

Endo and Kobayashi

THE LATEST ON TSUNDERE VILLAINESS

LIESELOTTE

Live!



Disc
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Chapter 1: Hearing the Voices of the Gods

“The tsun is coming off strong! Lieselotte’s acting as standoffish as ever, but this time, she may have taken it too far!”

“Lieselotte’s maneuver comes from the simple desire to not be left out, but her roundabout choice of words and constantly haughty attitude seem to be causing a complete misunderstanding. I suspect all she’s done is drastically lower His Highness’s opinion of her yet again. Things are looking grim!”

A pair of mysterious voices echoed through the tense air of the courtyard: the first belonging to an emphatic man and the second to a composed woman. These two antithetical announcers from the heavens meshed peculiarly well, and would go on to be remembered by history as the great Play-by-Play Caster Endo and Color Commentator Kobayashi.

— — — —

“My, whatever could you be doing in a place like this?” The noble daughter of Marquis Riefenstahl, and my fiancée, appeared in the courtyard. She was an elegant girl with bright-purple eyes and honey-blonde hair that ended in drills. As soon as the beautiful Lieselotte opened her mouth, I knew I was in for trouble.

“Um, well, there was something I didn’t understand in class, so...” Meanwhile, my new friend Fiene timidly shut the notebook in her lap. She nervously stood up from the bench we’d been sharing; her rose-blond hair quivered and her sky-blue eyes darted about as she awkwardly bowed her head.

“I just happened to see she was having trouble and decided to lend her a hand,” I explained, backing Fiene up. “What brings you here, Lieselotte?”

Lieselotte silently curtsied. “A kind little birdie went out of their way to inform me that my fiancé was out in the courtyard. With a girl. *Alone*. I came to examine the scene myself.”

I responded to her greeting with a casual wave, but her thorny attitude only

confirmed my suspicion that her arrival would bring trouble. Stifling a light sigh, I forced a smile onto my face and began to explain the situation.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” I said. “This is a public courtyard and we were merely discussing Magic Theory.”

“Though that may be the extent of Your Highness’s intent, who’s to say what your companion had in mind?”

Seeing Fiene flinch at Lieselotte’s piercing glare was tragic. I admit that the circumstances could be misconstrued when viewed under a ludicrously twisted lens, but neither Fiene nor I had any ill intentions. No normal person would come down so harshly on us. Alas, my fiancée’s informant had probably maliciously exaggerated the truth. *What to do now?*

“Well, I suppose it’s only natural that a *commoner* like yourself would find it difficult to keep up with the lectures at the Royal Academy of Magic. If you so wish, I would be happy to instruct you,” Lieselotte said. There was an ominous pause. “Or perhaps, Miss Fiene, could it be that you only accept lessons from handsome gentlemen?”

In the time that I had spent trying to find something to say, Lieselotte had piled on layer after layer of verbal abuse. But just as I opened my mouth to reproach her, I was interrupted.

“The tsun is coming off strong!” a man announced. **“Lieselotte’s acting as standoffish as ever, but this time, she may have taken it too far!”**

“Lieselotte’s maneuver comes from the simple desire to not be left out, but her roundabout choice of words and constantly haughty attitude seem to be causing a complete misunderstanding,” a woman said. **“I suspect all she’s done is drastically lower His Highness’s opinion of her yet again. Things are looking grim!”**

They were the Voices of the Gods.

“Why do you do this to yourself, Lieselotte?!” the man asked, frustrated. **“Why can’t you see that your sharp tongue only pushes His Highness away?!”**

I looked around reflexively, but couldn’t find a source for the sound. Despite being directly mentioned, Lieselotte seemed totally unaware of the voices. The

same went for Fiene. The two of them were preoccupied with their staring contest, the former exuding open hostility and the latter cowering from it.

“This is exactly what makes Lieselotte a tsundere,” the woman said. **“She can’t bring herself to admit that she’s legitimately worried for Fiene’s reputation or that she’s so super duper in love with His Highness that even the tiniest things send her into a fit of jealousy.”**

The calmly delivered analysis sent shock waves through my mind. *L-Love? Who? With whom? Jealousy? Wait...what on earth is a “tsun de rais”?* While I spiraled into confusion at the incomprehensible words of the mysterious voices, I happened to make eye contact with Lieselotte.

“Is something the matter, Your Highness?” she asked.

“No, uh, I heard the Voices of the Gods,” I answered meekly. I wasn’t completely sure, but these were most likely the words of gods that the royal family were able to hear. What we called the Voices of the Gods belonged to deities from foreign realms, and they were the reason my bloodline had risen to the throne. My forefathers had led the people according to their teachings and had been glorified because of it.

These heavenly voices told us many things; at times they offered knowledge, at others they prophesied the future. However, according to my father, his father, and all the tales I could find in the royal records, our correspondence with the gods was supposedly fleeting—so much so that our power was considered but a divine whim.

It was often said they offered some word or two of wisdom before a great disaster or in response to fervent prayer. I wasn’t supposed to receive an endless stream of information like this. What was more, no one in the history of the royal family had ever been blessed by the presence of *two* deities.

These unexpected developments combined with the gods’ unbelievable statements left me perplexed. The adverbs I would use to describe the likelihood of these voices belonging to divine beings included “probably,” “most likely,” and “almost certainly,” but I had trouble reconciling my doubt in their claims and authenticity with my faith in the gods.

“You don’t even know the power of the royal lineage?” While I was lost in

thought, Lieselotte began to carefully explain all of the minute details of my family history to Fiene. I blankly stared at her as she prattled on about our national legend and the gears in my mind slowly turned.

The voices I had heard were probably Voices of the Gods—and according to them, Lieselotte was in love with me. But despite our betrothal, she had never once acted sweetly toward me. That's not to say that she wasn't appropriately respectful when interacting with a member of the royal family, of course, but there was something about her politeness that felt cold and distant. Her stern expression never faltered and when she spoke, she often admonished me, just like moments ago.

In fact, I had always thought she *hated* me. Was it really a matter of not being able to admit affection?

“Why did Lieselotte suddenly start talking about Prince Siegwald?!” the god asked.

“I’m not sure myself,” the goddess replied. Her voice had been stripped of all theatrics and I would go so far as to say it sounded conversational. **“His Highness heard a Heavenly Voice’...? Wait, Fiene and His Highness shouldn’t be awakened at this stage, so he shouldn’t be able to yet. Plus, the courtyard scene doesn’t go like this, and it’s way too early for the Hidden God Route... Is this *another* hidden route that I didn’t know about? Endo, did you press any weird buttons?”**

It was true that I was young and inexperienced. This was my first time hearing a Voice of the Gods, but some part of me was absolutely convinced that the words that had descended upon me and me alone were none other than the power of my bloodline.

“I didn’t do jack,” the male deity named Endoh said in a similarly conversational tone. **“I put it on autoplay just like you told me to, Kobayashi. I haven’t even touched the controller since I picked the ‘I think I’ll study in the courtyard’ option...”**

“Uh, um,” I stammered. As the gods discussed amongst themselves, seemingly puzzled, I asked to the skies, “Are your names Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee?”

And then, the heavens fell quiet. Perhaps to not impede my divine exchange, Lieselotte and Fiene had ended their conversation as well. I cut through the total silence and continued on.

“I sincerely apologize for addressing you so suddenly. I am His Majesty King Fitzenhagen’s first son, Crown Prince Siegwald. Though you have been referring to me as ‘His Highness’ for some time now, I pray that you might call me Siegwald or Sieg.”

After offering a formal greeting, I bowed down to the gods. Lieselotte gracefully followed suit, and Fiene hurried to mimic us as we knelt and prostrated ourselves. No title, whether royal, marquis, or commoner, was worth mentioning in the face of a god; to be addressed as “His Highness” felt out of place.

“Ever since Lord Endoh announced...um, ‘the tsun is coming off strong,’ I’ve been able to hear the two of you speak.” I couldn’t see them, but I sensed that they wavered at my statement. I added, “My family and I have the power to receive messages from deities in other realms.”

“Uhh,” Lady Kobayashee started, “I mean, sure, that was a thing, but...are we in this ‘other realm’? Like, you can actually hear us? In that case, Your Highness—er, Sieg, if you can hear my voice, give Liese-tan—er, I mean, Lieselotte—a big ol’ smooch!”

...Smooch?! Lady Kobayashee sent me into shock once again. Did...Did she just tell me to k-kiss Lieselotte?!

Unbelievable as it was, it was a command from the goddess. As a member of the royal family—no, as a denizen of this world—I had no choice but to obey. Besides, Lieselotte was my fiancée. *A mere exchange of lips isn’t a big—ah, but we’re in public. No, but the gods...*

Even as my mind swirled into mush, I made my way over to Lieselotte and placed my right hand gently on her cheek.

“Y-Your Highness?” she asked, looking up at me, petrified by confusion.

The anxiety I felt over what I was about to do nearly drove me mad. *This is the gods’ will. But we’re in the courtyard. There are people about. But the divine*

must be obeyed. Wow, her cheek is soft. Her fair skin is springy too. Her lips are glimmering pink and... As my thoughts swirled, sloshed, and tumbled about, I finally reached my tipping point and left the rest to fate.

“Wh-What are you—”

Ignoring Lieselotte as she panicked, I leaned closer as if I were being drawn in. Finally, I placed my lips onto her...cheek.

“Will this suffice? Lady Kobayashee?”

A kiss on the lips had been too much to ask. Actually, the peck I’d given her cheek was already unbearably embarrassing. I hadn’t been given any instruction on *where* I had to kiss her—though that was just me making excuses. This was the best I could do.

“**Ffff—**” A short outburst from Lady Kobayashee gave way to an oppressive silence. I fretted over the shame of my public indecency and recalled the sensation of Lieselotte’s smooth, supple skin. A burning heat lingered on my still-outstretched hand. When I looked over to Lieselotte, she was beet red. There was a tear in her eye, her lips were quivering, and she was trembling all over.



Dear gods, she's cute. Wait, crap! I'd been so charmed that my train of thought had completely derailed.

"Finallyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!" Lady Kobayashee screamed so loudly that she blasted away my confusion and left my ears ringing.

"Calm down, Kobayashi!"

"I can't, I can't, I caaan't!!! Did you see that?! Sieg and Liese-tan...kissed! I know it was on the cheek, but still. That's a kiss! That counts! That's a fat smooch right on her cheek. Plus, Liese-tan is so cute! You know what? Getting to see that was enough for me. I couldn't care less about the small stuff!"

"Care a little! Look, I don't know how, but he can actually hear our voices. So if we have Sieg do his best, don't you think we can avoid all this final boss, witch stuff? C'mon, get your head in the game so we can try to help them!" After attempting to calm down his fellow deity, Lord Endoh paused briefly and added, **"Would you stop hitting me?!"**

"You're right!" Lady Kobayashee cried, excited. Then, the two of them began to whisper to one another in hushed voices.

I gingerly pulled my hand away from Lieselotte's cheek. Not wanting to bother my heavenly advisors, I had no choice but to wait. Still, I'd like to make it clear that I wholeheartedly agreed with their assessment that "Liesettan" (who I assumed to be Lieselotte) was cute.

Usually, she was prideful and strict when it came to etiquette. No matter how many men charmed by her beauty appeared before her, she always coldly turned them away without so much as blinking.

"I am His Highness's fiancée," she'd say.

I would have never thought I'd see the day when she would be rendered speechless, flushed and trembling before me.

Well, in fairness, I'd done something brazen enough to *make* her that way. I was prepared to have my bad manners criticized, to receive an icy glare that'd reduce me to roadside filth, or even to get slapped for my troubles.

Yet when I looked at Lieselotte, her face was completely red—in fact, so were

her ears and neck. *How far does her blushing extend?*

“Um... Ahem.”

The goddess suddenly cleared her throat as I lost myself looking at my fiancée. It seemed the divines had reached a conclusion, so I stood up straight to bear witness to their word.

“Uhhh, first of all, we’re not really sure why you’re calling us gods. Since we can’t play the part or anything, we’re gonna keep talking like this,” the esteemed goddess said.

I nodded up toward the heavens. *As the gods will.*

“I know the plot—er, I know the details of an upcoming incident that will take place in your country, revolving around this very academy.”

As expected of the goddess. I was in awe at Lady Kobayashee’s wisdom, but the word “incident” left a sinking pit in my stomach.

“Please wait a moment. Do you mean to say that something is going to happen at the Royal Academy?”

Every potential magician in the kingdom was obligated to attend this school. In practice, this meant the institution was filled with the sons and daughters of influential nobles, including those from the royal family. The faculty, staff, and security here were the best the crown could afford. I could hardly imagine anything going awry here, of all places.

“It’s less that it’s *gonna* happen and more, uh, we want to *prevent* it from happening? But, uhhh...”

“You have the power to prevent the incident, Sieg. The thing is, though, we don’t really wanna tell you—or I guess it wouldn’t work out if we explained it, so...”

Lady Kobayashee hesitated as she spoke, and Lord Endoh did the same as he jumped in to help. I tilted my head. *Is this about the “final boss witch stuff” that they mentioned earlier? What do I have to “do my best” in, and how?*

“Lemme see,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“Basically, at this rate, the super duper cute tsundere Liese-tan—a.k.a. Lieselotte Riefenstahl—is going to be doomed**

to ruin.”

I felt my soul abandon me as I listened to Lady Kobayashee carefully pick her words. *Lieselotte is... “doomed to ruin”? What does that even mean?*

“But we still can’t say why. We’re not allowed to tell you right now, Sieg.”

Her outright refusal to fill me in left me incredibly frustrated. Lieselotte was my fiancée, and yet I was still deemed unworthy of knowing how to save her.

“Hey, don’t worry about it! C’mon, it’s no fun to spoil everything in the opening act, right?” Lord Endoh said in an attempt to cheer me up.

“That’s right! Besides, if we tried to explain everything all at once, it’d get really messy and waaay too long! So we’re gonna wait for the perfect moment, then *bam!* We’ll give you the best advice we can through our play-by-play and color commentary!”

I tilted my head once again at the goddess’s peculiar divination. *Play-by-play and color commentary?* Although I remained puzzled, the gods excitedly continued on.

“Er, so, I’m—*ahem*. I’ll be your play-by-play caster, Endo!”

“Joined by your color commentator, Kobayashi!”

I chiseled their introductions into my brain: the god was the great “Play-by-Play Caster Endoh” and the goddess was the venerable “Color Commentator Kobayashee.”

“Going forward,” the goddess said, **“we’ll give you real-time analysis of Liese-tan’s emotions, so we want you to use our advice to confront her with an open heart. No guarantees that we’ll be able to explain everything even if you do, but the incident and Liese-tan’s ruin and the totally stupid bad end won’t happen! We won’t let it!”** A wave of relief washed over me with her emphatic conclusion.

“We’ll keep talking,” he said, **“and all you have to do is listen, think, and do your best. Can I add that these past few minutes of you talking to us have been really awkward? You look super cringe, so think of our commentary as a third-party thing. There’s no need to reply to us; just listen, and then brush us**

aside.”

I’m...super cringe? I reflexively snuck a glance at Lieselotte and Fiene to see they were both horribly perplexed. *Oh, right. They know I’m talking to the gods, but they can only hear my side. Nothing I’m saying makes any sense to them.*

I had become a total lunatic in their eyes, and it wouldn’t be limited to the two of them. Only those who shared my blood could hear the Voices of the Gods, meaning that a two-way conversation was far from ideal. The thought of “brushing aside” real deities troubled me, but I was grateful for their suggestion all the same.

“Thank you kindly for your concern,” I said with a deep bow. “Um, but, well, I still have several things I’d like to ask you.”

“Hmm, then...just one for the road, okay?” Lord Endoh said.

The heavens permitted me but one question to quell the endless sources of my confusion. Yet I had countless questions about the incident, the gods themselves, and above all, Lieselotte.

A moment’s hesitation swirled together with the fear that there had been things purposefully left unsaid due to my incompetence, spurring me on to make a decision...

“Um, what exactly is a *tsun de rais*?”

...And I chose the wrong question. I ended up totally blundering my one chance at more information.

That is what I chose to ask?! Literally anything else would have been better! I mean, it’s been on my mind since they keep using this mystery word, but still!

“Oh, a tsundere is...huh. What is a tsundere?” Lord Endoh said. **“It’s kinda like they’re all tsun-tsun and thorny on the outside, but they really wanna cuddle up to you on the inside. Or maybe that they look mean at first glance but are actually a misunderstood sweetheart?”**

“It’s basically just Liese-tan,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“Liese-tan is all tsun because she can’t express her love very clearly, but she’s secretly head over heels for you. You should be able to figure it out if you keep watching her**

closely. Okay, now get to it!"

"...Thank you very much," I said, thanking the gods for their benevolent answer to my ridiculous question with another bow.

I turned back toward Lieselotte and Fiene. After all, there was no use crying over spilt milk. Besides, I'd been in the middle of my conversation with these two ladies, and it'd been quite tense from what I remembered. Just as Lady Kobayashee said, I needed to confront them as sincerely as I could.

"Good luck, Sieg! Give it your all!" Lord Endoh said, and then shifted tones as he continued, **"Will he be able to reclaim the lost tension and see this scene through to its proper end?!"**

"Liese-tan's already mushier than a soft-boiled egg, so I think that may be asking for too much. I suggest the three of them give up and have a nice, friendly study session together."

I figured as much.

The instant I turned around, Lieselotte began anxiously twirling the drill in her hair, still beet red from the earlier kiss. The tense atmosphere from when she had first entered the courtyard had vanished. I wasn't sure what Lord Endoh meant by "scene," but I could say for certain that the situation had been radically altered by the gods' meddling.

"My discussion with the gods has ended," I said. "Let us study together—all three of us. Here, Lieselotte, this way."

With a smile that prevented either of them from raising an objection, I took Lieselotte by the hand and led her over to the bench Fiene and I had been resting on. In order from left to right, Fiene, Lieselotte, and I each took our seats.

Lieselotte didn't have the energy to pick a fight, and as Fiene watched my fiancée awkwardly lower herself on the bench in contrast to her usual absolute grace, her gaze was nothing but tender. I figured it was safe to let them sit by one another; in fact, I felt like any other seating arrangement would only fuel another unscrupulous gossip.

"So, Fiene, what is it that you don't understand?" I asked.

My divine conversation had left me in high spirits, and my grin was even wider than usual. Perhaps because she felt pressured by my smile, Fiene pulled out her notebook despite her reluctance.

Lieselotte peeked in to see that Fiene was struggling with the basics of the basics—things that were considered common sense. Any other student would have learned these topics years before their admittance, but Fiene had lived her life among commoners with no education in magic.

“M-My,” Lieselotte said, “you don’t even understand something of this caliber?” She snatched away Fiene’s pen with a mocking tone and began scribbling explanations onto the page. Despite her tough front, she seemed eager to teach.

“Fiene’s never had a chance to learn any of this. Don’t be so hard on her.” I told myself there was only one way to help tutor Fiene from where I was sitting. It was really just a thinly veiled attempt to justify what I was about to do. I turned to my left and leaned over until I was a hair’s breadth away from completely sticking to Lieselotte, and opened my mouth to start teaching. “See...”

As I did, Lieselotte instantly and obviously turned to stone, her mouth zipped shut and her hands frozen midair. Her ears and neck glowed red, and I was sure I’d see the same color all over her face if only her face were visible. *She really is adorable.*

Judging from her response, the prophecy that she was in love with me may not have been a lie—and nothing could have filled me with more delight.

I merrily continued on, leaving Lieselotte bewildered at my sudden shift in behavior and Fiene grinning at her precious reactions. Meanwhile, Lady Kobayashee sporadically abandoned her analysis in favor of girlish shrieking while Lord Endoh shouted, **“Ow, ow! Wai— Would you quit that?!”**

...What in the world is going on in their realm?

◆◆◆ The Young Duo on the Other Side of the Mic

“Wow, that was crazy,” the boy and girl said in unison. They glanced at one another and chuckled at their jinx, still in sync.

“No matter how this ends up, I look forward to working with you, Play-by-Play Caster Endo,” the girl said with a smile.

Her expression caused the boy’s heart to pound, but he did his utmost to keep a cool poker face while shaking her hand.

The boy’s name was Endo Aoto. He was in his second year of high school, was currently a member of his school’s broadcasting club, and he had a one-sided crush on the classmate-slash-clubmate grinning from ear to ear before him: Kobayashi Shihono.

— — — —

The tale began when Shihono brought a certain otome game to their club. The Broadcasting Club wasn’t very strict—in fact, it was infamous for being incredibly lax. Unless they had a competition coming up, the members only got together to practice on Wednesdays.

However, their club had a responsibility to deliver a broadcast at morning, noon, and the end of school hours every day, regardless of whether or not they had practice. As a result, on every other weekday, the two regular announcers were left all alone with little to do. To kill the time, the tight space of their soundproofed clubroom had been lined with manga volumes, a TV, and a game console someone had brought.

One day, Aoto’s beloved Shihono added yet another game to their pile: *Love Me Magically!*, also known as *Magikoi*. Set in a fantasy world styled after early-modern Europe, the main character Fiene finds her fifteen years of life as a commoner coming to an end as she is suddenly thrust into the world of nobility. All of it is thanks to her ability to use a noble’s greatest privilege: magic.

The romantic simulation game begins when Fiene finds herself admitted into

the Royal Academy of Magic, surrounded by a prince here, a knight there, and a teacher over yonder. In total, there are five potential suitors to pursue (plus one hidden route where she woos a god). From there, she loves, swoons, loves again, and even goes on an adventure or two.

Although students enter the academy at fifteen and graduate three years later at eighteen, the game only covers the first year of her time at the school.

“But the best character is definitely the tsundere villainess, Lieselotte! I’m sure her dignified cuteness will make even a guy’s heart seize up, so try it out, Endo! And once you do, cry with me!”

After fully clearing the game herself, Kobayashi Shihono had given in to the primal urge to share the story she loved with as many people as she could. She didn’t skip a beat as she passionately made her appeal to the young man she always delivered the morning, noon, and after-school announcements with.

Aoto was so plainly infatuated with her that the rest of his clubmates secretly conspired to give the two of them as much alone time as possible. Thus, although he wasn’t too keen on Shihono’s suggestion, he was so overjoyed that she’d chosen to share this with *him* of all people that he had ended up agreeing to play an otome game near the beginning of June. That was around a month and a half prior to their peculiar episode.

At first, Aoto had no interest in Lieselotte, and even less understanding of why someone would appreciate a tsundere. However, he was curious to see the game that had caused Shihono to squirm in excitement, empty whole boxes of tissues, and dance a cute (according to Aoto and Aoto alone) little jig of joy in the clubroom.

Furthermore, he had the ulterior motive of finding more common interests to talk about so that the two of them could grow closer. With all this in mind, he swallowed his pride as a high school boy and began playing a dating sim for women under Shihono’s instruction.

“So, where do I start?” Aoto asked.

“I think you should go with the fan disc! The game is way deeper when you

have an understanding of Liese-tan's charm, after all! Oh, and, Liese-tan's this ultra-high-spec marquis villainess who pops up in the main story and butts into the main character's business all the time. And she's always saying hurtful things and crossing a bunch of lines and gets possessed by this Witch of Yore demon-thing to turn into the final boss, but the truth is...she's a *huge* tsundere!"

Aoto felt slightly disturbed at how his simple question had been met with an unyielding onslaught of an answer, but Shihono only grew more fervent, wildly swinging her hands as she continued.

"You'll figure out that Liese-tan's just a big ol' tsundere if you play through the fan disc! Oh, and, you see, this disc has a bunch of visual novels that talk about the after story or expand on behind-the-scenes stuff during the main scenario, right? And there's one called *Lieselotte's Memoir*—which, since she's the last boss and all, ends right before she gets killed. It's really sad, and honestly kinda heavy all around..."

Recalling the sadness of Lieselotte's story toned down Shihono's vigor. Aoto grinned at her boisterous emotions and enthusiastically nodded to signal that she could keep going.

"First, you have this romance option in the main game, His Highness Siegwald, who's the crown prince and Liese-tan's fiancé. In her memoir, she confesses her secret love for him and her hidden admiration for Fiene's innocence. You can see her slowly break down as the Witch of Yore eats away at her psyche, all while she struggles with her inability to be honest and her terrible relationship with Sieg. Her misery and bravery in this part already bring me to tears, but playing through the main story when you know Liese-tan's true feelings makes her giga-cute! She's! So! Cute! So start with this!"

Shihono's eyes were shimmering as she looked up at Aoto. Taken by her excitement, he conceded and began working his way through the aforementioned story in the fan disc.

The conclusion? Aoto *bawled*. A mere otome game turned this high school boy into a sobbing wreck. It was a testament to just how miserable, brave, and

prone to misunderstanding Lieselotte was in spite of her young, purehearted love for Siegwald.

Lieselotte bore some of the blame, what with how she'd let the Witch of Yore manipulate her jealousy, but she was only sixteen at her time of death; at her age, she was *expected* to be immature. The heavy sense of duty that came with her status had instilled her with a respectable work ethic, and her diary was full of self-admonishment. In the end, her lovestruck heart cracked to the evil witch and she perished. The tragedy of her suffering had caused Aoto's floodgates to swing wide open.

"The cover art is so pretty and cute, and *Magikoi* is such a peppy title... Why is it so dark?" he asked weakly, wiping his eyes with his palm. Seeing his vulnerability, Shihono callously piled on more pain.

"What's more, Liese-tan ends up dying in every single ending except the reverse harem end!"

"That's so unfair! What did she ever do to deserve this?!" Aoto had developed enough compassion for Lieselotte that he found himself legitimately upset at the news. At first, he'd laughed it off when Shihono told him to cry with her. Yet here he was, crying and fuming from the bottom of his heart.

"Isn't it awful?" Shihono said. "There are even a lot of deaths among the romance targets. I swear, all the deaths in this cutesy-looking game are the devs' way of trying to scar a bunch of young girls for life. Then again, that's why it got enough attention to put out a fan disc right after release..."

Aoto stared at her, mouth agape, and sucked in the lingering sensation of tears that remained in his nose.

"How about you try playing through the Happy End now?" Shihono smiled as she made the suggestion.

And Aoto, who still had trouble with just how malicious the developers were, ended up playing through the main game's Reverse Harem Route. This route was only unlocked after clearing each character's Best End, but Shihono had collected all of the endings and CGs to 100% the game. She'd also unlocked the Hidden God Route. Thus, Aoto started his journey on the Reverse Harem Route.

This storyline even included yuri elements: not only did all five of the main heroes fall in love with Fiene, so did Lieselotte. The six of them went on to bicker over the heroine, and most notably, Lieselotte's love for Fiene allowed her to kick away the Witch of Yore. With all their powers combined, they easily slayed the witch and lived happily ever after.

By the time Aoto finished his playthrough, it was already late July.

"Wha... What do you mean, 'happily ever after'?! You're telling me these well-to-do ladies and gentlemen, including *the prince* and *a teacher*, fall in love with Fiene...and she goes out with *all of them*?! There's no way this is gonna work out! Is this kingdom gonna be all right?!" Aoto shouted at the top of his lungs when he experienced what Shihono had described as a "Happy End."

The girl in question snickered. "But see, in every other route, at least one of the others dies," she said.

"This is savagery," Aoto said with a straight face.

"C'mon, didn't I tell you? The main characters in this game have a really bad habit of dying all the time. Number two on the dying-ness scale is the knight Baldur—you remember Bal, right? He dies in every ending except the Best and Good End of his own route, so he's got it tough too."

Second place only gets him an extra two ends on one route? Aoto thought to himself. He couldn't help but feel like the difference between gold and silver was a photo finish. His face became a stony mask; it was as if the developers' venom had withered his very soul.

"You know Fiene's 'Awakening' thing?" Shihono said. "The one that lets her level up and get God's Favor? Bal's the one that dies during that scene. It gets to the point where I wanna cheer him on, like, 'Do your best to live a little longer!' Honestly, he sacrifices himself to protect Fiene from the possessed Liese-tan so often that I started worrying he might be a die-aholic. Well, since he and Liese-tan are cousins and act like siblings, maybe he dies so much because he feels responsible for her..."

Aoto could only muster a weak nod while Shihono prattled on.

"Anyway, the fact that both Baldur *and* Lieselotte are alive and well makes

the Reverse Harem Route the Happiest End in *Magikoi*.” After she casually summarized her case, Aoto groaned, unconvinced.

The Reverse Harem Route he’d just finished featured the cast cornering the Witch of Yore seven-on-one and beating the existence out of her. She hadn’t been able to take over Lieselotte’s body, so she didn’t even have a physical form and no one had to sacrifice themselves; the Witch simply manifested for the final fight and got pummeled without accomplishing anything evil—though, of course, she did plenty in the other routes to deserve it.

In some ways, Shihono was right about this being the Happiest End. It was the only one where the pitiful duo of Baldur and Lieselotte survived. Still, Aoto couldn’t let it slide.

“Look, I get that not dying is great and all...but after reading through Lieselotte’s Memoir, all I can think is, ‘Where’s the route where Siegwald and Lieselotte get along?! How can you call this the Happiest End?!’”

Shihono nodded along and let loose a listless sigh. “Doesn’t Liese-tan have the *worst* luck? Well, in my humble opinion, that just makes her cuter and more lovable, but...I did kinda want to see a better ending. In the end, Liese-tan’s just a villainess and the true heroine is Fiene.”

She looked over at Aoto with a bitter smile and saw that he still didn’t seem quite satisfied.

“You sure have fallen for *Magikoi*, huh, Endo? Or should I say, you’ve fallen for *Liese-tan*?”

Aoto awkwardly turned away from her teasing, but her tone only grew more mischievous and devilish to the point that it was borderline sadistic.

“Okay, next up...we’re finally getting to Liese-tan’s saddest route! Let’s watch her beloved Siegwald get snatched away by our heroic Fiene!”

“No way, I’m gonna feel *so* bad for her!” Aoto said reflexively, whipping back toward Shihono.

“But that’s the best part! Let’s watch Liese-tan suffer through her cruelest fate and cry together! And once we’re done, we can use our depression as fuel to write Sieg x Liese-tan fanfics!”

Was this her master plan all along? Aoto wondered.

Shihono, still spouting her madness, inched toward him with a controller in her hand. Aoto, for his part, inched away from her. Of course, their game of cat and mouse came to a rapid close in their tiny clubroom, and Aoto literally had his back to the wall in seconds.

“I don’t wanna!” he said, pushing back the controller. “Uhhh, oh! Hey, I think we should really get some practice in. You know, like vocal exercises and stuff. We’ve been slacking off a lot lately, right?”

He wasn’t wrong: the two of them had done nothing but play games as of late. They hadn’t done any practicing, but it wasn’t as if their clubmates had either. As mentioned, the Broadcasting Club was infamously laid back. They didn’t even bother aiming for prizes when they went to competitions.

This was a plain and simple excuse born from Aoto’s genuine desire to avoid seeing Lieselotte suffer. Little did he know this was all a part of the trap Shihono had laid for him, and her better grasp of the situation let her poke at his mind in all the right ways.

“Siegwald is sooo cool in his own route! Like, to the point that you start to get why Liese-tan’s so in love with him! I want you to see that. Besides, this is the main story that *Lieselotte’s Memoir* pairs with! Aren’t you interested?”

Aoto wavered. He tilted his head with a strained expression, leaving one ear pointed toward Shihono’s ongoing pitch.

“And on top of that, the last fight has Sieg x Liese-tan undertones! Despite not being able to love her, Sieg can’t bring himself to kill his fiancée and childhood friend, and then Liese-tan—ahh, no more! Spoilers are bad! Let’s play through it for real! Please?!”

Spurred on by Shihono’s fiery speech, Aoto reached out for the controller, then pulled his hand back. He repeated this process over and over, making his swaying resolution as obvious as possible.

“But, no matter how you slice it,” he said, “this is a tragedy from a Siegwald x Lieselotte perspective. I’ll admit that I’m curious... Oh, but I’m definitely not writing that fanfic with you. Aaah, but, man...”

“Oh, I know!” Shihono suddenly had a wonderful epiphany as she watched him deliberate. “How about you do some play-by-play on the game? I’ll handle the analysis!”

“Uh, what? I feel like this isn’t that sort of game.”

Shihono ignored Aoto’s doubts and tossed him the controller, bending his fingers into place with her own.

“Nope, nope, nope! There’s no such thing as a game you can’t commentate over. Even an otome game can be proper practice if we talk over it! Right?!”

The holes in the logic of her cheery conclusion were gaping to say the least. Yet her refreshing, confident grin practically screamed, “Isn’t this a good idea?!” To cast a shadow over the blinding cuteness of his crush was too much for the boy to handle.

Endo Aoto and Kobayashi Shihono packed up all their sympathy for the tsundere villainess Lieselotte as they took on their roles. And so, their play-by-play and color commentary of *Love Me Magically!* began.

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As a result, their play-by-play and analysis reached Prince Siegwald and began shifting the fate of the other world.

“Hmmm... There’s something off about the save data screen,” Shihono said.

Aoto had been in deep thought trying to recall how all of this had happened, but turned Shihono’s way when she spoke up. He peered over at the TV to see something very peculiar.

The save data screen was meant to list the date, route, Fiene’s location, and most recent play time. However, the route and main character’s location were glitched out and unreadable.

Before the two of them had taken up the mantle of gods, the in-game date had been April 18th, right after they’d entered the academy; the route had been the General Route, where Fiene went around earning affection points by chasing the heroes and talking to them in events; and the location had been the courtyard.

To elaborate, the General Route lasted from spring to fall. One of the male leads would then confess to Fiene based on their affection ratings, and ask her for a dance at the closing party of the cultural festival held in late autumn. From there, the player entered that character's route.

In the Reverse Harem Route, Fiene and Lieselotte snuck away to dance while the five men bickered. Aoto had been totally bewildered by the surprise yuri development when he'd played through it.

"Hmmm? What's with this? I can't even copy it..." Shihono tilted her head as she continued fiddling with the save file.

