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Dinners with My Darling:
How the Former Monster King Ate Her Way to Happiness

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Dinners with My Darling: How the Former Monster King Ate Her Way to Happiness Vol.2

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Dinners with My Darling: How the Former Monster King Ate Her Way to Happiness Vol.2
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First published in Japan in 2022 by
Futabasha Publishers Ltd.
English translation rights arranged with
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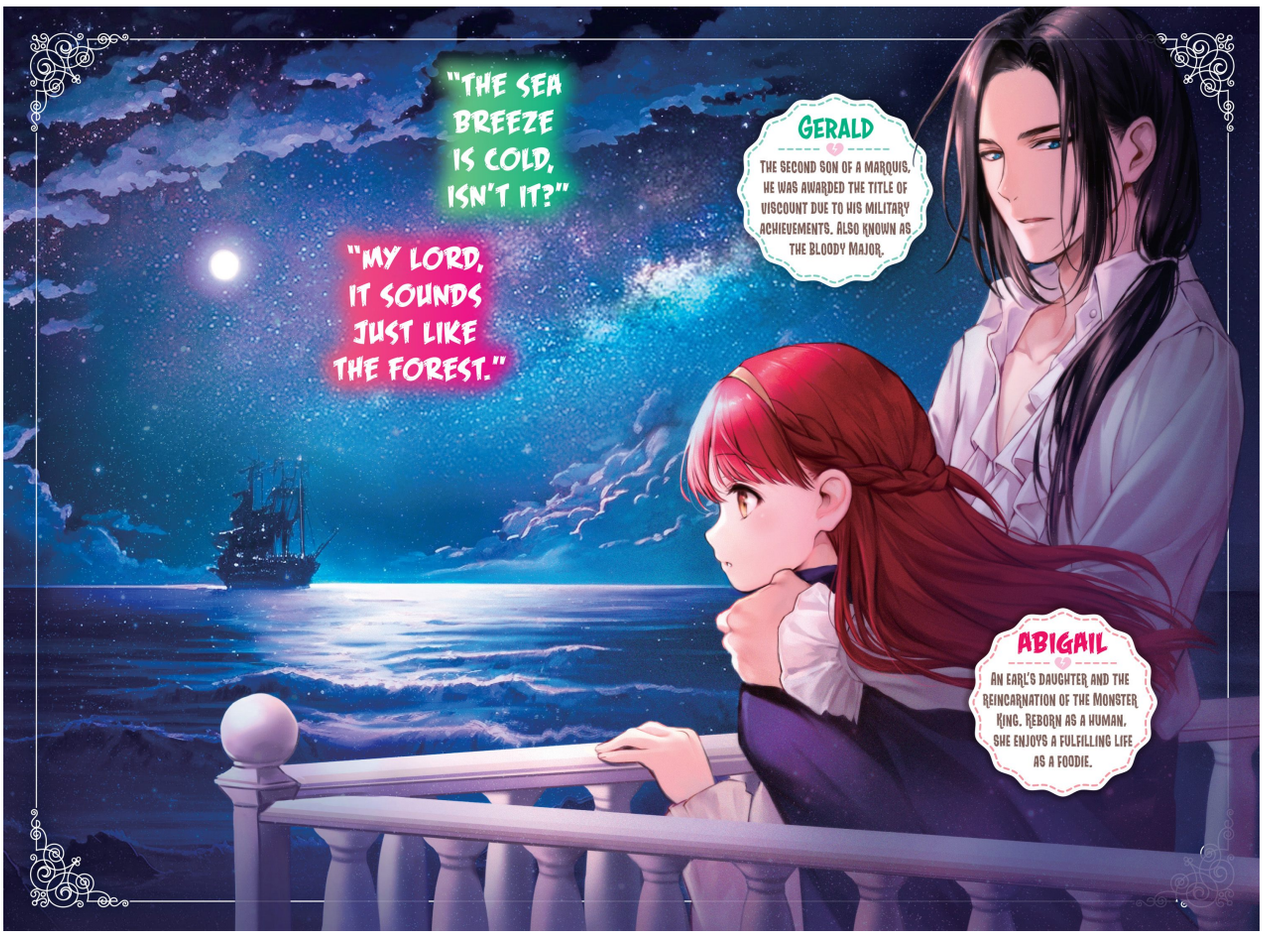
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Published in the United States of America

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First Digital Edition: April 2025

ISBN-13: 979-8-88560-169-6


"THE SEA BREEZE IS COLD, ISN'T IT?"
"MY LORD, IT SOUNDS JUST LIKE THE FOREST."
GERALD
THE SECOND SON OF A MARQUIS, HE WAS AWARDED THE TITLE OF VISCOUNT DUE TO HIS MILITARY ACHIEVEMENTS. ALSO KNOWN AS THE BLOODY MAJOR.
ABIGAIL
AN EARL'S DAUGHTER AND THE REINCARNATION OF THE MONSTER KING. REBORN AS A HUMAN, SHE ENJOYS A FULFILLING LIFE AS A FOODIE.


"IT'S YOURS, MY LORD. JUST LIKE HOW I HAVE A STONE WITH YOUR COLOR! NOW WE'RE THE SAME!"

# Chapter One: Small Failures Are Fine If Things Work Out in the End

**NOBODY** ever taught the Monster King anything.

It had always lived in a place of rock and wilted grass. It wielded magic easily and thus never wanted for anything nor lived with another creature. For a very long time, it never left its home in the forest. While it sometimes ventured to the forest's edge where a village was located, that was a rare occurrence.

Since being reborn as Abigail, Earl Longhurst's daughter, I learned how to read and write and behave like a young noble lady from a tutor. The tutor instructed me in etiquette, then gave me lots of books. I could follow instructions well, so that wasn't too hard.

But what I'm learning from Tabitha and Mother-in-Law isn't the same at all. They teach me with lots of talk and stories, and praise me joyfully when I do well. Stuff like standing straight when being measured for a dress and keeping still when they hold fabric or stones to my face and neck to check whether the colors match, and selecting the food to be served and the theme of a venue's decoration for events, and lots of other things like that. While I still don't really understand the concepts of beauty or cuteness, I know when something is delicious, so I'm good at choosing dishes. Most foods are delicious, really.

It is the day of our wedding ceremony and public banquet. We've been preparing for it for the past half year.

Although I've been my lord husband's wife for a year already, we haven't held a wedding or reception yet. That's why we're all at the Drewetts' residence in the capital. The wedding will occur in the capital, and the reception twice, the first instance at their mansion in the city and the second in Drewett.

If I perform well, Tabitha and Mother-in-Law will surely be happy and reward me with lots of praise.

And because the wedding is what my lord husband wants, I'll do my best as his wife to support him. That means I have to stay

calm and smile nicely all day and eat only the foods that I'm allowed to eat, and yet…

"Abigail? What's wrong?"

We consumed the huge cake and have just finished greeting and speaking to everyone on the guest list. Some people are dancing, and a jester entertains the crowd by throwing and catching many multicolored balls at once. *Wow, he's amazing.* The time for the bridal couple to retire from the festivities is approaching. I just need to wait a little more.

"O-Oy, Abigail? Abby!" My lord husband picks me up gently. His voice sounds a bit frightened.

*I'm glad he's holding me… My stomach hurts…*

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**THE** Drewett residence is divided into two wings, the east wing for the family and the west for guests. The reception is, of course, taking place in the west wing, and the noise from the party doesn't reach our room on the east side.

When I saw Abigail's face, so pale even through all that makeup, panic coiled within me as it hadn't in a while. In the past, she used to slip away to hide whenever she felt sick, and I knew that was what she needed. So I played the part of a groom eager to consummate his marriage, leading her out of the reception hall as she fought to remain calm as instructed, even as she tottered on her feet. Once outside, I picked her up and she immediately relaxed and pressed her face into my shoulder. *That must have been tough for her.*

The time was near for the newlyweds to retire anyway, so I doubt we will be needed for the rest of the evening.

In our room, the maids help remove Abigail's makeup and ready her for bed. She looks slightly better once fast asleep, though her lips are still blue. I caress the hair that has fallen over her face and neck, sweeping it behind her ear with my left hand. My right is trapped; she is gripping a fistful of my shirt cuff.

Her long, straight lashes, a shade deeper than her shining red hair, tremble as she opens her golden eyes a sliver. Her gaze unfocused, she says, "…My lord?"

“Are you awake? How do you feel?”

She blinks, recalling the evening’s events, then utters a soft “oh” as she frowns. “Did I fail, my lord? Why? I didn’t eat that much, and yet—”

“No, you didn’t fail. You did your best.”

“Yes, I did my best.”

I lift my hand to touch her, and she grabs it in her small ones, rubs it against her cheek, then guides it to the top of her head. *I see.* She’d like a pat. *Yes, she did well.* I run my hand through her hair, the tresses still somewhat curled but smooth and soft under my fingers.

“You had to put on a corset when you changed dresses, right? Tabitha was busy, so Mother’s maids did that for you.”

“Yes, Tabitha wasn’t there to help.”

“Right. She was busy. Seems the maids tightened your corset too much.”

Abigail does not routinely wear corsets, partly because she is already thin, and also because I treasure her wellbeing over fashion. She is much healthier than she was when she first arrived a year ago but still relatively weak for her age. Despite that reality, Abigail seems to believe in her own strength.

So she is permitted to wear corsets, though they are only ever tightened a marginal amount. That should have been the case for the wedding wear as well, but Mother’s maids are probably accustomed to most noblewomen’s preference to be laced as tight as possible and therefore did the same to Abigail. Tabitha has been quietly fuming ever since she discovered what happened.

“Was the wedding ceremony as you wished, my lord?” Abigail asks.

“Yes. My lady wife is very talented. Thank you.”

“Yes!” Abigail lets out a triumphant little huff, then wriggles away from me across the bed.

“What is it?”

“My reward!”

“O-Oh.” I lean over to give her the usual kiss on the forehead, but she shakes her head and pats the empty spot beside her. *Oh. I guess it’s finally time for me to redo our first night. That’s right.* But she certainly can’t mean what I’m thinking. Yet there she is, inviting me to bed, her eyes shining with anticipation!

*Argh! This is it!* I slip under the covers and, cradling her head, plant light kisses upon her face: one on her lips, one on her eyelid, one on her forehead.

One on the corner of her slight smile.

The golden hue of her eyes shifts darker as she looks at me.

I move in to rub our noses together, then brush my lips over hers again.

She releases a soft sigh tinged with the aroma of her favorite herbal tea. And just like that, she's asleep once more.

*I knew it! I should have known!*

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**THE** public banquet in the capital was a slight failure.

My lord husband tells me it wasn't, yet I believe it was, just a little. Our original plan was to head to Drewett with Father- and Mother-in-Law for the second reception, but because of my stomachache, my lord husband and I leave a day after everyone else. And whenever someone other than Tabitha laces my corset, I will remember to push out my stomach. I won't fail again.

Although we departed later than planned, several days remain until that of the reception, so we are enjoying a leisurely journey by carriage. My lord husband and I share one while Rodney and Tabitha occupy the other. Ethan, our steward, couldn't join us, and my lord husband assures me that we can bring some souvenirs home for him. *I need to think of something nice before then.*

When we last traveled to Drewett, half a year before, the fields were covered in golden wheat. Now they are an endless sea of spring green. My lord husband sits opposite me, relaxed with one leg propped up, and I look beyond him to see the fields change to grassy pastures. There are lots of square-shaped animals grazing leisurely on the grass. I've seen them before in my encyclopedia. *Could they be—?*

"My lord! Look! Are those cows? Black and white, and some brown ones!"

"Yes, those are cows."

"Cows with delicious cheeks?"

“Well, those brown ones are… I guess…”

“The brown ones have delicious cheeks… Humans’ cows are so different. The colors aren’t the same, and the horns are small too.”

“Compared to? Are there any cowlike monsters…?”

“A mad cochlear.”

“That sounds intimidating! Cochlear…? Oh, is it because of the shape of their horns?”

Mad cochlear are six-legged monsters that live in swamps. They have huge horns that point skyward and a line of rocklike spikes along the spine but are otherwise slimy. Overall, they’re squishy and not tasty at all. *Maybe Ethan would like a cow as a souvenir.*

“My lord, my lord.”

“Yes?”

“How about a cow for Ethan?”

“A cow for Ethan.” My lord husband glances out the carriage window, then back at me. “Our honeymoon will follow the reception at Drewett, so there’s plenty of time before we return home. There’s no rush to choose something; there’ll be other options Ethan would like, I’m sure.”

He’s right. We plan to spend our honeymoon at a port town about three days’ ride from Drewett. The trip will be my first time seeing the sea, so I’m certain I’ll discover lots of new things.

The cows outside the window move so slowly. *Is it because they’re pets?* They would be devoured in an instant if they behaved like that in the forest. “Yes. The cows are too slow, so they’re not good.”

“Oh, you meant a whole living cow for Ethan? I thought… Never mind, please think of something else.”

Our journey to Drewett Manor will take six days, so we will spend the night at an inn. I learned during our last trip to Drewett that the surrounding town has a robust dairy trade. The cows we noticed must belong to the local farmers.

Longhurst used to be a prosperous territory too, but because it’s smaller than Drewett, its dairy industry wasn’t as good. And although quite sizable for an earldom, much of Longhust is covered by the Monster King’s forest, so the area under human rule isn’t that big. Nor is the human population. The demesne’s

prosperity was due to bumper crops despite the lack of farmland. And there is a small mine too. I used to help manage the territory, so I know that very well.

Drewett possesses lots of land, lies next to the sea, and has a large population. Therefore, it can invest in various industries, such as the growing of grapes and production of salmon jerky.

Our lodging has a dining hall on the first floor. The last time we visited, I ate in our room because Tabitha said the dining hall was full of peasants and too raucous. That evening, we reach the inn late, and it's noisy despite the hour. The place smells of fragrant spices and roasted fat. How delicious.

"My lord, my lord! What's that?"

"You mean the pizza? Well, I guess we never did serve that at home."

I can glimpse the kitchen over the serving counter. The chef is slapping what looks like a white towel, then he throws it into the air. Why is he airing out the towel inside? *Oh, it's spinning! Round and round! Huh, is it getting bigger?!*

We're led to a table where I still have a view into the kitchen. My lord husband appears to have already ordered for us. *When did he do that?* Instead of sitting on the opposite side of the scratched but clean table, he settles right next to me. Tabitha and the others seat themselves around a different table.

"Would you like to eat that?" he asks with a smile.

"The towel?"

"It's pizza."

*So, not a towel but something called pizza.* He tells me it's like a flat version of bread.

We are served a salad with crunchy leaves and onion soup while we wait for our pizza. Eventually, a wooden plate much larger than my lord husband's hands is brought to the table. The pizza is big as well as flat. And it's steaming a little. *What's the pale-yellow goo? Cheese?* I smell it; it's cheese! Beneath the melted cheese is something red that I'm certain is tomato. *Oh, there's bacon too!*

My lord husband picks up a metal tool with a round wheel, then slides it across the pizza. *What's that? A cutter?*

I watch him. When he allows me to try, I run the wheel knife through the pizza, but the cheese quickly seeps into the gap,

covering the cut once more. I follow my lord husband's instructions to finish the task, and he serves me a slice. *Wow, the cheese stretches! I did cut it well!*

"You can eat it with your hands, like this." He lifts a triangular piece of pizza and bites into it, then runs a thumb across his lips. "See?"

I suppose he means that I don't have to adhere to the usual dining etiquette. The pizza is no longer steaming, so it must have cooled enough to eat. I try to pick it up… *Oh! Oh! The cheese is sliding off!* I hastily raise the tip to my mouth and bite, and the cheese lengthens as I pull the piece away. *How do I eat this cheese string…?*

I freeze, unsure of what to do. Beside me, my lord husband trembles for a moment before reaching out with a fork to sever the cheese and push it into my mouth. *How delicious!* Though melted, the cheese is still springy and chewy. The tomatoes taste sun-dried, and their rich sweetness tingles my cheeks along with the mellow flavor of bacon fat! I can also detect various spices and herbs, and garlic, in the tomato sauce.

"How is it?"

"Tasty! I think I can handle another slice!"

"But then you won't have space for the apple pie."

Oh! That won't do!

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**WE'VE** paused for a rest in a woodland near Drewett. It's where I returned Little Piyo when I was a child, so I always make a stop there. *To think that I got the chance to see Little Piyo again…* Our reunion occurred just six months before, when Abigail and I were returning to the capital. Without her, I probably wouldn't have recognized Little Piyo. Nor had I ever imagined that the ordinary-looking little bird of my youth could be a monster known as a rust beryl thrush, much less the boss of the surrounding forest.

"You seem anxious…" teases Rodney as he retrieves the lunch boxes we bought from the inn from the supply wagon.

"Of course. I promised that we would visit it again come spring."

He and Tabitha are setting out lunch boxes for us humans while I handle a much larger one intended for Little Piyo. Half of the box is chunks of red rock bear meat, Little Piyo's favorite when it was a chick. Because rock bear flesh is an autumn-only delicacy, however, we only managed dried jerky instead of fresh meat. The other half contains hunks of raw beef, which I'm certain it will like.

"I want to help, my lord! Oh, boiled eggs. Let me! Let me help!"

"Oh—"

Abigail rushes over to grab an egg from Rodney's hand. Before anyone can really react, her head sails forward and collides with the egg. There's a small cracking sound, yet the shell remains whole. "...Huh? Ouch."

"Abby, you're supposed to crack the egg on your head, not headbutt it," I sigh.

"A-Also, I think it's better to try cracking the round bottom part of the egg, not the pointy end, my lady," adds Rodney.

"Yes! ...So, the round bottom of the egg?" She raises the egg high for a second valiant attempt before Tabitha scurries over to intervene.

"Th-That's not right at all, my lady! Please, why don't we crack the egg without smashing it against our heads?"

"But it's how the old grandfather always cracks his egg for lunch," she states.

*Old grandfather?* She must mean our elderly gardener, Bob. They've become fast friends lately. *And smashing eggs on heads...?* Damn, my sides hurt from trying not to laugh... Rodney hides his grin behind a stack of wooden lunch boxes and hurriedly staggers away to distribute them to the guards. Guided by Tabitha, Abigail starts to crack eggs against the lunch boxes before carefully peeling off the shells.

"By the way, didn't Little Piyo come to us on its own the last time...? Will it come now without us calling?" I ask her.

"It's already on its way."

"O-Oh." I glance in the direction that Little Piyo arrived from the previous time. *...Oh, is that it?* I've spotted a speck the size of a sesame seed flying our way. "It's amazing that Little Piyo knows we're here."

"Because it's the boss," Abigail says casually.

“I see…”

I don’t really understand but decide to trust her. The speck in the sky grows larger as we speak.

“My lord, my lord! Hold me! Hold me!” my wife suddenly shouts, peeled egg still in hand.

I hoist her into my arms just as Little Piyo alights before us, its silent landing belying its enormous size.

“*Piyo!*”

“Have you been well?”

Little Piyo inclines its head as if asking for a pat. As I reach for the creature, Abigail grabs my hand and places it atop her head instead. I give her a pat first, which seems to satisfy her, for she feeds Little Piyo the egg. Finally, I’m permitted to sink my fingers into its soft feathers.

“I brought you meat, Little Piyo… Huh?”

A small bird has popped out from Little Piyo’s neck plumage. Its feathers are an ordinary, mottled brown, and I could easily hold it in the palm of my hand. I’m just about to ask whether the bird is Little Piyo’s offspring when Abigail pipes up.

“That’s Little Piyo’s mate. He’s brought her to meet you, my lord. How polite.”

“Little Piyo’s *mate*…? Isn’t she too small?”

“*Piyo!*”

I proffer a hunk of dried red rock bear meat to Little Piyo. Abigail stares at my hand, then opens her mouth wide.

“You haven’t finished your boiled egg,” I remind her.

“But we have to follow the right order! I’m first!”

“Bring the lady some water or tea, Rodney.”

After she swallows her egg and beverage, I feed her a small piece of jerky. She nods in approval, a signal that I may attend to Little Piyo. She still has more than half an egg in hand, not that she can finish a whole one usually… *Wait, isn’t she supposed to be helping peel them?*

“Little Piyo is raising his mate until she gets big,” Abigail explains, her voice a little strained. Maybe she’s thirsty.

“*Piyo!*”

Is Little Piyo planning to feed his mate red rock bear, as I used to feed him when he was small? In a flash, he’s swiped the dried meat from my hands and offered it to his mate. Then he leans

down to groom the little bird's head as she chirps and chews awkwardly at the meat.

"He's behaving just like you, Master..."

"Shut up, Rodney. Go brew more tea for the lady."

"See what I mean?"

How annoying. I'm just worried that Abigail will choke!

# Chapter Two: Because Reporting Is an Important Job

**IT** is the day of our reception at Drewett Manor.

The party in the capital was attended mainly by nobles close to the Drewett family and my lord husband's military colleagues, while the upcoming reception's guests mainly consist of the Drewetts' relatives as well as some of the territory's most influential people—merchants and so on. I memorized the second guest list too, so I know who everyone is. We've recently finished our rounds of greeting.

"Hmm…"

The girl before me is Lady Patty, Viscount Glenn's daughter. Since she is Mother-in-Law's sister's child, she is also my lord husband's cousin. She is slightly taller than me, and her hair a lighter shade than Mother-in-Law's, almost blonde. She looks me up and down several times, her expression cool. Two ladies stand behind Lady Patty, a baron's daughter and a merchant's. They're giggling about something; I don't know what. My lord husband and I have already exchanged pleasantries with Lady Patty, so why is she staring at me? Maybe her eyesight isn't that good.

I'm wearing an empire dress for the reception, and my corset was laced by Tabitha, so I'm feeling quite well. I've eaten meat flowers and some of the large cake, and drank too much fruit juice, so I've just returned from the bathroom. I found Lady Patty standing in the corridor to the great hall, blocking my entry into the conservatory where the party is taking place. Although her open fan conceals the bottom half of her face, I can see her eyes narrow.

"Poor big cousin Gerald, trapped in a political marriage, huh?"

I know Lady Patty is nineteen, so she is three years younger than my lord husband. Is that why she refers to him as "big cousin"? She doesn't resemble him at all, and I can't sense much magical prowess in her brick-colored eyes. I'm definitely much stronger.

“Oh, but it’s not really much of a good match anymore, is it? They say you’re an earl’s daughter, but your father’s gone and lost his status,” she continues.

The hallway and conservatory are lined with huge windows, so I can see what’s happening in there, and the glass door usually separating the great hall and conservatory has been thrown open for the party. I spot my lord husband standing with his back to us and speaking to an elderly man, whom I recognize as a popular restaurant owner. I also glimpse Rodney a little beyond my lord husband. He gives me a small wave, and I wave back.

“Are you listening to me?!”

“Yes.” I didn’t think she was looking for a response, so I gave her none. Perhaps I misunderstood.

I’ve come to realize recently that maybe I’m not good at social interaction. I can hold conversations with Tabitha and Mother-in-Law, so I’d thought I was fine. But as I spy Mother-in-Law chatting just as happily with some other ladies, I have to wonder whether she is the one who’s skilled. Those ladies too, probably. To interact with others successfully must be difficult, and Lady Patty appears to be struggling as well.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” I sympathize.

“Huh? What?!”

*Oh!* Rodney is pointing at a small plate in his left hand. … *Meat?*

Although I sampled everything on the menu that was served at the party in the capital, Lady Stella selected the dishes for the Drewetts’ reception, so many are a surprise to me. I peer closer. A bite-size piece of meat, and— *Oh!* A cross-section of circular white surrounding something round and yellow! A boiled egg, a small one!

I suspect it’s meat loaf filled with miniature boiled eggs!

I didn’t see that at our table earlier. Maybe it’s a rare treat because such small eggs are uncommon. *Oh dear! I have to think of a good excuse to leave… Yes, I’ve learned how!*

“Your family is more than ruined, you know?” says Lady Patty. “Don’t you think you should learn your rightful place?”

“Erm. I’m going to pick some flowers…”

“You just came back from there! What a lame excuse to try to leave?!” She rears up and forward, obstructing my view of Rodney.

I'm sure he will leave a bite of the meat loaf for me, though it looks too delicious to leave untouched for long.

I don't know what Lady Patty is trying to say. The corridor is wide enough for three ladies to comfortably walk abreast, and I wonder whether I should just slip past her. *But would that be bad manners?* I turn to look behind me yet see no one else in the hallway to help.

Lady Patty snickers. "Cousin Gerald has always been fond of me, and since your marriage no longer holds any political meaning, I'm sure he'll want me to become his wife very soon."

*Oh?* I had learned that only royals and dukes may take second wives. That's why my stepmother remained a mistress until my real mother died.

"Do you want to be my lord's mistress, Lady Patty?"

"Huh?! H-How dare you!" She stiffens, then retreats a step. *Oh! Now's my chance!*

"I understand! I'll speak to my lord about it!"

"Wait!"

I don a calm smile as I quickly slide past Lady Patty and her friends. *I did it! Now I can get back to the great hall... Huh?*

Something catches my ankle, and the floor rushes up to meet me. That's all right; I've watched His Excellency the general and my lord husband spar. I remember how it's done.

First, hunch and hug the shoulders! Curl the whole body! Knees up too! Then follow the momentum!

I land on my feet in a crouch and open my eyes to a pair of shining boots. I look up into the surprised faces of my lord husband and Rodney. "I did it!"

"That's—amazing?!"

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**AFTER** energetically announcing that she was going to "pick some flowers," a new phrase recently taught to her, Abigail headed to the bathroom down the hallway adjoining the conservatory. I was waiting for her when a businessman who owns several trendy restaurants throughout Drewett called out to me. We engaged in some polite but meaningless small talk. I may hold the title of

viscount, but ultimately I'm the Drewetts' second son with no land to my name, so we both know there's no benefit in currying favor with me.

"Master. The lady has been stopped by Viscount Glenn's daughter," Rodney abruptly whispers in my ear.

I stifle a curse and swiftly conclude the conversation with the restaurateur. Following Rodney's gaze out the window, I see several women clustered in the corridor to the great hall, their backs to us.

"I was wondering why they're out there chatting instead of in here, so I tried tempting the lady with some of her favorite food. But she's not moved at all, which means she can't…"

Despite the situation, his tone is cheerful, and he seems most amused. Everyone in the family knows that my little chick is strong, so we don't worry much about her anymore. Cousin Patty Glenn, on the other hand, is a mystery. I haven't seen her in years —I can't even remember when I last encountered her.

"What is she doing, messing with Abigail?"

"Maybe she's jealous? There's gossip that she's had no marriage prospects despite already being nineteen."

"I see…"

"She's always had a gross personality, so I guess it's inevitable?"

His biting remark as we leave the conservatory elicits a wry smile from me. From a young age, Cousin Patty was always overly sweet and clingy toward my brother and me, though he received the worst of it. Yet, while nice to us, she was the exact opposite to Rodney and the other servants. Of course, I didn't appreciate such treatment of my best buddy and recall being disgusted by her shallow attitude.

We round the corner and see the ladies split into two groups, creating a pathway in the middle for Abigail to pass through. Suddenly, one of the women I don't recognize juts a foot from beneath her dress to trip Abigail. Just as the instinct to dive to my wife's rescue flashes in my mind, she tucks into an impressive roll and comes to a crouch at our feet. *Huh?! What* was *that?! And in a dress?!*

"I did it!" she announces, still in a perfect landing position with her hands stretched before her.

“That’s—amazing?!”

Behind me, Rodney falls into a coughing fit at my squawked praise. *Stop that.* My sides hurt from holding in my own laughter.

“That was nicely done, indeed, but are you hurt anywhere?” I ask, extending a hand to Abigail. She grasps it calmly, then stands with grace as though I’ve just asked her to dance. Rodney appears to be wheezing for air. Abigail tilts her head before nodding.

“All right, come here,” I say, easily gathering my wife into my arms.

She quickly settles into her usual spot, then turns to me and reports, “Lady Patty says she wishes to become your mistress, my lord!”

*Huh?*

“Wait!” Patty’s voice rises in panic while the ladies behind her huddle close to each other, shoulders shaking. “Stop! Cousin Gerald! That’s a lie!”

“Do you know what a mistress is, Abigail?” I’m guessing she does, yet I’d like to confirm my suspicion.

Abigail straightens. “A mistress does a wife’s job. Lady Patty says that you wish to make her your wife soon, but because I’m already your wife, Lady Patty will become your mistress.”

“Y-Yes.”

Truly a strange understanding of a tricky situation. I wonder how she comes up with such weird interpretations.

“What nonsense is she spouting?! Cousin Gerald!”

I ignore Patty’s cries. “Abigail, Abby? Listen. I only need you. No mistresses.”

“Yes!” Abigail looks me in the eye and nods, then swivels to Patty. Impassively, her face emotionless, she declares, “Lady Patty, my lord doesn’t want you.”

Patty’s face slowly reddens and twists with humiliation. Rodney’s wheezing has quieted, though he looks like he’s about to have a seizure.

Abigail turns to him, speaking over my shoulder. “Rodney, are you all right? Was that meat loaf with small eggs inside?”

“M-My apologies.” He coughs. “Your eyesight is truly amazing, my lady. I-I saved some for you.”

“Yes!” Abigail hums in satisfaction, then pulls on my collar as if asking me to return to the conservatory.

“Give me a moment,” I say as I pat her gently on the back. My gaze finds the two women behind Patty, and I stare at each in turn as they cringe closer together. Patty looks up at me with tears in her eyes. *What’s with that?*

“Viscount Glenn’s daughter.”

“…Cousin Gerald?”

“I think you fail to understand what today’s reception is about. What do you hope to accomplish here today by lying to my wife? Do you think that’s acceptable behavior from a mere viscount’s daughter to a viscountess?”

“O-Oh, but Cousin Gerald—”

“Stop addressing me so casually. The Noel family will be sending a formal complaint to Viscount Glenn after this. And to your fathers too, ladies, for purposefully tripping the viscountess and trying to cause her harm.”

I throw Rodney a wink and he responds with a dramatic bow. While I’m unaware of their identities, Rodney, as my butler, isn’t, and their gasps at our exaggerated exchange tell me that they realize that fact as well. Their mouths open and shut as if to wail an apology, yet they appear to have lost their voices.

Patty’s mouth is set in a thin line. “What do you mean?! I’m your cousin!” she argues. “We’ve been close since we were childr —”

“I remember no such thing. If you don’t wish me to humiliate you publicly, I suggest you return to the conservatory’s antechamber and wait for your parents there.”

Her flippant tone, as though she truly believes those falsified “memories,” angers me. She has always behaved so, even as a child. I suppose that can’t be helped since my lady aunt, her mother, acts exactly the same. Even Mother herself has constantly invented excuses over the years to exclude her younger sister and niece from our social events, but I guess the day’s occasion is too important not to send an invitation.

I dodge Patty’s grasping hands as she reaches for me and pivot on my heel. The ladies immediately begin to whisper angrily, probably blaming each other. I pay them no heed.

“Just where does she get that conceited attitude from?” I mutter. It’s annoying, especially when I’ve promised myself to remain civil and friendly to all our guests that day.

“Well, if she had any capacity for self-reflection, she would have found herself a husband long ago instead of being forced to the edge of desperation like that,” Rodney hypothesizes.

“It’s fun to stand on the edge of a high cliff,” chirps Abigail.

“Yes, you do love heights, my lady. But please, you have to stop climbing trees.”

“Wait. Abigail’s been climbing trees?!” I cry.

“There’s a nice one just south of our house,” she answers.

As Abigail describes how pleasant and easy a climb her favorite tree is, I make a mental map of our journey home. We’ll have to avoid passing near any cliffs or high areas. Who knows what she’ll get up to when nobody’s watching!

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**MY** lord husband puts me down right before we enter the conservatory, asking once again if I’m all right. I’m fine. Nothing hurts. I did well and must eat that meat with small eggs that Rodney saved for me.

I’m escorted back to our table, where Lord Stuart and Lady Stella are chatting gaily with a group of people… I see a glass of deep-red liquid in Lady Stella’s hand. I think it’s wine. *Is that all right?*

“What’s the matter?” my lord husband asks as he passes me a small dish of meat loaf filled with pretty white-and-yellow egg. The egg is so tiny, I can eat it in one bite. If it were a regular egg, I’d grow full after just the one, and that won’t do. *This is perfect for me.*

I watch Lady Stella. She still holds the glass but doesn’t drink.

“Abigail?”

*What should I do?* We’re at Drewett Manor, not our home in the capital, and I’ve promised my lord husband not to talk publicly about my Gift or magic or subjects that normal humans won’t understand. *But is this one of them?* I’m not sure.

Mother-in-Law told me all about the food and drink to be served at the party. She said the kitchens have prepared various dishes for those with different tastes or restricted diets or who can’t drink alcohol. If that’s the case, why does Lady Stella have wine?

“…Abigail, can you whisper it? Then I’ll be the only one who hears you.”

I suppose it’s okay if I tell him in secret! My lord husband is amazing. He understands me so easily.

He bends toward me as I stand on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, “Is Lady Stella holding wine? I learned that humans shouldn’t drink alcohol when they have a baby in their belly.”

“O-Oh? You mean Stella is…? Did she tell you that?”

“Mother-in-Law says humans with babies shouldn’t drink alcohol.”

“Not that. I meant, did she tell you she’s having a baby?”

“No, but I can tell. There’s magical energy in Lady Stella’s tummy that doesn’t belong to her.”

“…Ah, I see. Hmm… I guess—I guess I’ll let my brother know. Wait here.”

“Yes!”

My lord husband approaches Lord Stuart and whispers to him. Lord Stuart blanches, then discreetly plucks the glass from Lady Stella’s hand. It’s definitely wine, then. The magical energy first appeared in her stomach two nights before, but maybe nobody had noticed it yet. I can see it if I concentrate, though perhaps that’s not something I should speak about openly. I’m glad my lord husband asked me to whisper the news to him.

I manage to eat the meat with the small egg in one bite. The fluffy egg dissolves in my mouth, mingling with the meatloaf to create a tender taste. *Delicious!*

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**WE’LL** spend our honeymoon at a port town about three days’ carriage ride from Drewett. I decided on that location because Abigail has never seen the sea. I’d wanted to take her further south to a tropical ocean, but there aren’t many prosperous and safe port cities, so my selection is the next best choice.

The reception concluded the night before without further incident, and we’ll be leaving Drewett on schedule for once. My parents and brother’s family come outside to say goodbye.

Mother presses a cheek to Abigail's while Father hugs her, then my nephew, Samuel, demands the same. "Abby! It's me!" he shouts.

"Don't be childish," Rodney whispers from behind me. *What?! I didn't say or do anything! Shut up!*

"Thank you, Abigail, for helping look out for Stella," says Stuart, clasping Abigail's hand in both of his. Abigail just looks confused.

Stella was examined by a doctor immediately after the reception, and although it's too early to confirm anything, the doctor said there's a high chance she may be pregnant. Samuel will soon be four, and while my parents have refrained, others have been gossiping about why my brother and his wife have yet to conceive their second child. So I suppose the pregnancy comes as good news for them.

