
2
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Illust.
Baracan
Disowned but Not Disheartened!
Life Is Good with Overpowered Magic


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Lera's home and enjoying her days hunting! But could more trouble be in store for her?!
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Life Is Good with Overpowered Magic


Colnesia
Bornir Aspozat
Affectionately known as "Colny."
Lera's childhood friend,
older than her by one year.
Tafelina Lowell
Lera Duval
Reincarnated from another world.
Specialized education in the countryside
left her with more muscles than brains.
Oldest daughter of House Duval,
but was disowned at a young age.
Water magic
makes it easy!
Pearls galore in the
Mystic Forest!


A case of larceny
interrupts the
hunting festival!

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Prologue

Have you ever heard of other world reincarnation? As the name implies, it's when you're reborn in a world different from your previous one. You reincarnate, that is. That's the gist of it. I'm sure most people would never believe in something so fantastical, and who could blame them? But I had the good—or bad—luck of reincarnating in another world. All of a sudden I found myself as a child in a world different from the one I knew. It's nothing to joke about.

Memories of my previous life seemed to start returning when I was about three years old. If I sound uncertain, it's because my memories from that age are vague. That's because I was, y'know, three years old.

And not long after that, I got booted out of the family I had been born into. Something about my appearance changing. I didn't suddenly grow or anything like that—my eyes and hair just changed color. I went from having brown hair and eyes, to silver hair and blue eyes. It made for a real startling before-and-after.

This dramatic change was a phenomenon called a "pigment shift." They said it was a rare condition that involved a drastic increase in mana. Sure enough, my mana pool was far above average. Except I don't actually know how that compares to my mana before the pigment shift.

After being disowned from my birth family, I was sent to live with my father's distant relative, Earl Peylon. The Peylon Earldom was one of the northernmost territories in our nation, the Kingdom of Ozeria. The eastern portion of the domain was taken up by the Mystic Forest, a place filled to the brim with terrifying monsters. Thankfully there were people whose job it was to hunt these creatures.

This territory was known as a community of meatheads. Might was everything and strength was lauded. What do you think happens when you throw a little kid into a place like that? They grow up hearty and healthy! They learn to use their magic and muscles! They joyfully hunt monsters every day!

I had been perfectly happy living in Peylon, but the man

raising me was an earl, and children of nobles had a certain obligation: to attend the noble academy. When I'd turned thirteen, I had left the Peylon Earldom to fulfill this duty of mine.

Returning to my birth place, the royal capital, sure was something. I got lost, then brought home by some knights I had never met before. Despite the academy being a place full of nobles, the trouble only continued once I moved into the dorm. It wasn't like the schools from my previous life in Japan, where even commoners could enroll.

There was that dorm manager who thought I was an illegitimate child and put me in an attic room; that baron's daughter who had a few too many dalliances; the melon-chested girl who called me out behind one of the buildings just because I got close to a knight she liked; and my antagonistic half sister.

For the cherry on top, a group of outsiders sneaked into the academy's festival and kidnapped some of the students' family members. And just to show dark times were upon us, some of the teachers had been directly involved in the plot.

But it wasn't all bad. I conscripted Peylon's magic research institute into helping me remodel my room into something nice and cozy. The baron's daughter and one Miss Cucumis Melos got thrown out of the academy. And as for my half sister, weeell, she had a long way to go before she could be a threat to me, so I didn't have to worry about her.

The kidnappers were all arrested before they could escape, leaving me to wait around while the adults went and dealt with the people responsible. Rooting out criminals is no job for a child!

Like the schools of my past life, the noble academy had an extended vacation during the summer. I was ready to go home and hunt in the Mystic Forest until I couldn't hunt anymore. I was hoping my friends would be able to go hunting with me.

Colnesia—or rather, Colny—was the daughter of House Aspozat and one year older than me. Her oldest brother Winville (or just Ville) was the heir apparent to the house and had already graduated from the noble academy. Her second older brother was Loksusad, also known as Loks. I was hoping they would all be able to go hunting with me. But I didn't think their mother Viltheoshila, or Sheila, would join us. Either way, I was excited.

Chapter One: Returning Home

We traveled from the royal capital to Peylon via teleportation magic. All that really means is that we stepped in one circle drawn on the ground and appeared in another, conveniently making the journey in a mere instant. I was the one who first proposed these portals, but it was Peylon's magic research institute that made them a reality, so we shared the intellectual rights.

Most portals were a single-use thing. In the royal capital, the only affixed portals were one somewhere in the royal palace and one in the Aspozat residence. Although I'd heard the one in the royal palace was rarely used. It was there for emergencies. It was even designed so it wouldn't activate unless fed mana by someone from the royal family.

One time, a drunken Bear (that would be the institute's chief) told me about it, and the next day Nielle tore him a new one. Apparently that portal was supposed to be a royal secret. But I didn't have any reason to spread that around, so their secret was safe with me.

And so thanks to our portal, the five of us, Sheila, Ville, Loks, Colny, and I all arrived in Peylon.

"The air's different from the royal capital," Loks whispered.

"That's because the Mystic Forest isn't far away," I told him.

We had appeared at the magic research institute, which was relatively close to the Mystic Forest.

"Oh, you're back," said a voice.

I turned and saw Bear—the institute's chief and the noble academy's general magic instructor.

"Oh, it's you, Bear."

"Would you quit calling me Bear?!"

Yeah, he had a name, but I couldn't remember what it was. "Bear" worked just fine, though he didn't care much for it. Awfully demanding for a bear.

And when did he even get back? He's here before us. How is that fair?

"That expression tells me you've got something on your mind, Lera," he said.

“Hm? Perish the thought.”

“No, I’m certain of it,” he insisted. “Don’t think you can fool me.”

“Waaah, Colny, Bear’s being mean to me,” I cried, clinging to my friend.

“Oh my,” she said.

Even Bear had to be courteous toward the daughter of a marquess.

Peylon, or rather the area around the Mystic Forest, got hot in the summer. The forest’s intense humidity reminded me of summers back in Japan, but at least it wasn’t quite as bad as the royal capital.

So I’ve been away for a whole year. That’s a funny thought.

“Lera, is something bothering you?” Colny looked worried.

We were making our way along a footpath that connected the institute to Castle Varchudar, where we would be staying. The castle was just a bit west of the square that was set up outside the Mystic Forest. It was there to keep an eye out for any signs of monsters overflowing from the forest, and to serve as a line of defense should that come to pass. If that happened, the resistance would be led by Lord Peylon, who resided in the castle year-round. And being Lord Peylon’s adopted child in all but name, I had been raised in this castle.

“No, I was just thinking about everything that has happened since I went to the royal capital,” I said.

“It was an exciting year.”

She had that right. Why was last year so packed? In my previous life we believed certain years to be unlucky ones. I was starting to wonder if something similar happened in this world too.

“By the way, Lera, don’t you have any luggage?”

“No, everything I need is here, including my summer clothes.”

Until about a year ago, I had lived in Castle Varchudar, so I had plenty of clothes and amenities laying around.

Colny looked at me doubtfully. “Won’t you have grown out of your old clothes if it’s been that long?”

Had I *grown*? My eyes fell to my chest armor, and all I saw was a zero rating.

“Must be nice,” I sighed.



“Goodness, Lera, where are you looking?”

“Your chest armor.”

“Excuse me?”

Aaah! Why can’t I grow like that? Damn it, why can’t she share?

“That reminds me,” Colny said, “did you inform Yuin that you would be away from the royal capital?”

Who?

It took me a moment, but I realized she was talking about the black knight. When I had gotten lost in the royal capital, I’d leaned against a wall in order to get a bit of rest. Apparently that building had belonged to the knights, and he’d approached me under the belief that I might be someone suspicious. Not my fondest memory.

Once he’d realized I had just been trying to find my way around, the two knights took me back to the Aspozat residence. After that I’d met him again during the commotion with that baron’s daughter, and we’d danced at the royal ball held for students who had excelled on mid-year exams. And it was because of this that Miss Cucumis later accosted me. There was no denying that he was handsome, so I shouldn’t have been surprised to learn he had many admirers.

But why should I have told him I wasn’t going to be in the capital for the summer? In complete earnestness, I posed this question to Colny.

“Lera,” she sighed, “you still have some growing to do.”

Of all the nerve! I’ll have you know I’ve gotten taller!

The institute and Castle Varchudar were close enough that you could easily see one from the other. Walking the tree-lined path between them only took a few minutes, so we weren’t on our feet for long.

“Ooh, I’m back!”

I had lived in this castle for ten years, so it felt like home.

“Welcome, members of House Aspozat. My lord awaits you within.”

Greeting us was the nice old man who served as the steward of Peylon. He managed both this castle and Swanille Manor, the latter of which was in Peylon’s capital. His unquestionable competence led many to credit him for the hunting festival’s yearly occurrence.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Zign,” Sheila said. “Is my

brother doing well?"

"Indeed, he is doing splendidly, Lady Aspozat," Zign replied with a smile. "And it warms my heart to see you, Lera."

"I'm glad to be home," I said.

Home. That's where I was.

Zign guided us through the castle, not that it was really necessary with this group. However, he led us somewhere different than usual.

"Zign, are there other guests besides us?" Sheila asked.

"Yes, Lady Aspozat. My lord has requested that I show you to them upon your arrival."

Lord Peylon did that? I exchanged glances with Colny. Not many visitors came to Peylon during this time of year because the whole domain was busy getting ready for the hunting festival. While I wondered what this was all about, we arrived at a parlor in the outer castle.

When Zign opened the door, I wasn't surprised to see Lord Peylon inside. But this was a parlor, so he naturally wasn't in there alone. That said, I didn't recognize his guests. There was a man who appeared to be about as old as Sheila's husband Thand, and a young man about Ville's age. And then I saw two faces I did know. For some reason, the black knight and Mr. Frivolous were there too.

"Ah, there they are," Lord Peylon said.

"I'm pleased to see you again, brother," Sheila said. "Now, may I request your reason for being here, Lord Yulville?"

"I have my reasons, Lady Aspozat," the man replied.

Hm? Am I imagining this tension? Did something happen between these two?

"Sheila, don't be like that. We can discuss their reasons for being here at a later time." Lord Peylon wore a wry grin. He was angular as ever. No matter how many times I looked at him and Sheila, I could never believe these two were siblings. I seriously thought there must have been some sort of mix up. "Now, let's start with introductions. This is Earl Yulville, captain of the royal capital's Knights of the White Summit. From his order, we have Sir Iyale of House Nedon and Sir Rolfed of House Rellogad. And we have House Fezgahn's Sir Yuin, from the Knights of Obsidian."

Lord Yulville and the young man—Sir Rolfed—bowed from their seats. Sir Iyale—that would be Mr. Frivolous—gave a light wave and winked at us. It looked like a very natural movement

for him. The black knight got up and walked over to me.

"It's been too long, Miss Lowell."

Before I knew what was happening, he had taken my hand and greeted me as gentlemen did. And why just me? There were two other ladies right there with me.

"Are you going to stay like that all day, Fezgahn?" Ville interjected.

I thought the black knight was finally going to let go, but instead he knelt down, still holding on to my hand.

"Miss Lowell, please forgive me for my abrupt request."

What's this about? Before I could even tilt my head, he continued.

"I, Yuin Sacourt Fezgahn, would like to request your hand in marriage, Lowell Duval."

Everyone in the room said the same thing.

"HUUUH?!"

After that, the parlor became very loud. Most of the noise came from Ville and the black knight. Loks was left to handle them while Lord Peylon, Sheila, Colny, and I all moved to one of the castle's inner rooms. Mr. Frivolous and the other guests were shown to their respective rooms in the outer section of the castle.

"That was very abrupt of him," Lord Peylon remarked.

Please just forget about that. I'm *trying to forget about it.*

"Lera, are you acquainted with Sir Yuin?" Sheila asked.

"Not at all," I said without hesitation.

And I wasn't lying. Sure, he had helped me when I got lost, but that was it. I guess I'd also run into him at the academy that one time, and danced with him at a ball, but I was pretty sure that was the extent of it. That wasn't the sort of acquaintanceship that led to marriages.

Sheila and Lord Peylon both turned toward each other.

"That certainly doesn't sound like much to inspire a marriage," Lord Peylon said. "Maybe it was love at first sight?"

"You're joking aren't you?" I said. "You know that's not possible."

"N-No, I wasn't at all."

Lord Peylon was a bad liar. The stuttering was a dead giveaway.

"W-Well, more importantly, I'm glad to see everyone's in good

health."

"*More importantly*?"

He sure was nonchalant. Like this didn't directly concern him.

"Sure, it was a sudden proposal," Lord Peylon said when he noticed my displeasure, "but it wasn't a formal one, so you don't have to give him your answer immediately."

"I don't?"

"That's right. A formal proposal would've involved his father broaching the idea to yours. That's how noble marriages work."

Ohh.

I had heard that almost all marriages among the nobility were political in nature. That's because marriages concern not just the individuals, but both their houses as well. Would that mean the black knight's father would be contacting mine?

"No," I whispered after some consideration.

"What's that?"

"I just don't think my father would agree to let me get married."

"Ahh."

That man disowned me and cared for me so little that he tried to switch me out for my half sister Darnir, the girl I referred to as "Ribbons." Lord Peylon made a bitter expression, probably reaching the same conclusion as me. But I saw no reason to accept this proposal, as I was still thirteen, a month away from being fourteen. In my previous life, I would've still been in middle school and very much a child.

"Well, I'm just glad to see everyone's doing well," Lord Peylon said in an attempt to get off this awful subject. "How was it down south, Sheila?"

"As you'd expect," she replied.

I assumed he was referring to the trouble in the petty kingdoms. There was always *something* happening down there. I worried where those kingdoms might end up if they kept up the constant infighting. But apparently Ozeria was supporting the ruling powers, and that support prevented things from getting out of hand.

Stationed down south was the private army of Marquess Zokbahr, the head of Ozeria's military faction. The *national* military didn't get involved, so Ozeria could maintain that they had no intentions of conquering Resnund. Since it was only the private military of Marquess Zokbahr, then that was between the

marquess and Resnund, not Ozeria and Resnund. At least, that's the explanation they allowed themselves to give. That's the world of adults, I suppose.

"I'm especially glad to see you doing well, Lera. How's life at the academy?" Lord Peylon asked.

"I ran into a bear."

"Ha ha ha, were you surprised?"