"It was already weird when I was messing with it earlier," Aoto said. "I know you saw that all of the dialogue options were gone, but I couldn't even stop the autoplay. It was like the characters were moving on their own."

Shihono's expression only grew grimmer at this news. "Does that mean the only things we can do are quicksave and load? I guess we could look at our stats... What the heck? We haven't done any leveling yet, so why is Fiene totally maxed out?" she asked, eyeing the character page with suspicion.

Magikoi had an RPG leveling system, and Fiene's strength was based on her level. The main heroes, on the other hand, had hidden stats. Their strengths were based on how much they wanted to help Fiene—in other words, their affection rating.

Furthermore, *Magikoi* was full of bad endings that triggered when the player lost a combat encounter. In short, Fiene died; the *main heroine* of the game *could die*. Those were the kinds of bad endings in this game.

To the two high schoolers aiming to avoid all bad endings, Fiene's stats were an important thing to check. Two things awaited them: the exact data of a max-level heroine and the names of all her potential suitors with glitched out affection ratings next to them.

"Oh my god, she could clear the game solo at this point. What is she, a gorilla? That's terrifying." Aoto tilted his head alongside Shihono and let his true opinions slip out.

His mention of clearing the game solo was a reference to a specific Solo Clear

End. The player had control of Fiene's activities on the weekend and after school: you could ask someone on a date, trigger a special event, or go train.

If Fiene was too weak, you were bound to run headfirst into the heroine-dies-in-combat endings. The player was meant to delicately balance earning affection points with training, but you could instead choose to use up all of the free time training her to max her out.

If—and only if—Fiene was as strong as she could be, she would win against the Witch of Yore during the scripted loss sequence at the end of fall. That was what led to the Solo Clear End.

The scripted loss came after the dance that brought the General Route to a close. Lieselotte would run out of the ballroom in despair because of Siegwald's cold attitude, Fiene would give chase, and the knight Baldur would follow to protect the two young ladies. Once the three of them were together, the scene began.

The Witch of Yore possessed Lieselotte, turning her into an unspeakable monster. Fiene and Baldur tried to fight her off, but Baldur lost his life. Fiene awakened to her true powers upon seeing her friend die, and her chosen dance partner rushed to the scene upon hearing the commotion. The two of them joined forces to fight the Witch off and barely survived.

Still, the Witch escaped, and the heroine deepened her ties with her partner as they continued to fight against the aberration in his personal route...or so the story was meant to go. (As an aside, Fiene awakened after Baldur got roughed up a bit in his routes.)

A max level Fiene had the power to brute force her way through this scene, all by herself. She was an absolute *gorilla*.

Incidentally, the Solo Clear Ending left no time to raise affection, so Fiene ended the game as little more than an acquaintance to all the main heroes. Lieselotte died alongside the Witch, and Baldur lacked the affection points to show off his true power, and died a meaningless death in the battle.

All in all, the ending was totally pointless. It didn't even have a CG. However, Shihono had gone through it in the desperate hope that some dialogue option—maybe even after 100%ing the game—would contain salvation for Lieselotte.

At the time, she'd complained to Aoto, saying, "Isn't that *awful*?! This ending had literally nothing to it!" That had been when he'd first heard about the power of a max level Fiene.

"Argh, I don't get it!"

In the time that Aoto had been contemplating Fiene's gorilla-like strength, Shihono had been mashing away at buttons to test all sorts of things. Despite her efforts to try and investigate the strange phenomenon and the equally mysterious save data, she finally threw in the controller.

"Oh, have you given up?" Aoto asked. "We've only got two minutes left, so let's hurry up and get in the broadcast booth."

Shihono rushed to her feet. The only reason they were still at school in the first place was to deliver the after-school announcements, and it was nearly time.

The boy held open the heavy soundproof door for her. Not wanting to make him wait any longer, she hurried over and went in.

After finishing their announcements, the two of them headed home. They were polar opposites when they walked side-by-side: Aoto was a tall, well-built athlete, and Shihono was a fair, dainty maiden more suited to the arts than sports.

"We ended up not figuring out anything..." Shihono rewound the conversation to the peculiar phenomenon as soon as the two of them passed through the school gates. Her worry was written all over her face, and the ponytail she wore today gently swayed as they walked along.

On the other hand, Aoto didn't seem the least bit bothered. In his deep, calm voice, he said, "Well, we don't know anything and it's honestly kinda creepy, but it's still a story on the other side of a TV. Let's just relax and enjoy it."

"Hrm... I mean, you're not wrong, but..." Shihono still didn't look convinced.

A tender smile came to Aoto's lips when he saw her perplexed. His gaze was

infinitely gentle, overflowing with his love for her.

Shihono's usually sluggish pace was worsened by her contemplation. Aoto's stride was far longer than hers, since he was a head taller and all; still, he slowed his steps down to match Shihono's.

To begin with, despite living in the same general direction, Aoto's home was much further and he rode a bike to school. Yet he went out of his way to slowly push along his bicycle and walk home with her. His love for Shihono was evident even in the finer details like these.

"I don't think you'll figure anything out no matter how long you think about it," he said. "Personally, I think we'd be better off playing the game and clearing things up that way."

Shihono glanced up at him when he spoke. Their height difference naturally caused her gaze to turn upward, and Aoto couldn't help but appreciate how small and cute she was. Still, he managed a straight face and asked, "What are you so worried about?"

The gentle baritone of his question was met with a contemplative moment of silence as Shihono carefully picked her words.

"Hmm... I think both the fact that it's so mysterious and creepy, plus the fact that I got you mixed up in all this are eating at me."

In contrast to her furrowed brow, Aoto's smile was bright and cheery.

"I'm fine. Besides, it seems fun. I wanna see Lieselotte live a happy life too. But if you don't want to keep going, I'm okay with that." Truth was, he wanted to spend as much time as he could with Shihono, and he was willing to do anything to make her happy. Despite omitting this final secret, his words had plenty of impact on the girl.

"No, I wanna see a Happy End to End All Happy Ends too! One where I don't have to worry about the future of the kingdom like in the Reverse Harem End—a real happily ever after where Liese-tan and everyone around her can live in peace!" Reinvigorated, Shihono once again declared her determination.



Let's use our play-by-play and color commentary to clear up Siegwald's misunderstandings about Lieselotte and guide everyone to a Happy End to End All Happy Ends!

This was the conclusion the two had come to when they found out that their voices had reached the prince.

Naturally, the strange circumstances were plenty disturbing; seeing a game character reply to them and call them by their names had freaked them out. But even so, their love for Lieselotte had won them over.

Lieselotte was the villainess and Fiene was the heroine. Aoto and Shihono decided to change this unreasonable fate—they'd live up to their names as gods and bend destiny itself.

And after thinking it over, their determination remained steadfast. Shihono reaffirmed her resolve with a refreshing smile and sparkling eyes, only for Aoto to tease her with a smirk.

"You sure are in love with Lieselotte, huh, Kobayashi?"

His voice was full of sentiment. He loved the way she gave everything her all, how her tiny body was packed full of all sorts of emotion, and how she could express them—including love—in a straightforward way.

"Hold up, you read *Lieselotte's Memoir* too, didn't you?! And you cried, just like me!" Upset, Shihono pushed up against him as Aoto tried to reassure her.

"I did, and I did—but only a little. I only cried a little bit."

The definition of "a little" varied from person to person, but Aoto had shed enough tears that both he and Shihono knew he was lying. However, being the high school boy that he was, he simply couldn't admit that.

"But you're still gonna cheer Liese-tan on, right?! You're a Sieg x Liese shipper, aren't you?! I really want to see her live happily ever after with Sieg..." Shihono elected to overlook his understatement and was on the verge of crying herself as she spoke.

"Well, I'll admit that sounds pretty good," Aoto said coolly.

"Right?!" Shihono spoke up in a burst of passion. "If Lieselotte finds love—or

at least, if nobody misunderstands her—I'm sure she won't turn into the final boss. Plus, Fiene's already maxed out for some reason. At the very minimum, I can see this being a route where no one dies!"

"The difficulty setting seems really high, though. I can't tell if we're lucky or cursed for Sieg to be the only one that can hear us." Aoto's somber truth instantly doused Shihono's excitement and she began to mope.

"Yeah," she said. "We need Sieg to fall in love with Liese-tan to stop her from getting possessed, but it's a one-way ticket to a bad ending if he finds *that* out."

This was why the two of them had dodged Sieg's question when he'd asked about the incident.

"That would just sound like we're telling him to fall in love for the sake of the world," Aoto said. "Or at least, he might start acting weirdly friendly with her. Not only would that not work, but I don't wanna see them like that."

Aoto and Shihono sighed in sync. They'd lost control of the game, and the characters acted of their own volition. Their voices were the only tool the duo had, but they couldn't be totally transparent with the *one* character that could hear them.

Their goal was to create a Happy End to End All Happy Ends with all of these restrictions. If nothing else, the challenge was sigh-inducing. However, Shihono whipped her head left and right to shake off the anxiety and confidently faced forward as she pumped her fist in the air.

"But Liese-tan's super cute and she loves Sieg so much, it'll totally be all right! With our commentary, I'm sure her charm will come through! Let's *make* it come through, okay?!"

Put on the spot, Aoto weakly raised his fist, but didn't seem that enthused.

"Sure, let's do our best. But summer break is starting in two days, you know? It's not like the two of us will have any chances to play the game together."

"Two days?" Shihono repeated blankly.

The end-of-semester ceremony was to be held on the day after next, and the two of them wouldn't kill any time in the clubroom for the whole break that

followed. Shihono had completely forgotten about all that, and stood petrified in shock.

“...What?!” Shihono suddenly broke free from her paralysis and began shouting as she swung her head back and forth. “No way, I wanna see Liese-tan be happy now! I can’t wait a *month*!”

Aoto loved the way she always went a bit overboard. He chuckled, watching over her tenderly, when she suddenly froze. A giant smile bloomed on her face and she turned up toward him.

“I know! Endo, you should come over to my house during summer break!”

Now it was his turn to become a statue. Her cheery invitation had turned him to stone. He wasn’t even blinking.

“Sieg might not hear me if I’m not with you, and it’s really hard to do color commentary without a play-by-play to fill the space. So if you’re up for it, how about you come over and we get as far as we can over the break?! Come on!”

Shihono merrily piled on her pleas, but Aoto remained an unmoving sculpture.

“W-Wait. What? Your...*house*?”

Creeeak. His response was so awkward that you could practically hear his discomfort. To be invited to his crush’s home was a daunting challenge to the high school boy who’d internally complicated the daylights out of his one-sided love. Furthermore, Shihono’s nonchalant invitation only exacerbated the bewilderment in his heart.

“Yup, my house! I know you might be sick of seeing my face throughout the school year, but please!” Utterly oblivious to Aoto’s infatuation, the girl clapped her hands together as if to beg him to come.

“No, I’m not sick of you at all!” Aoto said, waving his hands in a panic. “In fact, I want to see you every day if I can!”

“Then that settles it! It’s okay, my parents both work, and my sister’s in college and barely comes home. I think I’ll be alone for the whole summer outside of the Bon Festival!”

Shihono had either missed or ignored the pseudo-confession that had slipped out amidst Aoto's confusion. Either way, she smiled from the bottom of her heart.

"Hold on, that's not okay at all! There isn't a single part about it that's okay!" The thought of being alone with her worsened his alarm and he harshly rebuked her.

However, Shihono couldn't quite put her finger on what the problem was. She tilted her head with a perplexed expression. "Then I guess I could go to your house instead?"

"That's, uh, *even worse*... Anyway, I don't have the console to begin with." Aoto both looked and sounded like he was in great pain as he wrung out his answer.

Not owning the console was a real problem, but more importantly, personal circumstances had led to him living by himself—and not in a cheap apartment with paper thin walls either. He only had one room, but it was a steel-reinforced condominium.

Does she not understand how dangerous it is to say she's willing to come to a place like that? Aoto wondered. He glared at her, but she only returned a confused, innocent gaze. All he could do was sigh.

"I don't really get it, but just come over to my house. The console in the clubroom belongs to our upperclassmen and sis bought mine, so I can't bring it over to your place."

Aoto had gotten a headache from how far off the mark she'd been. He massaged his temples and delivered her a simple fact.

"You know I'm a guy, right?"

They were a boy and girl of sensitive age; he didn't even need to reference the old adage that men are beasts. Aoto thought an adorable girl like Shihono should be more cautious, and the fact that he wasn't even on her radar made him want to cry. She didn't seem to notice his pain, though.

"Yeah, I know. You're taller, your arms are longer, and even your hands are completely different."

She innocently closed the gap between them and lined up her arm against the one coming out of Aoto's short-sleeved shirt.

Although she could see the differences in skin texture, color, and the thickness of their arms, Shihono seemed to be missing the fact that their power disparity meant that Aoto could easily hold her down if he chose to do so. He couldn't tell whether she didn't understand that or if she naively believed that "Endo wouldn't do something like that."

Regardless, Aoto was so pure that the sight of her fair arm next to his own was enough to blind him. He would never do anything that might risk her approval.

"Oh," Shihono said. "You mean you don't wanna play an otome game?"

Her guess was wholly wrong. Aoto began to grow frustrated at how little notice she paid him; it was as if he were invisible.

"No, that's not the issue. Besides, it's a little late to be saying that." Aoto had already played through the fan disc and cried his heart out. If he had qualms like that, he would have refused outright to begin with. That wasn't the issue at hand. "...Well, I'm fine with it if you are, Kobayashi."

Still, he didn't have the mental fortitude to ask her, "What are you thinking, bringing a guy that's in love with you to your own home?" He wasn't even brave enough to let her know how he felt, and ended up caving in.

"Thanks! Okay, let's iron out our plans tomorrow!" And of course, Shihono replied with purehearted enthusiasm, happily shaking his hand up and down.

"You're very welcome." Aoto couldn't have been happier. Shihono was enjoying herself, he was going to spend the summer break with his crush, *and* he was going to make himself useful. Yet in frustration he added, "But you're really cute, so don't invite any other guys to your house, okay?"

Shihono released his hand and looked somewhat irked.

"Do you really think I'd invite over a guy that wasn't you? That's scary and gross," she said, making her disgust clear.

Aoto felt proud, content, and still a bit frustrated at her appalled attitude. He

waded through the feeling that he was still being taken lightly in search of a reply, but the two of them had reached the Kobayashi residence before he knew it.

“Okay, see you later! Don’t forget about tomorrow!”

Shihono’s smile was as infinitely innocent as a sunny day as she waved him goodbye. Her gesture had drained Aoto of all spite. He sighed and muttered to himself, “Well, I guess I’d better do my best to catch her attention over summer break...”

Chapter 2: The Gods' Commentary and Blessing

Ever since the gods had begun their play-by-play and analysis, my Lieselotte had become unbearably cute.

“Betrothed though we may be,” she said, “may I ask you to refrain from so casually touching me in public?”

We were in the dining hall at lunchtime, the day after the courtyard episode. Although Lieselotte had just coldly chastised me, the gods' breakdown left me struggling to hold back a laugh.

“Despite what she says, the cracks are showing in Lieselotte's face! Why can't she be honest and cutely accept it?!”

“Liese-tan's a tsundere, after all. The thorns come out when she passes her embarrassment threshold,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“However, I'd like to point out that she's basically saying she'd be fine with skinship behind closed doors.”**

Lieselotte's expression was indeed closer to flustered than angry. “Does that mean you won't mind if it's just the two of us?” I asked, channeling my stifled laughter into a smile. She turned beet red and instantly went silent.

“Critical hit! Lieselotte's too busy skipping heartbeats to say a word!”

“What a fine play from Sieg! The mood is so sickly sweet, I just feel bad we keep wrapping Fiene up in it.”

I tilted my head at Lady Kobayashee's statement. Fiene was in fact present, but I didn't know what Lady Kobayashee meant by “wrapping her up in it.”

After thinking on it more, I noticed that my first encounter with the gods had been in the presence of Fiene. What was more, I had only begun hearing their voices again today when I had entered the dining hall, where Fiene was already seated. Finally, I had heard nothing from the heavens when Lieselotte had come to greet me this morning.

Rarely, there were cases of people being blessed by the gods, and perhaps Fiene was one of them. My family's ability was also said to be something the Goddess Lirenna had bestowed upon us generations ago.

Maybe Fiene's strength originated from Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee's blessings; as a result, they were constantly by her side. I continued fleshing out my theories until I heard the goddess mutter to herself.

"Man, I wish we could go stick ourselves onto Liese-tan. And if we really are gods, I wanna give her some kind of divine blessing... Whoa?!"

That very instant, a pillar of light shot down from the heavens directly on top of Lieselotte.

"Eek!" she squealed. The shimmering rays looked warm and gentle as they enveloped her. Her honey hair and fair skin soaked up the light and glowed until the brightness faded.

"Huh? What? Huh?" Lieselotte mumbled to herself in confusion as she looked herself over.

"What was that?"

"She glowed!"

"Lady Lieselotte was sparkling!"

"Was that magic?"

Uh-oh. At present, the better part of the student body was here in the dining hall. Lieselotte was the daughter of a marquis, the crown prince's fiancée, and a gorgeous beauty; she attracted enough attention as it was. This miraculous event sent waves of chatter through the entire student population.

I stood up from my seat and spoke loudly from the bottom of my gut.

"As of this moment, the goddess Lady Kobayashee has blessed Lieselotte with her divine favor!" *...I think.* I wasn't too certain myself, but I made my declaration with confidence to quell everyone's fears. *Surely I'm right. I really think that's what happened. I'm not wrong, am I?*

"Yay, the camera's on Liese-tan! Does this mean I managed to give her my blessing? That has to be it. Liese-tan was sparkling earlier!"

Lady Kobayashee's cheerful voice brought an end to my unease. *Good, I think I got it.* I didn't know what a "camera" was, but the goddess's speculation lined up with my own, so I decided not to think about it any more.

"We've been looking in on your world through Fiene up until now, but our perspective just switched to follow Lieselotte. I'm not sure if we gave her any, like, *power*, but I think we'll be watching over her from now on. Best regards."

Ah, I see. I secretly nodded at Lord Endoh's calm explanation as I stared at Lieselotte. She was clenching and unclenching her fist to confirm the power the goddess had bestowed upon her.

"Th-The goddess chose to bless *me*," she said in awe. She trembled as she spoke, and the joyful tears that were on the verge of forming in her amethyst eyes filled me with secondhand happiness.

There were records—both in our kingdom *and* nations abroad—of individuals whose divine favor had blessed them with astonishing powers. That is to say, it was an event rare enough to leave a record of. Lieselotte receiving a goddess's blessing meant more than an increase in her potential: she now held serious political and theological sway.

"I knew you were special, Lady Lieselotte! How wonderful it is to see the future queen of our kingdom receive a divine blessing!" One of Lieselotte's friends lauded her with teary eyes. Once she began clapping, the whole cafeteria slowly joined in until I could only hear thunderous applause.

Surrounded by roaring cheers, Lieselotte blushed a deep red. Yet she still straightened her back and smiled elegantly, addressing the crowd with a curtsy. *I expected no less.*

"The words 'future queen' instantly turned Lieselotte's face bright red! You might as well marry her on the spot, Prince!"

Huh? Is that why she's blushing? Lord Endoh's statement threatened to turn my tender smile into a full-blown smirk. I had to cover my mouth to prevent anyone else noticing.

"That's right. The root cause behind every one of Liese-tan's actions is her love for Sieg."

By the gods, my fiancée's adorability is just too much. I moved to turn my swelling emotion into words of celebration, but I froze in my tracks when I heard the gods begin another discussion.

"By the way, since I managed to bless Lieselotte, doesn't that mean you can bless someone too, Endo?"

"You think so? Well, Sieg's the only one that'll hear me if I fail, so I might as well try. In that case, I choose...Baldur! I wanna bless him!"

As soon as Lord Endoh finished speaking, another pillar of light beamed straight at Baldur Riefenstahl, who was sitting a short distance away from me. This pillar was more forceful than Lady Kobayashee's, and it quickly zipped into him like a bolt of lightning.

"Huh?! Wh-Why me?" he asked, baffled.

Baldur was Lieselotte's cousin. He hailed from a branch barony of her family, and was in his second year at the academy. He'd already begun serving as an official knight-in-training. His short hair was a darker blond than my fiancée's and his eyes were a deep blue. While he was usually a man of few words, even he couldn't conceal his surprise at this startling development.

"For real? Why'd you pick Baldur? Endo, are you a Bal fan?"

"I mean... It's more that he comes in second in the dying-ness rankings. I figured if I could power him up or something with a blessing, then I should."

"Ah, gotcha."

Their conversation was too sophisticated for me to comprehend. As I stood puzzled with my head to one side, Lady Kobayashee offered me an explanation.

"Oh, Sieg. Bal was fated to die trying to protect Fiene from a powerful enemy that shows up at the academy. Endo blessed him with strength so we can avoid that. Would you mind telling Bal to stick with Fiene as much as he can, at least when they're here at school?"

"Baldur," I declared, heading straight for the man in question, "the god known as Lord Endoh has blessed you with his favor." I delivered the news with as much dignity as I could muster, but his muddled expression didn't budge.

“But why me? Surely the gods didn’t tack me on as an afterthought to Liese. Is something going to happen to House Riefenstahl?”

Despite our projected marriage, I couldn’t call my fiancée by any nicknames; meanwhile, Baldur did, as the two of them had been raised like siblings. I was surprised to find myself upset at that fact, but hid my emotions as I shook my head and began speaking once more.

“Baldur, the truth is, Miss Fiene is going to confront a dangerous foe that even she will struggle to combat, right here at this very academy. Protect her, and protect yourself—that is what Lord Endoh has given you this power for. From here on, you are to stay by her side as much as possible when the two of you are on campus.”

Still a bit lost, I figured that I at least had the general outline down as I carefully chose my words. In response, Baldur’s eyes opened wide.

“You mean to say Miss Fiene—*the* Miss Fiene—is going to struggle in *combat*?!” he shouted.

Unable to believe my statement, his voice had begun to tremble. The students around us also stirred uneasily at the news. A single nod from me caused Baldur’s tone to shift.

“An enemy of unimaginable power is soon to appear at the academy. The gods have blessed Liese with the strength to protect you, and me with the power to shield Miss Fiene. Is my understanding correct?” he asked gravely.

I think he’s a tiny bit off, but whatever. I kept a straight face and nodded back, as solemn as he was.

“It’s less about protecting and more about us personally hoping that they’ll stick together, but... Well, I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

Apparently, it was all going to work out. I quietly breathed a sigh of relief at Lady Kobayashee’s conclusion.

“I feel like the fact that the popular crown prince is the only one who can hear us is making us seem more and more magnificent than we really are...”

I’m sorry, Lord Endoh. I gave a tiny nod to the heavens in apology. Still, the

two of them truly were outstanding beings to be revered, so I didn't think it was a misunderstanding of any kind.

“Man, I guess Fiene really is a gorilla.”

Lord Endoh's final offhand remark was dripping with legitimate disappointment. I was impressed at my own ability to maintain composure when I managed to power through without bursting into laughter. *Hm, maybe I do control my facial expressions too tightly.*

“Fiene really is a gorilla.” The statement hardly seemed fit to describe a young schoolgirl—especially the dainty and cute Fiene—but she was certainly as strong as a gorilla.

Ever since our entrance exams, her grades in practical combat had been top-of-the-line. She surpassed the first-year Lieselotte, who'd been born to a martial family and diligently polished her skills; me, one of the top students in the third year; and Baldur, who could keep his own against full-fledged knights.

In fact, there wasn't a single person at this school who could best her. Honestly, I worried that there would only be a handful of knights among the royal guard who could hope to match her. Her combat ability was outlandish—so much so that it made up for her abysmal grades in the classroom.

“Your Highness Prince Siegwald.”

While I'd been zoning out and thinking about Fiene's monstrous strength, Lieselotte and Baldur had moved from being a little ways away to right next to me. They both knelt and bowed their heads. I only noticed thanks to Lieselotte calling my name, and I straightened my posture in a panic (but of course, in a way so that no one would realize I hadn't been ready).

“We of House Riefenstahl hereby swear to dutifully use this divine blessing for the crown, the kingdom, and for you.”

The two of them spoke in tandem as they offered their devotions.

“I thank you. However, make sure not to push yourselves too hard.” My words were met with an ever deepening bow. The Riefenstahls were originally a military family, and these two were especially serious.

I took a long look at them both. Their family's long history of producing warriors had left them with impressive physiques. Baldur was a well-built man nearing 190 centimeters, and Lieselotte was quite tall for a woman.

The length of her slender arms, legs, and perfectly straight back only heightened her beauty, but she herself was troubled by her height.

Her exact measurements remained a mystery, but even with high heels, her gaze remained slightly lower than mine. Since I was 181 centimeters, that meant she wasn't *that* tall. Personally, I thought her proportions were stunning.

"Baldur aside, it's a bit embarrassing that *I* have to be protected by *her*," I mused.

Nobody heard my faint whispers. They were swallowed up by the roaring cheers that followed the two Riefenstahls' proclamation of loyalty.

I think I might start training a bit more.

"Heya, Sieg. I heard you recently hit on that first-year commoner girl, and the Riefenstahl princess blew up on you." We were nearly a month into the new semester, and these were the first words my long-time friend said to me, after returning from a lengthy trip.

"Here I was, ready to welcome you back, but it sounds like your intel is old, Art. I'll admit Lieselotte and I had a small misunderstanding, but we've resolved it. Everything is going swimmingly between us."

Seeing me answer with a grin, he seemed a tad surprised but quickly regained his smile. My schoolmate and friend Art's full name was Artur Richter. Despite what his lax behavior might lead you to believe, he was actually from a count family. Born in the same year, we'd been friends since childhood.

"Honestly," I said without thinking, "you sure are as flashy as ever."

Art lightly shrugged and glanced up at his hair—that's right, his hair. It was downright gaudy. His pink-gold hair was extremely long for a man, and the loosely tied bundle went down to his waist. Not only that, but the ends of his hair were dyed crimson. He was a walking assault on the eyes.

Speaking of, his eyes were a common hazel, but his eyelashes were so impressive that I expected them to sound like two brooms brushing against one another. The rest of his facial features combined to be excessively handsome too. The very act of looking at him while we spoke tired out my eyes.

“And you’re so shiny that you look fake, just like always!” Art said with a brilliant smile. After being the subject of my stares for a while, it was his turn to return the favor.

I doubted I could be referred to as “shiny,” but my platinum-blond hair was nearly white and my eyes were golden. I had to concede that my appearance had a bright hue to it.

“Well, I’m glad to see neither of us have changed much,” he said.

I nodded emotionally. I was admittedly glad to see him return to the royal academy safe and sound. Truth be told, having someone who would talk to me this casually despite my position as crown prince was something to be grateful for.

Count Richter had been awarded his title by the royal family, but the Richter bloodline had many cases of divine blessings in its history. As a result, they enjoyed high privileges in the Church.

In fact, the top religious authority in our nation was Art’s father’s elder sister—in other words, his aunt. Art himself had great talents in healing and supporting magic, and had begun working as a priest before even graduating. He’d taken a leave from school to help rebuild part of the western reach after a horrible flood.

The Church kept the state and its politics at an arm’s length, and Art was all but certain to forsake his counthood to succeed his aunt’s position in the future. Unlike almost everyone else at the academy, he and his family were not direct subjects of the crown. This meant he had no need to suck up to me; Artur Richter’s unique position let him and I stand on equal footing.

“So, how is Fiene, really?” he asked, putting his arm around my shoulder. “I heard she’s super cute. Oh, I know! Did you take her in as your mistress?”

I glared at him as hard as I could for his vulgar question. “Of course not. I

would never take in a mistress—I'm not *you*."

Art was plainly shocked by my low tone and menacing stare. A shiver ran down his spine.

With how likely his future position of heavenly devotion was, Art had no arranged marriage. His family had given him permission to do as he pleased, within reason. The Church allowed for marriage, but there were all sorts of restrictions: for example, a priest could only marry a priestess. Furthermore, if he were to receive some divine blessing in the future, his god could forbid him from taking a wife.

That being said, he used his situation to earn quite the name for himself as he played around with every widow and popular waitress he came across. I was in a position of far greater responsibility. More importantly, I didn't want to be unfaithful to Lieselotte.

"Whoa, chill. Have you always been the type to get this genuinely angry?" Eventually, Art spoke up as if he'd seen something inexplicable.

Now that you mention it...I feel like I wasn't always this way. Still, it wouldn't do to cause any more misunderstandings with Lieselotte, so I was satisfied with my actions. A jealous Lieselotte was cute, but I would never want to make her legitimately sad.

"L-Look, the whole mistress thing was just a joke! Fiene's got the same specialties as me, right? Auntie and the rest of the Church bigwigs ordered me to check her out and try my best to have her join us. Would you mind introducing me to her?"

Oh, so that's what he's after. It all finally clicked. True enough, Fiene had an affinity for healing and supporting magic. However, the question of whether she and Artur Richter had the same *specialties* left me at a loss for words.

"I guess, technically, you might be *kind of* the same?" The way I tilted my head drew a dubious look from Art. "Um, well, how do I put this? Miss Fiene is significantly more...adept at *offense* than you are."

I carefully picked every word. It just made his confusion worse.

"Huh? What does that even mean? I thought she didn't have any capacity for

offensive magic, just like me.”

That was correct. Neither Art nor Fiene could use the sorts of aggressive spells that manipulated fire or water. In that sense, their talents were aligned. But the way they used their magic was, well...

“You’ll understand when you see her in action yourself. Come with me and I’ll introduce you to her.”

I gave up on explaining. I simply smiled and brought the conversation to a close. No one would ever believe the truth unless they witnessed it with their own two eyes. Instead, I chose to take the befuddled Art over to Fiene.

“I think it’d be best for you to experience her abilities firsthand in a real bout. You can pair up with either me or Baldur to face her,” I suggested. Art’s showy hair swayed gently as he hurried to catch up to me, and he peered at me curiously.

“No, no, no, hold on. We’re fighting two-on-one? Plus, if you and I team up, I don’t think we’d lose to *anyone*. Honestly, I’m not that confident that I could link up with Baldur Riefenstahl, but think about it: normally, bolstering that guy with my magic would obviously be overkill.”

Without a good reply, I merely cocked my head in response. Art was right—thinking normally, this was going too far.

Baldur specialized in channeling magic through his blade. Although his attacks were deadly, he was lacking in everything else. The finer details of restoration, defense, and supporting an ally were lost on him. But Art was a master of “everything else,” and the two would surely be great fits for each other.

I myself was more of an all-rounder with few distinctive fortes, but Art and I had impeccable synergy.

Either way, one would normally think that these combinations would be taking things too far; we would be up against a first-year, and a girl at that.

“But you’d instantly die if you were on your own,” I said with intentional nonchalance. Beside me, I could see Art reach the height of his confusion.

I wanted him to experience Miss Fiene’s terrifying strength head-on, not from

the sidelines. In order to let him do so without instantly dying, my options were limited. This two-on-one fight was by no means overkill, but I knew he wouldn't believe me if I told him that. Truthfully, I wouldn't have believed it either.

"Fiene uses healing magic...*right?*" Art nervously asked after mulling over what I'd told him.

The *magic* she employed was primarily of the healing and supporting variety—there was no denying that. I nodded.

"Well, you'll understand when you see her fight," I said, abandoning my explanation there.

— — — —

Miss Fiene's fighting style was, in a word, unique.

First, most supporting mages cast enhancement spells on their frontline companions; Fiene used them on herself. With her terrifyingly deep well of mana, she raised her physical abilities through the roof and began punching. She punched, punched, sometimes kicked, and punched some more. *Oh, she got in at a good angle there.*

"Fiene's a DPS healer!" Lord Endoh said.

"Wow, she sure is destructive. Where, oh where did the sweet and protectable heroine go?" Lady Kobayashee asked.

The Voices of the Gods rang out as I watched Art and Baldur duke it out with Fiene from the sidelines. The gods were completely right—Fiene was a menace. I didn't think she could be considered a healer. At least, she wasn't anything like Art.

Even now, Fiene's flame-bound fists were rapidly beating Baldur into a corner. Her magical fire wasn't particularly strong, but each blow was absurdly weighty. Baldur seemed to be taking a lot of damage.

Art had been knocked out long ago. Fiene had slipped right past Baldur to get up to Art's chest and had landed a clean uppercut to end him. She made great use of her speed and small frame to clean up most of her fights.

"Hrgh! I surrender!" Once the effect of Art's supporting magic began to wane,

Baldur conceded the match.

“So strong! Fiene’s a tough one!”

“Boy, isn’t she a little *too* strong? I get the feeling she’s different from the game.”

I listened to the gods speak while I blankly watched Fiene and Baldur shake hands to honor one another’s ability. *Oh, I should probably go heal Art.*

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Uh, yeah... Maybe?” My spell brought him back to consciousness, but Art remained in a daze. He began casting restoration magic on himself and continued speaking after a short pause. “Let me just double check—the one pulling all those crazy movements was that little first-year lady, right? It was Fiene?”

“No doubt about it. By the way, you might not have been able to see it, but she knocked you out with a striking uppercut.”

I decided that Art could tend to his own wounds and stopped casting my spell. He grew excited and almost seemed happy at my words.

“That was a fist? For real? I remember something super heavy and super painful striking my jaw. It snapped my consciousness so fast that I couldn’t even start healing myself before I was out cold. And you’re telling me that was a cute, tiny girl’s *fist*? Whoa. Holy moly. I didn’t even know you could *do* that.”

“DPS healers are a pretty common archetype in games, and I’m sure other people in this world have thought of doing it themselves. But we can see from Fiene’s stats that her physical abilities are just bonkers. They say strength comes from the fundamentals, but I’m curious to know how she trained to be this strong.”

Art’s admiration was followed by Lady Kobayashee’s analysis. As an aside, Fiene was similar to Art in the fact that they both excelled in self-restoration. There was a record of her confronting a band of villains before entering the academy, where she had had her arm cut off. Apparently, she’d reattached it on the spot and fought the assailants off.