Stella is all smiles as she brushes her cheek against Abigail's. "Oh, I wonder if being protective runs in the blood of these Drewett men," she chuckles. "My pregnancy with Samuel was an easy one; this shouldn't be any different."

Abigail tilts her head to one side. "This baby has significant magical prowess. It's hard to get yuthrina leaves around here this time of year. Will Lord Stuart go somewhere to get them?"

"...Huh?"

"Lady Stella, you don't have enough magical prowess, so you may become too weak to support the baby as it gets bigger. You have to eat some yuthrina leaves."

"Wait, what? Lady Abigail, what's that about yuthrina? Huh?"

Abigail isn't wrong. I've heard of pregnancies being difficult when the fetus possesses too much magical energy for the mother to handle.

...She has that look on her face again, her voice far away and detached. Stella is clearly intimidated. "You'll die if you don't eat them, Lady Stella."

"Abby!" I pick my wife up, and with a sigh, she returns to her usual self. "Do you mean the weed that grows everywhere in summer, that yuthrina?"

"Yes. Male monsters look for it for their mates too. This time of year, it can be found, hmm, at the foot of that mountain," she

says as she points southward. We all turn to see Mount Rossally in the distance, a roughly four-day carriage ride away.

"If Stella eats those, the baby will be born safely?" asks Stuart.

"That's what it does." She nods.

"I see… Thanks for letting us know."

I kiss the top of her head, and she huffs in satisfaction.

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**ABIGAIL** seems happy as she gazes through the carriage window, munching on a tasty-looking nutty marshmallow bar from Stella.

We delayed our departure somewhat to get more information on yuthrina leaves—how they should be prepared, for example, and how many are needed—but we should still reach our rest stop in time. Because she'd assumed that ingesting yuthrina was common among humans, Abigail was taken aback by Stuart's barrage of questions.

That significant differences in magical prowess between couples or mother and child can lead to difficulties in conception and childbirth is well known. While such an imbalance isn't a big issue for commoners since most of them possess no magic, it poses a more serious risk to the nobility, who consider the matter quite important. Despite that, we'd never found a solution. To think all we needed was a small local weed. Our ignorance makes sense though: no self-respecting noble wants to get caught eating random plants with no known medicinal value.

Of course, we won't know whether the remedy is beneficial until the baby is born, but we all trust Abigail's judgement. If the efficacy of yuthrina is proven by Stella's safe pregnancy and childbirth, an uproar among the aristocracy is inevitable…but I'm sure my parents will sort it out somehow… *I hope.*

I'm twirling a strand of shiny red hair around my finger when Abigail, sitting in my lap, suddenly looks up as though she's thought of something.

"My lord."

"Hmm?"

"When do humans go into heat?"

"Whaaa?!"

I thought she'd been properly educated?! *What the heck did she learn at Longhurst?!*

# Chapter Three: Humans Don’t Go into Heat or Clone Themselves

**THERE’S** a baby in Lady Stella’s tummy, which means she was in heat. And judging by the amount of magical energy inside her, it happened a few days ago? So if my lord husband or I go into heat sometime as well, that wouldn’t be so strange, I think. Though I truly have no idea.

The Monster King didn’t have a mate or anything like that and thus never bothered. Perhaps that’s why I’m clueless. But I suspect my lord husband will know.

“When do humans go into heat?”

“Whaaa?!” His gaze darts one way and then the other, and he appears to be having difficulty speaking. *Maybe he’s deep in thought.* I munch on the marshmallow bar Lady Stella gave me and wait. The bar is chewy, crunchy, and sweet. So delicious.

…*Actually, I was born around this time too*, I realize. My lord husband said that we’ll be celebrating my birthday in the port town we’re heading toward. The year previous, we’d just married and my body was still weak, so I had only a small birthday feast. Even that was shockingly grand in my eyes though, and I learned for the first time that birthdays are meant to be celebrated.

I’ve retained clear memories of my life since birth, so I remember how Mother screamed and fainted at first sight of me, and how the earl and the others didn’t seem too pleased either. For that reason, I always assumed birthdays weren’t celebratory events. *I wonder what type of feast we’ll have this year.* Since the town is a port, maybe I’ll have a cake made of fish.

The thought of brand-new food is tempting—*but no, we’re on the topic of heat*. I’ve discovered that humans experience a gestation period of over nine months, which is really long. When I consider the birth dates of myself and my lord husband, I can conclude that humans go into heat at different times. The breeding season for most monsters is autumn, yet there are some outliers. Some stronger monsters reproduce only once every ten

years, while weaker ones are in heat several times a year. *I wonder what it's like for humans.* My tutor at Longhurst taught me about coitus but never mentioned anything about going into heat.

"Erm, Abigail?"

"Yes!"

My lord husband shifts, repositioning me on his lap until I'm sitting sideways. His ears are slightly red, and when I reach up to touch them, he pushes my hand aside and grasps it in his. His other hand supports my waist, and his eyes are serious as he looks at me. "Humans don't go into heat."

"No?!"

"I mean, there's no set timing for it. Erm, yes, I'd say it's not a specific period, and we can do it anyti—"

"Humans are always in heat?!"

"Technically yes, but…"

Childbirth is a wife's job. I learned that at Longhurst. So if humans are always in heat… *Wait!*

"My lord! Why am I not reproducing?!"

"No, wait! Please wait!" He pulls me close and groans into the top of my head. "Slowly! Let's take this step by step, yeah?!"

*Step by step?*

"You said you received marital education, so you must know we haven't put anything you've learned into practice yet, right?"

"I thought there must have been some mistake…"

"Th-There's been no mistake. To put it delicately, unless we do what you've learned, there won't be children…"

"But some monsters can split into two even without mating."

"H-Huh? D-Did you learn about that? Well, humans don't have that ability."

"I see…"

I thought humans could reproduce in different ways, and evidently I was wrong. In that case, why haven't my lord husband and I mated? Aren't I his wife? But before I can ask, he hugs me again, squeezing my face against his chest.

"Humans don't mate just to reproduce." I look up at him, and he gives me a peck on the lips. "Do you remember how we talked about loving and being loved?"

"Yes!"

“Not all, but most humans need love… Argh, this is impossible to explain.” He presses his forehead against mine and goes quiet as if deep in thought once more. After a while, he grunts and nods, then meets my eyes again. “It doesn’t matter what other humans do or think. Abby, I don’t need to have children. I love you—that’s why I wish to mate with you.”

“Yes!”

“Y-Yes. Besides, your body is still weak.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yes, but traveling like this puts too much strain on it.”

“Strain on my body…”

“Y-Yes. Think of it this way: I treasure your body and health, so I don’t want to stress it too much. I—”

His sentence is cut short as the carriage jolts and I’m tossed into the air. He quickly grabs me and pulls me back onto his lap, where I feel something hard against my behind. Strange. I don’t normally sit there.

“W-Wait. Don’t move!” My lord husband remains still for a moment, then adjusts my position. *Oh, there it is. My usual spot.*

“All right… Let’s continue this conversation in Orta.”

“Yes!”

As the carriage trundles forward, I hear him muttering about something being not quite right, but he brushes me off when I ask about it.

Anyway, we’ll be doing coitus once we reach our destination!

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**ACCORDING** to my lord husband, we should arrive in the port town of Orta around noon if all goes well. Orta is hemmed by a crescent-shaped bay on one side and a small mountain range on the other. Our carriage is slowly winding along a valley road that cuts between the mountains.

My lord husband and I occupy the middle carriage, Tabitha and Rodney share the one in front, and a supply wagon transports our luggage at the back. Five guards ride beside us on horseback. The road is wide enough for two carriages to pass side by side, designed for merchants’ convenience, I’ve heard. Thick trees coat

the slopes of the valley, hiding whatever may lurk in its depths. I stare into the forest as we roll along. I know mountains and forests well but have never been to this one!

"You've not moved for quite some time. Aren't your legs numb?"

"Yes! But I'm being a lookout!"

The reflection of my lord husband in the windowpane puts down his stack of documents and turns to me. I'm no longer seated on his lap but kneeling by the carriage window. It's the best spot for surveillance. I've even removed my shoes to tuck my feet beneath me.

"Whatever are you on the lookout for?" he chuckles. He places his hands on the windowsill, caging me between them.

"There are humans running alongside us in the forest."

"Huh?"

The road isn't as grand as those in Drewett or the royal capital but is still well maintained, so our carriages are traveling at a speedy clip. Despite that, the humans have matched our pace for a while. They must be running really fast.

"Where?"

"It's too dark. You can't see them, my lord."

"What about you?"

"I can't see them either, but I know they're there. And they're not monsters, so they must be human. There's three of them."

"Hmm…" He rests his chin on the top of my head and starts to twirl a lock of my hair around his finger, deep in thought. I can feel his warmth on my back and begin to grow sleepy… No, I'm supposed to keep watch. The humans are running the way monsters chase their prey.

I continue my lookout until we reach our rest stop, a clearing large enough for several carriages to park. I don my shoes as my lord husband steps from the carriage, then he closes the door before I can follow. I pull on the handle, but the door doesn't budge, and when I glance outside, I see my lord husband holding it shut. I move to the opposite door. It opens, and Tabitha enters, smiling.

"Wait here with me, won't you, my lady?"

I suppose I have no choice. I always listen to Tabitha. I take off my shoes and resume my watch.

At my lord husband's command, the guards disperse into the forest. They soon reemerge, dragging three humans bound in rope. The guards served at Drewett Manor before their reassignment to the Noel household soon after I arrived, so no wonder they're so amazing.

My lord husband and Rodney had been waiting on either side of our carriage, and they reconvene to face the arrivals. I wonder if I can join them. *Oh, they're looking at me.* But wait, they've swiveled forward again and are burying their faces in the crook of their elbows. The guards have averted their gazes as well.

"Please step away from the window, my lady," Tabitha calls gently, and I turn to her. She dabs my lips and cheeks with a handkerchief, then shifts to wipe the windowpane too. *Wow, she cleans so quickly.* I realize that I'd been pressing my face and mouth against the glass. I've made a mistake.

Finally, my lord husband comes to escort me from the carriage. After I take his hand and step to the ground, I spot an unfamiliar supply wagon and a man who appears to be a merchant near the edge of the clearing. He glances anxiously at us as he prepares to leave, though the fire he kindled has yet to be doused. Will he put it out? *That's dangerous.*

"Are these the three you saw?" my lord husband asks.

"Yes! No mistake!"

"They're surprisingly bad at this," comments Rodney casually. He stands between us and the three bound humans, who've been pushed into a pile by the surrounding guards. "They attacked before our people could even ask any questions, so they're definitely up to no good."

"They do look shabby, though their weapons and clothes don't seem like those of bandits…" observes my lord husband.

"They don't seem like commoners who have fallen on hard times either. Since they attacked a noble's retinue, we can hand them over to the constables in the next town. What do you think, Master?"

"I'd like to know why they were following us first. Question them… Abby, wait over there, will you?"

Before my lord husband can usher me away, one of the bound humans screams. "Golden eyes! You monster in human skin! It's all your faul— Gaargh!"

The human falls to the ground with a yell as my lord husband kicks him. *Oh?* Wasn't he just tugging on my hand? *Wow, he moves so fast; it's incredible.*

"What's this? You from Longhurst?" he demands as he steps on the man's throat, prompting the others to start shouting as well.

"Golden eyes!"

"Disgusting!"

"Filthy!"

"You've all been deceived!"

"Kill her!"

At the last statement, my lord husband raises his sheathed sword and strikes them.

"Let's get back into the carriage, my lady."

I accept Tabitha's hand, but then a bitter, pungent smell on the wind assails my nose, sticking to the back of my throat. It's coming from where I last saw the merchant, and I turn to the sound of thunderous hooves echoing toward me.

"My lady!"

Short, dark brown fur fills my vision as I hear Tabitha cry out.

An arm slams into my stomach. I gasp.

The world spins and I glimpse the ground, the clouds in the sky, the lush green trees, Tabitha reaching for me as she falls, my lord husband and the others dashing in our direction.

"My lord…"

The dark brown fur must belong to a horse. Its rider yanks me upward.

"Abigail!"

"My lord! Please put out the fire!" I yell.

*You can't leave a fire burning near the forest!*

The merchant, or maybe not merchant as I can't be sure, drapes me across the horse's back like dried meat, pinning me down so I'm not hurled off. I almost am anyway, and my stomach bounces and lurches with the horse's every stride.

"Abigail! Jump!"

"Yes!"

My lord husband's voice sounds surprisingly close, then I hear the rider shriek, and the pressure on my back lessens. What feels like large drops of rain spatter me as I obey my lord husband; I

push off with my knees and leap into the air! My current body doesn't have wings, but I try!

A floating sensation overcomes me, almost as if I do have wings, then turns into something firm and stable.

It's my favorite place: my lord husband's arms.

"Abby! Abby, are you hurt?" His fingers are icy, trembling as they caress my cheek. He's sweating but also cold. I don't think he's exerted himself as much as he does during training, yet he's sweating so much.

He repeats my name again and again, stroking my cheek, and it finally dawns on me. *This is it! He must be hurting there again.* He once told me that he feels hurt when I'm hurt. I'm not hurt, but he must think I am. I reach out to touch his chest.

"I'm not hurt! I'm fine! We need to put out the fire, my lord!" I crane my neck to look over his shoulder at the maybe not a merchant's fire and spy only Rodney, who smiles. *Oh, he's put out the fire.* The dirt around it looks dark and wet. He must have used water magic.

I extend my senses, probing the silent forest. "There are only six monsters heading this way, my lord. Nothing to worry about. You can leave it to me."

"Whaaa?!"

Despite my assurance, my lord husband hurries Tabitha and me into the carriage.

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**AS** Abigail predicted, six crazed monsters soon barreled out of the forest. Dry grass foxes live near the edge of woodlands where the greenery isn't as thick, so they're skilled at stalking prey and don't typically charge into the open. Though the five guards and I dispatched them easily, we had a harder time than I expected. Frenzied and desperate, the monsters cared nothing for their survival, so their attacks were more vicious than usual.

"My lord!"

Abigail runs to us as I wipe the monster blood from my sword with a rag Rodney provided. Her previous dress, stained with the blood of the scoundrel who attempted to abduct her, has been

replaced with a clean, simple frock. Her face and hair have been washed and brushed too. Casually leaping over the pools of gore on the ground, she careens toward me. I raise my arms in front of my chest to signal her to stop, and she does instantly, bouncing in place.

"You've just gotten clean. Let me change first before you come over."

"Yes! Tabitha! Tabitha! My lord would like to change!" She pivots back toward the supply wagon, jumping over the Longhurst men as if they're nothing more than a spreading puddle of blood. The monsters attacked them as well, so they are seriously injured and weakening fast. In contrast, Abigail appears fine, certainly not like someone who's just vaulted off a galloping horse.

I glance at Tabitha standing by the wagon. I know that she has predicted my next move and will keep Abigail busy searching for a new set of clothes for me. Although I know Abigail wouldn't mind, I'd rather not have my wife witness what I'm about to do.

"Now, you better speak up while you still can. Depending on what you say, I may consider healing you."

One of the men is already dead, his throat torn out by the dry grass foxes, while the other two have lost an arm and leg each. His death was unavoidable since we had no intention of aiding or protecting them during the battle. And given their current state, I can bait the survivors with healing magic and trust that they'll speak the truth.

Either way, I doubt the trio were working with the merchant who tried to kidnap Abigail. To risk their lives by being near us when he burned the summoning blooms would be extremely foolish.

"Maybe you should have kept the merchant alive instead of this bunch, Master..."

"Out of the question."

"Oh, Master, when it comes to the lady, you're just... Well, guess it can't be helped," Rodney mutters.

I cluck my tongue in annoyance. Does he expect me to remain rational when my wife is abducted right in front of me? *Well, I guess I might have reacted that way a year ago.*

My blade had swung out before I knew what was happening as I yelled at my wife to jump—and to see her do exactly that

without a shred of hesitation… How could I ever let anyone take someone so remarkable as her away from me?

As for the merchant, his right arm was wholly severed at the shoulder, and he tumbled off his horse and died quickly.

The men bound before me are easy to understand. Judging by how Abigail was treated back at Longhurst merely for having golden eyes, I can guess why they wish to kill her. And naturally, I won't allow that. But why would anyone want to kidnap her?

She greatly contributed to the management of Longhurst, that is true. But it is not common knowledge. Yes, she predicted disasters and devised prevention measures, but she forged the earl's signature on each document, so I suspect only the smallest inner circle of his assistants knew about her and what she was doing. And the royal family has since annexed Longhurst and would have appointed people from the capital to assume management of the territory. Therefore, even if there are people who know Abigail's abilities and wish to reclaim her, they're no longer in any position to do so.

"Longhurst really is a cursed land," I grumble.

The guards come over to report that they've dug a hole with earth magic and have dumped the bodies of the monsters and the two dead men inside. I tell them to add the two survivors as well. Their injuries are too severe for any healer, even the best in Father's service, to fix. I'll just have to burn everything and bury the remains.

After all, leaving monster carcasses lying around is the fastest way to attract more of the creatures.

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**"I** smell something strange, my lord."

"Huh?"

The moment we leave the valley, a strange odor I've never smelled before drifts into our carriage. I open the window and inhale, and for some reason, my lord husband panics, pressing his face into and sniffing his underarms.

The scent on the wind is growing stronger.

“What is it?” I muse. “Hmm, it’s salty…? But it doesn’t smell like soup at all.”

“O-Oh, I see. It must be the smell of the sea. We’re still a while away though; your sense of smell is really good.”

“The sea!”

My lord husband moves to sit at my back, and we gaze out the window together. “Yes. We’ll soon reach a peak where you can get a great view. Wait, you’ve taken your shoes off again?”

“Because I have to be the lookout!”

It isn’t long before the great view appears. The wall of trees parts and I glimpse a town shaped like a bowl, the sky in the distance, and in between…

“Water! My lord! It’s water!”

“It’s the sea.”

“Wow!”

The Monster King’s forest had a large lake, yet there’s so much more water in the sea. I can’t even see the other shore, just white clouds floating between the sky and water.

Our carriage is still high enough in altitude that we can survey the town before us. Short buildings of white stone are packed tightly in rows, with many wide stripes winding between them and then to the sea. The wind blowing through the window feels humid and a little sticky.

And those things floating near the edge of the crescent-shaped bay must be ships. I’ve seen them in my encyclopedia before. My lord husband points to one end of the bay.

“Our villa is near that cape. There’s also a sandy beach. Would you like to take a walk when we get there?”

“Yes!”

A sandy beach is surely full of sand. I wonder if there’s salmon too.

🎂🎂🎂

**OUR** carriage traces the outskirts of town until we reach the villa. While Tabitha and the others unload our luggage, my lord husband and I visit the sandy beach. It really is full of sand. Some

areas have lots of rocks too, and Tabitha's warned him not to bring me there as it is dangerous.

"My lord! My feet are heavy!"

"That's why I said I'd carry you."

The sand weighs down my feet and legs, but my lord husband holds my hand firmly so— "I'm fine! My lord! I want to go near the sea!"

He chuckles and nods, then pulls on my hand. Sand becomes much easier to walk on once a little wet.

"I want to go closer, my lord."

"Wait here."

"But the salmon won't come unless I— Oh! It's come closer! The sea is coming!"

Waves occurred on the forest lake as well, but the ones on the sea are bigger and more frequent, reaching up the beach almost to our shoes before slipping away again. I try to chase one but am caught around the waist.

"Salmon don't live in such shallow water, Abby."

"Oh! But dinner..."

"Were you really thinking of catching fish? Look, the sun's already setting, so the water will get cold. Let's not do that today, all right?"

Since we've just arrived, my lord husband has decided that we'll have dinner at an eatery in town. I suppose he's right: if salmon prefer deep water, I may take too long to find them. The restaurant is one he went to many times as a child, and it's popular with the locals as well due to its delicious food.

Since it's still spring, the sun has already begun to set, and the wind is starting to chill. But I'm okay because I listened to Tabitha and put on a cape. The sun reddens as it sinks downward.

My lord husband narrows his eyes against the glare as his fingers comb absently through my hair, tucking windblown strands back into place. "Look. The sea and sky and sun are all red and gold like they're burning... Just like your colors."

He kisses my hair, then my eyelids. I want to bounce with happiness, but the sand slows my feet so I can't do it well.

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**THE** wide, round eyes stare at me, and I stare back.

Well, they can't be staring at me because they've already been cooked, yet they seem so lost, as though they don't know where else to look and are all watching me. They—the eight fish whose heads protrude from the pie—are herring, a seasonal fish available only that time of year. The dish is called stargazy pie, a food served in hopes of bountiful marine catches. But they glare at me, challenging me, from the pie in the middle of the table.

"They must be in season now… Hey, wait! They're just for decoration." My lord husband stops me before I can pierce one of the herring heads with my fork. He quickly removes the head, then cuts the pie, serving a wedge to me. *Just for decoration…?*

"Don't humans eat fish heads, my lord?"

"They're edible, but they're hard, so not delicious."

That's right. At home and in Drewett, fish is always served without the heads. The Monster King used to eat fish whole, and the heads had a nice chewy texture. But maybe they are too hard for a human jaw to handle. I slice into the pie and take a bite. Hiding under the crunchy crust are moist and soft potatoes! Smooth mashed potatoes flavored with bacon. And onions and leaves too! They all meld together with the flaky fish in my mouth.

"…Is it tasty?"

"Yes! …Oh? You don't have much, my lord. I'll give you some! Here!"

"Ah! Wait, no! We don't eat the heads! Not the heads, Abigail?!"

I know my lord husband usually eats much more than me, yet his serving looks smaller than half of mine, so I shovel some more onto his plate.

"Is it tasty?!"

"Y-Yes. Thanks." He turns the herring head so it faces away from him. After a small bite, he smiles at me. I swallow another mouthful. *It's so delicious!*

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**WHEN** I enter the master bedroom after my bath, Abigail is nowhere to be found.

A night breeze whispers through a pair of windows that open to a terrace with a panoramic view of the sea.

“Abigail?”

The moonlight adds a touch of silver to her red hair, and her thin nightgown flutters in the light wind. Although her hands rest on the railing, she isn’t leaning forward but merely standing and staring at the horizon.

I grab a robe from the room and place it over her slender shoulders. “The sea breeze is cold, isn’t it?” I ask as I embrace her.

“My lord.” Like the moon, her golden eyes glow with a quiet light. “It sounds just like the forest.”

“The forest?”

“Yes. The Monster King’s forest. Like the sound of the wind through the leaves.”

Her gaze appears unfocused, faraway. After a moment, it returns to mine, and she leans back into my chest, which I happily interpret as a show of her trust and security with me. She always seems as though she’s somewhere else when she speaks about the Monster King, and her delicate, fragile body feels almost insubstantial, filling me with anxiety.

“The Monster King had wings, so it sometimes flew above the forest. The never-ending sea of trees would ripple in the wind, look, just like those sparkling waves there.”

The moon is bright, and the crashing waves reflect a shining lapis lazuli.

Abigail claims not to remember the Monster King’s emotions and thoughts, yet when she describes what it saw, she speaks as if from its perspective, of its experience.

She presses her cheek into the arm I’ve wrapped around her, like a child searching for a comfortable spot on her bed. Her hand finds the magic sapphire hanging around her neck, then those golden eyes lift to me once more.

“The color along the curve of the moon, and the color of the sea between the waves. That’s your color, my lord.” She holds my gaze, peering closer as she tilts her head. “And the color of spring water in the forest. Reflecting the blue of the sky like a mirror, mixed with a little of the green of baby leaves.”

The eyes of those who possess great magical prowess are said to flicker like flames as they shift between shades. In fact, the

greater the change between hues, the greater the admiration of the power-obsessed nobility. So others have praised my eyes before. *I should be used to it by now.*

"The Monster King often looked up at the sky or into the water," Abigail says. "It would look for a long time, so long that it forgot to eat. Oh, but if any monster attacked it, it would eat it in one gulp."

"O-Oh."

"I like sparkly and shiny things, so the Monster King might have too… What's wrong, my lord?"

"Oh… No, it's nothing."

I know she loves the magic sapphire because it's my color. She maintains that she doesn't understand the concept of beauty, yet she speaks very bluntly about her likes and dislikes, which sometimes surprises—and embarrasses—me. *If only my face didn't feel so hot!*

Thankfully, the sea breeze caresses my cheeks, cooling them. I look once more into Abigail's golden eyes as she gazes up at me, noting the way the rich color shifts and wavers. It's hard to tell since gold varies little in shade, but I'm sure the magical energy contained within her tiny body is stronger and greater than mine. That was one of the reasons I believed her when she professed herself the Monster King's reincarnation, because I could sense immense power in her. And if her claim is true, then magical prowess is linked to one's soul.

"I'm looking for a magic stone of your color," I confess.

"A magic stone of my color?"

"Yes. A magical gemstone will suit your color more than metal. And when I find it, hmm… I can't wear a ring since I have to wield my sword, but I can make it into an earring."

"Then you can wear my color, just like how I'm wearing yours."

"Yes. Because I'm your husband. But it's hard to find a stone with a color as beautiful as yours."

"Beautiful?"

She received only criticism and hatred at Longhurst for her eyes, never a compliment. Of course, Tabitha and Mother have repeatedly told her that she is beautiful, and I haven't been stingy with my words either. Despite all that, she doesn't seem to truly understand.

But the incident that afternoon demonstrated the depth of abuse she endured daily as a child. If I'd been subjected to that, I suppose I wouldn't know how to appreciate beauty either.

Even so, I wonder if she's capable of learning to love her own color in the same way she's come to love mine.

"My lord." Her voice is low, and a small frown materializes on her face.

My heart starts to pound. In spite of the attack earlier that day, she acted as usual. A normal person would be left hurt and afraid after such vicious verbal assault. I pull her closer, shielding her from the cold wind. "What is it?"

"I just can't sense the salmon at all."

"...Salmon?"

"Yes. I can sense mountains and forests well, but not the sea. I mean, I can more or less determine the location of what I think are monsters, but salmon is hard."

"O-Oh. Well... That's a shame...?"

She sighs, a rare note of disappointment in her voice. *I see.* So she was merely searching for salmon. Because she loves it smoked and as jerky. *She did say salmon is amazing.*

"Yes... I wanted to catch ten."

"That many?"

"For me and you, my lord, and Tabitha and Rodney and the guards and the coachman."

"Not everyone needs a salmon, Abby."

"No?"

I allow relief to flood my chest as I hug her soft, slim body again. My sides begin to ache with suppressed laughter. One salmon for each person? What a thought.

"Th-That's right, shall we go on a ship tomorrow? I don't think we'll be able to get very far out, but it'll be nice."

"A ship?! Oh! Like that one over there?!"

"Yes. We also have ships the family uses for business."

"Wow... I've never been on a ship!"

She continues to mutter "wow" adorably under her breath, and I hold on to her in case she starts to bounce in excitement.

"Tomorrow, right? We'll go on the ship tomorrow?!"

"Yes, if the weather is nice."

“It will be! The weather will be nice tomorrow! Do I need to wake early?!”

“Yes, sure.”

*Oh, my little chick is so cute.*

“Then I need to sleep early! My lord! Let’s go to bed! Let’s do coitus!”

“Yes, of co— Wait, whaaa?”

I’m tugged back into the bedroom and seated on the bed. Abigail leaps up beside me and sits primly on her knees, arms outstretched. “As your wife, I just have to leave it all to you, my lord! That’s what I’ve learned! So go ahead!”

Yes. My wife is really cute. And intense. I should have known.

# Chapter Four: Souvenirs Are Fun Because It’s Like Saying “I’m Home”

**THE** rushing of the wind is pleasant in my ears.

It reminds me of the times I spent curled up sleeping in the forest, though the soft cries of the birds are unfamiliar, as is the smell of the air. Humid and sticky yet warm and fluffy as it surrounds me. My body feels relaxed and comfortable as if I’m swaying in a gentle breeze.

“…Hmm, are you awake? It’s not yet dawn,” a low voice, raspy with sleep, says from above my head as I stir.

The warmth I’m feeling must be my lord husband, maybe because I’m not wearing my usual pajamas. I rub my cheek against his smooth and supple skin, and it comes away wet. I’ve drooled! *My mouth is being rude again!*

I wipe his shoulder and arm with the edge of the comforter—and he bursts out laughing, so I suppose I’ve been found out.

“My lord.”

“Call me Gerald.”

“…Gerald.”

“Yes, what is it?”

He has told me to address him as Gerald in private, and I simply can’t get used to the name. After all, he is my lord husband, and I his wife.

I press my forehead to his so I can look into his blue eyes. They are softer than usual. *Maybe he’s still sleepy.* We retired early but ended up sleeping late.

“We’re going on the ship,” I recall.

“You remember… Yes, try standing up.”

“Yes!”

He unwraps his arms and I roll to the edge of the bed, intending to rise. Instead, I find myself on the floor.

“That’s what I thought,” he chuckles as he picks me up and returns to the bed.

“How strange, my lord. My legs feel so weak.”

“I told you it would stress your body.”

“Stress.”

He adjusts the comforter to cover my shoulders. “Yes, that’s right.” He pats me on the head, then shifts to slot it over his shoulder before nestling his cheek against my hair. “Let’s sleep a little longer. We can go on the ship tomorrow.”

He brushes his lips over mine and pats my head again. My body begins to relax once more, and… *Huh?*

“Something just rubbed against me, my lord.”

“Don’t worry about that. If you feel better later, shall we go to the market?”

“The market!”

“Then you should rest your body first.”

“Yes!”

My lord husband starts to stroke my hair. I feel all warm and fluffy and excited to visit the market. My good mood quickly lulls me to sleep.

*I wonder if this market will have urchins and sea cucumbers as well…*

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**WHEN** I next wake is almost noon, so I fear I’ve missed breakfast, but Tabitha brings it to me. My lord husband, clad in his robe, seems to be in a good mood for some reason; he hums as he sets up a tray table. I’m also somehow in my nightgown once more. I try to hum along, which makes him laugh, and he selects a flower candy from the side table and feeds it to me. He always ensures that our room is stocked with them, the candies protected by a glass cloche, and although I’m fed one every day, they never seem any fewer. Tabitha is also smiling as she lays bread, soup, and fruit on my tray.

*Oh! That’s right!*

“Tabitha! Tabitha! We’ve done coitus!”

“A-Abby!” splutters my lord husband.

“Oh my, oh my! That’s nice.”

“But it was different from what I’ve lear—”

“Abby! Wanna try this?! A banana?!” shouts my lord husband, brandishing a long, thin, yellow object.

“Banana?”

*Is it a fruit?* It has an unfamiliar sweet scent. My lord husband explains that there is a specific way to eat it and shows me how to peel off its thick skin. *That looks easy.* The skin appears dense and inedible; how convenient that it can be removed so effortlessly.

Tabitha is staring at my lord husband, and he ignores her as he picks up the white fruit inside and offers me a bite. How fluffy! And it’s so smooth and sweet on the tongue!

“Is it delicious?”

I nod before a second bite. *It’s tasty!*

“Master Gerry,” begins Tabitha. “I never imagined that you’d be so vulga—”

“I wouldn’t. Just, tropical fruits like this were always imported dried until technological advances shortened voyage times, so they can now be shipped fresh. I’ve merely been involved as part of Drewett’s business affairs.”

“Is that your job, my lord?!” I ask.

“If you like it, I’ll arrange to have some delivered to our home in the capital.”

“Yes! Then Ethan can try it too! I want to try peeling the skin, my lord.”

“Breakfast first, my lady,” insists Tabitha. I still have half a banana left, but I must eat the bread, omelet, and soup first. I have to listen to Tabitha.

After breakfast, I finish the banana but am too full to eat another, so my lord husband lets me peel his instead. It’s so easy!

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**ABIGAIL** begins to nod off while sipping her breakfast tea, so I put her back in bed. When I return to my private quarters, I find a suspicious Tabitha and an eager Rodney waiting for me.

“We did things the normal way! I wouldn’t do anything vulgar!”

“The lady is very studious; she’s learned well from her books. So when she says it was different…?”

“Of course it’ll be different from the book! Don’t make me spell it out! It’s not something I want to discuss with my mothe—… I mean… Aaarghhh!”

“Oh my… Oh my.” Mumbling under her breath, Tabitha quietly exits the room before I can say more. I fall onto the sofa, hiding my face in my hands. Tabitha was my nursemaid, so of course I naturally regard her as a second mother. That said, I’ve always been able to maintain our master-servant relationship. Never before have I let slip any language referring to her maternal role in my life.



Rodney grins as he sets a steaming cup of coffee in front of me.

“…Shut up.”

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“Your presence is too loud. And stop grinning.”

“That’s mean. I’m just happy for my best buddy… Hey!” He catches the cushion I’ve hurled at him with ease, then holds up several documents in his other hand. “Congratulations on fulfilling a long-held wish, Master.”

“What do you mean, long-held wish?!”

“Well, the lady did mention something different…”

“You’re all mistaken! We did things normally!”

“Oh?”

“Shut up! Give me those reports!”

His grin vanishes as he passes me the papers. I skim through them, and they confirm what I already know, that Longhurst is under the management of officials appointed by the crown.

“The messenger bird just delivered this from the old master. He was involved in the confiscation of Longhurst, so the information should be accurate.”

Father discussed the issue of Earl Longhurst and Abigail’s stepsister with me right after he submitted his initial report to the royal family, and the documents he’s sent show that nothing has changed since then.

So who would benefit from Abigail’s abduction? There has been no mention of any organized activity Longhurst. Even the three men who attacked us the day before were working separately from the merchant-abductor. Small gangs of people planning on their own are much more troublesome to deal with than a bigger, systemized group. If we can’t predict their next move, tracking them down or devising traps to capture them will be difficult.

“Continue investigating Longhurst. You can request Father’s men for help.”

“We’ll leave no stone unturned. I’ve also successfully arranged for more security. Five more guards from Drewett should join us soon.”

The moment we arrived at the villa, I wrote to Father for information on Longhurst and asked that he send more soldiers

from his private army. They have been with the family since I was a child, so I'm well acquainted with them and certain of their loyalty.

"In that case, we should be safe on the journey home… Send my apologies to the guards—I'll need everyone on duty at all times. Tell that to the new arrivals too."

Usually, three or so guards accompany us when we go about town or to the market, while the other two rest, thus rotating in duty. And although I'm confident that I'm strong enough to take on several attackers by myself, I must consider adding more men for the purpose of pursual and capture… That Abigail was taken from me, even if only for a moment, was my fault, and I never want to experience that again.

"Of course. The lady is very well-liked, and I hear there are quite a few men who've expressed interest in transferring to the Noel household."

"She's already my wife."

"I don't know what you're implying, Master…"

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**BECAUSE** I fell asleep after breakfast, we ended up staying inside all day. And when I finally woke, the sky was already dark…

But the following day is different! I managed to rise early, and we're currently standing on a ship. My first time on a ship!

