is just human nature. I'm sure he's simply tolerating your hideousness. You're just barely tolerable."

I couldn't rebut her. I simply accepted what she said. It was inherently human to prefer that which was beautiful. Sir Gino couldn't have been any different. Her words sunk deep inside me.

"You do understand the difference between being tolerated and being truly desired, don't you? You should try thinking about Sir Gino's happiness for once. So long as you are betrothed to him, he'll have to continue tolerating you, holding back from what he truly wants. That will only cause him pain. Have you no heart? Isn't it a little inconsiderate of you to not think about that?"

It was as if her words were a knife that she was driving deep inside me. Every day of being betrothed to him felt like a dream. Being with him made me happy, but he also made me feel happiness even when I was alone. The flowers I'd see during my usual walks through the garden felt so much more colorful and vivid now. Everything in my life had changed from monochrome to

dazzlingly bright.

I didn't want to lose this happiness, so I'd avoided thinking about these things. Sir Gino had said that he was happy with me. I'd continued running away from the possibility that he'd merely been polite when he'd said that. She'd called me inconsiderate, and that might have been the perfect word to describe me since I hadn't thought about his happiness like that at all. *Is he happy right now? I do believe that he was speaking from the heart when he said he was happy with me. But I'm sure that I'm simply within the range he's willing to tolerate. That means that I'm neither his number one choice, nor am I his only choice. Is he truly happy?*

"Aha ha ha ha!"

Lady Lalah turned and began walking toward the stage door, laughing loudly the whole way.

Ginorious

"Aha ha ha ha!" Lady Florro released a high-pitched laugh as she walked through the stage door.

Both Ana and the other girls seemed confused by her suddenly going inside. On the wall directly opposite the door, there was a decorative ornament that she pulled to open a hidden panel. I couldn't really see from where I was, but judging by its location, I could only assume it was a closet for cleaning tools.

When buying janitorial supplies such as wax, it was the customer's job to prepare the vessel with which to hold it, and the manufacturer would then fill these containers—often large barrels—with the product. Because the process could be a hassle, janitorial closets were typically near the back of buildings.

Most likely this particular door had been hidden simply for aesthetic purposes. After all, though it was in the back of the building, this wasn't a path specifically for servants to use.

The Florro family were in charge of the servants of this school, so it only made sense that she knew the location of this hidden door. However, the question was why she'd suddenly decided to go into the janitorial closet.

“I think it’s about time for you to step in. I wouldn’t mind doing it, but if possible, I’d like for you to do it.”

Though my mother-in-law had been stunned speechless after hearing Ana’s true feelings, she’d come back to her senses when she noticed what was going on. If she simply called out to them, this entire situation would shut down completely, so I felt that she was much better suited to stopping this than I was, but she probably didn’t want to for Ana’s sake. If Ana knew that her mother had seen everything, she’d more than certainly become depressed, thinking that it was her fault that her mother had to hear such insulting words against her. Naturally, Ana’s mother knew her well. Of course, I agreed to intervene.

“Do you know what this is?” Lady Florro asked after she returned with a metallic bottle, most likely made of copper judging by its color.

“N-No, I don’t.”

“My family is in charge of the cleaning products and other supplies, so I know precisely what this is. It’s called brown algae’s blessing.”

Oh no! I jumped out in a panic, knowing exactly what that product was. It was a concoction made up of water mixed with the ashes of seaweed and slaked lime. If diluted, it worked wonders as a stain remover, but it was also used in its undiluted form by sewage facilities to melt pipe blockages. In order to save space, it was typical for it to be stored in its undiluted form.

Since I had my memories from my past life, I could guess its composition and production method. Most likely it was an aqueous sodium hydroxide. Caustic soda, also known as sodium hydroxide, would burn through skin and cause chemical burns. The undiluted form of the algae’s blessing was concentrated enough to melt hair. Getting any on you was extremely dangerous.

“How about you become even more monstrous? This may push you out of Sir Valvalier’s tolerable range. Aha ha ha ha!”

“Wh-What are you doing?”

No! I’m too far away to use my magic in time! I poured mana into my ring, hoping that if I could speed up my time, I’d be able to make it. I ran, taking off my jacket and beginning to construct my spell. Within my sped-up time, the

open bottle that'd been thrown at Ana looked like it was floating in the air. When I reached Ana, I held her tight to me and moved her out of the bottle's trajectory. Then, I raised my jacket as a shield. By then, I'd completed preparations for my spell and deployed an invisible barrier over my jacket.

After confirming that everything was in place, I stopped supplying my ring with mana and the metal bottle collided with my jacket and the magic barrier, then fell to the ground. The droplets that'd hit the barrier also fell after I deactivated it.



“You! Do you know what you just tried to do?! You just attempted to inflict serious injuries! Lady Gastonieu, Lady Bhaitu, are you involved in this?!”

“You’re exaggerating. She didn’t throw it hard. She wouldn’t have gotten hurt from just a bottle,” Lady Gastonieu said, flustered.

It was true that Lady Florro had carefully lobbed the bottle so that the solution inside wouldn’t splash herself. If it was just the bottle that made contact with Ana’s head, it probably wouldn’t have caused too much damage. But that wasn’t the problem here.

It didn’t seem that anyone outside of Lady Florro knew what the solution was capable of. It was normal to think that cleaning products wouldn’t cause any bodily harm. The only ones who would know were Lady Florro since it was her family business, and potentially Ana with her wealth of knowledge.

I began explaining exactly what the solution inside the bottle was, and it seemed that I was right and the other two had thought this was all nothing more than something akin to tossing water in someone’s face. They didn’t know that every year there were accidents from improper handling that resulted in blindness or heavy burns. They went pale after realizing how much trouble they’d have been in if Ana had actually been hit by it. They finally seemed to understand how huge a deal this would’ve become since it would’ve resulted in a compulsory investigation from the court knights.

“I-I had nothing to do with this!”

“M-Me neither! I’ll be leaving now!”

The two of them, having learned the gravity of the situation, promptly fled, leaving Lady Florro standing stunned by herself. Eventually, she gave Ana a very nasty glare.

“I will never forgive you. Never!” she screeched before chasing after the other two.

Due to this incident, I had no doubt that she’d lose even more power in the school. Those two had been the last in her group, but there was no chance that they’d stand with her anymore. She was probably chasing them right now to try and keep them from dropping her altogether.