Seriously, what kind of training could lead to someone doing that?

“That’s amazing! Forget the Church’s orders, I’m genuinely interested in her now! I’ll be right back!” The priest was already back at full health and he energetically jumped up, then made his way over to Fiene and Baldur.

As I watched the three of them exchange praise for their duel, a question arose in my mind. For me to hear the two deities speak, Lieselotte had to be around. Yet I didn’t see her anywhere. Why was that?

According to the gods, Fiene had originally been the main character of the “game.” As a result, they had only been able to see the things revolving around her until the day they had awarded their blessings.

Once Lady Kobayashee had granted Lieselotte her favor, they were meant to be clinging to her. However, even after the duel had ended and things had settled down, Lieselotte was nowhere to be seen. I looked to and fro, only for Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee to clear up my confusion.

“If you’re looking for Lieselotte, she’s hiding in the shade of the northern topiary while keeping an eye on the courtyard.”

“Rather, Liese-tan’s not really looking at the courtyard, but at Sieg. From what she was muttering to herself while staring at him, we can reason that she was worried about him and Fiene getting along when she’s not around. Her plan seems to be to sneak a peek to confirm the truth.”

What the heck? That’s way too cute. I wasn’t even alone; Art and Baldur were here with me. What was more, the two of them were practically fighting over Fiene!

Lady Kobayashee’s insight on Lieselotte’s continued concealment made me want to squirm. I thought she might appear if I called out to the others and pretended not to know she was there. But all it took was a *single step* in their direction.

“My, what a terrific ruckus you all are causing. I could hear your hollering all the way from the study room I was in,” Lieselotte said with a flick of her luxurious golden locks.

“What happened to the investigation, Lieselotte?! This is way too soon to be

losing patience!”

Lord Endoh was right on the mark.

“What’s more, Liese-tan made it sound like she just so happened to hear the commotion, but that’s a lie. She went straight to Sieg as soon as class ended, but saw him talking to Art and decided to follow them until she found a chance to join in. She kept missing her opportunity and got a bit spooked when the fight started, so she kept her distance—but she nearly ran in to help when Art went down. Then she figured Sieg could take care of him, but was still too worried to leave. And thus, she continued peeping until this very moment.”

Lady Kobayashee’s matter-of-fact report put a serious look on my face. Lieselotte was so adorable that I’d skipped straight past smiling to loop back into sobriety. *It isn’t fair to be this cute.*

However, my expression caused all of the others to grow uneasy.

“I-I’m so sorry, Lady Lieselotte!” Fiene bowed in a panic.

Baldur and Art took a step forward to shield her from Lieselotte’s disdainful glare.

“We’ve got a serious atmosphere on our hands! Lieselotte’s back at it again with the misunderstandings!”

“Liese-tan’s scorn is half an act to fool herself and the other half is pure anxiety. Real jealousy only makes up a statistically insignificant amount of her emotions right now, so I don’t think there’s any need for caution.”

I figured. I deeply concurred with the gods’ play-by-play and analysis, but the others couldn’t hear it. They were still stuck in the same oppressive mood.

“Hey there, princess. You look awfully cross today. We may have been a bit loud, but I don’t think Miss Fiene is to blame. I got a bit carried away excitedly asking her about this and that—it’s my first time meeting her after a long leave from school and all. Will you accept an apology from me instead?”

Art put on his lady-killing smile and took Lieselotte’s hand for a cordial kiss.

Smack! In return, she used her free hand to slap him away.

“I need no apologies from you. More importantly, could I ask that you refrain from touching me so casually, Count Artur Richter?”

Lieselotte’s subzero gaze was matched by her grim tone of voice. Art made these kinds of moves on her whenever they met. Every time, it ended with her slapping him away. I thought it was impressive that he never faltered despite the fact that she stared at him like he was a repugnant insect.

As per usual, Art lightly shrugged with a laid-back smile. As Lieselotte’s cousin, Baldur furrowed his brow and took a step forward to assuage her concerns.

A single glare was all it took for Lieselotte to stop her cousin in his tracks. She scoffed upon seeing him freeze instantly. Her back was perfectly straight and her voice dignified as she spoke down to him.

“Bystanders ought to stand by. My business is with Fiene.”

With her declaration made, Lieselotte marched over to Fiene. The commoner girl had changed into sportswear with a wand holster on her belt, and Lieselotte looked her over.

“Ah, I knew it. What a pitiful wand,” she said, sighing in disgust.

“Oh, um, well! This is something that was left in the lost-and-found box for over half a year, so I got it for free, and that’s enough for me, so—”

Fiene pulled out her wand in a panic and prattled away. I hadn’t known that she’d gotten her wand in that way. The academy’s lost-and-found did have a policy like that, but I couldn’t help but think the item in her hands was practically garbage.

“This isn’t a wand. It’s rubbish.”

Lieselotte plucked the wand out of Fiene’s hands. She looked down at it with revulsion. Suddenly, her hand squeezed the middle of the shaft and it snapped with a loud crack.

“Oh dear, it must have truly been worthless to break this easily. Had you used this with a group—whether in practice or combat—you certainly would have been a nuisance to your companions. Do you understand that?”

Lieselotte tossed away what had once been a wand with icy eyes. Both Baldur

and Art were furious, and seemed to be on the verge of lashing out.

“That had to have been on purpose! Lieselotte’s hostility is off the charts!”

“But it’s true that a wand Liese-tan could break with a light grip is dangerous. It might be a nuisance to others, but the person most at risk of injury if it were to break mid-spell would have been Fiene herself.”

I gestured for the two men to stand down off the back of helpful divine analysis.

“Using a wand that defective would be dangerous for Miss Fiene. I know Lieselotte’s methods aren’t perfect, but I agree that it wouldn’t have done for her to continue using it.”

Once I finished speaking, Lieselotte scoffed again, Art and Baldur cooled off, and Fiene began to sulk.

To tell the truth, it wasn’t as if Fiene *used* wands. They were supplementary tools to direct magic to a faraway location. She didn’t need one to cast spells on herself or things she could touch. I’d once heard her say, “Honestly, I feel like I don’t need it, but apparently all mages are supposed to have one...”

The wand’s lack of importance to Fiene was evident in how little she cared about the fact that it’d been broken. One of us could give her a replacement in the coming days and everything would likely be fine.

“My word, this is why I can’t stand the shabby tools of impoverished folk. I shall provide you with a replacement—one of my spare wands should be more than enough. With that, we should be even, yes?”

Lieselotte slipped out a beautiful wand that glimmered sky blue. For a “spare” tool, it was remarkably lavish. It looked brand new and the little embellishments all over it were painstakingly crafted.



“Isn’t that slimmer than your usual wand?” Baldur asked quietly. Lieselotte glared at him, and he quickly averted his eyes with a zipped mouth.

Now that he mentioned it, the wand was tailored to fit hands that were a bit smaller than Lieselotte’s. It would fit someone like, say...Fiene.

My brain churned as I gazed at it, and I realized that both the material and make had been hand-picked to perfectly accommodate healing and supporting magic. This wand had literally been made for Fiene in every way, shape, and form.

Lieselotte was like me: good at offensive, defensive, supporting, and healing magic. You could call us jacks-of-all-trades or masters of none; we didn’t excel at anything, but nothing stumped us. Clearly, the wand did not fit Lieselotte’s style.

More importantly, a handcrafted order like this must have cost a fortune. No one in their right mind would believe it to be a spare.

Ah, I understand. This is what they call a tsun de rais, isn’t it?! How can one girl be so cute?!

Art and Baldur must have come to the same conclusion I did, because the two of them were looking at the ground and trying to keep it together. Art in particular failed to fully stifle his laughter and had to loudly clear his throat. The corners of his lips were still obviously twisting into a smile. *Hold it in!*

“Hey, that’s the mystery wand that came in last week. Lieselotte’s been taking it out, putting it away, and longingly staring at it, all while floundering in excitement this whole time!”

“I get it now. Liese-tan ordered it for Fiene, but she couldn’t figure out how to give it to her. Neither of them would be happy with a simple handout, after all. So instead, Liese-tan destroyed the old wand and gave her this as an ‘apology.’ Thinking back, she kept touching the wand whenever she was around Fiene.”

I can’t take this anymore. Unable to endure the gods’ analysis, I covered my face with both hands and looked up toward the sky. *Oh my gods, she’s too cute!*

After a few seconds of screaming internally, I returned to my post of watching over my dear fiancée. Still unable to understand the value and make of the wand, Fiene stood perplexed. Lieselotte, on the other hand, had frozen under the pressure, a grave look on her face. The wand was still in her hands, waiting to be taken.

“Fie—pft! Fiene, go ahead and take it,” Art said, trembling from his leaking laughter.

“That wand is a good product. Think of it as Liese’s way of apologizing for breaking your old one,” Baldur added awkwardly.

Lieselotte shot the two of them the dirtiest look, but even that was nothing more than adorable.

◆◆◆ The Matchmaking Goddess

“Hey, it’s almost time,” Shihono said. “Let’s go ahead and save.”

Aoto stopped fidgeting with the controller in his hands. He looked up at the wall clock in the brightly-lit Kobayashi living room.

“Oh, you’re right. We’re at a nice stopping point, so this is a good time for a break.” As he spoke, he went through the well-rehearsed motions of saving the game and turning off the console.

Right when he did so, Shihono switched the TV to a public broadcast channel. It was streaming the afternoon news.

“Phew, it looks like they haven’t started yet!” she said.

“It doesn’t matter if we miss a bit at the start anyway. All I’m interested in are the results.”

Their program of choice was not yet on, and Shihono’s relief contrasted with Aoto’s apathy. Thinking his response was odd, she glanced over at the boy to see him staring intently at the screen; it turned out he just hadn’t been honest. Realizing this made her snicker.

“I’ll get us some fresh tea before it starts,” Shihono said, picking up the two cups on the table. They had run dry at some point during their heated gaming session, and she took them with her behind the kitchen counter.

“Ah, sorry. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, but you know this is *my* house, right? Besides, you bring snacks and stuff, Endo. No need to worry.”

Shihono giggled at how Aoto always thanked her for her hospitality so earnestly while she filled the glasses with ice from her freezer. She pulled out a pitcher of barley tea from the fridge and poured it out over the ice. Aoto had followed her up to the kitchen counter, so she reached over to hand him his cup.

“Thanks,” Aoto said. “But, man, Fiene’s strength sure caught me off guard.”

“Right?” Shihono said. “At first, I thought the stats page was bugged out or something, but then she was...you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The two of them thought back on what they’d seen in the other world. They spoke about the duel and Fiene’s power with disappointment. The main heroine had turned into a gorilla, after all.

“Seeing Fiene that jacked makes me wonder if she needs to be protected at all... I guess you didn’t really mean for Baldur to defend her, though. You just told them to stick together because you want them to pair up, right, Kobayashi?” Aoto asked as they walked back to the three-person couch in front of the TV with their drinks in hand.

“Mmm, that’s true, but that’s not all I had in mind. Actually, my real plan was the opposite, but I felt too bad for Bal to say it out loud.”

“The opposite?”

Aoto tilted his head at Shihono’s vague explanation. She hopped onto the sofa and grinned.

“Here’s a question for you. To avoid Liese-tan’s death flags, we need to protect her heart; to avoid Bal’s death flags, what does he need?”

As he began deliberating, Aoto discreetly sat on the other side of the couch to leave one person’s worth of space between them. Baldur only survived in the Reverse Harem Route and the Good and Best Ends of his own. Even in his own route, he’d run into a Bad End and die if either his affection rating or Fiene’s stats were too low.

The question was: *what’s the common thread?* After reorganizing the question in his mind, Aoto had an epiphany and raised his head to answer.

“Basically, are you saying that he won’t die if Fiene protects him?”

Shihono frowned and nodded awkwardly.

“Err... I mean, you’re not *wrong*, but I asked what he needed, so I wanted you to answer, ‘Fiene’s love!’”

Shihono puffed up her cheeks discontentedly and Aoto returned a troubled smile. With a smug look on her face, she unleashed her hypothesis onto him.

“As someone that’s completed all the routes in the game, my opinion is that Bal only lives when Fiene cares for him on some level too. Which means, instead of him one-sidedly trying to shield her, they need a healthy relationship where they can protect and support each other, I think. So even though I’d be super duper happy if they got together, all I can ask is that they at least get along as friends. That’s why I gave them that order. With Fiene as insanely strong as she is, she wouldn’t let her friends get hurt, would she?”

“So that’s what you meant by ‘the opposite.’ He’s not protecting Fiene, but getting protected by her.”

Shihono’s theory was sound. If a maxed out Fiene somehow made it into Baldur’s route and awakened during their fight with the witch, that would be more than a perfect defense. In fact, it would get to “Run, witch, run!” levels. Baldur certainly wouldn’t die. Aoto mulled it over and nodded along enthusiastically.

“I want to save Lieselotte, but I don’t want anyone else to die either. We did already bless both her and Baldur, but we don’t even know if that does anything. Okay! I’m on board team Bal x Fiene!”

Spurred on by Aoto’s passion, Shihono pumped both her fists and joined in.

“Exactly! We won’t let anyone die! Let’s see through a Happy End with everyone in it!”

The very moment the two of them declared their determination, a long, long, long, tear-inducing siren rang out.

The blaring sound called their attention to the television. They turned to see a slew of familiar faces staring back at them from beyond the screen, looking serious and a bit nervous.

Aoto wished he could have been there with them, but he was also happy with his current life. Unable to determine which emotion was stronger, all he could do was watch his former teammates line up at Koshien Stadium.

“It’s finally starting,” Shihono said. After a pause, she laughed and joked, “Do you wanna add some play-by-play? I don’t know much about baseball, so I can’t do much color commentary, though.”

“No, I’m good,” Aoto said, somehow managing to smile back. “But...thanks.”

Although he was grateful for her attempts to cheer him up, he didn’t have it in him to say anything more. The usually talkative duo simply sat in silence as they watched the world on the other side of the screen.

— — — —

Their school’s first opponent was a mainstay team in the Japanese National High School Baseball Championship.

In contrast, Aoto and Shihono’s school had a fairly strong team in their prefecture—the key word was “fairly.” Last year, they hadn’t been able to secure a spot at Koshien, and they weren’t famous across the country by any means.

The disparity in skill between the two schools had dragged them into the eighth inning at zero points to seven. Their school was slated to drop out of the tournament in their first match.

“Ah, you know, I think I’m gonna go home after all.”

Aoto’s quiet voice cut through the silence. His expression was just as pained as those of his old friends trapped in the TV.

“I thought you were gonna watch it all here,” Shihono said curiously.

“That was the plan, but...I feel like crying. Jeez, I’m so pathetic.”

Aoto’s voice was quivering as he spoke. He covered his face with both hands; whether he was trying to hold in his tears or hide from his team’s stinging defeat, not even he knew. Shihono watched over him compassionately while he froze in place.

“Honestly, I don’t even get it myself. I can’t tell if I’m empathizing with them or if I’m just mad that I couldn’t be there. Either way, it looks like I haven’t gotten over it, huh? I’m just a wreck!”

Aoto’s disordered emotions and the frustration at his pathetic self took form

as something hot soaking into his palms.

“In that case, that’s all the more reason to watch it here. Endo, you live by yourself, don’t you?”

“What, are you saying you won’t let me cry all alone? You’re so manly, Kobayashi.” Even as he tried to crack a joke, Aoto’s voice was already stuffy.

“Well, I saw you cry plenty last year, so what’s it to us now anyway?” Shihono smiled weakly, like she was on the verge of crying herself. She scooted over to Aoto and began patting him on the head. Although it was usually out of reach, she now gently ran her fingers through his bristly hair.

Resurfacing year-old memories and the kindness packed into her hand pushed Aoto over the brink.

“Hng... Augh, waaah!”

Aoto finally started to cry. Unable to hold back the floodgates, he let it all out—just like last year.

Until one year ago, Aoto had been chasing the Koshien tournament alongside the young men on the TV. Yet his dream would remain forever unfulfilled: he’d quit baseball.

It was no exaggeration to say he’d given everything to the sport. To a boy like him, the incident had felt life-ending.

However, he’d been able to get back on his feet thanks to her. She’d let him cry, accepted his pain, and simply been there by his side. She had saved him.

In the autumn of last year, at this very house, Endo Aoto had fallen in love with Kobayashi Shihono.

— — — —

Aoto had loved baseball ever since he’d been little. Aoto’s father had dedicated his youth to the sport, and now taught at a middle school where he guided the baseball club.

Aoto had both an older and a younger sister, but his father had spent the most time with him. As the only son, he’d been introduced to baseball at a young age. He’d played catch with his father for as long as he could remember,

participated in the little leagues in elementary school, and joined his father's team in middle school.

Whenever his father had a spare ticket to a game, Aoto was always the one to accompany him. Naturally, he wanted to live up to his old man's expectations. But more than that, he loved seeing his stern dad revert back into a joyful little boy when they talked about baseball. At some point, it had become fun for Aoto too. Before he knew it, Aoto had fallen in love with the sport himself.

Baseball had also been the deciding factor in Aoto's choice of high school. After graduating from middle school, he'd left behind his mountainous rural home to attend a private school in his prefecture's capital that was renowned for its baseball team.

His aunt already lived in the city and owned a spare studio condo in her complex that she'd purchased for his late grandmother. When she'd offered to let him stay there, that had been enough to push him over.

For Aoto, leaving home at the age of fifteen hadn't been all that lonesome. He wasn't necessarily on bad terms with his family, but his mother and sisters were tightly knit, making it difficult to gel with them. Because of all the time he spent away from home practicing baseball, the women in his family felt a tad distant. In fact, this summer, he only planned to go home for a week or so, around when the Bon Festival would be held.

This only further illustrated how immersed Aoto had been in baseball—his whole life had revolved around it.

The turning point in his life had been last year, around the time of their regional tournament. He'd been pushing himself like crazy to keep up with his talented teammates. He'd pushed and forced himself on, and had begun to fear that maybe he didn't have what it took.

And then, Aoto hurt his shoulder. It wasn't serious enough to have a lasting impact on his everyday life, but the diagnosis was clear: with his injury and natural physique, he could no longer continue as a pitcher.

So he'd quit. He'd considered returning to the game as an outfielder once he was done with physical therapy. But before he could come to hate baseball—before it stopped being fun—he had decided to cut ties with the sport.

The next crossroads had come in the fall, when his school was preparing for a ball-sports event. Aoto had become a walking husk, lost as to why he was even alive. He spent his days attending school and simply not dying.

Each class had to choose their teams for volleyball, basketball, table tennis, and softball. His entire homeroom was discussing who would do what. In the name of fairness, active athletic club members couldn't participate in their respective sports—and for softball in particular, both softball and baseball players were banned. Suddenly, one of his classmates shouted across the room in the face of this restriction.

“Since Endo quit the baseball club, we can put him on the softball team, right?!”

Aoto was at a loss for what to do. True, he was no longer a member of the baseball team, and his shoulder had healed to the point where it felt fine in daily usage. However, there were still times when it suddenly hurt again, and he was still a regular at the local hospital. Thus, the runaway excitement of his classmates left him in a bind.

“Will anyone even score a hit with Endo on the mound? Yeesh, there's no way we'll lose!”

“We might even beat the third-years at this rate!”

“Yeah, but who the heck's gonna catch his pitches?”

“I bet Endo could carry us with his batting alone.”

His peers prattled away, stacking expectation upon expectation. None of them aware of Aoto's inner turmoil.

“Uh, hey, guys...” The homeroom teacher tried to calm the class down, but he was young and inexperienced. Unable to disclose the details of Aoto's injury without permission, he couldn't give any concrete reason to deny them. Similarly, Aoto himself couldn't bring himself to snuff out everyone's excitement and sat helpless.

“Oh, but Endo's a Broadcasting Club member like me, so there's no way he

can enter in softball. That'd take way too long! Plus, if he's on the team, we really will make it all the way to the finals, so I'm vetoing it!"

The energetic, clear voice of one of the classroom Madonnas turned the atmosphere on its head. Her words brought relief to some, perplexed and confused others, provoked questions from a number, and caused the rest disappointment.

"What? Since when?" The question came from the first girl's friend.

Kobayashi Shihono, the Broadcasting Club member who'd shifted the tides, smiled and spoke with natural confidence.

"Since yesterday. Endo has a great voice, so I scouted him. Baseball players sure know how to breathe from their gut!"

Shihono's announcement was news to everyone in the room—including Aoto. The relief belonged to their teacher, and the perplexity and confusion to none other than Endo Aoto himself. After all, he was neither a Broadcasting Club member nor had he received an invitation to join.

A disappointed chorus of "Aww"s and "Man"s filled the room. Shihono glanced over at Aoto and grinned like a child proud of her own prank. His heart skipped a beat, and the teacher spoke up while he sat bewildered.

"Hey, hey, hey! Endo has his club to worry about, so don't kick up a fuss. Besides, it's wrong to push everything on one person. Everyone should be working together to win this, okay?"

At long last, their homeroom regained some semblance of composure. Meanwhile, the expectations placed on Aoto began to dissipate. All that remained in Aoto's heart were the moving feeling of having been saved and the sweet excitement caused by Shihono's smile.

"So, I joined the Broadcasting Club yesterday?"

After school, Aoto hurried after the short girl making her way to the Broadcasting Club clubroom.

"Oops, it might've been today. Don't worry, one day doesn't make a big

difference,” Shihono said, chuckling.

“I don’t remember saying that I’d join today either,” he said with a wry smile.

She continued straight for her clubroom without any hesitation and smirked at him.

“But everyone thinks you’re part of the club now, so won’t you be in trouble if you don’t stick with us until the end of the ball-sports tournament?”

“Well, yeah...”

“You can quit whenever you want to, so go ahead and sign up. Don’t worry, we’re super lax! We only practice once a week on Wednesdays! We have to do the daily announcements, but I’m sure they won’t make you do it right after joining. If they do, I can switch with you! Plus, you can go around saying, ‘Sorry, I have to go help with the broadcast’ for everything. Forget the sports tournament, you can get out of *anything!*”

Shihono’s upbeat pitch threatened to overwhelm Aoto’s hesitation.

“Come on in,” she said.

They’d reached the clubroom, where she slid the door open for him. He could see a large metal door leading to a broadcasting booth in the back of the room, but the space leading up to it was littered with games and manga. There was even a giant bean bag sofa with other members of the club lazing around on it.

“Wow, it really *is* lax.” The comfortable mess of a room and Shihono’s prior persuasion were beginning to hook Aoto.

He knew that stepping through the doorway meant more than physical entry; to walk forward was to declare that he was willing to join the club. It would mean rejecting the offer he’d received from the baseball club advisor to return to the team as a manager.

“Thanks,” he said.

Even so, Aoto bowed to Shihono and entered. This marked the moment that he cut his attachment to baseball, and the first of many times that he would lose to this girl’s smile.

That day happened to have been the one day that week that the Broadcasting Club did anything. An athlete to his core, Aoto was astonished to hear that they were missing members even on an active day, and just as amazed when the whole club welcomed him despite his untimely application. The culture shock continued when everybody continued chatting during their fun and leisurely club activities, nearly instilling him with a sense of horror.

During their discussion, he found out that he and Shihono lived in the same direction. The flow of the conversation lent itself to the two of them walking home together, and the day came to an end while he was still internally celebrating.

“I can’t believe they were trying to get you to do practically the same thing that got you injured. Our classmates are monsters!” Shihono began laughing about what had happened as soon as the two of them left the school.

“To be fair, I’m mostly better and I try not to make it look like I’m injured. I don’t think they had any ill intentions. Still, you really saved me. Thanks.”

Aoto bowed and formally thanked her once more. Shihono lightly slapped his upper arm to try and get him to ease up.

“No prob. To tell you the truth, I was already considering scouting you because I think you have a good voice!” Aoto blinked in confusion, so Shihono went on with an ever widening grin. “You know how all the sports clubs go around chanting—especially the baseball team? Everyone does it during practice. One day, I heard a really great voice from out in the fields, and when I looked, it was you!”

Being praised so openly was incredibly embarrassing for Aoto. He desperately tried not to let it show as he averted his gaze.

“That’s why I’m really happy that you joined the Broadcasting Club! We’ll take the voice you trained through baseball and put it to good use!”

Shihono’s conclusion brought his attention to the reality that shouting and cheering as a member of the baseball team was a thing of the past for him. Assaulted by the fact that he would never return to the field, he took on a cynical tone.

“‘The voice I trained up through baseball,’ huh? I’m not sure if I should say I’m glad I at least have this, or if I should cry that this is all I have left.”

“Ha ha, you’re such a pessimist!”

Aoto let out a relieved sigh the instant Shihono laughed him off. He’d realized that he was just begging to be consoled as soon as he finished speaking, and it made him feel miserable.

“But it’s not like you lost *everything* when you hurt your shoulder, right?” Out of nowhere, Shihono began speaking quietly. Aoto’s face went stiff. “Baseball isn’t just about the players—or at least, I don’t think so. You could become a coach or a masseuse, or, you know, a play-by-play announcer. All the hard work and experience you built up can be put to use somewhere. Your voice isn’t ‘all you have left,’ I’m sure of it.”

Shihono’s soft spoken, thoughtful statement left Aoto at a loss for how to reply. He couldn’t even figure out what kind of face to make. She was usually the center of attention in their class, and he honestly thought of her as a rowdy person. Yet her carefully chosen words were full of a warmth that seeped deep into his soul.

“Oh...really?”

Aoto had barely squeezed the words out of his mouth when a single tear streaked down his cheek. He could no longer speak. Shihono stuck by his side without a word. Lit by the mellow evening sun and enveloped in a gentle silence, the two walked home side by side.

“Here, this is my house. It isn’t much, but I can get you a towel and tissues and tea and snacks.”

Shihono stopped in front of a house plaque that read “Kobayashi” and whirled around to Aoto. Even though tears had begun relentlessly flooding from his eyes during their walk, he was still trying to hold himself back. Without the energy to say “No thank you,” all he could muster was a small shake of his head.

“Come on in.”

Yet Shihono tugged him inside with a smile. Being a total homebody, she

wasn't very strong. Aoto had continued a physical therapy and exercise regimen even after quitting baseball, so it would have been easy for him to shake her off. Somewhere in the back of his mind, reason told him that he shouldn't be troubling a mere classmate this much.

However, he was already beginning to fall for both Shihono's compassion and smile. Her cool hand was altogether different from his: it was smooth, soft, frail, and it wasn't something that he could shake away.

"I'm sorry," he managed to spit out between sobs. His face truly was wet enough to warrant a towel.

"You don't have to apologize," she said tenderly.

Aoto crumpled, clinging to a girl who, at this point, was nothing more than his classmate. He broke down and wailed at the Kobayashi front door. Crying his eyes out in a stranger's house was absurd, but Shihono didn't bat an eye and quietly sat beside him. Her kindness compelled tear after endless tear; the boy cried and cried, enough to flush out all the years he'd devoted to baseball.

Eventually, Aoto's well of emotions ran dry. The back of his nose hurt almost as much as his head. His hiccups were unstoppable. He'd cried so much that the tears had blurred the very thoughts in his own mind.

When Aoto looked up at the end of his outburst, he saw Shihono smiling—smiling because he'd been freed from being bottled up. At that moment, Endo Aoto was already hopelessly infatuated with Kobayashi Shihono.

— — — —

"My head hurts..."

After watching his old comrades play at the stadium he'd given up on, Aoto had cried just as much as he had the previous fall. He sat in the Kobayashi living room, still sniffing. The game that he and Shihono had been watching had ended with their school's loss long ago.

"Yeah, you can sorta fix the eyes and nose, but you can't do much when your head starts hurting."

The smiling girl had been handing him tissues, wet towels, hot milk, and more

to support his bawling with everything she had. She'd remained by his side until he finally finished crying.

"Thanks, seriously. You saved me. Man, Kobayashi, you sure are good at making people cry," Aoto said to hide his growing embarrassment at his unfiltered sobbing.

"Of course! This is my second time bringing you to tears, after all." Shihono played along and puffed up her chest in pride.

Aoto gave her a round of applause to commend her efforts. Then, without much ado, he suddenly said, "You know, I really felt like dying back then."

Despite his notably light tone of voice, he used a remarkably heavy word. Shihono stiffened up when she heard the word "dying." Catching on to her gravitas, he attempted to smile and elaborated.

"Not that I was actively trying to die or anything. It's just that I didn't have anything to live for, you know? But I feel really alive now thanks to you, Kobayashi. The Broadcasting Club is a lot of fun, and I'm grateful for everything you've done. That's all I'm trying to say."

Shihono didn't know how to react, so she responded with an awkward laugh.

"Man, dying just isn't it," Aoto continued. "They say something good will happen eventually, which I'm not sure about, but I know that dying isn't the answer. It's the end of everything—both good and bad. So that's why we've gotta make sure *they* all survive until the end too."

Aoto eyed the silent game console. Shihono followed his gaze and did the same. Thinking about the denizens of that other world, she asked a single question.

"Do you mind if I say something kinda heavy?"

Aoto cocked his head at her serious tone and simply nodded.

"I tried a bunch of things on my own, but I can't even open that weird save file without you around. Not only that, but I can't copy it or move it to another save slot, and I can't even load mid-game."

"What's with that? I've known for a while that this isn't a regular game, but..."

Somewhere deep down, Aoto had still thought of it as a game world on the other side of a television screen, as strange as it was. Shihono's unsettling news drained the color from his face.

Like he'd said, he no longer thought it was a regular game. The characters that reacted to their voices were more than text on a screen—he cared for them like they were his own friends. His most earnest wish was to see them all happy and healthy.

However, there was a part of him that had clung to the game-like thought they'd get as many tries as it took.

"There aren't any redos. We only have one chance. At least, I think. It really is more than just a game."

Shihono spoke as if to convince herself more than Aoto. Still, her words drove home the point that he'd taken the situation too lightly.

"And what we say could end up *killing* someone..." His voice was trembling ever so slightly.

"That's right. So I want to do everything I can to keep everyone alive and let them live happily ever after. Everything that I can do, everything that I can think of, I want to do it all the best I can."

Aoto felt like Shihono's resolution had a firm core. She knew far more about the game than he did, loved the characters far more than any normal fan, and had realized the true gravity of the situation before he had. She'd already hardened her resolve.

If their extradimensional companions were going to call them gods, Shihono was ready to play the part: she was going to lead them to be as happy as they could be. Her words, expression, and most of all, her earnest gaze conveyed her determination straight to Aoto. It swallowed him whole, freezing him in place.

But suddenly, she laughed.

"Still, that doesn't change what we'll be doing on our end! We're gonna keep peeping in on their world and adding our own play-by-play and analysis. That's all we *can* do, since the controller doesn't work, and it's been going well so far anyway."

Shihono made her voice as cheery as she could to reset the mood. Aoto heaved a sigh and loosened his tense shoulders to match.

“Yeah, we can’t act too anxious, or Sieg will start panicking too. He really believes we’re gods, after all.”

Aoto’s weak smile was met with Shihono’s jovial one.

“That’s right! So let’s leave this discussion somewhere in the back of our minds and keep having fun!”

Their direction was set: serious but fun. Noticing that Aoto still didn’t look totally confident, Shihono happily chattered away.

“Not letting Bal die is great and all, but I would love to see him and Fiene get together! I think he loves Fiene the most, since his route is the sweetest!”

“Huh? Oh, uh, really?”

Aoto looked puzzled. Little did he know, Baldur was the type of man to sacrifice himself to protect Fiene regardless of which route the player chose. The events on his route were head and shoulders above the other romance targets’ events in terms of lovey-doveyness.

This was why Shihono pushed this ship so hard. She passionately began her speech to win Aoto over to her side.

“Bal’s the easiest one to win over in the whole game! He’s literally made to fall in love with Fiene! In fact, you can earn affection points with him by accident when you’re trying to go for another character. I don’t even remember how many times I screamed, ‘Not *you*!’ at the last dance...”

Shihono trailed off at the end, causing a series of memories to flash back into Aoto’s mind. Back when she’d been playing the game by herself in the clubroom, he had indeed heard her scream those exact words on several occasions.

Each and every time, she’d continued to say, “Don’t get me wrong, I love you! You’re my favorite, okay?! But it’s not your turn!” The uncovered memories returned to Aoto along with the tinge of envy he’d felt when he had heard those words.

“Now that I think of it...don’t you like him?”

“Huh?”

Aoto worded his question vaguely to tiptoe around the central point, causing Shihono to tilt her head in confusion.

“Don’t you, you know, *like* Baldur?” he asked. He couldn’t fathom why she’d proactively try and stick the guy she liked with someone else.

“Uh, yeah?” she said, still puzzled. “I do. He’s my favorite out of all the *Magikoi* characters.”

“Right. So are you all right with him and Fiene getting together?”

The two of them stared at one another like they were looking at an incomprehensible alien.

“Oh! Wait, that’s not what I mean when I say I like him!”

Finally keying in on the source of their misunderstanding, Shihono clapped her hands together in epiphany. On the other hand, Aoto’s head remained skewed to one side as she slowly elaborated.

“How do I put this? I like Baldur *as Fiene’s lover*. Bal’s route gets me the most excited, but it’s not like I’m in love with Bal himself. Do you follow?”

Aoto most certainly did not follow. In fact, the angle of his neck only grew deeper and his brow furrowed. Shihono laughed at his obvious confusion.

“Pffft, I get it. Endo, I think you’re misunderstanding something about otome games.”

“What’s there to misunderstand? Aren’t they just romance simulators aimed toward women?”

Aoto was completely stumped. Shihono put up two fingers in a V sign and began explaining.

“This is just my personal pet theory, but I think there are two kinds of otome games: ones where the heroine is a blank slate and ones where she has her own personality. On top of that, there are two types of otome gamers: those who insert themselves as the main character and those who play god, sticking

people into relationships.”

Shihono dexterously snipped her fingers together like scissors as she talked.