"My lord, my lord! We're so far from the port, and there's still so much sea. Is it sea all the way over there too? When will we reach the other side?"

"There should be another landmass in that direction… It takes a few days by ship, so you won't see it even on tiptoe."

The land on the other side is called overseas. The ship sways as we sail, and my lord husband holds the deck railing with both hands, caging me safely within. I lower from my tiptoes and he bends to rest his chin atop my head. The vessel bobs gently, and we rock to and fro with it. It's fun, and I lean back against my lord husband.

I step to the right when the ship goes right and step to the left when it dips left… My lord husband stands with his feet slightly

apart and doesn't move at all. *Maybe I should place my feet wide like his?*

"...Abby, it's not a competition," he says. He wraps an arm around my waist and lifts me up. "Look, they're hauling up the nets." With a chuckle, he turns us to face the rear of the boat just in time to see the raised net deposit its contents all over the deck. There are so many things! I don't know what any of them are, and they're all dripping wet!

"My lord, my lord!"

"Yes, yes. Don't run."

A large fish flops wetly on the deck as if trying to escape, yet it has nowhere to go.

"...Please put that into the wooden crate over there, Abby."

"Yes!" I grip the fish with both hands and place it in a crate that the other crew members are tossing fish into.

"Y-You really got yourself a nice one there, my lady..."

"And the biggest one too..."

I acknowledge the crew's praise with a nod, then turn to my lord husband, who grabs the towel offered by Tabitha to wipe my chest and stomach. Tabitha soon takes over to blot each of my hands dry. Rodney is doubled over.

"Which one is salmon, my lord?" I ask.

"Well, let's see... Hey, you, which one is salm— Abby?"

I've spotted something amazing. It's slimy and slippery with many legs that extend everywhere. The legs writhe, then latch onto the floor, the creature pulling itself along. *Legs, legs, legs.* Eight of them? I crouch to peer under its sagging head. It seems to have two eyes. The Monster King had more.

"My lord, is this the Monster King of the sea?"

"It's an octopus."

"Octopus?" I've heard of that! I've eaten octopus carpaccio at the castle. *So this is it!* But that means it isn't the Monster King of the sea. I should have known. It was so easily captured and has fewer legs and eyes and no wings at all. *Oh, but...*

"Can the octopus swim, my lord? It doesn't have fins like fish do."

"Huh? Well, let's see... Hey, you!" My lord husband snags one of the crew.

“Y-Yes!” the sailor replies. “We didn’t get any salmon this time. And the octopus… Octopuses rides ocean currents, so I guess it can swim?”

*So there’s no salmon. And octopuses can swim.*

“I’ve not swum before, my lord. Can I swim if I try? Is it difficult? Can you swim, my lord?”

Although there was a large lake in the Monster King’s forest, I don’t think the Monster King swam. It could simply walk along the lake bottom. And I haven’t had the opportunity to swim since becoming Abigail.

“It’s not a competition, Abby… And it’s still cold this time of year. I’ll take you somewhere near home when it gets warmer and teach you then.”

“Yes! I can do it; you just have to teach me once! …I’m still sticky, my lord. Isn’t this water?”

“It’s seawater… Tabitha is fetching a damp towel, so just wait a moment.”

“Yes!” I try to kneel to examine more fish, and my lord husband pulls me backward. I don’t see any sea cucumbers or urchins at all.

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**I’M** surprised to find my feet stepping sideways of their own volition as we disembark onto the pier. “My lord! My legs are strange; they’re walking by themselves! Why?”

“That can happen when you get off a ship. Don’t fall over.” He pulls me close, his arm snaking around my waist.

We’ll be going to the market to have lunch. The one in Drewett was so lively, and Orta’s bustles as well with lots of humans with skin and hair colors I’ve never seen before. Back at the docks, a din of voices shouted and yelled in various foreign languages, and the market is no different. Back home, when I was taught about the territory, I learned that Orta’s port is a hub for both fishing and trade. I’m my lord husband’s wife, so I need to know that.

A fragrant, smoky aroma makes me feel hungry, and searching for the source, I see something amazing. “My lord! My

lord! It’s big! Big meat!”

“That’s *doner* kebab, a dish from somewhere far away. We do a lot of trade here, so there are probably some immigrants. It’s certainly something we don’t see anywhere else.”

“True,” Rodney agrees from behind us.

The meat is so large and impressive… What animal is it from, and which part? A cylindrical shape thicker than my torso, turning round and round on a skewer. Is that bone? No, it’s a metal rod. Why is it turning?

“My lord… Isn’t that too thick to—”

“It’s not a whole chunk, Abby. Many thin slices are seasoned and layered over each other to make it.”

That makes sense. No animal has such stout legs, so I thought it could have been monster meat. *But I guess not*. My lord husband orders, and the stall owner starts to shave off pieces with a knife. Wow! It’s coming off so smoothly. *It’s a hunk of thin slices being thinly sliced again!* The meat is bundled into a wrap of thin bread along with chopped vegetables. My lord husband gets two and passes one to me, then glances at Rodney.

Rodney appears to understand, turning to order wraps for himself and the guards. Seems like we’ll all be eating as we walk. *I can do that!* Tabitha returned to the villa after we docked the ship, so she won’t be around to chide me for bad etiquette!

The bread is thin yet soft, the vegetables crunchy, and the slices of meat chewy in a sweet and spicy sauce. It’s delicious! Even though it’s a little spicy, it’s still tasty!

“Abby, let’s sit over there to eat.” My lord husband looks disappointed as he plucks a piece of vegetable from my forehead.

*How did it get there?*

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**THE** guards normally don’t dine with us, but they currently have no downtime because I have us on high alert. We’re fortunate that they remain ready and vigilant even with a kebab in hand. Perhaps they’re used to eating on the go.

Noblewomen, however, typically don’t walk and eat, so I shouldn’t have allowed her to start. Especially since she got

vegetables on her forehead. That didn't happen the last time we simultaneously walked and ate—probably because I was feeding her. *It's strange. She eats very neatly, so how did it get there?* Regardless, I guide her to a nearby bench. She seems confused as well and tries to be more careful, yet in the short time to reach the bench, there are vegetables on her face again. *A complete mystery.*

"Abby, please sit and eat."

Her usual chirpy response is absent as she circles the bench in a dissatisfied manner. She can be stubborn at times, often when she fails to copy something that I do. But she's so cute that I can't possibly reprimand her, even when her behavior upsets Tabitha and I end up the target of a peevish glare. *But I just can't help it.*

"Oh, by the way, you've not tried candied strawberries before, have you?"

"Candied strawberries?!"

I nod to Rodney, and he heads off to buy some while Abigail finally settles beside me. The guards ring us, keeping a casual eye on the surrounds. I watch Abigail as she grips her kebab in both hands and takes a prim bite from one end with her tiny mouth.

Aside from a little shakiness after deboarding the ship, she seems back to her regular self after spending the whole of the previous day resting, for which I'm most thankful. Not stressing her out is my top priority, so I've held back in various ways. *...But if possible, it would be nice to do that again...*

"There, there, there, Master! You look very frightening," Rodney exclaims as he thrusts a wooden skewer of candied strawberries before my eyes.

"...Seriously?"

"Strawberry candy!"

"Seriously. The melancholy is overflowing."

"Strawberry candy, my lord!"

I don't think she noticed me. *She really loves strawberries.* Scrubbing at my face with one hand, I hand the stick to an excited Abigail and take the half-eaten doner kebab from her. The guards and I have already finished ours.

"Well, it's been a long wait. As a fellow man, I truly understand," prattles Rodney.

"You're really too noisy..."

"My lord! It's shiny! So shiny! Would you like some, my lord?"

“I’m good. You can have it all, Abby.”

“Yes!” She examines the strawberries, up and down and all around, then bites down on one with a crunch. The look of satisfaction on her face is truly adorable.

“Can you believe she’s my wife?”

“Yes, though I can’t believe some of the words coming out of your mouth lately, Master.”

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I lick the thin candy shell around the strawberry, then bite into it, exposing the crunchy, sour fruit within. My mouth, still full of sweetness, tingles with the sudden tart flavor. The sugary melted candy and refreshing acidity of the strawberry mix so well together! So tasty! But the treats are bite-size, and before long, they’re all gone.

I ponder, sucking the hardened candy remaining on the skewer. “What meat was on the kebab, my lord?”

“Hmm? Oh, well… Maybe mutton,” he answers, turning from Rodney.

Mutton is from sheep. I know that. I’ve seen sheep in my encyclopedia. And I also know that they are reared in areas of Drewett near where cows are raised, or at least so it appears on the map.

“Will we pass by any sheep on the way home? Are they in a different place than the cows? Or are they near each other?” En route to Orta, I noticed that real-life direction and distance differ from what I observe on maps, so I have to confirm that possibility with my lord husband. I know lots about forests and mountains when I’m in them, but farmland is different.

“They’re close, probably. Are they?”

“What are you saying, Master?” asks Rodney. “We saw the cows on our way here, right? The sheep are just in the next town over.”

“I-Idiot.”

If the sheep are nearby, maybe we can buy one as a souvenir. “Does Ethan like sheep too, my lord?”

“I knew that was coming…”

“Hm? What’s this about Father, my lady?”

“I thought Ethan would like the cow with delicious cheeks, but I’m certain he’ll like that big meat too.”

“Big meat? That doesn’t have to be mutton,” Rodney says. “But yes, I think he’ll like that. He’s a surprisingly big eater for his age.”

I swivel to my lord husband. “My lord?”

He looks serious, and although I’m still holding the skewer, he grasps my hand in both of his. “Abby, you can only choose one.”

“One?”

“Huh? What is this about?” queries Rodney.

“Cow or sheep. Only one.”

“One…”

*That’s hard. Which is better?* According to my encyclopedia, cows are bigger than sheep. But the cheeks are the most delicious part of the cow, and each cow has only a bit of cheek. As for the sheep… My lord husband and Rodney are whispering to each other. I wonder if Rodney prefers cows, but we’re getting a souvenir for Ethan, not him.

“The whole animal?! Did she say the whole animal?! Really?!” he squawks.

“Sh-Shut up! We just need to arrange for it to be delivered!”

“Are sheep fast, my lord?” I inquire.

“Are you planning to bring it along, my lady?!”

“I don’t know, Abby, but I can have it deliv—”

“Oh! No! I need to give him the souvenir when I announce I’m home!”

“No?! B-But even if we put the cow, or sheep, in the supply wago—”

“Because you always give me a souvenir the moment you reach home, my lord.”

I always look forward to his gift when he returns from work. Even when he buys the same sweets I eat at snack time, the ones I receive as souvenirs at the door taste different. They’re both delicious, yet different.

“Souvenirs are nice because they come at the same time as you, my lord.”

At that, my lord husband covers his face with both hands and presses his head back against the bench.

“The whole animal…” mutters Rodney again.

The guards aren’t looking at us, and their shoulders are trembling.

“…We still have time, so you can think it over,” my lord husband finally says.

“Yes!”

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**ALTHOUGH** the Noel household has fewer servants than the Drewetts’, there are still quite a number of them. The old gardener gives me candy, the chef lets me taste the dishes he’s cooking, and the kitchen and laundry maids share their snacks with me on their breaks. I only ever take a single bite though, because Tabitha will become upset if I get too full.

That’s why I need to find souvenirs for all the servants who stayed behind. Mother-in-Law says “being considerate” is part of a wife’s duties.

“My lord! How about those sparkly shells?!”

Swinging in the breeze, several seashells dangle on strings from the eaves of the market shops. Their insides shimmer with a rainbow iridescence as they sway to and fro. For some reason, most of the food stalls have such a display. Maybe it’s meant to signal something since they’re so sparkly.

The servants at home must love shiny and sparkly things too, because they always compliment my accessories as cute or beautiful.

“Oh, those…? Hmm, there should be a stall that sells seashell crafts,” my lord husband muses.

“Yes, of course,” the stall owner replies. “There are quite a few reputable ones.”

“But these are so sparkly, my lord.”

“I’m afraid they’re not for sale, Abby… Look, the shine helps keep birds away, so the shop will be in trouble if we take it. I’m sure the shells at the craft stall are sparkly too.”

“I see… All right!”

In the end, all the shells at the crafts stall look the same, so my lord husband and Rodney help me choose. My lord husband

wants to take everything, but Rodney says to pick one of each design. So I select the one right in front of me. It's perfect!

After that, we peruse some other shops, including one selling fabric from overseas, then head back to the beach. The sand is wet, so walking on it is easier. I stroll along, sure to keep away from the surf.

"It's dangerous, so don't go too near to the waves, Abby."

"Yes!"

Since I no longer have to struggle to walk, I'm not holding my lord husband's hand. I wanted to return to the shore because the crafts stall owner said that I can find shells there. If I find an amazing one, I'll give it to Tabitha. Although Rodney's accompanying us and therefore doesn't need a souvenir, he said he wants one too, so I'll look for him as well.

The beach stretches endlessly before us, and we're the only humans in sight. I don't know the sea as well as I know forests, yet I can still sense creatures and their location. A wave rolls in, then retreats, shifting the sand, and— *Oh!* I dash forward and grab it.

"I got it, my lord!" I jog back to my lord husband with my catch. It's bigger than my palm, though its shape makes it easy to hold. It resembles a bright red maple leaf like the ones in the Monster King's forest. Those trees are full of sweet syrup.

"That's a starfish… We're looking for shells, remember? Let's put that back."

"Oh, yes!"

Shells are hard, not squishy like the starfish. I've made a mistake. I toss it in the direction of the sea, and an incoming wave sweeps it away. *How nice.* Once more, I focus on searching for shells. *I'm good at sensing things that are alive*, I realize. *But shells are not alive.*

"…Are starfish easy to find?"

"Well… Probably for you, Abby."

"Oh."

I continue along the beach, eyes on the sand. I spy a hole and start to dig, and unearth something that looks like an earthworm, so that's not it. I cast it aside and Rodney yells in shock. Why? The guards stand at a distance, surrounding my lord husband, Rodney, and me, and as I promised my lord husband, I stay within their perimeter.

“Abby, come look over here.”

“Yes!”

I stare at the spot my lord husband is indicating and glimpse a shell half buried in the sand. It’s a deep pink color that lightens toward the edges and is about the size of my thumbnail.

“My lord! Here! Is this one cute?”

“Yes, it is cute.”

*I did it.* I found a cute shell, but… “It’s smaller than the ones we bought at the stall. I want to give Tabitha a bigger one. Maybe I should have gotten her one there.”

“In that case, can I have this one?”

“Is it okay? It’s not very big.”

“W-Well, it’s good enough as a souvenir to commemorate this trip.”

“Commemorate.” *What does that mean,* commemorate*?* I learned that we commemorate our kingdom’s founding. Is picking up a shell something to commemorate too? It doesn’t feel the same.

He notices my confusion. “Oh, erm… It’s my first time here with you, and this is the first cute shell you found. If we keep it, we’ll remember this moment every time we look at it, won’t we? That’s why it’s a commemoration.”

“Commemoration.”

I never forget anything, so I’m certain I can remember the moment even without the shell. I look up to see my lord husband’s soft gaze on me, the tips of his ears slightly red. I glance at the small sand-covered shell on my palm. It’s the same color as his ears. Rodney waits some feet away, fidgeting.

“Can we display the commemoration with the flower candies?”

“Oh, that’s a nice idea. Let’s decide how to do that when we get back?”

“Yes!”

My lord husband takes out his handkerchief and I place the shell on it. He folds it up carefully and tucks the bundle in his breast pocket, then gently brushes the sand off my hand. “Come, let’s head back. We’re celebrating your birthday tonight, Abby, so you’ll need an afternoon nap.”

“My birthday!”

*That's right.* We were supposed to celebrate the previous night, but since I slept the entire day, we're doing it this evening instead! I heard we'll be having a feast of all the fish we caught on the ship! The chef at the villa is a local who comes in only when the Drewett family visits, and apparently he is really good at cooking seafood. And the night will be extra special because Tabitha, Rodney, and the guards will all join in the feast as well!

My lord husband dusts the sand off my dress and offers me his hand.

Just then, a huge wave retreats into the sea, revealing—

"Ah! A crab!"

"Abby?!"

The wave has deposited a large crab on the sand! The creature is scuttling back into the sea, but I'm much faster!

I am about to grab it by the pincers when my lord husband, sprinting after me, whirls me up and away by the waist.

The sea rises before my eyes, much taller than my crouching lord husband. It crashes into us as he pulls me into him and twists to take the full impact on his back. Seawater engulfs us instantly and we spin head over heels. The air leaves my mouth with a cough. *Oh.* An urchin tumbles past us.

The wave carries us to the guards before leaving my lord husband sitting on the sand with his legs extended before him and me held tightly in his lap. The guards are all yelling in panic.

My lord husband gasps, then shouts from above my head, "Abby! Are you all right?"

"My lord! Huge scallops! Two of them!"

The crab I was chasing is gone, but I've snared two large scallops, one in each hand! I raise them high so my lord husband can see.

*I'll give these to Tabitha!*



# Chapter Five: Matching and Secrets Are Fun and Nice, I Know

**WE** return to the villa soaking wet and endure some nagging from Tabitha, then take a bath together.

I leave a napping Abigail and head to my private quarters, where I'm surprised to find Tabitha waiting for me with a serious expression on her face—she should be busy preparing for that night's celebration. She is holding a soft cloth in both hands, and when I enter, she raises it to chest height for me to see. Rodney, beside me, looks baffled, then his expression twists as he tries and barely succeeds to suppress his laughter.

"...What's this?"

"The scallops the lady gave to me... But look." Tabitha gently places the cloth on a low table, pausing as I take a seat on the sofa, before unfolding it to show its contents.

"Are those...pearls?"

"Yes. Each scallop contained one."

I stand to retrieve my gloves from the desk, then sit back down and pull them on. I pick up one of the pearls, roll it across my palm. I may not be an expert like Mother, but I was raised a nobleman and assist with the family business from time to time, so I can judge the approximate quality of precious items even if I don't necessarily appreciate them. I also know that scallops do occasionally produce pearls. *But these*...

"They look to be of high quality. They lack iridescence and aren't perfectly round, but they're well-formed and glossy to the eye."

The pearl in my hand is teardrop-shaped and smooth with no visible imperfections.

"I've heard that oddly shaped pearls have been gaining in popularity these days if used in jewelry with the right design," Rodney adds.

"Oh?"

“I appreciate the lady’s goodwill,” sighs Tabitha, “but I really can’t accept these, so please take them, Master.” She frowns, probably troubled by the thought of rejecting a gift from Abigail… Especially since Abigail dashed over so excitedly the moment we arrived back at the villa and proudly handed her prize to Tabitha before anyone could even speak.

“What’s wrong with keeping them?” I ask.

“Well…”

“Abigail put in much effort to search for these and secure them for you. I’d be a horrid master if I took them away. Besides, do you think she will understand why you can’t keep them?”

“That’s why I waited until the lady fell asleep. We’ll be using the scallops in a dish tonight. Being able to share that with her is more than enough.”

Abigail doesn’t really comprehend the worth of money. Yes, she knows numbers and arithmetic, but money doesn’t hold the same meaning for her as it does others. She went to great lengths to catch the scallops for Tabitha, so their refusal will surely hurt her feelings. *If only they hadn’t contained these pearls.*

“Well, since there are two pearls, why don’t you have them set in a pair of matching jewelry? Abigail will be glad to have an accessory that matches you,” I suggest.

“A lady matching her servant? Master, that’s—”

“Oh, the lady will surely love that,” says Rodney.

“Yeah. It’ll make Abigail so happy.”

Tabitha falls silent, and after a beat, Rodney and I burst into laughter.

“The sea was so calm,” I wheeze. “It’s crazy that we were suddenly slammed by such a big wave. She was going to catch a crab but got scallops instead!”

“Not just any scallops, two with rare, high-grade pearls in them.”

“Was it just coincidence? Probably not.”

Soon after Abigail married into our household, Longhurst suffered a small-scale monster stampede. A large flock of frenzy sheep trampled its granaries, which triggered the decline of the once abundant and fertile demesne.

She had predicted the stampede and left documents detailing how to counter and avoid the disaster, yet the earl took no action.

In the end, insufficient reserves paired with a slim harvest hit Longhurst hard, and the earl was forced to beg the aristocracy for money, eventually dying a dog's death by the roadside.

The deterioration of Longhurst did not end there however.

"Didn't it used to be a fertile land that seldom experienced bad harvests?" I recall.

"It was," Rodney says. "Crops always yielded more than expected, and without much population growth, it was an easy territory to manage."

A prosperous territory usually attracts migrants, but the denizens of Longhurst are infamously wary of strangers, so not many were successful in their attempt to settle there.

"There's been more news as well," he continues. "Apparently, the locals lack the manpower to restore the region damaged by the frenzy sheep. Yet when outsiders were brought in as extra help, the locals started rioting and making trouble. The harvest from the unaffected land hasn't been bad but is nowhere near the usual yield overall. And now that the territory has been annexed, the government is responsible for feeding the people. This is going to spell a huge deficit, and it's rumored to be causing the officials quite a headache."

"Hah! That's truly laughable."

Although Abigail is its rightful heir, we've never wanted Longhurst and staked no claim on the territory. But the capital took advantage of our disinterest, annexing the land without any formal communication with her. *I know we don't want it, but that still rubs me wrong!*

"Master Gerry!" chides Tabitha.

I clear my throat, signaling for Rodney to resume.

"In fact, Longhurst has faced few disasters in the past ten years or so, not even heavy rains or drought, so it's no surprise that its possession is so enticing."

"In the past ten years or so? I wonder why that is."

"It's such a wonder, isn't it, Master?"

I return the pearl to the cloth on the table, then wrap it neatly. "Nobody knows the answer, but when my little chick brings a gift, I think it's best that the receiver keeps it." I offer the bundle to Tabitha, who hesitantly takes it in both hands. *Yes. This will make Abigail happy.*

She is possibly outstanding at territory management, very knowledgeable about monster ecology with a seeming ability to control their movements, and was quite successful in ensuring Longhurst's prosperity due to the fact that she was the Monster King. And despite her ignorance regarding the sea, she is somehow able to obtain rare items that regular people might never find. *That said*…

"We don't know for sure why these things happen, nor can we prove anything. So what's important now is to ensure Lady Noel has an enjoyable birthday party."

"What an amazing change of topic, Master," Rodney quips.

"You've really grown up so well…" sniffs Tabitha.

Instantly, everyone vanishes from my office, likely to continue preparing for the celebration, disappearing with a speed that is just as amazing!

◆◆◆

**WHEN** I gave the scallops to Tabitha, she stood still for about five seconds, then broke into a happy smile. *I did it. I really did it.* But then she noticed I was dripping wet and got a little angry at my lord husband and me.

Despite her scolding, my lord husband readied our bath himself. He's really good at water and heat magic. *He's amazing.* He washed my hair with his big hands, which felt really good. The bath warmed me all the way to the tips of my toes, and I was lulled into a deep afternoon nap.

When I wake, Tabitha helps me into a dress, the type I usually wear, comfortable with just a string cinched under my bust. The fabric is smooth and soft with long sleeves and doesn't cling to my legs, so I can run easily. I thought I would have to attend the birthday party in a corset, but Tabitha says my dress is okay because the party is for me to enjoy myself. That means I'm free to run and jump about!

My lord husband escorts me outside, saying that the celebration will be held in the garden. Father- and Mother-in-Law often hold garden parties at the villa, so it has a really big lawn and few flowerbeds. I step into the adjoining greenhouse to

discover the garden has been transformed since I last saw it. Glass lanterns of different colors illuminate the dark evening. Even the young spring leaves of the plants seem to float in the air… *And what's this?!*

"My lord! The garden has become a kitchen!"

"Let's greet everyone first, Abby."

"Yes!"

Two steps lead from the greenhouse terrace to the garden, and I almost leap down them before remembering I have to be a lady. Tabitha, Rodney, and the guards wait for us between several long tables covered in cloth. *Oh!* A portable stove sits between the tables! *I've seen that at the market! At the stalls!* My lord husband has already started to speak. *That's a large fish on that table! I wonder what it's for!*

"Greeting first, Abby."

"Yes! Thank you for my birthday!"

My lord husband makes a strange noise, but everyone else smiles and claps. *What shall I do now? Where shall I go?*

"You can walk around and look at things… Ah! Wait!" His chuckle quickly morphs into a shout as I vault down both terrace steps in one jump. I'm all right! The heels of my shoes are low!

I approach the long tables where cooks are making delicious food. They are people from town who work at the villa only while the Noels are there. I've been busy since our arrival in Orta and have managed to visit the kitchen just twice so far. On my second trip, I was given a piece of crunchy bread crust.

Tabitha and Rodney, and the guards, coachmen and servants all come to stand before the tables too, smiling.

"Look, my lady. This dish is topped with lots of melted cheese."

"Huh? Oh!"

"This fish was caught by our ship this morning, my lady."

"The fish I caught!" I gasp.

"Here are the scallops you caught, my lady."

"They're open! The shells have opened!"

I spot a cook toasting a sizeable, semicircular piece of cheese on a skewer over the portable stove. Its surface looks soft and bubbly, and—*it's falling off! Oh! And he's cut off the fish's head!* The

cheese has fallen onto a piece of bread! The scallop meat shines in its open shell, and *oh*! *He's putting it on the grill?!*

Someone calls out to me, and I turn, and then another voice beckons, and I twist to see more delicious food! *I can't go everywhere!*

"My lord! I'm so busy!"

My lord husband doubles over with a snort but soon straightens again, then clasps my hand. "Take your time, it's okay. Why don't we start from the righ—"

"What's that, my lord?!"

"Wh-What?"

I've sighted something new. It looks like white cream on a black stove plate? Something thick and sticky. *Melted wheat flour? Oh, it's flowing now.* Is the cook making square bread?

My lord husband guides me closer, and I spy various chopped ingredients mixed in with the cream. The cook holds up a long skewer and drags it through the bubbling liquid, cutting it into multiple smaller squares. Then he deposits a piece of white meat with red skin on each one. *Oh!* I see suckers! That's octopus meat! *What is octopus doing here?!*

I blink, and suddenly the small squares are gone. The cook has spun them into round balls. *They're all round now! So round! When did that happen?!*

"My lord! They're round! Just by spinning!"

I remember the large hunk of kebab meat rotating on its skewer. *Incredible.* "Is this the town of spinning meat…?"

My lord husband snorts again and the cook loses his rhythm for a moment. *Oh, he must not be a castle person. I guess it can't be helped.*

Thankfully, he resumes once more, slathering the octopus balls with some black sauce. He adds a sprinkling of green powder before plating three on a small dish, then drizzles something white over them, probably mayonnaise. Then a shake of something thin and crunchy, then… *Huh?*

My lord husband accepts the plate and holds it out for me to see, cautioning that it's hot.

"My lord, is that fresh…?"

"Oh, no. It's dried fish flakes…I think. Right?"

The cook stammers an anxious confirmation. The bits of fish flutter and dance like wood shavings. The Monster King used to fell trees, but it never saw wood so paper-thin. My lord husband cuts one of the round balls in half… *Oh, it looks so thick and sticky!* He blows on it, then feeds it to me… *Hot! So hot!* I jump in shock.

"Whoa! Sorry! Is it still hot?! Oy, water! Get her some water!"

But my next bite is fluffy and full of juicy octopus! *So delicious!*

🎂🎂🎂

**ALTHOUGH** my birthday celebration will continue late into the night, I grow sleepy halfway through and am brought back to our room. I am really full after tasting all the dishes. I tried merely a bite or two of each, but there were so many.

After a quick bath to wash the smoky aromas from my hair, Tabitha sits me down before the vanity to brush it. That feels so good that I fall asleep for a bit. The smooth strokes of the fine-tooth comb from the top of my head to the ends of my hair are nice, the sensation different from when my lord husband washes it. None of the maids accompanied us on our trip, so only Tabitha attends me. Hair brushing also feels good when the maids at home or Drewett Manor do it, yet hers is special because she speaks to me in a low, soothing voice.

"My first birthday celebration was fun, and this year's was fun too. It was like a festival," I tell her.

"That's wonderful," she replies. I like it when she says that. "The scallops you caught were very delicious too, my lady."

"Yes. They were big, so I knew they must be good."

Because they were a souvenir for Tabitha, I wanted her to eat them all, but she shared some with me in the end. I took just one bite since I hoped to try lots of other dishes and gave the rest to my lord husband. *Should I have given it back so Tabitha so she could have more?* She said it tasted great because we were eating it together.

I understand. Food is also more delicious when I share it with my lord husband.

"Those scallops had pearls in them as well, my lady."

"Did you bite into them? Were they hard?"

“It was fine. The cook discovered them while he was prepping the scallops for cooking.”

That’s good. Tabitha’s teeth are safe.

She shifts to stand between me and the dressing table and pulls out a small vanity case. She opens it and shows me two shiny white stones resting on a velvet lining. “These pearls are rare, and a little too precious for a servant like me, my lady.”

“But they’re yours, Tabitha. Don’t you like shiny, sparkly things?” *Did I get it wrong? I thought everyone liked those.* Perhaps Tabitha is different?

She frowns for a moment, then smiles. “I do. Now, I have a secret wish, would you like to hear it?”

“A secret! What is it?!”

I’m no longer tired. My lord husband and I share a secret about the flower candies, but I don’t have any with Tabitha.

“The scallops you gifted me contain a pearl each. May I have your permission to order pieces with matching designs? A jewelry box for you, my lady, and a brooch for me?”

“Matching! I like that!”

Tabitha wears a brooch on her lapel to indicate that she’s the head housekeeper and in charge of the other servants. Ethan also sports one as our steward. I was taught that they’re really important. *And now I’ll have a matching one with Tabitha!*

She bows deeply. “Let’s call on the jeweler when we get back to the capital.” Then she leads me to the bed and pulls the covers over my shoulders, giving me a pat on the head.

I listen to the merry sounds of my lord husband and the others enjoying the festival, to the rustling leaves outside my window, and soon I’m sleepy again. *It’s been such a fun day.*

🎂🎂🎂

**I** seldom dream since coming to the Noel household. The bed at home is so fluffy and comfortable that my slumber is nearly always too deep. When I do dream, it is of flower candies or salmon jerky.

At Longhurst, my bed was a thin layer of straw over the storeroom floor. I was fed once every two days, which was all right

because I could forage leaves from the garden and pick nuts in the woodland behind the house. That never filled my stomach though, and I often felt dizzy and tired, and slept a lot. The sensation of the straw on the hard floor was a little similar to when the Monster King dozed on a grassy field. Maybe that's why I used to dream of my life as the Monster King, of standing amid the trees and listening to the rustling leaves.

That night, I dream again for the first time in a long while. I am a young Monster King, back when I wasn't yet known by that name. Since I never forget anything, I remember the period well. The sound of the crashing waves becomes the wind whispering through the canopy.

Humans always flee screaming when they see the Monster King. Occasionally they drop their lunch boxes in their panic. Although the Monster King never leaves its woods, it sometimes ventures to the forest edge to watch the human settlement there. And sometimes, it encounters those villagers within the forest. It has never entered the village but has great eyesight and can observe everything that happens there.

The small humans living in the village never come into the forest, but one day, the Monster King meets a medium human—a human larger than the small variety and smaller than a grown one. He is tending a fire, and when he sees the advancing Monster King, he screams and hurls a roasted potato at it. The potato is delicious.

That happens several times until the human stops bolting when the Monster King approaches. Soon, he even starts to share his potatoes. The Monster King understands human language yet cannot talk despite its many mouths. Even so, the human speaks to the silent Monster King. He talks about the lives and jobs of the other humans in the village. From him, the Monster King learns the concept of working for food.

The Monster King hasn't done any work but receives potatoes nonetheless.

"Because we're both lonely, aren't we?" the human explains as he passes one of three to the Monster King.

The human soon matures into an adult and is able to press deeper into the forest to gather grass and nuts and even hunt weaker monsters. The Monster King always sees him in the

woodland near the village, never too far from the edge. Then, one day, the Monster King chances upon the human further in and under attack by a large monster that rarely appears in that area.

“Help me!”

For the first time, the Monster King kills and eats a monster without provocation.

“Thank you.”

…I don’t remember the Monster King’s thoughts or feelings, not even in the dream, but I recall it bouncing around afterward.

I consider my urge to bounce whenever my lord husband thanks me or kisses me as a reward.

I was the Monster King, so it must have felt the same way I do in those moments. But before I can name the emotion, I sense someone stroking my hair and smell my lord husband close by. My thoughts grow heavy once more and I fall into a deep sleep.

I don’t dream again.

# Chapter Six: I Know That Fantasy Stories Aren't Real

**WE** set out from the port town, making our way home to the capital with a planned stop at Drewett Manor. I've noticed that our travel party includes many more guards than when we came.

"Is it because we'll be bringing back cows and sheep?" I ask my lord husband.

"I thought I told you to choose just one?"

*Seems like I really do have to choose.* The city with cows and sheep is located midway between the capital and the Drewett estate, so I still have time to decide.

Ethan, who stayed behind in the capital, isn't the only one who needs a souvenir. I've found something for Father-in-Law, Mother-in-Law, and the other Drewetts as well. I think Lord Samuel will be very pleased; his is perfect. My lord husband helped me select gifts for everyone else yet said Lord Samuel would be happy if I chose his myself.

"You already saw what's outside on our way here… Are you being a lookout again?"

"I only saw the view from one side of the carriage, so now I'm looking from the other."

"I-I see."

I can't watch from both carriage windows at the same time, so a different set of scenery accompanies the return leg of our journey. I've removed my shoes again. We leave the valley road, and instead of the fields I saw before, various small hills spread before me… *Oh!*

Fuzzy white creatures dot the gentle slopes. "My lord! My lord! Fluffy animals! Sheep! Those are sheep, aren't they?!" I've seen them in my encyclopedia. I lean forward on my knees and my lord husband grips my waist. *They're sheep!* Some of them are black.

"Yes… That's right, they rear sheep here too."

"My lord?"

“...No, Abby. No cows here. Are you sure you want the sheep without seeing the cows again?”

“Huh?”

“The place where we saw the cows is close to another farm with sheep too. You can compare them in person before deciding.”

“You’re right!”

We will reach the town we stayed in very soon. They didn’t serve big meat—mutton—when we were last there. But maybe they will on our way back?

🎂🎂🎂

**WE** have dinner on the first floor of the travel lodge again. En route to Orta, we tried to eat in such dining halls if we had time. Each place served different food, so it was fun. Tabitha and the servants sit at another table along with some guards, whose larger number allows them to rest in turn. The hall isn’t that big either, so it’s easier to secure too.

“Abby? Are you all right?”

“Yes. What’s wrong?”

The plate before me is heaped with tender haggis and mashed potatoes. I take a bite as everyone stares at me, even the guards at the next table. My lord husband seems a little worried. *I wonder why.*

Haggis is made by stuffing a sheep’s stomach full of boiled sheep organs. Then the contents are removed and served. I spotted one of the guards eating it and asked what it was, and he explained, mentioning that I probably wouldn’t like it. He gave me a portion anyway, and I try another forkful, that time with mashed potatoes. It’s smelly. And not delicious.