"You bet I was. Please tell me these sorts of things in advance."

"Sorry, I really am, but Jian said he wanted it to be a surprise."

And why did he side with the bear? Is that really any way to treat your adopted daughter?

While I chatted away with Lord Peylon for the first time in months, Ville, Loks, and the black knights rejoined us. It appeared they had finished their *discussion*. Or so I thought.

"Ville, what happened to your face?!" I cried.

"Looks like you two had a lively exchange," Lord Peylon commented.

Ville and the black knight were both visibly roughed up, their faces bruised and swollen.

They hit each other, didn't they?

"Loks, why didn't you stop them?" Sheila asked, her voice chilling even to me on the sidelines. She was angry, and beautiful ladies can be very scary when that happens. But her son was able to brush it off.

"Honestly, I had my hands full just making sure they didn't start slinging spells," he said.

"For heaven's sake. Oh well. Have you two gotten it out of your system?"

Sheila received no response. Maybe they still had some pent up anger? And why had they even come to blows in the first place? Sheila looked at them and sighed.

"First, let's get your wounds treated. Lera, if you would."

"Coming right up."

I was actually very good at healing with magic, which is to say I was skilled with recovery spells. First I had to thoroughly scan their bodies with mana in order to see what sort of injuries they had. Ville had a cracked molar and some damage to his chin. The black knight had some bruises and swelling, but nothing wrong beneath the skin. This much damage wouldn't be hard to heal.

Recovery spells enhanced a person's natural healing abilities. But I used mana to heal wounds at their source. I regrew skin, produced blood, and erased blood clots. The result was fast healing.

It only took me a few minutes to take care of them both. This wasn't a new experience for Ville, but the black knight looked mystified as he put a hand to his cheek. It had taken me only a moment to remove the pain.

"So tell me, how did you two end up like this?" Sheila said.

Asking obvious questions just to make someone say it in their own words was something she did a lot. Ville and the black knight remained silent, but she wasn't going to accept that.

"I won't know unless you tell me," she pressed. "Or are you too injured to speak?"

That definitely wasn't it—I had done a thorough job. But I kept that to myself.

Ville realized clamming up wasn't going to work anymore, so he said, "This one was speaking nonsense. I wanted him to retract his statements, and resorted to force to make that happen."

Once Ville was done, the black knight immediately offered his own answer. "Aspozat began to hit me, so I retaliated."

Okay, you two can quit glaring at each other. Sheila's gonna get pissed.

"Goodness. Have you both forgotten that you're adults?" Sheila said. "Ville, you need to reconsider when you resort to force. And, Sir Yuin, there's no need to retaliate. Loksusad was there, wasn't he? Did he not try to stop his older brother?"

"Yes, he did," the black knight admitted.

So Loks had at least made an effort. But the black knight still hit back? Honestly, what was wrong with those two? Colny was just as exasperated as Sheila. Oh, but Lord Peylon was nodding along like this was entirely sensible. He *was* lord of the meatheads after all.

"Let's set that aside for now," Sheila said. "Now, Sir Yuin, let's be clear. Is your desire to marry Lowell genuine?"

"It is."

"Why did you make the proposal personally? Why not ask Lord Fezgahn to bring the proposal to Lord Duval?"

He sunk into a silence. Was there something he was trying to avoid bringing up?

“Are you perhaps on bad terms with your father?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then would you care to explain why you made the proposal yourself?”

Sheila was smiling, but her eyes were cold. Even if it hadn’t sounded like it, that was clearly an order. Otherwise, she would have said “would you please.” “Would you care to” clearly wasn’t actually a request. Judging by his growing discomfort, the black knight understood this. Was he really that desperate to avoid speaking his mind?

But trying to escape Sheila was a losing game, and the black knight eventually caved.

“I was afraid that I had to make a move immediately,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

“I thought another man might take her.”

“Oh my. You aren’t referring to Winville, are you? Or perhaps Loksusad?”

Really?

I didn’t see Loks or Ville that way, and I was sure the feeling was mutual. They thought of me like their second younger sister and I thought of them as older brothers.

“No, not them,” the black knight said.

“Then who? It’s in your best interests to tell me.”

Holy shit, she’s scary. What a terrifying thing a beautiful woman could be.

Realizing he had lost, the black knight gave in.

“Sir Rolfed,” he said.

“Ah, he was with you, wasn’t he? But Lord Yulville has no say in who Lera marries. Don’t tell me he’s planning something.”

Lord Yulville? Ah, that’s Mr. Frivolous’s boss. Or maybe superior is the better word? He’s the captain of the white knights. But why would he decide who I marry?

“Sheila, Lera’s tilting her head,” Lord Peylon said.

“Oh. Come to think of it, it only makes sense that you might be out of the loop.”

I furrowed my brow. This was getting more and more confusing. Sheila and Lord Peylon exchanged glances, and that exchange led to Lord Peylon offering an explanation.

“Lera, Lord Yulville is your maternal uncle.”

WHAAAT?!

Twenty years prior, the daughter of Earl Yulville, Hepiner Pisonowa fell in love with a man. That man was the son of Earl Duval, Quinevan Mowart. Luckily for Hepiner, Quinevan wasn't engaged, nor did he have any lovers. The issue was that their respective houses were of different factions and House Yulville was of higher status than House Duval.

At the time, House Duval was already losing face. It wasn't as bad as it would eventually get, but they were already heading steadily to the bottom of their faction's hierarchy. House Yulville wasn't eager to hand their dear daughter off to a house like that.

Hepiner's parents both tried their hardest to convince their daughter to forget about him, but there are some things a girl in love is impervious to. She was deeply enamored, saying things like "There's no point in living my life if I can't spend it married to him!"

Lord and Lady Yulville were the losers of this battle of wills. They didn't see what else they could do if their daughter was so determined. They took advantage of their high status and proposed a marriage with House Duval, who were absolutely thrilled. However, there was one person opposed—the man who was to be married. In other words, my father.

"Huh? My father was opposed to marrying my mother?" I said.

"It might not be for me to say," Lord Peylon said, "but Quinevan was, um, a *romantic*."

"A romantic," I parroted.

It was so unexpected it almost sounded like a foreign word. Would a *romantic* man come up with a plan to replace his wife's daughter with the daughter of his mistress?

"He seems to like women who are dainty and stir one's protective instincts. And Hepiner, she had a stern face, you could say."

"So, she looked like she might be strong willed? And that alone made him try to call off the marriage?"

Lord Peylon and Sheila both silently nodded.

Ahh. Now I know a bit more about my parents.

"I'm surprised my brother and I were born," I said.

Their marriage easily could have become one in name only.

"Lera, please, don't say it so...oh, I suppose it doesn't matter," Sheila said. "Your brother Taeid was born for the sake of the house. It seems Quinevan resigned himself to that. And you were born because Hepiner wished for it. It seems she was very

insistent on that point."

So I was born at my mother's insistence. But still, that couldn't have happened without my father's cooperation. So while saying this and that, he still did what he did. *Men*.

"He already was having affairs before you were born, so I believe that had something to do with it."

That would most likely include Ribbons's mother. I had never met her, so I didn't really know, but I assumed she was the sort of frail person my father liked. And what about Ribbons? Where was any of that in her?

"The point is, Heridar, the current Earl Yulville, is Hepiner's older brother. Your uncle, in other words. Still, that doesn't mean he has any say in who you marry."

For nobles, marriages concerned their house. A paternal relative had no right to interfere, to say nothing of a maternal relative. Ozeria had many laws about the marriages of nobles, and this was one of them.

"So I don't need to obey Lord Yulville, no matter what he says, right?" I said.

"Yes, but the problem is that you're a girl," Sheila replied.

"How's that a problem?"

Both her and Lord Peylon looked at me pitifully.

"You won't be able to refuse the marriage so easily if certain *allegations* start making the rounds."

Ohh, like that. But wait. I'm still thirteen.

"You don't seem convinced. Sir Rolfed doesn't have to actually *do* anything. Proof that you two spent the night in the same room will be enough."

"That's it?! But I've slept in the same room as Loks and Ville before."

But that was before I had entered the academy. I noticed the black knight giving Ville a death glare, and Ville returning the gesture.

"You were all children then. There's nothing wrong with something like that," Sheila said through a strained grin. "The point is, if they're plotting something, you need to be careful, Lera."

"Okaaay. But can I counterattack if it becomes necessary?"

I didn't expect the room to grow so quiet.

"Just exercise restraint."

Come on, Sheila, I know that. I'll make sure they can still get back

up.

I thought our conversation would end there, but that wasn't the case.

"Now, are your intentions unchanged from before this conversation, Sir Yuin?" Sheila asked.

"Naturally," he answered.

His proposal was still in effect.

"I see," Sheila said with a small sigh. "By the way, are you aware of who Lera's guardians are?"

"Is it not Lord Duval?"

"It's not. Currently, all authority over Lera is shared by my husband and my brother. That, of course, includes the right to decide who she weds."

"Really?!" I blurted.

This was news to me! But Sheila and Lord Peylon both suddenly made very scary faces.

"Lera, didn't I tell you that you would be a ward of House Aspozat when you entered the academy?" Lord Peylon asked me.

He sure had. But I thought that was more like a request to look after me while I was in the royal capital.

"I know you're still too young to know much about royal law," Sheila said, "but surely this isn't your first time learning about house affairs."

It wasn't. I had heard things about how much authority the head of a house had.

"Well, you'll learn about it soon enough at the academy. It'll be a problem if you still don't understand after, but I digress," Sheila continued. "Now, my brother and my house have the right to decide your future. That naturally includes who you marry."

So that's where she was going.

"Hence my earlier confirmation, Sir Yuin. Now, if you're serious about marrying Lera, you need to prove that you're fit to be her husband."

What? We can't just tell him to get lost?

"What would that involve?" the black knight asked.

"First, a show of your strength—and yours alone—would draw her attention. But don't be fooled, that won't be easy. She's no ordinary young lady."

I wanted to protest, but Sheila was right. Nothing ordinary about memories of a previous life and an upbringing among

meatheads.

“I’m prepared to do that,” the black knight said.

“What’s more, now is not the right occasion to make any plans regarding an engagement, much less marriage. At the minimum, I’d like you to wait until Lera’s an adult. Until then, do your best to woo her.”

“At the minimum?”

The black knight seemed unhappy about this. Well, if he didn’t like it, he was more than free to rescind his proposal.

“You can use any proper means to win her heart, but don’t even think about laying a hand on her. If you do, I’ll make sure you’ll have no use for women for the rest of your life.”

Sheila’s smile was one that brooked no argument.

After that, the black knight reluctantly agreed to Sheila’s terms. Those were as follows:

Until I was fifteen, no engagements could be made.

He was free to try and win my heart, but my academics took priority.

He would receive no special treatment if other suitors appeared.

So basically, he was free to approach me, but he couldn’t be a bother, and he wouldn’t get any help from House Peylon or Aspozat.

He took all this in with a quaint expression. He received special permission to participate in the hunting festival, so he also secured permission to stay in Castle Varchudar.

Once Zign had taken the black knight to show him to his room, I was left with only familiar faces.

“Mother, why are you allowing Fezgahn to court Lera?” Ville asked the very moment he was gone.

I was starting to get uncomfortable with everyone talking about me.

Sheila wasn’t budging. She had the strength that came with being a mother.

“If any other suitors appear, they’ll be treated no differently than Sir Yuin.”

“Yes but—”

“Lera’s like a younger sister to you, isn’t she? I understand you’re trying to protect her, but not even you have any right to interfere in her marriage prospects.”

Ville didn't argue. By the sounds of it, only Lord Peylon and Thand had any say in the matter. Being Sheila and Thand's oldest son, Ville was set to inherit the title of Marquess Aspozat, but that day was yet to come. So he had influence on this matter, but not enough.

"And what do *you* think, Lera?" Ville said, suddenly putting me in the spotlight.

"Huh?"

"Do you want to be Fezgahn's wife?"

Huh? Now *you're asking that?*

Everyone in the room was looking at me. Colny's gaze was an expectant one, except I didn't quite know what it was she was expecting.

"Uhh, can't I just turn him down?"

I know I'm repeating myself, but I was still just thirteen for another month. I had just finished my first year at the academy. I was still just a kid, I didn't want to have this major life decision thrust in front of me. Sure, if you added my years from my previous life, I'd be thirty or forty, but the current me was a minor.

"Lera, do you not like Sir Yuin?" Sheila asked me.

I tilted my head. "I'm not sure I'd say that."

"Then do you like him?"

"I wouldn't say that either. I don't really know *what* to say."

After all, I had only met him a few times. I hadn't had so much as a proper conversation with him. I didn't even know why he was asking for my hand in marriage.

Sheila then suggested, "If you don't outright oppose the idea, why not take some time to think it over? At the very least, you have a year until you can formally get engaged."

Lord Peylon seemed surprised. "Are you sure about this?"

"I think it's fine. Even Lera will have to get married eventually, and Sir Yuin doesn't offer much to complain about. He's fine-looking, skilled, and comes from a good family. Doesn't that make him a good choice? And he seems to like Lera enough that he didn't withdraw his offer after our conversation."

I had my doubts. I couldn't think of any reason he might have taken an interest in me. He had helped me when I was lost, we had met at the ball and at the academy, and that was about it. On none of those occasions could I recall doing anything that might have caused him to like me. What had motivated him to

propose to me?

"But the boy's the son of a marquess," Lord Peylon pointed out.

Just as he said, the black knight was set to inherit his father's title, and would thus become a marquess himself. House Fezgahn was higher on the pecking order than House Duval. Why would someone in a position like that pick someone who came with as much baggage as I did?

Colny seemed to have her doubts, albeit different ones from mine, and said, "But, uncle, why can't the son of a marquess marry Lera? Being the daughter of an earl, there's certainly a difference in rank, but it's not immense."

"Huh? Oh, well, about that..." Lord Peylon said, groaning and fidgeting.

I was more impressed that Colny was thinking that deeply about it. I had just assumed that if he was the son of a marquess, then we should just forget about the whole thing. But then I remembered that Sheila was the daughter of an earl and she married into the family of a marquess. Except her house and Thand's were part of the same faction and had a long history together. Neither of those things could be said of Duval and Fezgahn.

"Colny," Sheila said with a sigh, "what I'm about to tell you isn't yet public, so it is not to leave this room."

"Of course," Colny answered.

"Lera is the heir to House Duval."

"Huh?"