“Playing god...” The two of them had been called gods, and there was a hidden route where Fiene could woo the deity that played a vital role in her awakening. *Magikoi* could almost be said to revolve around this concept of divinity. This thought was what had caused Aoto to mumble to himself in reflex.

“*Magikoi* is the latter on both fronts. None of the final CGs are drawn from Fiene’s perspective—they show a third-person view of her and her lover. All of her drawings have a lot of work put in, and she even has a bunch of solo art. *Magikoi* is the prime example of a game where you play god to lovingly care for the heroine.”

Shihono backed up Aoto’s intuition and lowered her fingers. She put on her thinking face and pondered aloud to wrap up her thoughts.

“*Magikoi* is a game where I honestly think Fiene got the most love out of all the characters. So I only ever looked at Baldur as one of her potential lovers. Basically, I want to tie them together as a goddess and... Yup, that’s about it!”

Finally convinced, Aoto nodded deeply at her merry conclusion. Yet suddenly, Shihono switched back to serious muttering.

“Buuut, from my *divine* perspective, I was all, ‘Isn’t Liese-tan way cuter? Why can’t I stick her with Sieg?’”

“The Matchmaking Goddess sure is busy,” Aoto said with a sarcastic smile. Watching her mull over the Fiene x Baldur and the Lieselotte x Siegwald pairs, he was tempted to offer a prayer for his own romantic endeavors.

Chapter 3: Colored Ribbons

The academy had a longstanding tradition of older students guiding their underclassmen.

Although the teachers were all capable mages—signifying their noble birth—most of them chose not to inherit their family titles. As a result, a decent number of students looked down on their instructors. This was especially true of the first-years, who had only ever interacted with their family and hired help.

As a result, they were often taught alongside third-year students. Sometimes, the upperclassmen would be given the reins altogether and lead many classes from spring to summer.

Now, halfway through June, we were participating in a courtyard exercise where students of similar magical inclinations formed small groups and shared knowledge with one another. Or at least, that had been the plan.

“I can’t help but sense quite the stir,” Lieselotte said.

We were in the same group, but she glared beyond our unit as she spoke. Just as she’d said, a certain crowd of students had been rather distracting for a while now. They didn’t number that many, but I could see a handful of students snickering as they exchanged hushed gossip.

Our group had still been in the middle of discussion, but others had already begun practical demonstrations led by the older students. Even without the watchful eyes of our teachers, this was not a situation where one could play around.

I frowned. I was both a third-year and royalty, giving me the most authority of everyone present. Accordingly, the teachers had entrusted me with the responsibility of leading today’s activity. Finding the cause of this disturbance and putting it to rest was part of my duty.

“It looks like the commotion is centered over there. Shall we go take a look?”

As the most reputed first-year student, Lieselotte had been similarly tasked by

the teachers to act as my aide. When I suggested that we examine the situation, she promptly pulled out her wand and nodded.

“Hold on, I don’t think there’s any need for violence,” I said immediately.

“Preparation and spirit are key. Let us be off.”

Lieselotte’s delivery was as straight as her back. She quickly marched forward and I scrambled after her.

I wanted to remind her that our goal was resolving the issue amicably. However, the stares we received on our way there gave me a bad feeling, and the threatening glare Lieselotte sent back toward them terrified me. I ended up keeping my mouth shut.

The healing magic group that Art and Fiene were in was the center of all the commotion.

“What’s going on?” I asked Art.

“Sieg, not *you*!” he replied, turning to me angrily. “Anyone but you! Couldn’t you at least leave your fiancée behind?!”

Art’s curious shouting stopped me in my tracks for a moment. Lieselotte took the opportunity to step forward and made her way straight to Fiene.

“That *wand*,” Lieselotte spat in a low voice.

I looked to see the wand that she’d given Fiene just a few days ago. A golden ribbon had been tied to the handle.

“Yes, this is the wand that you gave me, Lady Lieselotte!”

Fiene cheerfully twirled it around. Yet for whatever reason, Lieselotte’s expression had morphed into a hideous scowl and Art let out a massive sigh beside me. As I stood in confusion, the Voices of the Gods graced my ears.

“It’s not the wand, but the ribbon on its grip, Fiene!”

“Of all the colors she could have possibly chosen, she went with a splendid gold. Had she used a softer shade or gone with a deep blue, no one would have said a word... Anyone could have predicted the murmuring rumors of

the crowd and Liese-tan's unchecked fury."

Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee's statements puzzled me.

"Is there something wrong with that ribbon?" I whispered to Art.

"Right now, the girls have a fad of tying a ribbon on their wand's handle," he said in a similarly hushed voice. "The color is supposed to match the hair or eyes of either your lover or someone you look up to. So now, the guys that know are going around sending girls ribbons that match their own colors. But, well, you know, I'm pretty sure Fiene doesn't have any female friends. I'm sure she was thinking something like, 'Look, this makes the wand easier to grip!' and innocently copied someone without properly understanding what—"

"Miss Fiene, are you aware of what the color of your ribbon symbolizes?" Lieselotte asked. She wore a graceful smile, but her voice was clearly steeped in rage.

"The...color?" Fiene cocked her head. She didn't understand at all.

As he understood the significance of Fiene's actions, Art had been trying his best to wrap this up before Lieselotte and I could notice. He held his head in his hands. Although I had only learned of this trend moments ago, Lieselotte's overwhelming pressure froze me in place too.

"Indeed," my fiancée said. "The color is to signify the object of one's affections. Pray tell, Miss Fiene. For you to choose gold—the color of His Highness's eyes—is this a declaration of war?"

At those words, the color finally drained from Fiene's face and she turned to stone.

"And further, this ribbon seems to be made of silk. I wonder, how in the world did you get your hands on something like this? Of course, you wouldn't dare to say that you personally received it from His Highness, *would you?*"

I could feel the air around us freeze over as Lieselotte spoke. She was terrifying. Even Lord Endoh seemed panicked.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man! Lieselotte is *pissed!*"

"Sieg, don't look. That is not the kind of face a lovestruck maiden is

supposed to make!”

The goddess didn't need to tell me that: I couldn't look Lieselotte in the eye right now anyway. I knew for a fact that this outburst had been caused by her love for me. What was more, I'd never seen the ribbon in my life. Still, she was just too frightening.

“N-No, this is something that you gifted me, Lady Lieselotte! Er, I guess technically you didn't *really* gift me it. This was just the ribbon that you had used to tie up all those notebooks you handed me. But still, this was something I received from you!”

Lieselotte stared at the piece of silk on the wand. As Fiene's hysterical plea went on, my fiancée's head slowly began to tilt.

“Oh. Now that you mention it...I suppose you're right.” When Lieselotte finally accepted Fiene's explanation, everyone in the area breathed a sigh of relief.

“Paper is still an expensive commodity in that world. Fiene had been collecting used paper, writing on the back of each sheet, and bundling them up into a makeshift booklet. When Liese-tan caught her, she sent Fiene a ton of fresh notebooks.”

“You two sure are close.”

I couldn't help but comment on Lady Kobayashee's analysis. In response, Lieselotte whirled around and began shouting, her face beet-red.

“Unthinkable! I wouldn't go as far as to call it almsgiving, but this is simply my duty as a proper noble!”

Lieselotte's frenzied attempt to convince me otherwise only confirmed that she doted on Fiene a great deal. In fact, Lieselotte naturally cared for those around her. Perhaps if I hadn't involved myself, the two of them could have gotten along normally.

Suddenly, I noticed that the crowd was stirring in a different way from before.

“Oooh, I get it. They're seeing this as yuri,” Lord Endoh said.

“Fiene wrapped her wand with Liese-tan's hair color *and* received the

ribbon from the person in question, after all. Still, the two girls can probably write this off as admiration or friendship.”

I wouldn't say that I was *jealous* per se, but this was no laughing matter. The gods' words put a scowl on my face.

“Basically, this golden color was the reason for all this confusion, right? I'm very sorry. I didn't intend to stick my head in the lion's mouth, so I'm going to stop using this ribbon. So please, Your Highness, Lady Lieselotte, don't glare at me like that.”

Fiene bowed her head. Then, she untied the ribbon from her wand and slipped both back into her pocket like a sad puppy.

“Oh, um... I'm sorry as well,” I apologized, slightly embarrassed.

“To...” Lieselotte had been staring at the ground with a flushed face for some time, but finally exploded. “To begin with, you lack any sort of critical thought, Miss Fiene! How many times have I told you to pay more heed to those around you?! And how often have I said to come to me for advice *before* you do anything you don't properly comprehend?!”

Lieselotte pointed her wand straight at Fiene as she tried to shout away her embarrassment. The way Fiene sulked with her head hung low made it clear how sorry she was.

“Now then, we've gotten past the danger, so the next thing to key in on is Liese-tan's wand. Hurry, while she's still focused on Fiene! Take a nice, looong look, Sieg.”

Lady Kobayashee's merry tune pulled my attention to Lieselotte's wand, which was still being used to admonish Fiene. The base of it was gold. An amethyst adorned the handle, and a ribbon was tied around it: a white ribbon embroidered with a delicate touch of gold.

“Are these...my colors?” I asked suddenly.

Lieselotte's movements stopped in an instant.



Huh? What was that? That's so cute!

"They really are," I said. "What beautiful embroidery. I might place an order with the same craftsman for a gold ribbon with purple embellishment."

I let my bliss take hold and ran my mouth. Lieselotte went red once more and stared at her feet, trembling.

"Please, Lieselotte. Won't you tell me which artisan stitched your ribbon? Don't you think it would be nice for us to match?"

Considering that she had something so finely crafted, there was surely no point in sending Lieselotte a ribbon of my own. This suggestion was my solution to that. Yet for whatever reason, Lieselotte glared at me with teary eyes.

"...Me." Lieselotte squeezed out a single word as she continued to quake.

I had no idea what she meant.

Seeing me tilt my head, she shouted out in despair. "It was me! I embroidered this ribbon myself! Fine! Very well! A gold and purple ribbon of the same design, was it? I humbly thank you for your patronage—your order will be delivered as soon as it is completed! Thank you in advance for your patience!"

Lieselotte went off like a merchant and then turned heel to sprint back the way we had come. A brief moment of silence followed.

"Hey, isn't she *too* cute?"

Awestruck by my fiancée's fearsome cuteness, I couldn't help but comment. Art shrugged with a sarcastic grin, but Fiene nodded enthusiastically.

"She really is. Lady Lieselotte is super cute, and she's a super nice person too."

I was slightly surprised that Fiene agreed so readily. Not too long ago, she had seemed to be positively terrified of Lieselotte. Perhaps catching onto my curious stare, Fiene smiled wearily and explained.

"Um, you see, I thought about it, and Lady Lieselotte gives me a lot of stuff, so I figured that maybe she is a good person. Plus, I'm grateful that she lectures me out of the kindness of her heart. All in all, I realized recently that she's been

helping me a ton. The horrible mood from earlier is completely gone, see?”

Fiene glanced around and I followed her eyes. She was right; all the gossipers that had been making fun of her were now silent. In fact, some were even looking on at Fiene with sympathy.

“You know, people like her who act thorny and...tsun? But who actually are sweet at heart are apparently known as tsun de rais.”

“Oh, I think I get it. So she’s called a ‘tsun de rais’... That’s cute!”

I shared my god-given knowledge with Fiene, who immediately got the gist.

“I’m glad to see you understand. You two truly are close, aren’t you?” *When Lieselotte isn’t flustered with me around, that is.* Naturally, I swallowed that last part; I was not so vain as to say that aloud. Still, it was a matter of fact that Fiene and Lieselotte got along so long as I wasn’t present.

“And we have Sieg to thank for that! His masterful handling of Liese-tan’s emotions has made her adorability clear—even to everyone else! All this color commentary was so worth it!”

Ah, I see, I thought in response to Lady Kobayashee’s analysis. While I was listening to the goddess, Fiene had grown a tad pale. She spoke up with hesitation.

“But, um, like I said earlier, I don’t have any interest in sticking my head in the lion’s mouth. So, uh, I guess I’m trying to say that I’m rooting for you two!”

Whoops, it looks like she thought I was saying that sarcastically.

“No, no, I truly do think that it’s wonderful for the two of you to deepen your friendship,” I said.

Fiene breathed a sigh of relief.

“Still,” I continued, “just bear in mind that Lieselotte is *my* fiancée. Are we clear?”

The words of warning that slipped out of my mouth surprised even myself. Fiene began nodding so fervently that I worried she might hurt her neck, and I was left feeling puzzled at the foreign emotion that had taken hold of my heart.

◆◆◆ Carnivorous Beast

After school on the same day of the wand incident, Fiene walked over to Lieselotte's seat. The few classmates that remained in the room quickly scattered when they saw her do so. Fiene noticed them leave out of the corner of her eye, but simply bowed her head to Lieselotte.

"Lady Lieselotte, thank you very much for what you did earlier today."

"What a strange one you are. Who in their right mind would thank another for a scolding?" Lieselotte scoffed after uttering her icy words.

"No, I was in the wrong. The fact that you call out my mistakes as soon as they happen really helps me, Lady Lieselotte."

Fiene raised her head and smiled. A faint blush could be seen on Lieselotte's cheeks. Bashfully, she began mumbling excuses.

"It isn't as if I do this for your sake. You're so ignorant that I simply instruct you so as to maintain the esteem of our class and school."

"Which means you consider me a real part of our class, right? Lady Lieselotte, you're the only one who would ever say that."

There were plenty of students at the academy who gave Fiene no more respect than a roadside pebble. A commoner without a family name may as well have been a forgettable weed to them.

Although Lieselotte's reprimands were harsh on the surface, they indicated how much she cared for Fiene. This attitude was so phenomenal that it filled Fiene with deep gratitude.

Lieselotte averted her eyes from Fiene's thankful gaze. Her snow-white cheeks grew redder by the moment.

"I can't help but think Prince Siegwald cares for you as well," Lieselotte said. Her mouth twisted into a pout, leaving Fiene with a troubled smile.

"Yes, but the prince is, well... How do I put this? I feel like he's equally nice to

all his subjects. It just so happens that I'm especially pitiful, so he tried to shield me by acting as my friend."

"Perhaps at first. But now, one can hardly deny you hold a special place in His Highness's eye."

"I mean, I'm pretty sure he respects my *strength*, but there's no way that he sees me as a girl! Besides, I don't think there's anyone stupid enough to try and get in the way of you and the prince—at least, not at the academy—so don't worry! Everyone already knows how passionate you two engaged lovebirds are!"

"L-Lovebi— I, um..."

Fiene's unflinching smile directly contrasted with Lieselotte's moping, the latter of whom grew more and more embarrassed.

Their classmates had fled the scene, not wanting to get caught up in the marquis lady's bullying. However, their warrantless imagination was nothing like reality. In fact, if anyone was being teased here, it was Lieselotte.

Still, the two of them speaking in private was enough to give birth to new misunderstandings. Or perhaps the girls who'd fled the classroom earlier had reported their imagined harassment.

"Liese, are you bullying Miss Fiene again?" Baldur stepped in between the two girls as he called out to Lieselotte.

"Bal!" Lieselotte responded with a low growl in turn, glaring at her cousin. The atmosphere was tense, but Fiene heartily laughed at the boy's misconception.

"Nope, we were just talking about how madly in love His Highness and Lady Lieselotte are."

"Ah... So you were swooning over His Highness again?" he asked Lieselotte. Then, he turned and said, "I apologize that my cousin is always showing off her fiancé, Miss Fiene."

A refined lady seeing a commoner like me as a rival is weird, but not as weird as a viscount and upperclassman who lowers his head to me, Fiene thought. All she could do was laugh off Baldur's serious apology.

“What in the world are you saying?! Me, swooning?! I-I would never! At any rate, the two of us aren’t like that!”

Lieselotte had flushed crimson and tried to deny Baldur and Fiene’s rapid back-and-forth. However, Baldur’s reaction was one that bordered on pity.

“It’s a well established *fact* that you’ve been single-mindedly pining for His Highness all your life. And for his part, it seems His Highness has finally seen through your act. He’s been incredibly sweet to you recently. You two love each other,” Baldur concluded.

“H-His Highness is kind to everyone!” Lieselotte said. “I’m sure that his soft demeanor toward me is but a part of his responsibility to his fiancée...”

“That might be part of it,” he said with a sigh. “That man acts as a prince, through and through. But from the outside looking in, I can’t see you two as anything but a couple that’s stupidly in love.”

“I...I...I!” At a complete loss for words, Lieselotte could only stammer.

“You know,” Fiene said, “recently, His Highness has been watching over Lady Lieselotte with a tender gaze. He’s like a lion watching a kitten accidentally scratch something with their claws. ‘Aww’ is written all over his face.”

“Agreed. That about sums it up,” Baldur said.

Neither of them spoke with any intention of teasing Lieselotte. Fiene had simply given her honest recollection of what had happened earlier that day. Baldur’s nonchalant agreement was the final straw to totally rob Lieselotte of her speech. She bit her quivering lip with tears in her eyes.

“See?” Baldur said. “If nothing else, Miss Fiene has the common sense to know that trying to get in the way of your love is a fool’s errand. Don’t pick on her or use her as a roundabout way to gloat about your relationship again.”

Still shivering, Lieselotte could find no response to her cousin’s exasperated words. Perhaps the conversation had revived the prince’s gaze in her mind. Whatever the reason, she could no longer bear to stay.

“E-Excuse me!” she shouted in frustration. She rose from her seat and glared at the two of them one last time before making her escape out the classroom

door.

“Now then, Miss Fiene, where do you intend to go today? Shall I escort you directly to the dorms?”

Baldur apparently had no plans to chase his fleeing cousin. After Lieselotte left the room, he promptly turned to the young girl the gods had bid him to protect.

“Nope. I want to get some exercise, so I was thinking of hunting monsters in the mountains behind the school. It’ll be outside of the campus, so you don’t have to come with me, Sir Bal.”

“The mountains are still part of the school’s property. Let me accompany you as a guard.”

The knight-in-training’s response was as deadpan as ever. Fiene had already begun walking at a brisk pace to shake him off, but he quickly followed behind her. She looked up at him with complicated emotions.

Truthfully, exercising was just an excuse for Fiene. Her main goal was to procure some meat for her dinner. Dragging around a young viscount who was only a few steps off from being an official knight for a cause as stupid as hers didn’t sit well with her.

“I’m strong, you know? The monsters in the mountain can’t even compare to me.” Fiene deliberately chose her words to sound arrogant as she peered up at her companion.

“I know,” he said somberly. “That’s exactly why the gods’ prophecy is so grave. An enemy is going to appear that threatens your safety despite your monstrous strength. For the sake of the kingdom, I don’t want to leave you on your own for even a moment.”

“Monstrous” isn’t a very becoming word to use to describe a lady, Fiene thought in response. Still, she acknowledged that she was far stronger than average; besides, she wasn’t a proper lady and had no intention of ever being one. With a short sigh, she quickly proceeded toward the mountains.

Fiene and Baldur had been acting in tandem for a month and a half now. Though there had been some distance between them at first, their relationship had begun to slowly shift.

At first, Baldur had honored Fiene as his liege, whom the gods had ordered him to protect. He'd spoken to her very formally and suggested that she call him simply by his name or nickname. As a commoner, the thought of speaking to nobility in this way had caused her to kick up quite the fuss. Eventually, the two of them got to know one another and settled into a friendship between a senior and junior student.

While making their way to the mountains, Fiene was lost in thought. Marquis Lieselotte Riefenstahl saw her as a rival; Viscount Baldur Riefenstahl treated her with reverence. As she pondered why, an epiphany struck.

"Do the people of House Riefenstahl think that might equals right?" she asked worriedly.

Fiene thought that an esteemed aristocratic family subscribing to the philosophy of wild beasts was ridiculous. Yet the low-born girl with an unknown background had only one saving grace: her skill in combat.

"Isn't that obvious?"

Baldur didn't even blink. He merely confirmed her suspicions, causing her eyes to open so wide that her eyeballs nearly fell out.

"...Are you *stupid*?"

Insolent words passed Fiene's lips. She quickly covered her mouth, but unfortunately Baldur had heard her loud and clear. He nodded again.

"Our family originally attained its status through combat, so there are very few of us who bother to use our brains. Whether it's magic or swordsmanship, we're taught that spirit, tenacity, and our senses are what we need to succeed. Most of us live off of instinct alone, and only a few Riefenstahls think before they act."

Baldur didn't seem upset at all. Perplexed, Fiene silently blinked at his explanation.

“Liese is the type to use her head and weave a well-balanced array of spells into her combat—and she even employs all sorts of tactics. But she’s the exception and not the rule when it comes to House Riefenstahl.”

Fiene was happy to hear that Lieselotte was not among the ranks of her muscleheaded kin.

Baldur watched her sigh in relief, only for a thought to spring to mind. “Speaking of which, are you not going to holster the wand she gave you?”

Fiene looked over her own attire. As usual, she was wearing a school uniform and a robe. The wand was hidden in her robe’s inner pocket—it wasn’t exactly ready at the draw.

The academy’s dress code mandated that all students wear a robe with the school’s emblem on it during class. However, what one wore underneath the robe was left up to the students. There was an official uniform (a blazer, with slacks for boys and skirts for girls), but this wasn’t enforced.

Lieselotte and many other female students elected to wear full dresses instead. On the other hand, Fiene could always be seen in the official uniform.

Fiene’s financial straits had previously been so dire that she’d worn horse-riding clothes meant for exercise underneath her robe at all times. When Lieselotte had found out, she’d said, “The very existence of a lady in such wretched clothing will tarnish our school’s reputation.”

What awaited Fiene were school uniforms that seemed normal at first glance, yet a single touch was enough to tell that they were woven from some material that she’d never even seen before. She’d received three whole sets *each* of the summer and winter variants. Although she’d considered returning them, they were so perfectly tailored to her proportions that both the bust and height would fail to fit Lieselotte. Fiene wore them to school every day with a heart full of appreciation, and today was no different.

However, the wand that Fiene had received in a similar fashion was stashed away in her inner pocket. She didn’t use it very frequently.

“Um, it’s just that this wand seems super expensive, so I figured I should keep it safe. I tried to return it to Lady Lieselotte, but she tsun de rais’d me by saying,

‘You expect *me* to accept a wand that you’ve already used? A *hand-me-down*, so to speak?’ But it’s so shiny that I can’t bring myself to use it unless I need to for class. Plus, now that I took off the ribbon, I’m scared that it might slip out of my hand.”

“Waiting for Liese to back down is hopeless. Just use it. There’s nothing more pitiful than a tool that’s never used.”

Baldur apathetically cut through Fiene’s internal struggle. Yet she hung on in spite of his stoic judgment.

“But I don’t even really need a wand in the first place. Well, I guess except when I’m supporting you, but...” *At the very least, I don’t need to have it on hand at all times*, was what Fiene had planned to say. But she trailed off when a question came to mind. “Wait a second, you don’t use a wand either, do you, Sir Bal?”

All that Baldur had around his waist was his sword, without a wand in sight. In fact, Fiene had never once seen him wield a wand.

“That’s because this sword doubles as a wand,” he said, placing his hand on the sheath.

“Wow! That’s so cool! Where’d you buy it?!” Fiene asked with stars in her eyes. She would love to get a pair of brass knuckles or a knife that could do the same, but Baldur slowly shook his head.

“This is an heirloom that belongs to the Riefenstahl marquise. I’m slated to marry into the main family, and the current head fawns on me. Maybe it’s because he only has daughters. Regardless, he’s letting me use it before I’m wed just because he likes me.”

Baldur had a fiancée. This revelation filled Fiene with a disquieting sensation, though she herself couldn’t put her finger on why.

“...*Oh*,” she muttered, suddenly incredibly displeased.

“Is something wrong?” Baldur peered at her with worry in his eyes.

“Not at all. I thought that it must be tough to be a noble, is all. A commoner like me could never understand what it’d be like to get engaged when you’re

still a student.”

That’s right, it was just a bit of culture shock, Fiene told herself. Still, her tone of voice was clearly unhappy.

“I can’t understand it either. Or rather, I can’t *accept* it.”

Fiene was dumbfounded to hear Baldur immediately and glumly concur with her. She looked up at him curiously.

“Is there any reason for you to be dissatisfied? I’m sure Lady Lieselotte’s little sisters must be beautiful.”

Fiene’s question put a grim expression on Baldur’s face. He looked like he had just bit into a disgusting, bitter insect.

“I won’t deny that the daughters of the main branch are all gifted with natural charm. But I’ve grown up with them my whole life and they feel like my own sisters. More than that, the head of the family told me to take one of the twins just below Liese, but both of them broke down in tears and begged me to choose the other. The youngest of the household told me, ‘I can marry you if I really have to,’ but she’s only nine...”

Baldur looked genuinely upset. He certainly didn’t look like someone discussing his marriage candidates. Seeing him vigorously scratch his head in frustration, a wry grin cracked onto Fiene’s face.

“Well, I’ll be forced to take one of their hands in marriage eventually, but...thinking about it makes me want to throw away my life to hole up in the mountains.” They had finally reached the entrance to the mountains they were headed to, and he looked up at the peaks as he spoke.

“Is it *really* worth abandoning the title of viscount?” Fiene asked with a chuckle.

“That’s how lost I am,” Baldur said, still bleak. “I don’t care much for titles anyway. But I do truly wish to live up to the expectations of Marquis Riefenstahl. He’s taken care of me for so long... Honestly, what am I meant to do?”

Fiene realized that Baldur had kept this news under wraps because he was

still unsure about it himself; he didn't know who he was to marry, or when, or even if he wanted to marry them at all. Fiene smiled merrily and pointed at the path ahead.

"Then how about we go and blow off some steam? Want to go for a trial run holing up in the mountains?" *Until we find some tasty meat* was left unsaid.

Fiene's invitation caught Baldur off guard for a moment, but his bewilderment quickly turned into a savage grin. He put his hand on the grip of his sword. Noble houses, status, and the future—*his* future—could wait. For now, he would let himself be a beast, drowning in the heart-racing thrill of combat.

The pair of battle junkies didn't need to share a single word to come to the same conclusion. They lined up together and sprinted forward. Just a moment ago, the commoner girl and noble boy had had their differences, but these two birds of a feather were in perfect sync as they ran into the den of monsters that lay behind their school.

— — — —

The mountains behind the academy were prone to amassing mana. When minerals, animals, or plants were exposed to mana for extended periods of time, they twisted into hellish, bloodthirsty monsters.

Their aggressive instincts often led them to attack humans, and the crown encouraged anyone who could use magic to hunt them when possible. Naturally, the students of the academy were no exception: eliminating dangerous monsters was an expected part of their training.

At regular intervals, the whole student body was rounded up to clean out these mountains. Thus, there were only relatively weak monsters who hadn't had time to grow.

Also, despite their name, monster meat was just regular meat. It was perfectly safe to eat. That was why this was Fiene's favorite place to hunt.

Like always, she pressed on without a hint of uncertainty. She ran, punched, kicked, punched, kicked, punched, punched, and punched some more, with only joy in her heart, tearing through the mountain as she pleased.

"This is so much fun!" she hollered in bliss. Beside her, Baldur laughed heartily

and nodded along.

Fiene's incredible strengthening magic allowed the duo to blaze past human limitations. With a dependable partner to watch their backs, the two of them enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content.

"Hrm? I haven't seen any meat today."

In spite of their satisfying rampage, Fiene suddenly stopped when this thought came to mind. Up until then, they'd been butchering a ton of plant-based monsters and a handful of mineral-based ones. Not once had they seen one that originated from an animal; those had enough presence of mind to move quickly in combat.

"Ah, I see," Baldur said. "I suspect a strong monster has appeared in the area."

When a powerful monster manifested, weaker ones were forced to hide away in their dens or flee from its territory. Either way, they weren't able to roam around freely.

Once Baldur came to this conclusion, he calmly explained this to Fiene. She didn't even flinch; in fact, she couldn't have looked more thrilled.

"That means there's a super strong monster around here, right? We can't just *not* hunt it!"

Baldur nodded along with Fiene's merry declaration.

These mountains were scheduled for a school-sponsored mass hunt soon, and it was enclosed in a barrier to prevent monsters from getting out. The appearance of a strong monster wasn't that big of a deal.

Still, the crown offered bounties for dangerous marks; also, the barrier wasn't there to be used as an excuse to look the other way. Motivated by the reward and knightly honor respectively, Fiene and Baldur decided to face off against a foe that they judged to be quite the beast.

"Miss Fiene!"

"Huh?"

Daydreams of extra cash were cut short when Baldur called out to Fiene. Still

in a daze, she could hardly keep up with what was going on. He stepped forward as if to shield her and drew his blade. Following his gaze, she saw a grizzly bear. It had ash-gray fur and an ominous red glint in its eyes. With much caution, it slowly began to approach.

“Um, you’re in my way...”

Fiene was tiny even for a girl, and she was totally hidden behind Baldur’s large frame. She poked her head out to confirm the bear’s whereabouts and immediately attempted to head toward it. However, Baldur cut her off with his spare hand.

“Supporting magic,” he ordered, still locking eyes with the grizzly.

Fiene was irked by his attitude. Although she showed it with a pout, she simultaneously noticed the bear move.

“Tsk!” She clicked her tongue as soon as the grizzly bolted toward them.

Realizing that they had no time to argue, Fiene rapidly cast a slew of supportive spells on Baldur. She placed the palms of her hands on his wide back and prayed. Shimmering light danced around him, invigorating his arms, legs, and core.

One moment, one strike—Baldur had leapt forward faster than the eye could see. The beast’s head had been lopped clean off.

“Sir. Bal.”

Without skipping a beat, the to-be-knight had begun the process of confirming his kill. Yet a deep, deep, razor sharp voice cut into his ears.

“Why did you do something like that?!”

The flame of rage in Fiene’s eyes flickered as she marched toward him. Confused, he cocked his head.

“I’m strong,” she said. “Not only am I strong, but I can heal myself instantly. Even if my arm is cut off, or my stomach is pierced, I will never die.”

Fiene’s compounding fury could be felt as she stacked on brutal word after word. All Baldur could do was awkwardly nod. *If you know that, then why?!* This question and unfiltered anger filled her mind to the brim. She let passion take

hold and began to shout.

“Sir Bal, you’re *weaker* than me! And you suck at healing magic! What are you going to do if you die trying to protect me again?!”

Seeing Fiene scream with tears in her eyes left Baldur discouraged. He stared at his feet in shame.

“Huh?” On the other hand, Fiene now tilted her head at her own words. She found it mysterious that she’d used the word “again.” Maybe she was just that emotional right now.

“I concede that I have never won against you, Miss Fiene. Truth be told, I don’t ever see myself being able to beat you.” Baldur spoke softly, his eyes still downcast.

“Then—”

He looked up. His strong gaze pierced straight through Fiene, robbing her of her words.

“But that isn’t because I’m weaker than you. It’s because I’m weak *to* you.” Baldur’s straightforward, brazen, and forceful declaration left Fiene at a complete loss. “Well, I agree that I need to work on my healing magic. That will be a battle for another day.”

“Right, sure, that’s fine. You can rely on your companions as long as you’re aware of your weaknesses, so that isn’t an issue. Let’s put that aside for a second. Sir Bal, you said something really strange just now. What was it? You’re weak *to* me?”

Thinking that she may have misheard him, Fiene rewound the conversation to confirm what Baldur had said. He tilted his own head to mirror hers and began speaking like he was explaining something so obvious it didn’t need to be said.

“That’s right. I’m particularly weak against you. Rather, is there anyone alive who could bear to point their sword at a girl as lovely as you?”

Faced with what amounted to a pickup line, Fiene was on the verge of punching Baldur to shut his mouth. Yet somehow, she managed to tighten up and stop her fist from flying forward. Instead, she brought up an unpleasant

memory from before she entered the academy in a desperate attempt to debate him.

“What are you even saying?! ‘Lovely?!’ Besides, I’ve met people who tried to kill me without a second thought. Several, in fact!”

“They must have been demons or the devil himself. At the very least, I could never do that.”

“Urk! W-Well, doesn’t that make you a failure as a knight if appearances are enough to sway you?!”

“Appearances? It’s more that it’s you, Miss Fiene. Should the need ever arise, I could cut down any girl that matches your charm so long as it isn’t you.”

Nothing I say is going to convince him. At this point, Fiene finally blew past her limit of humiliation. Realizing the futility of her actions, she crumpled up and buried her face in her hands.

Oblivious, Baldur continued to smack her with compliments. His face was still as stoic as ever.

“...Now that I think about it, I genuinely doubt that there’s any human as pretty as you.”

Stop. Shut up already. The unbearable mood had Fiene screaming internally. Not realizing that he was already a step past flirting, Baldur continued on as solemnly as could be.

“Basically, what I want to say is that you are my only weakness, Miss Fiene. Against any other living being, I’m not as weak as you think. Please, don’t worry and let me protect you.”

“...Okay.” After being complimented to death, Fiene could only muster a single-word response in the teensiest, tiniest voice possible.

What followed were a few seconds of pure quiet. The first to crack from the awkward silence was Fiene.

The anger that Baldur had sweet-talked her despite being slated to marry swirled together with the shame that she’d been swept up by it. All her emotions came together in a single shout.

“Oh jeez! Unbelievable. *Sir Bal*? Are you for real?”

With that said, Fiene took off. A ton of thoughts bounced around her head. “Meat!” and “I should bring back some of the carcass to prove we hunted a big monster,” and “Wait, I guess Sir Bal was the one who killed it, so it isn’t my problem, right?”

Despite her zooming brain, the foremost priority in her mind was to get the heck away from this sickly sweet mood.

“So this unbearable feeling is why Lady Lieselotte tries so hard to be tsun every day!”

Although Baldur gave chase only a few seconds later, Fiene’s tearful soliloquy failed to reach his ears.

Chapter 4: Ten Out of Ten Tsundere

“Marquis Riefenstahl’s daughter is bullying that commoner girl in the courtyard. Please, go help her!”