One's position in the school hierarchy and what group of friends you had—all of this was stupid to care about from an adult's perspective. But the students were only children, and to them, these were the most important things. That's why she harbored so much hatred toward Ana. I couldn't blame her for having tunnel vision, as she was still very much a child.

But even so, it was best to be wary of her. A child she might be, but she was still someone who demonstrated that she'd resort to actions like this, and she was messed-up enough to bully Ana for all these years. In order to protect Ana, I needed to step things up a bit. My mother-in-law had jumped out slightly, also thinking I wouldn't make it in time, but fortunately, she'd returned to her hiding spot by now. After seeing that everything was resolved, she signaled with her fan that she was going to leave the rest to me before heading to the carriages. Conveying your thoughts with a hand fan was an absolutely necessary technique that noble ladies learned for evening soirees and such.

"I'm so terribly sorry. I've caused you so much trouble," Ana said, bowing her head deeply.

I explained to her that she had nothing to apologize for and shouldn't worry about it.

"I'll take you to the church," I said, holding out my arm to escort her.

There was no way I was leaving Ana by herself again.

"I've no right to be escorted by you."

"What are you saying? We're betrothed."

"I...I've been trying my best to become someone who you would not be embarrassed to have by your side, but...but...I couldn't do it. Instead all I've done is cause you trouble."

I embraced Ana. I couldn't hold my emotions back when I saw her about to cry. The shock from being hugged prevented her from saying anything further.

"You haven't caused me any problems at all."

"But, even just now, I put you in danger of being burned! Your jacket's damaged too..."

“That’s not your fault. I did this all on my own. I wanted to protect you. I made the choice to spring into action. You didn’t cause any problems for me whatsoever.”

“But if in the future anything happens to you because of me, I—”

“Even if something did happen, there’s nothing to worry about at all. Defending their betrothed is a man’s honor. I will wear it as a badge of honor.”

“It’s better for you not to be burned at all! If I were more together...if I were a girl who wouldn’t cause you problems—”

“Let me say this again: I acted on my own. There’s absolutely no need for you to feel guilty or apologize for anything. But if you really feel like you want to do something, then smile for me. Don’t dwell on your regrets and instead thank me with your smile. I did all of this to see you smile.”

Ana looked up from my arms and when our eyes met, I could see the tears still welling up in her eyes. Then, she pushed against my chest and escaped from my arms.

Anastasia

“Let me say this again: I acted on my own. There’s absolutely no need for you to feel regret or apologize for anything. But if you really feel like you want to do something, then smile for me. Don’t dwell on your regrets and instead thank me with your smile. I did all of this to see you smile.”

He’s so kind. Even though he was put in a situation where he could have been disfigured, he hasn’t blamed me even in the slightest. If anything, he’s being kind and trying to make me think that I carry none of the burden. As I looked up at his face, I could see the sincerity in his gentle eyes.

I did everything I could do to hold back the tears that were threatening to burst out. Men loathed seeing my tears. Even though he was acting so kindly to me, I hadn’t been thinking about his well-being at all. Even I thought I was a horrible woman. I forcibly separated myself from him.

“I don’t believe I have the right to be by your side. I’m an underhanded person. I’ve been running away from the thought of your true happiness all this

time.”

“Huh? But I’m more than sufficiently happy as things are now.”

“I’m sure that you’re quite generous in regard to your tolerance of a woman’s looks. That’s why you’ve treated even me so well. It’s why you’ve kept me by your side despite my ugliness. However, there’s a difference between tolerating someone and truly desiring them. I believe it shouldn’t be too difficult for you to marry someone truly beautiful.”

“Oh, I see. Lady Florro’s words have affected you. You’re misunderstanding something, Ana.”

“I am?”

“Yes. You’re not ugly. You’re cute.”

“You’re the only man who’s said that. You’re very kind, so I’m sure this is nothing more than an extension of that. You’re pushing yourself to find good things about me.”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort. Ana, you are truly cute. Allow me to explain.”

Then, he began to list off everything he found cute about me, giving examples as well.

“When we dance, the way you glance at me and then immediately look away is cute. The way you twitch with surprise when you see a bug on a flower is cute. The way you smile from ear to ear when you eat honey cake is cute. The way you close your eyes to enjoy the aroma of tea is cute. The way you move your thumb to flip back through pages while you read is cute. The way you look down and sheepishly smile and slightly shake your head is cute. Also—”

As he did his absolute best to explain his feelings, I could feel the warmth in his words. It took everything I had to hold back my tears. As he spoke, I realized that he and I had very different definitions of the word “cute.” For him, it seemed to have nothing to do with looks. I had no clue that the basis for what one would call cute could be so different. Although, thinking about it, it might be only natural. After all, there were many types of beauty and everyone had different preferences.

Those who were beautiful were praised for their looks. On the other hand, I was deemed ugly by everyone. That's why I'd thought that from anyone's point of view, I was ugly. If we were being graded on it, I'd be at the absolute bottom. This had been essentially common sense for me up until now.

However, through his passionate words, that certainty was beginning to crumble. I was beginning to think that there was no absolute value on beauty. *That's right... Beauty, cuteness, sexual allure—there are many factors that determine whether one likes someone or not. All of those are subjective. It's all up to the individual, and they're not unified, logical, or objective.*

I'd been trying to avoid talking about my looks as much as possible because I hadn't wanted to think deeply about it. However, as I continued to avoid it, I never came to the realization that all of this stemmed from my own weakness.

"It's cute when your eyebrows furrow slightly when you eat something sour. Also—"

"Th-That's enough," I said, stopping him.

If I heard any more of these kind words, my tears were going to spill out. After stopping his list, he put both of his hands on my shoulders. I was shocked by the sudden touch and looked up at him. I could see sincerity reflected in his purple eyes as he looked straight at me. His gaze was so strong as if he was wishing for something. I couldn't look away.

"Ana, you should trust *my* words, not the words of others. I truly think you're cute. Can you believe what I say and think of yourself as cute? I'll keep saying you're cute as many times as it takes for you to regain your confidence. I'll say it a thousand times, tens of thousands of times, or even a million times."

Tears began streaming down my face as I couldn't hold them back any longer. Sir Gino looked unsure of what to do, but eventually he used his handkerchief to wipe them away. However, this only made more tears fall. I was so emotional, I couldn't even speak. His words and the gentle touch of his handkerchief were all too kind.

Sir Gino was the first man to not seem displeased at the sight of my tears and was even kind to me as I cried. *Beautiful people are those who are rated highly by others' subjective preferences. Mother is one such person. There are so many*

who love her for her beauty, which is why she gets so much attention whenever she's in public.