“Please don’t force yourself, my lady,” the guard pleads. “It’s all right; not everyone likes it.”

“It’s not delicious, but I’m not forcing myself.”

I haven’t eaten something not delicious in a while. I’m not full though, so I can manage the last bite. How smelly! The guard who shared the haggis with me looks a little frightened. He’s one of the newcomers who just joined us.

“This dish is full of nutrients, so you should finish it too,” I tell him. “Also, the sheep used to make this possessed magical energy, so it’ll help replenish your magic.”

To eat sheep in a dish like haggis is much easier than swallowing them whole as the Monster King did. My lord husband calls Rodney over and they whisper to each other. *That looks fun.* I wonder if he will whisper with me too.

“Abby, it appears the sheep from around here are hybrids of regular breeds and magic goats…”

“I’ve never learned about hybrids, but I see. I can sense their lingering magical power.”

Magic goats have sticky fur that adheres to the tongue, and very hard hooves. While most living creatures contain nutrients and magic in their organs, not many are tasty when eaten whole, which is a bother. Besides, weaker monsters possess little magical power, so one must devour them raw and in their entirety to have any hope of ingesting it. Cooking them removes the useful magical energy, as I discovered when I ate prepared monster meat as the Monster King, yet makes the meat delicious. So haggis is special because it retains magic despite being from a weak monster.

One after another, my lord husband and the other guards try the remaining haggis. I watch their faces twist and grimace.

“It’s not delicious, but that’s to be expected. It wasn’t cooked by castle people,” I remind them.

Then I spot what looks like cherry pie at the neighboring table. The pie is topped with lots of round fruit and thick sauce drizzled over yellow cream. The filling looks reddish-black, so I suspect it’s cherry pie.

“Do you think the chef at Drewett Manor can make haggis delicious?” asks my lord husband.

“Yes, because he is a castle person!”

“You’re very optimistic, my lady,” Rodney quips.

I observe another table of strangers as they are served a plate of grilled meatballs on a bed of roasted mini tomatoes… *Oh! That must be it!*

I tug on my lord husband’s sleeve. “They have sausages on bone!” I whisper to him when he leans over.

“I-I see.”

He requests an order of the boned sausages, roast lamb, and cherry pie. I don't understand how he knew all the foods I want to eat, but it must be because he's my lord husband. Everything is delicious!



**WE** reach Drewett Manor, where we'll be staying the night before continuing to the capital. We'll also stop to see Little Piyo, of course. I don't mind either way, but my lord husband has made a promise. He sent a messenger ahead of us, so everyone is waiting by the door to welcome us as we arrive. I glimpse them from the window as the horse's hooves clop on the tightly packed cobblestone road.

"My lord! I see Mother-in-Law!"

"Please put on your shoes, Abby."

"Yes!"

The carriage rolls to a stop, and I hear the footman preparing the stool outside the door. *Ah, I've lost a shoe! It's gone!*

"Hey! Be careful, you'll fall!" My lord husband grabs me before I can bend to search under the seat. Pushing me back into the bench, he locates it under my skirt and slips it on for me. The door opens and I accept the footman's proffered hand before stepping down. I greet everyone politely and receive their hugs. Lord Samuel cries to be carried, and I pick him up only to have my lord husband take him from my arms and return him to Lord Stuart.

We change out of our travel clothes in my lord husband's private quarters, then reconvene in the family parlor. Time to hand out the souvenirs! My lord husband told me they weren't necessary since the port town is only three days' ride from Drewett, but I insisted.

Mother-in-Law gets a ream of scarlet fabric patterned with large yellow and green fruit. My lord husband says the cloth is from overseas. For Father-in-Law, a big, sturdy horn on a string. I didn't know that sea monsters have horns too, and that one must have come from a mighty monster indeed. Father-in-Law looks quizzically at his gift. I don't know what it's for either; I bought it

simply because it looks strong. My lord husband's shoulders tremble, but otherwise he appears calm.

Because Lady Stella is expecting, my lord husband suggested a joint souvenir for her and Lord Stuart. I've never been near pregnant humans before, so I asked Rodney for advice, and he said he couldn't help since he's never had children either. In the end, I purchased a set of handleless cups that the store owner said is for couples. My lord husband held the large one while I gripped the smaller one in both hands, and it felt right. The sparkly white porcelain features an openwork engraving of flower petals and snow, and ultimately I bought a separate pair for my lord husband and myself too.

Then Lord Samuel's souvenir is carried into the room, and he lets out a shrill scream and runs to hide behind Lady Stella. What's wrong?

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**SAMUEL** cowers behind Stella, his eyes wide with tears threatening to spill over at any moment.

His reaction has flustered Abigail, and she glances back and forth between him and the stuffed animal. "It looks strong, Lord Samuel," she coaxes. "Look. It's strong."

Yes… That's why he's terrified. *I get it, Samuel.*

The stuffed animal, delivered by two male servants, is a—

"Turtle! I've seen it in my encyclopedia!" announces Abigail.

While it does possess a turtle's basic form, a regular turtle doesn't have five horns radiating from its shell or long fangs protruding from its lower jaw. The horn she gave Father came from the same monster—known as a horn turtle—though she doesn't know that. I've been holding my breath for so long that I feel as though I'm about to burst. Rodney is clutching his stomach in the corner, pretending he has indigestion. *Stop that!*

"…G-Gerald?" asks Father, his voice strange.

"…Abigail insisted," I answer, my voice equally odd.

The servants clear a space on the carpet for the stuffed turtle. It's much taller than a coffee table and so wide that I can't wrap my arms around even half of it.

Abigail moves to stand beside the creature, grabbing one of its horns. “Look! It’s big and strong!” she says again.

Yes, my little chick has always valued size and strength.

Mother and Stella are hunched over, covering their faces with their fans, and Stuart has taken a seat on the sofa, his head in his hands. The room is strangely silent, except for Abigail’s anxious voice and Samuel’s helpless cries.

Then Abigail’s face lights up and she leaps onto the horn turtle. “Look! You can ride on it! Look! It’s perfect!”

Perfect? Suddenly Samuel seems interested. Meanwhile, Rodney makes himself scarce. *He’s fled, that idiot!*

Soon Samuel is in a good mood, the two gasping and shouting as they ride the turtle. Abigail is light enough that Samuel’s nursemaid easily pushes them from behind. I doubt it’s supposed to be played with in such a manner since the seller told me it’s a wall ornament.

“Turtles are hard and large, and they swim well in the sea,” Abigail informs Samuel.

“Abby! This is amazing!”

“Yes! Amazing.”

“Wasn’t that expensive?” whispers Stuart with a frown. “It’s not a kid’s toy, is it?”

No. I’m sure it’s the type of thing a vain nouveau riche collects as a hobby.

“Is it really a gift for Samuel…?” he asks again.

“Abigail says it’s perfect for him.”

“Well then, I’ll accept it with gratitude.”

“Also, I think it will slide more freely if you tie some cloth around its stomach.”

“Huh? What…?”

The sight of the pair gallantly riding the horn turtle is somehow charming. “Maybe you can even commission a special cart for it?” I muse. “Oh, isn’t that just adorable?”

“Stop, stop, stop… That aside, you’ve really loosened up, Gerald…”

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**WE** play with the souvenir until my lord husband says he wishes to discuss business with Father-in-Law, at which point I'm invited to tea with Lady Stella in the small parlor. The small parlor is actually a tiny greenhouse, warm and bright with spring sunshine. Lord Samuel retires for his afternoon nap because he's still small. I'm fine though. I already napped in the carriage.

Lady Stella takes a sip of her yuthrina tea and sighs. She tells me the family arranged to have some harvested right after we left for Orta. "We tried incorporating it into a salad, but it tasted bitter..."

"The tea stinks too!"

Lady Stella splutters, placing her teacup onto the table with a clink. She's usually well-mannered, so her reaction is strange. I'm drinking regular herbal tea, yet the aroma of her dark green brew has wafted over to my side of the table. The yuthrina leaves will help prevent the baby's stronger magical prowess from weakening Lady Stella. Although stewing the plant isn't ideal, she needs to drink its juice somehow, even if it stinks.

"It's better than chewing it, at least... And I'm glad it's also preventing morning sickness."

Tabitha taught me that pregnant humans sometimes suffer from morning sickness, which makes them vomit. The thought of vomiting delicious food right after eating it sounds terrifying...

"Lady Abigail," begins Lady Stella as she straightens. She looks at me. "I just want to say thank you."

As I predicted, she soon fell ill after her pregnancy was confirmed, though she quickly recovered after chewing yuthrina leaves. Lord Stuart thanked me earlier, and Father- and Mother-in-Law praised me too. I was surprised that nobody knew about yuthrina, so I'm glad I told them. Though Lady Stella's stomach is still flat, the baby seems healthy and full of magical energy. It's about as big as the round pastry on the tea table. *Is that a cookie?* The pastry's powdery surface is white tinged with yellow.

"It's true that my marriage to Lord Stuart was a political one, but I've always admired him," Lady Stella says. "His magical power is much stronger than mine, so I was lucky to conceive Samuel so soon. And I've always wanted to give Samuel a sibling."

"Admire?"

"Oh... To admire means to like someone."

“Oh! Because you’re Lord Stuart’s wife! I like my lord husband too. We’re the same.”

“Yes, that’s right… Lord Stuart doesn’t really have the typical Drewett temperament. He’s funny and very kind to me, even on our first meeting.”

“Temperament… You mean this wrinkle here?”

She splutters again when I point to the center of my forehead. *That’s right, he doesn’t have wrinkles there.* I practice in the mirror sometimes and struggle to make them appear. I wonder if the pastry is soft. It looks soft yet dry, so I think I should eat it before I finish my tea.

“Y-Yes… And that’s a *polvorón*. Samuel likes them too. Please have one.”

“Yes! Oh, it melted!”

“Y-Yes. It does that.”

It melted the moment I bit into it, becoming something smooth despite its apparent dryness! Lady Stella picks one up with trembling fingers and takes a bite too. I pop another in my mouth, so crispy and melty! Delicious!

I hear giggling and glance up to see her watching me with a soft, relaxed gaze. Because of her low magical ability, her eyes are a normal color, a nice warm walnut, and don’t shift in shade. Though Lady Stella’s features are very different from Tabitha’s, right then she somehow looks just like her.

“Mother-in-Law, Father-in-Law, and especially Lord Gerald have changed so much. They’re all kind and lovely people yet seldom show it, so it’s hard to tell. I guess their pride as high-ranking nobles preempts that… Their standing leaves them no choice but to be stern,” she says.

“Sometimes you have to show your strength to others,” I say with a nod. Monsters are the same when defending their territory.

She blinks, then stretches out a slim, manicured hand to hold mine. “Mother-in-Law shared that you haven’t really thought about having children?”

“I think I’m fine, but my lord says my body is still weak, so I’m taking medicine and… Ah! Oops! I’m supposed to say that my lord doesn’t want children if someone asks!”

“Oh!” Lady Stella giggles. “I see. Well, that’s a good answer when talking to people outside the family. If anyone bothers you

about it, please let me or Mother-in-Law know. Yes, we'll help you manage them." She smiles as she gently squeezes my hand. Her hands are softer than Tabitha's but just as warm and lovely. Nobody at Longhurst ever touched me, so I never knew what human skin felt like.

But I like my lord husband's skin the most. It's soft but firm and feels so nice.

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**WE** dine with Father- and Mother-in-Law that night. Lord Stuart and his family are eating in another room.

After we arrived, I learned that sheep from the town where I ate haggis was brought to the manor and that the chef has done his best to prepare the same dish. Despite his efforts, the smell may still be offensive to Lady Stella, and that's why she is dining elsewhere.

Something that looks like cake is carried in, its round flat layers separated by thin, wavy lines of sauce. It looks nothing like the haggis at the inn. The bottom layer of the "cake" is brown, the middle white, and the uppermost is orange—no, carrot colored! The chef has informed me that the top layer is carrot.

"Is this haggis?! Oh! It is! I can smell it!"

"...I've always wondered, Abigail. You often sit up very straight when detecting scents."

"Yes! Because my sense of smell is great!"

The haggis at the inn was cooked in a sheep's stomach that resembled a ripened nut, then the tender organs were removed and served with mashed potatoes on a separate plate. The dish before me looks just like a cake in spite of its odor—it smells like meat. *As expected of a castle chef!* He's made it so appetizing. I scoop a forkful of all three colors and bring it to my mouth. Delicious! It doesn't stink at all!

"My lord, my lord! Look! The castle chef has done it!"

"Yes, I see. It's really totally different."

The mutton is tender and fluffy and enhances the meaty flavor of the organs. The white layer of mashed potatoes is smooth and thick, pairing well with the meat! And the carrots are

sweet! As for the sauce… I've never tasted the flavor before. A little spicy with pepper but somehow intense and unfamiliar…

The chef has come to tell us about the dish. Whiskey sauce! Whiskey is an alcoholic drink! I've not had any before!

"My lord! I want to have alcohol—"

"This isn't really alcohol. Maybe next time."

The sauce is delicious, so alcohol must be delicious too. I'm looking forward to trying it.

"Hmm. I've had haggis with my men, but this is something different," comments Father-in-Law.

"It tastes like liver pâté, but lighter on the palate," Mother-in-Law adds with satisfaction.

I agree. It's all thanks to the chef. I turn to give him a nod. He's smiling so widely that I wave instead, which seems to surprise him.

"Now, if this can boost the recovery of magical energy…" muses Father-in-Law.

"It does, Father, but it's troublesome to make. And the smell sticks to the pots and pans, making them unusable for other dishes."

"There's no magical energy in this," I say.

"But the pots can be… Huh?"

"Food loses magical power when it becomes tasty!"

The chef's knees buckle at my words, and Father-in-Law's steward grabs the man's elbow to steady him.

My lord husband casts his eyes down, deep in thought. "Oh… I see… Is that so?"

"Is the chef all right?" I ask. "Is he tired from working hard? I think he needs to eat some haggis. It's a delicious and energizing meal."

"…I guess he put in too much effort," Mother-in-Law says with a chuckle.

"Right. I suppose that's the trade-off. Abigail, do you like the haggis made by our chef?"

"Yes! He's amazing!"

"That's good, then. Here." My lord husband smiles and feeds me some beans. They're perfectly salty and plump and delicious!

"Abigail, you always talk about how amazing castles are," observes Mother-in-Law.

“Because they’re castles!”

“Is it only the royal castle, or any castle?”

“There are different castles…?” *Huh? Are there?* Aren’t all castles just castles? Are there more impressive castles? Are they somewhere nearby? “Can we visit one on our way home, my lord?”

“Don’t worry about it. All castles are the same.”

I see. That’s good to hear. I can’t imagine how much more amazing castles can be.

“Why do you like castles so much, Abigail?”

I pause for a beat as I ponder Father-in-Law’s question. “… When I started working at Longhurst, I was given access to books in the earl’s office and study.”

“…Oh?”

My lord husband freezes, a spoon of jelly halfway to my mouth. I stare at it until he notices and resumes feeding me. *Yep, it’s tasty!* Full of tiny shrimp and tomato! I return the favor with a small spoonful of corn.

“Oh, you two…” starts Father-in-Law, and my lord husband interrupts him.

“We’re all family here. Do continue, Abby.”

“Among all the documents and textbooks, there was a picture book about a hero who defeated a dragon and went to a big strong castle where he was treated to an amazing feast.”

“A strong castle?”

“Yes, though the dragon wasn’t that strong.”

“Hmm…”

“The castle people were so kind to treat him to such a delicious meal. Back then, I thought castle people must all be amazing since they live in such a big castle, and I was right.”

“Hmm, do you remember the title of that book?”

“Of course! It was *The Monster King–Slaying Hero and the Princess*!”

“Oh, so it wasn’t a dragon?” whispers Father-in-Law.

“The Monster King sounds weak,” Mother-in-Law adds.

My lord husband stops and takes three deep breaths, then tops my next spoonful of jelly with a large shrimp. How delicious!

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**WE'RE** assigned to the same rooms as on our previous stay. I'm lounging on the sofa while Abigail has found a nice spot on the carpet between my legs, where she sits staring at a cup of hot milk on the low table before her. It must still be too hot to drink. I swallow a sip of brandy as I study her motionless figure, enjoying the aroma stinging my nose and throat. *I must thank Father for sharing this delicious liquor.*

"This milk smells different than usual, my lord. That sweetness…is pomegranate! Pomegranate and honey? What is it…? Oh! Wine! It smells like wine!" Her eyes narrow in pleasure as she catches the scent wafting from her cup.

I give her a peck on the lips followed by a lick, and her golden eyes fly open. "Is this the smell?" I ask.

"Yes! Yes, it is! So this is alcohol! Oh! That's hot, my lord!" she cries in warning as I take a sip of her milk. Yes, there's definitely some fruit brandy in it, probably the sort Mother likes to drink. I return the cup to the table, and Abigail continues to watch it, allowing all the alcohol to evaporate.

"It should be cool enough now," I tell her after a few more minutes.

"Yes!" Without any hesitation, she grabs the cup with both hands and drinks. *My little chick is just too cute.*

"Is it tasty?"

"Yes! I can drink alcohol now, my lord."

"Yes, but always ask me before you have any."

"…Yes!"

*Lovely.* She's always so obedient, though she can be sneaky sometimes as well… Like just then, as she reaches for my glass. I pull it away. She must think mine is all right to share since it smells like hers. "Not yet," I say, and she backs off without protest, returning to her milk.

Abigail was sixteen when we married, and we've just celebrated her seventeenth birthday. Our society considers individuals adults once they turn fifteen, so she is technically allowed to have alcohol. But she is still frail. Although she's certainly gained weight since our first meeting, she remains too slim.

"That picture book you read, there's a hero in it?" I ask.

"Yes."

Abigail focused on the hero's feast at the castle, yet I doubt that was the main plot. *The Monster King–Slaying Hero and the Princess*. I'm no expert in literature, but Father and Mother didn't seem to know the tale either. While novels and short stories are readily available, picture books, especially those for children, are rare commodities that only the richest of nobles can afford. Especially a book so rare that only one copy of it apparently exists.

According to the reports from my investigation into Longhurst, the legend of the Monster King was orally passed down through generations. Abigail's picture book is the first instance I've heard of it presented in written form. If the picture book was indeed a family heirloom, Earl Longhurst must have been more obsessed with golden eyes than I previously thought.

Abigail has said the earl's family didn't physically abuse her, just deprived her of food. Her stepmother and stepsister seem to have been the main instigators, and although the earl neither stopped nor encouraged them, his silence probably served to condone their behavior. I also recall Rodney informing me that when Abigail first arrived at our house, she was accompanied by a lone old coachman and carried naught but the clothes on her back.

Nothing adds up. First, they starve and imprison her, then rid themselves of her by marrying her off, then suddenly send people to attack and abduct her? How do they actually view the Monster King, and just what do they want?

"If you don't mind telling me, what was the story about?"

"It's about a dragon-slaying hero who defeats the Monster King and marries the princess."

"Oh, so the title does summarize it all…"

Drewett mythology seldom features a creature known as the Monster King. In our territory, dragons pose a greater threat to humans. Yet in Abigail's book, the opposite seems to be true.

"My lord?" Perhaps unnerved by my silence, she twists in my arms to look up at me, golden eyes glimmering.

Though she claims to not remember the Monster King's thoughts and feelings, her descriptions of it always seem so animated and full of emotion. Is that because she witnesses the Monster King's memories from an outsider's perspective or

because the traces of its psyche are accessible only when she talks about the Monster King?

Didn't the Monster King hate the humans who betrayed and killed it?

What if Abigail becomes aware of those emotions one day? What will happen to her then?

"It's nothing," I eventually say.

The earl passed, and Abigail yielded the Longhurst line. No one remains to inherit that book, and there's no need to dredge up those memories. I kiss Abigail on the forehead, caress her cheek.

"It's not real, my lord."

"Hmm?"

I loosen my embrace, and she climbs onto my lap. Holding my face in her small hands and looking straight into my eyes, she says, "The dragon isn't strong, but it still lives in the same place. The hero never slayed it."

"H-Huh?"

"The picture of the Monster King in the book looks nothing like the real Monster King. Even Lord Samuel's drawings are a closer resemblance."

"I see…"

No, I don't see. I'm merely unable to think of anything else to say.

"Well, I guess it's true that castle feasts are amazing," concedes Abigail, "but now that I think about it, the feast in the book didn't look that appetizing at all." On her knees, she leans closer, wrapping her arms around my neck.

*What? What's happening?*

"The picture book is just a book. It's not real, so there's no need to be scared. You'll be fine." She pats me on the back.

Is she imitating Tabitha?! Or is she imitating me?! *Wait, does she really think I'm afraid?!*

"Hahaha! Yes, I'm not scared anymore. Thanks." I can't hold back my laughter. She's just so cute! I return her embrace and shower her with kisses.

She nods in approval, then suddenly cries out as if remembering something. "Coitus! Let's do coitus!"

"Huh?!"

Eagerly, she leaps from my lap and takes my hand, pulling me toward the bed. But we're scheduled to leave for the capital the following day; we shouldn't do it again until we get home.

"Hey, wait, you're still hurt—"

"No! I'm healed! And coitus feels good!" She jumps onto the bed and spreads her arms wide in invitation. "Come!"

My wife's cuteness really has no limit!

# Chapter Seven: Thump-thump! Beep-beep-beep! Turn and Turn and Spin, Spin, Spin!

**FINALLY!** After four days of travel, we've finally arrived at the city of cows and sheep!

The next city over is apparently more famous for sheep but is another day's ride from our route. Where we're stopping is along the way home and has sheep too, so my lord husband has suggested that I make my selection there. That way, I can compare the cows and sheep side by side.

"It's here! The home of cows and sheep!"

Renowned for its dairy farms and products, the city is large and prosperous. And the pizza is delicious, making it my second favorite city so far. The best city is still the port town, excluding the capital, of course.

The stone walls surrounding it are also impressive, bordered in turn by large wooden buildings where the cows and sheep reside. I watch the animals leisurely grazing on the other side of a wooden fence as Rodney speaks to the farmer. They're a little far away, but I have great eyesight.

"My lord, my lord! There are white and black cows! And brown ones! And black ones! Which are the most delicious?"

"Well…"

"Which have the biggest cheeks? They all look the same size to me."

"You can tell from this distance?"

"Because my eyesight is great! Oh, but the sheep are so fluffy that it's hard to tell which ones have the most meat."

"Pick either one, not both."

"…Yes!" I know I can't get both. I have to choose one. *If only Ethan were with us, then I could ask him directly.* Then again, if he'd accompanied us, I wouldn't need to buy him a souvenir.

"By the way, calves and lambs should be more delicious," says my lord husband.

“I’ve heard that before! That’s right! They are more delicious! In that case, how about that small one over there…? Will a small one be enough?”

“It will. Don’t worry about it.”

“But… Oh, Rodney! Do you think just one will have enough meat for Ethan?!” I ask as he rejoins us after his conversation with the farmer.

“W-Well, a whole animal is truly too much for Father…I think.” Rodney has a strange look on his face, and the corners of his lips are twitching. “M-My lady, the cows here…”

“Yes?”

“They’re all dairy cows…”

“Dairy cows.”

“It means they produce milk and may not taste delicious.”

“Oh no! But they’re cows!”

How shocking. Rodney’s shocked as well: he’s leaning against the railing and clutching his stomach. *I know! How unimaginable!*

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**WE** arrived at the city earlier than scheduled, so I have time to relax in my room at the inn before dinner. I’m sharing a room with my lord husband, naturally. I’m sitting on the edge of the big bed, hugging a large pillow.

*It can’t be helped.* Sometimes one just has to know when to give up. The sheep are edible but wandered off to graze somewhere*. I’ll simply choose one tomorrow morning before we set off. Yes, it’ll be fine. There’s nothing to worry about.*

“Abigail? Abby? Abby! Are you still upset?”

“I’m fine.”

My lord husband laughs and pulls the pillow from my face to look at me. I’ll be fine. I merely want to hug the pillow a little more. I tug it back and bury my face in it once again.

He pats my head. “There seems to be a festival going on today, Abby.”

“A festival?!”

I know the harvest festival, the one with lots of stalls and bonfires! My stepsister disrupted it the previous year. I toss the

pillow aside and dash to the window, but the view is blocked by the building next door.

"It's a flower festival. It's not as big as Drewett's harvest festival so we can't see it from here, but there will be stalls. Shall we have dinner there?"

"Yes!"



**THOUGH** our inn is near the city's outer gate, the festival plaza isn't too far away, so my lord husband and I head there on foot, hand in hand. As we walk closer, I see houses and shops decorated with colorful flowers and flags.

My lord husband tells me that lovers and couples wear matching flowers to the festival, then tucks a pale pink bloom with pointy petals and a yellow center behind my ear. He tells me it's a rhodanthe, which I've not heard of before. He sticks another in his breast pocket.

A tower adorned with flowers stands in the center of the plaza amid lines of stalls. I hear strains of music, powerful echoing drums backed by high-pitched flutes and fluttering strings.

"Wow! My lord! The bonfire! Where's the bonfire?!"

"Oh, I don't think they do bonfires here."

"But it's a festival, right?!"

"I guess they have a flower tower instead?"

*I see!* People form circles around the flower tower and dance! Without a bonfire!

The dance looks fun, though it's different from those my lord husband and I do at evening parties. The music is also less formal compared to the light-hearted melodies played at the Drewett harvest festival. It has a heavier beat. *Oh, but it seems somewhat familiar...* The way the people move their arms and legs to the rhythm resembles the dance performed at the village near the Monster King's forest. There's no bonfire, yet I can feel the beat, and my body has started to bounce on its own

"If you'd like to dance, we'll do so away from the crowd."

"Yes!"

I am careful to stay within the wide circle of guards. *I can do this!* After watching the villagers dance from a distance, the Monster King practiced at the edge of the forest!

Strike the ground, then stomp!

Stretch my arms to the sky!

Ride on a wind strong enough to sway large trees, and spin, spin, spin!



“A-Are you trying to summon rain or something?!” whispers my lord husband loudly.

“That’s—not—it!” I pant in reply as I twirl past Rodney, who is on the ground for some reason. The moves require more arms and legs than I first thought, and I’m growing tired.

But it’s fun! So fun, even without a bonfire!

I think I can summon a small drizzle if I try. I’ll ask my lord husband if he’d like me to do that later.

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**OUR** carriage trundles forward, the horses’ hooves clopping at a steady pace on the neat stone pavement. Three great walls safeguard the royal capital, and the noble district lies just past the second set of gates.

Abigail, who has been glued to the window the entire trek, quickly pulls on her shoes. “We’ll be home soon after we pass through this gate,” she explains in a hurry.

The carriage doesn’t sway much on the paved road, yet each bump is enough to jostle her small, light body. I hold her arm to prevent her from falling out of her seat as she fumbles with her shoes. We have time, but I suppose she’s too excited to be patient. She’s been fidgety since we cleared the first gate.

“Is Ethan aware that we’re arriving home today, my lord? He won’t be out, will he?”

“I sent word ahead, so he’ll be there to welcome us home… Don’t get up yet, Abby.” I grab my wife as she moves to stand and pull her back to sit on my thigh. She quickly settles into my lap but continues to crane her neck to watch out the window. She did the same when we came home from Drewett last year. She said that she enjoys announcing that she’s home, now that she actually has one.

Because my noble rank is relatively low, our mansion is small, although the grounds are large considering its location within the capital. As we pass through the estate’s main gate, I spot Ethan and the other servants lined up in front of the manse in welcome.

We alight, Abigail managing to resist her urge to bounce while she politely addresses Ethan. “I’m home,” she declares. Then,

as though her duty is done, she whirls around and dashes to the supply wagon. I hear Rodney suck in a breath, and my abdominal muscles clench in anticipation.

"Come on, you! Please get off!" shouts Abigail, her eyes sparkling. She tugs on the rope around the sheep's neck and leads it from the supply wagon.

Ethan blinks, yet his smile doesn't falter.

"Ethan! Here is your souvenir!"

"A-A sheep for me? A sheep. For me. A sheep."

"Yes! Because the big meat was delicious!"

"...Thank you, my lady. This is an incredible honor, and I am truly overwhelmed." As expected of the household's head of staff, Ethan maintains his composure.

But his rigid posture and the way he's leaned back slightly is undoing me. I hear a snort from behind me. *Was that you, Tabitha?*

Abigail distributes the rest of the souvenirs to the servants, starting with the chef, then proceeds to her room brimming with satisfaction. I also retreat to my private quarters, and as Tabitha enters to take my travel clothes and prepare my bath, Ethan says, "So...none of you, not even Master, thought to stop her?"

I wasn't expecting him to air his grievances in my bedroom, yet suddenly Rodney and Tabitha are standing beside where I sit on the sofa, while Ethan stands glaring at us.

"...You know Abigail. There's no stopping her."

"But a sheep! A whole sheep!"

Rodney snorts.

"Rodney! How could you allow this?!"

"Would you rather have received a cow, Father?"

"A cow?!"

Tabitha stifles a laugh.

"Tabitha! You too?! We don't have room to keep an animal!"

"It's for food."

"What did you say, Master Gerry?!"

"Don't call me that."

I recount how we ended up buying a sheep, and eventually Ethan lets out a pained sigh. "She's adorable, but..."

"That's my wife," I warn.

"Is it really all right to slaughter that sheep? Has the lady developed any feelings for it?"

“No. We made sure to keep the animal away from her on the way home, so it should be fine.”

“I hope so. I don’t wish for the lady to get a shock when she learns it’s been slaughtered. I bet none of you thought about that.”

We didn’t, that’s true, but Abigail understands and accepts where food comes from. Besides, I doubt she’s learned to feel compassion for animals in that way yet. Regardless, we followed Rodney’s advice to separate the two.

Abruptly, Tabitha speaks. “To think the lady was worried that the journey would stress the sheep and cause it to lose weight, resulting in less meat. Ethan, if you’re so upset about the gift, why don’t you let the lady know yourself?”

Rodney takes a step back while I press myself into the corner of the sofa.

“Yes, I think you should tell her,” Tabitha demands.

“T-Tabith—”

“You should tell the person who was sad that you had to stay home and couldn’t taste the same delicious meat. The person who agonized over whether you’d prefer a cow or a sheep.”

Ethan is silent.

“The person who knows lamb tastes good but feared that the small size wasn’t enough meat for you.”

“Bu—”

“The person who decided on a sheep because they have wool, and she can use that to make a hat for you.” Tabitha advances with each sentence as Ethan backs away.

Rodney edges closer to the door. *Hey, don’t abandon me!*

“The person who examined every single sheep! So many of them! Comparing them! Choosing the best souvenir for you, Ethan! Tell her! Tell her to return that sheep to the farm!”

“I’m sorry!”

“Good.” Tabitha halts, victorious, her chest puffed and her hands on her hips. I step over Rodney who has collapsed in laughter and leave the room. Abigail should be done with her bath soon, and I need to be there to shower her with love.

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**THE** capital is located to the south of Drewett, so the days are longer and warmer than when we first embarked on our honeymoon. There are many more types of flowers in the courtyard and front garden too.

The old gardener has landscaped the back garden to resemble a forest, just the way I like it. Instead of flowers, uncultivated trees and ivy populate the plot, and a simple path of scattered wooden planks winds through the area. When I first came to live at the Drewett mansion, the back garden was fully untended with little sunshine and no footpath. Since then, he's also planted small flowers at various spots and cleared a few trees so soft sunlight can enter.

I know all the plants in my back garden, yet there are many others that I'm unfamiliar with. The cultivars developed by humans come in so many shapes and colors, some fluttery, some straight, some twisted.

That day, as usual, I spent some time with the old gardener, who taught me about every new flower and leafy sprout we saw.

"Oh! He gave me some jam cookies made with the raspberries he grew!" His wife always makes delicious cookies.

The hour is just before bedtime, and I'm giving my lord husband my daily report of what I've done that day. He's listening to me attentively, but…

"Are you still sad, my lord?"

He always drinks his tea or wine on the sofa while I often slot myself into the space between his legs. That evening, however, I'm made to sit on the sofa instead of the carpet, my back to his chest. Hugging me from behind, he buries his face in my hair, which tickles when he nods in acknowledgement.

I'm quite sensitive to human emotions and can tell when someone is happy, angry, or sad. I just don't understand why they feel those emotions.

But that evening I know exactly why my lord husband is sad!

When he returned from work, he told me with a groan that he has to visit the royal palace the day after the next on the invitation of the second queen consort. I'm to accompany him. Actually, I'm the one who's been summoned, and my lord husband requested that he be allowed to escort me. Because he will be there with me, I'm not worried—*I'd be fine on my own anyway*—yet he is still

concerned for some reason. I feel another heavy sigh on the top of my head.

"I'll be fine, my lord. I still have enough salmon jerky."

"I think it'll be best to leave that at home."

"We won't be needing it?"

"No… In fact, I'd prefer you keep it hidden."

"I see… Oh! My lord, my lord!"

"Yes?"

"Shall we do coitus?"

He snorts, his breath tickling the back of my neck, then starts to laugh. He likes coitus, so I thought it could cheer him up, and apparently just the thought of doing it is enough!

"…Sorry. I didn't mean to laugh." His laughter subsides as he squeezes me tight and rubs his cheek against the top of my head. After a moment, he selects a nut from the bowl of snacks on the low table before us and feeds it to me. *Oh!* It has a sweet and crunchy caramel coating! Delicious!

"Have I told you the reason you've been summoned?"

"It's about Longhurst, right?"

"Yes. It's now royal land, so they shouldn't be bothering you about it."

"Yes."

"But as I've mentioned before, Longhurst used to be prosperous, which was why the royal family wanted it. At least, that was what they expected when they annexed it."

"Yes."

"However, Longhurst hasn't generated as much profit as expected this past six months or so. In fact, it's apparently costing them money instead… To be frank, the granaries were trampled by frenzy sheep; it's wishful thinking to expect the territory to recover that quickly."

For the first time in a long while, I permit myself to think of Longhurst. In addition to providing the people of Longhurst with food, the granaries also supplement the kingdom's stockpiles, generating about one-third of the region's revenue. So the granaries' loss due to a frenzy sheep stampede was a huge disaster. Longhurst still has its mine and other farmland though, and in the absence of extreme weather, that should generate enough money to break even. If the land is nonetheless falling to

ruin, then Earl Longhurst must have been more incompetent than I thought.

"Longhurst is special because its yield is very high for the size of its farmland," says my lord husband, "and its emerald mine, though small, is consistent in its production of high-quality gems. At least, that's what the royal family was banking on. Now the yield isn't any higher compared to other territories', and even the quantity of emeralds has dropped… Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"Isn't it normal that the yield is the same compared to other territories'…? Why is that a problem?"

"O-Oh. No, it's not a problem. I see, I see. It's fine if you don't know what's going on." His arms loosen around me as he nods to himself. "Okay," he murmurs. "We'll just need to be careful of the fourth prince. He's the second queen consort's son, and—"

"As for the mine, it isn't producing emeralds because the dragon's in a bad mood."