Faced with this inconceivable statement, I wondered how I was meant to respond. Was I to grow upset at this slight to my fiancée’s name? Should I have explained that this was a misunderstanding and boast that my betrothed was an adorable, kind girl? Or perhaps the right answer was to act shocked and say that bullying was unacceptable.

Regardless, the meek girl who’d come to tell me this was trembling. All I could do was half-heartedly smile in the same way I always did and say, “I understand. Thank you for letting me know.”

However, I may have been able to protect my easily misunderstood fiancée more. The thought left a tinge of regret in my heart. The other day, it had become clear that Fiene wasn’t at all scared of Lieselotte. I hoped that there was a way for me to let the rest of our peers appreciate her cuteness as well.

With this in mind, I made my way to the courtyard, looking for the misinterpretable Lieselotte.

“Miss Fiene, you reside in the faculty dorms, do you not?”

“Lieselotte’s questions are so roundabout that not even we understand them!”

“It looks like there’s something in particular Liese-tan wants to ask. I don’t know if this is a noble specialty or one of her own, but she’s been asking so many seemingly unrelated questions that this conversation is becoming an interrogation.”

There she is. I found Lieselotte sitting on a bench beside Fiene, pressing her with questions. Judging from the gods’ statements and the fixed forty-five degree angle of Fiene’s head, her queries were both unclear and far too numerous.

“Um, yes? The school is letting me stay in the dorms.”

Generally speaking, the academy’s students were the well-to-do sons and daughters of the aristocracy. Commonly, every noble house in the kingdom had their own estate, but also owned a secondary residence in the capital.

Since our campus was located on the outskirts of the capital, all students commuted from home. That is, except for one lone exception: Fiene. She instead lived in the faculty dorms.

Still, it was rather late to be confirming such a detail. *What is Lieselotte planning?*

“And the faculty dorms...provide meals, don’t they?”

“She is on the cusp of getting to the point! We’ve seen this shtick so many times in the past few minutes.”

Lady Kobayashee’s remark was spot-on. Lieselotte seemed troubled by the fact that she couldn’t ask what she wanted to in a straightforward manner.

“They do! It’s delicious! But because of budgetary concerns—or maybe because everyone there is a full-grown woman—they don’t serve much meat at dinnertime. I go out and get my own to make up for it, though!”

“I don’t think that’s what Lieselotte was trying to ask!”

“Fiene is living in the female staff dorms. Not only that, but the teachers are all high-born ladies fit for their role at this school. It does make sense that a growing warrior like her would find their meals lacking.”

Fiene’s answer was as enthusiastic as could be, but it only left Lieselotte fidgeting, unsatisfied. Lord Endoh must have been right.

“Lieselotte, is something the matter?”

It was high time I quit my silent observation, and so I called out to my fiancée. Both she and Fiene recoiled and whirled around in unison, and remained in sync as they smiled in relief upon seeing me.

“Oh, Your Highness. Well...”

Lieselotte looked happy, but trailed off all the same. The contents of her

question were difficult to disclose, even to me.

“You were discussing the meals served at the faculty dorms, weren’t you? Speaking of which, Miss Fiene, what are your plans for the summer break? I heard the dining hall is closed for part of it.”

The academy’s summer vacation was only a week away. During the month-long break from school, the faculty and staff continued to work. However, there was a full week where even they were released for holiday.

Lieselotte silently gasped. She reacted to my offhand comment with a beaming smile.

“I see now. Lieselotte is worried about how Fiene plans to get through the summer break!”

“She goes on a trip with her chosen romance target in the game, but...I can’t help but feel like an unwed boy and girl traveling together goes against the morals of their world.”

I frowned in reflex at Lady Kobayashee’s statement. It was indeed disreputable for an unmarried couple to go on a vacation together.

“Oh, summer break? If I can find out where mommy—er, I’m sorry, where my mother is, I’ll go live with her. Otherwise, I’ll stay in the dorms and cook for myself.”

Fiene seemed to think nothing of her reply, but it raised serious issues. I’d heard that she had no father. The fact that she couldn’t locate her only parent was seriously alarming. I unconsciously stepped forward and asked her to clarify.

“Miss Fiene, what in the world does that mean?”

“Oh, well, my mother apparently made a bunch of very powerful nobles very, very mad. Now they’re after her life.”

My serious tone was met with utter nonchalance from the girl in question.

“As a result, they nearly killed me too. We moved about once a month when I was little, and now that we live apart, she won’t tell me where she is, even though I’m her daughter. Honestly, I wonder what my mother could have

done?”

Fiene chuckled as she spoke, but I was fairly certain this was no laughing matter.

“Since I can use magic, I’m pretty sure my father must have been a nobleman. Also, I’ve heard that he passed away before I was born. That means he died after I was conceived but before I was born. At the time, I wondered, ‘Did mommy kill him during a fight about the pregnancy? Could it have been a crime of passion? And is that why we have hits out on our lives?’ I couldn’t bring myself to ask my mother about any of this, though.”

Fiene’s gaze wandered off as she elaborated. Neither Lieselotte nor I could say a thing.

What a frightening conjecture. I simultaneously wanted and didn’t want to know the truth.

“Fiene’s theory is wrong. The real story is exceedingly peaceful.”

Thank the gods. Lady Kobayashee’s interjection left me at ease.

“L-Let us put aside your mother’s tale for now! Miss Fiene, don’t you think it would be uncouth of you to stay behind in the dorms all by your lonesome? No matter how strong you may be, you are still a girl, you know?”

Lieselotte’s face was incredibly grim. Still, she had managed to put our conversation back on track.

The overwhelming impact of Fiene’s mother’s story had made me lose track of the issue at hand. Meals were not the only concern. A girl of fifteen was meant to be properly cared for. The security detail at the academy was but a skeleton crew in the summer. We couldn’t simply leave her here.

The royal palace had no shortage of guest rooms, so I figured it would be best to shelter her there. *However, despite my status, would receiving an invitation from a man cause harm to her reputation?*

“Why does Lieselotte look so grim?”

“Part of it is that she’s upset by Fiene’s life story. But as we all know, she’s a tsundere. Basically, I speculate that the main cause is that she wants to invite

Fiene to stay with her but can't figure out how to do so."

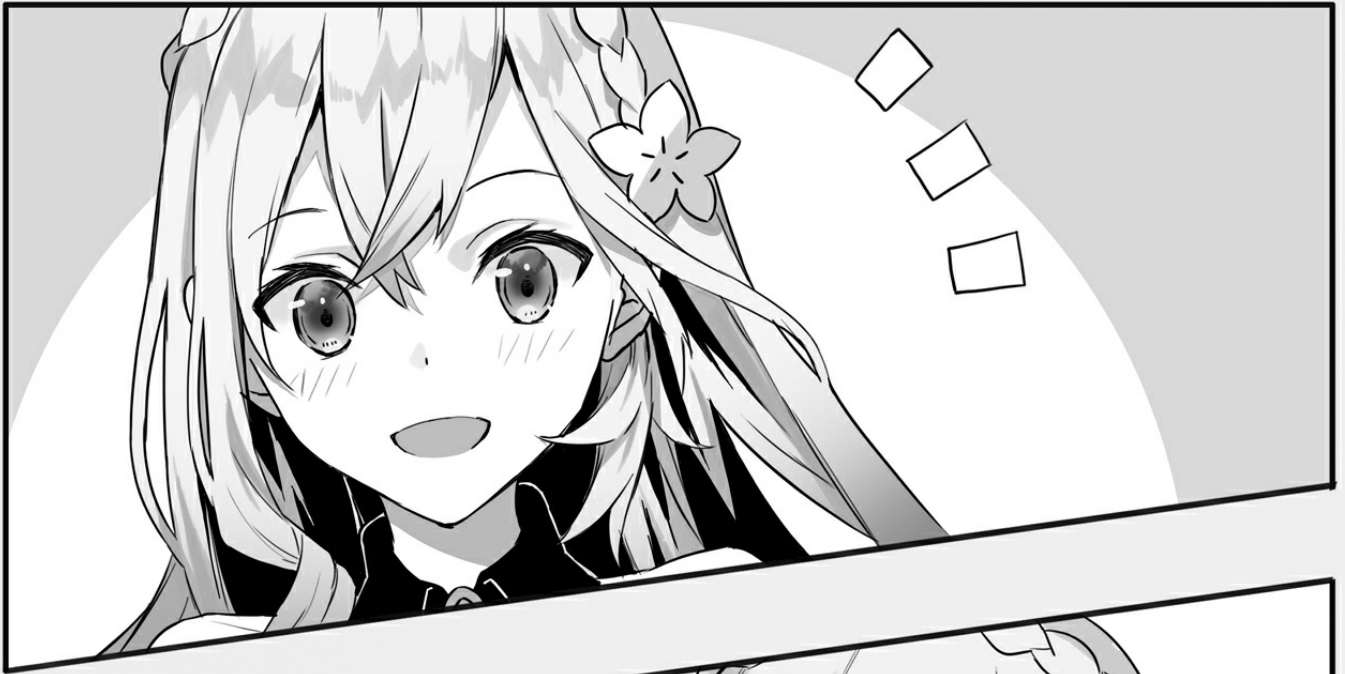
Just as I was contemplating what the best course of action would be, the gods had a short discussion of their own. *Ah, I see.*

"In that case, Lieselotte, why don't you harbor Miss Fiene for the summer?" My suggestion caused the corners of Lieselotte's lips to pull up ever so slightly.

"B-But of course! I plan to return to the main Riefenstahl estate for the summer, and with three younger sisters already, adding one more would be little trouble! As an esteemed lineage of warriors, we pride ourselves on our strength. Should an incident occur brought on by Miss Fiene's mother, we shall handily dispose of any assailants. Furthermore, Miss Fiene, you still have much to learn when it comes to manners and the like; I could not be a more perfect example to show you proper form! Can you think of anywhere else as fit for your stay as my home? I suppose if His Highness *insists*, then, um...I wouldn't, um, mind letting you stay."

"Lieselotte can't hold back her joy! Here come her rapid-fire excuses! A haughty choice of words won't be enough to hide that smirk, Lieselotte!"

"Near the end, she realized she was getting too excited and slowly toned it down. A ten out of ten tsundere performance from start to finish."



The gods could not have been more right. I silently revered the heavens. My fiancée was so adorable it hurt.

“No, please, I can’t cause any more trouble for you,” Fiene said, shaking her head in shame.

“Hmph, did I not *just* state that taking care of you would cause us no trouble? What, do you mean to dishonor the Riefenstahl marquise? Shall I take this as an implication that our venerable estate is so destitute that the custody of a lone girl for a mere month would bring us to our knees?”

Lieselotte leered at Fiene. Still, from clothing to wands, the number of gifts she’d sent to Fiene in her *tsun de rais* way was ludicrous. I felt like she didn’t even give *me* this many thoughtful presents—and we were to be married.

I could hardly blame Fiene for wanting to refuse some of Lieselotte’s favors. What was more, the duration of her stay had changed from the week that the dorms were closed to the entire month without our noticing.

“The key to uncovering the peaceful truth of Fiene’s mom’s past is with House Riefenstahl,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“We need Liese-tan to win out here no matter what.”**

If this was more than a matter of Lieselotte being excited about spending the summer with her friend, it was my time to step in.

“Miss Fiene, the Riefenstahl estate is located by the ocean. The seafood there is delicious.”

“Lady Lieselotte, I will be in your care for the summer.”

My little joke immediately robbed Fiene of all reservations.

Upon seeing Fiene bow down, Lieselotte stood stupefied. Yet still unable to best the happiness in her heart, she smiled.

— — — —

The two girls went on to plan out their activities for the break, but their conversation came to an abrupt end when Baldur arrived to pick up Fiene.

“I imagine this will take some time, so let us postpone our preparations to a

later date,” Lieselotte said.

As I absentmindedly watched Fiene leave, Lieselotte suddenly asked me a question.

“By the by, how do you expect to pass the time this summer, Your Highness?”

“I’m...probably going to have to go around inspecting various estates, as per usual. In just a year, I’ll graduate from this academy and begin engaging in state business as an active member of the royal family. My father insists that I get used to my future affairs as much as I can now.”

Imagining all the things my father would tightly pack into my schedule left me feeling depressed. Lieselotte didn’t seem very pleased; in fact, she looked to be sulking as she opened her mouth again.

“My, I would say that taking full advantage of opportunities to rest is rather important, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t disagree...”

Unfortunately, my father had pushed a handful of his responsibilities to me, specifically so he could get some rest himself.

To tell the truth, I wanted a moment to summon my lovely fiancée to the palace and slowly deepen our bond. However, my father would surely get in the way of any attempt at such frivolity. Without a means to negotiate with him, I could only reply in vague platitudes.

“I think it imperative that you find time to exchange ideas with your peers while you remain a student. Indeed, learning from adults will be possible after graduation, but there are some things that can only be experienced as a student.”

Lieselotte’s persistence brought a certain friend’s invitation to mind.

“That may be true. Art said, ‘Let’s skip out on all that and go on a vacation! It’ll be our graduation trip!’ Although he’s practically a devil whispering over my shoulder, should I take him up on his offer? It won’t be easy to find time to travel with him after we leave the academy, after all.”

For a brief moment, I thought back on Lady Kobayashee’s words and

entertained the idea of vacationing with Lieselotte. However, that was too unrealistic. Instead, if Art and I visited House Riefenstahl, I would at least be able to see her. But my unspoken scheme was cut short by the panicked words of the goddess.

“S-Sieg, I don’t think that’s what she meant... Liese-tan’s *really* mad!”

“Count Artur Richter, *was it?*” Lieselotte’s low voice crawled about the earth. Her silent fury sent a chill throughout the entire courtyard.

“The flames of jealousy are burning in Lieselotte’s eyes!”

“Liese-tan’s lonely since she won’t get to see Sieg for the entire break. Also, truth is, her jealousy of Art is a regular thing due to how close he and Sieg are.”

This news, combined with Lieselotte’s irregular attitude, shocked me into a state of urgency. I quickly exposed all of my thoughts until this point.

“That’s right. My father can’t say much when it comes to Art. I thought that I might be able to use him as an excuse to visit your residence. It would be too lonely to go that long without seeing you.”

Baring my true feelings was rather embarrassing, but Lieselotte’s expression instantly brightened. I was relieved to know that she didn’t find me to be disgusting or clingy.

“W-Well, of course! Our estate is expansive, with several sightseeing locations perfect for your vacation! Rather, I think it would be the ideal location for Your Highness’s inspections!”

Lieselotte twirled the tips of her honey-blonde hair. The way she fought back her grin was incredibly cute.

“Mm, no, the Riefenstahl estate doesn’t need to be inspected. Your family is exemplary and dependable.”

I delivered her the cold truth. Her twirling finger froze in place and she stared at me solemnly.

“I cannot help but criticize such unfettered trust. My father holds the posts of both marquis and warmaster. Do you not think a careful eye is needed to

discern whether or not he harbors any intention of rebelling against the crown?”

“If he did, he wouldn’t have married off his precious eldest daughter to *me*...”

Despite this comment, the precious eldest daughter of House Riefenstahl shook her head, still glaring at me.

“Perhaps this is all a ploy to make you think that way. I suspect you’ll have to confirm the truth with your own two eyes by inspecting our estate from corner to corner.”

“No, it isn’t a ploy. I *truly* doubt that’s the case. Both my father and I know our generals well, and the marquis is undeniably a loyal soldier.”

I tried my utmost to calm Lieselotte down. Then, the entertained voices of the gods reached my ear.

“Lieselotte throws her own father under the bus for a chance to see His Highness! All truly is fair in love and war!”

“Her logic is totally bonkers, but the passion behind wanting to see Sieg and keeping him at the Riefenstahl estate for as long as possible is coming through!”

I knew it. Lieselotte is so cute, even when she’s running amok like this.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I sighed, smiled, and closed the distance with Lieselotte. I scooped up the ends of her hair, disheveled from her earlier fidgeting.

“Ah...” She began to say something, but then fell silent.

I laid my heart bare for her.

“Inspection and work aside, I will come visit for no other reason than to see you, Lieselotte.”

“Sieg combs through Lieselotte’s hair and hits her with a princely smile at point-blank range! His final line seals the deal! This is absolute destruction!”

“So flashy! God, that’s so showy! But as expected of Prince Sieg, he pulls it off without a hitch!”

The gods issued their judgments of my actions. Now a little worried, I snuck a glance at Lieselotte's face. She was flushed red and had averted her gaze.

"There isn't any need to force yourself to come," she mumbled meekly.

Lieselotte was so unbearably cute that I resolved myself then and there to twist open time in my schedule at any cost. Even if I had to burden Art with all the blame in the world, I would visit her. *I swear it.*

◇◇◇ The Riefenstahl Family

It was two weeks into the summer break. Fiene was in the middle of adjusting to life in the fortified Riefenstahl manor. Things were so comfortable it was *scary*.

At first, Fiene had shown up with all the ado of a girl sleeping over at her friend's house. Her eyes had gone white upon seeing the grand, dignified mansion—and more importantly, the servants that busily walked its halls. Still, after a couple of weeks with Lieselotte helping her along, she had managed to at least stop cowering in fear at this lifestyle.

Of course, Fiene couldn't totally relax like Lieselotte. A commoner at heart, it was too much to ask to feel at home when countless servants waited on her every need.

However, Lieselotte had grown keen on the idea of raising Fiene into a proper lady, and the past few days had been laden with personal classes on aristocratic etiquette.

"Any guest of mine ought to be able to participate in a tea party at minimum," she'd said. These words opened the curtain on a series of well organized lessons that were both strict and filled with care. As a blueborn noble fated to one day take the seat of queen, Lieselotte was the perfect example to learn from.

However, Lieselotte's form was so ideal, so perfect, that Fiene's incompetence stood out all the more. As a result, every lesson caused her to feel a little down.

Just like now. The two girls were sitting in an arbor that overlooked the expansive rose garden of the mansion's yard. Though a slight tension filled the air, they were enjoying a nice tea time together.

"You've gotten much better, Miss Fiene. You would hardly embarrass yourself in public at this rate."

Lieselotte smiled gracefully. Her natural elegance stole Fiene's breath away, and the commoner sighed.

"No, I'm still far from perfect."

As Fiene spoke, a tinge of sadness caused her to slump forward a tiny amount. Lieselotte's gaze instantly shot toward her, putting her on edge. She straightened herself back out in a hurry—of course, without making it seem like she'd been in a rush.

"Very good," Lieselotte said. "Still, I genuinely do think you're a wonderful learner, Miss Fiene."

Fiene smiled, slightly embarrassed. She humbly explained herself.

"When I was little, my mother would dedicate one day a week to playing princess. It was a game where my mother would play princess first, and then I would copy her. When I noticed that your mannerisms were similar to our old game, I began putting my old training into practice, which is why I'm barely managing to keep up."

When Fiene and her mother had played, points would be docked if Fiene failed to act the part of a proper princess. When she succeeded, points would be awarded. Depending on how well she did, the quality of their dinner would change.

Fiene's innate gluttony had led her to try her absolute hardest. Eventually, her mother had decided that she was good enough, and thus Fiene's days playing princess had come to a close. Regardless, those precious memories now lived on in Fiene's conduct.

"Oh, so the groundwork had already been laid. You have a wonderful mother. Even then, I would say you are much, much, *much* easier to teach than my sisters. I especially adore how well-behaved you are... Honestly, I have three whole sisters, so I wish at least *one* of them would be as respectful as you."

Lieselotte heaved a heavy sigh, and a deep wrinkle appeared on her brow. Truth be told, the three younger Riefenstahls had been meant to join Fiene for a lesson in etiquette, but none of them were here. Today, all of them had managed to escape.

“Lady Adelina and Lady Katrina are still twelve, and the younger Lady Cecilie is only nine. At their ages, I can understand why they’d prefer to go play.”

Fiene tried her best to cover for them, but Lieselotte’s expression didn’t budge. That she hadn’t managed to catch a single one today must have left her feeling frustrated.

“Oh!” Fiene exclaimed. The rare occurrence of all three of the little ladies managing to evade tea time brought something to mind: this meant that none of Baldur’s potential marriage candidates were present.

Lieselotte tilted her head curiously. Fiene steeled her will, deciding to open up and ask Lieselotte for advice. Ever since Fiene had come to this estate and gotten to know the young tomboys in question, she’d been even more perplexed than ever.

“Speaking of which...”

— — — —

Fiene put everything on the table. She talked about Baldur’s pseudo-confession; about how she felt troubled knowing her place in society; and about how a betrothed man saying such things was far too thoughtless, even if the engagement wasn’t set in stone.

Lieselotte pressed a hand to her forehead upon hearing the story. She’d frozen in place with a terrible look on her face. It took a few moments of Fiene awkwardly staring at her for Lieselotte to finally break her silence with a long, heavy sigh. Still somber, she began to speak.

“I’m so sorry... Bal is exceptional with a sword, but he is stupid beyond words.”

Faced with this overt declaration, Fiene smiled noncommittally. She neither denied nor agreed with the statement, but shifted her gaze.

Lieselotte continued on while pressing her fingers against her temples.

“I doubt that he even realizes he’s in love, much less the fact that he’s already aggressively flirted with you.”

“I figured...”

The two girls sighed in unison.

“At first, I thought, ‘Wait, is he hitting on me?!’ but he seemed so dispassionate, and he wasn’t the slightest bit embarrassed. Then I figured that maybe Sir Bal thought what he was saying was just a matter of fact. Do you think so too?” Fiene asked, worried from the bottom of her heart.

Lieselotte had been raised alongside Baldur like the two were siblings. Her understanding of him led her to nod with a dry smile.

“Unfortunately so. Bal genuinely thinks with all his soul that you are so unfathomably and objectively adorable that his inability to defeat you is a matter of course. I’m sure of it.”

“That’s the most subjective thing I’ve ever heard! He’s wearing the rosy goggles of love!” Fiene screamed, head literally held in her hands with only her bright-red ears poking out.

While this wasn’t very becoming for a lady, Lieselotte had forgotten to care. The only emotion that came through her amethyst eyes was unbridled fury at her absent cousin.

“Bal has been like this forever. He’s unresponsive to the subtleties of emotion, including his own. It’s as if he makes his decisions based on instinct alone... What I’m trying to say is that he is *stupid*.”

“Wait, isn’t that kind of bad? Is it really all right for someone like him to inherit a marquisate?”

The words left Fiene’s lips before she could think, and she quickly covered her mouth. No matter the circumstance, she worried that she may have gone too far. However, Lieselotte didn’t seem to care one bit and merely nodded.

“For years, our family has been full of people whose muscles extend well into their skulls. The head of the family hires a capable advisor to manage our affairs each generation. What’s more, Riefenstahls are incredibly sensitive to hostility—Bal included—so it ends up working out. Still, their talents for the sword and sensing animosity are more intuitive than not; it isn’t as if they’re *thinking* about what they’re doing. And, well, essentially... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for all the trouble he’s caused.”

Lieselotte went so far as to lower her head in apology, causing Fiene to shake her own in a panic.

“No, it’s fine! I’m well aware of my social standing, so I wasn’t taking him seriously! I just thought that it’d be nice if you could give him a warning, Lady Lieselotte. You know, something like, ‘Don’t go around seducing women when you’re already engaged,’” Fiene said with a weak smile.

Lieselotte raised her head and straightened her back perfectly. Her powerful gaze met Fiene’s and she uttered a single sentence.

“I shall beat him to a pulp.”

“...Th-Thank you very much?”

Fiene thanked Lieselotte, though she was somewhat frightened by the intensity of Lieselotte’s statement.

“Uh, um, when you say, ‘beat him to a pulp,’ you mean...emotionally or something, right?”

Fiene suddenly began to worry about Baldur’s health and safety. However, the only response she received was an elegant grin that left her befuddled. Just as she started rehearsing the steps needed to cast healing magic on another person, Lieselotte sighed dejectedly.

“However, I suspect that fool has begun to catch on to his feelings for you, Miss Fiene.”

Fiene froze in astonishment, at a loss for words.

“As soon as the summer break began, Bal met with my father at the royal palace and apparently tried to return our family sword. He said he couldn’t hold onto it as he isn’t guaranteed to be the next Riefenstahl head. My father is thoroughly infatuated with him, so he begged and pleaded for Bal to take the sword home, and eventually won out. Still, that begs the question: does he plan to forsake his noble title?”

Lieselotte delivered the news with an air of boredom, but Fiene could not have been more stunned. Fiene tried to object, but the words clung to her dried throat. She extended a shaky hand to her teacup and slowly drank her black

tea.

“He...He can’t—no, he can’t do that.”

After wetting her mouth with a sip of tea, Fiene just barely managed to wring out a reply. In contrast, Lieselotte tilted her head, thinking nothing of Baldur’s actions.

“Who knows? Bal may be the eldest son, but he has two brothers and a sister. Should he find himself wrapped up in a serious scandal—say, one where he breaks off his engagement to woo a commoner girl—I’m sure House Riefenstahl would have no choice but to disown him. Besides, at this point, his promise to marry one of my sisters is a mere verbal agreement for the distant future.”

“W-Wait a second! I don’t want that! Noble titles aside, I don’t want him to throw away his home and family for me! That’s way too heavy, not to mention sad!” Fiene shouted in a panic.

Lieselotte knew Baldur—or rather, the entire Riefenstahl bloodline—well. She knew that once they fell in love, they would fervently pursue that yearning until the end of time. Her own experience devoting herself to her own romantic endeavors left her unable to come down too harshly on him.

“I suppose so...” With a vague comment, Lieselotte turned to the sky, lost in thought.

Fiene was desperate to try and convince Lieselotte to stop him, but had no idea what to say. She took another sip of black tea to try and calm herself down, but could no longer taste the flavor. Silence ruled over them for an extended moment.

“Very well, I understand. I shall speak to Bal.”

Hearing Lieselotte say this, Fiene beamed with joy.

“However... Let me first preface this by saying this is only a *possibility*,” Lieselotte said clumsily. She still refused to meet Fiene’s gaze as she continued, “When I speak to Bal, there is a chance that he’ll say, ‘So I *am* in love with Miss Fiene,’ and immediately elect to secede from House Riefenstahl. And when I say there’s a chance of this happening, I mean to say that this is probably going to happen.”

Fiene tilted her head. She looked as serious as could be.

“...Even though we’re not dating?”

If they’d already been lovers, she could have understood. However, the two of them were mere school friends. There was no need for him to forsake his title. Even if he did, there was no guarantee that their relationship would progress past this point. There wasn’t a single reason for Baldur to withdraw from House Riefenstahl, or so Fiene thought.

Lieselotte spoke very slowly, as if she were teaching a young child.

“Bal—Baldur Riefenstahl—is a man who will sort out his affairs *before* seriously attempting to win your heart. Should he lose his title, his family, all of my sisters, his sword, his knighthood, and even you, he will still press on without any regret. That’s the kind of person he is.”

Lieselotte looked Fiene straight in the eye as she spoke. Fiene could tell her gaze was packed with certainty and faith in her cousin, and this brought a tear to the commoner girl’s eye.

“But...But...But that’s no good at all!”

“It isn’t. *He* isn’t. My twin sisters both cry, ‘There’s no way Bal’s clever enough to handle a political marriage! He’ll definitely break off the engagement at some point! We will never, ever, ever get engaged to him!’ You can only describe that *thing* as ‘no good.’ There isn’t any use pointing it out now.”

Baldur had at long last been reduced to a mere “thing” in Lieselotte’s mind.

In truth, Fiene didn’t hate Baldur and his straightforwardness. But her lack of distaste for him only worsened her troubles. She couldn’t think of a way to stop him from willingly throwing himself into a despair-inducing situation, and that thought brought her to the brink of tears.

“Then...Then what *am* I supposed to do?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Would it be too much to ask for you to marry him as a commoner and live together happily?” Lieselotte’s question was accompanied by a smile.

“I can’t,” Fiene replied instantly, and she shook her head. “I would never be able to forgive myself for making him throw away everything. There’s no way I

could live happily like that.”

Lieselotte’s expression returned to weariness as she sighed.

“I suppose that’s true... Honestly, what are we meant to do? Miss Fiene, you wouldn’t happen to be the illegitimate daughter of my father, would you?”

If she were, then she could be accepted as the marquis’s daughter and it would be easy to marry her off to Baldur. Furthermore, Lieselotte had always wanted a mild-mannered sister, so it would be perfect.

Alas, Lieselotte’s wishful fantasy was shattered by a teary-eyed Fiene.

“Of course not! Think about it: if I were, then based on our birthdays, your father would have been having an affair while you were still in the womb! Can you imagine how much chaos that would cause?!”

Lieselotte knew from her parents’ relationship that her hopes were impossible, but that didn’t stop her from genuinely wishing for it. She and Fiene’s gazes met, and the two of them sighed in sync.

Chapter 5: Brothers and Sisters

Oh, this is my chance to visit Lieselotte.

I was a little over two weeks into my summer break. A string of coincidences during my travels to inspect various estates had cleared up my schedule for the next three days.

Furthermore, I was only a half-day carriage ride away from the Riefenstahl estate. When I realized this, I altered my plans straight away to go see Lieselotte. Using magic, I quickly sent her a letter that read, “I would like to visit your manor tomorrow. As previously discussed, this is not a public matter but a private one. May I humbly ask for your permission to come?”

I was worried that my request would be rejected due to how little notice I’d given, but she quickly sent a reply consenting to the visit. As I was a member of the royal family, retainers and bodyguards would get in my way no matter how private a meeting was; still, the thought that I would soon see Lieselotte had me jumping for joy.

As an aside, Art happened to have joined my entourage recently. Although it was obvious he was using me as an excuse to slack off, this let me fulfill my promise with him as well.

When we arrived at my fiancée’s residence, we were greeted by Lieselotte and her friend-turned-guest, Fiene.

“This is much too sudden. To think your first notice would come a mere day in advance! Though we may have agreed to meet at some point, I had presumed you would have the good sense to know the effect your royal actions have on those around you.”

Right after getting through our greetings, Lieselotte began to angrily berate me.

“No, don’t worry. You did great, Sieg! Being heard is so wonderful!”

“After Liese-tan received your letter, she was frantically busy with organizing cooking and cleaning, caring for her skin, picking her dress, and more. It’s less about you being a prince or whatever and more that she wanted more time to prepare for a visit from the man she loves. But on our end, we don’t care how sudden it is. We’re just happy to see you!”

Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee welcomed me with open arms. However, Lieselotte remained bitter—or more accurately, she was still pouting.

“My father has returned to our territory as of yesterday. Yet he promptly left the manor behind to inspect some of our faraway holdings, and could not make it back in time to greet you. I apologize on his behalf, but know well that it was *you* who made an unreasonable request, Your Highness.”

Lieselotte glared at me. I had a feeling that she was legitimately angry. *Not good.*

“Liese-tan woke up at four this morning to take a bath, prepare her skin, do her hair, and fix her makeup. It took a long road filled with a tear-inducing amount of effort for her to stand before you, Sieg. Please forgive her for being on the grumpy side.”

Empowered by Lady Kobayashee’s explanation, I breathed a sigh of relief. While this didn’t change the fact that I’d wronged Lieselotte, it did mean that she hadn’t seriously grown to dislike me.

“I’m sorry. I suddenly chanced upon some time to myself, and I thought that this was my best opportunity to visit. I wanted to see you no matter what... You’re as beautiful as ever, Lieselotte. Having you come to greet me like this leaves me more than content.”

With that said, I took a knee before Lieselotte. Her eyes went wide seeing the crown prince do such a thing, but I ignored her and took her hand. Like a knight greeting a noblewoman, I gently placed my lips on the back of her hand. I could only pray that my apology and love for her would convey itself.

“A critical hit! Lieselotte’s heart is skipping past tsun and straight to dere!”

“Wow, Sieg sure has gotten the hang of handling Liese-tan. How dependable. Keep it coming!”

I looked up when the gods spoke to see my fiancée bright red and at a loss for words. Fury had completely disappeared from her expression. *Thank the gods.*

While I was basking in relief, Art snuck up in the corner of my vision.

“Long time no see, Fiene! What do you say we leave these lovestruck idiots to their business and you show me around? I heard Lieselotte’s sisters are all really pretty. Where are they?”

Art had grown tired of playing retainer. He broke character by attempting to take Fiene’s hand, but his own hand was quickly slapped away by a magical blast of water from Lieselotte.

Still, now that he mentioned it, where *were* Lieselotte’s younger sisters? Had they left for the outskirts of the territory with their father?

“Stay away from my sisters,” Lieselotte said with an ice cold glare.

Perhaps the little ones had been hidden away until the marquis could arrive. Art was here, after all. None of them had fiancés, and it would be a catastrophe if any of them were sweet-talked by a playboy like him.

“I wonder why you hate me so much, Lady Lieselotte,” Art said. “I know I can’t inherit my father’s countship, but I’m slated to be a pretty important figure in the Church, you know? I’m a promising young man.”

“I think it’s how loose he is.”

Art had tilted his head like a sad puppy, but Lady Kobayashee hit the mark without missing a beat. *As the goddess says.*

“To marry a priest, one must be a priest themselves. No Riefenstahl would ever choose to forsake the blade,” Lieselotte declared.

The fact that she found a reason that didn’t include a jab at Art himself spoke to my fiancée’s kindness.

“Oh, I guess that’s fair. Mmkay, Fiene, how about you come join the Church and marry me? Weapons are banned, but there aren’t any rules about fists.”

Art gave up on Lieselotte’s sisters without a moment’s hesitation. He turned to Fiene with a smile and began his pitch.

The Church had many restrictions, but it didn't call for a total ban on violence. Force used to protect yourself or another was perfectly acceptable.

"...I've heard that priests aren't allowed to eat meat?" After a contemplative pause, Fiene spoke with a serious face.

"Ah, that's true. But it's not like you can't eat *any* meat. You'll have to give it up for a year or two as a trainee. After that, you're free to eat as much as you want outside of one month a year, which—"

"No, I refuse."

Fiene instantaneously shot Art down. He hung his head mournfully.

"I've never been rejected over meat before... Why do I get rejected so much, anyway? I feel like I've got a decent amount going for me if you take the time to look."