However, thinking about it, what did it matter to me how many people were interested in me? The only thing that mattered was the opinion of the best, most wonderful man—Sir Gino. Up until now, my looks had been a large, tree-sized thorn in my heart and a source of inferiority, but all of a sudden, I didn't feel it there at all anymore. Sir Gino's impossible kindness had melted it away. I had no doubt that I might still express feelings of inferiority at times, but...I was okay now. After all, Sir Gino promised that he'd tell me I was cute as many times as I wished.

Ginorious

"I'll trust your words... No matter how much others may call me ugly, I will continue to believe I'm cute," Ana said with a smile, tears streaming down her face.

"Thank you."

I'd panicked when Ana began to cry. She hadn't said anything after stating that guys didn't like it when she cried. No matter what I said, she said nothing in return. She just continued to cry, which made me seriously panic.

I tried everything I could to comfort her with my words, but the more I did, the more she cried, which made me freak out even more. *But finally! She's finally smiling now! And she's talking to me!* I was relieved, but very soon, that feeling turned to shock. *What?! Ana's hugging me?!* It was a very reserved hug where she put just her hands on the sides of my body. *But still, this is without a doubt a hug!* A powerful shock shot through my body. This feeling wasn't anything as simple as a hammer smashing against my head or being struck by lightning. In the eighty-two years that I'd lived in my past life and the seventeen years in this one, I'd lived almost a combined hundred years. In my long life, I'd never been hugged by a girl who wasn't a family member. My mind went blank.

"Sir Gino, I...treasure you very deeply."

I jumped. It was as if an explosion went off, my emotions bursting all at once

from inside me.

“Me too, Ana. I love you!”

Then I wrapped Ana in my arms. This was the first time in the century I’d lived that I’d told a woman I loved her. Even so, it came out so easily. There was a torrential flow of emotions swirling around inside me, so all I had to do was let them out just a little. Hearing me use the “L” word made Ana look up from within my arms. I looked back at her, and I could feel her existence from the warmth she radiated. It was as if time had stopped as we gazed at each other.

It felt like we were the only two people in the world. I couldn’t see anyone but her. Everything else in the world might as well have been worthless. That day was the first time our lips touched one another’s.



Chapter 8: A Mother's Love, a Daughter's Feelings

The day after the ceremony, Ana was invited by her mother to have tea. Most likely, she wanted to talk to Ana about the bullying since she'd seen it firsthand and was now fully aware of it happening.

Surprisingly, though, Ana had extended a tea invitation to her mother as well because she also had some things she wanted to tell her. They'd also invited me to join, which was why I was here with them. We enjoyed some light conversation, but eventually, my mother-in-law dismissed those around us and asked them to shut the door behind them. Usually, when Ana and I had tea, Bridgette would stay too because it was improper for an unmarried man and woman to be left alone in a room together. However, since my mother-in-law was with us, Bridgette was excused as well.

"I heard from Lady Valvalier that your formalwear was ruined, Gino. Did you have anything to do with that, Ana?" she asked, cutting straight to the chase, pretending as if she hadn't seen everything that'd happened.

"I...invited you to tea to speak with you about that." But Ana clammed up immediately after saying this, most likely not having the willpower to say what she wanted to.

I couldn't blame her. One needed courage to tell their parents they were being bullied. She stayed in silence, and all the while, her mother looked at her with a gentle expression, silently encouraging her. As the third party, I also stayed quiet to let them work through it together.

The gentle sound of the water clock echoed across the large and lavish eighteenth drawing room, Black Luster. There was a faint sweet smell wafting around us from the vase of red lythraceae on the table. Ana gripped her hands as they lay in her lap. I reached out and squeezed them. This was about the most I could do for her. She smiled at me, then took a deep breath before finally beginning to speak.

She started by talking about how her personal items had been vandalized

recently, and then about how she'd been bullied in the past, and then about how I'd defended her when she'd almost been hit by industrial-strength lye. Her mother listened to all of it with an expression of anger and sorrow.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? I know I might not be the most reliable mother, but I'd do anything I could to help you."

"I'm really sorry," Ana replied, falling silent again.

She didn't try making excuses for herself. She'd often act like this when she was convinced that the blame rested with her. Seeing this only made her mother sadder. But that being said, I felt that Ana had missed some parts of her explanation. I wanted to stay out of this as much as possible, but at the very least, I could help clear up the misunderstanding.

"Ana kept this a secret out of consideration for you," I explained.

"How so?"

"The reason she kept the bullying a secret for so long is because she didn't want you to blame yourself. Since you're the one who gave birth to her, Ana was worried that if you knew she was being bullied because of her looks, you'd think it was your fault. That's why she chose to endure it all by herself in order to protect you."

My mother-in-law's eyes trembled with emotion.

"It's true that's how this all started, but...that's not how I feel anymore," Ana told her. "All I ever do is cause problems for Sir Gino, so I began thinking about what I was doing wrong and what I could do better. That's when I began to realize I was thinking about things incorrectly."

"In what way?" Ana's mother asked her.

"When I was young, I'd always come home in tears whenever anyone said something mean about my looks. You were always so sad seeing me like that, so I always assumed it was because you thought it was your fault that I look like this. But now I realize that if I'd returned home not because I'd cried but because I'd lashed out and made someone else cry, you wouldn't have been sad, but angry with me." After saying this, Ana shut her eyes. She wasn't calm enough to get it out all at once. "I've finally realized that the real reason you

were sad was because I was crying. It was all because of my own weakness. If I'd had the same strength that you and Sir Gino are proud of, then I wouldn't have made you sad, nor would I have ever caused problems for Sir Gino. That's...what I think now."

"Ana, you..."

Her mother was too choked up to finish her sentence. In order to not hurt her, Ana had chosen to endure everything on her own. She'd chosen not to blame her mother even a little bit for the difficult times she'd endured. She'd made everything her own responsibility and had resolved to become strong for the people important to her, starting with her mother. Learning this must've been a great shock to my mother-in-law.

When I'd been bullied in my previous life, I'd done nothing more than lament my unluckiness for being born ugly, resent those who bullied me, and lash out at my mother, but Ana was different. She didn't let those around her be worried about her because of her looks. Instead, she found a solution—to change herself. Despite her being the one going through these rough times, she remained considerate to those around her. *What a pure and kind girl you are! The likes of me isn't worthy of you.*

"I'm... I'm truly pathetic for hurting you this much, mother, and causing so much trouble for you, Sir Gino. The fact that I'm only realizing all this now just shows how long I've been trying to avoid the truth," Ana said, looking down, tears falling from her eyes.