"What?!" I cried.

Excuse me?! This is news to me! Why am I going to be the successor?

"There are extenuating circumstances," Sheila said. "We've already discussed this matter with His Majesty."

So I was boxed in on all sides. And why was the king sticking his nose into the matter of an earl's inheritance? Or was the matter brought up to the king first?

"His Majesty?" Colny said. "Mother, aren't matters of succession usually just reported via documents?"

"It's different with House Duval," Sheila replied. "We're expecting resistance from the current Lord Duval, you see."

I figured as much. My father would have never willingly allowed me to become his successor. I was the unwanted child

he had chased out. But more than that, there was already a suitable successor—my older brother. It wasn't exactly common for a man to be set aside so his little sister could take over. That must have been why they went to the king first, so my father couldn't interfere. They were covering all their bases.

It seemed they really wanted me to become the head of House Duval. But *why*?



“Sheila, can I ask a question?” I said.

“As long as it’s something we can answer,” she replied.

She was playing a cautious game.

“Why is it that I have to succeed House Duval?”

What I got was silence. Sheila and Lord Peylon exchanged glances, making me think this concerned him as well.

Duval was to the west of Peylon. They shared a border and were both involved in the monster material industry. But Duval didn’t sell raw materials. They just bought and refined them. If you tried to use monster materials without this refinement, something about their mana would get in the way.

I didn’t know if they just thinned the mana or outright removed it, but I knew this was one of Duval’s industries. Supposedly, none of the other domains had this sort of technology, so it must have been a big source of income for them.

Could that have been why Lord Peylon and Sheila were so invested in House Duval’s successor?

“Does it involve the Duval Earldom?” I asked.

“Oh, Lera.”

The look on Sheila’s face suggested I had hit the mark. It’s not like it could’ve been anything else. But that still didn’t change why it had to be *me*. The next head of House Duval should have been my brother.

A brief silence fell over the room, which was eventually broken by the voice of Lord Peylon. “Lera, we can’t go into details for the time being. This is for your own safety, but mostly for the people of the Duval Earldom. It’s also in their interests that you become the successor.”

It’s that serious?! Am I really fit to become Lady Duval?

Noticing my concern, Sheila said soothingly, “Even if you become the successor, you won’t have to do anything until you’re an adult. You still have until next year, so take this time to prepare yourself.”

“Sheila…”

But she was still treating it as a given that I would inherit the title. And she said “until next year” but that wasn’t really that much time.

“But the point is that our decision has been made. You will inherit your house and take a husband.”

“Do I *really* have to?”

Was there really nothing I could do? Frankly, I wasn't interested in *either* of those things. I supposed marriage didn't seem that bad, if I found someone I could get along with. I had died single in my previous life, so maybe this would be a decent chance to give marriage a shot. But, for some odd reason, I just didn't like this "it's not actually my choice" part.

"Lera, I don't necessarily agree with my mother, but there are unavoidable obligations that come with being born into a noble house."

You too, Colny?

I got that there were obligations, but I didn't like that I had nothing *but* the obligations of nobility thrust on me before I could even enjoy the privileges that came with them.

While I groaned internally, Colny was looking at her brothers.

"Aren't you two surprised?" she asked them.

"I more or less knew this was coming," Ville answered despondently.

"Why's that?"

"Because Lera's brother didn't go to the academy."

I was still confused. I had heard that my brother hadn't gone to the academy on account of illness, but I didn't see what that had to do with anything. Colny and I both tilted our heads, the two of us being the only ones unable to connect the dots.

"To inherit the title of a house, there's a certain requirement," Sheila said through a wry grin. "Do you two know what that is?"

"Nope," I answered.

"I don't," followed Colny.

"You have to graduate from the noble academy."

This was a surprise. Colny and I looked at each other. So going to the academy was necessary for inheriting a title. Kind of like how job listings wanted high school or university graduates?

"So if Lera's brother didn't attend, then the natural conclusion is that Lera will take over House Duval?" Colny said.

"My brother and I both think so," Sheila said. "Lord Duval is, of course, able to adopt a child, but I believe blood relations take priority when applicable."

"And that's why it won't be easy to hide the possibility of Lera inheriting her house," Ville added, turning toward Sheila and Lord Peylon. "Mother, uncle, what exactly do you plan to do?"

If Ville and Loks had already pieced it together, then there were probably other students who had done the same. And if

their parents heard about it from them, then they would naturally assume that it would be the younger sister who would take charge of House Duval.

So then what was the point in all the secrecy?

It was Sheila who gave Ville his answer. “Surprisingly few people are aware that Taeid is the oldest son of Lord Duval and that he didn’t attend the academy. I imagine this knowledge is limited to only a handful of houses in our faction.”

“Even if he didn’t make any sort of social debut, if he was the son of Lord Duval, people would have at least seen him—”

“He *hasn’t* been seen very much. Ever since he was young, Hepiner rarely took him outside.”

This took Ville by surprise. Loks just grimaced. I, however, was falling further out of the loop.

Colny picked up on this and whispered to me, “For noble houses that have a residence in the royal capital, the children will accompany their parents to certain social events on occasion. This is for the sake of the house and so the child can make acquaintances.”

Apparently, this started once a child was around ten years old. It was like prep for the academy. And then my mind wandered back to my past life. The academy was like kindergarten, and until noble children were old enough to attend, they got dragged along to adult gatherings while the parents made mommy friends.

No, Lera, it’s not quite like that.

Whatever the case, it seemed my mother hadn’t brought my brother to those events. In fact, it sounded like my mother hadn’t made many social appearances herself. From the sounds of it, my family seemed to be bunch of hopeless shut-ins.

“I don’t know what Hepiner intended by secluding her son,” Sheila continued, “but that seems to be the reason so few know of Taeid’s existence.”

“So most people believe House Duval just has Lera and the other girl?” Loks asked.

“Indeed.”

The “other girl” he was referring to was my half sister, Ribbons. If everyone believed it was just the two of us, then they would naturally think I was the next head, for several reasons.

But even after hearing all this, my brain refused to process it. I figured it would be okay if my only takeaway was that I had to

become the next head of House Duval.

Oh, hold on. There's still one more thing I need to be sure of.

"Sheila, I get that I have to inherit the house, but do I really need to get married?"

"Of course you do. Part of taking over a house is producing the next generation."

Those things were part and parcel it seemed. I guess it made sense.

"And having kids without marrying isn't an option?"

"If that were to happen, the church would get involved, in which case the child wouldn't be allowed to succeed the house."

That sounded about right for Ozeria. Religion had a strong presence in this kingdom, with the dominant faith purporting the chief deity as the one true god. Because of that, monogamy was a tenant of both Ozerian law and religion—having an affair was somewhat sacrilegious, and children out of wedlock weren't formally recognized. Those children couldn't inherit their parents' titles or marry into good houses.

Could this have been why my father tried to replace me with Ribbons? Was he hoping to find her a good partner? I suppose only parental love could drive someone to ends like that. Too bad I wasn't in any way obligated to go along with their plan!

Besides, it looked like that girl was aiming for the third prince. She was on a vain path, clawing her way to a flower on a peak she would never reach. Though maybe that was a weird metaphor to apply to a man.

"Lera, I don't know what you're thinking, but you'll have to marry *someone*," Sheila said with a grin.

I had an urge to book it out of the county.

After that, she told me all about the things I needed to consider going forward with the inheritance, what I needed to look for in a good partner, and the secrets to a good marriage. Perhaps it wasn't surprising that Colny was far more interested in this than I was. She too would have to find a nice house to marry into.

The inner section of Castle Varchudar was for the lord of the castle and his family, including myself. Colny and her family were staying there as well, as relatives through Sheila. Our conversation, which was supposed to have been just a simple greeting, had left me tired. Even the walk down the hall felt like a

trek.

“You haven’t been here in a while, have you, Lera?” Colny asked as she walked beside me.

“That’s right. I didn’t go home for the winter, so I haven’t been here since I set out for the academy.”

The academy only had winter and summer vacations. There was a break in the spring, but that was so short nobody went home for it. Everyone either went to a residence in the royal capital or stayed in the dorm. There were some that traveled to the capital’s outskirts, but they were few.

I had spent my spring break lazing around my attic room. I could have gone to the Aspozat residence, but that would’ve been inviting commotion from admirers, and I began to resent Ville and Loks’s popularity due to that. Once, I’d visited them on a mundane errand and got all but interrogated when I got back. Did I go out with one of them? Were their futures promised to anyone? Not only that, but some questions were about more carnal matters. They’d been so blunt about it that even I wanted to request they show a little ladylike discretion.

My room was on the third floor of the inner section, the same floor as Lord Peylon’s room. Everyone from House Aspozat was down on the second floor. This arrangement was because certain lines had to be drawn. Even if they were close acquaintances, they were still guests from another house.

“This is where we part ways,” Colny said when we reached the staircase.

“Yep. See you later.”

Colny stopped at the second floor while I kept climbing. Castle Varchudar was made of stone, and that included the staircase. Even in the summer, the handrail was cold to the touch.

The third floor had only four rooms. The largest one was Lord Peylon’s room, which mine sat opposite of. I pushed open the heavy wooden door to my chambers, but someone was already inside.

“Welcome home, young miss!”

“Sheebis!”

Sheebis was the castle’s caretaker and in charge of the female servants. She was of the old guard, having been around since Lord Peylon and Sheila were children. She had been looking out for me ever since I first came to this castle.

She was about as old as Zign, and if he could be said to handle all the external matters of the castle, then Sheebis handled all the internal matters. She was small and her face was covered in wrinkles, but still had an endearing charm. Her hair was almost ocher-colored and she had violet eyes. Her marriage had been a source of tragedy for men all throughout Peylon and she had gone on to raise four boys.

Sheebis looked at me through teary eyes.

"I'm glad to see you're well."

"You too, Sheebis."

"Ohoho, it must be my constant scolding of the youngsters that keeps me healthy."

That didn't sound like a joke to me at all. She came across as a cute old lady, but looks could be deceiving. Even Lord Peylon didn't mess with her. Sheebis very much belonged to *Meatheadidae lunaticus.*

"Now, you must be tired," Sheebis said. "Shall I bring you some cold juice?"

"Yes, that'd be nice."

Once she was gone, I took a look around. It seemed they had been keeping it clean even while I had been away, but otherwise my room was just as I had left it. I had gotten used to my attic room in the dorm, but this space was special.

"Ahhh, no place like home."

My suite consisted of three rooms. I retreated to the bedroom in the back and flopped down onto my bed. I knew it was luxurious for a child's chambers, but this was apparently normal for the daughter of a castle's lord.

The first room was the outer room, in which I could entertain most anyone. Beyond that was the living room, which was for close acquaintances. As long as it was someone like Lord Peylon, Ville, or Loks, it was okay for me to bring a man in here. Beyond that was the bed and washroom. This space was entirely private. From a young age, I had been told very sternly that I wasn't to allow *any* man in here, even if it was Lord Peylon.

I was lying with my limbs splayed out, staring at the bed canopy. I was a little bothered that I had finally come home to Peylon only to be hit with bizarre conversations before I could even relax. My uncle had shown up, and then the black knight had proposed to me. And then that somehow led to me learning about how my parents ended up together and then there was

that whole discussion about inheritance. I had had my fill.

I had all sorts of things I had wanted to do once I got back to Peylon, but I ended up falling asleep without even realizing it. When I awoke, it was already time for dinner. Everything piling up at once must have really drained me. And so when night came, I had energy to spare and used it to grumble to Colny when she came to my room to visit.

"You've had a long day, Lera," she said with a wry smile. Then she gently patted my head. She was doting on me because she could tell just how worked up I was.

Oh, Colny, I love you.

"If I was a man, I could just take you as my wife," I said to her.

"Or perhaps the inverse? I could be a man and marry you."

"No, that would be squandering something good."

"And what does that mean?"

For her promising chest armor to disappear would be a shame on multiple levels. Talking like this made me realize that one day Colny would go off and get married. Something about that made me lonely.

Oh, speaking of wives.

"I know I'm slow on the uptake here, but Ville still doesn't have a partner, does he?"

"Apparently there's some difficulty working with the other houses in our faction. I've heard bits and pieces from my mother and it all sounds quite complicated. She says there are lots of potential candidates."

"That so?"

House Aspozat was the head of the royal faction, so no matter whom Ville married, be they from within the faction or not, there was a lot to be taken into account. Taking someone from another faction would cause the other royalists to kick up a fuss. But even if he did marry someone from their faction, everyone would want to know it wasn't someone from their house specifically. Either way, arrangements were bound to be a pain in the neck.

"It gets even worse when you remember how popular Ville is. It sounds like an utter mess," Colny sighed.

"Ahhh, I can imagine."

Ville was very good-looking. Oh, he was good with a sword and he was smart too. He also cared a lot for his family.

Wait. What even are *his flaws?*

"Colny, we've got a problem," I said.

"What's the matter?"

"I can't think of anything wrong with Ville."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

What? Is it?

"But he would feel more relatable if he had a flaw or two."

"My brother's marriage will be a political one, so I think all that's really necessary is that he and his wife respect each other."

I for one hoped he could find someone he could fall in love with. He had the terrific trifecta of brains, brawn, and a bombastic bod—actually, even that was selling him short. It would be wasted on someone who didn't appreciate him.

"Goodness, Lera, forget about my brother and think about your own situation a bit harder."

"Do I have to?"

Thinking about other people was a lot easier because you weren't responsible for them. This might sound strange, but I didn't exactly consider myself a good pick for a spouse. After all, I was estranged from my birth family and my father didn't care much for me. I wasn't bothered by that, but it was hard to imagine many nobles would want to wed someone cut off from their family. Marrying someone like me wasn't exactly politically advantageous.

Not to mention my Peylon upbringing had given me muscles for brains. Noble women were expected to raise the next generation and bridge their birth house to the one they married into, socially and genealogically. But that required parental cooperation. This was in the interests of the house, so most parents wasted no time searching for a partner for their daughters. And to do this, they used every connection they had.

But my father despised me and my mother was long deceased. Although by the sound of it, she would have been too busy doting on my brother to pay any attention to me anyway.

"When I think about it like that, is there really anything to be gained by marrying me?" I said. "Maybe once the black knight sees it that way, he'll withdraw his proposal."

"I doubt that. If he was the sort of man to make those sorts of considerations, then he would have looked into them before making his proposal. That's the sort of thing you use your family's influence for."