Art drooped his shoulders. In the very same moment, I heard someone's muffled groaning.

"Mmph! Hrngh! Mmgh!"

My accompanying security detail surrounded us to protect us from the source of this mysterious sound. Art and I prepared for combat behind them. Fiene had cast supportive magic on herself and Lieselotte, and the two were ready to watch one another's backs. Their teamwork was impeccable.

"Lieselotte! Lend me a hand, I'm begging you!"

At the center of all the discord was the absent marquis himself.

I looked closer and saw that his three youngest daughters were apprehending—or at least, trying to apprehend—a woman of small build. Whatever the case, the four entangled girls were approaching us.

The marquis seemed to have reservations about touching the woman himself. He simply watched helplessly from the sidelines, pleading with Lieselotte for assistance.

However, the small woman's rampage was uncontainable. She'd been gagged and had both hands tied behind her back. Still, her rose-blond hair flailed violently about, and her restraints were on the verge of—*oh, there they go*. The

nearly undone rope had come undone. With both hands now freed, she tore off the gag.

“Where is my Fiene?!”

“I’m telling you, she’s over here!”

“Stop struggling!”

“Can you please stop trying to run away?”

“Fiene! Where are you?!”

“Why’s this lady so freakishly strong?!”

“I dunno, but dad said to capture her, so hurry up and help!”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to knock her out?”

“Don’t hurt her!”

“Fieeene!”

The individual speakers blurred together in a cacophony of voices. The marquis, the woman, and Lieselotte’s younger sisters were shouting one after another.

“...Mommy?”

Suddenly, Fiene pushed through a gap between my bodyguards and stepped forward. As soon as her voice carried through the air, the woman froze solid. Everyone’s eyes were on Fiene and the woman she’d called “mommy.”

Now that I look at them, they look profoundly similar.

“All the pieces have assembled,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“I wanted to say something cool like that, but I never would have expected everyone to get together like *this*.”**

Apparently, the situation exceeded even the goddess’s capacity for analysis. *Wait, am I supposed to be the one settling this matter?*

Struck with a terrible omen, I silently panicked. The woman was the first to break free of the confusion and speak.

“Huh? *Fiene*?! Goodness, what’s with that gorgeous dress and shiny skin? You

look like you're doing great! Aren't you supposed to be getting tormented by Riefenstahl's eldest daughter?!"

The woman was aghast when she got a good look at Fiene. It would seem that my adorable fiancée was indeed a magnet for misunderstandings.

"Lady Lieselotte gave me a whole wardrobe of dresses that she used to wear when she was my height. Plus, they've been feeding me all sorts of tasty things since the first day I arrived."

Fiene's expression was sullen and she glared at the woman, whose confusion had only worsened at this new information. Fiene went on.

"Lady Lieselotte is too kind to ever torture, bully, or do anything mean to anyone. And besides, we're *friends*!"

"The corners of Lieselotte's mouth are twitching!"

"Getting along with Fiene has made Liese-tan so happy recently that this is to be expected. Good for you, Liese-tan! By the way, the dresses were a mix of touched up hand-me-downs and new products. She's keeping it a secret from Fiene, but the ratio is around two-to-eight."

I quietly revered Lieselotte's cuteness that the gods exposed. Yet I suddenly noticed that the marquis had grown solemn and was making his way toward Fiene. No one else was in his sight: not I nor any of the others. He stared straight at her and made his way over with an uncertain step.

"...Excuse me. How old are you?"

"Huh?" Fiene said, slightly intimidated. "Um, I'm fifteen, sir."

"I see... I see. You really are... Oh, your eyes are the same. They're the color of the sky."

Marquis Riefenstahl nodded to no one but himself. His speech was dyed with deep emotion. He broke out into a crying smile, piecing together his words gently, softly, and with overflowing happiness.

"It is nice to meet you, young lady. My name is Bruno Riefenstahl. I am Lieselotte's father, and...your father's younger brother."

"Fiene's father is the marquis's older brother, August Riefenstahl. He passed

away sixteen years ago. And the woman who caused the whole scene just now is her mother. Her name is Elizabeth, formerly of House Marschner. Once upon a time, she was known as the Fae Princess of the Marschner Duchy.”

...That thing is the Fae Princess?

I didn't mean to doubt Lady Kobayashee's statement as she elaborated on the marquis's claim. Simply put, the facts on display were too unbelievable. My first reflex was to deny them.

The Fae Princess was famed for her fragile, fairy-like beauty. The tragic tale of the love between her and her fiancé August Riefenstahl was still told in high society today.

I stared at her in disbelief. When she noticed my gaze, she glanced my way. Then, she smiled tenderly like a blooming flower and curtsied gracefully.

Her fragile beauty and refined mannerisms evoked the image of someone fit to be called the Fae Princess. However, she was so impossibly different from the person she'd been mere seconds ago that I was left to steep in the perplexity of my own mind.

— — — —

I found myself joined by the marquis, Fiene, and Miss Elizabeth. For whatever reason, the four of us had been chosen to resolve this strange situation. We began our talks in the Riefenstahl estate's drawing room.

To explain how it ended up being the four of us, first I have to note that Art had asked the marquis's three youngest daughters to show him around. When they fled the scene, my fiancée had joined them to keep an eye on Art. I'd tried to do the same, but Lieselotte had asked me to sit in on the discussion in her stead, so I was forced to stay.

“I'd heard rumors that my daughter, Fiene, was 'dragged to the Riefenstahl manor against her will to be tortured by Lady Lieselotte,' so I rushed to the scene,” Miss Elizabeth said. Despite wearing a classless one-piece dress, her smile was more noble than any aristocrat's.

“Dearest sister,” the marquis said, “it is far too late to don a mask of grace. If we elaborate on your actions a little further: you scaled our outer walls and

infiltrated our territory to steal back your daughter. What's more, you were more than willing to resort to violence."

Alas, the lady's actions lacked any semblance of nobility. When the marquis pointed this fact out, Miss Elizabeth discarded her facade as the Fae Princess. She slumped onto the sofa with a bored shrug.

"My daughters spotted her intrusion and attempted to apprehend what they thought to be a thief," the marquis said to me. "Then, I arrived and realized she was my late brother's wife, which is how the confusion began. Your Highness, I sincerely apologize for allowing you to witness such an unsightly scene."

The marquis bowed to me in apology, but I was only here on a personal vacation. Honestly, I felt like Fiene deserved it far more. She was balled up with her face hidden in shame. Though, to be fair, I couldn't think of any way for us to help alleviate her embarrassment.

"Um, Miss Fiene?" Next, the marquis turned to Fiene. "Your father may not have inherited the marquisate, but he was a good man I'm proud to call my brother. My siblings include a sister, a brother, another sister, me, and then a younger brother. Out of all of us, my elder brother—that is to say, your father—was the kindest and most gentle. What I'm trying to say is that he was a wonderful person."

The marquis's tender tone caused Fiene to peek out from the cracks in her fingers, and she listened to him with all her attention.

"His only flaw was a frail constitution. We weren't sure if he'd be able to inherit the house... Truth be told, we weren't sure if he would survive until he came of age."

The man's shoulders slumped down in sadness. My father had once told me that Marquis Riefenstahl had gotten along extremely well with his elder brother—or rather, that he valued brotherly love to an astonishing degree.

In fact, it was said that this military general had begun training in both swordplay and magic to protect his sickly brother.

"August managed to survive to adulthood," Miss Elizabeth said. "Actually, he made it all the way to twenty-four. But by the time I could marry him at sixteen,

he could hardly rise from bed. The Marschner duchy that I belonged to didn't wed me to August as a person, but to the next marquis, so they tried to make me marry Bruno here instead. I had to keep arguing with them even after Bruno and little Josephine got together, and I lost my temper. I screamed at them that I didn't care about marriage so long as I could have a child with August, and... This probably isn't a story I should be telling my daughter."

Fiene stared at her mother in disbelief. Miss Elizabeth cleared her throat once and attempted to resume her tale.

"Anyway, when August was twenty-four and I was seventeen, I chose to become an unwed mother. I only realized we'd succeeded after he had already passed, though. I knew that if my family found out, they'd try to kill me, or at least kill my baby. Since I was antagonizing them either way, I looted our house and ran away. That's how I made all those powerful nobles so mad."

Marquis Bruno had been treating Miss Elizabeth as his sister-in-law this whole time, but I recalled that House Marschner had blocked their official marriage. Furthermore, the tragic tale of the man who had passed away and the woman who had disappeared in despair was a popular morsel of gossip to this very day.

"Why?" the marquis asked, furious. "Why did you flee?! Any enemy of my brother and his family is an enemy of mine! I would have used everything under the Riefenstahl name to bring those who would hurt you to their knees!"

"That's exactly why. An all-out war between a marquisate and duchy is no laughing matter." Miss Elizabeth's reply was quick and simple. "Use your brain, will you? How would Fiene feel knowing that she sparked a conflict like that? What about me? What about *August*? Would House Riefenstahl emerge unscathed? And your little daughters are...well, rather sturdy, I'll admit, but... Oh, I know, what about Josephine? She can't fight. Speaking of, where is she?"

Miss Elizabeth's argument slowly broke down as she remembered the young girls' contributions to her capture. Instead, she elected to ask about the marquis's wife.

"...My wife is currently cooped up in our mountainside atelier."

The marquis seemed somewhat dissatisfied, but answered all the same. His wife, Josephine Riefenstahl, was a painter. Despite the fact she had been born a

viscount, her artwork was so exceptional that having a portrait done by her was considered a status symbol. Even after marriage, she had begun to delegate all her own work to Lieselotte lately, so that she herself could return to the path of art. No other noble would get away with such things, but none dared to question her.

“Oh, so she’s been struck with another bolt of inspiration?” Miss Elizabeth asked.

“No, she’s there because it’s hot. I doubt she’ll return to the manor until fall.”

What is she, a wild animal? An unbearable silence followed the marquis’s reply.

“Uh... Um... Well... Anyway! Look, your kids were still young back then, and I figured it would be best for me and my daughter to keep our heads down. That’s why I went into hiding!”

Miss Elizabeth was anything but subtle in her attempt to shift the conversation. I decided not to notice.

“But then, last year, the Marschners finally caught up to us. They nearly killed Fiene and me, but my daughter is strong. She managed to fight them off almost entirely by herself.”

There had been an incident where a certain commoner girl happened to have the ability to use magic. At the time, her encounter with a band of scoundrels had seemed like a coincidence, but it was clear that had been untrue.

“That’s when I realized Fiene would be fine on her own. In fact, I’d just drag her down. So, I disappeared and had the academy take custody of her. Not even a duke can cause trouble there.”

The academy was so isolated from outside influence that I was permitted to walk its campus without a single bodyguard. That spoke volumes to how safe it was. Miss Elizabeth’s plan made a great deal of sense.

“Also, I was sort of hoping that she might find herself a boy who could take her in and protect her.”

“What?!”

This final statement triggered a heated reaction of shock from Fiene. Miss Elizabeth looked at her daughter and sighed before continuing on.

“Think about it. Those cravens want to kill us both and pretend we never existed. If they decide that’s too much work, they’ll change strategies and try to use us as their pawns. Say, by marrying you off for political gain. Personally, I just want to see you marry someone of your own choosing before they can start meddling.”

“Oh? I think I’ve got just the guy in mind!”

“His name starts with ‘B’ and ends with ‘aldur’! He’s a bit of a romantic dunc, but everything would wrap up just fine if he and Fiene fall in love. That’s not to say it *has* to be him or anything, but I totally ship it!”

Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee’s enthusiastic voices reached my ear. And if I could hear them...

“In any event, Miss Fiene, your first order of business is to become my sister.” These were the words that accompanied Lieselotte’s graceful entrance to the drawing room.

I spied Art holding the door open for her as she walked in. I couldn’t tell whether he was unharmed or if he’d simply healed all the damage he’d taken. His face looked fine and well, but his clothes were suspiciously tattered. And most curiously, he was dutifully playing the part of Lieselotte’s retainer.

...I guess Lieselotte taught him a lesson.

“Your sister, Lady Lieselotte?” Fiene asked with rosy cheeks.

“I feel like we’re witnessing the birth of a new misunderstanding!”

“I’m almost positive that this isn’t the kinky kind of ‘sister.’ But then again, these two did share a yuri route...”

That was not something I could let slide. A sudden sense of crisis struck, propelling me to step into the awkward mood the two of them were sharing.

“Do you mean to say that House Riefenstahl should welcome Miss Fiene as an adopted daughter?”

“Precisely,” Lieselotte said. “What do you say, father? Would it not be lovely

for your beloved brother's only child to inherit our great estate?"

"There could be nothing better," the marquis said. "The marquise was originally meant for August. It wouldn't be *unheard* of to have a female heiress, but... Ah, do you mean to suggest we find a groom for her? But still, I've promised the title to Baldur, so we'll need to discuss this together..."

The marquis's wishy-washy response drew a harsh glare from his eldest daughter.

"The very Baldur you speak of has already made an attempt to woo Miss Fiene," Lieselotte said snappily. Her declaration filled me with silent awe.

I had no idea.

The gods had said something similar, but the thought of Baldur falling for Fiene—and what's more, *flirting* with her—was unimaginable to me.

"Although," Lieselotte continued, "it would be rather difficult to wed the two at present, seeing as they are not yet lovers. However, we must swiftly make it known that Miss Fiene is to inherit our house, lest her life and honor be targeted once more. Baldur would happily concede his claim to the title for his beloved Fiene, so let us waste no more time dawdling."

I found Lieselotte's confidence strangely persuasive.

"But that's pure speculation. I mean, everything we know points to Bal being head over heels for Fiene, but...is it really all right to make that claim when he hasn't even said it himself?"

For once, Lady Kobayashee seemed hesitant. Yet I chose to dismiss the goddess's fears and put my faith in Lieselotte.

"In essence," I said, "Baldur will be removed from the line of succession temporarily. Instead, you'll tell the world—and more importantly, House Marschner—that whoever marries Miss Fiene will be the next marquis."

Lieselotte nodded emphatically. This plan would exceed the Marschners' wildest dreams; after all, they'd wanted to install their daughter as the grand dame of the Riefenstahl marquise for years. Fiene's safety would be all but guaranteed.

The only issue was that Baldur's social position would be weakened considerably. Still, Lieselotte showed no sign of hesitation as she cast him aside.

"All shall be well so long as Baldur manages to charm Miss Fiene. And if *it* fails, then all responsibility lies with *its* own shortcomings. Our first priority ought to be Miss Fiene's safety. Let us take her in at this very moment."

"You have a point," the marquis said. "I raised Baldur to be a sturdy man. Besides, I suppose I can always assign him a position with one of our branch families should Fiene choose to marry another."

Lieselotte smiled with great satisfaction. In contrast, the mother and daughter duo had frozen, their eyes wide in shock. Lieselotte's tongue only grew sharper, as if to drive the point home to Fiene and Miss Elizabeth.

"The post of a knight or aide is more than enough for a *failure*. I should hate to imagine my own cousin to be so lacking that he lets another man swoop away Miss Fiene from under his nose."

Lieselotte's grin was positively wicked.

"Looking cool, Lieselotte!"

"Boy, she really feels like a villainess now! Check out that evil sneer and her nasty insults. I couldn't imagine a better antagonist if I tried! But when I think about how her actions are being fueled by her love for Fiene and trust in Baldur... Ugh! I can't! I love you, Liese-tan!"

Lord Endoh, Lady Kobayashee, and I all marveled at Lieselotte's diatribe. Meanwhile, her father nodded with an awkward smile and then walked over to Fiene.

"What do you say, Miss Fiene? Would you do me the honor of becoming my daughter?"

"Uh, um, but... I-I've lived my whole life as a commoner. I don't know anything about my father, and none of this changes the fact that I was born out of wedlock. I don't think I'm fit to be the heiress. Plus, I think there would be a bunch of people who'd doubt that I'm even my father's child." Fiene sounded panicked.

“Artur Richter,” Lieselotte said quietly. All she had to do was utter his name for him to step forth and straighten himself out.

“Yes, ma’am!” he said. “Marriage is synonymous with the Church! I swear by the goddess that I will find the records of August and Elizabeth Riefenstahl’s solemn vow, for the sake of your newly sanctioned sister!”

Art? What happened to you?

Seeing this foreign creature answer so readily filled me with terror. Putting that aside, though, Art was the perfect man for the job. Art’s aunt currently headed the central religious body of our kingdom, and there were plenty of other Richters working in the Church.

If Artur Richter said that he would find the records, then he would...even if they didn’t exist.

“Oh...” I said in a contrived way. “The royal records might be a bit *unreliable* considering how long ago this was. Still, I’ll make every effort to find them.”

“Unreliable indeed,” Lieselotte said with a nod. It appeared she caught my drift. “Alas, the crown is not perfect, so such hiccups ought to be expected.”

Forging national records was practically hopeless, but that wasn’t to say we didn’t lose track of a file every now and again. It was well within the realm of possibility to make their marriage impossible to *disprove*.

Bolstered by our backing, Lieselotte smiled like a child pulling off a prank.

“Miss Fiene,” she said, “it would seem you are, in fact, my uncle’s flesh and blood. Of course, if you choose to join our family, no one would dare question your birth again. Or rather, I wouldn’t let them try.”

“Uh, um... Huh?” Fiene was overcome with disbelief.

Then, Lieselotte took a single step forward. The distance between them closed by the slightest of increments.

“Miss Fiene, don’t bother worrying about Baldur. Just take a moment to think. Do you not want to be my sister?” Lieselotte asked, her tone sad.

“Of course I do!” Fiene said. “Lady Lieselotte, you’re so kind, beautiful, elegant, graceful, and strong! You’re adorable when you’re with His Highness,

and even though sometimes your tsun is really strong, recently I've started thinking that just makes you cuter! You're so cute that I think it's unfair! I love you, Lady Lieselotte!"

Fiene feverishly shook her head. Her enthusiasm caused Lieselotte to flush bright red and take a step back.

"A surprise attack straight outta left field! Fiene's words of praise leave Lieselotte recoiling!"

"This is dangerous. You'd better stay on your toes to make sure Fiene doesn't snatch Liese-tan away, Your Highness."

That would be a problem.

"To be honest," Fiene said, "I do. I do want to be your sister. But...the thought of becoming the next marquis terrifies me."

Fiene's tightly clenched hands were trembling in front of her chest. Although it seemed she was doing her best to steady herself, it clearly wasn't going very well.

"There is nothing to fear," Lieselotte said. "I will be here with you. Miss Fiene...*Fiene*. Your mother was once the daughter of a noble duke. I'm sure she will be there for you too."

Lieselotte cupped her hands over Fiene's with a smile so tender that —"...Probably."—it left me enchanted.

Wait. I distinctly heard Lieselotte quietly whisper an extra word.

True, Miss Elizabeth was rather, shall we say, *eccentric* when she wasn't playing the part of the Fae Princess, but I doubted that she would ever unmask herself.

...Probably.

"Lady Lieselotte..."

Fiene seemed unaware of Lieselotte's addition, and she looked up at my fiancée with her big, sky blue eyes. They were damp with emotion.

"My, won't you refer to me as sisters do?" Lieselotte said with a snicker.

At long last, the floodgates of Fiene's eyes could bear no more.

"I've been an only child all this time! And we moved so much that I never had any friends! So...So... I've always wanted a sister like you, Lieselotte. I'm so incredibly happy."

Fiene wound down to a bashful smile at the end. She was undeniably adorable. Yet I couldn't help but be more concerned about the fact that Lieselotte then hugged her in a fit of joy, squealing, "So cute! Yes! I finally have a cute and well-behaved little sister!"

"Sieg looks so conflicted!" Lord Endoh said.

I immediately covered my mouth, but the analytical tone of Lady Kobayashee quickly followed.

"The fact that Liese-tan is interacting with Fiene without a hint of her shy, tsundere exterior means that she already sees her as family. I'm sure there's no need to worry."

Are you sure?

There was something about the passionate tears they exchanged while looking into one another's eyes that made it seem like nothing else in the world mattered to them. *Is this mere sisterly love?*

"...Probably."

My goddess, I really, really did not want to hear you so uncertain.

◆◆◆ Of All People

After watching Lieselotte and company finish drafting the paperwork to officially foster Fiene, Endo Aoto saved the game without a word. Once the console and TV were shut off, Kobayashi Shihono's living room was silent—or it would have been, if the sound of her sniffing wasn't echoing through the room.

"I'm so glad. I'm sho glaaahd!" Eventually, tears and snot leaked out as Shihono spoke.

"I'm glad too," Aoto said, handing the girl a box of tissues. "I'm impressed you managed to hold out this long, Kobayashi."

Shihono took the box and pulled out five or six tissues. She vigorously wiped down her face and then blew her nose. Now that she'd finally quelled the waterworks, she looked up at the boy next to her with red eyes and smiled in embarrassment.

"Thanks! I tried really hard not to cry! Can you imagine how much of a letdown it would have been if they'd heard me sniffing at a time like that?!"



As the two girls had sworn their sisterhood in game, Shihono had begun crying even earlier than Fiene had. She'd been desperately fighting the urge to sniffle and had somehow managed to keep her voice steady. Yet the whole time, her face had been soaking wet with tears.

"I still don't get whether or not it was *that* emotional of a scene, though."

In contrast, Aoto's expression was the pinnacle of serenity, though he tilted his head curiously as he asked his question. Seeing how different Shihono's reaction was had him worried that he'd lost the ability to emote or something.

"It's just... I dunno. This is the first time I truly felt like we have the power to change their fates. After all, we did!"

"Oh, I get it. The game always lets you influence the main heroes to some degree, but this is the first time we've gotten real adults involved, huh?"

"That's right. Having Fiene adopted by the Riefenstahls without marrying Bal was totally impossible in the base game."

Magikoi was an otome game: things other than romance were outside of its scope. No matter how earnestly Fiene prayed for familial or sisterly ties, they were never meant to be. Seeing that turned on its head caused Shihono to reach for another tissue to wipe her eyes with.

"And when I saw Liese-tan and Fiene smile like that, it hit me right in the feels. I'm just so, so glad it worked out. I'm so happy!"

Shihono buried her face in her hands and crumpled up.

Aoto now understood just how unbelievable and moving the previous scene had been. He quietly patted her on the back to soothe her as she sobbed.

In the game, Fiene and Lieselotte had been heroine and villainess. Outside of the Reverse Harem Route, they were rivals that never saw eye to eye—and that was an understatement. They fought to the death in some routes: sometimes Fiene would die, and other times Lieselotte would die. The two were fundamentally incompatible beings.

Yet now, they were sisters who loved one another so dearly that it had the prince quaking in his boots. What could that be if not a miracle brought on by

Aoto and Shihono?

At long last, Shihono finished crying and looked up. Aoto was there waiting for her with a wet sports towel that he kept in his bag out of habit.

“You should cool off your eyes,” he said.

“Thanks.” Grateful for his thoughtfulness, Shihono took the towel and draped it over her eyes.

“Can I pull out an ice pack?”

“Sure. Er, I mean, thanks. Seriously, thank you so much for all of this.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve bawled at your house twice already, so I can’t even say we’re even. You still get one more good cry before we settle the score.”

Shihono slouched onto the sofa and took the ice pack Aoto handed her. As she pressed it against her puffy eyes, she couldn’t help but laugh at his words. Now that she thought of it, their roles had flipped from the last two times.

“By the way,” Aoto said, “you don’t find out that Fiene and Lieselotte are cousins in the game until after Lieselotte is already dead, right?”

He asked the question casually in an attempt to reset the mood. Shihono nodded with her eyes still covered.

“Yup. Usually, Fiene ends up filling Liese-tan’s shoes once she dies. They find out while she’s still alive in the Reverse Harem Route, but even then, it’s after they beat the witch. Looking back on it now, that ending is basically exactly what Fiene’s mom’s family was after, huh?”

The epilogue of the Reverse Harem Route contained a scene where Duke Marschner welcomed Fiene and her mother back to the family after she and her friends saved the world.

The text read, “And so, where once all had thought the girl to be a commoner, Fiene rose to become a fine princess loved by all.” But now that the two of them knew House Marschner’s true colors, it looked more like Fiene was being played.

“Fiene ends up being the savior of the world with the crown prince, the first daughter of a marquisate, a knight destined to be the future marquis, an elite priest, a boy genius mage, and a shady teacher in her back pocket. That’s just a threat to national security,” Aoto said with a sigh.

Shihono slipped off the towel and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Right? And then she becomes a pawn to her mom’s old family...”

The Marschners would either enact a coup or puppeteer the kingdom from the shadows. Knowing this, the two of them clammed up with furrowed brows.

“So the kingdom really is in peril after the Reverse Harem End,” Aoto said to himself.

“For real,” Shihono agreed.

The two of them nodded solemnly.

“I...I want all of them to live happily,” Aoto said after a pause.

His earnest prayer was met with an understanding expression from Shihono. She nodded.

“I know we started all this without understanding much about the whole ‘gods’ thing, but I still really want everyone to be happy. Something in me is shouting, ‘Just you watch! I’ll figure out a way to guide everyone to happiness!’”

In turn, Shihono’s determination was met with a deep nod from Aoto. They’d been groping in the dark up until this point. Aoto in particular hadn’t even known much about the game.

Still, before they knew it, the duo had grown fond of every single one of their otherworldly friends. Empathy drove them to wish for their friends’ happiness from the bottom of their hearts.

“Let’s keep doing our best!”

Shihono thrust out her dainty white hand with a smile, and Aoto gripped it in a firm handshake with his own calloused and tanned hand. A warm silence filled the air.

“I know!” Shihono said, instantly overwriting their moment. “Let’s go out

tomorrow to celebrate!”

Aoto tilted his head, unsure of what she meant. She happily shook his hand up and down and continued on.

“Let’s go have a nice meal to celebrate Liese-tan and Fiene formally becoming sisters! We can take the day off from playing the game!”

The corner of Aoto’s lips twitched upward, but he immediately forced it back down. While he was momentarily excited about being invited to what sounded like a date by the girl of his dreams, he couldn’t bring himself to let his happiness show. If he could, then his one-sided crush would have gone places long ago.

“Yeah, it’s good to go out every now and again,” he said. “Summer break is gonna end after this upcoming weekend too.” Although his expression was cool and his voice was calm, it was almost *too* calm. He was so unnaturally placid that it betrayed his true feelings.

“All right, let’s do it! We’ll meet up outside tomorrow!”

Shihono’s happy declaration almost drew out a smirk from Aoto. He barely held it in and nodded along.

“Heh heh, it’s a date!”

Alas, Shihono teased him with a mischievous smile that struck him through the heart. Aoto could do nothing but look at the floor to hide his blushing face. The play-by-play caster who spurred on the love of others had completely lost his ability to speak.

— — — —

A boy in a sports club spends the greater part of his life wearing a tracksuit.

Aoto may have been part of the Broadcasting Club now, but he was still a baseball player at heart. It followed that he had absolutely no understanding of fashion. To be perfectly frank, he thought it was commendable that he wore any clothes at all with how ridiculously hot it was outside.

Still, at the very least, he should have put more effort into dressing himself for a date with his crush. Overcome with regret, he hung his head.

Aoto's outfit was made up of a sportswear-branded T-shirt, capri jeans, sandals, and a shoulder bag. That was it.

On the other hand, the girl he saw hurrying toward him through a crowd of people did not match him at all. Shihono looked unfathomably cute. Usually, she wore her hair in simple styles, but today she'd twisted it into a chignon. She was wearing a white sleeveless blouse with a rounded collar and a striped cardigan. The sky blue skirt that came down to her knees paired nicely with her heeled black sandals, and she had a basket bag in one hand. All in all, she gave off a neat, graceful, and adorable impression.

Even from afar, Shihono was practically sparkling. Aoto cursed himself with all his being for throwing together a random outfit.

"What the heck? She's so cute. Why is Kobayashi so cute? What am I supposed to do?"

Aoto mumbled to himself in a daze right before Shihono caught up to him. When she arrived, she seemed flustered and surprised. Her movements were a bit jittery.

"Huh, uh, um, h-hey, Endo. Uh... Sorry for making you wait."

"No, I got here too early. We still have five minutes until the time we agreed on. Besides, it must have taken you a ton of time to dress yourself up. That means if anyone's actually late here, it's me."

Aoto looked serious, but Shihono had no idea what he was trying to say. Slightly troubled, she just smiled back at him.

Truthfully, the boy had been standing there for fifteen minutes, so he was verifiably not late. Of course, judging from Shihono's complicated hairstyle, carefully chosen outfit, and the touch of makeup she wore, her date preparations had absolutely taken a long time. Still, that didn't make Aoto's words any less ridiculous.

"In fact, I should be the one apologizing," he said. "I can't believe I'm casually wearing normal clothes when you showed up looking *this* cute. I should just go die."

While Shihono was lost in confusion, Aoto had somehow managed to twist his

logic all the way to death. Startled, she tried to refute him.

“What? I don’t get it. Anyway, Endo, you’ve got a great build, so you still look, um, cool with simple clothes,” she said, bashful.

“Are you an angel?” he asked.

“Angel?! Oh jeez, stop teasing me!”

Shihono grew more embarrassed by the second and frantically shook her head. Aoto stared at her, burning the perfect image of angelic beauty into his eyes.

“You’re cute. Super cute. Kobayashi, you’re already cute when we hang out normally, but today you’ve broken the upper limit to become a literal angel.” Despite the incoherent words coming out of Aoto’s mouth, the boy was as serious as could be.

“...Really? Do you really think I’m that cute?”

To begin with, Shihono had done her best to make Aoto think she looked cute. Putting his penchant for exaggeration aside, receiving unfiltered compliments from her date had left her far less troubled than she let on.

“I do. You’re the cutest girl in the whole world.”

That declaration got a shy but blissful smile out of Shihono.

“Ugh, that smile... That smile is too powerful! What are you, a goddess? Oh, you are. Hold up, I get to walk beside a girl *this* cute? Is that allowed? Yeah, no, I definitely should’ve dressed nicer. Not that I have anything better at home.”

Aoto slipped into play-by-play mode, causing Shihono to stare at the floor with her hands on her cheeks. After a brief moment of hesitation, she looked back up at him and made a suggestion.

“Uh, um... Then maybe after we eat, we can go look at some clothes for you to wear on our next date?”

“Thank you very much,” Aoto said, instantly leaping at the offer. They’d gone from a mere celebratory lunch to a meal plus shopping—with another date lined up, to boot.

“Okay,” Shihono said, “with that out of the way, let’s go eat! It’s almost time for our reservation!”

She pushed through the lingering embarrassment with enthusiasm. She turned her back on the awkward mood and fled the scene by power-walking toward the train station.

The day prior, the two of them had made a reservation at a café there that served sweets and pasta. There was still a decent amount of time before they needed to be there, but no harm could come from being early.

Just as Aoto began chasing after Shihono, a mass of people flooded out from the ticket gates. A packed train must have arrived. He began to worry that they might lose each other in the crowd when a voice suddenly called out.

“Eve!”

“Eek!”

A tall man wearing sunglasses had rushed ahead of the pack and grabbed Shihono by the arm. Aoto tried to hurry over to where they were, but was stopped by a wave of people.

“Wha— Hey! Let go...” Shihono turned to face the man but her tone was meeker than usual.

The man stood dumbfounded. He peered at her for a moment and then tilted his head.

“...You’re *not* Eve?”

“What are you doing to her?” Aoto said, prying Shihono away. He’d finally caught up, and he glared at the suspicious man as he pulled the girl into his arms. His scowl caused the man to let go without incident.

Aoto looked him over, still glaring. The man was roughly 185 centimeters, since he was close to Aoto’s height. His face was on the smaller side, which made his giant shades stick out suspiciously, but he was handsome and had long limbs.

The man was dressed in a summer jacket and leather shoes that looked like they came straight from a fashion magazine. Frankly, he looked like he’d be rich

and popular. He wasn't your average creepy weirdo.

Still in Aoto's arms, Shihono looked utterly perplexed. A hint of embarrassment caused her to shift her gaze to the earth.

"I'm asking you what your deal is," Aoto said with a low voice. He was starting to get angry at how the man simply stood there, bewildered.

"Oh," the man said. "I'm sorry. She looked so much like Eve—my lover, and so I just..."

The man bowed. To be fair, Shihono had been turned with her back toward the man when he'd grabbed her. She and Aoto breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that it had just been a case of mistaken identity. Aoto's hands loosened their grip.

"But as faint as it is, I swear I could smell Eve. Still, this world doesn't have the requisite ties or numbers. Could she have stumbled into a fate without me? No, impossible. That can't be. But maybe..."

The man began rambling to himself at a rapid pace. Aoto suddenly reevaluated him as a creep and once more tightened his hold around Shihono.

"Smell?" the girl asked. "That's so gross. Do you mean we use the same shampoo or something? I used a little bit of perfume today, so maybe that?" Shihono looked disgusted. Her repulsion was written all over her face.

On the other hand, Aoto's cheeks were beginning to redden. She'd brought his attention to the nice smell wafting up from in his arms. It was a bit late, but he was finally growing conscious of how close they were.

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant!" the man said, taking a step back and shaking his head. He paused his self-reflective mumbling to try and explain. "I'm sorry for causing you even more trouble. I was mistaken. It's been so long since I've seen her that I'm lonely, and I think I was a little out of sorts." He bowed again.

"So basically, you were trying to hit on her?" Aoto asked. "If you're so innocent, then why don't you leave us alone?"

"I wasn't!" the man exclaimed, his head jerking up from his bow. "I would

never do something so rude! I don't have any want or need to hit on girls. Look, I know I was acting suspicious, but trust me!"

The man furiously shook his hands as he made his excuses.

"You see, the thing is..." He trailed off and then glanced around. The wave of people that had flooded out the gates was gone. There were still people all around, but they were all indifferently walking past them or fiddling with their phones.