"No... No, that's not it at all, Ana..."

Seeing the two of them hug each other with tears streaming down their faces was enough for me to understand that I shouldn't be here, so I quietly left the room.



Not very long after, I was having tea again with my mother-in-law, this time in the eleventh drawing room, Milky Quartz.

"It was just as you suspected, Gino."

I'd been gathering evidence of all the bullying up until now in preparation to

accuse Lady Florro and her group. Some of these were testimonies I'd requested from the girls I'd won to my side. After Ana confessed to her mother about the bullying, I'd covertly passed all of this evidence to my mother-in-law.

Ana wasn't aware of any of this. She didn't know that Lady Florro and her group had threatened younger students into helping to harass her, nor that I'd gotten them to switch sides and had used them to help gather proof against Lady Florro, nor that said proof was now in her mother's hands.

If she knew that uninvolved people had been threatened to help bully her, Ana would definitely feel bad, which was why I couldn't let her know. I'd only tell her after I'd resolved everything. After all, at that point, there'd be no need for her to worry anymore.

As I'd handed over the evidence, I'd told my mother-in-law my theory. In our elite class filled with greater nobles, servants took care of many things such as cleaning and taking out trash, which meant there were many servants around often. Even so, the school apparently had no clue about Ana's personal effects being messed with. Despite the amount of times it'd happened, nobody had seen anything, which was obviously strange.

From what I'd seen in the video footage that my black wasp had taken, the servants always seemed to leave the classroom at the same time, right before anything happened. It made me suspect that the servants were also connected to Ana's bullying. The servants in the school had all been posted there by House Florro. It was more than possible that Lady Florro could also have been giving them commands.

The girls that Lady Florro used as pawns were ordered to plan their times of attack in advance so they could make sure that the servants had all left. This only strengthened my theory that the servants were being controlled. The only question was whether or not Lady Florro was the only one pulling the strings.

From what my mother-in-law told me, the school had stopped receiving reports of bullying after the third grade. There'd been absolutely no reports after that. However, according to Ana, though the bullying had gotten overall less severe, it hadn't stopped completely. Though Ana didn't really consider the recent lighter harassment to be bullying, it was unmistakably the same

unpleasant thing to me. It would also mean that they'd somehow been controlling the servants to allow for it to happen since the third grade.

To the servants, their master wasn't Lady Florro, but her father. The only way they would have neglected their jobs would be if they'd been ordered to do so by him. There was no way they'd leave the posts they'd been assigned to simply because of threats from Lady Florro. It was hard to believe that she would be continuously successful in compelling them to leave their posts for extended periods of time all these years.

In addition, the bullying had started when Ana was in elementary school, meaning that Lady Florro had also been an elementary school student. It was hard to imagine that a child would've been able to command the servants like that. Thus, I concluded that Marquess Florro had to have been involved somehow, and that was what I'd told my mother-in-law.

"House Florro is always very careful with their vetting process, so we didn't send any of our covert agents into the school, but I see. So that's what's been happening."

After saying this, my mother-in-law had promised to investigate, and now, she was confirming my theory. Just as I'd suspected, House Florro had played a part in Ana's bullying.

"I went to the school and read the reports from the servants. It seems there were many of them in the beginning, but they completely stopped sometime during the third grade."

Whenever the servants saw violence or misconduct between the students, they were supposed to write a report and give it to their supervisor, and these records were what my mother-in-law was referencing. Apparently, since there was proof of bullying now, she'd been allowed to read them without any fuss.

"Even the notes left by the servants' supervisor were strange. Before, there were multiple incidents that were marked as needing the school board's attention, but they all ended up dismissed as being unnecessary to pass along. I believe the supervisor buried these reports, and since there were no reports, the school was never alerted and our family never learned about it either."

The bullying had started in the first grade. The fact that the reports stopped

coming around the third grade probably meant that what had been done previously had been spontaneous and not planned. It would also mean that they'd thought of this dastardly plan partway through Ana's third year at the school.

"What could they gain out of doing this?" I wondered out loud.

"It seems that they thought by sowing the seeds of inferiority into her as a child, she'd still have that vulnerability as an adult, making it easier for them to coerce her into accepting any of their demands."

Suddenly, I remembered a time in my past life when I'd met my bullies at a reunion. As working adults, there was no way they'd be violent, but just seeing their faces, I began sweating profusely. Before I knew it, I'd developed a strong aversion to them to the point that I wanted to avoid doing anything that would upset them.

House Florro knew what they were doing. Ana was a weak point for the duke, my mother-in-law, and of course me as well. If someone could make Ana do whatever they wanted, they'd wield tremendous power.

"I had our covert operatives look into things, but it seems that House Gastonieu and House Bhaitu are also involved."

Apparently, the Sevensworth's covert operatives had confirmed this from a memo locked in a safe in the Florro household. Unlike when she'd held off on sending them to the school in order to prevent relations with the Florro household from deteriorating, this time, she'd had them search fully knowing that their relations could be damaged.

"Sorry, I can tell that you'd love nothing more than to help retaliate, but I've already taken care of everything. There's nothing left for you to do."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, despite them going after our family, they didn't go after me or my husband. They went after our child. As her mother, it's only natural that I make them pay the price, isn't it?"

Seeing her innocently giggle made a chill run down my spine. My mother-in-law was famous for her beauty and considered by most to be a kind and lovely

woman. As a daughter of the royal family, it seemed that she'd been thoroughly trained on how to smile because there was a refined grace to it.

However, in those kind eyes, I could see the same look that a hawk had when it caught its prey. Though her smile was undeniably elegant, I could feel hell's wrath radiating from it.

"However, they're not stupid. I'm sure they've prepared for the possibility of this all coming to light," she said.

Most likely they'd ask the royal family to mediate; however, there was no chance they'd ask His Majesty to do it. The Sevensworths were the biggest backers of His Majesty. He wasn't foolish enough to mediate for someone in direct conflict with them. It was also doubtful they'd ask His Highness, the crown prince, either. He didn't have enough sway over his family yet.

Most likely, they'd ask the previous queen—my mother-in-law's mother—Her Majesty herself, or His Majesty's concubine. Their top choice had to be the previous queen. The only one who could stop the Sevensworths was her. They could potentially request help from the other two, but it would likely only be to assist her.