"Huh?!"

The dragon lives on the other side of the mountain where the mine is located. The mountain also borders the Monster King's forest. Much like the Monster King, the dragon loves sparkly things, and when it's content, the mountain generates various gems. Most of them pop up in the dragon's lair, but some surface in the nearby forest and on the rocky slope on the other side, where humans dig them up. Back when I was the Monster King, no humans came to collect the gems, so I didn't know what color they were. *But I guess the dragon's in an emerald mood these days.*

"The dragon's really stingy, so it always snatched any fallen gems before the Monster King could see them. I've realized recently that the Monster King must have loved sparkly things too. It must have wanted to take a look! But the dragon never allowed that! So the dragon must be stingy… My lord?"

Belatedly, I notice that my lord husband has fully slumped forward onto my back. He's not too heavy so I don't mind, although I can somehow feel his exhaustion.

"Yes, thank you," he says. "I'm glad you're telling me this now. Don't mention any of it at the castle. Pretend you know nothing, yeah?"

"…Yes!"

He doesn’t have to worry. I’ve already promised not to talk about monsters outside of our home. I don’t break promises!

# Interlude: My Concept of Haggis Is Ever-Changing

**THE** marquisate of Drewett, where I was born and raised, values chivalry as a culture, and every man aspires to serve in the marquis's private army. When I was a boy, although the territory sometimes suffered poor harvests, the marquis and his family never forsook his people. Together, lord and vassal built roads, created jobs, and turned the region into a wealthy trading hub.

The great size of the demesne meant that it often suffered monster attacks, so its denizens by necessity learned how to fight. Additionally, as trade spurred prosperity, outsiders flooded into Drewett, and crime rates increased. The private army, already known for its impeccably trained soldiers, saw the circumstances as a golden opportunity to further distinguish itself.

I started my service at the age of fourteen, and after toiling for five years, I was finally posted at Drewett Manor that spring. Such an achievement was rare for someone like me, and my entire village celebrated when the news came.

Perhaps that was why I had grown a little complacent by the time I sparred with Lord Gerald, second son of the marquis. After amazing success in the royal military, he returns to his family home only on occasion. He's truly a monster on another level…

"Your left hand's grip is slightly weak. Work on that."

I can merely gasp in pain.

"Answer?!"

"Yes! Thank you, sir! For the advice!"

Despite facing myself and two of my comrades, he managed to knock the training sword from my hand, leaving me screaming as I clutched my numb fist. My legs are shaking so hard that I am unable to stand, and my fellows lie beside me, victims of the same fate.

Without breaking a sweat, he mows down the new soldiers one by one, offering each a few spare words of advice. Then he departs with a final order to "train harder." *To think he's only three*

*years older than me.* Nor can his victory be attributed to his magical prowess, strong even among the nobility, because he didn't use a lick of magic against us.

***

**"HE'S** so cool…"

"You still drooling over him? But I guess he is."

That day my charges are Lord Samuel and Lord Gerald's wife as they play in the courtyard. The castle is well guarded, so there's no actual need for us to patrol the secluded garden. Besides, Lord Samuel is a well-behaved child, so we always refer to those assigned to him as the "lucky ones." But I'd hoped to train with Lord Gerald again, so I don't feel as fortunate. I sigh and my partner jabs me with his elbow.

"Abby! Look! Look! A red fish!"

"I see it."

"Look! The same color as Abby!"

"Yes."

The pair have been squatting by the edge of the pond for a while; the sight of a noble lady crouching is quite strange. Her wedding reception is two days hence, so the marquis and marchioness are exceptionally busy. Even Lord Stuart and his wife are involved, so why is the bride staring idly into the garden pond?

She is beautiful, that's true, her vibrant, lustrous red hair flowing down her delicate back. I'm standing a fair distance away, yet I still remember the intense shine of her golden eyes, how they momentarily stunned me when she passed by earlier. With translucent pale skin, a youthful but elegant face, and pale pink lips, she is picturesque next to Lord Gerald, a strikingly handsome young man despite his fierce gaze.

"Hey, you've heard the rumors about the lady, right?"

"Huh…? Shut up."

"Oh, fine."

Rumors that she is the younger sister of the woman executed for disrupting the harvest festival the previous year, that she is a man-crazy villainess. Rumors that would earn us a thrashing if we repeated them before our seniors or superiors. Rumors that

nevertheless persist among the young recruits. Is such a woman truly worthy of our great Lord Gerald? …*Huh?*

“Wow! Amazing, Abby!”

“Yes! It’s just ripe for eating!”

*Huh?*

*HUH?*

Raised high in her slender hands is a flopping red…fish?! The sunlight sparkles on its scarlet scales and the water droplets flying through the air.

*Huh? What? Whaaat? Ripe for eating?!*

“Huh? D-Did you just see that?” breathes my partner.

“I d-d-don’t know. What just happened?! Huh? Huhhh?”

The lady has a good grip on the fish, and no matter how much the poor creature struggles, it can’t escape. *Wait, why is a noblewoman catching fish?!*

As we stand frozen, a black shadow sweeps past us like a gust of wind. In the blink of an eye, Lord Gerald is standing by the pond, holding Lord Samuel’s collar as the toddler teeters with his head inches above the water.

“Abigail… Put it back into the pond.”

“But fish is a Drewett specialty.”

“That’s not the edible kind.”

“Oh.”

After the incident, we receive a horrible scolding, and for good reason. Though obedient, Lord Samuel is still young and unpredictable, and he almost fell into the pond trying to imitate the lady. We were fortunate that Lord Gerald happened to be there, because we failed in our duty to protect him.

But I will soon learn that Lord Samuel is not the one who is unpredictable.

***

**A** week later, additional security is requested for the lady. She already has five veteran guards assigned to protect her, all of them soldiers who have served Lord Gerald since he was a child. He is skilled enough to protect her himself, so everyone says the post is more of a quasi-retirement for the older officers.

Gossip is circulating about the couple: The lady, unpredictable and unexpected! And the incredible reaction time of an utterly unfazed Lord Gerald! Everything I've learned thus far will prove inadequate, I'm told, and I'll have to do much more as their guard. I dismiss all such rumors as mere hearsay and am first to volunteer my name.

My squad leader answers my enthusiasm with a doubtful glance but reassigns me regardless, and I'm successfully transferred to the Noel household along with two other recent recruits and two middle-ranking soldiers.

As soon as we arrive in Orta, the port town where the family is staying, the leader of the original five-member veteran guard briefs us on shift arrangements. As a precaution, four of us are to accompany the couple whenever they go outdoors. In emergencies, two veterans will focus solely on the lady's protection, so the rest of us must be flexible in our support. While a security detail is understandable, so many men for a mere viscountess seems extraordinary. Lord Gerald doesn't need defending, which means all ten of us are there to guard the lady. Strangely, we've also been instructed to refer to her simply as "the lady."

"She's easy to guard. At least, that's what the master says. And she rarely strays outside our circle, but…" The veteran pauses and we hold our breaths in anticipation. "Be sure to stop her from eating the leaves in the garden."

"Leaves?"

"She moves very quickly, so stay alert."

The great veteran, whom I've always admired for his kind nature, advises us with a straight face to never relax in her presence. I can't tell whether he's joking—but witness the truth on the first night after leaving Orta. I don't think the lady's behavior is a prank. And while Lord Gerald is far quicker to recover than I am, their exchanges are just too bizarre.

But I mustn't laugh. When we reach the inn, my stomach already hurts from a day of suppressed guffaws. *Truly a unique workout…*

***

**IN** the dining hall, we take turns surveilling the couple's table, where the lady seems preoccupied with sheep for some reason, and sitting at our own table to eat. Because we younger guardsmen will be on the midnight shift, we're allowed to eat first. And that's when…

"Erm… M-My lady…?"

She's staring intently at my plate of haggis. A dish originally created to provide meat to children in poor villages, it's familiar and nostalgic to someone like me who grew up in the countryside. For those unused to haggis, the smell of innards can be off-putting, but for me, it's a taste of home. Even after my assignment to Drewett Manor and eating the delicious food served in the castle every day, I always order the dish whenever I get the chance.

"Please swap! Here!" She spears a glazed carrot with her fork and thrusts it toward me. *Wait, isn't this the lady's own fork?! Whoa, Lord Gerald's expression is horrifying! I haven't done anything wrong, have I?!*

Quashing my dread, I politely decline the proffered carrot and cut a small portion of haggis for her. That she'll actually eat it is impossible; a noblewoman could never enjoy a peasant's dish. But since she's requested it herself, I'm sure Lord Gerald won't hold me responsible for her inevitable reaction. He's not like some of those unreasonable nobles—*but wow*. *His expression is still horrifying.*

After quipping that the haggis isn't delicious, the lady nonetheless eats it all and even advises me to finish mine: "This dish is full of nutrients, so you should finish it too. Also, the sheep used to make this possessed magical energy, so it'll help replenish your magic."

I feel a strange tingling joy, surprise too. I didn't expect her to know about magical prowess. I ask one of the veteran guards about it when he briefs us before our midnight watch.

"Just take it as good advice. Yes, take everything the lady says in stride. You'll get used to it," he answers, deadpan.

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**"A-ARE** you trying to summon rain or something?!"

"That's not it!"

My abdominal muscles are getting good exercise as I watch the lady dance with vigor, swinging her arms and legs in every direction.

She’s totally impossible to predict, and that in itself is good training, I suppose. Probably. I’ll get used to it. Someday.

# Chapter Eight: A Maid Teaches Me to Bestow a Kiss before Any Request

**WHILE** the gardens at home and at Drewett Manor are both magnificent, the royal castle's are also very impressive. I glimpsed the grounds from a terrace when we last visited the palace for the ball, yet I wasn't really interested at the time and didn't notice much. But after learning so much from our old gardener, I've become very knowledgeable about plants.

"My lord! That frilly white one is an Agnes Smith lilac! We have them at home too!"

"Oh…do we?"

"Yes! I learned about it from the old grandfather! There are many kinds of lilac here, so I'm sure this is their lilac garden. Humans have cultivated lots of—"

"Abby. Abby, look where you're going."

"—Yes!"

We're at the royal palace at the invitation of the second queen consort, although not in the building where the ball was held. My lord husband is escorting me down an unfamiliar outdoor corridor, and as we walk, I teach him about the blooms in the adjacent garden, passing along our old gardener's lessons. Humans don't just grow flowers and plants; they change them as well. I hadn't known that until the old gardener taught me.

All the flowers propagated by humans are bitter though. Why didn't they make tasty ones? That would have been lovely. *Oh, but those sunflower seeds I ate last year were delicious.*

We're following a castle maid who leads us to an outdoor gazebo surrounded by roses. Some have pointy petals, and some have small and frilly ones, each likely planted according to color or type and… *Huh?* A pair of horse-shaped trees flanks the entrance, an arch latticed with more roses. Two horse-shaped trees. How did both trees happen to grow like that at the same time?

"M-My lord, my lord. Why are those trees shaped like horses?"

“Hm? Oh. Those are topiaries. They’re bushes trimmed to look like that.”

“Oh.”

“…Anyway, remember, Abby.” He bends to my ear. “You have to act calm today. Calm,” he whispers.

“Leave it to me.” I can do that.

Yet he frowns slightly and says, “Sorry you can’t be yourself.”

I frown in turn. “Pack rules are important, so I will follow them.”

Animals and monsters that live in groups must abide by certain unbreakable rules if they wish to avoid banishment. Humans have them too, and they’re harder to follow because I don’t really understand many of them. Of course, some nonhuman tenets are also strange, but human rules are much more complex. Even so, I’ve learned them well and can follow them.

I sense someone approaching and turn back to the castle. A maid waiting a distance away bows. We follow suit, and eventually a lady appears, walking slowly toward us. She must be the second queen consort. I patiently remain bowed. My knees are shaking from the position, but I persevere.

“Welcome. Please make yourself at home.”

We greet the second queen consort as she takes a seat in the gazebo, then we sit as well. Maids quickly set out tea and pastries, including small white and pale pink rose cookies the size of my thumbnail. The old gardener’s cookies are bigger and have jam in the middle. I like those better. After the second queen consort picks up her teacup, I’m allowed to take a sip of mine. *Oh?* The faint fragrance of roses wafts from the cup. But roses are bitter… *Wait, sour! This is sour!*

“Ah, what a wonderful aroma,” comments my lord husband. “This is a lovely rose garden. Is this tea made with its flowers?”

“Yes. It’s a blend of last year’s autumn rosehips and these flowers here. Look, they’re a vibrant red, just like the viscountess’s lustrous hair.”

The sourness was unexpected, but I must stay calm. I keep my lips shut as I return the second queen consort’s smile. I suspect I’m blinking too much, although I doubt she’ll notice. *Oh, the afternoon tea stand!* The sandwiches on the bottom tier are cut

into small circles and flower shapes! Tiny scones crowd the upmost level, above miniature cakes in the middle. *Wow!* The cakes are topped with something shiny that looks like spider webs!

"I've heard you have quite a discerning palate, so I hope you'll like these. We're alone here; don't stand on ceremony. Feel free to choose anything you like."

I know teatime etiquette. We're supposed to start with the sandwiches, yet the second queen consort is the most important person present. I steal a glance at my lord husband. He wears a beautiful, serene smile. I get it. I'm good at reading expressions. I adopt a troubled look that means "Everything looks tasty, and I don't know which to choose."

"My apologies," he says on cue. "It's been a while since I've had the honor of attending such an occasion… I usually spend my days with my men. Thank you for your generous consideration." With that, he signals to the waiting maid, indicating a cheese tart for himself. For me he selects a white cake crowned with a single raspberry and that golden web mesh. I poke at the mesh with a thin silver fork, and the strands collapse without a sound. Candy! It's candy!

It doesn't taste too sweet, maybe because it's in mesh form. I eat it with some cream, and they melt together in my mouth. Delicious! Castle cakes are the best!

"These are from a pastry shop that's become popular recently. I heard that the queue for the place starts early in the morning, and even then, it's not easy to get them."

"Are they not made in the castle?!"

That means I can go with Tabitha to buy some! What a thought!

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**ABIGAIL'S** eyes are glued to the cakes on the second tier of the tea stand, and I know there's no reason to stand on ceremony anymore. *No problem.* She caved earlier than expected but still within reason. And she's less likely to accidentally mention her Gift or monsters if she's fed. In fact, we might even keep the

conversation safely centered on food. I pray that will be the case. *I hope.* But I mustn't let my guard down.

"Are they not made in the castle?!"

*Ah.* She must find the cake delicious… She has high expectations for everything linked to castles, and her extreme shock will seem too much.

Her Majesty, Queen Chelsea Maureen Walley, flicks open her fan and blinks at us.

"My apologies," I say after a beat. "My wife has extraordinary respect for those who work at the palace. I'm sure she is just surprised that the pastries are as delicious as something served here."

"Oh, I see…" She exhales behind her fan, then laughs.

Queen Chelsea began as a low-ranking noble, the daughter of a viscountess, before rising to second queen consort. Her cheerful and friendly nature has made her popular with the public.

Mother, an influential noblewoman herself, has nurtured a good relationship with the royal family, so I know much about them. Currently, they consist of the first and second queen consorts, both of whom bore sons. Despite the elder princes' legitimate claims to the throne, no disputes or fights have arisen between the royal brothers. One reason is that the crown prince is exceptionally talented, and another is that the two queen consorts get along very well with each other.

While Mother has conceded that the second queen consort is a good person, she personally dislikes Queen Chelsea. When I asked her why, she merely chuckled and said it's something us men wouldn't understand. I suppose the second queen consort is just like everyone else, then: there must be more to her than meets the eye.

"I'll be sure to request that our bakers prepare something impressive for your next visit," she says.

"Thank you!" chirps Abigail happily. She looks at me proudly as if to say she's accomplished something incredible.

"Viscountess Noel, I've heard that both the strict Lord Gerald and the renowned Lady Katrina dote on you, and I must say you're not as I imagined. You're, well, you're very straightforward, aren't you?"

“My lord husband and Mother-in-Law are very kind to me. Oh, this cake tastes like banana! It’s banana cream, right?!”

“Oh, you’ve tasted bananas? That’s right, Drewett imports them.”

“Yes! I first tasted one in Orta. It’s delicious as cream too! Amazing.”

My heart thrums with anxiety at the abrupt speed with which Abigail and Queen Chelsea have begun to comfortably chatter. Just as I’m about to stop her, she turns to me.

“My lord! Can I go to the pastry shop with Tabitha tomorrow?”

“That’s a little sudden… I’ll have to ask for the day off first.”

“Yes!”

“…Are you going to stand in line with them?” asks Queen Chelsea, surprised. “Viscount Noel, queued outside a pastry shop?”

“Yes. It’s something I’ve gotten used to doing.”

“I’ve never joined a queue before,” chimes Abigail.

“You, Viscount Noel…? Used to queueing? How can it be?”

“It sounds strange, but there are many men who do so.”

True, most are servants, yet many men accompany their womenfolk to cafés and wait with them as well. My subordinates, too, tell me about suffering long lines to buy goods from popular shops. And it’s the only way to procure fresh sweets for Abigail on my way home from work.

I notice her staring at the fruit tarts and beckon the maid again. The pastries are all small enough to finish in a single bite, two bites in Abigail’s case, so I’m certain she’s not full yet. I also request that the maid switch Abigail’s tea for another drink. She didn’t look like she enjoyed the acidic flavor…

“Oh my, well…Viscount Noel, you’re…really…”

“Wow! There’s something sparkly here—it’s gold! The tart is covered with tiny flecks of gold…oh! It’s sugar! How tasty, my lord.”

Queen Chelsea snaps open her fan once more. Nearby bushes, a stand of white-blossomed silver privet amid the various roses, rustle unnaturally at the same time. When I noticed the prince hiding there earlier in the conversation, I chose to say nothing.

Queen Chelsea shrugs, then releases a resigned sigh as she closes her fan. “May I call you Abigail?”

“Yes! …I mean, I’d be honored!”

“Thank you. Abigail, I’d like to ask you about Longhurst, your former home, and wanted to put you at ease first.”

“Put me at ease?”

“We are grateful for your thoughtfulness, Your Majesty,” I say. “My wife isn’t easily intimidated, so please continue.”

“I see. Good. Well then, I was the one who invited you here, but as you may know, Viscount Noel, my son Dominic has been put in charge of Longhurst…”

Abigail probably sensed the prince’s presence as well, and may have even guessed his identity, but didn’t expose him because she’s more interested in the food. At the moment, her sole focus seems to be savoring the fruit tart. I gently take the plate from her and guide her up into a bow.

“Apologies, Mother, but she’s just too interesting… Long time no see, sir. No need to stand on ceremony.” The fourth prince, Dominic Gideon Walley, untangles himself from the bushes, the cheerful smile on his face identical to his mother’s.

*There he is, the womanizer.*

While the crown prince is exceptional, the other princes are talented as well. Prince Dominic, in accordance with his royal pedigree, is highly educated. Because I graduated early from magic school, he and I were schoolmates for but a year. Even so, I’ve heard that he was an excellent student and, since joining the military, has proven an accomplished officer. An apt socialite, he handles the noble factions with ease and is said to be a great mediator. But he’s also known to prefer socializing with women rather than men, so no way am I going to let him anywhere near my wife!

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**THE** hedge with small white clusters of flowers is silver privet, I remember. Someone is crouched behind it, someone not very good at hide-and-seek. Or not as good as the others hiding elsewhere in the garden. Lord Samuel taught me hide-and-seek. Drewett Manor in its entirety is too big, so we played only in the great hall. Lord Samuel cried. He told me to hide, and I did. *Wait, that’s not important right now.*

So the man unskilled at hide-and-seek is the fourth prince. He has wavy blond hair and green eyes that shift slightly in color, which indicates decent magical prowess. But my lord husband is definitely much stronger. He's also shorter than my lord husband, and thinner too.

My lord husband has warned me many times to be careful of the fourth prince. He may be talented and good at his job but is nonetheless a womanizer. If he invites me to do something, I mustn't answer. Because he's a womanizer.

I asked what a womanizer is, and it's something about having no boundaries. But why can some humans have many mates, while others are allowed only one? *It's really confusing.*

"I heard the rumors but wouldn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes! I mean, I was surprised to hear you'd married, sir, and to see you being so kind and considerate to your wife…" The fourth prince grins as he sits next to the second queen consort. Rodney likes to grin too, yet the prince's grin is different. He's not grinning because he's enjoying himself. And he keeps referring to my lord husband as "sir" although they overlapped at magic school for a year. Besides, the prince was thirteen when my lord husband was sixteen, so they wouldn't have been close.

My lord husband calmly sips his tea. I stay calm too. He's asked for something less sour for me.

"You're staring at your tea, my lady. Is something the matter?" asks the fourth prince.

"It's still too hot."

"I see… How does Lord Noel normally address you, my lady?"

"Abigail, or Abby."

"Oh! Then—"

"If you don't mind, Your Highness, please address my wife as Viscountess Noel."

"…Sure."

Princes are supposed to be powerful, and I know power isn't determined solely by strength, yet my lord husband seems to outmatch the fourth prince in that category too.

The second queen consort hides her face behind her fan for a moment, then sits straight and clears her throat. "As I mentioned, Longhurst is now under Dominic's jurisdiction. Its finances are precarious right now, but if he can bring it back to profitability, it

will become part of his official inheritance… Viscount Noel, Abigail, I'm sure you have your own thoughts on the matter, but might you lend Dominic a helping hand?" She smiles.

My lord husband has taught me that her requests are as good as commands. If that is true, we won't be able to refuse. I wonder why she's even pretending to ask in that case.

"Well, I'll leave the discussion to you," she concludes as she stands. We rise as well, then sit again after she has left.

"Please permit me to state now that I won't allow my wife to visit Longhurst. I hope Your Highness will keep that in mind as we proceed."

"It's just us now. We can relax and speak our minds, can't we, sir?"

"Perhaps, but we've never been close."

"That's exactly what I like about you, sir. Whoa! You've not mellowed at all, have you? Look, Viscountess Noel! Do you see how he glares at me?!"

My lord husband's serene face has morphed into one of annoyance. I try to frown as well. *It's the Drewett temperament!*

"Why are you holding your breath, Viscountess Noel?"

"Relax, Abby. Finish your tart."

"Yes!" *I'll practice my frown when I get home*, I decide as I accept my plate from my lord husband. The tart is very fragile, so I have to eat it carefully.

"Please continue, Your Highness," my lord husband says.

"Back to formalities, I see. Anyway, how much do you know about the current situation at Longhurst?"

A layer of jam lies between the custard and the crust. *I wonder what kind it is.* It's quite sour yet tastes good in combination with the sweet custard. *Oh, the crust has crumbled apart.* It is bad manners to try to scoop it into one mouthful. Maybe I can surreptitiously spoon it atop the custard? Surely that will be fine. *Quietly now.*

"Just general news: that the palace has appointed some officials to manage the territory."

"Well, that's right, but a messenger bird arrived four days ago. It seems they're all dead."

"…That's…"

“A strict gag order is in place, so not even Marquis Drewett knows yet. In fact, we don’t even know if they’re truly dead. The message just said that they all disappeared one morning, and the mansion was found awash in blood.”

*I know!* It’s blackcurrant jam! I’m glad I’ve figured it out. I’m sure our chef will be able to recreate the tart if I ask him. The season isn’t right for blackcurrants, yet he will definitely figure something out.

“Who made the discovery?”

“The officials were staying at the lady’s former family home, which was converted into an administrative building. The resident chef made the discovery when he arrived for work early in the morning.”

“And who sent word to the capital?”

“Former assistants to Earl Longhurst. I’ve already dispatched some knights to investigate, but they don’t know the territory well. Since Viscountess Noel here used to live at Longhurst, I thought to ask her counsel. So what do you think, my lady? Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“I wasn’t there.”

“…No, of course not.”

The culprits must be mirror birds, but I can’t speak of monsters! I promised my lord husband!

I’ve finished my fruit tart, and my herbal tea seems to have cooled down enough, so I take a sip. I think I can eat a little more. I sneak a glance at my lord husband and he gives a slight nod. Good, that means I’m allowed to eat more. I think that’s what he means. *Probably.*

“Erm… Sir?”

“Please don’t tilt your head like that; it gives me goosebumps.”

“That’s mean!”

*Oh!* I’ve spotted a tiny glass container filled with white cream? Or is it jelly? And a red substance that looks like compote! I didn’t notice it before, until the maid rotated the tea stand so I could see what’s on the other side. Castle people are just too kind. I meet her gaze and smile, and she offers me the container. I think it’s cheese cream. Or so it smells.

“Did Viscountess Noel just make eye contact to ask for permission to eat…?”

“Yes, and what of it?”

“That’s…interesting.”

I scoop some thick, fluffy cream and a small bit of compote into my mouth. *Oh*, there’s something plump within the cream. *So sweet and delicious.* I wonder what fruit it is. I usually feed unknown food to my lord husband so he can identify it, but I’ve learned I can only do that in front of family.

“If you have questions, please be forthright. I’m sure Your Highness is well aware that I dislike the aimless chatter typical of the nobility.”

“But it’s not a nice topic, and I wonder if it’s all right to ask a lady such questions directly.”

“My lord?”

My lord husband glances briefly at my spoon. “I think it’s fig,” he says. The maid nods, her head low. “I’ll answer your questions, so ask away.”

A fig. He knows what it is even without tasting it! How amazing!

The fourth prince lets out a long sigh and scratches his head, which is bad manners when at the table. But I don’t tell him that. “The officials we appointed were working hard to turn the estate around. That much was clear from their reports, but the locals don’t sound too friendly and didn’t seem willing to cooperate with our men. That’s why they decided to look through past documents as well.”

“It’s well known that the locals of Longhurst are wary of outsiders. Wasn’t the royal family aware of this when you annexed the territory?”

“Please stop. You must understand, don’t you, sir? The royal family doesn’t make every single decision. The officials are the ones on the ground and reporting to us.”

My lord husband shrugs. His cheese tart appears untouched. *Is he going to eat that?*

“Besides, their investigation found that while instructions to manage the territory appeared to have come from the former earl, there are clues that someone else was issuing orders concerning the most important decisions. For example, after a

directive to increase the stockpile in a certain year, the following harvest would drop as if by magic. There's no sign of foul play, of course, but that was all we'd managed to learn before the messenger bird came."

The serving of fig compote and cream is tiny; I've already finished. I've eaten three dishes, each so small that I wager I can eat one more.

"Taking the earl's household into consideration, I concluded that the person issuing orders was Viscountess Noel. Now, I know it's rude of me to say, but, well, the lady does not look the part at all. For one, she's much cuter than I imagined."

I look up. "Yes!"

"Wha—"

"Yes, my wife is cute."

"That's…not something I expected you to say, sir. Wait, you're glaring again! Why?!"

"My lord always tells me how cute I am," I inform the prince.

"I-I see… He always…tells you…"

"That's how I know I'm cute."

"Whoa. How blunt."

"My lord?"

"Yes. If you are aware of the circumstances surrounding the earl's household," growls my lord husband, "then you are aware of how my wife was treated there. And yet you've asked her to come here?"

His cheese tart is delightful! So smooth!

"I really apologize for that, but— Huh? That happened so fast and n-naturally that I almost missed it, but did you just feed the lad—"

"So an incident has occurred at Longhurst. But as she told you, my wife was not present when it happened. What more do you need to know?"

During our previous trip, I learned that delicious cheese is made from delicious milk. Maybe cows live in the castle. *But wait, we're not with family; was it all right for him to feed me?* I take a sip of herbal tea to cleanse my palate and am met with another mouthful of cheese tart. *Oh, it's really so tasty!*

"I just thought she might recall anyone suspicious… From my perspective, the primary suspects would be the earl's former

assistants and the chef who made the discovery."

"...Well, that's fair... The Longhurst family is an old one. Perhaps the royal family has some knowledge of its history?"

"Huh? Really? The Longhursts may have been wealthy, but they were never close to the royal family... Also, it was only in recent years that they began to appear in high society. I heard it was something they never did before."

"I see."

"Wait, do you know something, sir?"

"Only that that family is full of scum. Abby?"

"Yes!" I've swallowed my mouthful, so I sit up.

"Do you know of any suspicious persons among the former assistants and servants at Longhurst?"

"Nobody suspicious!"

"That's what I thought."

"O-Oh..."

"My lord?"

"No more, Abby."

I had three whole dishes and two extra bites. How wonderful!

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**ABIGAIL'S** satisfaction after three and a half pastries is palpable. And since our host, Queen Chelsea, has already left...

"Was it delicious?"

"Yes!"

"Now, please excuse us—"

"Wait, wait, wait! This isn't a cafe, you know?!" cries Prince Dominic.

I cluck my tongue in annoyance. *I guess we can't leave yet.* In addition to the reason for our summons, I also wanted to find out how much the royal family knows of Longhurst's past, how deeply they're currently involved with the territory, and if they were who sent the hero from legend to defeat the Monster King. I've learned that Prince Dominic at least has no inkling of the Monster King, so my business with him is done.

"I've sent some knights for now, and once they confirm that the area is safe, I'm thinking of heading down myself to

investigate. I mean, it's supposed to be my inheritance, after all."

His entitlement pisses me off. I may not want the land, yet it rightfully belonged to Abigail.

Besides, Longhurst is the location of the Monster King's forest. Abigail still speaks about events and creatures there when she remembers her life as the Monster King. She tells the stories in a factual way, though I've detected a slight bit of emotion when she mentions other monsters. Despite that, she doesn't seem to be experiencing nostalgia or longing. Rather, it's as if she's merely recounting something that happened the day before.

Most people love their childhood homes, myself included, and although I know that isn't the case for Abigail, I still worry about her.

But I don't want that land! My sentimentality and her claim to the territory are two different things!

"I see," I reply. "I'm sure Your Highness will deploy maximum security while there. Please be careful."

"Will you come as well, sir?"

"Protecting the royal family is the responsibility of the knights."

"Seriously? You're too cold!"

Abigail glances up at the suggestion of me accompanying the prince, then looks away. Dread ghosts down my spine... And I can't feed her more because she may get an upset stomach.

"My lord, can I queue at the pastry shop?"

Was that all she was worried about? Thank the gods! She's just too cute!

"Sure. I'm not accompanying His Highness, so let's go on my next day off."

"Yes! Thank you!"

"That's a lovely smile, sir." Prince Dominic's own smile is suddenly sly. "...Viscountess Noel, can you recommend any good eateries in Longhurst?"

"Recommend...? I've never been, so I don't know."

The prince frowns. "Never been? But the Longhurst mansion is located in the city center, isn't it?"

"I've seen maps, so yes, that is true, but I've never been outside the house."

"Oh... Well, I see. I see."

“…Your Highness,” I warn.

“Look, I’m sorry! Oh, right. Then would Viscountess Noel know which shop paid the highest taxes?”

“The Sunshine Kiosk,” she answers instantly, and Prince Dominic’s leer deepens… *Oh, how I detest him.*

“I see. I guess we don’t really know things until we ask. If they pay such high taxes, they must be a popular shop. Do you think they sell delicious food? How about we have a meal there together, my lady?”

“I promised my lord that I wouldn’t go with you even if you offered delicious food.”

“…I see. Can’t make you break your promise then.”

“Yes!” Abigail smiles at the “praise” and turns to me, gazing at me in such an adorable manner. I give her a firm pat on the head. Good, she’s keeping her promise to not divulge anything.

“Sir, I really hope that both you and Viscountess Noel can accompany me to Longhurst. Her role as former manager of the territory will be— Whoa! You’re glaring again! I’m sorry!” The prince scowls and dips his chin in apology, but his deference doesn’t change the fact that he’s using his status to push his agenda.

I lower my voice. “I’ve said that I won’t allow my wife to visit Longhurst…”

“Well, I think we should let the lady speak for herself. Would you not like to travel with Lord Gerald to Longhurst, Viscountess Noel? We’ll see to it that he gets time off before we leave, of course, so you can queue at the pastry shop.”

“I must accompany my lord, because I’m his wife!”

Prince Dominic blinks, taken aback by her frank declaration. “Wow… Now I see why you’ve changed so much, sir. The lady is really adorable.”

“She’s *my* wife.”

“I know, so please stop glaring at me! Since I’m a royal prince, rest assured that maximum security will guarantee your safety as you travel with me. Besides, Viscountess Noel has proven herself talented enough to be called upon to serve, so this is a great chance to build upon the ties between our families. Most noblewomen in high society are tasked with socializing. Despite not fulfilling such duties, the lady is protected by the marquisate

of Drewett. You must be keen to show her contributing to the territory in other ways, I would think…?”

“Perhaps I’m only going to allow it because I’m exceptionally possessive.”

“Hmm! Perhaps, but I have a feeling I’m right!”



**THE** prince’s words indicate that he severely underestimates Abigail’s abilities. Yes, he must think that she’s accomplished what she has due to the presence of capable assistants. Nevertheless, he’s requested our cooperation, probably because he needs someone who possesses inside knowledge of Longhurst.

If that’s the case, then my compromise is that we’ll perform the bare minimum while remaining wary of the prince and extract a promise that he’ll leave us alone after our help. That’s our only choice… *Damn! He’s always smooth-talking into getting his way!*

“My lord?”

“Yes?”

We’re in the carriage heading home, and Abigail squirms as she turns sideways on my lap. Her face nears mine, so close that our noses almost touch, and she gives me a light kiss.

“Can we visit the Monster King’s forest after finishing the job at Longhurst?”

“Huh? Well, I think we can do that, but…it’s a very large forest. Is there a particular spot you’d like to visit?”

The gold sparkle of her eyes is mesmerizing. “I looked at a map! I’m sure it’s only a slight detour!”

“Of course.”

“There’s a spring in the forest that’s your color, my lord! I want to compare it with you!”

*Oh, so that’s what she wants to show me.* How adorable she is!

# Chapter Nine: When Giving a Tour, I Must Point with an Open Hand

**MY** lord husband and I were able to wait in line for the shop selling delicious cakes. The guards didn't join us, instead standing some distance away, and Tabitha and Rodney waited at home, so we bought lots of souvenirs for everyone. The staff promised to deliver everything to our home, but I wanted to carry some myself, so they placed a few of the cakes in a small box for me.

"It was so delicious and fun," I recount.

"I'm just glad I got to see Viscount Noel standing in a queue…"

We're on our way to Longhurst and have stopped to rest. The servants have set up a table, where the fourth prince and I are enjoying afternoon tea. My lord husband is present too, of course. He and I took tea by ourselves on the first day of the journey. After that, the fourth prince always invited us to join him, twice so far. We are scheduled to arrive at the earl's mansion, since converted into an administrative building, the following day.

"…To bring ten guards seems a bit excessive," the fourth prince comments as he glances around, brow raised. "I'm traveling with knights myself—aren't they enough? I mean, I doubt we need much protection in the first place with you around, sir."

Only three of the ten guards are currently on duty, since they're working in shifts. I wonder why he is so surprised. My lord husband had to submit a report on how many from our household would make the trip, so the prince should already know about them.