I had to admit she was right. But I still didn't understand why the black knight had proposed to me.

"It does puzzle me that Yuin would act with such haste," Colny said.

"Right?! He should've started small and worked his way up."

"But, Lera, I'm not sure you would've noticed the small steps."

What a terrible thing to say. Not that I could fight back, because I was fairly sure she was right, but what was I supposed to do?! I wasn't very popular in my previous life and I didn't recall being in any relationships—I was terminally single.

And in this life, I had been raised in a community of meatheads. There wasn't a whole lot there to stimulate a maiden's yearning for romance. Every day was spent working out, practicing magic, and hunting monsters.

"Perhaps he opted for the sudden proposal knowing full well what sort of person you are?" Colny suggested.

"Hm? You think so?"

That just raised the question of where he got his information then. Didn't seem like he got it from Ville at any rate.

"Well, I look forward to seeing what tomorrow brings."

"I'm depressed."

I hoped the next day would never come. Colny seemed to take my remark as a sign of worry and tried to console me.

"You don't need to worry so much. My mother made sure that he won't try to coerce you."

She must have been referring to when Sheila said she would "make sure he had no use for women for the rest of his life" if he got forceful. A rather visceral way of doing things. But it's not like I'd let him try anything like that in the first place!

"If he does attack me, I'll strike back with magic!"

"Don't. That could easily kill him."

"I'll say it was an accident."

If it was just an accident, then I couldn't be blamed for whatever happened. I smiled, to which Colny just heaved a sigh. With this settled, I decided it was time to get some sleep. I certainly needed it, because *tomorrow* I would be going to the Mystic Forest!

A sky both clear and vast. The scent of dense foliage. I had returned to the Mystic Forest.

"Another great day for hunting!"

I hadn’t been here in so long, I could barely contain my excitement. I had already prepared my coveralls and boots. Both these items were made with monster materials. The coveralls, boots, and socks I had on were all breathable, absorbent, and flexible. No matter how much I moved around in these, sweat never became a bother. What’s more, the boots were also waterproof.

The forest could get very humid, so gear like this was necessary if you didn’t want to deal with damp clothes. It was when I’d first started hunting that I asked the institute about making items like this.

Initially, people thought I looked funny and laughed. That ticked me off, so I kept these items to myself. But then some adults took an interest, and a few started wearing them. Eventually they became standard wear for anyone going into the Mystic Forest.

Ha ha! Functionality triumphs! I laughed to myself as I extended a hand toward the sky.

“And who was calling themself depressed last night?” said a voice from behind me.

“Did she say that?” said another voice.

“I assume Fezgahn’s to blame for that?” said a third.

It was the Aspozat siblings, being their usual selves. And god did it irk me that some men looked nice no matter what they wore! Colny, though, was *cute* regardless of her outfit. And cuteness is justice, so for her it was fine.

Colny’s coveralls were orange, the same as mine, while Ville was in navy blue and Loks was in green. However, our boots were all the same shade of black. Everyone else entering the forest was also in boots and coveralls, but theirs had camouflage patterns.

I had been partially joking when I suggested the pattern to the institute. But it really helped people blend into the forest, which made it a huge hit. On the other hand, that created a problem where people would lose track of their companions. The institute quickly came up with items that let people recognize their fellow hunters, but they didn’t go handing them out for free.

“Please gather here if you’re taking the beginner courses!” someone called.

It was time for the lessons they gave to everyone new to the

Mystic Forest. This was another of my ideas. I had started going into the forest when I was around seven years old, and back then people going in often didn't come out. Deaths were particularly common among greenhorns—that is, anyone who'd been hunting for less than a year.

Those lucky enough to make it back would say things like they'd run blindly into danger without knowing the first thing about traversing the Mystic Forest. In my case, my friends had taught me a thing or two, so I had been able to make my first entry equipped with the basic knowledge.

But most people didn't know anyone who could teach them these sorts of things. Some were lucky enough to befriend a monster hunter they could talk to, while other people said you should just watch and learn. And so in order to reduce deaths in the Mystic Forest, classes were set up in which veteran hunters taught the core knowledge and techniques.

These lessons were run by people with experience and taught the things everyone should know in advance. They started with classroom learning before moving to lessons conducted in the forest itself. When they did this, the students received permission to enter Layer One. Greenhorn deaths were reduced thanks to these courses, and as a result they were made compulsory for anyone wanting to enter the Mystic Forest.

"Oh, Ville, what of Yuin?" Colny said. "I heard he was going to enter the Mystic Forest."

That reminded me, they had mentioned something about him wanting to learn to fight monsters.

"I believe he'll be taking a beginner's course," Ville told her with clear displeasure.

"Oh, so he's serious."

About what? And would you stop smiling at me, Loks?

"Don't worry about Fezgahn," Ville said. "Today we'll be enjoying some long overdue hunting with Lera."

"Ah... About that. I took down a Peylon baboon all by myself, so I should be able to go to Layer Five. With permission from Lord Peylon, I'll go alone."

"What? All by yourself?" Loks asked.

"Lera, is that true?" Ville questioned.

Neither of them seemed to believe me, but Peylon baboons were admittedly rather tricky things.

"It's true. If you don't believe me, then you can check with

Lord Peylon."

The two brothers started whispering to each other. Except I could hear them plain as day.

"*Can* you take one of those down solo?"

"I don't believe it, but she did say we can check with Lord Peylon."

"Both of you!" Colny cut in. "Lera's talents should be nothing new to you! Why don't you believe her?"

Thank you, Colny, for being my one believer!

"Sure, but a Peylon baboon is clever and resistant to magic," Ville said. "One of them once burst through my magic defense. Of course I find it a little hard to believe."

Well, that was true enough. It hadn't exactly been easy.

"Lera, it's not that I don't believe you, but how did you slay it solo?" Loks asked.

There was no reason for me to hide it, so I gave him an honest answer. "I used a spell to increase my speed so I could move faster than the baboon. Then I took out a modified steel arrowhead and fired it with magic."

It was sort of like a gun, but with an arrowhead instead of a bullet. It was a lot easier than flinging a whole arrow, shaft and all. Also, the arrowhead had been slightly altered. I had vague memories of seeing something on TV about an arrowhead with high puncturing capabilities, so I'd used those for reference.

As for why I was watching something like that, it's because documentaries are really something. And I'm someone who remembers lots of useless things. I had a good memory for things that never benefited me at school.

When I finished my explanation, Loks and Ville were pale as ghosts. I wondered why.

The Mystic Forest was just as noisy as I remembered it. I searched my memories and couldn't recall a single instance of it being calm and quiet.

The voices of people mingled with the echoing screams and roars of monsters.

"It went over there!"

"After it! After it, after it!"

"I'll tear it to shreds!"

Ahh. This is the Mystic Forest all right.

Normal prey would be scared off by the sounds of humans,

but monsters were instead drawn in. By shouting and making noise, hunters would draw the monster in, then using their camouflage to confuse it, they would strike when they saw an opening.

“Now, I’ve gotta hurry.”

I had gotten permission from Lord Peylon to enter Layer Five, but the travel time didn’t leave me with much room for hunting. Usually, going this deep meant staying overnight. And even though I had permission to go to Layer Five, I wasn’t allowed to spend the night because I was still a minor! Can you believe that?! And this was all after the institute had made camping out super easy with their simplified equipment.

Up until Layer Four, there were roads through the forest. Not animal paths, but somewhat decent roads. That was because a fair number of people could go this far. For instance, the Aspozat siblings could all go to Layer Three or Four.

But there was nothing of the sort in Layer Five, meaning you had to cut your own path there. There was an invisible but enormous wall separating Layer Four and Five, and that was slaying a Peylon baboon. Like Ville had said, those monsters were every mage’s nightmare. Usually, the baboons were hunted in groups that consisted mainly of people who excelled at physical attacks and defense.

It was pretty natural that Ville and Loks didn’t buy my story that I had taken one down alone. Even Lord Peylon had been surprised.

“All right. First time Layer Five! What could there be? Oh? Enemy, two o’ clock!”

I had already spotted a monster.

Woo! First hunt of the day!

Storage magic was a wonderful thing. Previously, you had to either carry the monsters you had killed, or use a portal to send them back to the square outside the Mystic Forest. Now I could easily carry my bounties without having to part with them.

The bag was still in its testing phase, so they couldn’t yet be shared with the public. So everyone but me was sending their prey back with portals. But once they were complete, I was sure the institute would start selling and renting them out.

My catches for that day were: two Peylon baboons, two forest sheep, one large-fanged rabbit, and four hump-backed boars.

Ha ha ha! A good haul and all in a single day!

I had stopped early on account of it being my first hunt in about a year, but I was still satisfied. I had entered the forest at around seven in the morning, so I wasn't surprised to see it was approaching evening. I had used a few means at my disposal to decrease travel time, but it still took around two hours one way. This was something I wanted to improve upon.

I also had other monsters that I had slain while on my way to Layer Five. These I would give to my spider, Al. The monsters were pretty strong ones, so I was sure they would make a good meal. I didn't want to keep him waiting.

Oh, the forest sheep fur will make good wool. Maybe I'll dye it and make a shawl?

Humming to myself, I exited the forest and saw a number of exhausted people sitting around. It looked like something had happened.

"Oh, Lera," Ville called.

He was standing in the middle of the crowd. As I approached him, I noticed the exhausted people were all wearing red coveralls.

"Ville, are these people…"

"Yep. Before I could make it to the forest, uncle caught me and made me help with the practical beginner courses."

"I figured."

The red coveralls meant they were novice hunters. And if Ville had been involved in their lessons, then there was nothing mysterious about their exhaustion. Ville was an absolute machine, so it must have been a trial for them to keep up with him.

I offered a silent prayer and apology for the weary students.

"That reminds me," I said, "wasn't the black knight going to take one of these courses?"

"He's over there."

Now looking *immensely* displeased, Ville pointed at the black knight, who was standing around, same as ever. So he had been the only one able to keep pace with Ville. It made sense, seeing as he was a knight and all.

"Did you have a good day, Lera?" said someone behind me.

I turned and saw Loks and Colny returning from the forest together.

"Did you two just get back?" I asked.

“Yeah,” Loks answered. “I haven’t been here in some time, so I got a little carried away.”

Loks getting carried away. I looked at Colny and saw she had a strained grin.

“Well, I can’t wait to see what you got.”

“Yeah, same.”

Neither I nor Ville could manage anything less stilted. For the monsters of the forest, it had probably been like the end of the world. But they were just monsters, so I guess it was fine.

I had lent them bags with the experimental storage spells, and I was blown away when I saw the extent of their haul. Chatter filled the square as they emptied their bags, but it wasn’t the contents that caught their eyes.

“Holy crap.”

“Yeah, but what’s that bag? It’s storing a whole horde of monsters.”

“I hear it’s something the institute is testing out.”

“Really?! I hope I don’t have to wait long before I can buy one.”

“Don’t be stupid. We don’t make enough to buy cutting-edge stuff like that. I just hope we can rent one.”

“Yeah, but that won’t come cheap either.”

“Should still be better than buying one outright.”

I was glad people were interested in the bags. I thought they had promise. And if they didn’t sell, or get rented, then that would mean less money for me.

“This makes everything,” Loks said.

Piled up before him and Colny were forest sheep, Peylon mountain goats, Peylon wolves, green-striped lizards, and Peylon serpents. Very impressive.

“How did you fare, Lera?” Colny asked.

“Not bad, not bad. But god, what a catch.”

“Since it’s been so long, we figured we might as well put our backs into it.”

Colny smiled. Her lustrous black hair didn’t have a strand out of place. Running around drenched in sweat didn’t suit her.

“How was the bag?” I asked.

“It was quite nice,” she answered. “However, that *fwoop*ing feeling when it takes in a large monster leaves something to be desired.”

Ah, yes. The fwoop*ing.*

It was indeed a surreal sight. I had become sort of

accustomed to it, but I understood how it could be off-putting at first.

“I’ll make some improvements.”

“I would appreciate it.”

These bags were nothing more than prototypes. There were still lots of potential features to be added and their completion was still a long, long way away.

Opposite of the square was the brokerage that bought up monsters. I went over and sold my catches, the payment going to my account.

“And here’s your receipt. In a few days, please compare your account with this to make sure everything matches up.”

The material broker on duty was one I knew. His name was Tiient and he came from House Geyen, a branch family of House Peylon.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him. “I thought you handled the beginner courses?”

“They were shorthanded over here, so I got a sudden request for help.”

“I see. Good work.”

“You too, young miss. This is quite a haul.”

Tiient was older than me, but social circumstances made him call me “young miss.” I came from an earl’s house and had been adopted into his family’s main branch. The adoption wasn’t official, but he still treated me as though I were Lord Peylon’s daughter.

Once I left the brokerage, I headed to a building not too far from the square. It was known as the Spider House, and as the name suggests, it housed spiders that had formed contracts with humans.

Here the threads produced by spiders were immersed in a special solution that allowed them to be turned into a usable material. The Spider House handled the production of threads and the proceeds were deducted from the spider’s housing fees. And if you were going to be away for an extended period they would look after your spider for an extra fee. This is why I chose this location.

It was because Al was in safe hands that I had been able to accept leaving Peylon. Even if it was my duty to go to the academy, I probably wouldn’t have gone if I had nobody to look after him. I certainly didn’t want my spider starving while I was

gone. I was sure Al would be happy to see me bring him some nutritious monsters for the first time since I had left.

“Hellooo.”

“Oh, do come in, young miss. It’s wonderful to see you.”

I was greeted by the bountifully bosomed bombshell beauty Jilbayla. She was Tiient’s younger sister, and had super ultra chest armor.

“Now it’s Jilbayla’s turn? Good to see you.”

“My turn? Oh, did you see my brother at the store? And, yes, it fills me with joy to see you again.”

“Are you guys shorthanded here as well?”

Jilbayla normally worked as what was called a “material broker.” For her job, she had to know what monster parts could be used for and what they were worth. If she couldn’t do all this in a matter of seconds, then she’d lose the right to call herself a professional.

Sadly, in Peylon this sort of talent didn’t get much respect. In this community of meatheads, lots of people were blind to anything but one’s ability to fight. This was something I honestly didn’t like about the people of this domain. I sometimes wanted to remind those fools to take a moment to consider who it was that made the food they ate and the clothes they wore.

“We don’t have many new recruits,” she said glumly.