"Let's have a little lesson about politics. What do you think House Florro will do to get my mother to mediate?" my mother-in-law asked.

"Well, even if they sweeten the deal, it's hard to think that she wouldn't side with you, her own daughter. In that case, I think they'd have to try and convince her family, the Slattorys."

"In that case, what do you think they'll do to get the support of the Slattorys?"

"Despite their prestige, the Slattorys are not very wealthy, so I supposed they'd try to offer them financial assistance."

"So what should I do to stop their plan?"

"Offer something more valuable to them than financial assistance."

"You've studied very well, but you're only half right," she said with a satisfied smile. Judging by her reaction, I could confidently say she wasn't being sarcastic

with her praise. “Getting them what they want is the simplest option, and what they want isn’t money, but industry.”

“It is?”

Up until about a hundred years ago, the majority of nobles had looked down on trade as an activity of the poor. However, that attitude changed a lot in the past century. If they weren’t running a business, the main source of a noble’s wealth had been through taxes on the crops that came from their territory. In other words, the money they made was based on farming.

However, times had changed, and the value of farming had been greatly surpassed by industrialization. Nobles that had their hands on these kinds of businesses saw their economic power grow greatly, gaining them both money and influence in turn. With the number of nobles with industrial businesses growing, even those who’d turned their noses up on trade began making ventures into industry.

In the present day, it was common for nobles to own a handful of businesses, and very rare not to have at least one. However, the Slattorys were one of the last few traditional noble households. They’d held out, continuing to focus on farming, relying on their fertile lands.

“The Slattorys are on the road to ruin and they know it. That’s why they want to have their own business. They know they can’t afford to fail, so they’re examining their prospects very carefully.”

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that she was able to get this information. The reason they couldn’t allow themselves even the slightest error in choosing a business venture must’ve been because of how stubborn they’d been to adapt to the modern ways. If they failed here, then they’d be ridiculed as a house that hadn’t attempted to start a business because they didn’t have any business acumen to begin with. Nobles cared a lot about their honor, and if they became the target of ridicule, the family would start fighting among themselves, ending in their entire house falling into chaos.

“So that’s why I’ve prepared something for the Slattorys that absolutely won’t fail. I’m arranging similar opportunities for other royal members as well. There’s no chance they’ll help with the mediation, so nothing will be able to interfere

with my retaliation.”

Though her smile was filled with grace and refinement, it still sent chills down my spine.



When Ana and I arrived at school, we saw a notice of expulsion regarding Lady Florro and her group on the announcement board. It all happened pretty quick since we’d had all the evidence put together. The school was an institution with the purpose of developing talented individuals to serve the palace. In order to prevent having malicious people as colleagues in the royal court, the school had a zero-tolerance policy for bullying.

I’d been right that the girls had been bullying Ana under instruction from their parents; however, that wasn’t where the story ended. Due to poor coordination between Lady Florro and her family, they hadn’t always been able to prevent the servants from submitting reports. As a result, there were numerous reports that’d been filed and subsequently buried.

Lady Florro and her group had also been bullying Ana for the selfish motivation of growing their group’s size and influence. In addition to what they’d been instructed to do by their families, they’d also bullied Ana of their own accord, which had contributed to incidents slipping through the cracks. Since they’d done this all gladly and willingly, there was absolutely no room for sympathy. Even so, Ana didn’t seem too happy as she looked at the notice.

“If I’d been more skillful at handling the situation, perhaps they wouldn’t have had to be expelled.”

“Aren’t you angry? They bullied you for so long.”

“I can’t forgive them for involving you in all this, Sir Gino. But as long as they were just focusing on me, it didn’t really bother me too much. To be honest, I’d already gotten used to the majority of what they did.”

“You could forgive them if they only focused on you? How?”

“I’m not sure if ‘forgive’ is the correct word. However, I would at least not hold a grudge against them. If I face these dark emotions inside me every day and weaken them, then after a year or five years, I’ll no longer be a prisoner to

them.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. She was able to face the dark emotions inside her? Not holding on to those feelings was something I’d never been able to accomplish. With my lengthy life experience, I’d gotten good at keeping a lid on my more unseemly emotions. But that was as much as I’d done. I hadn’t gotten rid of them, and as a result, they still leaked out every now and then.

“I believe that every time we rid ourselves of the dark emotions that build up inside us, we can become more understanding. A knight can swing their sword every day and gain physical strength, and it’s the same for one’s heart. By training it, I believe you can make it stronger.”

I did get what she was saying. When I was met with an unfair situation in my previous life, if I could overcome my rage, accept the situation, look for how I could’ve handled things better, and be satisfied with that, I became more understanding. However, I’d only had that realization about halfway through that life, as compared to Ana who already understood it at her young age. She’d faced these unfair situations straight on, much more than I ever had.

“Humans aren’t gods. There isn’t a single perfect person in this world. Everyone has a flaw, so at a certain point, you’ll certainly find one thing or another that you don’t like about someone. That’s how it is for everyone, which is why I think it’s important that we learn to forgive each other as people living in a world with no perfect people.”

As Ana smiled sheepishly, I found myself completely struck by her. It was a smile filled with gentleness and kindness, so bright I felt like I had to squint. Ana was much more mature than I’d expected. It just showed how long she’d been thinking about the act of forgiveness.

The environment she’d grown up in was different than the one I’d known in my past life. At the very least, graduating from school meant that you didn’t need to see your bully anymore, but in this world, even after graduating, Ana would see them at social functions. She was in an environment where she had to think deeply about forgiving others. Though she was wearing a peaceful smile, behind it was the struggles she’d overcome to get to this point.

With my memories of my past life, I was mentally much older than Ana, and

as an adult, I'd always thought that I needed to be protective of her. But wow, I'd been so conceited. Ana was much more of an adult than I was with her ability to process the dark emotions within and channel them into making her a more understanding person.

But I felt thankful. This was something I realized when my mother-in-law had stopped me from immediately rushing in to save Ana. What I wanted to be wasn't her guardian, but her spouse who could walk by her side. I didn't want to protect her from afar. I wanted to be right next to her and protect her as an equal. If she was more of an adult than me, then there was no need for me to try to be her guardian, especially since I didn't want to be. I should simply walk by her side.