"The knights' responsibility is to protect the royal family, namely you, Your Highness. It's not unnatural that I'd like to have guards whose top priority is my wife's safety."

"But we have ten knights here. Surely that's—"

"Ten is less than usual, given the secrecy of our trip."

"But you're here too, sir—"

"I'm strong too," I add.

"I'm here merely as a viscount, not security."

Before we left, I promised my lord husband that I wouldn't leave his side under any circumstances. Someone may try to abduct me again, which is why he can't protect the fourth prince as well.

"Please do your best," I tell the fourth prince.

"Huh?"

"If strange men appear, I'm to hide behind my lord. Your Highness should find a place to hide too."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

"Shall we practice? You have to crouch down, like this. Look!" I stand to demonstrate. He says he'll practice later though, so I sit again. The tea isn't as nice as Rodney's brew. I'll have to decline the prince's next invitation.



**WE'VE** entered Longhurst and will be staying at an inn for the night. The town we're in is the second largest after the territory's main city of Longhurst. Although the demesne is prosperous, the population is comparatively small, so there are fewer settlements. Despite that, the route from the capital to the city of Longhurst is lively and well inhabited.

The fourth prince is traveling with servants in addition to the ten knights, while our party includes Tabitha, Rodney, and the coachmen as well as other help. The inn isn't big enough to accommodate everyone, so the fourth prince and his retinue will stay at another.

"This room offers the best views. Shall we deliver your meals here?"

"Yes, please do. And aside from these two, the rest of the servants can do as they please."

The smiling innkeeper turns to Tabitha and Rodney to tell them more about the bathrooms. My lord husband drapes his coat over the back of the sofa while I study the room. Is that the balcony, outside the large window on the opposite wall? A door to the left opens to the master bedroom, and another on the right leads to the bathroom and servants' quarters. I spot a round white table with a glass bowl of sparkling red fruit.

“Oh! Cherries.”

“Yes. They were just delivered from the nearby village this morni—” The innkeeper stops speaking as his eyes meet mine.

My lord husband quickly steps between us. “Is something the problem?”

“N-No, my apologies. Please make yourselves at home.” The innkeeper beats a hasty retreat, my lord husband glaring at his back. *What happened just now?*

Rodney picks up a cherry, nibbles it. “These seem fine,” he remarks.

“...Abby?”

I hurry to answer, my mouth full of juice after biting into a large one. “Yes!” I roll the fruit around in my mouth as I chew.

“From now on, don’t eat anything unless Rodney or I say it’s okay, yeah?”

“And Tabitha?”

“Tabitha as well.”

“What about salmon jerky?”

“Do you still have more? Yes, that’s fine too.”

“Yes!” I wrap the salmon jerky in my handkerchief and return it to my pocket. I have to focus on the cherries.

Before I can eat another, Tabitha wipes my mouth with her handkerchief. “The pit, my lady.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t eat the pit, Abby.”

“Yes!”

She removes a small plate from a cabinet and portions out three cherries for me to eat before dinner. I select one more from the glass bowl, pluck its stem, and feed it to my lord husband.

“Thanks.” He closes his teeth on my fingers and the fruit, then laughs and tells me that it tastes delicious.

That’s right. The cherries are so tasty!

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**RODNEY** has arrived with our dinner trolley. He’s also a guest at the inn, so I wonder why he’s delivering the meal. When I ask him, he smiles and answers that he met the inn’s server along the

corridor by chance and offered to take over from there. So he and Tabitha serve us dinner, just as they usually do at home. The first dish is cabbage rolls, the leaves wrapped so tightly that no picks are required to hold them in shape, with thick tomato paste drizzled on top. The leaves are so tender that they part immediately under my knife and don't snag on my teeth, but their contents are hot, so I have to be careful.

"Oh! Nuts! There're nuts inside! Delicious!"

The tender, juicy minced meat filling is accented with spices, chopped vegetables, and crushed nuts. The heat stings my tongue a bit, but I'm fine.

"Abby." My lord husband murmurs an incantation, and something clinks in my glass of water. *Oh, it's cold!* He's so amazing. The Monster King would have frozen the whole table. I haven't tried that spell as Abigail yet, so I don't know how I'll do. I sip the water, its temperature just a step away from ice, and the stinging sensation eases.

"By the way, what type of magic could the Monster King wield? I'm sure it knew healing magic?"

"It never got hurt, so I don't know."

"Ah, I see."

"Sometimes bits would get sliced off without the Monster King realizing, but they always grew back on their own."

"I-I see. I guess the concept of injury doesn't apply to it."

Next is mushrooms. Thick slices of fried king oyster mushrooms smelling of butter and garlic. They're very chewy.

"Is it tasty?"

"Yes!"

I enjoy an onion soup without scalding my tongue, then a crunchy salad with thin slices of carrot. I'm learning that delicious food can be found in Longhurst too, so I'll be able to find a nice souvenir for Ethan again. Otherwise, I'll find him a nice stone from the forest spring. Those are also great.

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**AFTER** settling Abigail in bed, I exit the bedroom to find that Rodney has poured me a nightcap. I glance at the label on the

nearby bottle, noting its high proof.

"*Freeze!*" I mutter, and two chunks of ice fall into my glass with a plink. I examine the drink, watching the ice and liquor mix together as I wait for Rodney to speak. Worried when dinner had yet to arrive past sunset, he'd gone into the corridor with Tabitha to check on the situation.

"That's where I found the server pushing the dinner trolley down the hallway," he reports.

"I've heard that this is a luxury inn, so I'm shocked," adds Tabitha, wringing her handkerchief in both hands in frustration. "How rude of them to do so in plain sight of the guests."

"The innkeeper was acting strange too. Did you manage to discover anything?" I ask.

"...Just the usual comments about golden eyes. They're obsessed because the legends are so ingrained in them, though it seems to be more a feeling of aversion than any true ill will," says Rodney.

"I still had all the food tested for poison on the spot, just in case," Tabitha says. "Everything turned out safe. They won't be trying anything funny for breakfast tomorrow, will they?" She thinks for a moment, then snaps her handkerchief like a fan. "No, I'll have them test for poison again."

"It's only our first night here. Who knows what's to come..." I sigh.

"Good thing we brought along extra security," says Rodney.

"I hired them to guard Abigail. They'll go wherever she goes."

Although we've been forced to accompany the prince, I've always wanted to investigate Longhurst myself, so I may as well make full use of the opportunity. At the very least, I'd like to find the mastermind behind Abigail's abduction and beat them to a pulp.

Rodney shakes his head. "I had no idea the prejudice against golden eyes is so widespread..."

"Perhaps it's because of the isolated nature of the land?" suggests Tabitha.

"Yet they seem obsessed with the Monster King's forest," he argues.

"It could be fear of its proximity."

Like the royal capital ensconced by walls, the Monster King's forest is bordered by rocky peaks on all sides. The city of Longhurst sits right where the mountains open into the valley, acting as a sort of gate that sequesters the forest from the rest of the territory.

"Well, at least we now know that there's no need to play nice with the locals here," I say.

"Is it true that the former earl's wife and servants were evicted from the manor?" asks Tabitha.

"That's what Father ordered, yet it seems the officials from the capital took pity on them. The former earl's wife is definitely gone, but not the servants. Even if they'd been fired, the officials would have had to hire more locals to fill the positions, which seemed pointless I suppose."

"Oh dear. So it's their own fault they were attacked by mirror birds?" guesses Rodney.

"Of course. Mercy doesn't beget mercy when it comes to monsters," Tabitha says, though her heart isn't in it.

If the officials had lived, they would have been punished for ignoring the marquis's instruction to evict the servants. If only they were all capable and intelligent men, then perhaps they wouldn't have thought to disregard orders…

Abigail shared her suspicions that the officials at Longhurst were victims of mirror birds the moment we returned home from tea with the second queen consort.

The notion of mirror bird eggs hidden within the Longhurst mansion is absurd, so I had to devise a story of discovering some while on patrol to initiate an inquiry with the investigative bureau. Would those monsters really lay their eggs inside the well-protected manor, among humans they know to be far more intelligent than themselves? If that's true and the officials really were attacked by mirror birds, then there's a high chance that the servants in the former earl's residence know something. It's too much of a coincidence otherwise.

"I've registered a report about finding mirror birds around," I tell Tabitha and Rodney. "Once we're at the manor, I'll try to establish a link and put out a formal warning. You two, take the guards and do a thorough search, but remember, Abigail's safety is top priority."

I down the liquor in one gulp and slam the glass on the table.

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**WE** reach the erstwhile residence of the former earl. The fourth prince and his retinue arrived just before us, and the old servants are all outside to welcome him. I gaze at the row of familiar faces. The man greeting the fourth prince was chief of the earl's assistants. He is a baron without much hair.

My lord husband escorts me from the carriage, and the guards form a semicircle behind us. They're all so tall that I can't see past them. My lord husband stands in front of me, so I can't see forward either, although I can hear the fourth prince calling for him. He answers simply in a clear tone. He really does sound more powerful than the prince. *He's so amazing.*

A maid guides us from the entrance to the stairs leading to the second floor, where our rooms are. I recognize her as well. She used to give me bread for helping her with her work. Our eyes meet and she frowns just like my lord husband.

*Wait!* I must speak as Viscountess Noel! I pull ahead of him. "My lord will stay in the guest room! The bed in my room is too short for him! And I'll be staying in the same room as him!"

"Huh?"

"Because I'm his wife!"

I won't back down. *It's best if we stay together!* I don't have a fan, so I place my left hand on my hip, lift my chin, and puff out my chest. I learned the commanding yet calm stance from Mother-in-Law.

The maid just glares at me.

Unexpectedly, Tabitha steps out from behind me and grabs the woman by the jaw. *Oh?* "What's this attitude from the former maid of a disgraced earl to my mistress?" she snarls.

*Whoa! Tabitha's angry!*

The maid's face twists in Tabitha's grip, her eyes roving from side to side, and she manages to answer, "...Th-The mistress...?"

"Lady Abigail. Viscountess Noel. Someone you should be treating with respect."

"B-But she's— Oh! Ow!"

Tabitha pushes the maid against the banister. The servant struggles to pry off the fingers digging into her chin, and Tabitha quickly captures the woman's sleeves in one hand, effectively restraining her. *How did she do that?! Wow! Tabitha's so strong!* I clasp my hands together and bounce in awe.

"Tabitha," my lord husband says.

"...My apologies for overstepping," she murmurs as she releases the maid, who collapses onto the floor. Hastily, she bows to my lord husband and returns to my side. *Oh, was she standing there before?* That's nice, because she's so strong.

"It's fine. Let the head housekeeper deal with her... Your Highness," my lord husband says, turning to the fourth prince, "as you've seen, this servant was rude to my wife, so my staff took action to rectify that. I'm sure you have no complaint?"

"N-Not at all," the fourth prince's shoulders hunch, and he seems weak and small. "I-I guess it's true that the servants are under royal employ... Oh dear."

"It looks like the servants here are not up to par at all. I assume Your Highness has your own chamberlain to see to your personal needs, so would you mind if I assign someone experienced in running a household to oversee the manor during our stay?"

"Wha—?" squawks the chief assistant.

"Silence. I have not given you permission to speak."

He falls silent at my lord husband's reprimand. *That's because my lord's strong!*

The fourth prince nods. "Oh, yes. Please do."

My lord husband signals for one of the guards to restrain the maid. Longhurst's former steward and the other servants linger awkwardly, unsure whether they should resume their task of showing the fourth prince to his rooms. Rodney steps forward, barking instructions in a tone utterly at odds with his usual laidback demeanor. A group is assigned to escort the fourth prince to his suite, another to convey us to ours, and the rest are to wait in the servants' quarters. The restrained maid is to be led there as well.

"Abby?"

"Yes!" I requested a clean room for my lord husband! I'm fulfilling my role as viscountess! I'm sure he'll praise me for it. I

walk to stand beside him, and sure enough, he strokes my hair with a gentle hand. *Oh, but why does he look a little sad?* "What's the matter, my lord? You'll have a clean room."

"Yes, thank you for that… Since we're here, can you show me the room you used to sleep in?"

I tell him it's a small room and there's not much to see, yet he insists, so I set off down the hall. I left just over a year before, so I remember the way. I remember how to get to every single part of the house.

"This way!"

I lead us through the servants' passage and down the stairs to the basement. *Oh, it smells moldy.* That must be because I'm no longer there to clean. After I joined the Noel household, I came to understand that the Longhurst servants are really bad at cleaning. I was the best of them all.

The third door from the bottom of the stairs opens into my old room. It's probably been closed since I left and has become even more rickety and hard to force ajar. My lord husband has to shove it open for me, and a blast of humid air hits me in the face, making me sneeze. We squeeze past some broken cabinets and dressers with stuck drawers, all the way to a space in the back large enough for two of me to stand with arms outstretched. The stone walls appear to have a few more cracks compared to when I last saw them, but the floor is still nice and flat. The thin straw in the far corner, once spread in a neat square, looks sticky, probably because it's been absorbing moisture for the past year.

"…Here?"

"Yes, my lord. The bed is smaller than I remember. Now that I'm bigger, I don't think I can sleep on it anymore. I've grown! I'm so glad I requested the guest room for us instead! Did I do a good job?!"

"Yes… You did. As expected of my wife." He hugs me tight and nuzzles his cheek against mine. He'll hold me in the same manner that night so I sleep well. I reach my arms around his broad back and embrace him in return.

"Let's show those servants that what goes around, comes around," he growls over my head. His breath tickles.



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**ABIGAIL** often spoke of her life at Longhurst, always calmly and usually offhand. To hear her recollection of how she lived made my blood boil.

But nothing could have prepared me to see the extent of her suffering with my own eyes.

Together with Rodney and the others, I follow an enthusiastic Abigail to her old room. Even Prince Dominic tags along, trailing at the back, and I can't be bothered to shoo him away. We pass through a dim servant corridor and down a dark staircase to the basement, where the air feels damp and reeks of mold. The stone walls are crumbling and the floor muddy. We halt before a blackened wooden door that she struggles to open, so I do so for her, revealing a space haphazardly packed with old, cheap-looking furniture and wooden crates.

Abigail slips inside easily, but the rest of us have to shimmy through sideways. Beyond is a tiny cell that she declares her room. The small patch of straw—*how can that be her bed?*—somehow looks less comfortable than what we provide the horses at home.

My chest is weighted with a black lump.

Was that where the skinny Abigail curled up to sleep before she became my wife?

Did she work hard to keep it clean, the place forsaken by the others, so she'd be given some bread to eat?

*How long did she live like this?*

🎂🎂🎂

**I** leave Tabitha to help Abigail out of her travel clothes and into bed for a nap in our guest room, briefly stopping to station three guards in the hallway outside the door. While the others patrol the grounds, I find an empty room in the mansion and proceed to kick over all the chairs and tables within.

Yes, I've seen battlefields, witnessed desolate and starving villages, visited the slums hidden behind the glittering royal

capital. I've met so many pitiful children that I thought my heart no longer capable of hurt.

And yet it does. How could they reap all the benefits of a well-managed territory, even predictions regarding natural disasters and monster attacks as well as strategies to counter those issues, but order her to clean an abandoned basement in exchange for bread?

The Longhursts themselves lived a wealthy life so different from hers, never experiencing hunger or the ache of work-weary hands or fitful sleep in the cold.

For the first time, tears of rage sting my eyes. I wipe them away roughly with a sleeve, heave a few deep breaths. I let calmness return before addressing Rodney, who followed me into the room and waits by the wall.

"What's the most severe punishment meted out to servants who insult an earl's daughter?"

"Five lashes of the whip, followed by dismissal."

"That's not enough."

"Understood. I've instructed our chamberlain and guards to interrogate the household. If such blatant disrespect is allowed, I'm sure they're guilty of many more crimes as well. We'll pile on the punishment." His lips are tight without any hint of his usual smile.

Tabitha also appeared stoic when I left her with Abigail, yet I saw her throat tremble. I know we all feel the same.

🎂🎂🎂

**AS** I leave the room and its broken furniture, I find Prince Dominic standing outside, a remorseful look on his face. He probably followed us to the basement out of curiosity and at last feels guilty about forcing Abigail back to Longhurst. Figuring there's nothing more to be said, I brush past him. He mutters an apology.

"I'm not the one who needs it, Your Highness, and my wife won't understand. That's why I wanted to keep her away. I hope you understand now."

"...I'll leave the servants to your discretion, sir."

I plaster on a fake smile, bow, then head back to our room. My mind is preoccupied with how best to deal with the servants, and I forget to knock. I walk in to find…

"Like this! Then this! Yes?!"

Tabitha is teaching Abigail how to restrain an opponent. *That's right, she looked really excited when Tabitha was disciplining the maid…*

"Oh, my lord! Look! I just learned this from Tabitha!" Abigail dashes over to me and grabs my sleeve, and I twist my arm and her around, pulling her into a hug instead. "Huh?! How did you do that, my lord?! What?!"

The sight of her begging from my arms to show her the move again melts the black lump lodged in my heart. I can't help but smile, enjoying the feeling of her softness as she bounces against me.

Suddenly, she stops wiggling and places a hand on my chest. Looking up at me, she says, "You haven't changed out of your travel clothes, my lord."

"Yes, I was just thinking I'd patrol the grounds. You can rest up."

"No! I can show you around!"

I'd hoped that she could relax and rest once the servants retired, but she appears even more agitated and excited.

"Where shall we start? Hmm, there's an acorn tree to the east! And to the west—wait, no. The west is that way. To the west, there's a chicken coop!" She spins on the spot, pointing and naming locations in all directions, the soft and light fabric of her loungewear fluttering.

I pick her up as though scooping a butterfly into a net and ask if she's tired, to which she replies with a cheerful no. That must be because she already napped in the carriage.

"Then let's put on something warm and go for a walk." The city of Longhurst is at a higher altitude, so the wind is still chilly despite the early-summer season.

"Yes! Tabitha, Tabitha! I need a coa—whoa! It's right here!" she cheers as she turns to find Tabitha already holding a hooded cape woven with an intricate pattern. Her delight is understandable. The Kofi family has been serving me since I was born, and I'm still amazed by their intuition even if I don't show it externally.

After Tabitha ties the cape around her shoulders, Abigail bounds over to me and takes my hand. She seems more like her usual self as she babbles on about the acorn, lingonberry, and apricot trees in the garden, as well as the mulberries in the small untended grove at the back. *Wait, acorns?*

"...Are acorns delicious?" I ask suspiciously.

"Huh? No, my lord."

*Don't look so worried. I'm not planning to eat any.*

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**THERE** are quite a number of delicious berries in the garden and grove. They're tiny, so I quickly grow hungry again after eating a whole bunch, but certainly tastier than the hard bread I used to receive. They were a treasured food source, though I've since learned that there are many more delicious foods.

*That's right, the mulberries should be here; it's the right season for them.* After walking through the garden, I take my lord husband's hand and lead him to the small grove at the back. He seems strangely interested in acorns, so I'll save those for last.

"Wait, Abby, let me go first... What's gotten you so excited...?" He stops me before I can push into a prickly bush. I used to sneak into the grove often and had cleared a path, yet the bush has grown into the gap once more. My lord husband summons wind magic to cut a new opening. *He's so good at that.*

I pass through the bush easily and spot the familiar tree. "Here, my lord! Look, there's so many!"

"Abby! No!"

I've grabbed a branch and braced my foot on the trunk, ready to climb, but my lord husband grips me around the waist. I need to climb into the tree to get the mulberries. I can see them so clearly, the plump black fruit peeking between the leaves.

"They're ripe and delicious."

"I'll get them," he says.

"Mulberries are soft and squash very easily, so you have to be gentle."

"Of course."

"Did you know that already, my lord?"

“I’ve seen them served at local exhibitions. The knowledge was also drilled into us at the military academy.”

Once again, he murmurs, “*Cut*,” and the leaves high in the mulberry tree start to shake. The wind catches the falling berries and deposits them in his large hand. I peer into it to see that they’re ripe to eat! The shiny black bits have amassed into large berries!

“What’s this…?”

“Mulberries!”

“They’re huge?! Almost the size of strawberries!”

I pop one into my mouth, and it crunches on my tongue, releasing a sweet and tart flavor. *So tasty.* They are just as delicious as the old gardener’s berries at home.

“They’re good, my lord!” I press one to my lord husband’s lips.

“It is good… Are mulberries always so fresh and tasty…?”

I eat another while he savors his. *Yum!*

“Ever since I learned how to climb, I always had these for lunch around this time of year. …My lord, my chest feels a little fluffy. Why’s that?”

“Perhaps you’re feeling nostalgia?”

“I see! That’s right, I didn’t get to eat any last year!” I was already living with my lord husband then.

The canopy above us shakes noisily.

*You’re delicious this year too.* I gaze at the top of the mulberry tree as I channel my compliment to it.

Abruptly, my lord husband picks me up. “Abby?”

“I want more, my lord, for Tabitha and Rodney.”

“S-Sure.”

He sets me down, and a sharp wind whips through the branches again. I hold up my skirt to catch the raining fruit. *He’s really so amazing!*

◆◆◆

**I** thought someone was going to take her away.

Her golden eyes unfocused, she stared up into the branches as though listening for something. When she smiled as if she’d heard a reply, I panicked. I sweep her into my arms, and she

doesn't even flinch, merely continues to press berries into her mouth with red-stained fingers while chirping about her "amazing lord." At her request, I cut down more until she has a small pile in her lap.

She pauses as though something has just occurred to her. "Oh! Are the acorns ripe?"

"What are you talking about? Anyway, your skirt is full; there's no more space for acorns."

I'm starting to worry again, so I lift her in my arms and bring her back to our room. Does she think I want acorns? They're not even in season.

"Master…?"

"They're mulberries."

"Mulberries! I got some for you too! There's lots, so you can give some to the guards and servants as well!"

"Mulberries…"

"Don't lift your skirt so high, Abby."

"Yes!"

I avoid Tabitha's sharp gaze as she transfers the fruit from Abigail's skirt into a wooden bowl. *Sorry if the stains don't come out easily…*

As she leads Abigail into the next room to change, Rodney loudly whispers, "So big?! Aren't they too huge?! And it's not even the right season?!"

"I know!" I whisper back. "They're huge *and* early!"

🎂🎂🎂

**AS** expected of the blockhead prince, although he sent knights ahead, he didn't think to bring a chef along after childishly insisting on a secret trip to the bloody place. And while the knights and I can prepare simple dishes due to our outdoor training, we certainly don't know enough to cook grand meals for royalty. In the end, we have no choice but to rely on the former earl's staff. As a precaution, I station guards in the kitchen to supervise them. Tabitha has also taken it upon herself to be there.

"It's amazing that she can bake too. She's so incredible," Abigail gushes.

She’s been restless since she learned that the mulberries will be used to make pastries. Normally, she would have accompanied Tabitha to the kitchen, but I don’t want her wandering the manor on her own and told her to stay with me.

“Expectations sure are high…” chuckles Rodney.

“Tabitha’s cobblers are delicious,” I agree. The last time I had her peach- or berry-topped biscuit cobbler was at the Kofis’ house when I was a child, so I’m looking forward to it.

“They sure are, and that’s not the only thing she can make,” he whispers.

I smile wryly. Tabitha is a baron’s daughter, so the fact that she can cook even one dish is no mean feat.

A timid knock sounds at the door.

“Come in!” says Abigail, dashing to the door.

“H-Hey!”

She opens it just as I reach her. I push her behind me when I spot Prince Dominic on the threshold, his hand still raised and ready to knock again. Our eyes meet.

“I-I was wondering if we might dine together,” he asks with a bright smile.

I return the blockhead prince’s smile and shut the door in his face.

# Chapter Ten: Perhaps My Lord Husband Is Just a Little Timid

**THE** large pie dish is made of thick ceramic, and a wooden lid keeps the contents warm. When Tabitha lifts it, steam wafts upward, mixed with the soft aroma of biscuit and the sweet and sour fragrance of mulberries. The cobbler is our postdinner dessert. I've heard that they are Tabitha's specialty and that the Kofi family used to enjoy them often. I will be trying it for the first time.

After much royal begging, my lord husband granted the fourth prince's request to join us. Tabitha looked shocked to see him when she returned from the kitchen. *Don't worry, Tabitha.* I will watch him to make sure he leaves enough food for Rodney.

"It's all right. I baked two. There is plenty for everyone," she whispers in my ear as she serves me. *Phew!* I add some fresh cream to my cobbler, which is crowned with whole black mulberries, the scarlet sauce dripping to the biscuit base. My spoon crunches into the crust, and after checking that it holds a bit of biscuit, fruit, and sauce, I take a bite.

It's not too hot, just pleasantly warm! The top of the biscuit is crunchy, but the base has absorbed the sauce and is soft on my tongue. The mulberries pop when I bite into them, leaving a tart aftertaste that pairs well with the thick, sweet sauce… *Why is the sauce so thick when mulberry juice is watery?* It's delicious all the same! And when I include the cream, the mouthful becomes extra smooth. Tasty!

"Ooh! Are these wild mulberries? They're good," comments the fourth prince.

"Tabitha's amazing," I tell him.

"Your…lips are stained, my lady."

*Oh!* I quickly dab at my mouth with a napkin, and it comes back red. *Oh dear!* I displayed bad manners! I fold the napkin to hide the stain. The fourth prince coughs quietly, and I ignore him. He can't have a second slice just yet! Rodney must have his first!

I am savoring my last bite of cobbler when the fourth prince turns to me, serious. “Viscountess Noel,” he begins, “I’ve heard the complicated story of how Longhurst was annexed by the crown, but I didn’t think much of it at first. I’ve been entrusted with the management of this land, so I’m responsible for the lives of its people. That was why I requested your assistance, and now I see that I should have been more prudent.” He sighs heavily.

Wait, I can feel a small mulberry seed stuck in my teeth.

“I was present this afternoon when the servants were interrogated…” he says. “I wasn’t there for long, but I saw how this wasn’t the best place for you. I took the report at face value…and I apologize for that.” He drops his gaze.

The taste of cobbler has faded, so I take a sip of Rodney’s herbal tea. It is delicious, as usual. And it’s washed the seed out.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say.

I don’t know what report the fourth prince is talking about, so I don’t think he needs to apologize. He looks defeated, his eyes lingering on the table. I hear my lord husband cluck his tongue beside me, and I wonder if he knows about the report. I glance at him.

“Don’t worry, Abby. I’ll handle this.”

That’s fine. *I guess it’s all settled then.*

The fourth prince shakes his head slightly, then smiles. “You’re very kind, my lady! You’re as adorable as an angel, but now I think you’re more like a goddess! Isn’t she, sir?!”

“She’s my wife, not a goddess.”

“Oh! Is that so?!”

Something is bothering me, but the prince’s words have caught my attention. “Have you met one?” I ask him.

“Met who?”

“There are no gods, but perhaps there is a goddess if Your Highness has met one.”

“O-Oh… Well, as a prince, I’m aligned with the state religion, but I’ve never met a goddess, no.”

*I knew it.* Since becoming Abigail, I’ve read about human deities. I’ve never met one though, not as the Monster King nor as a human.

Even after losing its body, the Monster King’s soul remained in the forest, probably because the place is the only one it knows.

My memories of that time are fuzzy, so I don't remember how long its soul stayed there before I suddenly became Abigail. I'm guessing it was there for ages, and if it never met a god even as a soul, then I doubt one truly exists.

"Gods don't exist. It's just a fantasy. Not real," I inform the fourth prince.

"Yes, right. I can't say it publicly, but I suppose you may be right."

"Yes. It's good that you know."

My lord husband seemed sad after reading the book about the hero, so I felt a need to assure the fourth prince that gods aren't real either. I nod at him and he nods back, which means the conversation is over. I stand to indicate that he can go, and he merely tilts his head... *Have I made a mistake?*

"Wait, has Viscountess Noel just asked me to leave?"

My lord husband snorts. "Abby's right, Your Highness. You won't want to linger in our rooms. I mean, we are newlyweds, after all."

"Oh, how rude of me! Well, yes, you've been very kind so far, and I'll be grateful for your assistance tomorrow too. And thanks for the dessert. It was delicious."

"You're welcome!" I say.

"How cute you are. ...All right, sir, you don't have to glare so hard!" laughs the fourth prince as he leaves.

Good, I can finally tell my lord husband about what has been bothering me. They're so weak that I didn't notice them at first. "My lord?"

"Yes?"

"It's strange, but there are mirror birds nearby. Lots of them."

"Whaaat?!"

See? I kept my promise to not say anything until we're alone!

🎂🎂🎂

**A** stable stands next to the chicken coop on the west side of the manor. Beyond that is a hut where the stableboys rest when they're not working, the gardener's shed, and an outbuilding for the servants and their families. Apparently, all the servants were

fired and evicted from the outbuilding when the earldom collapsed, then rehired to serve the officials from the capital.

"Over here." I squeeze through the gap between the chicken coop and the stable, through the bushes behind them, and past the back of the barn to reach the servants' quarters. My lord husband, Rodney, and the guards follow, and when I turn back at the outbuilding's entrance, everyone is covered in leaves and twigs, glancing in confusion at a path some distance away.

"Abby, doesn't that path lead from the main building to here?"

"Yes, but I wasn't allowed to walk on it!"

"O-Oh."

I reach for the door, and my lord husband catches me by the waist and pulls me backward. He looks at Rodney, who steps forward and fiddles a little with the locked door. It soon unlocks with a clunk. *What did he do?*

"They're in here, right? Do you know where exactly?"

"They're in the basement. About ten or twelve huddled in a corner."

"That many?!" yelps Rodney. He yanks his hand back from the open door.

"Mirror birds are weak. Also…"

It's true. I can feel them clustered tight in the basement. They must be trapped. Even disguised, mirror birds are some of the weakest monsters in the forest. When they hatch, they morph to resemble any living creature nearby. They can get stronger by eating monsters more powerful than them, so they risk being devoured to hide their eggs in other monsters' nests. That's how weak they are.

That's also why I didn't notice them right away despite their proximity.

*…Oh, it happened again.*

"Also, there are nine left now."

"Come here, Abby. All of you, there may be humans here, so be careful."

My lord husband pushes me behind him as the guards advance into the dark building. No moonlight pierces the shadows inside, so Rodney chants, "*Shine on, light up*," and a glowing sphere materializes in his palm. The guards spread out along the corridor stretching left and right from the entrance hall, venture up the

stairs to the second floor, then return quickly. I've never been to the outbuilding, so I don't know how to access the basement.

"We found no humans," Rodney reports. "And if the place follows the general blueprint of servant quarters…" He glances around, then strides down the corridor on the right. We pass through a small kitchen, and he opens a wooden door at the back, revealing steps to the basement. *Wow! Rodney's amazing!*

The guards go first to investigate. Soon quiet grunts of surprise echo from the darkness.

One of them comes back. "This may be too much for the lady," he mutters, face pale in the glare of Rodney's light.

"My lord?"

"Don't let go of my hand."

"Don't be scared. I'll come with you," I reassure him.

I grip his hand tight as we descend the narrow stairs, the stench of rot growing with each step. A black metal door waits at the bottom of the stairs, probably to a storeroom. The guards must have lit a lamp, for I can glimpse its glow wavering through the gap where the door stands ajar. We enter a large room lined with wooden shelves, and I hear a frail, high-pitched cry from near the opposite stone wall.

There are only seven, no, six, left.

A tall cage comes into view. Iron bars form its four sides, a slab of wood its top.

My lord husband swallows audibly and Rodney clears his throat.

The monsters press against the far side of the iron bars, trembling as they try to put as much distance as possible between themselves and us. They've mostly transformed into human shapes although not completely. One has a wing instead of an arm, another a three-toed bird's claw below the knee, and another a face like a horse.

All of their eyes are golden.

Many lay on the floor, half decayed. The one sadly wailing is only skin and bones.

*Why?*

"My lord."

"No."

He won't let go of me. I have no choice but to drag him closer.

"*Kyup-kyup!*"

*How are they still alive?*

One tries to fly at me but slams against the bars and falls to the floor, dead.

"Why are you here?"

The rest let out one last cry. Then they die too.

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**THE** mirror birds look like monstrous, half-finished human-animal sculptures created by some perverse artist. Those still alive cry pitifully, coated in filth and surrounded by rotting corpses and waste. I know they have taken the shape of human children to better disarm and attack people, yet I still feel pity for the sorry creatures.

"Why are you here?" murmurs Abigail without emotion. She kneels before the cage, her eyes blank and unfocused.

"Come, Abby. You'll catch cold," I urge, but she remains motionless, watching the last mirror bird die with a final chirp. I pick her up, cradle her. "If you wish, we can bury them in the forest."

My wife isn't too familiar with human customs, so I don't know whether sentimental rituals like funerals and burials mean anything to her.

She blinks at my suggestion and looks up at me. "Why? They're meat now."

"Oh, well, I guess...I mean, they came from the forest, right? I wasn't sure if you wanted to bring them back..."

"I see! I didn't think of that!"

"O-Oh."

I don't wish for her to be sad, but I realize then that there's a part of her that I may never understand. And perhaps I'm selfish to feel hurt by that. I hold her close and bury my face in her shoulder while she pats my back. *She really likes doing that...* I sigh, and simultaneously, one of the lookouts whistles, warning of an enemy attack.

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**BEFORE** we entered the outbuilding, my lord husband divided the guards into two groups. The veteran five accompanied us inside while the five recruits who joined us in Orta remained scattered across the grounds as sentries. Once we return to the entrance hall from the basement, Rodney quietly asks the guard posted right outside the entrance for an update on the situation. The man seems to not hear him, continuing to whistle different notes with his fingers in his mouth… *How does he do that?*

"Please stop that, Abby."

I remove my fingers from my mouth. I can't make any sound at all and merely got saliva all over my hand. My lord husband cleans me with a handkerchief as Rodney coughs and doubles over.

"…Yes, seems like there are about twenty of them out there," Rodney reports in a funny voice. "They've decided to act, just as we predicted."

"What a joke," sneers my lord husband as Rodney straightens again.

I try to sense our surrounds as well. I can already recognize the auras of our new guards. The one who shared his haggis with me is on the opposite side of the stable. Two or three unknown sources of energy are huddled in the area between the guards and the outbuilding.

"There are twenty-one humans I don't know. I'm sure of it."

"…That's amazing, my lady. Are they humans you've met before?"

"I don't know them!"

"Well, all the servants are in the manor's basem— Abby! We're going to capture them, so make sure you stay behind me."

"Yes! I'll be fine! I'll do this!" I slide to stand behind my lord husband. And when he shifts, I do too! I've practiced well in anticipation of such an event.

Rodney snorts at my demonstration and doubles over again.

"Y-Yes, good. That's perfect," my lord husband says, then prods Rodney with a foot. "Now go see if the guards can take care of it without my help."

Rodney rises unsteadily, opens the door a sliver, and relays the message. A short while later, the guards with us in the outbuilding slip outside too.

I stand behind my husband patiently, waiting for him to move.