After confirming his surroundings, the man slipped off his sunglasses. His newly exposed face was perfect—his beauty was breathtaking. His lighter complexion begged the question as to whether one of his parents came from abroad. He was so gorgeous that it seemed unlikely that he'd ever need to hit on anybody; surely his androgynous charm could win over anyone his heart desired.

"Hm?" Aoto said, cocking his head. "I feel like I've seen you somewhere before."

"Kuon Kirise," Shihono muttered after a pause.

That's right! the boy thought. *He's that famous actor!*

Aoto stared at the beautiful man in shock. The man seemed relieved that Shihono had recognized him, and once more donned his sunglasses.

"That's right," he whispered. "Considering my position, I can't go around flirting with people, so I want you to believe me. I really just mistook you for someone else." The man bowed his head again.

Aoto wasn't the type to blindly believe someone just because they were famous, but it seemed reasonable that a stunning guy like him wouldn't need to hit on someone in the streets. Now calmer, he finally loosened his grip on Shihono.

"I see. Well, we've got places to be," Shihono said quickly. Her voice was hardened and she bowed to take her leave.

Aoto gently stopped her with his arm and curiously asked, "Are you sure?"

Had either of his sisters run into a TV personality that they could name on the

spot, they surely would have been more excited. They might have even asked for a picture or autograph.

He could hardly believe that Shihono would walk away from such a rare opportunity. However, she looked totally unaffected.

“I don’t care. Plus, we’re actually gonna run late at this rate.”

Before Aoto followed in her footsteps, he glanced back at Kuon Kirise and bowed goodbye. Although Aoto couldn’t tell what kind of expression he was making under his sunglasses, he could tell that the man was still watching Shihono. That, paired with his strange words from earlier, clung to the back of Aoto’s mind.

— — — —

What the heck was I thinking, hugging her like that?! But she was so slender and smelled insanely nice, and the way she looked up at me was super cute! Argh, forget food or water, the sensation of holding her is enough to keep me going!

Aoto’s head was a swirl of disordered thoughts. He managed to walk into the café, take a seat, order, and make small talk with Shihono, all without letting it show. However, he’d been on autopilot the whole time, and his mind was still replaying their chance meeting with Kuon Kirise and the feeling in his arms that had accompanied it.

He finally regained his sanity when his food was served and he took a bite. The squishy texture of hot eggplant splattered in his mouth.

Aoto had ordered an eggplant Bolognese. He hated eggplants. He would go so far as to describe cooked eggplant as his Achilles heel. He was utterly dumbfounded as to how on earth he’d managed to order something he hated so much.

Exasperated by his muddled brain, Aoto gulped down some water and began speaking to distract his taste buds.

“I wonder what all that was about? You know, with the actor.”

Shihono chewed on both her salad and the question. She understood as little

of what happened as Aoto did, and her decision to leave had been an instinctual one fueled by fear. Now that she'd calmed down, her mind was exploring the possibilities that lay behind their encounter.

After wiping some dressing off her lip with a paper napkin, she took a sip of water. Finally, she answered.

"Well, I'm not sure what the whole 'Eve' thing was about. But it's pretty weird that we met Kuon Kirise, of all people, huh?"

Shihono's question was meant to be rhetorical, but Aoto hadn't even noticed the presence of the possibilities she was exploring. She noticed his puzzled gaze and clapped her hands together in epiphany.

"Oh, I guess you wouldn't know," she said. After Aoto nodded, she explained, "I think that Kuon Kirise might have something to do with *Magikoi*. I mean, I say that, but I guess you could kinda sorta argue that he doesn't, and that I'm overthinking things... It's like a 'Hrm...' type of thing."

The way Shihono picked her words made it clear that even she wasn't completely sure what she wanted to say. Aoto munched on his pasta, as baffled as he was when he had been listening to Kuon Kirise's rambling.

"Um," Shihono said, "you know how *Magikoi* has that one God Route? The hidden one."

Aoto nodded, swallowed, and then replied, "The one where you can romance the god that only shows up as a bodiless voice in all the other routes, right?"

In every other route, a god called out to Fiene when Baldur died. He would say, "Don't cry, my dear girl," and then Fiene would awaken to her true powers. Once the player achieved every ending in the game (including Normal Ends and Bad Ends), this god would appear as a potential love interest in a hidden route.

Aoto knew of this storyline's existence, but had no idea how any of this connected to the matter at hand.

"That's the one," Shihono said. "Fiene's mom comes from the Marschner duchy, which is distantly related to the royal family, so they deus ex machina Fiene to be able to hear the Voices of the Gods. After that, it's just a normal route where she falls in love with a god. At the end of the route, the god whisks

Fiene away to his own world, which looks a lot like modern Japan... Did you already know that much?"

Aoto looked somewhat surprised and shook his head.

"Oh, well, that's how it is," Shihono said. "Anyway, the god is this college student who goes to W University. He's a total hottie who works as an actor in his spare time and is named Kuon."

"Wait... They just ripped off Kuon Kirise's bio."

"Exactly. They say it's just a coincidence, but the CGs look like him too. Most people think *Magikoi* just modeled the character after him without permission, and the game got a lot of buzz with his fans because of it. They were all, 'A game where I can go out with Kirise is so godly. The devs who made him a god are gods too!'"

They could still write all of this off as a coincidence or mere chance, but...

"From what you're telling me," Aoto said, "it sounds like our mysterious connection to the world of *Magikoi* might have something to do with what Kuon Kirise said earlier. If we pair the two together, I feel like there might be something big under the surface."

A chill ran down his spine as he finished speaking. Shihono nodded quietly.

"Yup. I'd be completely sure if he'd said 'Fiene' instead of 'Eve,' but all I feel right now is this weird, lingering discomfort," Shihono said, wistful.

Aoto shut up with a grave face. Two concerns bounced around his brain. The first of his fears was a worry that their attempts to save their beloved game characters would be interrupted. The second was anxiety that came from the thought that a remarkably desirable man like Kuon Kirise might further involve himself with them—or more precisely, with Shihono.

"By the way," Shihono said casually, "you've been totally avoiding all your eggplant. Do you not like it? Or are you the type of person to save your favorite food for last?"

Naturally, the answer was that Aoto did not like eggplants. However, some part of him felt like that would be uncool to admit, so he shut up and moved his

fork. By the end of lunch, he'd eaten all his eggplant.

Chapter 6: Inside the Handkerchief

I had spent three whole days relaxing at the Riefenstahl estate. Today, I was to return to the capital. Art and my retainers were already waiting inside the carriage, ready to depart.

No matter how many times they beckoned me to come, I couldn't pry myself away from Lieselotte. The Riefenstahls had retreated into the manor to give us some time together, and yet the thought of leaving her behind was still too much for me to bear.

"Oh, I really don't want to go." I attempted to hug Lieselotte. However, she deftly avoided my grasp. My gaze was tinged with resentment as she stepped aside, and she turned away with her nose held high, bidding me to leave.

"Your Highness, both Artur Richter and your retainers have been waiting in the carriage for quite some time, and your personal guard has been standing about with little to do. How much trouble do you intend to cause them? Please, pull yourself together."

"Maybe doting on Liese-tan for so long that her family went back inside wasn't the best play..."

"But I spot a bit of red on Lieselotte's ears! I'm sure she's not as stoic as she's pretending to be!"

Lady Kobayashee sounded exasperated and Lord Endoh made an attempt to cheer me up. Both of their reactions made me feel like it was probably time to call it quits. However, I couldn't turn on my heels so easily.

"Won't you feel lonely, Lieselotte?" I asked.

"Well, um..." Her furrowed brow betrayed her fluster. With a faint blush, she said, "The summer break will last but one more week. Once it's over, we shall be able to meet as we always do."

Lieselotte was completely correct. And yet, if I had been able to accept that, I wouldn't have dragged things out for as long as I had.

“I know. I know that, but...once I return to the palace, I’ll have to resume my work. I don’t want to go.”

“Pft—”

My childish whining was met with a short bit of laughter. Surprised, I looked at Lieselotte to see that she’d turned away with her hand over her lips.

“A-Apologies,” she said while stifling a laugh. “Yet it truly is rare for Your Highness to say such things.”

I felt as if I’d completely blown it. “Are you disappointed?”

“...Huh?” Lieselotte tilted her head. She seemed to be taken aback by my question, but her eyes looked straight up at mine without any hint of disdain.

In which case, I decided to open my heart for her. I let my deepest feelings loose.

“At times, I, too, grow weak and wish to indulge myself. I know I’m a prince—the *crown* prince—and the future king. I take pride in my position and am ready to fulfill my responsibility to the people as best I can. Yet sometimes, with my family and friends, I’d like to be a little vulnerable.”

Furthermore, I had a mysterious feeling that I shouldn’t leave Lieselotte here all alone. While this unease refused to abandon me, I couldn’t bring myself to say this, as it was in the realm of pure guesswork.

Lieselotte was blinking curiously at my forthright declaration.

“Are you disappointed in me?” I asked again, with a weakened smile.

“N-No, no, uh, um!” For whatever reason, Lieselotte instantaneously turned bright red and clutched her chest. She vigorously shook her head and fell silent after stammering something that could hardly be described as a sentence. With her eyes closed, she continued pressing her trembling hands into her heart.

Seeing her this way left me worried, until the entertained voices of the gods filled the air.

“Lieselotte’s down! Her heart’s pounding so hard it hurts!”

“The gap between Perfect Prince Charming and Sieg’s current demeanor is

killer. And Liese-tan's memoir has lines about how unfair it is that 'His Highness only leans on Artur Richter,' and how she wishes he'd 'act more naturally' with her too. Right now, the happiness that comes from Sieg's sincerity is mixing with her overflowing love—to cause an explosion of emotion!"

I didn't mean to do that.

I was contracting secondhand embarrassment when Lieselotte began slowly breathing in and out. After a few deep breaths, she eventually spoke.

"Here." Her voice was tiny as she thrust out her hand. In it was a single handkerchief. "I shall offer this up to you. I, well, how should I put this? This is to show that I wish you the best, er, that I hope you won't find yourself too exhausted, or maybe, um..."

"She finally hands it over! Open it!" Lord Endoh said. **"Open it up right now, Sieg!"**

"That handkerchief has something spectacular inside!" Lady Kobayashee said.

Lieselotte's mumbling was overwritten by the enthusiastic cries of the gods. Unaware of their intent, I obediently unfolded the cloth.

"Ah!" Lieselotte had evidently not planned for me to open it here, as she reached out to stop me. I evaded her and completely unraveled the package.

The large cut of cloth contained a single folded ribbon: it was the same light purple as Lieselotte's eyes. Embellished with shimmering golden embroidery, this was no doubt the ribbon I had ordered from her many days ago. I stared intently at the strip of fabric; Lieselotte must have done the delicate needlework herself.

"Th-This is merely an amateur attempt of poor make," she said in a panic. "I questioned whether it could be considered fit to offer a prince so accustomed to the best material in the nation. However, the request came from you, Your Highness, and I *did* assent to its creation, so I was left with no choice—no choice, I say—but to deliver you a ribbon!"

"For something she had 'no choice' over, Lieselotte sure made a ton of

prototypes!”

“To make that single ribbon, Liese-tan created a little under twenty other versions. She swapped out the base fabric and the embroidery thread countless times, tweaking this and that over and over. Finally, she picked the best of the batch to hand to you, Sieg.”

The gods shed some light on Lieselotte’s actions. Yet I’m sure I would have understood even without them. This ribbon was impeccably made.

Emotion swelled within me as I gazed at it. Lieselotte’s expression remained uncertain, but she took it upon herself to continue her excuses.

“I know well that your request was for a golden ribbon with purple embroidery, but I simply couldn’t achieve any semblance of balance with that color scheme. Not to say that this product is any good, of course. I merely meant to suggest that this is—at the very least, this one is—marginally better than—”

“Thank you.”

Lieselotte’s voice was ramping down to a whisper again, but I cut her off before she could reach a mumble. This time, I hugged her without fail, in an attempt to convey the flood of emotions in my heart.

“The design is beautiful and the stitching is perfectly done, just as I knew it would be. Above all else, I can tell how much love went into creating this wonderful ribbon. I couldn’t be happier. Thank you.”

“S-Skill with a needle is to be expected from any self-respecting lady,” she said. “Besides, the design mimics a handful of traditional charms—hardly anything worthy of note.”

I kept squeezing her tight, despite her pessimistic outlook and uncomfortable squirming. As I did, Lady Kobayashee’s voice rained down from the heavens.

“If I remember correctly, Liese-tan explained to Fiene that the pattern symbolizes a prayer for safety and good health. Oh, and by the way, Fiene got one of the prototypes. It’s a sky blue ribbon with pink embroidery to match her own colors, though.”

The goddess's report that Fiene had received a ribbon before I had was remarkably unamusing. But, well, I was the only one to receive Lieselotte's colors, so I supposed it was fine. I decided to let it slide and leave it at that.

Meanwhile, Lieselotte was approaching temperatures that bordered on heat stroke in my arms, so I finally loosened my hold. Still close, I showed her the fullest smile I could muster.

"Thank you, Lieselotte. I'll think of this ribbon as a part of you and treat it with care. When I feel tired or lonely, I'll look at it and push on," I said. After waiting for my blushing fiancée to respond with an awkward nod, I said, "I'll send you something to remember me by shortly, as a token of my gratitude."

"It isn't as if I created this hoping for some kind of repayment," she said shyly. Her head was pointed straight down and I couldn't see her expression.

I felt it wouldn't have hurt for her to be a bit excited. I loosened my arms further. When I tried to peer into her face, Lieselotte turned up with a vicious glare, causing me to recoil.

"N-Now," she said, "go on and resign yourself to your departure! The new semester is right around the corner, and everyone is waiting for you!"

Although I still was reluctant to leave, how could I refuse her after receiving such a wonderful parting gift?

"I suppose so," I said. "I'll see you again soon."

I slowly let go of her. As I did, Lieselotte looked down sadly for a brief moment, and then looked up at me. Her gaze tightly stuck to me as she bid me farewell.

"...Let us meet again soon," she said, her amethyst eyes wet with tears.

Lieselotte will miss me too. Finally sure of this, I took a deep breath and left her side. Despite the summer weather, I felt slightly cold as I turned away. I felt her gaze on my back all the way into the carriage.

"Look who *finally* decided to show up," Art said as soon as I stepped inside. "How many hours were you planning to make us wait?"

“Sorry,” I said with an apologetic nod. Quietly, I ran my fingers over the freshly received ribbon in my hand.

“Well, you don’t make personal requests often, so I don’t really mind.” Art laughed, sounding somewhat reassured.

Up until now, I had never opened up to anyone but him or my family. He must have been worried about me. This vacation was a prime example of his concern, and even in everyday life, he was always telling me to loosen up.

I took a seat next to my priceless friend and the vehicle immediately took off. They must have been waiting for quite some time. *I’ll need to formally apologize to everyone*, I mused. Looking out the window, I could see Lieselotte bowing to bid us farewell.

And then...

“These two will be fine...won’t they?”

Lady Kobayashee’s hesitant voice dripped into my ear. It was neither color commentary nor an address to me—she was simply talking to herself. The faint whisper of her voice would have been all too easy to miss yet it planted a tiny seed of uneasiness and the slightest bit of ill omen deep within my soul.

◇◇◇ Save Me, God!

“Who was it that said absence makes the heart grow fonder?”

It was the evening of the third day back from the academy’s summer vacation. Baldur found himself sitting on a grand sofa in an equally grandiose room. A large window signified the great wealth of the homeowner, and the furniture that surrounded the seating in the center of the room pushed that point home.

The fair lady to whom the room belonged sat across from him; Lieselotte’s eyebrow twitched upward at his wistful remark.

“When we entered summer break,” Baldur continued, “I had no opportunity to see Miss Fiene. My life was desolate—drained of color, even. I felt like I’d been robbed of something precious. When the thought of her crossed my mind, I was visited by momentary bliss, but that only made it more unbearable to think that she wasn’t there. As I simmered in my loneliness, fondness, and desire to meet her, I realized something. ‘Am I in love with Miss Fiene?’”

“How observant of you. It took you a mere eternity to notice,” Lieselotte said.

Baldur groaned at her biting tone and fell quiet, dejected. However, his cousin’s glare was practically commanding him to speak. Unable to withstand her pressure, he attempted to mount a defense.

“No, see, I’d already been thinking that she was notably cute. But I thought the reason my eyes trailed after her was because of the story that preceded her enrollment, her incredible strength, and my interest in her girlish grace...”

Baldur’s mumbling was met with a cold scoff from Lieselotte. She had every intent to mock him.

“Your ‘interest,’ you say? I haven’t the faintest idea how you managed to get that far without considering that your interest could be *romantic*.”

“Now that I’ve connected the dots myself, I agree. But you involved yourself with her so much that I was worried for her, and I felt it was my place to shield

her from you. When the gods appointed me as her protector, it became natural to be curious about the girl I accompanied.”

“Duty and responsibility. You mean to say these were the concepts you misconstrued your emotion for?”

Baldur nodded awkwardly. Despite his intentions, his actions had clearly crossed the line, seeing as Fiene had easily deduced what true feelings hid under the surface.

He himself had come to realize the truth during the summer break, and he now knew that he was impressively dense. Lieselotte attempted to meet his gaze, but he didn’t have the heart to meet hers.

“Well,” she said, “that may have been the case up until the beginning of summer. Now, you claim to properly comprehend your burning love. Then, pray tell, why have you yet to make a single advance on my adorable little sister?”

So it all comes back to this, Baldur thought with a sigh. This was the topic that the conversation had started with. Earlier in the day, his cousin had summoned him to the main Riefenstahl family’s estate in the capital. Ever since he’d stepped foot in her private room, Lieselotte had been grilling him as to why he hadn’t made a move on Fiene.

“Like I said, I’ve only recently realized how I feel. Besides, it’s only been three days since we returned to school. I can’t just confess to her straight away.”

“I never asked you to go so far. You tickled her ear with all manner of sweet nothings prior to the break, did you not? To begin with, I see no hope for a Riefenstahl to resist that which they love. Before the summer, your actions were befitting of our name, as unplanned as they were. What has you so scared now?”

Baldur scrunched his face up at Lieselotte’s rationale. He planted his cheek on his palm. She was right: Riefenstahls were passionate people with little talent for logic. Once they set their hearts on something, there was no turning back. When honed as loyalty to the crown, this attribute had helped their family climb to the top of their nation.

After recognizing his love, Baldur had thanked the god who’d placed him by

Fiene's side. He'd spent the last few days lovestruck with her adorable exterior, her straightforward personality, her simple way of thinking, and her dignity as a warrior. Now that his prospective engagement had been annulled, it was strange that he wasn't using the opportunity to press forward.

"But," Baldur murmured, "if I try to sweet-talk her now, it'll seem as if I'm pretending to love her to win back my lost position."

Lieselotte was taken aback. Her eyes opened wide to convey genuine surprise.

"Think about it," he said. "To tell the truth, I planned to confess my love for her in the near future, but now... How did this happen?! I don't understand what's going on!"

Lieselotte looked away, feeling awkward. After all, she'd been the instigator of Baldur's present unhappy situation.

"I did, in fact, realize that I was in love," Baldur continued. "And at the same time, I finally figured out that the twins have been right this whole time: I'm not clever enough to go through with a political marriage. That's why I tried to return the sword to Uncle Bruno, and I had planned to get on my knees to beg the main house to dismiss my inheritance. But when he cried for me to stop, I figured the best plan of action would be to take some more time to do things properly. I was going to convince my parents and younger brother first, and have them help me..." He paused. "I even started working out how I'd make a living after losing my position as a knight, with plans to use my skills as a bodyguard, adventurer, or mercenary. I had all of this planned out, but now..."

Now, Fiene was firmly placed at the head of succession for the marquisate. Every single barrier to Baldur's courtship had been reduced to dust—all thanks to Lieselotte. What was more, she and her father had broken the news to him in less than ideal wording a few days prior.

Fiene is the rightful heir of House Riefenstahl, and as such, whoever's hand in marriage she takes will ascend to be the next marquis. Baldur, we removed you from the line of succession, so you must win Fiene's heart if you wish to regain your lost position!

With a statement like that, who could blame him for thinking that others

would suspect him of ulterior motives?

“I admit I feel rather guilty for moving things along without you,” Lieselotte said, somewhat pained.

“I don’t mind that.” Baldur sighed. “Under the circumstances, I think the quick action and public announcement was for the best. I didn’t have any real desire to lead the family, and I understand that Fiene’s safety was at stake. I’m more than happy to make that sacrifice.”

Lieselotte squinted at him apprehensively. For someone “happy to make the sacrifice,” Baldur looked incredibly dissatisfied.

“But the fact that this all happened before I got a chance to confess will make even my most heartfelt plea reek of lies. I don’t care what anyone else might think, but if Miss Fiene doesn’t believe me... What will I do if I lose her trust, to the point that she casts me away even as a mere bodyguard?” He sighed again.

“And so you plan to be *more* distant than you were before?” Lieselotte asked sharply. “I can’t help but feel as though you’re being stubborn with how unfrank you are.”

“Liese, you are the *last* person I want to hear that from. There isn’t a single human on this planet who is less frank or more stubborn than you.”

Baldur’s response touched a nerve. Lieselotte snapped, causing her expression and tone to go ice cold.

“*Wimp*,” she spat.

The insult pierced Baldur’s guard at the perfect angle. He went silent and stared at his feet.

“Why don’t you go grovel on your knees, begging and pleading for Fiene’s hand with tears streaming down your face? I can hardly imagine anyone will think your love is a sham *then*. At any rate, Fiene feels rather guilty for swiping your position from under you. If nothing else, I’m sure she’ll at least allow a tentative courtship out of guilt.”

“That’s exactly why I don’t want to do that...”

For Baldur, this was not merely a matter of pride. He also didn’t want to take

advantage of Fiene's good will for his own desire. Reminded of this conundrum, he buried his head in his arms.

"Use anything that you can use. Eliminate anyone that stands in your way. I would hope to see at least some semblance of avarice from a Riefenstahl," Lieselotte said with a thin smile.

However, this was less of a family policy and more of a personal one. Lieselotte truly had done anything and everything it took to retain her position as Prince Siegwald's fiancée. Yet her unreasonable mantra caused a stray thought to cross Baldur's mind.

"Now that I think of it," he said, "I would have never expected you to invite Miss Fiene to become your sister."

In the spring, Fiene had been a prime target for "elimination," as Lieselotte had put it. Seeing her as a pitiable victim was originally why Baldur had felt a need to protect her from his own cousin.

Lieselotte took a deep breath and began to explain.

"I will admit that I felt some jealousy over His Highness's closeness with Fiene. I'll even admit that a girl who could claim to be his friend as a commoner can be considered my greatest threat now that she is the daughter of a marquis."

Lieselotte was not speaking to Baldur. Her speech wasn't directed at anyone—instead, it was as if she was sorting out the thoughts in her head aloud. Suddenly, her downward gaze shifted to look straight ahead.

"However, I am his fiancée. I believe the education I've received in preparation, my unceasing efforts, and the love that I've slowly built up over the years are second to none. His Highness is a prudent man. I'm...I'm sure he'll make the correct decision."

Over the course of her explanation, Lieselotte's voice only grew meeker and meeker.

"...Don't cry," Baldur said, troubled by the tear streaking down his cousin's face.

"I am not." Lieselotte used a single finger to wipe away the tear.

“If it’s going to make you cry, then you shouldn’t have suggested the adoption to begin with.”

Lieselotte shook her head. “I can’t allow Fiene to be robbed of any more than she already has. For her to be hurt, go hungry, or feel sad and alone—or worse still, to be *killed*—is absolutely unforgivable.”

Baldur was struck with admiration for how virtuous his prideful cousin was. Yet this feeling of praise was short-lived, as she quickly turned back at him with a vicious glare. Once again, he balked under the pressure of her gaze.

“As such, Bal, you ought to hurry and grovel on your knees and swear your undying love for Fiene. Take that excessive affection of yours and put it to work shielding her from all that might hurt her.”

“So we’re back to this...”

“I *brought* it back to this. Regardless of whether you tell her, I wasn’t wrong in my assumption that you are fond of her, was I?” Lieselotte asked, suddenly timid.

Had Baldur not been so infatuated that he was willing to give up his title, everyone involved would have been slated for terrible fates. He figured Lieselotte was worried enough about her decision that she would bother to confirm this point more than a few times.

“It’s the truth,” Baldur said. “I only realized it once we left for summer break, but I am in love with Miss Fiene. Your observation that I exhibited all the signs before then was completely right.”

Relieved by her cousin’s candid answer, Lieselotte let out a small sigh.

“Thank goodness, though I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. By the way, Bal? There *is* one thing I must apologize for.”

“...What is it?” he asked. Rare were the times Baldur had seen Lieselotte smile, and a terrible omen hung over his head.

“For the past three days, you have been walking Fiene to the school’s faculty dorm. Alas, she no longer lives there. I’m so sorry.”

Lieselotte’s smile grew deeper and deeper. The happier she appeared, the

more Baldur's premonition soured.

"She has been packing her things, eating dinner, and saying her goodbyes to all the wonderful staff who've taken care of her there. However, she has been spending her nights resting here in this very manor."

Finally, Baldur put the links together. He was convinced he knew what she meant to say, and he shot to his feet.

"Yesterday, she completed all of the chores involved with moving out—naturally, this means she joined me today in my carriage to come straight home from school without stopping by the dorm."

Baldur was no longer listening. He was too preoccupied trying to search the room for any foreign presence.

"From tomorrow onward, do give her a ride in your carriage and see that she returns *here* after school."

Once she said all that she had wanted to say, Lieselotte stood up to depart the room. But before leaving, her eyes flickered ever so slightly.

"Here?!" Baldur shouted, tearing open the door to a walk-in closet.



Inside, he was awaited by none other than a blushing Fiene.

Baldur was unsure if he was meant to scold himself for his inability to detect her, or if he was to admire how his cunning cousin would go so far as to use him to neutralize a potential romantic rival. Or perhaps the latter point was meant to be met with anger? In the moment that Baldur spent hesitating, Lieselotte slipped out of the room.

There was no going back now.

“I’ll save groveling as the final resort...”

Baldur wore a ghastly expression as he muttered to himself. He took the petrified Fiene’s hand and led her into the center of the room, sitting her down on the couch that Lieselotte had occupied moments prior.

Once the perplexed girl was properly seated, Baldur knelt down in front of her and took a deep breath. He had no idea how he was supposed to profess his love. Instead, he resolved himself to be completely frank, and deliver his sincerest feelings straight from the bottom of his heart.

— — — —

Fiene was very fond of her new older sister—she loved her, even. Not romantically, but she respected Lieselotte so much that she would go so far as to say that the marquis lady was her favorite person in the whole world.

When the two had first met, Fiene had been terrified of her. Lieselotte was the quintessential noblewoman in every conceivable way. A commoner like Fiene had not the family history, grades, appearance, or beauty to match Lieselotte’s perfection, and the thought of speaking to her was already scary. When this exemplary lady had begun to consider Fiene a romantic threat, the only emotion that had run through Fiene was raw terror.

However, in their time together, Fiene had come to notice something: regardless of whatever Lieselotte might *say*, she gave out goods and advice at every turn. *Perhaps*, Fiene thought, *she’s actually a good person*.

When she began to take note of how Siegwald and others close to Lieselotte lovingly watched over her, Fiene finally came to a realization.

Oh. Lady Lieselotte is just a tsun de rais.

Lieselotte was an upstanding person whose only shortcoming was her bashfulness and her propensity for putting on airs. As a result, she had a sharp tongue, but in truth she was incredibly cute.

Whether it was material presents or words of wisdom, Lieselotte shared all that she had without reserve. When she had come to know of her ties of blood to Fiene, she had instantly invited the commoner girl to join her family, all to protect her.

After slowly piling up their memories together, Fiene now had a revised opinion of her new sister. Specifically, she thought, *Lieselotte is so cute! I love her! I want to repay her in any way I can!*

“Fiene, dear? I have something to ask of you—just a minor trifle that I’d like you to do for me.”

So, when Lieselotte came to Fiene with a request, the girl didn’t even stop to think before she replied.

“Of course! I’ll do anything for you, Lieselotte!”

Lieselotte snickered at how over-enthusiastic Fiene’s response was. Even this little laugh was packed with beauty, grace, and a touch of seduction. Her mannerisms stole Fiene’s breath away.

“Thank you,” Lieselotte said. “But truly, it isn’t anything difficult. All I ask is that you stand here in silence for a short while.”

Fiene didn’t bother responding. Instead, she walked straight into the closet that her sister had referred to. She twirled around to face Lieselotte and huffed out her nose with pride.

Lieselotte promptly began to gently pat Fiene on the head. In turn, Fiene was so utterly blissful that she completely forgot to care about the context behind the strange order.

“Good girl,” Lieselotte said. “Now, Fiene? You mustn’t say a word no matter what happens from here on. No sounds of any kind, in fact. Just stay here, still

and silent. Can you do that for me?”

Lieselotte spoke as if guiding along a toddler. Fiene was still swooning and nodded along eagerly.

Me good girl. Me no talk. Me no move. Me stand still. Me can do it!

Fiene’s sparkling eyes were evidence enough of her determination to see the request through. Once Lieselotte confirmed as much, she patted her little sister one last time and shut the door.

— — — —

And so, Fiene had been subjected to an overdose of unfiltered shame.

Lieselotte had expertly manipulated Baldur into passionately declaring his love for Fiene—who had been faithfully obeying her sister’s order. She’d listened to his entire spiel without so much as a peep.

Now, Baldur was mercilessly laying out another assault on her emotions.

“Please, Miss Fiene, believe me. I love you from the bottom of my heart. When I’m away from you, that alone robs the whole world of its color; when I’m with you, that alone makes it beautiful. For the sake of your everlasting smile, I’m absolutely certain I would lay down my life without regret. How can I get you to understand these fiery emotions that threaten to burn my whole body to ashes?”

I swear you’ve never talked this much before! Fiene screamed internally. Baldur’s murderous words left her eyes swimming and her face bright red.

“Wait, hold on, please...”

Fiene could bear this no longer and barely managed to squeeze out a plea for him to stop.

Baldur obediently shut his mouth and peered up at her. His eyes were wavering with uncertainty.

Fiene met his gaze as if she had discovered some kind of alien life-form.

When Baldur had pulled Fiene out of the closet, she’d been faced with a dilemma. Was she meant to apologize for eavesdropping? Maybe she could

brute force her way through the situation by pretending that she hadn't heard anything. As a last resort, she could faint and escape from reality without settling the matter. And yet, all of her confusion and panic amounted to nothing, as he'd begun his Ode to Fiene without so much as giving her a moment to breathe.

Baldur's rush of sweet words reminded Fiene a lot of the way he sparred. He simply told her, without any embellishment, that he loved her regardless of whatever status accompanied her name.

On the receiving end, Fiene felt like she was going to be killed. The thought that she might literally die of embarrassment genuinely crossed her mind.

"Sir Bal, do you not comprehend the concept of *shame*? How can you fire off such embarrassing lines one after another like this?"

Despite getting a moment to catch her breath, Fiene's voice was still extremely weak. Baldur seemed confused at her question and answered with one of his own.

"Now that it's come to this, I don't think I have any leeway to be ashamed. I'm nervous, of course, but I guess I'm the type of person that likes having my back to the wall. When you're cornered with no hope for escape, you tend to abandon the defense for an all-out attack too, don't you?"

The two of them were both the kind of battle junkies who got a kick out of tight situations. Though in Fiene's case, this exhilaration was limited to situations of life and death.

Fiene felt like Baldur's logic wasn't *wrong*, but it still felt off to try and apply it to their current predicament. She sat twisting her face in silence.

Then, Baldur clasped her two tiny hands in his own and pulled them to his forehead.

"I beg you, Miss Fiene. This is how desperately I wish for your love. I plead that you might consider placing me by your side."

"But I...I'm still confused. I don't hate you or anything, Sir Bal. In fact, if I had to choose, I think...I like you, between the two," Fiene said, trailing off.

Baldur's face shot up and his brilliant blue eyes gleamed with hope.

"But! I can't handle getting married or engaged or anything right now!" Fiene's panic was obvious from how quickly she spoke. Seeing Baldur nod magnanimously, she asked, "Hey, Sir Bal? Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"All I'm asking is that you believe me when I say I love you. In the future, I would love to date and eventually marry you, but that's beyond the scope of my current hope." Baldur was as stoic as ever, and his matter-of-factness took the wind out of Fiene's sails.

"Now that you mention it...you haven't said anything about marriage this whole time, have you?"

"Oh, don't misunderstand. I *do* want to marry you. My desire for your hand isn't a half-baked sham. Still, I want to put your feelings above all else."

"That's so...ugh!" Fiene groaned, at her wit's end. Baldur was so ridiculously straightforward that he had practically proposed on the spot.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "That was hasty of me. Uh, I know, would you mind letting me hear what you have to say?"

"Where do I start?" Fiene asked. Her stiff shoulders finally loosened up a bit. "To begin with, I've spent my whole life as a commoner, and I'm still a commoner at heart. Marriage is something you do with someone that you love and have gone out with for a few years. Not everyone shares a roof with their partner before that, but weddings are supposed to be the result that comes *after* a couple is close enough that they think they can live together. Or, at least, that's how I see it."

Fiene spoke slowly, thinking before every word. Baldur nodded along seriously.

"That makes sense. There's no need to throw away your previous line of thinking. Besides, I understand. If my family ordered me to marry any other girl, I would run off into the mountains." Baldur's reference to a conversation from days gone by drew a small laugh from Fiene. In an unsteady voice, he continued, "Still, if you don't dislike me, I'd like to ask your permission to court

you with the intent of marriage. Is that...still too much to ask?"

"It's not the idea of *dating* you that I don't like," Fiene said after a moment of contemplation. "But considering our positions, everyone around us will start thinking that we're sure to get hitched and become the next Mr. and Mrs. Marquis Riefenstahl. I'm sure the current marquis will celebrate like crazy, and then it'd be nearly impossible to abandon the title or break up, right? And so I'm really worried... Not that I have any plans of breaking up if we go out, but being put on the fast track to becoming the good wife of House Riefenstahl is a bit overwhelming..."