I was suddenly surprised by a thought. Every time Ana had endured hardship, she'd grown, and her rate of growth was incredible. I'd always known she was a wonderful person, but at seventeen, she was more mature than me. If she kept maturing her beautiful heart like this, I couldn't even imagine how wonderful a girl she'd be in ten years' time. *In ten years, will I be someone worthy of standing by her side?* I needed to make myself more mature so I could still be with her ten, twenty, or even more years into the future. First, I needed to fix my inability to speak with women. *I need to actively overcome this weakness of mine!*

"I heard about everything. You really had it rough."

"You finally stood up to them. Great job!"

When we entered the classroom, Anthony and Justin said this to Ana.

"I feel much better now that you've struck back. True to your word, you stood up to them by yourself. I suppose it comes as no surprise since you are my friend." Lady Byron seemed proud as if this were her own accomplishment.

Ana had gone to her for advice about being bullied. Though I understood it was normal for girls to talk to each other about these kinds of things, it still made me a little sad that she hadn't come to me.

"I noticed you being bullied more than a few times, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything, so I'm glad you fought back."

The reason that Anthony and the other sons of military families didn't interfere was because of their upbringing. A knight's primary duty was protection, so it was normal for them to spend most of their time by the side of their lord or their family members. Since they were always with their clients, they also had to be around for any kind of family fights.

Even if there was a domestic dispute between the lord they served and their wife, if the knight got involved, they'd inevitably pick a side, which would consequently brand them as being more loyal to one over the other. In general, it was best if there was just one knight around in these situations. If there were more knights present, that was when it got tricky because if they all chose different sides, then a simple quarrel between spouses could escalate to a divisive civil war.

That's why, in order to keep the peace, knights were instructed to stay out of fights and only step in if things became violent. This had been drilled into them from a young age, so it was a habit of theirs to stay neutral. That was their form of justice.

"You've changed quite a bit from how you used to be, Lady Anastasia. Standing up to Lady Florro and her group is already impressive, but you're even actively participating in discussions and taking more responsibility at school. What's changed?" Anthony asked.

"Well..."

Ana glanced at me before looking down, growing red.

Seeing her reaction amused Anthony. "Oh, I see. You wanna show off to your fiancé, huh?"

"Th-That's not it! I-I merely wanted to, at the very least, change who I was inside so I could be on an even level with Sir Gino..."

What?! The reason she's been trying so hard recently is because of me?! Really?!

"You're wrong, Ana! If anyone needs to step things up, it's me! You're such a splendid girl with the shine of a thousand suns!"

"You really don't skip a beat, do you," Justin said, laughing.

The girls in our class squealed as I once again lost to the emotions rushing through me and hugged Ana because she was acting so pure and cute. Ana being too cute was becoming an increasingly frequent problem for me.



House Florro was removed from their role of overseeing the servants at the school, which only made sense since they'd buried evidence of bullying. Outside of the school situation, they were also losing contracts left and right due to my mother-in-law's plan. Without any work, they were unable to keep paying their employees, making them hemorrhage the majority of their workforce.

Those who'd been let go were hired by the Slattorys. They'd recently gotten into the business of staffing operations themselves and were coincidentally the same people who'd taken over supplying the servants at the school.

The Sevensworth family was also in the same business within the capital, and the ones in charge of it helped the Slattorys with their new business endeavor until they were fully up and running. With their help, they couldn't fail in spite of being novices.

With House Florro having their business stolen from them, the Slattorys were swooping in to fill the void. Effectively, my mother-in-law had simultaneously punished House Florro while also making business for the Slattorys. Plus, the Sevensworths hadn't ceded any of their own business, so this came at almost no cost to the family. It was truly a brilliant move by my mother-in-law.

She'd also arranged to give the king's concubine a massive ironworks factory as a gift. It was decided that it'd be built, with the direction of the Sevensworths, in the Lefou territory, which was run by the family of the king's concubine. It was good news for them since their territory's fragile economy could expect a sharp increase in their tax revenue.

However, this was essentially a death sentence to the Gastonius, whose bread and butter was iron manufacturing. The Sevensworths had a great influence on the flow of iron ore thanks to their mines. For the time being, they wouldn't disrupt the Gastonius' iron supply, but once the Lefous had their operation up and running, it was natural to assume that all manufacturing would move to them. This was also an arrangement that punished one family

while rewarding another, and my mother-in-law had even kept in mind our country's iron flow to make sure it wasn't affected. It was pure genius.

But she didn't stop there. Any house involved with the bullying of Ana was seeing disastrous consequences. At first glance, it might have seemed that the Sevensworths were currying favor with the royal family so their retaliation against other families wouldn't be interfered with, but that wasn't the case.

The Slattorys would be leaving the management of their business to the Sevensworths for a while. During that time, the majority of the executives they were hiring were actually people who worked for the Sevensworths. Even if the Slattorys ran their company independently, the Sevensworths would still have people on the inside.

It was the same for the massive ironworks they were helping to build for the Lefous. They most likely thought that prominent commoners had succumbed to the pressure of the Sevensworths and that's why they decided to co-fund the ironworks. However, in reality, these commoners had gotten the funds from the Sevensworths and were bound to them by contracts and debt. If anything happened that would put the Sevensworths in danger, they would cause a rebellion like good little puppets.

None of this had been done simply for the favor of the royal family. However, my mother-in-law certainly allowed them to think that while silently infiltrating the households with members from the Sevensworths. It was the so-called Trojan horse strategy.

I couldn't help but be awed by her plan. Though she looked like a gentle person you'd want to protect, she was different on the inside. There were three members of the royal family that the Sevensworths had to account for. The first was her mother, the previous queen, whose family had just gained a staffing operation. The second was the king's concubine, whose family just earned a massive ironworks. However, Her Highness was only given extra beauty products in the end. Apparently, she hadn't latched onto the too-good-to-be-true deal that my mother-in-law had presented. She was truly a wise person.



I'd gotten word of another medicine that sounded like it could possibly cure

Ana's curse. Legends of this "elixir" were apparently known all around the world. If this idea had existed in my past world, it would have just been laughed off as a myth, but this world had dungeons where mysterious items called artifacts could be excavated. Artifacts were incredibly valuable. If the third son of a farmer, for example, discovered one and gave it to the royal family, they could easily be granted a noble title as a reward. There were records of many such cases, and public ones at that. Given what we already knew about artifacts, it wouldn't be strange at all for there to be a godly panacea out there somewhere.

Currently, I was in the Sevensworths library researching dungeons in order to find any that were unexplored and could possibly have the elixir in them. Despite the incentive of artifacts being a path to prestige and higher social status, there were still many unexplored dungeons in this world. This was due to the large number of powerful monsters that tended to take up residence inside them. The humans of this world weren't necessarily at the top of the food chain. There were plenty of areas that humans couldn't step foot in because they were ruled by monsters.