In the end, he doesn't, and twenty-two humans bundled in rope are dumped at his feet. I spot the chief assistant in the crowd. Strange, I hadn't detected his presence until then.



**"TH-THIS** is a misunderstanding, Your Highness! Why are we being treated like this?!"

"Then why are you all armed? Do you take me for a fool?" sighs the fourth prince in exasperation, leaning against the stair banister. He had already retired for the night and wears a warm-looking nightgown.

The captured humans had been restrained with additional rope and led like cattle back to the manor. The spacious entrance hall of the mansion feels cramped with the twenty-two of them, even though they're piled in a heap. Their spears, hoes, and sickles have been confiscated and tossed in a corner. They are dressed in leather armor and metal breastplates, making them appear bigger than they are.

I'm not allowed near them, so I crouch halfway up the stairs to the second floor, watching them through the railing. I recognize three of them, including the former chief assistant, and the rest also seem to be locals. They are a mix of young and old men. The former chief assistant wriggles wormlike toward the fourth prince, and Haggis the guard kicks him before he can speak. *Oh, he's rolling away like a roly-poly.*

"So, did you find the mirror birds, sir?" the prince asks.

"Yes. Knowing their life cycle, we can safely conclude that the missing officials were eaten by the monsters, and I have reason to believe that these men played a hand in it." My lord husband quickly describes mirror bird eggs and the chicks we discovered in the outbuilding.

The former chief assistant tries to protest and is kicked once more by the guards... *Wait, what is my lord husband talking about?*

"My lord?"

"Hmm?"

“What do you mean, ‘They played a hand’?”

“I mean that they snuck the eggs into the manor at night after the officials had gone back to their inn.”

While mirror birds are known to infiltrate the nests of stronger animals or monsters, they seldom do the same to creatures more intelligent than themselves. That’s why I was surprised to find that egg in Mother-in-Law’s castle. I thought the mirror birds had made a mistake.

They aren’t very smart, after all. And they’re incapable of human speech.

Though they love to chatter on and on in their own language.

If they did leave their eggs among super strong or intelligent monsters or humans, then they just had to live with the consequences.

That’s how it is.

But the ones in the outbuilding spoke differently before their deaths. They said things like *no*, *stop*, *don’t take us*, *return us*, *no*.

I stand, clutching the banister. “You. It was you,” I yell at the former chief assistant squirming on the ground.

All the captives look up at me, their glares sharp and fearful, yet they hastily avert their gaze when my eyes land on them. Yes, I remember that behavior very well.

“Did you take their eggs?” I shout again.

“Wh-What? Please don’t listen to her, Your Highness! She’s not human!”



Sometimes, humans say something untrue as though it is true.

*This human stole the eggs.*

His expression is the same as that of the villager who called out to the hero, asking to be saved from the Monster King.

"Abby." A pair of big, warm arms wraps around my stomach from behind me. "It's okay," my lord husband whispers, his embrace tight. His low voice in my ear sounds so nice, and I can't detect any lies in his tone. I don't know what will be okay, but I trust him because he's strong.

When mirror birds hatch, they take the form of whatever lives nearby. If they succeed in fooling a creature and eating it, they'll return to their parents and shed their disguise. The chicks in the outbuilding were exposed not just to humans, but also horses and chickens. That must be where they grew up, and perhaps they forgot how to revert.

"What happened to the chicks who ate the officials?" I ask.

My lord husband is silent.

The former chief assistant glances at him over the top of my head, emits a squeak, then turns to the fourth prince. "Y-Your Highness, you mustn't listen to he—"

"Viscountess Noel has asked you a question. I'd like to hear your answer as well." Although the fourth prince's usual mild smile is in place, his expression is anything but kind. He never warmed to the chief assistant and the other Longhurst servants, and I don't think they noticed.

The assistant swivels to me, his face pleading. I try to turn to look at my lord husband but am held fast in place.

"Is everyone from Longhurst an imbecile...? Answer the question!" he rumbles near my ear. *Oh! He's really mad!*

"Y-You ignorant nobles! The monsters are meant to be used! You don't even kno—"

With a *swish*, a thin knife suddenly strikes the ground inches from the former chief assistant's nose.

"Eek!"

*Huh?!* Where did it come from?! I lift my lord husband's arm and roll up his sleeve but can't find anything. He simply kisses the top of my head and rubs his cheek against my hair, the sensation familiar and pleasant.

Then someone places another knife in his hand. Rodney! He supplied the knife!

“It seems the baron can’t hear my wife the viscountess very well.”

The second knife just skims the assistant’s throat, almost cutting him as he twists and arches away. My lord husband raises his hand again, and a third knife is deposited in his palm… Just where is Rodney getting them?

I hold my hand up next to my lord husband’s. Rodney hesitates for a moment, then gives me a strip of salmon jerky. Wow! He’s just like Ethan, conjuring anything I desire anytime I want it, without me saying a word!

“Your Highness,” says my lord husband.

“…What?”

“These servants seem unable to answer even the simplest questions. Do you still wish to keep them around?”

“Well, you’re right. They do seem pretty useless. I don’t think they provided much assistance to the officials either.”

My lord husband slides the blade of the knife along the banister. I refrain. Rubbing my salmon jerky on the railing will only make it dirty, so I eat it properly. The piece is a little small, perhaps because bedtime is near.

The bound humans start to struggle, bumping into each other and kicking their legs, with little success. They look like they’re attempting to cluster together like the mirror bird chicks but are doing quite a bad job.

One of the former assistants pushes his way out from the others. “Y-Your Highness! W-We were just trying to help Longhurst regain its former glory!”

“Hmm? Are you trying to strike a deal with me? Do you even realize you’re now under suspicion for the premeditated murder of royal officials?”

“I-It’s all a misunderstanding!”

“Is that so?” interjects my lord husband. “We saw with our own eyes the mountain of mirror bird corpses in the outbuilding. Was your illegal rearing of monsters a misunderstanding?”

“Th-Those had golden eyes! Monsters with golden eyes are—”

“They can be used! Yes! They’re useful! B-But not for murder!” yells another.

One by one, the captives all start to shout.

The remaining salmon jerky has gone soft, so I sever it with my teeth. It's delicious.

They tremble, they swear, and they continue to lie.

"Abby?" My lord husband pecks me on the cheek. I look up to see him smiling. "It's impossible to talk with these men. Why don't you go to bed first? I'll let you know how things go tomorrow."

That's fine. I already know they are lying.

The fourth prince appears disgusted as well and waves his hand in dismissal. "Whatever the case, Longhurst will never recover with people like you in charge," he sighs. "To be honest, it wasn't doing well even when the earl managed it."

"That's because he was incompetent! A fool who didn't know how to use golden eyes! But we're— Arrghhhh!" The man writhes in pain, the handle of a knife jutting from his shoulder.

"Oh dear, sir... Not in front of the lady," tuts the fourth prince.

"My wife doesn't need to hear such filth."

"You can leave them, my lord," I say.

My lord husband stares at me, and I lift my salmon jerky to his lips. I need to warn him that an upset dragon is approaching, but I can't do so until we're alone in our room. Perhaps I can whisper it to him?

"What is it?" he murmurs.

*Yes! He knows!*

He bobs his head to bite the jerky, leaning toward me so I can talk without the fourth prince hearing.

"You can roll those humans outside and leave them there. The dragon will either stomp on them or take them away!"

"Wait, wait, wait, what? I'm going to need more details. Let's go back to our room."

# Chapter Eleven: If Someone Roars at Me, I'll Roar Back

**ABIGAIL** is keeping her promise not to speak openly of monsters, yet what she's just whispered in my ear makes me want to scream for clarification.

"Huh, are you going to bed, sir?! Right now?!"

"We're newlyweds!"

"Wait, wait, wait! It can't be! This is unlike you, sir!"

"I'll be right back!"

"That fast?!"

I pick up Abigail and dash up the stairs, Tabitha and Rodney on my heels, leaving the guards to watch the captured men. I know I sounded like a fool, but what else could I say? *A dragon! The stingy one? The dragon that's in a bad mood?*

"I want water!"

Upon entering the guest room, Tabitha quickly responds to Abigail's request, pouring her a cup. I deposit my wife on the sofa and kneel next to her as she drinks. She blinks her golden eyes and looks at me quizzically.

"Well? What did you want to say?" I prompt.

"Oh! Yes! The dragon is coming!"

Tabitha freezes, her hand outstretched for Abigail's empty cup. Rodney's jaw drops, and he abandons his task of scooping tea leaves to brew tea.

Although I had my suspicions, the news is totally not what I expected. "A-All right. Do you know why it's coming? Is this the one who lives near the mine and is in a bad mood?"

"Yes. I don't know exactly why it's angry, but I think it's upset that the mirror birds were brought here and confined. It's the boss of the forest."

"...I see?"

"Yes." She nods sagely, as if all is clear. Meanwhile, I'm dumbfounded, unsure even of what to ask.

In the end, Tabitha speaks first. “My lady…? Is the dragon the current boss of the forest?”

“It’s been the boss for a while now. Are you brewing tea, Rodney? I’d like some.”

“Oh, apologies. Please give me a moment.”

“Yes! Tabitha, Tabitha, may I have a flower candy?”

Rodney appears troubled as he pours hot water into the teapot. Tabitha steps into the bedroom next door to retrieve the candies, telling Abigail that she can have just one.

“For a while? You mean when you were still the Monster King?” I probe.

“The Monster King is a Monster King. Not a boss.”

“…Is the dragon the boss because it’s stronge—”

“No! The Monster King is strong!” Abigail says hotly, puffing out her chest as if offended.

“I-I see.”

A boss… *Like Little Piyo? But Little Piyo is*— No, that’s not important. And yet… I watch as she leans back into the sofa and removes the candy stick from her mouth. She waves it with a satisfied expression, and somehow, I feel myself relax a little.

“If the dragon is angry, does that mean it’s here for revenge?”

“Revenge…? The humans hurt those mirror birds, so it’s here to return the favor. It’s like when monsters attacked small humans, and the big humans came to the forest in droves to attack them. Even monsters who were innocent.”

“Right, I see.”

“Some monsters eat humans, and if they go to a human village, it’s inevitable that they’ll be attacked. The same is true when humans enter the forest; it’s inevitable that monsters will attack them. Eating and being eaten, it’s all part of nature. The dragon isn’t angry about that.”

Her face is blank, perhaps because she’s not upset. In fact, her voice was just as emotionless when she asked the former chief assistant about the mirror birds. The only difference was that her timbre was serious and solemn, in contrast to her usual light chirpy tone. She didn’t seem fazed when the captives tried to excuse their cruelty, and I knew she was in Monster King mode.

And so she is again.

“But that’s wrong. They’re not yours,” she murmurs.

Are her words the dragon's, audible only to her? Or are they hers?

When Abigail provided countermeasures to Longhurst or advised Drewett, she never suggested the killing of monsters as a solution. She diverted a herd of frenzy sheep by planting their favorite kajuka fruit in strategic locations, or employed five-needle pine leaves, thunderbirds' favorite nesting material, to coax one from its blockade of a river. While her strategies ensure zero human casualties, they're also designed to gently guide monsters back to their rightful territories, protecting the creatures from harm.

"Abby, I don't care what happens to those humans."

"Yes."

That scumbag spoke of using monsters as mere tools. I suspect they didn't want to kill Abigail but to abduct her. In the same manner that they utilized the mirror birds to assassinate the officials, they would have used her for their own means. That would explain why they tried to ambush us—because we were in the way. Either way, the situation was wholly disgusting.

"I believe the dragon's revenge is justified," I tell her.

"Yes."

"But can dragons distinguish between different humans?"

The way her mouth drops open speaks volumes. She often boasts that she never forgets, yet that attention to detail seldom extends to humans… I suppose that incredibly strong creatures rarely consider the perspectives of those weaker than them. The dragon is likely the same.

"Can it distinguish between the captives and us?"

"It's quite intelligent so I think we'll be fine… Probably."

"I knew it! We'll be killed indiscriminately, won't we?!"

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***I** think this is what humans call a blind spot.*

I remember the dragon being interested in shiny rocks and nothing else. That's why it always stayed near the mountain, never venturing into the woods beyond. Perhaps it's never even seen humans before. But no, it must know of humans. It's the boss after

all and thus must be aware of all that happens in the forest. Or it's supposed to be, yet it's probably interested in humans to the same extent it's intrigued by a strong breeze through leaves. In other words, hardly at all.

"Will we have time to pack up and leave, Abby? Where's the dragon now?"

"It's dancing."

"Dancing?"

I turn my senses to the mountain at the forest's edge. The dragon is stomping its feet, causing the surrounding trees to shake. It seems very excited, so I suspect it'll keep dancing for a while. It doesn't seem to have left its territory yet. Maybe it needs to generate momentum to do so.

"My lady, do you mean the dragon is dancing…like it's dancing?" Rodney appears extremely confused.

Perhaps dancing can mean other things? *I guess there's no choice.* I will have to show them myself. I raise my leg, then the other, with increasing power each time! "Like this! Right arm up! Right arm down! Left arm up! There! And its tail goes—oh, I don't have one! But it goes like this!"

My lord husband doubles over with a strange sound and Rodney leans against the wall for support. *Jump now, jump! Then spin once round the room!* Tabitha is crouching on the ground too. Shall I do it again? *Does Rodney understand now?* I'm slightly out of breath.

"A-Abby, is this the dance you did at the flower fes—"

"No! That one was! Harder to do! Now it's shaking its bottom!"

The Monster King's dance is more difficult because it was originally performed by a body with many arms and legs. The dragon has only two arms and two legs! Oh, and a tail too! *Now raise both arms up high! Then…*

"Whoa! Wait, wait, wait! Your imitation is too real!"

I open my mouth to roar, and my lord husband picks me up and presses my face to his chest, so I can't. I release my breath, then inhale a lungful of his scent. He smells good. He starts to pat me on the back, and I suddenly grow sleepy. But I can't do that. I glance up to see him trying to hold in laughter.

"My lord!"

“Yes?” He strokes a hand through my hair, and cool air swirls over my sweaty scalp. It feels nice.

“I’d like to go to the forest for a bit.”

“Hmm?”

“To the dragon. You and the others can’t go, my lord. He’ll attack you.”

“Can he understand you?”

“Huh?”

*Another blind spot.* I’ve not attempted to talk to a dragon since becoming human. Then again, I didn’t speak to any when I was the Monster King either, so I really don’t know. *Oh, his smile is gone.*

“No. The dragon is still in the forest, right? It’s dangerous for you to go there, where there’s only so much I can do to protect you. I’ve never been to this particular forest before.”

“You’ll stay here, my lord.”

“What are you saying?”

“Because it’s dangerous. I’ve never seen humans approach where that dragon is located.”

“You’re human too now, Abby.”

He’s right, but I think I’ll be fine. His frown deepens. *This won’t do.* He’s worried, so I have to explain better: “I’m strong, and even if this body dies, I’ll do my best to be reborn as another human.”

“…Huh?”

“Then I’ll come look for you, my lord. So please make me your wife again.”

My lord husband appears shocked. I wonder what’s wrong. I’m his wife currently, so I’m sure I can be his wife again.

“I won’t be able to move much as a baby, so it may take a few years before I can find you. That’s not a long time, so I doubt you’ll be dead by then.”

“No!” He abruptly yanks on my cape, and I assume he’s trying to take it off, but he wraps it tightly around my body instead. “Don’t let her out of your sight,” he instructs Tabitha in a hard voice. “Rodney, we’re going to dump those men in the forest.”

He pushes me into Tabitha’s arms and pulls on the leather armor that Rodney hands to him, refusing to look at me. I try to move closer, and Tabitha holds me back.

I can tell that he’s angry. Angry at me. *Why?*

“My lord?”

Rodney hurries out of the room, donning his own leathers.

My lord husband isn't looking at me. He's strapping on his knife, a map, readying to go.

I'm calling to him. "My lord?"

He's never been angry at me before.

People used to get angry at me all the time in Longhurst, and I never minded it. But my lord husband's anger bothers me. *Oh! That's right!*

"Gerald!"

He freezes on his way to the door but doesn't turn.

He's always asked me to call him by name.

I look up at Tabitha. She holds my cape fast, and her eyes are wet. She shakes her head.

"Can I not become my lord's wife again?"

"No, my lady," mutters Tabitha as she rubs my shoulders, "that's not it... Master Gerry!"

He still faces the door. He pulls at his hair and groans.

"You shouldn't get mad at me, my lord."

"Argh! Damn it! You're wrong, Abby!" He whirls around and scoops me into his arms. "Remember I spoke about how I feel hurt when you are hurt?"

"Yes."

"Even if you can be reborn as a human again, I can't bear you getting hurt and dying."

"...Yes."

"Sorry, I'm not angry at you. It's just... I just need to dump those men in the forest first. I don't know if that will buy us some time, but I'll be back soon, so you stay here and get ready to leave."

He hugs me tightly. I don't think he's angry anymore, and I'm glad. But it's not right that he enter the forest alone; I should accompany him as protection. I know he may grow angry again if I say that though, so I'll keep quiet for the time being and follow him in secret later.

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**ALONG** the manor's drive, guards and knights load the captives into the former earl's supply wagons, as well as those servants we'd finished interrogating.

Prince Dominic is ready to leave as well, yet he lingers beside me, his arms crossed in frustration. "I trust your judgement, sir, but I don't understand how you've managed to predict a sudden monster stampede. You'll explain this to me later, won't you?"

While not entirely convinced, he's accurately discerned the truth of my warning. The prince is certainly shrewd.

"Did Your Highness see the monster corpses in the outbuilding?"

"There are some things I need to see to believe."

"That's what Longhurst is like. I don't know all the details yet, but they seem to know more about monsters than they let on. Perhaps that's the source of the information."

"Did the servants confess to it during the interrogation?"

I shrug, silently shifting the blame to the locals.

The prince frowns in anger. "You asked me to look into the ties between the royal family and the earldom a while back, sir. I did do some investigation out of curiosity and found some leads hidden in the crown's archive of forbidden texts."

It's my first time hearing of such an archive, and I raise my brow to signal him to continue.

He sighs and buries his face in his hands. "The region next to Longhurst used to be a small country. It was really tiny, so it would have been absorbed by the kingdom sooner or later, but it collapsed before that could happen."

"And it's royal territory now, isn't it?"

"Yes. An exclave that wasn't useless but wasn't profitable either. Not very appealing, really. That's partly why we wanted to annex Longhurst, to drive up its value, but when I looked through the documents, I found texts advising against taking Longhurst. I haven't managed to find out why though."

"How did your ancestors not pass down such seemingly important information?"

"It's inevitable. The royal family has had its ups and downs with would-be usurpers. That's probably when the knowledge was lost."

"Did you find out why the country collapsed?"

“Mainly due to long bouts of heavy rainfall, drought, and other natural causes. Longhurst probably suffered the same but survived with the royal family’s support.”

“I see. Something must have happened to prompt someone to write that the kingdom should avoid the territory.”

“I think so too… Father said he’d bequeath Longhurst to me if I manage to make it profitable again, but I don’t want it anymore… But if I could get help managing it…”

“I think Your Highness should heed your ancestors’ advice. Now, your chamberlain is waiting.” I turn away from his questioning stare.

After a moment, he heaves a heavy sigh and departs to find his chamberlain.

I assumed that the rulers who sent the hero to defeat the Monster King were of our royal family, but perhaps they were heads of state of the fallen country instead. If Abigail is right and the dragon is on its way to avenge the mirror birds, could it have done the same when humans attacked and killed other monsters in the Monster King’s time? I doubt she can give me a clear answer. The Monster King didn’t seem too interested in events that didn’t concern it. Abigail wasn’t even bothered by my rudeness the first night we met or by Prince Dominic’s insensitivity.

She only became more emotional after eating delicious food and experiencing fun, which she’d never done before.

And that’s not just wishful thinking on my part. She’s learned to express her mood, if only with a tiny quirk of her lips. She’s learned to question the emotions in her heart, clutching at her chest in an attempt to understand what’s happening. She’s learned jealousy and adorably insists that she’s the only one I can hug. She’s learned to feel upset when people close to her get hurt.

And yet she speaks so casually of her own death.

I thought that if I was patient enough, she’d eventually learn to understand love, affection, and other such subtle emotions, but I was wrong. Her view of life and death is exactly the same as when she was the Monster King. It’s honestly terrifying.



**AS** we finish filling the wagons, a young guard hitches them to horses. To quicken our trip, I am considering casting body fortification magic on the animals so they can gallop all the way to the forest's edge.

Rodney appears with a heavy tattered sack. "Master, I—"

"Quiet."

"But you said no."

"Now I'm saying quiet."

"...The lady sure has the best pick-up lines."

Yes, when a regular woman speaks of remarrying her lover in her next life, that's probably romantic. Abigail is different though. She has experienced reincarnation and rebirth before, so death doesn't mean anything to her.

"I understand your worry, Master," Rodney says, "but you know the lady will most likely come to no harm in the forest."

"It's not a certainty. There's no way I'm bringing her along when she doesn't fear death."

"Then what do we do now? She's—"

"It's fine. Don't look at her."

"I'm not. It's just...my stomach hurts from holding it in." His eyes dart toward the tree Abigail is lurking behind. She's been there for a while, and although skinny enough to hide in the shadows, she exposes her face with every peek in our direction! *Damn it! I won't take her!*

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**THE** guards and knights are rolling the former assistant and other captives onto the supply wagons. I think they could fit more if they lined the prisoners up properly, but they're just carelessly tossing people into big piles like firewood. I've been watching them from behind a tree near the drive but can't figure out how to get closer.

"...My lady."

"Shh! Shh!" I motion Tabitha to hide behind me, and she steps to the side.

They've brought all three wagons from behind the stable and yoked them to both our horses and local ones. Each wagon is tied

to four horses, and—*oh, that corner by the third wagon looks perfect!*

"Come, Abby."

"Yes!"

My lord husband has called for me without even a glance in my direction! Maybe he'll bring me along after all! It must be, it must be! I'll be useful!

"Do you know which path the dragon is likely to take?" he asks.

I study his map. The forest is ringed by mountains, but if we head straight to the tree line from the manor, we'll soon come to a clearing. The dragon is still in its usual territory, and I trace its route toward the clearing for my lord husband. Its path is partially flyable, clear-cut with no obstacles.

"I see. Thanks." He kisses me on the top of my head.

Tabitha calls for me then, and I turn to see her both smiling and frowning. "My lady, all the men are busy. Do you think you could help me with the packing?"

"Yes!" I can help her! She's always working so fast that I've never had the chance before!

She teaches me to wrap precious objects in soft cloth before placing them into wooden crates. I make sure to pack other items around our matching couple's cups and the glass cloche that holds my flower candies so they won't jostle and break. *Perfect!*

The servants and guards from our household help us load the crates into our own supply wagon. We had only just arrived, so most of our luggage is still unpacked, and we complete the task quickly.

When I return to the front drive, the Longhurst wagons, my lord husband, and all the others are gone.

*How can it be?!*

"Erm… Viscount Noel has entrusted your care to me, my lady. We should depart soon," the fourth prince says to me.

"Okay. Please be careful!"

I cast my senses in the direction of the forest, searching for my lord husband. *Oh, I see him.* He's galloping at top speed toward the woods' edge; the supply wagons move so fast with four horses attached.

“N-No, my lady,” says the fourth prince timidly. “Viscount Noel has instructed some guards to stay behind to escort us, and my knights are here too, so you’ll be very safe… Let’s go on first, my lady. I’m sure he’ll catch up to us soo— Wait, why are you hoisting your skirt?!”

“N-No, my lady!” Tabitha pounces on me just as I’ve gathered the hem in my hand and pulls it down again.

“But it’s difficult to run like this.”

“You were planning to give chase?!” shouts the fourth prince.

“The master is very strong, my lady. He’ll ride back once he’s done and catch up with us quickly,” Tabitha says in a coaxing tone.

“I don’t know the details, but he’s doing whatever’s necessary to delay the stampede. He’s a successful military officer, and not just because of his fighting ability, but also due to his quick thinking and decision-making. Please trust him and come with me, all right?”

I know he is strong. I don’t need convincing to believe that!

The fourth prince winks and the guards start to close around us. I see Haggis as well as the five veterans. Two of the new guards are with my lord husband. *It’s not fair. I should be able to accompany him too.* I try to lift my skirts again, and Tabitha snatches the fabric from my hands. Wow! She’s so strong!

*What’s this?* My heart feels so uneasy… *Oh.*

“My lady?”

A strong wind begins to blow, buffeting the trees around the manor… The dragon is on the move.

The forest edge is pitch-black, and the moon and stars dye the sky above the color of my lord husband. I squint as Tabitha releases my skirt and wraps her hands around mine.

The dragon is able to fly but travels much quicker on foot. It is definitely running, loping down the mountain toward the forest and Longhurst.

“Viscountess Noel…?”

My lord husband and his men are moving fast. I can run fast too if I use a lot of magic.

But I won’t get there in time.

“We’re just following Master’s orders, my lady. Please come thi__”

I duck underneath the guards' arms as they reach for me. My fingers slip through Tabitha's.

"My lady!"

I bend to pick up my skirts.

The treetops rustle louder and louder, the roar of sound foreshadowing the dragon's.

Around the manor. Through the back garden.

When humans enter the forest, monsters will inevitably attack them.

When monsters enter human settlements, they'll inevitably be attacked in turn.

The Monster King made the mistake of heeding the villagers' requests. It didn't respect those unavoidable rules.

That's why the Monster King was ambushed.

*...But I'm a human now!*

"My lady!"

"Huh, wait! What?!"

I leap into a swaying mulberry tree. Grab a branch. Kick against the trunk. Pull my body upward. Grab the next branch. Kick again.

Colorful particles of light rise into the sky near the tree line. Tabitha has followed me, is clinging to the base of the mulberry tree. *Oh, the fourth prince is down there too!*

I plant both feet firmly on a bough. When I lived in Longhurst, I used to sit there eating mulberries.

I take a deep breath. The magic spins fast and strong inside me. Then...

"*Cut!*"

The fourth prince screams. "Ah, waaaaah—!"

My roar is louder, mightier than the dragon's, causing all the nearby mulberry and acorn trees to tremble.

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**DESPITE** its small population, Longhurst enjoyed more prosperity than other territories of comparable size, and the road leading into the forest is well maintained. With access to a mine and rich

farmland, not many locals choose to venture within to hunt, so perhaps the road is used for another purpose.

The wagons roll smoothly despite the power generated by teams of four horses. I've assigned guards to drive the other two carts while Rodney steers the one I ride. I sit with my back to him and a foot propped on the pile of human offerings. They stir occasionally and emit muffled noises, but the bottom layer has gone mostly silent. I suppose that's what happens when one heaps humans on top of each other.

"We're arriving sooner than expected," observes Rodney.

Our destination is just past the tree line. Abigail indicated the location as a potential spot where the dragon will emerge. The forest crowns a hill that slopes gently toward the city of Longhurst, and I can glimpse the converted manor below with all its lights ablaze.

The Monster King must have seen the same when it watched the village festival. There were probably less lights then, but the fire burning at the village center would have been big and bright, the flames scattering sparks in every direction. Abigail has said that the Monster King had many arms, legs, eyes, and mouths, yet the image that appears in my mind when I think of it is Abigail with her shining golden eyes, bouncing as she frets about extinguishing the fire before it grows too big.

"Master?"

"Hmm?"

"What was with that long piece of salmon jerky dangling from the lady's waist?"

"Urgh, don't remind me of that."

It was nigh impossible to contain my laughter when I spied Abigail peering at us from behind the tree! I fought so hard! I elbow Rodney's back as he bursts out laughing.

"...Wh-Where am I?"

The baron, whom I've been using as a foot stool, is slowly regaining consciousness. Though we didn't have much time, the brief interrogation of the servants locked in the mansion's basement yielded various confessions: all of them were stealing the former earl's effects. His assistants were no different, and a search of their rooms revealed jewels and artwork taken from the

manor. Since those items technically belong to the crown, they can be charged with the theft of state property.

"Nice timing. There's one last thing I want to ask." I remove my foot, and the baron raises his head and slowly looks around, processing his position. "Tell me everything you know about the people after Abigail."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"This isn't the time to stall. It doesn't matter if you refuse to talk either, because we're strong enough to repel them. It's just that what you say may change your fate."

"F-Fate?"

"It seems as though your actions have angered the dragon of the forest. You're probably aware of the practice of human sacrifice to appease the monster's anger, right?"

"N-No, you can't!" The baron swallows as he catches sight of the forest behind me. He must have guessed my intent.

We've surmounted the overlook with the nice view of the manor and have progressed onto a stretch of road bordered on both sides by dense, dark trees. The road has also narrowed to the width of a carriage, though it's supposed to widen again later.

The wind whistles noisily through the trees as the baron starts to shout, his incoherent rambling interspersed with pitiful screams.

"We're nearly there, Master."

"I-I've already! Told you! E-Everything!"

We're almost at the end point of the route Abigail predicted the dragon will take. The baron heaves ragged breaths, begging for mercy, but still hasn't given us any useful information. *Well, it wouldn't have made a difference anyway.*

"Did you think we'd have a court determine your fate? No, you'll face the judgement of the forest you've exploited."

At my signal, the guards rein in the horses. Then, together with Rodney, they start to untether the horses from the wagons. The baron is yelling again, and the others who are still conscious join him. They're still bound by rope and were secured with netting to prevent them from tumbling off the carts, and that's how I plan to leave them. We empty the tattered sack of stolen jewels, scattering them around the wagons. Hopefully that will satisfy the dragon and we won't have to engage it in battle.

“Will it really work?” asks Rodney.

“The dragon is said to like shiny things, and as long as these can distract it for a bit, I’ll count that as a win, so—” The hairs along my spine stand on end as the air and ground begin to rumble. I don’t even need to see the creature, for I can sense its powerful aura barreling toward us. “Retreat!” I bellow.

A guard screams in frustration as he mounts a horse, his hands fumbling with the reins in terror.

“Damn it! *Freeze! Freeze! Freeze!*” I throw the sack in the air and encase it within a wall of ice, then slap the horses on the rump to send them galloping. “Get away! Go now! *Shine on! Shine on! Shine on!*”

After ensuring the other guards have escaped, Rodney comes to stand beside me, chanting spells as well. Spheres of light pop into being all around us, their glow reflected by the frozen jewelry.

A shadowed mound appears beyond the light, darkening the sky further as it lets out an earth-shaking roar. Rodney and I jump as one into a bush some distance away from the supply wagons.

The dragon resembles a large lizard, though its short front legs, so at odds with its massive size, and muscular hind legs make it look more like a frog. When its opalescent white scales catch the moonlight, I can easily discern its form. A thick tail protrudes from its rounded back.

“Are you sure that thing can dance?” whispers Rodney.

“Stop it, shut up,” I hiss.

An instinct to shout a warning mingles with the terror welling deep in my soul, and for some reason I have the urge to laugh. But I don’t, instead crouching low as we retreat. The people on the carts lie still as well, totally motionless. *If only one of them would make themselves useful and scream.*

The dragon turns its head, seemingly suspicious of the ice wall that materialized in its path. Its glittering eyes shift between shades of green, from that of young saplings to the deeper viridian of the forest. Later, the only feeling I remember from that moment is surprise that its eyes were not golden.

Its gaze lands on the wagons. Then the ice wall shatters with a crash as the dragon twists to swipe them and the nearby trees with its tail. All three carts are immediately reduced to broken

planks as they are hurled against the tree trunks. It aims a shrill, earsplitting shriek at the moon, the treetops shaking in response.

The guards should already be clear of the forest, and I don't think the dragon's noticed us yet, but… No, its stare is trained on me. It opens its mouth wide enough to swallow both me and Rodney whole, exposing two rows of teeth sharp as swords.

*"A loved one waiting at home can serve as motivation to return to them safely."*

I suddenly recall what a general said to me long ago, the phrase repeating in my mind as I focus my magic.

*Aim for the back of its throat.*

Just as I'm about to summon a piece of ice sharp enough to kill…

A sound reminiscent of a summer storm stops the dragon in its tracks. It appears stunned, its green eyes darting back and forth.

Then the sound ceases as abruptly as it began, and the dragon's scales flush from white to red under the bright moonlight.

And something falls to the ground, bouncing and rolling.

…An acorn?

# Chapter Twelve: Always Together Means Forever

I cling to the mulberry tree's trunk, both feet braced on a branch, so I'm not blown away by a gale so strong that it's bending nearby trees in half. Leaves rattle around me as acorns and mulberries are violently snatched by the wind. Like migratory birds flying in formation or debris in a flowing river, the nuts form clusters as they're sucked in the dragon's direction.

I did it! I cast a spell just like my lord husband!

The flashes of color near my lord husband and the dragon have vanished. The impenetrable black of the forest's shadow once more juts into a sky studded with stars as numerous as grains of sand.

When I was the Monster King, I used to watch the village below, which was probably where I currently stand. I don't think mulberry or acorn trees existed back then. It feels strange to be where the small human who gave me potatoes used to live, to gaze up at where the Monster King called home.

The human who gave the Monster King potatoes visited the forest less often as he aged, but he never stopped coming, even when he grew small again and wrinkly. Then his child took his place, then that child's child. It all happened so quickly.

Humans don't live for very long.

I know that the dragon is no longer angry. It was probably surprised by all the falling acorns. That's fine. The fourth prince is with me, and a thousand humans will probably come to protect him.

"My lady! My lady! Are you all right?! Aahhh! Please don't move! My lady!"

I glance down to see Tabitha screaming. She still clutches the trunk, her face pale and white. Perhaps she can't climb trees.

"Tabitha, grab that branch next to your right hand. You'll be able to climb up that way."

The fourth prince turns away, shoulders trembling, while the guards' eyes rove around, looking everywhere but me.

“No! Come! Please get down! No! Wait! S-Stay there!”

Should I climb down or stay…? *How confusing.* The last time I used magic, I extinguished a huge bonfire in Drewett and got a really bad nosebleed afterward. But I’m no longer weak. I even did the incantation, just as my lord husband taught me. My knees do feel a little shaky though, so maybe I can’t jump down safely…

The back of my mind floats, then my feet are in empty space.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

“Huh?”

“My lady! My lady! Are you all right?!” Tabitha is touching me, patting me as I open my eyes to the sky. The guards are grouped around me too, looking down at me and murmuring to themselves. I feel a bunch of arms and hands supporting my back, so I know they must have caught me as I fell. *They’re amazing. No wonder they’re castle people.*

“I fell! Thank you!”

“Th-Thank goodness…” mutters the fourth prince as he plops down beside me. “I can’t imagine what would have happened if you’d gotten hurt…”

Meanwhile, Tabitha is crying. She asks if I’m in pain. I sit up to check, then start to hurt everywhere. My muscles ache. I don’t have a nosebleed though. I try to stand, but my legs tremble with pain.

I need to see my lord husband. I spot Haggis crouching in front of me. “Haggis! Please carry me and run!”

“Huh?! Me?! Please spare me, my lady! The master will kill me! And wait, *Haggis*?!”