“And that’s normal around here, isn’t it?”

“No point in hiding it from you, is there?”

It didn’t seem like Lord Peylon to neglect an issue so obvious that even a child like me could see. I wondered if he had any plans to do anything about it.

When I told Jilbayla what I had come for, she immediately took me to see my spider.

“Albion is right this way.”

“Thanks. Ooh.”

We entered a dreary room that was dominated by the smell of the solution used to process threads. But it didn’t smell bad. Rather, it was minty.

About a meter above the angular tanks that were set in the room was a wooden pole, and atop it was a spider.

“Al,” I called quietly.



Al turned and looked at me. Other spiders were scary and not something I wanted to get close to. But Al was different. He was cute and precious. He left the pole and climbed onto my hand, and with him in tow we moved to another room that functioned as the spiders' cafeteria.

"Have you been well?" I asked.

He couldn't speak because he was a spider, but he could understand what I said to a degree. If he wanted to say "yes" he would move his body up and down, and he would move side to side to say "no." He moved up and down in response to my question, so it seemed he had indeed been well.

"That's good to know. I brought you lots of tasty treats, so I hope you're excited."

At that he began spinning around on my palm. This was something he did when he was happy.

Yeah, treats are great, aren't they?

The cafeteria was mostly empty, except for a few partitions. We entered one of the closed off spaces, and I placed Al on a perch sticking out of the wall.

"Now, what should it be today?"

I had sold most of my catches at the brokerage, so I was just picking from what was left over from that. Al would get bored if I kept on feeding him stuff from the lower layers.

"Here, let's be extravagant. Today will be forest sheep!"

The meat of the subspecies was too valuable not to sell, but I kept the remains of the standard variety forest sheep. I saw Al spinning around on his perch. Of course he was happy. Forest sheep were delicious.

"Here you go. Eat the fur as well."

When Al ate monsters, just about everything was converted into mana that was used for producing threads. He needed only a teensy bit to sustain himself, so giving him powerful monsters allowed him to make threads that were fine, durable, and beautiful. I was sure he would be able to make some incredible silk with the treats I had in my bag for him.

I placed four forest sheep before him, and he quickly had them wrapped up in his threads. This would dissolve the sheep heads into a substance that Al would drink up. Unfortunately, the threads used for encompassing prey couldn't be turned into fabrics. They were actually less like threads and closer to a membrane, so they had a tendency to stick to everything. The

only thing to do with it was throw it away once it had served its purpose.

Still, I hoped that one day someone might find a way to put the membrane to use.

Jilbayla offered to take me to see Al's threads, and since I had the time I took her up on it. We left the cafeteria and returned to the previous room, or the threading room, as it was called.

"That was a good meal, so I'm sure he'll produce some excellent threads," Jilbayla said.

"Isn't he still digesting?"

To be fair, Al had just eaten four sheep, each of them upward of ten times his size. He was big enough to fit in the palm of my hand, yet he had managed to fit all that flesh, bones, and fur somewhere.

Al got into his usual position and angled his abdomen downward. A line of thread lowered down, into the solution-filled tanks below. Once the thread settled on top of the liquid it immediately began its transformation. Without this process, the threads would be like those he used for eating, which were sticky and solidified.

"Isn't this going to get full?" I asked, watching the threads in the tank gradually increase.

"There's no need to worry yet," Jilbayla replied. "We'll be weaving these together."

She took some threads from the liquid and began wrapping them around a spool. She had multiple spools, which would eventually go to a spinning wheel. It sounded like a lot of work, but I was sure this wasn't easy for Al either.

Thanks for all you do.

There were plenty of other white spiders in the room, some of them lowering threads into tubs of solution. Most of them had red eyes, but I couldn't see another one with blue ones like Al's. He was a special breed. There were spiders with green, orange, and even the occasional yellow eyes. However, nobody had yet found a specimen with gold eyes.

"I get the feeling you're also shorthanded here," I said, noting the lack of humans.

"Not quite," Jilbayla told me. "Women from the town usually come in to help, but in the summer they're busy preparing for the hunting festival."

That explained it. The hunting festival was the largest event among the royalists, and also the largest in the Peylon Earldom. This made it a big deal not just for Lord Peylon, but everyone in his domain. Lots of nobles came, as well as their drivers and servants. And then there were peddlers who came to sell to these travelers. There were also visitors who couldn't participate, but still wanted to watch. These were mostly women who had their eyes on one of the men taking part.

The result was the regional capital being absolutely *packed*. The capital didn't have enough inns to accommodate everyone, so some people rented out rooms in their homes in order to make a little extra cash. Like a vacation rental.

In preparation, people all throughout the capital were busy with things like cleaning or washing and buying new linens during this season. So of course there weren't a lot of people available to help at the Spider House.

Jilbayla continued to fill one spool after another with Al's threads.

"Albion seems as happy to see you as you are him," she said. "He normally doesn't produce threads this rapidly."

"Huh. Sorry for leaving you for so long, Al. But there's no monsters in the royal capital, so you wouldn't have anything to eat. You'll have to stick it out here."

I would make sure Al was fed well as long as he was in Peylon. But he would definitely starve if I were to bring him to the royal capital, and that sounded a lot worse than having him endure a bit of loneliness.

"With all these fine threads, we'll probably have some wonderful fabric ready in time for your fifteenth birthday next year."

"Huh? Next year?"

Did she know about the black knight too? And was she also certain I'd fall for him between now and then?! Her question caused me to panic a tad, which she clearly hadn't expected.

"You do turn fifteen next year, right?" she asked. "Your fifteenth is when you become an adult. Aren't those birthday parties larger than usual?"

"Ah. Right! Adulthood. You're right."

So that's *what she had been getting at. Oh she threw me for a loop.*

"Is there something else happening then?"

“N-Nothing! Not one thing. Yeah, becoming an adult is huge.”

It’s normal for humans to act suspiciously when surprised. Totally normal.

Feeling warmed up after my visit with Al, I returned to Castle Varchudar, where Zign caught me at the entrance.

“Young miss, my lord is calling for you.”

“Lord Peylon is?”

What could this be for? All I had done today was go to the forest, then see Al. I didn’t think I had done anything that could have ticked him off. Confused, I followed the kind old steward along. But he didn’t take me to the inner section of the castle, instead leading me to a parlor in the outer section.

My uncle, two of his subordinates, and the black knight were all staying in Castle Varchudar. If Lord Peylon was in a parlor, then it was most likely my uncle that he was talking with. If it had been Mr. Frivolous, the other white knight, or the black knight, then they probably would have been taken to a different room.

I entered and saw Lord Peylon with the man I had expected.

“You’re back,” Lord Peylon said, looking quite bitter.

Meanwhile, the other man—my uncle, that is—wore a big grin. A really suspicious grin.

“Lera, I believe I introduced you two yesterday,” Lord Peylon said. “This is Lord Yulville.”

“Lord Peylon, I believe there’s something you’re forgetting,” Lord Yulville added.

“Then you can say it yourself.”

Lord Peylon really didn’t like this guy. It was always easy to tell how he felt about things.

“Allow me to introduce myself again. I’m your mother’s older brother, Heridar Ruzay Yulville. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m Lowell Duval,” I replied.

I wasn’t feeling particularly motivated to give my full name, so I just went with what they called me at the academy. “Tafelina” was off the table, and I only wanted close acquaintances calling me “Lera.”

Lord Yulville froze and looked at me doubtfully. “But Lord Peylon addresses you as Lera.”

“That’s a name reserved for people I’m close with.”

And I’m not close with you, so don’t try using it.

I didn’t say that bit out loud, but I think he still got the

message. Being a noble, I'm sure this man was used to reading between the lines. But for some reason, I heard a strange *pfff* sound from Lord Peylon and saw that his shoulders were shaking.

Lord Yulville cleared his throat and said, "As I said earlier, I am your uncle."

"So it would seem."

And what of it? I really hoped he didn't want me to be friendly with him just because we shared blood. My birth father had kicked me out and I had ended up being cared for by people who I was only distantly related to.

Blood relations are a bad card to play, Lord Yulville.

I looked at him silently, and he eventually gave in.

"You see," he said, "I've already talked with Lord Peylon about making you a member of our house."

The hell?

I guess my thoughts showed all too clearly on my face, because Lord Peylon said, "Lera, your face," between fake coughs.

Okay, I'm getting tired of referring to both of them as "lord whatever." Let's see. This guy's captain of the white knights. So let's go with white knight captain.

"My house is the house of your mother," the white knight captain said, giving Lord Peylon a sideways glare. "Compared to a house to which your familial connections are debatable—"

"I decline," I interrupted.

Lord Peylon seemed relieved. C'mon, did he really think I was going to take this guy's offer? What a lack of faith.

The white knight captain's superficial smile vanished. "Why? You may not know this, but our house is renowned for its magic talents. We have plenty of spells you won't be able to learn anywhere else. I hear you're quite skilled where magic is concerned. If you want to put those talents to use, then joining us—"

"Simply put, I like it here."

"Huh?"

"PFFFF."

It seemed Lord Peylon was no longer able to hold back his laughter, much to the ire of the white knight captain.

Noticing the man's glare, Lord Peylon cleared his throat and said, "Lord Yulville, the young lady is personally refusing your

offer. Don’t try to push it any further.”

“Very well. I’ll withdraw for the time being. However! She is nonetheless a daughter of House Yulville!”

And with that, the white knight captain stormed out of the room. Except he was staying in Castle Varchudar, so he was probably just going back to his room.

I was starting to really appreciate that there was a clear boundary between the inner and outer sections. To reach the inner section from the outer, you had to pass through a sturdy metal door. That door was enchanted to not let anyone through unless they had permission. Yeah, this was another of my ideas. What of it?

“He’s finally out of my sight,” Lord Peylon sighed.

“Should you really say it like that?”

“It’s fine. Nobody is here but us.”

That was fair. But if Zign was with us, we both would’ve gotten a lecture. Lord Peylon for his choice of words, and me for not correcting him.

“But is he serious about wanting to take me in?” I asked.

“I’m sure he is. At the very least, I think his parents are genuinely concerned about their granddaughter.”

“Really?”

This was a surprise. I had assumed they had been uninterested in me. Lord Peylon made a wry grin when he saw me yet again wearing my heart on my sleeve.

“Truth is,” he said, “this is the third time House Yulville has asked to take you in.”

“Excuse me?!”

What the hell? Nobody had ever told me about this.

“The requests came from Rackerull, the previous head of House Yulville. At the time, he had already stepped down and ceded the headship to Heridar. I trust Rackerull and his wife. If he had still been in charge of House Yulville when he made his request, I might have agreed.”

Lord Peylon wouldn’t have said something like that if my maternal grandparents weren’t upstanding people. So how did my mother and uncle turn out the way they did? Genetics are a strange thing.

“House Yulville aren’t part of your faction are they? Do they have any relations with Peylon?”

“Not directly. But Sheila and I both learned magic from

Rackerull and his wife while we were at the academy."

"You did?!"

So Lord Peylon had plenty of reasons to place so much trust in them. I could see why he might have been willing to put me in their hands. But now that they were retired, they had very little influence on what their house did. Lord Peylon didn't want me going to a house where that white knight captain was calling the shots. That was a bullet dodged.

"Lera, I don't think Heridar's given up just yet, so be careful. There's also the matter of the magic research institute, so I don't think we're done with him yet."

"Understood. If anything happens, I'll make it look like an accident."

Lord Peylon cocked his head. "An accident?"

Accidents happen. Yeah. All the time.

I left the parlor and decided to stop by the institute before dinner. If the white knight captain was involved with them somehow, then Bear might know something. The Peylon magic research institute wasn't far from the square that hunters gathered in. The building itself looked like a simple mansion, and behind it was a grove of trees separate from the Mystic Forest.

I had been visiting the institute since I was a child. Offering ideas for spells and magic tools was a source of income for me.

"Hellooo," I called as I walked in.

"Welcome, Lera," the lady at the front desk said to me. "What brings you here today?"

Even here, I went by Lera. It's because that was how Bear and Nielle addressed me.

"Is Bear here?" I asked.

Despite being the chief of this place, he had a habit of wandering around.

"Bear, is it? Just one moment."

Huh. Even the employees know that nickname. Well, it's been in use for a while.

The lady at the desk called someone on the internal line. Yep, the institute had an internal line for communication. But it wasn't a telephone. It was a transmitter.

"Thank you for waiting. Bear is in his office."

"Thanks."

The institute had three aboveground floors, and six

subterranean levels. The underground floors were for magic experiments, while the upper floors were for offices and visitors. Bear's office was on the third floor. I took the stairs to the top, where there was just one room.

I flung the door open without knocking. "Hellooo."

"You could at least have some manners," said the bear sitting behind a large desk.

"I'll save those for the academy. Now, there's something I want to ask you."

"What's that? It wouldn't be about the captain of the Knights of the White Summit, would it?"

"How'd you know?!"

"How could I not? I had been told that he was coming to Peylon and that he would pay this place a visit."

Ugh. He's coming here.

"If you want to know how he's involved, hide back there and have a listen. Oh, and don't forget to put up a barrier."

Bear was pointing at the window curtains. They were open and tied back with tassels. Apparently, this was where he wanted me to hide.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Sure. I don't plan on saying anything important."

I was tempted to remind him that this was going to be a conversation between the captain of an order that specialized in magic and the chief of a research institute. But if he was okay with me eavesdropping then I figured I may as well hear what they had to say.

"Oh, can I set up a camera?"

"Don't see why not. Be sure to save the footage. We can use it against him later."

Bear had a mean look on his face. He was already scary at the best of times, and now he looked downright diabolical.

After hiding in the curtains and casting a barrier, I waited for a few minutes. And then he really came. He wasn't alone either—he had two companions.

The camera was in an optimal spot, allowing me to clearly see them on the portable screen in my hands. This was an improved, thinner version of the one I had borrowed during the academy festival. It looked like a handheld game system. I could even move the camera with a jog dial on the left-hand side.

“It’s been some time, chief.”

“What can I do for you?”

It wasn’t often that Bear spoke so cordially. But he was dealing with a man who was a knight captain *and* an earl.

“I believe you’ve already received correspondence explaining just that,” the white knight captain said, a smile plastered on his face.

“Oh, that nonsense? I assumed it was a prank and disposed of it.”

“It was serious! That spell should be managed by the domain of the Knights of the White Summit! Because you’ve dragged this out, I had to come all the way out to place like—”

“Manage? Don’t you just want the portals so you can profit off them? This isn’t about anything but your greed.”