As I pored over the documents, I remembered video games from my past life where treasure boxes could be found at the ends of dungeons, but they'd always be guarded by formidable monsters. The way these artifacts were also "guarded" by monsters reminded me of those games. The game designers made it that way so you'd always have to defeat some enemy to get the treasure, but that wasn't the case in the real world. There were some dungeons that had no monsters at all, or had only weak ones living in them. Such areas had already long since been plundered, though, leaving only the dungeon ruins behind.

Looking at the documents, essentially all of the dungeons were underground. They were subterranean structures with many levels that adventurers would explore one by one. This made it seem even more like the games from my past life.

But the dungeons weren't conveniently laid out from the starting village to where the last boss was; all of the unexplored dungeons were in monster territory, meaning that no humans lived near them. That being said, it didn't

mean they were all past the country's borders. Of course, outside the country was monster territory, but even within it, there were places where humans didn't live. For example, I found somewhere called the Ogre King's Forest. This forest was essentially in the middle of the kingdom and it was rife with monsters and unexplored dungeons.

According to the documents, only about five percent of those who ventured into that forest came back alive. That percentage was determined by if even one person from a group of adventurers or knights survived. Putting that into perspective, if there were a hundred parties that tried exploring those dungeons, then that meant ninety-five of those parties back. They were fearsomely dangerous, but these dungeons were the most viable options, and the forest was the closest area with dungeons to me. Besides, five percent was overall on the safer side.

"Oh, Sir Gino? What are you doing here in the library?"

Just as I was looking through the bookcases for more documents, Ana called out and excitedly trotted over to me. *She's so cute! Like a puppy!*

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"I was wondering what kind of dungeons are out there that I can sightsee."

Nobles valued trust, so I tried my best to not lie and merely only omit things or word things more vaguely. Even if it would be while battling monsters, I would still *technically* be sightseeing around the dungeon. The only problem was, while I didn't mind bending the truth a little around other people, deceiving Ana hurt my heart.

"What about you, Ana? Why are you here today?"

"Oh, me? I was wondering if we might have any books on the Liebeh kingdom's embroidery techniques," she explained.

I need to make sure that we stay off the topic of dungeons. If she knew I wanted to go to these unexplored dungeons, she'd definitely stop me, and I wasn't sure I had the strength to go against her wishes. I'd do anything she wanted if she cried. In order to obtain the elixir and make her happy, I needed

to do this without her realizing.

After finding what she was looking for, Ana soon returned to the school. I didn't have any classes today, so I only walked her to the carriage.

"Oh, speaking of dungeons, I'd very much like to see the bell of Sicily Whee in person one day," Ana said as we passed through the library's main entrance.

"Oh, the bell of the goddess of luck, Lutohna?"

"That very one. It's in a tower that's over three hundred meters tall and is in the same shape as the bell. They've successfully excavated it and it's now a famous tourist spot. It's said that praying in front of the tower will bless you with good fortune."

It was rare for the ruins of excavated dungeons to become tourist destinations. Even more strange, it was apparently a colossal, mysterious structure. It felt like something that would've traveled around by word of mouth, but this was the first I was hearing of it.

"It's not strange for you to not know it. After all, it's in the Cantoll region of the Liebeh kingdom."

Oh, it's there, huh? Not only was it far from the country we lived in, but we had no relations with them. The fact that she knew about these ruins despite them being in a foreign country was impressive. She really had such a wealth of knowledge.

After I saw Ana off, I returned to the library and began looking for documents regarding the Sicily Whee tower. Not only had it been fully excavated, but it was very far away. If I was looking for the elixir, then there was no way it was there, so I had no reason to look further into it other than the fact that Ana had said she'd wanted to go there. I wanted to do what I could to take her, and I couldn't hold myself back from seeing what I could do to accomplish that.

After finding a book with famous dungeon tourist spots, I brought it over to a chair to read. Thankfully, it was written in our country's language.

"H-Huh?!"

I shot to my feet from overwhelming shock. There was a picture, most likely

drawn by a knight who was talented in art, of the Sicily Whee on the page I'd opened the book to. It was so realistic, like looking at a photograph. *I know this structure! It's the top of the Tokyo Skytree!*

What's going on?! Is this possibly the future of the same world I came from?! I began looking at the pages of other dungeons in the book because unlike unexplored dungeons, these all had descriptive texts and pictures. Unexplored dungeons were dangerous areas where one didn't have the luxury of taking their time to sketch, but these tourist destinations were safe, so they could be rendered in great detail.



As I flipped through the book, my hands stopped on the page describing the two towers from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. There weren't any dungeons-turned-tourist-spots in this country or surrounding countries. Even after excavation, the areas around them were still full of dangerous monsters, so it was natural for them to not attract sightseers.

This was the first time I was seeing an actual picture of a dungeon, and as I flipped through the pages, they all seemed like tall buildings from my past world. I stumbled back into the chair, my body sagging low as I fell deep into thought, staring at the ceiling. *So I didn't get reincarnated into a different world, but the future of my old world? No, it's too soon to form any conclusions. I don't remember perfectly how these structures looked. They simply have a similar appearance to the buildings and towers from my past life. I need to look into this more.*

Though I wanted to look at some of the artifacts that'd been found, that wouldn't be easy. Among all the ancient objects unearthed, artifacts were things that could be used in modern day as magic tools. Most of them were in possession of the royal family or greater nobles. They were either royal or family heirlooms, and since there was a threat of them being stolen, it was incredibly poor manners to even talk about them. It went without saying that they weren't ever shown to others.

However, other ancient objects were generally displayed in museums, and there were quite a number of them. Different from artifacts, they couldn't be used as magic tools. They weren't very valuable and were kept in museums or given to academics to study. Though the Adolni territory didn't have any museums, the royal capital did. I'd been busy, so I hadn't had a chance to visit one, but now I needed to go no matter what.

Afterword

Nice to meet you all, I'm Shinten-Shinchi. Thank you very much for picking up this book! Before I wrote it, I watched two movies: *The Elephant Man*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The former is a tragedy, while the latter also has an ending that's difficult to call happy. That's when I got a certain idea in my head. Why did they end the way they did? Wouldn't it be better to have a gentler story where the main characters find happiness? This story is a result of that thought.