For as long as Fiene rambled on, Baldur sat faithfully listening to her every word. Noticing that he was waiting for her to arrive at a conclusion, her brow furrowed with fret.

Oh, I'm the one that has to decide, aren't I? Oh no. I don't want this. Please, someone save me! Someone, anyone! Save me, God!

"Man, I wanna say something."

"We're just spectators without Sieg... I wanna comment on stuff! Ughhh, these two are so serious."

Fiene's heartfelt prayer was met with the voices of a man and woman.

"Huh? What? Who? Where? Up?" Her eyes darted all over as she tried to find the source of the two voices. Yet no matter where she looked, she could only see herself and Baldur in the room.

"Blessing Bal so we could see him went great," the man said with a sigh. **"But everything since then has been such a wash..."**

Fiene was now certain that the voices came from above. She glared at where the sound had emanated from, but all she saw was the ceiling.

"'Up?' Miss Fiene, is there something above us?" Baldur asked in bewilderment.

It was at this point that Fiene caught on to the fact that he couldn't hear the same voices. This realization drained all the color from her face.

"They should just go out already."

“Right? Worst-case scenario, Fiene asks Art for a favor and joins the Church. And if she sticks with Bal for a Good End, then the two of them get to enjoy a fun life of adventure as a pair of commoners. It’s not like they’re super duper one hundred percent guaranteed to get married and become the next marquis couple.”

The two voices seemed unaware of Baldur and Fiene’s change in demeanor. The strange voices irresponsibly prattled on about the possibilities of their world as if they were gods who knew all that was and would be.

“Wait!” Fiene shouted. “Wait just one second!”

“Huh?”

“What?”

The heavens fell silent.

“Um, do you hear those two voices? The ones that have been talking for a while now? Or...is that just me?”

Can it be? It can’t...can it? Fiene had finally arrived at an improbable—implausible, even—conclusion, and meekly tried to confirm her suspicions with Baldur. He stared back at her blankly and tilted his head.

“Two voices?”

“Oh no. You can’t hear them, Sir Bal? The man and woman? Oh. You really can’t. Are these the ‘Voices of the Gods’ His Highness Prince Siegwald was talking about?”

Fiene was halfway to tears and Baldur could do nothing but listen, still utterly confused. However, there were *some* at the scene who knew all too well what her soft whispers were referring to.

“Whoa, Fiene’s awakening triggered at a time like this?!”

“Has she awoken to her true powers?! Fiene, if you can hear our voices, give us a little wink!”

The “Play-by-Play Endoe” and “Color Caster Kobayashie” that Siegwald had once told her about were in hysterics. Fiene hesitated, but obeyed their command.

...Wink.

“Wha... That was cute.”

Fiene’s begrudging wink meant for what she assumed to be gods ended up piercing straight through Baldur’s heart. She thought she heard him say something very strange, but the happy man and woman gave her no time to think.

“She can hear us! Hi, I’m Endo on play-by-play!”

“And I’m the color caster, Kobayashi! Don’t bother replying to us—it’s best to listen to what we say and leave it at that!”

“Why would you do something so adorable out of the blue? What could you possibly stand to gain from making me fall for you any more than I already have? What do you want from me? Do you want me to hunt down a dragon for you?”

It’s the gods! Play-by-Play Endoe and Color Caster Kobayashie, just like His Highness said! Fiene now knew whose voices she’d heard, but decided her first priority was to stop Baldur from running wild.

“Stop! Why do you look so on edge?! Are you seriously planning to slay a dragon?! No, stop, you’re not allowed to do anything dangerous!” Fiene managed to shout out in one breath.

Baldur’s knee had begun to rise, but he once again planted it on the floor, and he seemed somewhat disappointed as he looked up at her.

“That’s right, you don’t have time to talk to us right now! Go, go, Fiene!”

“Fiene, Bal has been saying that he doesn’t care about noble titles since the very beginning. If you don’t want to be part of the marquise, then he’ll be happy to run away with you!”

This gleeful tidbit of analysis shook Fiene to her very core. And yet, these divine words also shone the spotlight on a part of Baldur’s character that gave her a sliver of hope. She gulped and carefully picked her words.

“Sir Bal, let’s pretend—and we’re only pretending, okay? Let’s pretend I said, ‘I like you, but don’t want to lead House Riefenstahl.’ What would you do

then?”

“I would take you and flee the country. Fortunately, both of us are skilled in combat. I’m sure we can make a living anywhere, and I swear to you that I will do everything within my power to let you live a life free from trouble.”

Baldur’s unwavering, immediate oath moved Fiene and caused a noticeable thumping in her chest. Yet she still had another question to ask.

“Sir Bal, are you okay with that?” Fiene was. She was *more* than okay with that. But she didn’t want him to push himself beyond what he was comfortable with.

Her question was asked in a trembling voice, but Baldur nodded as surely as ever.

“I was prepared to abandon the Riefenstahl name from the time I thought you were a commoner,” he said, his expression unchanged. “I’m ready to give up my knighthood, and I have an idea of how we could get by. Of course, I can’t say with confidence that our life would be as luxurious as if we’d stayed here. But if you can’t find this mansion comfortable, then it has no value to me.”

“I don’t care about luxury,” Fiene murmured. “I’m a commoner, remember? But Sir Bal, you’ve grown up as a noble your whole life, and you’d have to throw away your entire family... I just don’t want you to force yourself to do that.”

“I don’t care about luxury either,” he said, chuckling. “I’m a boring man whose sole interest is the blade. For nobility—and especially warrior clans like us—it’s common to be posted far away from home, or to be shipped abroad for marriage. Most importantly, seeing your smile is enough to bring me happiness, Miss Fiene.”

“...I can’t believe you can say these things with a straight face.” The sense of defeat was setting in for Fiene, so she snuck in one last jab.

“That’s how serious I am,” Baldur said. In a moment of what almost seemed like weakness, he added, “Truthfully, I don’t feel like I have the leeway to be embarrassed.”

Fiene slowly exhaled. With a feeble smile, she signaled her surrender.

“I see... Fine then.” Fiene’s smile grew stronger when she saw Baldur tilt his head at her ambiguous statement. Refreshed, she put her feelings into more certain terms. “Let’s put talks of marriage aside. For now, we’ll do no more and no less than...date. Sir Bal, I accept your offer of courtship.”

For whatever reason, when Baldur saw Fiene’s relaxed and cloudless grin, the sober knight finally blushed.

Chapter 7: One Light, Two Voices

It had been nearly two weeks since we'd returned to school. I wasn't sure whether to say it was late summer or early autumn. As the swelteringly hot noons and pleasantly cool nights passed, one fear took shape in my mind: Lieselotte was acting strange.

First, she was unhealthily pale. Further, I often noticed her staring blankly into space, and she seemed a bit emotionally unstable.

I'd tried to ask her cousin and newly adopted sister if they knew anything, but they wrote my worries off as my imagination. When Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee also dodged my question, the anxiety I'd felt over the summer break began to swell exponentially. It had come to the point that I found myself eavesdropping like this.

To explain, I'd been looking for Lieselotte after classes ended. I'd spotted her in the courtyard being interrogated by Fiene with Baldur in tow, and immediately hid to try and hear what they were saying.

"Lieselotte," Fiene said, "you've been staying up as of late, haven't you?"

Fiene's absolute confidence and piercing stare put Lieselotte on the back foot. Still, my fiancée smiled elegantly and merely tilted her head.

"Ah, did the candlelight perhaps leak into your room? My apologies. I've been so utterly swamped with fascinating reading and important work. I can't help but sleep at a later—"

"You aren't staying up on purpose, are you?" Fiene's voice was harsh and curt; she was evidently upset that her sister was straining herself. "I know you're having nightmares terrible enough for you to jump out of bed and weep. And I know that it's taking its toll to scramble yourself together by morning, and I even know that you're coming to school with your head held high so no one else will notice."

"Wha— How...do you know that?" Lieselotte asked in shock.

My face must have been just as devoid of life as hers. She'd been going through something so awful, so why? Why had the gods said nothing to me?

"Give it up, Liese," Baldur said with a sigh. I felt as though he was an actor on a faraway stage. "Marschner blood flows through Fiene's veins, and she's awoken to the Royal Ear. Your strong front means nothing when faced with the Voices of the Gods."

"...It isn't anything worthy of note. Truly, all it amounts to are unpleasant dreams."

Lieselotte pushed through Baldur's startling revelation by stiffening up. In response, her cousin spat back at her in a gruff tone.

"Don't be *stupid*. You exposed my feelings without my knowing and hurried to pair me with Miss Fiene—but suddenly, you started crying over the thought of His Highness falling in love with someone else. What part of this sounds unnoteworthy to you? Now that I think of it, you haven't been acting like yourself at all."

Lieselotte looked pained but said nothing, simply turning to the ground. Wet tears bubbled up in her amethyst eyes. My first instinct was to rush forward and wipe them away, but I froze in place when I heard Fiene mention me.

"Lieselotte, we're just *worried* about you. That goes for His Highness Prince Siegwald as well. He's been asking why you've been so down ever since we came back to school."

"In fact, Sieg's been questioning us so much that I'm getting a bit scared of that smile of his."

I have no idea what you're talking about.

Regardless of what Lord Endoh claimed, all I'd done was check in with Baldur and the gods accompanying him a handful of times.

"That can't be!" Lieselotte's agony was given form by a single tear sliding down her face. "His Highness thinks absolutely nothing of me!"

"His Highness truly cares, Lieselotte!" Fiene said. "The gods said they have...circumstances? So they haven't been able to tell him about your

troubles, but still...”

“How did you manage to get the idea that he doesn’t care about you in the first place?” Baldur asked, confused with every fiber of his being.

Honestly. Why was Lieselotte putting words in my mouth and crying over something that wasn’t remotely true? *What’s happening to her?*

“Because!” Lieselotte’s expression turned melancholy as she quietly explained. “We may have been engaged for years, but we hardly ever met until I entered the academy. All this time, he’s been a faraway figure.”

“Hrm, well, I agree that used to be the case before you enrolled,” Baldur said.

“I’ve had more opportunities to speak with him recently, but unlike Fiene, I’m too prideful to be cute.”

Huh? I thought that pride—or her stubbornness, I suppose—made her supremely adorable.

“Doesn’t Sieg find that part of her cute, though?” Lady Kobayashee said.

Yes. Yes, I do.

I could see Fiene nod along to the goddess’s question. I don’t know how else to phrase this, but I personally thought that I was being rather obvious with my affection. Yet Lieselotte’s tone had nonetheless transitioned from sad to downright depressed.

“We still don’t call one another by pet names; we still don’t converse casually, even behind closed doors. I’d love to believe that he doesn’t *hate* me, but it’s clear he isn’t explicitly fond of me either. That is our relationship. Don’t you agree?” The end of Lieselotte’s pessimistic soliloquy was marked by another tear streaming down her cheek.



Baldur stared at her aghast, as if to ask, *what in the world are you on about?* Fiene fidgeted in a panic as she handed her sister a handkerchief.

“That was true in the game, but Sieg now is sweeter on Liese-tan than pure sugar...”

“Yeah, which is why we figured Lieselotte would be fine. Is this some kind of destiny, or is the witch’s power that strong?”

Lady Kobayashee and Lord Endoh’s divine discussion was rife with concern. The word “witch” sent a terrible shiver down my spine.

“But that all changed this past spring,” Baldur said, annoyed. “There isn’t a single person in this academy that doesn’t know how well you two get along, like a... What was it? Like a kitten and lion?”

“That’s right!” Fiene instantly jumped in with great enthusiasm. “His Highness is the spitting image of a lion tenderly watching over an adorable little kitten baring her fangs! He’s confident, majestic, horrifying, and overflowing with love, just like any big carnivore!”

Listening to Fiene’s attempt at describing me I could understand confidence, majesty, and love—but what part of me was horrifying? Of course, she was completely right about Lieselotte being very much like a kitten.

The girl in question could not bear hearing Fiene’s words. Lieselotte covered her ears with both hands and weakly shook her head with a flood of tears. This time, I didn’t stop as I ran toward her.

“What happened here?! Lieselotte, why are you crying?”

“It doesn’t matter!” she screamed. She glared at me through damp eyes.

“I think my sister’s just overthinking things,” Fiene said from behind me. “You two only got to meet for a short while during the summer, so she must have gotten lonely and confused... Right, Lieselotte?”

“Really?” I asked. “I’m sorry for making you feel that way, I really am.”

I rubbed my hand against Lieselotte’s haggard cheek. What was I to say? I held her so dear; how could I convey these emotions to her? I could only pray that my touch and gaze would reveal my love for her.

“...Auh...”

Perhaps my affection had finally gotten through. Lieselotte bashfully whimpered, looking as embarrassed as could be.

“What the heck? That was *so* cute,” I said with a straight face. Seeing her act so timidly, such a departure from her usual demeanor, hit me straight in the heart. I didn’t even think before speaking.

“...Huh?” Lieselotte said, stupefied.

While I couldn’t be happier that she’d stopped crying, the look of total perplexity on her face was unbearably embarrassing. I decided to clear my throat and speak.

“Mm, ahem. Um, well, you *are* my fiancée, after all. Naturally, I worry when you cry, and I’d like to cheer you up if I can. I’ll apologize if I made you feel lonely, and I’d like for you to tell me about anything else that concerns you.”

I wanted to keep the fact that I’d listened in on their conversation hidden. Still, the misunderstanding that I didn’t care about her needed to be resolved. My attempt to do so was met with a troubled expression, and Lieselotte looked down at her feet.

“...I won’t force you, though,” I added. For a brief moment, Lieselotte glanced up and our eyes met; she shyly averted her gaze immediately after. Her gestures were the pinnacle of kitten-like behavior. “*So* cute.”

Again, my mouth moved before my brain. Lieselotte’s cheeks turned warmed up and she blushed red.

Ah, it’s just like that first day. I leaned closer toward her.

“Y-Your Highness?” Lieselotte was petrified, looking up at me in distress.

I want my feelings to reach you. I let my emotions recreate a moment we’d shared once before—but this time, of my own will.

“Wh-What are you—”

Ignoring her as she panicked, I felt as if I were being drawn in and placed my lips...on her cheek.

Lieselotte gasped and twitched once. Suddenly, she went limp, and I rushed to support her weight.

“Lieselotte!” I shouted. The only response I received was a faint flutter of her eyelids before she blacked out. Her face was as pale as death; I could feel my veins run cold. The ruinous fate I’d heard of in the spring, the mysterious anxiety of summer, and the witch that had been mentioned earlier today raced through my mind.

Are these the things behind her suffering?

Fiene and Baldur were frantically speaking as they sprinted over. The gods were shouting. Yet all I could do was call her name, over and over again.

— — — —

Recreating a bygone scene, Siegwald placed a kiss on Lieselotte’s cheeks. And in that moment, something inside the girl reached its limit. Various things, in fact: shame, joy, confusion, discomposure, love... A swirl of emotions that she herself did not fully comprehend exploded within her.

An evil spirit known as the Witch of Yore had plagued Lieselotte with nightmares, chipping away at her sanity and rattling her very ego. Unable to rest properly, she had been exhausted—more so than her fiancé, sister, or even she had realized. The aforementioned emotional shock had pushed her over the edge.

“Lieselotte!”

Yet just as Lieselotte’s consciousness faded, she heard her beloved call her name. The last thing she saw was platinum blond hair and eyes that twinkled gold; to her, this was the color of light itself. In the sentimental stew that was her psyche, her love for Siegwald alone shone brilliantly. That was all she knew as she plunged into the depths of unconsciousness.

From then on, Lieselotte dreamed. She dreamed of a nostalgic, heartwarming memory. It was the memory of when she had first felt love: the day she’d met Siegwald. Her father had brought her to the royal palace to meet her future fiancé.

“Prince...” The five-year-old Lieselotte said this and only this the instant she laid eyes on him. She’d spent hours and hours and hours practicing a formal greeting the day prior, only for her to forget so much as to bow her head. She was breathless, as if he’d snatched away her soul.

“Liese. Liese...Lieselotte!”

Only when the panicked marquis called her name did Lieselotte remember to curtsy. However, she blanked on what she was supposed to do next, freezing in place with her head bowed. Her father was apologizing to someone, and someone else was telling her to raise her head. Neither of their voices reached Lieselotte’s ear.

“Don’t be so stiff. Come on, let’s go play!”

And yet, Siegwald’s soft whispers rang out loud and clear. Lieselotte instantly looked up and nodded as hard as she could. The boy smiled at her eagerness; just like that, she had fallen for him. It was love at first sight.

On this fateful day, Lieselotte did not call him “Prince” because she knew him to be one. She simply felt that Siegwald was the same as the princes that appeared in fairy tales. Her choice of words followed, as did her love.

The boy was beautiful, noble, and had a heart-stopping smile. Furthermore, a young boy and girl two years apart were sure to have trouble finding games to suit them both, but he was so kind that she didn’t even notice.

Thus, Lieselotte fell in love in just one day.

The little girl was over the moon when she found out she would grow up to marry her Prince Charming. She celebrated with a pure heart.

Excited, Lieselotte went to tell her father. She told him how wonderful His Highness was, how much she loved him, and how she wished he’d love her too. To that end, she was ready for anything: the difficult training to be a future queen consort; her duty to the blade and magic as the eldest-born Riefenstahl; and the etiquette lessons that bored children to tears. It would all be worth it.

Her father’s smile was tinged with heartbreak as he patted her on the head.

“You can tell me this all you want, Lieselotte, but keep this a secret from His

Highness. Prince Siegwald is in no position to say whether he likes or does not like anyone or anything.”

“Why?”

“That boy is going to become king one day. One word from him on what he favors can cause massive ripples of hysteria. What’s more, he’s well aware of that. Of course, I think it’d be wonderful for you to get along with him as the future queen. But to ask for his love—or for any kind of special treatment—will only hurt him.”

At the time, little Lieselotte had not been able to comprehend her father’s complicated explanation.

However, as the years went by, she came to realize that love was too much to hope for from a political marriage. She finally understood that, even if she were to ask for Siegwald’s affection, he would not be able to give it freely.

The prince’s ever present smile was proof enough. In contrast to his grinning mouth, Siegwald’s eyes had an unreadable blankness to them. They conveyed neither good nor bad. Who could say how much emotion he’d suppressed to achieve such tranquility? When Lieselotte had first asked herself this, she’d wept.

“Father, I wish to support him. I wish to forever love the one who can love no one. I wish to be his truest ally.”

Lieselotte had made this declaration to her father one year ago. Prior to enrolling in the academy, she’d happened to see Siegwald on a trip to visit the campus. Without the presence of his closest friend, Artur, he’d treated everyone in the sizable crowd following him with equal courtesy.

To choose someone is to forsake another. As such, Siegwald was forced to keep others at an arm’s distance. Of the only two exceptions, one involved a special sociopolitical position between the Church and state, and the other was his fiancée. Even as a student—nay, *because* he was still a student—he could not afford to form concrete relationships.

At long last, Lieselotte understood his burden. Her epiphany twisted years of pent-up adoration. The crown prince was loved by all yet utterly alone; and she

loved him and loved him and *loved him* so much that it hurt.

When it came time for her to attend classes in the springtime, the morsels of communication they shared had filled Lieselotte with unfathomable joy. Nothing could have made her happier.

Still, there was *something* that cast a shadow on that bliss. The ghastly darkness had appeared around the same time Fiene had. By the time Lieselotte noticed this disquieting, unknowable entity, it had already soaked deep into her heart.

It was evil incarnate: by planting the seed of doubt, it cast suspicion on Siegwald. Just as Lieselotte's infatuation warped, so too did her spirit waver.

no. don't hate me.

i love you. don't look at anyone else.

i hate her. don't steal my light.

love. mine. hate.

i love you.

so.

i won't forgive you. i won't forgive you. i won't forgive you. i won't forgive you. ———.

no, ———, don't throw me away.

The personified malice oozed jealousy, resentment, and fury straight into Lieselotte's heart. She scowled with envy, her tongue a poisoned dagger to cut deep with equally toxic words. One terrible crime followed another, until she realized that she'd morphed into a hideous monster.

The monstrosity once known as Lieselotte then attacked Fiene, Baldur, and Siegwald—everyone she held dear. And as she moved in for the kill...

Lieselotte would wake up. Such was the dream she'd been tormented by every night as of late. Upon losing grip of her consciousness in the courtyard,

she had a terrible feeling that she'd see it once more.

Yet at the last moment, a ray of light shot through the darkness. The voice calling her name and the image of her beloved coalesced into her love for Siegwald—and it protected her. The light bestowed upon her a nostalgic dream that resurrected her feelings for him.

As Lieselotte wielded her pure love to combat the evil shadow, she heard voices that she was never meant to hear.

“The Witch of Yore’s curse really has started to eat away at her!”

“Liese-tan, stay strong! I swear we’ll protect you! We’ll never, ever, ever let you die! We’ll work with Sieg to give you a happy ending!”

A man and woman shouted. Their hope enveloped Lieselotte’s very being.

“That being said, our voices unfortunately can’t reach Lieselotte!”

“Yeah... It sucks to admit, but we’ll just have to count on Sieg. All we’re good for is play-by-play and color commentary... No, actually, there’s one more thing: we can pray.”

“Pray?”

“Yup. Let’s pray from the bottom of our hearts that she’ll live to be showered with love like we know she can be. Let’s pray that she’ll stay strong and win out against the witch! It has to work... We’re gods, aren’t we?”

The words of a faraway boy and girl transformed into a gentle warmth. It chipped away at the incomprehensible horror they called the “Witch of Yore.”

Lieselotte’s breathing returned to normal with a short puff of air. *Ahh*, she thought, *I have a peculiar feeling that I’ll sleep well tonight*. The tension in her body washed away. She felt a gentle sway. Something warm that soothed her heart by its presence alone had lifted her up.

“Urgh!” the woman said in pain. **“A p-princess carry is downright destructive!”**

“Chill, Kobayashi! Ow!” The man’s voice seemed to suggest he was trying to ease her suffering, but it didn’t seem to be going very well.

“But this *never* would’ve happened in the game, and it’s making me squeal like nuts! Ahhhhhh! I can’t! They’re too precious!”

Hearing them go back and forth had put Lieselotte in a spectacular mood.

“I get it, I get—hm? Lieselotte’s...smiling? And then she leans into Sieg?! Her adorable maneuver has Sieg stunned in place!”

“Liese-tan can literally pull off power moves like that in her sleep! I expect nothing less from her!”

It appeared that today’s dream was not the usual nightmare; still, Lieselotte found it all very curious. As she mused on the oddity of it all, the two voices slowly drifted away. The girl sank into a deep slumber beyond the reach of dreams.

One light, two voices—surrounded by these, she had nothing more to fear.

— — — —

“Liese-tan can literally pull off power moves like that in her sleep! I expect nothing less from her!”

Hearing Lady Kobayashee reclaim her usual energy and seeing Lieselotte’s expression shift into a blissful smile, I was finally able to relax.

The past few minutes had been chaotic. Fiene had instantly begun casting restorative magic, and Baldur rushed to find the best healer in the school—my best friend, Art.

Art and Fiene had both come to the diagnosis that Lieselotte was merely catching up on much-needed sleep. At some point, Lieselotte mellowed out, possibly thanks to Lady Kobayashee’s prayer. Ever since, her complexion had been steadily improving.

However, the fact that she remained unconscious worried me. Still carrying her, I rose up and decided to take her home.

Once the marquis’s carriage arrived to pick her up, I hoisted her inside. The Riefenstahl guards offered to hold her in my stead, but I refused. I didn’t have the slightest intention of letting go of Lieselotte when she was snuggling up

against me so happily, and especially not to another man. To be honest, my arms were starting to get sore, but this was something I wasn't willing to cede.

At long last, the doors of the carriage were shut and the carriage bumped along the road. Inside, I was alone with the slumbering Lieselotte. While I admit that I was a bit flustered, I had no mind to do anything ungentlemanly.

"...So, are you certain the Witch of Yore is the same as the Great Calamity and Malevolent Black written about in legends?"

I whispered so that the driver wouldn't hear my question to the gods. As private as this carriage was, the watchful eyes of the divine were ever present. We couldn't do anything scandalous if we tried—though of course, I wouldn't try even in their absence.

"That's right. Liese-tan is sorta on the same frequency as the witch, which is why she's after her body. Right now, the witch is grinding down Liese-tan's psyche so she can weaken her and swoop in to take over."

The atrocious possibility Lady Kobayashee outlined caused me to tighten my grip around Lieselotte instinctively.

"If the witch manages to break Liese-tan's heart, she'll turn her body into an unspeakable monster and try to kill Fiene. Once she kills Fiene, she'll destroy the kingdom. Once she destroys the kingdom, she'll lay waste to the world. The tragedy is that the only way to stop her is to kill Liese-tan, and that's the 'fate of ruin' in the game we keep mentioning. Sieg, *you* are the key to preventing this tragedy."

I'm...the key? When Lady Kobayashee saw me tilt my head, she snickered.

"Liese-tan really loves you. To the point where whether her heart holds firm or shatters all depends on you."

I was at a loss for what to say in the face of the goddess's teasing. I stared at the floor, but Lady Kobayashee ignored my confusion and continued on.

"In the game, Liese-tan falls into the depths of darkness because you cast her away, Sieg. She'll fearlessly carry on like the villainess she is no matter who denounces her—that is, except for you. On the other hand, as long as you don't hate her, Liese-tan will be okay."

She loves me that much? According to the goddess, Lieselotte held me so dear that her heart would *break* if I broke away from her. I could feel a faint heat rise in my cheeks.

“Sorry,” Lord Endoh said. **“We know we should’ve told you, of all people, sooner.”**

“But then we’d practically be forcing you,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“It’d be like saying, ‘Fall in love with her for the sake of the world!’ And we just kept putting it off until things ended up like this... We’re sorry.”**

I shook my head at the gods’ apologies. I couldn’t be more grateful for their decision. The fact that I had been able to enjoy my time with Lieselotte without responsibilities to bind me was something to be thankful for. My duty as a royal and the key to combating the witch hadn’t gotten a chance to cloud my memories with her.

“But you’ll be fine now, won’t you?” Lady Kobayashee said, confident. **“Knowing that now won’t change anything, right?”**

I knew that my face must have been bright red. The fact that she was so sure of herself was a bit frustrating: she was saying there wouldn’t be an issue...so long as I was already in love with Lieselotte.

“...Well, you’re correct. Once I figured out what made Lieselotte tick, she turned out to be shockingly cute, after all.”

Putting it into words was embarrassing, but I admitted it—I had no other choice. Lieselotte was cute, and I loved her. Changing my mind and casting her away now was impossible.

“Glad to hear it!” Lady Kobayashee said. **“In that case, we’ll leave Liese-tan to you. We’ll still be watching carefully, of course, but if she ever seems restless or exhausted, pamper her right away. Make sure her heart never falters, so that the witch can’t lay her dirty hands on Liese-tan.”**

“Understood,” I said, glancing at Lieselotte’s face. Quietly, I muttered to myself, **“The Witch of Yore...”**

She was a terrible witch who had been wreaking havoc throughout the land for eons. Time and time again, she was brought down, only to return in the

body of another innocent victim like Lieselotte. Casting a shadow over the whole planet with her presence, the witch was evil incarnate.

— — — —

When we arrived at Lieselotte's residence, her father was already there.

"Y-Your Highness?! Liese?! E-Excuse me!" The marquis stammered in shock when he saw me, but quickly bowed his head.

As we exchanged greetings, I wondered why he was here. He quickly informed me that he'd received news that his daughter had passed out and that the crown prince was bringing her home. After that, he'd rushed here to receive me.

"Lieselotte fainted at the academy and is currently sleeping," I explained. "Miss Fiene and Artur of the Richter Countship have tended to her. They said that she's experiencing some mild mental and physical fatigue. She may be deep asleep, but there isn't any need to worry about her safety."

"Ah, I beg your pardon for all the trouble."

"Lieselotte is my fiancée—pay it no mind. More importantly, I plan to carry her to her room... Is it on the second floor?"



The marquis shook his head furiously. “No, you mustn’t! Your Highness, I cannot possibly burden you any further. Someone, come carry Liese!”

I stopped Marquis Riefenstahl from summoning a servant. “I won’t hand my lover to anyone else. Show me to her room.”

The marquis watched me shake my head with a blank stare. I must have said something truly outrageous, to confound our nation’s top general like this.

He continued staring in silence for a few more moments. Suddenly, without a word, the violet eyes that he shared with his daughter glistened with tears.

“Hm?! M-Marquis Riefenstahl? What’s wrong?” I asked in a panic.

“No, it’s...” He wiped away his tears. “It’s just a great deal of emotion is surging within me.”

“Oh, I see. I suppose it would be difficult to entrust your daughter to me...”

Lieselotte and I may have been engaged, but it was only natural for a father to disapprove of a man trying to take his unwed daughter into her private bedroom. In which case, I had to respect his wishes. I was best off handing her to a maid or the very father who had reproached me.

“No, not at all! I’m simply overwhelmed with joy—a deep-seated happiness to know that...my daughter’s wish has finally been fulfilled.”

Much to my surprise, he refuted my presumption and gave an incomprehensible explanation instead.

“Her dream?” I asked.

“Yes, the dream she’s carried since she was five years old. She had a wish that she never shared with anyone but me. Even when she realized she could not hope for it—that it was unattainable, even—my daughter could never let go of it.”

I wonder what kind of dream it was? Seeing my curiosity, the marquis merely smiled warmly. He didn’t seem like he was going to tell me.

“I’m so happy for you, Liese,” he said.

The man gently ran his hand over his beloved daughter’s head. He was

altogether different from the general I saw in the palace and the marquis I saw at social gatherings: right now, he was just another father.

“Oh, my sincerest apologies for keeping you! Please, Your Highness, this way.”

The marquis deftly reset the atmosphere and began walking off. With how much the mood had shifted, I couldn’t bring myself to ask about her dream now.

“What was that five-year-old child dream stuff about?” Lord Endoh asked.

And apparently, I wasn’t alone.

“It’s the one that pops up in her journal. You know, the one from when they first meet? But it wouldn’t be very classy of us to say it here,” Lady Kobayashee said.

It was a tad vexing to be led on like this...

“Oh, *that* dream. Yeah, Sieg’s gonna have to hear that one from the source.”

But when Lord Endoh merrily joined in, my impatience turned to heart-fluttering excitement. I had a feeling that this would be yet another of Lieselotte’s adorable hidden sides.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. I'm Suzu Enoshima.

This book is a revised version of something I uploaded on an online novel sharing site. In the web novel, the perspective changed left and right; for the print edition, I corrected it to flip between Siegwald's perspective and a third-person narrator.

Also, the chunk of the web novel this volume corresponds to was originally a tad under 80,000 Japanese characters. After revising and editing, it's grown to over 130,000.

I hope that first time readers and fans of the web novel alike will be able to enjoy this work.

Next, I'd like to dedicate a section for thanks.

First and foremost, thank you to each and every one of you who read this novel. I'm sure there are many of you who have been supporting me since I originally published the story online—or perhaps even from my *Moonlight* days. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I wouldn't be where I am now without you.

A sincere thanks to Eihi, who drew all of the illustrations seen in this work. Your drawings are cute, cool, and refreshing. I can't stop grinning whenever I look at them, and I do so at least three times a day.

Thank you to my editor O, and to everyone else at Kadokawa BOOKS who helped me with detailed advice when I was completely lost. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me. Thank you so much.

I'd also like to thank all my online friends I met through writing. Whenever I went crying to them, they always did their best to cheer me up. Ayano Aoi, Arurun, Yummy-looking meat bun, Kamii Chikuma, Dottan, Noukan, Bubi, and Wontonnoodles—thank you all.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family, best friend Y, and my beloved dog, Milk.

I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Thank you this, thank you that, this thanks section is so long..." And you're exactly right. Honestly, when I began writing this afterword, it shocked me to see how many people from all sorts of different places I wanted to thank.

This is a testament to how many people helped me on my path to finish this work. The fact that so many people supported me with high expectations makes me feel like this book is blessed.

By the way, I looked up "how to write an afterword" and found out that it's a common trend for debuting authors to fill the afterword of their light novels with endless words of gratitude. I'm glad to see I'm not alone.

I think that just shows how much trouble newbie authors cause to everyone around them as we somehow stumble into the world. And to think that this story managed to stumble its way into a book so you could read it is like a dream come true.

If the stars align and we meet again someday, I hope you'll be able to appreciate my growth upon seeing a slimmer section of gratitude.

With that prayer in my heart, I hope to see you again.




THIS
STRONG
FRONT IS
EXACTLY
WHAT
MAKES
HER A
TSUNDERE.

THE TSUN IS
COMING OFF
STRONG,
LIESELOTTE!

"I heard
the Voices
of the
Gods..."

Endo and Kobayashi
THE LATEST ON TSUNDERE VILLAINESS
LIESELOTTE

Live! 



Sincere Knight

BALDUR

Physical Powerhouse
Puppylike Heroine

FIENE

Main Hero / Prince

SIEGWALD

Play-by-Play Commentary

ENDO AOTO

Color Commentary

**KOBAYASHI
SHIHONO**

Tsundere Villainess

LIESELOTTE

The daughter of a marquis. In the game *Love Me Magically*, her inability to express herself dooms her to a fate of ruin.



**I'M SURE
HER DIGNIFIED
CUTENESS WILL
EVEN MAKE A GUY'S
HEART SEIZE UP,
SO TRY IT OUT,
ENDO! AND ONCE
YOU DO, CRY
WITH ME!"**

**"THE BEST
CHARACTER
IS DEFINITELY
THE TSUNDERE
VILLAINESS,
LIESELOTTE!"**

Spoiler: he cries.

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Endo and Kobayashi Live! The Latest on Tsundere Villainess Lieselotte: Disc 1

by Suzu Enoshima

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