“Wha?!”

Ah, that’s the Bear I’m used to.

But I had just heard something extraordinary—the white knight captain was demanding control of the portals. And he couldn’t even manage a levelheaded argument. I’m pretty sure anyone would take Bear’s side in this.

The portals were the result of a spell I had thought up, made reality through countless rounds of trial and error at the institute. But this knight was saying his people should have control of them. Between this and his requests to make me part of his house, I didn’t think I’d become friends with him anytime soon.

The white knight captain was clearly unsettled by Bear. Being a bear meant he was good at things like that.

“In Ozeria,” Bear stated, “the rights to magic spells are protected by law. As long as it isn’t used for illegal purposes, not even His Majesty can forcefully take a spell’s designs from someone.”

“I-I know that! That’s why I came all this—”

“Then show some dignity and stop expecting people to hand their stuff over for nothing! You came all this way just to say the same damn nonsense as your letter.”

“It’s not non—”

“Enough! My people poured endless hours into that spell and you want us to part with it for free! Sounds like nonsense to me. If you don’t like it, you can take it up with the courts of the royal palace. Now get out of here!”

That seemed to knock the fight out of the white knight captain. Yet he still offered a parting jab as he left.

"D-Don't think this is over!"

After a few moments of silence in the office, Bear said, "You can come out now."

I undid the barrier and left the cover of the curtains. I didn't really know what to say.

"Uhh."

"Did you record it? Audio too?"

"Yes. Very clearly."

"Good. Take that to Kend."

Why to Lord Peylon?

Lord Peylon had two offices in Castle Varchudar. One was in the outer section, the other in the inner. Today he was in the latter.

"'Scuse us, Kend."

That's your greeting? Bear, do you know what they say about people who live in glass houses?

Still, Lord Peylon let it slide.

"Jian? And Lera?"

"And Lady Aspozat should be here any minute."

Lord Peylon's attitude quickly changed when he learned that Sheila had been invited as well.

"Has something happened?"

"I've had it with those White Summit pricks. They came in person today."

"Lord Yulville, huh?"

Oh. He's furrowing his brow.

"And you see, I took the effort to get proof of their belligerence. I thought you might want to see."

"Proof? What did you—"

Before Lord Peylon could finish his sentence, the door opened. It was Sheila.

"Brother, did you call me here? Oh, Chief Bear."

"Lady Aspozat, I'll have you know I'm human."

"I think you ought to get used to the name already. And Lera's here too, I see. Is something the matter?"

"He says he's got proof of the White Summit's belligerence," Lord Peylon told her.

"Well, I'd love to hear all about that."

And she did! I let Bear handle it.

"And so I had this one record it all," he said at the end of his detailed explanation.

"I see," Lord Peylon said. "But more importantly, Jian. Don't drag Lera into your conflicts."

"I know where you're coming from, but this concerns a spell that she has partial ownership of. This is her business."

"Yes, but Lera's still a minor!"

It was true that I didn't want to get dragged into this mess, but I didn't like Lord Peylon using my age as a justification. He also used it as an excuse to keep me from staying overnight in the forest.

"Brother, let's set that matter aside for now. First, let's see the footage."

"Right. Though I already know what that man demanded."

He does? Oh, this is why he mentioned the institute earlier.

The portable screen was awfully small, so we used a spatial projection spell to show them the footage.

"Oh my."

"That's a bold request."

That's how most people would react to a demand like the one made by the white knight captain. He was telling someone to hand over the product of their hard work.

"Jian, can this be duplicated?" Lord Peylon asked. "This should be shown to the royal palace."

"You should be asking Lera, not me," Bear said, throwing the ball my way.

Yeah, the spell was my idea, though the institute had made it a reality. But I guess I was supposed to answer.

"It can be duplicated," I answered. "But a storage medium is necessary."

"Jian."

"I'll get one ready immediately."

Mana crystals were used as a storage medium. But only places like the institute could reliably get their hands on them.

So that footage is going to the royal palace? There might be a demotion in the white knight captain's future.

We went straight back to the institute in order to get something to copy the footage. I wanted to take some time to look around since I hadn't been here in so long, but a message

came from Castle Varchudar. Since the white knights were our guests, a banquet was being held to welcome them. A banquet for that entitled man…that I was supposed to attend.

"I'm just a kid, but I still have to go," I grumbled as I walked back to the castle. Next to me was Bear, who would also be attending.

"It's because House Peylon is *hosting*. It's when you're the *guests* that children are allowed to skip out."

Yet being a child was the exact reason I couldn't stay in the Mystic Forest overnight. Couldn't I use my age as an excuse this time? Say this little girl needs to get her sleep? Maybe not. There was that whole thing about me being treated like an adult because I was an academy student. And most people would have their social debut during their time at the academy.

"This sucks," I groaned.

"Social relationships are often like that."

"You don't want to go either?"

"Of course not. People who work at magic research institutes usually don't care for much besides their research."

Oh, right. They call him the chief, but Bear is *also a researcher himself.*

"Still," I said, "the guest of honor is *that* white knight. I don't have the slightest inclination to welcome him."

"But the gesture is still important, hollow though it may be."

"Ugh, adults are the worst!"

"Don't be stupid. Besides, isn't that guy a relative of yours?"

"Yeah, but I hadn't met him until yesterday. He's a total stranger."

Our chatter was interrupted by the ringing of a bell. I don't know about other domains, but Peylon had a bell that rang long rings at every third hour starting at 3 a.m. For the other hours, it did short rings. What we had just heard was the 6 p.m. ring. Dinner at the castle was always at seven, so I didn't have to worry about being late.

When I entered the front hall, Sheebis was there waiting for me.

"Young miss! Where in the world were you?!"

"Uhh."

Damn. I forgot to tell her I was going to the institute.

In the royal capital, I never had to tell anyone where I was going.

“You were at the institute, weren’t you? Mr. Bear, a word, if you would! How could you hold Lera up in the institute when you knew we had guests?!”

“Huh? Was that wrong of me?”

Even Bear was intimidated by Sheebis.

“Sh-Sheebis, don’t I need to get ready?” I asked, afraid that Bear might get exterminated if I didn’t do something.

“Oh! Goodness, that’s right. We must hurry. This evening’s banquet is at the usual seven o’clock! Mr. Bear, that goes for you too.”

Preparing for a banquet took a fair bit of time, particularly for women.

“Now, now, off to your room we go.”

“Okaaay.”

Pushed along by Sheebis, I headed to my room. The moment we arrived, I was tossed into the bath and cleaned off, then once I was all dry I put on my dress. The banquet dress was slightly different from the one I wore at the ball. The skirt wasn’t flared, the sleeves went a bit past my elbows, and I had no gloves. I also didn’t wear much in the way of accessories.

“It’s because you still haven’t debuted,” Sheebis explained. “We also don’t have to tie up your hair or adorn it with anything more than ribbons.”

“I’ll leave it all to you.”

“Oh, goodness, young miss.”

Frankly, I wasn’t in the mood for dressing up. I liked fashion and all, but it was hard to get excited, considering the company I would be with. I already had to deal with the black knight, and now the white knight captain was on my case. He might’ve been my uncle, but he just rubbed me the wrong way.

The dress Sheebis picked out was a youthful green embroidered with flowers. For my hair, all she used were some ribbons a shade darker. She didn’t tie up my hair—that was for people who had already made their social debut. Instead, she just braided a portion of it and wove a ribbon into the braid.

I put on a necklace, earrings, and a bracelet, all made of pearls. These pearls had been taken from the forest. I’m not making that up. In this world, pearls came from monsters found in the Mystic Forest. Specifically, a monster from Layer Four known as devil-tusk shells. I found it strange that there were shellfish in the forest, but there they were. And they had pearls

to boot.

So despite Peylon being landlocked, pearls were one of their unique products. Not a single person besides me found this strange. Times like this reminded me that I really was in another world. But I hadn't been summoned or transported to this world. I had been reincarnated, which made me one of its own.

"There, all finished," Sheebis said.

"Thank you."

Looking in the mirror, I saw an unusual version of myself. I thought I looked pretty nice. Except the disappointing chest armor. I mean, I was thirteen. I still had hope for the future. I had heard that being well endowed was troublesome in its own way, but after lacking any presence of peak or puff in my previous life, I pined for more than a paltry plateau. I didn't want to be greedy and hope for something comparable to Sheila or Jilbayla, but at least a C-cup would've been nice.

As I started despondently at my chest, I heard some noise from one of my chamber's out rooms.

"Lera, are you finished?"

It was Colny. Her dress was a shade of green deeper than mine, with a gradient that darkened as it approached the floor. There was no embroidery, but pearls had been woven into the dress at various points. Pearls were also used in her jewelry and hair ornaments.

However, Colny's pearls were gold, whereas mine were black. The color of a pearl was determined by the variety of the devil-horn shell that produced it. The easiest to obtain were white pearls, so they weren't very costly, but black and gold were tricky to harvest, so they were on the expensive side.

"Oh, just ribbons in your hair?" she asked. "No pearls?"

"Yep, I just let Sheebis take care of it all."

"Ahh."

She seemed a little exasperated, but I couldn't muster the energy to care much about how I looked at an event like this. Although I kept that to myself.

"Shall we go? My brothers will escort us."

In the outer room were Ville and Loks, both in formal attire. As always, they looked dashing.

"Oh, there she is," Ville said.

"You don't have many pearls on you," Loks remarked.

"I'm still a child, so this is just fine," I told him. "It's perfectly

fine for someone my age."

I emphasized the last part. I definitely wasn't just mad because they wouldn't let me camp out in the Mystic Forest.

Doing the opposite of what we did at the ball, Loks was my escort and Ville was with Colny. Though the reason for this was lost on me.

"It's a precaution," Loks said. "Though I don't think I'll be necessary."

"What do you mean?"

"Since I'm the second son, it doesn't matter if I go to another house. But my brother is set to inherit our father's title. So certain people might take note of which of us is your partner."

Hmm?

If Ville was my escort, nobody would think we were going to get married because we were both supposed to succeed our respective houses. But if I was with Loks, some people might start jumping to conclusions, thinking that we made a good couple. I was pretty sure it was something like that.

"This is important because Lord Yulville will be present," Loks continued. "If Sir Yuin is to be believed, Lord Yulville wants you to marry Sir Rolfed. And you never want to approach a battle without proper protection, right?"

So with it being Loks escorting me, other men were going to find it harder to approach me. What a convoluted world nobles lived in!

Lord Peylon, Sheila, the black knight, and Mr. Frivolous had already arrived when we reached the outer section's dining room. Counting the four of us who had just arrived, there were enough seats for three more. One of those would be Bear's, and another would be going to the white knight captain.

I took my seat and quietly waited for the meal to commence. But I didn't have to wait long for the remaining guests to arrive. All three showed up at the same time. There was the captain and a bland-looking white knight. I didn't recognize the third guy.

"Sorry, am I late?" he said.

"No, you've got time to spare," Lord Peylon replied.

He was large, wore a nice suit, and had a very neat beard. He also seemed to be a friend of Lord Peylon's. But I felt like I had heard this voice somewhere.

"Jian, I'll never get used to seeing you like this."

“Hmph.”

“Gee, and I’ll never.” What a strange phrase. Wait, did he actually say “Jian”? Is that Bear*?!*

I nearly screamed, but somehow I managed to hold it back. I couldn’t believe that was Bear. He looked like a normal human being. He had even trimmed his rampant beard, and styled his hair too. I didn’t feel like such a dramatic change should be possible. Unable to look directly at him, my gaze fell to my knees. It turned out foxes weren’t the only tricksters in the forest.

“The bear disguised itself as a human,” I mumbled in spite of myself.

It seemed that didn’t escape Loks’s notice. I heard him stifle a laugh, something he didn’t often do. I was just glad nobody else had heard me.

Lord Peylon sat at the head of the table, flanked by Sheila and Lord Yulville. On Sheila’s side, it went: her, the black knight, Colny, Loks, then me. On the other side, it was Lord Yulville, Ville, the frivolous white knight, the bland white knight, and finally Bear directly across from me.

Bear and I were at the very end because of our odd positions. I wasn’t formally a member of Lord Peylon’s family, so I was just treated like a simple guest. As for Bear, it’s because he wasn’t a noble. I had heard that he was the son of a knight, but he had multiple older brothers, so he wasn’t able to inherit his house.

“Now that everyone’s here, shall we begin?”

And with that announcement from Lord Peylon, an uncomfortable feast began.

It didn’t exactly have an amicable atmosphere. Once we finished talking about the food we moved onto discussing the Mystic Forest.

“About that,” the white knight captain said as though he had been waiting for it to come up, “I hear my niece is quite accomplished out there.”

By that he meant me. Except I didn’t feel much like we were family.

“She’s invaluable to our house. In multiple ways,” Lord Peylon said casually.

I could hear the faint enmity in his voice. “Don’t start calling her your niece now after ignoring her all these years” was probably what he was getting at. But not to be outdone, the

white knight captain brushed it off.

"She really takes after her family," he added with a laugh. "I'd love to see her receive a lady's upbringing under our house. Of course, she'd learn magic as well."

Didn't I already turn you down?

"Let it go," Loks whispered to me—he must have noticed my utensils stopped moving. I tried to focus on my food instead.

"Are you suggesting she isn't receiving a proper upbringing here?" Lord Peylon asked, his voice suddenly dropping.

"Well, I wouldn't quite—"

"Let me be clear with you, Lord Yulville. Tafelina Lowell Lera Duval's presence in this house has the blessing of the royal family. Do not forget that."

It wasn't just the white knight captain—everyone but Bear and Sheila was surprised to hear that. *I* was surprised to hear that! What did the royal family care about who an earl raised in his house?

"Well...of course."

"If you think I'm lying, you can return to the royal capital and ask His Majesty. Though I don't know if he'll give you an answer."

He was more implying that he didn't know if the king would even be truthful to the likes of the white knight captain. Lord Peylon knew how to win a verbal exchange, and he had done so at this feast. Though it might've been just me, it seemed like it was kind of a petty victory.

Chapter Two: The Mystic Forest

Ten days had passed since my return to Peylon. Once again, I entered the Mystic Forest, taking joy in the first hunt of the day. The white knight captain hadn't bothered me since the night of the feast. Instead, he and his rather plain companion had been doing something near the borders of the Mystic Forest, but I didn't know what.