I thought that at the very least in a work of fiction, I want a happy ending. That's why I promise this story will have a happy ending. There may be various things that happen along the way, but everything will be perfect at the end, so please don't worry as you read it.

I began posting my story to Shosetsuka ni Naro with that intention, and thanks to everyone's encouragement, my work has been published. By the time I finished, I barely had two hundred points on the Shosetsuka ni Naro website, but now, I have thirty-three thousand and have even placed first in various rankings. It's proof of the readers' encouragement taking shape. Without you all, I don't think there'd have been any chance of me getting published. I truly thank you all!

There are some differences between the web novel and the published version. I actually cut a lot of different little events and stories when I posted the web novel. I cut out a lot of the original story to make it about the size of a single novel, so that it could be read more casually. In contrast, the published version is based off the original story and hasn't been trimmed at all, which is why it has essentially double the number of episodes and events of the web novel. It's become significantly longer than a single volume, but I think it has a lot more emotion in it as a result.

For this volume, the main things I added ended up being about thirty

thousand extra characters long. This includes the school arc, the trip Bridgette and Gino took, and their time in the Sevensworth's territory. I also added the stories of Gino finding Ana the black ice flower, Gino and Ana looking at the white-violet Gemini star flowers, the scenes in the Sevensworth's library and Ana's embroidery room, and even Gino's initial story while he lived as Ginorious Adolni—these are all new additions, not seen in the web novel. It all started from the first scene where Gino is meeting with other merchants. These should all be new even to those who've read the web novel, so I'm sure you'll all enjoy these extras!

I also have to give thanks to the artist for this series, Tokima. It's not easy to make art for this series, but I love how they were able to make the atmosphere of the illustrations match the kind and beautiful story that it accompanies!

Since this is the afterword, I think I'd like to take this opportunity to talk about some of the behind-the-scenes regarding Gino's biological family, the Adolnis. They actually were originally a family of knights, but due to their achievements, they were given their own territory and lay down their arms to manage it as regular nobles. Their crest is a plaited cord and dual swords.

Before being rewarded with land, the Adolni family were famous for fighting with dual swords; however, there's nothing that remains of that in modern day. They stopped passing down their dual-wielding techniques, and as a result, nobody in Gino's immediate family knows how to do it.

Since he comes from a family of knights, Gino's father, Thorkult is very much in shape. He's 182 centimeters tall, which is average by his world's standards. Gino is only sixteen but 180 centimeters tall, but also slim, which he gets from his mom. He isn't the only one who inherited his mother's lithe figure. His sister, Viviana, is also tall and slender. She's 174 centimeters tall, which is about ten centimeters taller than Ana. The eldest son, Davy, is also tall, but he resembles his father more and is broader than Gino. Their second son, Kevin, and third son, Ashe, all take after their father and are tall and well-built.

The eldest son (whose full name is David) is also single. Not too long ago, he had a fiancée, but it was simply a strategic marriage. He had never met his fiancée, and the marriage plans fell through due to political reasons. This world

has a comparatively large number of older people who are single, but it's not out of the ordinary for there to be a ten-year age gap between people in strategic marriages. Because of that, none of them are really worried.

Kevin and Ashe were not engaged at the beginning of the story. Both of them were like Gino in the sense that they couldn't take over House Adolni, so they were on track to becoming commoners. There aren't many who are interested in marrying people with unsure futures like that, though, so in order to avoid the commoner path, they are both working hard every day in the knight troupe.

Viviana is engaged. Out of all her potential suitors, she found the most attractive one and pushed for them to get married. But it turns out that the family he comes from is very strict, so Viviana, with her wild personality, is having a hard time adjusting to their family. Their engagement almost fell through once because the family saw her climbing a tree in a skirt.

Also, this series has a manga! I'm incredibly surprised! I'm so touched to be able to see Gino, Ana, and the others talking to each other, their rich expressions on full display. The artist is the great Inagi Kakimori, who's not only amazing at drawing but also really breathes life into their work. It will be running in Shonen Ace Plus, so I encourage you all to check it out!

I'd had this story written before I even posted it as a web novel, but it took me a year and a half to revise it for novelization. I've revised it dozens of times, and even revised it again after the layout for the novel was decided. I know I put a lot on the shoulders of those involved in this project, but thanks to all of you, I was able to create a final product that I'm proud of. I truly hope you all continue reading this series!

It's my genuine wish that those who read this series are able to be filled with joyful feelings. The second volume will come out in spring, and I'd be so happy if you stuck around for the continuation of this story.

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. On the left, a young man with dark hair and purple eyes stands in a dark, ornate military-style uniform with gold embroidery. He has a brown satchel slung over his shoulder. On the right, a goblin maiden with long, flowing white hair and a green complexion is shown from the waist up. She wears a purple dress with a white lace collar and a white veil adorned with flowers. She is holding a needle and thread, appearing to sew or mend something. The scene is set outdoors with a large, arched window or doorway in the background. Pink petals are falling around them. In the top right corner, there are pink flowers and green leaves. The overall color palette is soft, with pastel pinks, purples, and greens.


1

Using a
Past Life to
Keep a Joyful
Wife

THE REINCARNATOR
AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Author
Shinten-Shinchi

Illustrator
Tokima



"Please marry me.
I promise I'll make you
happy, so please don't
give up on your own
happiness."


**Ginorious
Adolni**



**Anastasia
Sevensworth**


THE REINCARNATOR
AND THE GOBLIN MAIDEN'S
HAPPILY EVER AFTER


Using a
Past Life to
Keep a Joyful
Wife





Gino **faced** deadly monsters to
find a flower to **give** to Ana.

"I can't believe you were able to cut
right through the winged wolf with a
single slash!"




Sensing Ana was in **danger**,
Gino used body **fortification** magic and stealth
magic as he ran through town at **full speed**.



“My mother-in-law smiled like a kid who’d successfully pulled off a prank. She now truly looked as if she were in her midtwenties.”

Gino used his previous life’s **knowledge** to start up a magic lotion **business** to get the **funding** to find a cure for Ana’s **condition**.

Jennifer
Sevensworth



Gino **knows** all about
how **wonderful** Ana is!

“Ana is **talented**.
You’ve all simply **failed**
to **realize** that.”



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

The Reincarnator and the Goblin Maiden's Happily Ever After: Using a Past Life to Keep a Joyful Wife Volume 1

by Shinten-Shinchi

Translated by Geirrlon Dunn Edited by Alex Chiccola

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Shinten-Shinchi, Tokima 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: October 2024