“No, we need to leave now. You, carry Viscountess Noel to her carriage.”

“Forgive me, my lady.” A guard who looks as old as Father-in-Law lifts me in his arms. The man’s been serving the Drewetts since my lord husband was a child, and used to give him candy, my lord husband told me. I don’t mind being carried, but why are we going to the carriage? Tabitha jogs alongside the guard, gently holding my hand.

I give hers a squeeze. “Tabitha? Tabitha, I want to see my lord husband.”

“Master will catch up to us very soon, my lady… Let’s wait for him together.”

“I’m sure Viscount Noel has a plan, but we still need to play it safe and assume there’s a stampede coming. He would want that, which is why he left you in my charge, my lady.”

“Stampede…? Oh, right!”

“Huh?! What’s with that response?! Have you forgotten what’s happening?!”

*That’s right.* My lord husband didn’t tell the fourth prince about the dragon, warning him of a stampede instead. That means I shouldn’t mention the dragon, I think. Even though it’s no longer angry.

“Tabitha?” If only the fourth prince weren’t there, then I could tell her. I’m certain I would be allowed to see my lord husband then.

She just squeezes my hand in return.

“Tabitha, Tabitha, why does my chest feel so uneasy?”

“Oh! You must have bumped it against something?! Wait! Don’t move around too much! Lie down!”

“Y-Yes!”

But I haven’t bumped against anything. She’s mistaken. My muscles ache, yes, but I have been feeling uneasy for a while. I wonder what that means. Tabitha urges the guard to ferry me quickly and quietly to the carriage.

I grab hold of the carriage door and grip it tight.

“P-Please let go, Viscountess Noel. Please? Wait, why’s she so strong?!” The fourth prince tries to pry my fingers open. My arms throb, and I do my best to hang on. If I can’t go to my lord husband, then I want to stay to welcome him back.

“My lord is already on his way here, so we can’t leave now,” I insist.

“On his way…?”

“My lady?” Tabitha ignores the fourth prince and leans down so my lips are beside her ear. *She understood me!* I inform her that the dragon is no longer coming! But I’m still uncomfortable. The feeling will go away when my lord husband returns, I’m sure.

She thinks for a beat, then clears her throat before addressing the fourth prince. “Your Highness, our master has accomplished his mission and prevented the stampede.”

“This whole thing is just confusing. How do you know what he’s accomplished when he isn’t even back yet?”

“Master will explain it to you later.”

I know my lord husband is coming. He’s moving much faster than usual, so he must be on horseback. I’ve never ridden a horse before. I pick up the salmon jerky attached to the ribbon at my waist and bite into the end.

“Wait, wait, wait… Does Viscountess Noel possess some awesome Gift? I mean, she did wield wind magic just now.”

“Master will explain it to you later.”

“Viscountess Noel, about what happened, mayb— Huh? Is it snack time now?”

I’m eating my salmon jerky, yet the fourth prince refuses to be quiet. *He’s got so much more to learn.* I pull a small piece of salmon jerky from my pocket and push it into his mouth.

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**THE** strong wind lashing the forest suddenly falls silent. Moonlight shines down on us in the quiet as though nothing had happened.

The dragon gazes at the moon like an actor in a stage play, then places its front legs back on the ground. Its white scales are stained red with, yes, mulberries… It seems to have lost all its rage and even looks a little depressed. It clearly has lost all interest in us. We had better escape while we can.

“…Master?” whispers Rodney as he tugs at my sleeve.

I know. Abigail is almost certainly responsible. She must have wielded extremely potent magic, and my desire to check on her is overpowering. I turn to go, then freeze at the sight before me.

The dragon is meandering across the clearing, gathering fallen acorns with its short front legs. When it bends to collect more, however, some of the nuts tumble back to the ground. I stare at its futile attempts for a moment.

Rodney notices my gaze and looks as well, then doubles over as though struck. *Argh! Damn him!*



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**WE** whistle to summon our horses and ride back toward the manor. As we exit the forest, we encounter the guards. Panicked, they didn't know whether to run away or return to help us. Because they're still young, I won't reprimand them for their indecision, though I'll have to increase their training once everything is settled. For the present, I signal them to fall in behind me as I urge my horse to up its pace.

"Funny how we're rushing back to the manor, but you still stopped to help the dragon," Rodney teases as he pulls up beside me.

"It didn't take long," I grumble.

I just couldn't help myself. Maintaining a safe distance, I used wind magic to collect a number of acorns and stuffed them into the tattered sack. Abigail said that the Monster King wasn't particularly good friends with the dragon, but considering the night's events, that hardly seems to be the case.

It's before dawn, yet at every house we pass, the door is tightly shut, faint light filtering through the windowpanes, as if the entire city is holding its breath. The sheer number of backlit windows reminds me that the locals deserve no mercy. They may not know exactly what is going on, but they're obviously aware *something* is happening. And despite their knowledge, they neither warned nor aided us outsiders.

Worried about Abigail's safety, I hurry onward. She's much stronger compared to the time she got a nosebleed, so I doubt she's terribly hurt, *but what was the deal with all those acorns*? What did she do, and why? *Ignoring the fact that it's not acorn season.* I can just imagine the confusion on my little chick's face when I ask her. She's never understood why I can't comprehend what she knows so naturally.

"My lord!" Abigail jumps on unsteady legs through the open door of a carriage parked in front of the manor. I hand the reins of my horse to Rodney and run to her, catching her moments before she collapses. She's dressed in the same clothes as when I left her, so no nosebleed.

“You used magic, didn’t you? Let me see your— Huh?”

She frowns so cutely as she grabs my hands and moves them away from her face. *What’s this?* Why is she placing my hands on top of her head?

“Abby? Does it hurt here?”

“Yes! It does! But that’s not it!” My wife looks uncharacteristically upset.

If not the pain, then what could be bothering her? *No, wait, I should focus on the pain!*

“So it does hurt! Where?!”

“No!”

I try to pick her up, but Abigail won’t relinquish my hands, pressing them harder onto her head. She herself seems uncertain, unable to understand what she wants.

She stomps a foot on the ground. “It hurts! You forgot about me, my lord!”

“…Huh?”

I hear Rodney snort.

“I went to help Tabitha! It hurts! And when I came back! My lord was already gone! It hurts!” She punctuates each sentence with a stomp.

*Wait, is she angry at me?* She usually pouts when she can’t get what she wants, yet I’ve never seen her truly mad before… Perhaps even she is unsure what she’s feeling.

Rodney quivers, clutching the horse’s neck for support. Nor will Tabitha meet my eye from where she stands with a hand covering her mouth.

“Abby? I didn’t forget you, Abby. I really didn’t.”

“But you were gone!”

“Yes! I was wrong! Sorry! I’m truly sorry. You’re hurt, right? Let’s stop fighting, okay?” I bend to her height, and she rests her forehead against my shoulder. At last, I lift her in my arms

She pushes her face into me. “You mustn’t leave me behind, my lord,” she whispers, wrapping her arms snugly around my neck.

“I know; I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

*This is why I can’t let my guard down! My little chick has the firmest grip on my heart!*

I stroke her back and kiss her on the cheek and forehead, her breathing already beginning to even. I'm guessing she's never stayed up so late before… I hug her tighter and rub my cheek against her silky red hair.

I finally notice the fourth prince watching me with an utterly bewildered expression.

"Erm, are you done, sir?"

"…Why are you eating salmon jerky?"

"Why, indeed…?"

Seriously. I don't think I'll ever understand him.

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**IT'S** breakfast time when I wake again. I welcomed my lord husband back just before dawn, so I rested only for a little while, yet I feel as refreshed as if I've slept an entire day. My muscles don't ache anymore. I feel totally fine.

Because my lord husband dumped the manor's staff in the forest, he's brought in the chef from Sunshine Kiosk to cook for us. The restaurant pays the most sales tax in Longhurst, so of course we chose them. And maybe that's why the fourth prince decided to join us instead of returning to the capital. I tell him that the cherries are delicious, and he shares some with me, so perhaps he's not so bad after all. He *is* a castle person, but my lord husband says I'm mistaken.

Then we visit the forest spring. Rodney and the guards come too. When the fourth prince learned where we were going, he stared at me for a moment, then said, "I think I've had enough of that forest… After all I witnessed yesterday, there are some things I'd rather not know." So he doesn't accompany us, though we didn't invite him in the first place.

"Over there! There!"

The narrow path to the spring is gone, probably because the Monster King is no longer around to maintain it. So the guards clear the way before us, cutting branches and grass. I'm wearing a light, fluttery dress under a hooded short cape, as well as long pants and knee-high boots, so I have no trouble walking in their wake.

Because the spring isn't too deep into the forest, there are no strong monsters in the area. *Oh, mushrooms.* And due to the thick vegetation, humans seldom find their way there either. Of course, I'm leading our party, so we easily navigate the undergrowth.

"My lady, that mushroom is—"

"Shiny!"

I add it to a bag Rodney prepared for me. I've been gathering various curiosities en route, and he stares at each item in confusion. I realized that I struggled to choose between cows and sheep because they are both big. But if the souvenirs are smaller, then I won't need to decide between one or another and can bring home lots for Ethan.

"My lady?!" gasps Rodney as I drop a snake's shed skin into the bag.

"This skin has nice fur. We can make it into a hat for Ethan," I explain. Ethan likes hats. He told me they keep him warm in winter.

"But I thought snakes don't have fur..."

"That's not edible, Abby."

I glance at my lord husband. He walks beside me, holding my hand. I wait until he isn't looking, then sneakily... *Oh.* He's stopped me with his free hand. Although bitter, the leaf has a nice crunchy texture, so the Monster King often snacked on it while ambling through the forest. *Wait, I forgot.* Humans taste bitterness much more strongly than the Monster King. I abandon the leaf and pick up a nice stick instead, using it to brush grass aside as we hike. *Oh!* That's—

"My lord, my lord! Look at this!"

"...What's that?"

"It's perfect for Ethan!"

The skull of a mad cochlear! One with a large horn! I can make a strong, shiny hat for Ethan!

🎂🎂🎂

**"WHOA,"** someone gasps as we reach a clearing in the dense forest. The spring reflects the sky, sparkling so bright in the sunlight that it dazzles my eyes. The white sand and pebbles at the

bottom are clearly visible through water dappled with the green of the surrounding trees.

The guards form a perimeter around the clearing while Rodney smooths the rocky ground in one spot and lays down a sheet. We're having sandwiches made by the Sunshine Kiosk chef for lunch.

"Isn't that heavy, Abby?"



“It is!”

“I see… Shall we put it away?”

“Yes!”

The mad cochlear hat is a bit too big for me; I can’t see well with it on. I remove it, place it in Rodney’s souvenir bag, then take my lord husband’s hand as we stroll the spring’s edge. The small, round, white pebbles click against each other under our feet, and small waves slosh along the shore.

I spot something amid the light flashing off the splashing waves. “Oh! There! I found it!”

“Ah, hey!”

I let go of his hand and dash toward the shining object. He chases me, grabbing my arms and lifting me from where I stand ankle-deep in water. Though the hem of my dress is wet, my feet are dry in the knee-high boots.

“My lord, my lord! Look! Look!”

“H-Huh?” He carries me out of the spring.

I unclasp my necklace and hold up the embedded lord husband–colored stone for comparison. The shade of the sky mixed with the shimmering green of new leaves. The color of my lord husband’s brilliant eyes. I study the spring, the necklace, then him. “Look! It’s all your color, my lord. It’s the same!”

He smiles, his ears reddening somewhat. “…I see. You must be cold, Abby. Let’s get your hands dry and—”

I open my other hand, showing him the magic gemstone I’ve just found. It’s roughly the size of a coin, and its deep golden hue gleams under the sunlight and glittering water droplets, its center shifting between shades of pale yellow.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaat?!”

“My lord, I remember you said you were looking for a stone that’s my color? Look! Here it is, my color!”

“Wh-What? D-Did you just pick that up?”

“My eyesight is good!”

He’s said that he wants to make earrings using an Abby-colored stone but hasn’t been able to find one.

“…It is your color, isn’t it?”

“Is it cute?”

“Yes, as cute and beautiful as you. Can I really have it?”

“It’s yours, my lord. Just like how I have a stone with your color! Now we’re the same!”

His whole face has turned scarlet in addition to his ears, and he hugs me tight, mumbling something. But I know he’s happy. He’s happy because I’ll always be with him, forever!

# Side Story: Tabitha Can Do Anything, So She Can Teach Me Anything

**“IT’S** not something I want to discuss with my mothe—… I mean… Aaarghhh!”

“Oh my… Oh my.”

Master Gerald’s face grows redder by the second as he realizes his slipup, so I spare him the embarrassment and leave the room.

A year has passed since the lady joined our household, and one day since the night they finally consummated their marriage. And while I don’t doubt that Master will cherish his precious wife and take good care of her, I just wanted to be sure. He’s a rational person, but men can sometimes act in completely unexpected ways.

A smile rises to my lips as joy bubbles inside me, and since I’m in the servants’ corridor, I let it. I’m always mindful of my behavior so I don’t cross the boundary of our master-servant relationship, yet deep in my heart, I’ve allowed myself to view him as a beloved son as precious and true as my son Rodney. Of course, I’m not aiming to replace his mother, my lovely lady Katrina. Rather, after so much time nursing him to sleep in my arms, such feelings naturally developed.

The marquisate of Drewett suffered a series of poor harvests after Master was born. Additionally, Master possesses immense magical prowess, which left Lady Katrina weakened after his birth and unable to bond much with her new child. She was raised to place her duties as a noblewoman first and foremost, and thus struggled to prioritize her children. She is incredibly compassionate, however, and I can only imagine how she felt when her sole contact with them was a daily update from the servants after they had long gone to bed.

Master is intelligent and coolheaded, so he never complained, even as a young child. But all children crave the warmth of a loved

one, and he looked so lonely on occasion that I resented my status for ensuring that I could be no more than a mere servant to him.

…Yet what a year he's had so far!

I can't help but chuckle as I arrange for a hot meal to be brought to the lady when she wakes again. I'm sure she'll enjoy something warm and fresh.

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**CERTAIN** duties are required of noblemen, and other duties of their noble wives. Young noblewomen are taught how to support their future husbands, ensure the continuity of the bloodline, socialize with fellow aristocrats, and even aid in managing a territory. The higher a noblewoman's rank, the more expected of them.

Although noble myself, I'm merely the third daughter of a poor baron, born without any outstanding beauty or particular talent or skill. My parents couldn't even afford a dowry, so no betrothal was sought for me. In fact, many young noblewomen are in the same exact position, and we usually end up servants to the higher aristocracy. I was no exception and joined Lady Katrina's retinue through my father's connections.

Back then, she was only seven years old, yet very clever and already well aware of her family's social status. Her manners and etiquette were so perfect that I remember feeling embarrassed by my own though I was eight years her senior. Therefore, I trained hard to prove that I was worthy of serving her. My efforts paid off, and I was one of the few attendants selected to accompany her when she married into the Drewett household.

Lady Katrina's family is one of prestigious nobles, and Marquis Drewett's is the same. The marriage was political, which she was raised to expect. Despite that, she was nonetheless a young maiden, sighing and blushing whenever she read one of those romance novels so trendy among the commoners. The books were frowned upon by the nobility, so she had to keep them hidden, and of course, only we, her long-time servants, were privy to that side of her.

…Unfortunately, her husband Lord Wallace was so unrefined! Yes, he was still an heir and working hard to earn his title, as any

eldest son is expected to do. But the timing of their union was truly the worst: the old marquis fell ill soon after, and Lord Wallace was spending each day preparing to assume his father's role should the worst occur. As for Lady Katrina, she was a newly married sixteen-year-old who'd yet to receive a flower or any romantic gift from her husband! And suddenly she had to learn to run an entire household. It was too much even for someone as talented as she!

The old marquis's lady wife had passed several years before, so when Lady Katrina married into the family, she was immediately tasked with the duties of the marchioness. And though we could all see that Lord Wallace was madly in love with her, he was wholly unable to express his feelings. He could barely look her in the eye.

In the end, both of them were so focused on their respective responsibilities that their marriage never bloomed. Of course, Ethan, who grew up serving Lord Wallace, did not believe that to be the case, and we sometimes—only sometimes—argued about it.

"Do you want to get married, Tabitha?" asked Lady Katrina once, shortly after the birth of her first son, Lord Stuart.

"Huh?" I wasn't vehemently against the idea. Serving as a nursemaid is one of the ways a lady's attendant can improve her social rank, and when I first came to Drewett, the steward actually asked if I wanted to pursue such a position. But to become a nursemaid, one has to be a mother, and I'd need a husband for that. That was what I told the steward, and I said the same to Lady Katrina.

"You're aware there's talk of you becoming my children's nursemaid, right?"

"Yes, I guess."

"I'm not forcing you into it. You don't have to marry just to become a nursemaid. You're allowed to choose your own husband, yes?"

Noblewomen are brought up to believe that marriage is a duty performed for the sake of their families in exchange for the privilege and benefits of status and luxury. On the other hand, girls like me may not be able to afford a dowry but are free to determine our own fate.

“Please choose, because you have the choice,” Lady Katrina said, the romance novels left behind in her family home not forgotten.

Yes, I would seize the opportunity and become a nursemaid. From that moment on, I resolved, I would serve at Lady Katrina’s side for as long as I could.

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**IN** the meantime, Ethan’s elder brother and his wife became valet and nursemaid to the young Lord Stuart. As for Ethan and myself, I don’t think it was pure chance that brought us together. His family had served the Drewett marquises as stewards and butlers for generations, and I was the right age to nurse Lady Katrina’s second child. So yes, luckily, I happened to have feelings for him. Fate worked well in our favor, and everything turned out as I had wished.

That Rodney and Master got along so well was doubly lucky, and I raised him like my own alongside my biological son. Unfortunately, as he matured, his experiences with other nobles in the royal capital left him disillusioned, and he grew to dislike being around women. That was truly frustrating to witness, yet I knew it hurt Lady Katrina so much more than it hurt me.

When he earned a title and established the Noel viscountcy, he asked our family of three to join his new household. That necessitated a change of allegiance for the Kofi family, and I saw it as a way to further support the Drewetts and Lady Katrina. I said yes.

And after several years, our lady married into the household.

“Tabitha?” said Lady Katrina once. “How should I say this?”

At first, she was shocked by the lady’s free spirit and attempted to strictly guide her to become a more acceptable noblewoman. But that day, as she watched me carefully arrange a suitable portion of food for the viscountess, she just seemed perplexed.

“That child is making me realize that not everything needs to be forced to a certain standard…”

It took all my effort not to burst into laughter, for my life had also been drastically changed by my lady’s presence. *Yes, I guess*

*that's how it is.*

***

**SERVANTS** form their own network of rumors and news, and the poorer the noble family, the looser the servants are with information. Some families also treat their staff poorly, though that isn't true of the Drewett and Noel households, of course, which increases the likelihood of gossip. We servants so often hear of noblemen taking a second wife and neglecting the children from his first marriage that we've become immune to such scandal. Thus, my lady's story garnered nothing more than passing interest from most.

To say that the lady had gone hungry for many days when she knocked on the front door of the Noel mansion that night is probably no exaggeration. She wore an old, ill-fitting dress, and her dull red hair was long and tangled. Her limbs were twig thin, and her cheeks sunken, yet her eyes were large and bright, giving her an uncanny appearance.

She was cheerful as she offered her name: "Good evening! I am Abigail Longhurst! I've come from Longhurst to become your master's wife!"

As the head housekeeper, I was planning to leave chores like bathing her to the maids. She looked so pitiful, however, that I couldn't help but linger to check for injury. I was relieved to find no visible scars.

The following day, I rubbed ointment into her small hands. The skin on her bony fingers was cracked and peeling. Vertical ridges ran the length of her nails, and I couldn't stifle my sigh at the evidence of her poor nutrition. Even a washerwoman had better skin.

Her golden eyes had widened in surprise when I first touched her, then slowly softened as she relaxed. "Wow, Tabitha's hands are nice and smooth. And so warm…" she breathed. "So this is human skin… How soft…"

Her strange choice of words, mumbled in a groggy, dreamy voice, intrigued me. It was also upsetting, the thought of her never having touched another person, and I felt a renewed sense of purpose to help her skin and hair regain their original shine.

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**“IT** tastes like milk! And what’s this fluffy aroma? Is it bug—”

“It’s risotto.”

“Risotto!”

I watched the lady carefully as she worked through her portion. Her small feet tapped a happy rhythm under the bed tray, and I remembered with fondness how Rodney and Master used to do the exact same. But bugs? Why would she think it normal to put bugs in food…?

***

**“A** stroll? Can I go outside to the garden?”

I’d been slowly increasing the lady’s serving size to stretch her stomach, and at last the doctor had indicated that she could safely exercise.

She appeared surprised at my suggestion of a walk, and I recalled how impressed she was to learn that she’d receive three hot meals a day. So, in addition to being denied food, she had been imprisoned in the house as well. I added the discovery to my mental list of Longhurst’s mistreatment, vowing to report it to Master so we could prepare for a chance at revenge. He was already completely in love with the lady by then.

But for that moment, I watched her squinting in the soft sunlight. I relayed her enjoyment to Master later, and he immediately instructed the gardener to rework the garden to the lady’s preferences.

***

**“TABITHA,** Tabitha, I’m great at cleaning!”

The lady insisted she would work for food even as I took the mop from her. Her face was devoid of emotion as usual, and despite all evidence of her mistreatment, she lacked the emaciated look that most malnourished children have. In fact, her voice was strong and proud whenever she spoke.

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**“TABITHA,** Tabitha. My lord gave me his strawberry today. A whole one. He may be a nice person!”

Master tends to alienate those around him due to his serious and strict nature, which he inherited from his father, yet he’s always had a kind and caring side to him, even as a child. Unfortunately, his bluntness on the first night of their marriage caused him to speak foolishly to his wife, although she didn’t seem to take it to heart, thankfully. I hoped that their relationship would continue to deepen, though the lady did need to improve her ability to judge character. To pleasantly accept everyone at face value isn’t safe.

Regardless, she’d received a proper lady’s education from a tutor, so her manners were good. She was still slightly awkward and childish, and said things a normal young lady wouldn’t say, albeit politely. I figured that was because she simply wasn’t used to speaking to people. Which wasn’t the main reason, as we discovered, but was certainly a major factor.

The conversational skills of a noblewoman extend beyond mere choice of words to topic, eye contact, and other subtleties. That is true for commoners as well, but nobles have refined elocution to an art which can only be acquired through practice. Because she wasn’t accustomed to using her facial muscles, the lady’s face lacked the necessary emotion. Yet I could sense rich waves of feeling inside her, evident in the sparkle of her rare golden eyes and her bright if faltering speech—and sometimes in other ways.

“My lady.”

Blancmange had just been served for dessert. Hearing my disapproving tone, the lady stopped bouncing in her chair and straightened, bringing her feet together beneath the seat. Master hurriedly turned away, shoulders shaking. As for Rodney… I had to teach him how to better hold in his laughter.

The lady isn’t picky in general but does have her favorites. She prefers meat to vegetables, and a well-cooked stew to simple grilled steak, though she does like aged beef very much. She likes only slightly sour or spicy food, nothing too strong. And her love of sweets. If we catered to her every request, she’d definitely overeat,

so we're very careful about the portions we serve her. The gardener and the head cook are the worst! They let her sample dishes and share their plates with her when I'm not looking! I had to make it clear to our entire staff that they must inform me of everything she consumes.

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**"CAN** I read anything I want?!"

While not as impressive as Drewett Manor's, our library at home has a fair number of books. Master loves to study and doesn't mind the servants using the library too. It is the Drewett way to be meritocratic and accept anyone who wishes to learn.

"I've read this one, and that one too! Oh, I've not seen this one before!" The lady skipped between the shelves, examining the spines, before picking out a beautifully bound book. "It's shiny!"

The lady learns by collecting several books in a pile, then flipping through them quickly, glancing at each page and, most surprisingly, memorizing it word for word. She can fluently recite poetry and passages from tomes on national history, but her favorite book, which she reads again and again, is a colorfully illustrated encyclopedia of animals and plants.

The volume is so thick and heavy that she couldn't even lift it on her own. Every afternoon she stared at the pages until nodding off, so one day, I offered to read it to her.

Her face remained blank for a moment, then she gasped. "My lord told me recently! About how Tabitha used to read to him when he was small!"

At that moment, I realized that my suggestion was rooted in nostalgia; I indeed remembered telling Master and Rodney bedtime stories. Hiding my slight embarrassment at being caught, I placed a chair next to her bed as she clambered under the covers, then opened the large encyclopedia in my lap... *Now, how to go about reading an encyclopedia?* I couldn't disappoint those sparkling eyes, so I would do my best. I started by reading the captions that accompanied each image.

"Your voice is lovely, Tabitha, just like my lord's," the lady murmured just as she fell asleep, her lips turned up slightly. I'd reached the middle of page two.



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**AFTER** she gained more strength, we added weekly dance practices to her exercise routine, on top of our daily walks. Master had no plans to bring her to any social events just yet, but I felt dance could be a good hobby for her. She seems to really enjoy moving her body.

"You're quite athletic," commented Master during one such rehearsal.

"Yes!"

She was able to learn steps after a single demonstration, so he had an easy time leading her. Her sharp movements occasionally had Rodney doubling over with laughter, which merely indicated lessons in grace would have to follow. Dancing is unexpectedly physically demanding, so she needed to take it slow and steady…

Enjoying himself, Master lifted the lady in a spin. She blinked hard, then cried out in excitement, her eyes shining. "Ohh…!"

Rodney snorted next to me, so I gave his bottom a smack—out of the lady's view, of course. *The boy's professionalism is truly nonexistent these days. How shameful!*

But Master's carefree smile reminded me of when he and Rodney chased each other around as children, and I found myself grinning too. *They look like they're having so much fun…*

"My lord! Again! That spinning thing you just did! Again!"

"Haha! Really? Again?!"

*How lovely…*

"My lord! Once more! Once more!"

"Sure!"

*How fun…?*

"Amazing! You're…so amazing, my lord…! One more time…"

"Of cou—"

"Stop! Master Gerry! Please wait! She's dizzy! The lady is dizzy!" I shouted.

"Huh? Whoa! What's wrong, Abigail?!"

*What's wrong?! She's wildly overestimated her body's limits, that's what's wrong!*

I put the woozy lady to bed, then gave Master a firm lecture on not granting her everything she asks for.

***

**OUR** lady is always adorable and as free-spirited as a child. Though her face is usually empty of emotion, she expresses joy and fun with her whole body. Her endearing nature is so cute that it melted Master's stubborn and serious facade. And although some aspects of their relationship are a little excessive, there's nothing better than a happy marriage.

She harbors no resentment for those who mistreated her, yet her talk of her life as the Monster King or her childhood at Longhurst pains me. In fact, her apathy makes us even more upset for her, though those are purely selfish feelings on our part. What's important is that she is able to live a good life as herself.

But…

"I'm strong, and even if this body dies, I'll do my best to be reborn as another human."

"…Huh?"

"Then I'll come look for you, my lord. So please make me your wife again."

She always surprises us with the most unexpected declarations.

*But this isn't right. It isn't right at all.* Doesn't she want to spend her life in happiness beside her beloved Tabitha?

Hasn't she said she doesn't want her family to hurt or die? Not her lord husband, or her father- or mother-in-law, or me or Ethan or Rodney?

Those in positions of authority tend to put their own needs last. Like how Lady Katrina chose not to evacuate when summoning blooms were burned during the harvest festival, instead prioritizing the safety of her people. The lady's expression is the same as the one Lady Katrina wore then.

The lady always speaks of the wind and clouds, the creatures in the skies and forests, and the principles of nature in a calm, even voice as though gazing down at the world from somewhere far away. She may not understand humans, but she certainly has the aura of a king.

That's why she is rarely upset or resentful, because she sees most things as insignificant. But her outlook makes me uneasy,

and I fear that one day, she'll go so far away that we can no longer reach her.

Master didn't see how she extinguished the harvest festival's raging bonfire in an instant. But he must have felt the same disquiet I did at her talk of death, for he pulled her into a tight embrace afterward.

And as she stands on the top branch of the mulberry tree, so high that I can't touch her no matter how I try, that uneasiness comes rushing back.

She straightens her back in a dignified manner. Gazes into the distance, her golden eyes shifting between shades.

Her body is bathed in the pale light of the moon floating in the night sky. Her vibrant red hair streams in the wind.

How can I make her understand? That even if she can be reborn quickly, we don't wish her to experience any pain? That all of us would give anything to have her as she is?

"*Cut!*"

*My lady...just chanted a...!*

***

**TWO** weeks after we returned from Longhurst to our home in the capital, I sit with the lady in the garden. The wind is no longer chilly, and I am teaching her how to knit lace under a parasol that shields us from the early-summer sunshine.

The lady declared with enthusiasm that she would knit socks for Lady Stella's baby. Although the baby isn't due for a while, she wants to practice. I was momentarily confused that she'd chosen such an ordinary gift, but was sure not to let that show on my face. Ethan, on the other hand, couldn't help but mutter his surprise under his breath. I just nod in acknowledgement.

Always a quick learner, the lady rapidly interlaces the needles with precise, rhythmic movements. I join her, threading a needle before starting to add frills to a baby's bib.

Our calm and quiet work is interspersed with the light chirps of birds and the whisper of rustling leaves.

When a breathless Master dashed out of the Monster King's forest, the lady stomped her feet in anger at being left behind. I could tell she was frustrated by her emotion and didn't know how

to express it. Only after he apologized profusely, kissing her over and over again, did the weight on my chest lift.

And since then, the memory of that scene makes me smile.

*Dear Lady Katrina*, I think, the beginnings of a letter in my head.

*You worried that Gerald had inherited the marquis's serious and stubborn personality, but he is now living his best life with his treasured jewel.*

*You worried that Abigail would be harmed one day due to her immaturity, but she is blooming like a soft and strong flower, her innocence still intact.*

*I'm sure they will continue to move forward together at a pace that suits them both. And the Kofi family will continue to support and watch over them, hoping that their path will be a bright one.*

*Yes, Lady Katrina, it was you who chose this path for me.*

"Tabitha… It's all around me…"

I look up at the sound of the lady's helpless voice to see the white cotton lace tangled so tightly around her fists that they're no longer visible. When did that happen? And however did she manage to get both hands stuck?

*Lady Katrina, I'll surely see you again this autumn in Drewett and will be able to tell you once more how much joy and happiness you've given me.*

*But for now, I need to figure out how to unravel this intricate lace without damaging it.*

# Afterword

**I'M** on vacation with my lord husband after traveling by boat from the port town of Orta.

Lots of humans at our destination have black hair and black eyes. They don't possess magical prowess and seem quite weak, and there are so many of them. And I've heard there is lots of food I've never seen before too.

We are seated along a counter, and a large bowl is placed before us. It contains soup overflowing with lots of vegetables… I'm told the dish is called ramen and is similar to pasta, yet I can't see anything other than vegetables. *Oh, half a boiled egg, and meat too. And what are those?* One is soft and branchlike, and the other flat and round with red and white swirls on it. From the bowl wafts a delicious mixture of aromas. I watch as my lord husband spoons a portion into a smaller bowl for me. *Ooh!* Something long and squishy! It's the ramen peeking out from under the vegetables!

"It's hot, so make sure you blow on it before eating… I heard it gets heavy if it cools too much though."

*Isn't heavier better?*

He picks up two thin sticks he calls chopsticks, then starts to slurp his ramen noisily. *Guess bad manners are okay then!*

I try to do the same but can't capture any noodles. One of the staff passes me a fork. I can surely do it; I just need some practice. But if I take too long, the noodles will get heavy. *Again, isn't heavier better?!* Perhaps I won't be able to eat it all in that case.

I blow on it for a moment then take a bite… I can't manage the slurping sound.

"W-Well, maybe try eating two or three strands at once?" My lord husband winds some ramen around his chopsticks and feeds it to me. Delicious! It's so soft and smooth and chewy! I taste a combination of flavors as varied as the aromas, along with a bit of meaty soup!

I can do it myself. Hook three strands with a fork… *Oops*. Two have fallen off so just one is left. *Now, slurp, slurp!* I suck hard and

something flies upward, hitting my forehead.

*Hot! So hot!* I jump a little, and my lord husband coughs before hurriedly peeling the object off my head.

It was the red and white swirl. So small yet so hot… My lord husband pops it into his mouth, then twirls more noodles around his chopsticks for me. So squishy and delicious! Twirly noodles are tasty. *This must be the city of twirls!*

…The next volume, *Abby Goes to Japan: Even If They Tell Me to Stop Because I Can't Finish it All* is coming soon!

Soon? Maybe not.

Thank you for your continued patronage! This is Mameta!

I'm so happy to release the second volume of *Dinners with My Darling* despite the rising cost of paper in Japan. It must be all thanks to everyone who has supported me…!

If you've picked up this second volume, you must already own the first one. If not, it is likely displayed somewhere near this second volume, so please grab both of them and proceed to the register. Thank you!

Well, this is my first time penning an afterword. When I was compiling volume one, I was given the choice to write one and gleefully opted not to. I mean, I didn't know what to write!

A self-introduction first? A self-introduction…?

Well, the origin of *Dinners with My Darling* was the web novel site *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, where both professional writers and amateurs can post their work. The series belongs to a popular genre called romance, and more specifically to the "I won't love you" subgenre, where the story begins with a protagonist uttering this phrase. I love it.

Abigail was born because my fellow writers who read my drafts and then blackmail me into releasing new works convinced me of the merits of the "I won't love you" genre and persuaded me to write it. In the first few paragraphs I wrote, she wasn't the former Monster King at all, but after I took a break and made some coffee, she became the former Monster King. Somehow. Because I thought that was cute.

I'd planned to write a novella, and it just got longer and longer because I wanted to add in more things, until the publishing company Futabasha approached me about going to

print. I've been cluelessly and selfishly relying on CutieU, my editor at Futabasha, and Hanazome-sensei, who illustrated the adorable Abby, and here we are today. So books are made through the efforts of many people! Amazing! And thanks to them, I've heard that the story has been very well received.

What's more, the manga version is scheduled to be released in Japan one month after the release of this second volume! Amazing! I feel like I've used up all the virtue from my previous life in a single year.

As I write this afterword, I'm planning to upload the third arc, a sequel to this second volume, on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. There are no plans to release a third volume yet. It all depends on the sales of the second volume!

I hope to deliver more Abigail to everyone. I should be able to do that; I think I still have a lot of virtue left in my current life. I've heard rumors that the editorial department will publish a third volume if they receive letters requesting a sequel! If that's the case, thank you in advance!

Once again, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone who purchased this book, all my supporters on Shousetsuka ni Narou, my editor CutieU, Hanazome-sensei who accommodates all of my requests, and everyone involved in bringing this to print.

And to my friends reading my drafts and hounding me for updates, thank you with all my heart, and please give me more ideas.

Praying to meet you all again. Have a nice day!




## Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato　Illust Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!




## How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue　Illust Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!




## How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken　Illust Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.




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