The clock tower in the square said it was five in the evening—close to when it was considered to be nighttime. However, because it was summer, visibility wasn't an issue—Peylon was rather far north, so the sun could still be in the sky well past dinner during the summer. On the other hand, you might not see the sun at all in winter.

I was walking through that sunlit square when I heard some commotion.

"What's that? Ah..."

At the center of it all was the black knight. Or rather, the noise was coming from the ring of people around him. Standing before the black knight was a flustered young material broker. Around this time, the square was always busy with hunters having their hauls appraised. Even with the ruckus, there were still other examinations going on.

"Will this suffice?" the black knight asked the panicking young man.

I saw a black great-lizard at the knight's feet. Even from a slight distance, I could tell that it had been a clean kill. Black great-lizards had alligator-like skin and reminded me of komodo dragons in both size and appearance. Just like their name suggested, they had black exteriors.

Their skin, claws, fangs, and organs were all used for materials. Their meat was repugnant and couldn't be eaten, but it was sometimes sampled by the occasional brave soul. Because the skin was put to use, it would sell for a higher price if it had fewer flaws. Given the good condition of the black knight's lizard, he must have used magic to drown or freeze it.

Killing a black great-lizard was how you earned the right to enter Layer Two. But hadn't he only just recently taken the

beginner course? Most people took a month or two to graduate from Layer One, but he had managed it in a few days. Was restraint a foreign concept to him? That said, he didn't look like this had been too difficult for him.

The material broker before him was frantically flipping through a small book. It seemed he didn't recognize the monster before him.

"Am I permitted to enter Layer Two tomorrow?" the black knight asked as he watched the young broker.

"Ah, um... One moment please."

Perhaps the young man was new to his post. An experienced broker would've granted him permission the moment they laid eyes on the carcass. While the young man continued to look through his book, a middle-aged broker walked up to him.

"What're you doing, rookie?!"

So he *was* a rookie. And this older guy appeared to be at least somewhat experienced. For some reason, the more years on the job they accumulated, the more unpleasant brokers became. To be fair, the people who were active in the forest were mostly brutes. Anyone would become a bit ill-mannered if they constantly had to deal with those sorts of people.

"U-Um, this man says he wants to enter Layer Two now that he's slain this monster," the young man explained.

"Oh, now this is some fine work," said the older broker. "You did this, mister? All by yourself?"

"I did."

"Then take this. It's your license. You're free to enter Layer Two."

"I appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it. Just show me some more clean kills like this."

And with that, the material broker left, dragging the rookie along behind him.

Licenses like the one given to the black knight were used for outsiders. Residents of Peylon generally knew each other's faces, so there was no need for them to go around with proof of which layer they could enter. The regional government liked to save time when they could.

"Miss Lowell, have you also just gotten back?"

I'd been spotted! Well, I had been just standing there vacantly.

"Ah, yeah."

“I thought you would return later, seeing how deep you’re able to go.”

“Yes, I wish that were the case.”

“Miss Lowell?”

From the entrance, it took a few hours for me to reach Layer Five on foot, though I was able to shorten that time with magic. But I had limits on when I could be in the Mystic Forest. A curfew, if you will. I couldn’t be out past five. I still hadn’t been given permission to camp out in the forest, and the long trek to Layer Five didn’t leave me with much time for hunting.

“Augh! Dammit!”

“Hm?”

Oops. I didn’t mean to say it out loud. And right in front of the black knight.

I was technically an earl’s daughter and had received lessons in etiquette in Peylon, but I just wasn’t cut out for this shit. In my previous life, I had been a commoner, just below average. At times like these, the facade came peeling off. But maybe the black knight would give up on marrying me if he saw my true colors.

“Pardon me,” I said. “I’m not permitted to be in the Mystic Forest at certain hours, a restriction which frustrates me to no end.”

“I see.”

He nodded understandingly. That wasn’t quite the reaction I had been anticipating.

“Uhh. I saw that you caught a black great-lizard.”

“Yes. Aspozat told me that I could advance to Layer Two if I successfully killed one.”

Oh? Ville gave him a proper answer?

Although I supposed lying wasn’t really his style. If anyone was going to give a bald-faced lie, it would be Loks. As for Colny, the only person she could ever deceive was me. To this day I haven’t the slightest as to why.

I looked up and noticed the black knight was staring straight at me. What an uncomfortable spot to be in.

“B-But you only took the beginner courses ten days ago,” I said, trying to keep us on topic. “I don’t think many people have advanced to Layer Two that quickly.”

I tried giving him a friendly smile, but that caused him to grow red for some odd reason.

“Yes. Even Aspozat told me it would take some time. In the end, I couldn’t stop myself from rushing.”

“Rushing?”

What for? Was he that eager to get to the point where he could take on the powerful monsters of the deeper layers?

Oh, he’s looking at me again. No, he’s staring.

“Because I want to catch up to you,” he stated.

“Huh?”

“I want to see what you see. In order to do that, I want to be able to go where you go.”

Huuuh? Th-This is embarrassing. Ah, my face is burning. No! I’m not moved! I’m being bashful!

“Uhhh. Ummm.”

“I’m certain I’ll someday reach the same layers as you.”

I couldn’t say anything. The thing was, people who could go all the way to Layer Five were a valuable asset. For one thing, they could obtain monster materials from there, but they were also necessary to keep populations in check. In that regard, Peylon was always glad to have capable people in the forest. But I’d feel really bad if I took advantage of his feelings like that!

“Also, Aspozat said something else…”

“Hm?”

By “Aspozat” he was referring to Ville. I stood silently, waiting to hear what Ville had said.

Suddenly avoiding eye contact, the black knight told me, “He said that you wouldn’t even give me the time of day as long as I was at a lesser layer than you.”

Viiille! What the hell was that for?! This guy seriously believes you!

Did this mean that I *would* give him the time of day if he reached the same or a higher layer than me?! Ville did some astounding things at times. But he was still a good person, a good older brother, I swear!

My mind was racing as I tried to figure out what to do, when the black knight asked me, “Come to think of it, where are your catches, Miss Lowell?”

“Oh. Inside this.”

“That? That’s not a very large bag.”

Oh? He doesn’t know about the storage bag?

They were still in the testing phase, but I had thought word of their existence had already gotten around.

“It’s a magic tool,” I explained. “It can carry a lot more than

you might think.”

“Amazing.”

He looked at the bag with fascination. I guess he really hadn’t seen Colny or anyone else using them.

“How many monsters can it hold?”

“Would you like to see?”

“Could I?!”



He seemed awfully excited, and his word choice was less stiff. Maybe this was his natural state.

It's a lot better than the formal tone he usually takes. Wait, no! Forget I said anything.

I dashed those thoughts from my head and decided to show him the sort of monsters that could be found in Layer Five.

"I'll remove them at the brokerage over there. They'd get in the way if I dropped them out here."

The square was already littered with the catches of other hunters. It was sort of a first come, first served place.

The broker's building was at the edge of the square, opposite of the entrance to the Mystic Forest. It was a tall wooden structure that had an open exterior facing the square, making it easy to come and go. It was one of a few similar buildings. The others hosted restaurants that offered light meals and booze. It reminded me of the sort of places I would see at the beach in my previous life.

"Hellooo," I announced. "I'd like to sell some monsters."

"Be right there!" replied a voice. "Oh, Lera. How are you?"

Huh? Jilbayla?

"What are you doing over here?"

"Young miss, did you forget what I primarily do?"

"Oh, right."

Her main job was being a material broker. Hired by the local government, she identified slain monsters and appraised their worth. She was very important because people like her kept the monster trade alive.

When I really looked at Jilbayla, I realized she somewhat resembled Sheila. Not just visually, but in demeanor and that they were both very capable people. Jilbayla was from one of Peylon's branch families, so they were related, albeit distantly. But I had to keep thoughts like these to myself, because Jilbayla regarded Sheila as a pampered lady of the main family.

Also, Jilbayla wasn't very fond of her own appearance. She was pretty and had a nice figure, but none of that seemed to matter to her. She cared for her skin, and wore outfits that accentuated her figure, but only because she knew she could use that to her advantage. She used whatever was available to her. That sort of pragmatism was very Peylon-like.

But she didn't have the mana or muscles to be deemed a

good fighter, which put her low on Peylon's internal hierarchy. Even still, she wanted to be of use to the main family and her community, so she studied monsters and the forest so she could become a material broker. That sort of gumption made her really incredible to me.

"So," she said, looking around, "where might the monsters be? In the square?"

"No, no. They're in here. Could we go somewhere with more room?"

"Oh, are you perhaps using one of those new magic tools? I heard about them from my brother. Right this way."

Jilbayla showed me to an open spot deeper within the building, like a showroom. I had no idea they had one.

"My brother was certain we would need a place like this soon," she said with a laugh, "so we quickly had it prepared. This is the first time we've used it."

"How did you know what I was thinking?!"

"Just a hunch."

She was the same as ever!

The amount of time we'd known each other was one thing, but our personalities were a perfect match. Otherwise we couldn't have had this banter while I removed the monsters from the bag. With each *fwoop* a monster came out, and Jilbayla's expression gradually clouded over.

"Lera, let me be sure of something."

"What's that?"

"Did you catch all this in one day?"

"That's right. Is that a problem?"

"It might be."

Huh? Really?

In the end, we put off the sale for another day and the monsters all went back into the bag. Jilbayla and I swiftly made our way to Castle Varchudar and arranged to talk with Lord Peylon. Oh, and the black knight came with us.

We sat down on the sofas in Lord Peylon's outer office.

"I heard the basics over the transmitter, but I'd like to hear more," Lord Peylon began.

"Yes, Your Excellency. First, please direct your attention to this," Jilbayla said and handed him a document. It was a list of all the monsters that had been removed from my bag. I hadn't

realized it was so many.

The color was draining from Lord Peylon's face.

"Hm? Am I seeing this right?"

Did I kill something strange?

"It's the latter half that particularly concerns me," Jilbayla said.

"Indeed," Lord Peylon replied.

The two exchanged nods, then turned toward me.

"Lera, could you tell us about this?"

"We'd like you to tell us exactly where in Layer Five you killed the monsters on this list."

It was hard to be specific with things like that.

"I didn't go far after entering Layer Five," I answered. "Since I'm not allowed to camp out, I can only make day trips."

This was something I was *quite* unhappy about. But I was still a minor, so if they gave me a curfew, I had to obey it. Age is one thing you can't do anything about. Since I couldn't get too far from home, I stuck to the border of Layers of Four and Five. Of course, I wished I could go farther than that.

Lord Peylon and Jilbayla both furrowed their brows as they listened to me. All together, it seemed like something worrisome was happening.

"Your Excellency..."

"If Lera's back, then so are Ville and his siblings. Let's bring Sheila in as well."

Jilbayla nodded. "Certainly."

"Lera, we're going to the inner section."

"Okay."

What in the world is going on?

The rooms in the inner section of Castle Varchudar were for our personal acquaintances, so they had simple, but quality furniture. We were in a space we used for important conversations that concerned our family. Even more than the others, this room was built to withstand attacks both physical and magical, and hinder intruders of all sorts.

In this room was Lord Peylon, Sheila, Jilbayla, and the Aspozat siblings, who had just gotten back from the Mystic Forest. Oh, and the black knight and myself, of course.

"Looks like everyone's here," Lord Peylon said.

"Brother, what's the meaning of this?" Sheila asked. She seemed puzzled. If this was something work related, we

would've used a room in the outer section. If someone who didn't normally have access to this room, like Jilbayla, was here, then it must be something urgent.

"I'll get right to it. We've discovered signs that the Mystic Forest might overflow."

Everyone but Jilbayla let out gasps of shock. Unless I was mistaken, he was talking about when monsters broke from their usual habits and left the forest in large numbers.

Once the room was silent, Lord Peylon grinned.

"However," he said, "that overflow won't happen for another year or two."

Oooh. I panicked for nothing.

Likewise, everyone else seemed quite relieved.

"Hey, don't tell me you're all breathing sighs of relief."

How could he tell?!

"Especially you, Lera. It's written all over your face. Be more careful."

"You meanie."

Our little exchange softened the tension in the room, and some of us began to smile. Was that his intent? Teasing someone to lighten the mood is just awful.

"We may have a year or two," Lord Peylon continued, "but we'll need every bit of it to prepare. If anything, it's hardly enough."

"Uncle, what exactly do you mean by 'prepare'?" Ville asked.

"In every way we can. We'll need to bolster this domain's forces on every last front. That's the sort of threat we're dealing with."

The room once again fell silent. Strengthening the whole of the domain's forces was much easier said than done. And to me, overflows were something from history books, so the idea of one was hard to grasp.

"We have a year, but it's better to think of it as *only* a year. I want you all to understand that."

"We will."

Ville, Loks, Colny, and I all nodded. Lord Peylon seemed satisfied with this, then turned to the black knight.

"Sir Yuin, I'd like you to return to the royal capital immediately."

"Huh?"

The black knight flinched. Given the circumstances, he

probably felt like he was being excluded.

"I want you to report what we've discussed to His Majesty. And to your father," Lord Peylon continued, "We'll need their cooperation in this."

"Understood."

Ah, so Lord Peylon was sending him off because he was a knight, and because his father held the powerful rank of marquess. Keeping the rest of the nation informed would be an important part of making sure we were prepared.

This wasn't just Peylon's problem—it was all of Ozeria's problem. If the monsters broke through our domain, they would run rampant through the rest of the kingdom. We would of course do whatever we could to keep them at bay here, but there are no guarantees in life.

"Even pushing it to its limits, going by horse will take three days. It's already late, so leave first thing tomorrow morning. I'll make sure spare horses are prepared along the way."

"Yes sir," the black knight replied with a bow, then left the room.

He was probably going off to get ready. I was surprised we wouldn't be using portals. I wasn't sure if this was because the situation wasn't quite that urgent, or because the spell was still being kept a secret. (I later learned that portals *out* of Peylon were even more restricted than ones coming *in*.)

Once the black knight was gone, we were left with a room of only familiar faces.

"Brother, are there really signs of an overflow?" Sheila asked.

"Of course. Would I lie about something like this?"

Lord Peylon would rather say nothing than tell a lie. More than that, he wasn't the type to lie about a matter that could envelop the entire kingdom.

"But if the previous overflow was caused artificially, isn't it too early for another occurrence?"

"According to the records, the last one was fifty-eight years ago. The one before that was two hundred and forty-one years ago, and the one before that was five hundred and thirty-four years ago. The records don't go any further back, but oral traditions suggest there have been more."

Hm? What did Sheila just say? "Caused artificially?"

So I decided to ask!

"What do you mean by artificially?"

I knew that if they couldn't answer, then they would tell me that up front instead of beating around the bush.

"Right, you and Colny wouldn't know, would you?" Lord Peylon replied like the idea had just occurred to him. "Sheila, I'm surprised you haven't told them."

"I planned to inform them once they were adults." Wasn't Colny already an adult? Then Sheila finished, "I thought it would be easier to tell them both at the same time."

Lord Peylon nodded. "I see. So I assume Loks and Ville both know? Well, it's a bit early but we can tell them. Lera, it's exactly as it sounds. It was human action that caused the previous overflow."

"What?"

Humans did? How?

"The previous overflow occurred because a particular nation set fire to a portion of the forest."

"They set it on fire? And that upset the forest?"

"We don't know for certain. But it seems fair to assume that the blaze incited the overflow. It's said that the nation that caused the fire bore the brunt of the damage."

Even if they didn't have formal relations, there were five nations that bordered the Mystic Forest, and merchants and travelers still transmitted information between them. Your typical traveler preferred to go around the forest, opting instead for roads or traveling by sea.

An overflow was a big deal for any country that ran up against the Mystic Forest. Normally, there would be signs in advance, like there were right now. But that hadn't happened fifty-eight years ago. Finding this suspicious, the other nations investigated the forest and found that one of the nations had started the fire. Apparently, some landowner had made some half-cocked, shortsighted plan.

While it was true that the last overflow was less than sixty years ago, you could disregard it as an irregularity. In which case, it seemed we were due for another one. But could we really be sure that overflows happened at regular intervals?

"Uncle, you said there were signs of an overflow. What were those signs?" Ville asked.

"Right, I haven't mentioned that yet. Take a look at this."

Lord Peylon showed them a document. It was the list of the monsters I had caught just earlier that day.

Oh yeah. I still haven't gotten paid for those.

Everyone's expression changed when they read the piece of paper.

"A large-horned baboon? Who caught this?!" Ville exclaimed.

"Lera did," Lord Peylon answered.

"Really?!"

Was it that shocking? Large-horned baboons were said to inhabit the deeper parts of the forest.

There was a whole encyclopedia of the monsters of the Mystic Forest. It was a publicly available collection of all the information that had been accrued over the years. However, it only gave vague descriptions of where monsters appeared. It just used phrases like "front" or "middle" or "far reaches."

Layer Five counted as being in the far reaches. Since the encyclopedia said large-horned baboons appeared in the far reaches, I hadn't thought it strange to see them in Layer Five. Similarly, I didn't think there was anything strange about the fact that I had killed one.

"Lera," Ville pressed, "do you know what layer large-horned baboons appear at?"

"No? But the encyclopedia says they appear deep in the forest, so I didn't think it was weird that Layer Five—"

"They appear at Layer Six. And near the border of Layer *Seven*, at that."

"Wha?"

I looked at Ville. He seemed very concerned.

"That's a monster that you can only find in the deep parts of Layer Six. And yet you killed one."

"Hold on. I only went to Layer Five, and the shallow end at that!"

"There's also an increased number of Peylon baboons," Sheila added.

"Indeed," Ville agreed. "Uncle, is this the sign you were talking about?"

"It is."

Ahh, I'm out of the loop again.

Monsters appearing in strange places was bad news, but how was this the sign of an overflow?

"Lera, overflows start from the center of the forest," Lord Peylon explained when he noticed my confusion.

So monsters started flooding out from the center?

“As though being pushed along by something, monsters from the deep layers start inundating the shallow areas. This is just what it looks like in the beginning. If this continues, monsters from the furthest reaches will start showing up in the lowest layers. Once that happens, an overflow will be imminent.”

Now I understood why Jilbayla had been panicking. Finding those monsters in Layer Five was a sign of an overflow.

“With the hunting festival coming next month, we can use that opportunity to let the other royalists know,” Sheila suggested.

“That’s right. Man, what a mess this is.”

Both of them looked worn down. Lord Peylon had once said that an overflow was something you could never be too prepared for. But if monsters from the deepest parts of the forest started appearing, would we have people capable of fighting them back?

When I awoke the next morning, the black knight had already departed. He took his duty seriously and left at the break of dawn.

For the time being, there was nothing I could do about the overflow, so I decided to go hunting, just like usual.

“Lera, Loks and Ville will be going to Layer Five today,” Lord Peylon informed me.

“They will?”

I then learned they had both managed to slay a Peylon baboon the previous day. But what about Colny?

“Aren’t they terrible?! They’re leaving me behind!” she cried with tears in her eyes.

She looked so cute like that. But yes, they were terrible.

“Layer Five’s a dangerous place,” Ville told her.

“But Lera’s going, isn’t she?!”

“Yes, well. She isn’t exactly normal.”

Ville, how could you say that so casually?!

To make it even worse, Ville and Loks both had permission to camp out! *Unbelievable!*

“Those two are both adults,” Lord Peylon reminded me. I don’t know why he was recoiling slightly. “Once you turn fifteen, I’ll give you permission.”

“You better! It’s a promise!”

I’m holding you to that, Lord Peylon! In the meantime, I’ll make

some really nice camping equipment!

What I currently had from the institute was like a prefab that you could carry around, which was still far from what I was aiming for. Even deep in the forest, I was of no mind to compromise on comfiness!

"I won't let you deny me my overnight privileges!"

"And I'm going to make it to Layer Five!"

"Let's do our best, Colny!"

"Indeed!"

Everyone watched us exchange vows with gentle gazes, but I ignored them.

Seven days had passed since I had first killed a large-horned baboon. I had spent every one of those days in the forest. In these early stages, the forest didn't seem like it was preparing for an overflow. But I was coming across large-horned baboons daily. Unlike Peylon baboons, these weren't resistant to magic, so they were easy for me to hunt.

"But taking down ten in one day is still excessive," Jilbayla sighed with a hand pressed to her cheek.

After that meeting, she had been handling all the monsters brought in by Loks, Ville, and myself. However, I was the only one bringing in catches daily. The other two could spend the night in the forest, so they were only stopping by once every two or three days. How nice that must've been.

"I wanna hurry up and turn fifteen," I said.

"There's no need to get so anxious. It's only a year away," Jilbayla reminded me.

"Yeah, but still."

She was entirely right, but I still didn't want to wait another day, even though I knew that the more years you had, the less you wanted any more.

"Do you want to camp out that badly?"

"If I could, I'd be able to go even farther into the forest."

That's what it boiled down to. I wanted to go where nobody was said to have gone—Layer Ten. There was nothing more to it than the simple desire of wanting to go. In the past, I had dreamed of passing through the forest all the way to one of the nations on the other side. But now I was more interested in means of travel that went around the forest.

While I watched Jilbayla do her calculations, I thought about

how we could do that. Maybe we could have planes or trains or something. Cars, however, seemed a bit much for this world. Not to mention the trouble that would come with maintaining the roads. But maybe that meant trains were out as well.

But I could think about transportation another time. For now, I just wanted to go to the center of the forest. I wanted to see what was there, even if it was nothing. I wanted to push on because I could.

"Oh my, that's quite a commotion outside," Jilbayla said.

"Oh, you're right."

I had been too spaced out to notice.

I stuck my head outside to see what was up, and saw a group of people in white uniforms. Were they from that one order?

"Oh? Those are the royal capital's Knights of the White Summit, aren't they?" Jilbayla asked. "What are they doing in Peylon?"

"Maybe because their captain is out here?"

"Lord Yulville is in Peylon?"

Why's she grimacing?

"You don't like him either?"

"Of course not. It's not just me—nobody connected to the magic research institute can stand him."

That made sense, given the demands he had been making to the institute. Apparently, the portals weren't the only spells he wanted access to. And he had made repeated attempts, which was why Bear had me record their conversation when I'd been there for it.

The institute used monster materials in large quantities, which meant they were often in contact with material brokers like Jilbayla. That had probably given her plenty of opportunities to hear institute employees griping about the white knight captain.

Of course, not all materials went to the institute. Many went straight to the market, enough that there were trading companies that specialized in monster materials.

But what had brought the captain and his knights here in such large numbers?

When I returned to Castle Varchudar, I got my answer.

"They say they're conducting investigations in the Mystic Forest," Lord Peylon told me. "Remember how we sent Sir Yuin to

the royal capital? Lord Yulville used his own means to contact his order and got permission to investigate on their own."

"Who gave him that permission?"

"Some members of the royal palace. Everyone there serves the royal family, but some do it simply to advance their own interests."

Palace intrigue, huh? But wasn't the Mystic Forest under Peylon's supervision? If nothing else, the entrance to the forest was in Peylon. I guess this meant the white knights had entered without permission.

"They've got a document with the royal palace's seal on it," Lord Peylon explained. "It's a dubious piece of paper, but the seal's the real thing so I can't defy them."

It seemed the white knight captain was good at power struggles. So what about his magic? The only mages I knew weren't very interested in power; they were too focused on their research.

"How's the white knight captain at magic?" I asked.

"You mean Lord Yulville? He's not particularly good or bad, I guess."

"Doesn't his order specialize in magic?"

"Yeah. As needed, they dispatch their mages to aid the other orders."

"And yet their captain isn't particularly good? Hold on. Didn't he say Yulville is a house of mages?"

He had even seemed quite proud of that point.

"That was their reputation. Until Heridar came along at least."

"And now their house has gone to shit?"

"Lera, phrasing."

I could mind my words, but the meaning would still be the same. But going to shit meant they had something in common with Duval. Yulville had once been the more esteemed house, but according to Lord Peylon the two were now about the same. And yet that man had acted so haughty to Bear, tried to adopt me, and now used underhanded means to commandeer the investigation of the Mystic Forest.

"So what's he after?" I asked.

"Probably the revitalization of his house. But that's probably not going to happen unless he improves his own magical abilities."

Did he mean to say that was impossible? Magic talents did

most of their development in one's teens.

"Needless to say," Lord Peylon continued, "we've got some troublesome fellows in the forest, so be extra careful from now on."

"If I need to, I'll make it look like an accident, then toss him out of the forest!"

"Don't sound so eager about it!"

He's not a fan of that idea. Damn.

The next day, I heard people outside the forest exchanging warnings like "watch out for those guys in the white uniforms." Referring to them as something like "the guys badgering the institute" might've turned the locals against them. But we couldn't have that, given who these knights were. So someone was making sure that anyone entering the forest knew to give the white knights a wide berth.

"Their captain is a noble, so you'll have to watch what you say. If you do something disrespectful, you could find yourself being put to death."

"Oh c'mon, Ville."

"Lera, don't cause any unnecessary fuss, okay?"

Why were Ville and Lord Peylon both convinced I was going to make things worse? Granted, I'll admit I had been planning to keep a close eye on the white knights. But can you blame me? If they confiscated the fruits of the institute's research, they'd also be cutting off a source of income for me! Was I supposed to just let that happen?!

I did my best to make Ville understand this, but that didn't work out.

"All right," he said, "just don't cause any problems. Got it?"

"Got iiit."

If necessary, I could always say it was an accident.

I hadn't eaten a meal with the white knight captain since the welcoming feast. That had been held in a dining room specifically for guests, but I had been sticking to the private one in the inner section. Apparently, he didn't have any complaints about this. And I didn't run into him in the forest, because I always had to make a mad dash for Layer Five.

Meanwhile, Ville and Loks were supporting Colny in her efforts to reach Layer Five. I thought about joining them, but

they told me to go on ahead, so I went by myself.

With a fairly large haul, I sold half and set aside the rest for Al. Jilbayla gave me a knowing look when I was unloading what I wanted to sell, but I had pretended not to see it. If I acknowledged the look, I would lose. I was pretty sure she wanted me to sell her *all* my catches, but she couldn't outright say anything because she knew I planned to give the other half to my spider. A real dilemma.

Two days after the white knights had arrived in bulk, the black knight returned. He had gone out by horse, but he had made the return trip via portal. Lord Peylon commented on how quickly he had returned, to which the black knight simply replied that he had been given permission by the royal family.

They had even been the ones to offer him a single-use portal. Even Lord Peylon didn't immediately know what to say. Maybe they considered the possibility of an overflow to be that serious of an affair. Or maybe they simply trusted the black knight that much.

The two of them headed off to Lord Peylon's office in the inner section. There they could talk in detail without fear of someone listening in on them. With all the white knights around, they had to be careful to not let anything slip out.

That night, Colny and I had a slumber party. When she came to Peylon we would occasionally spend the night in each other's rooms. This time, we were in my room. With snacks and drinks, we munched, sipped, and chatted to our hearts' content. Nothing better than enjoying a snack with some tea. Calories? What might those be?

Inevitably, our conversation turned to the matter of the intruders in the forest.

"I still don't understand what Lord Yulville's thinking," Colny said.

"According to Lord Peylon, he wants to revitalize his house."

"And what does that have to do with romping around in the Mystic Forest?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just telling you what Lord Peylon said."

"Right. Indeed. But don't you find those knights to be absolutely unbearable?"

"Oh yeah. Agreed."

They hadn't even taken the beginner courses. If one of them

died to a monster, they'd have nobody to blame but themselves. I heard they had even signed waivers saying they were responsible for whatever might happen to them out here. But I could still imagine that captain might try to pin the blame on us anyway.

"I'm sure uncle will do something about that," Colny said. "As a general rule, you're responsible for yourself in the forest."

That was true. You had to realize nobody else was responsible if you got hurt or even killed in the forest. This was something they taught in the beginner courses. If you weren't prepared for the consequences, you weren't supposed to enter the forest.

"Hey, Lera," Colny said in a slightly stiffer tone.

"What's up?"

"Tomorrow, would you go to Layer Four with me?"

So it was a hunting invitation. I realized we hadn't actually gone together in a while. I was mostly going on my own, and she was mostly going with her brothers.

"That sounds nice. Should we hunt for pearls?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Layer Four was host to devil-tusk shells, which were host to pearls. We could catch a plethora of shells and bring in loads of pearls. And not just white ones, but black and gold as well. There were even silver pearls, but I had never seen them before. I was always hoping to get new colors.

"Let's get enough so we make new accessories," Colny suggested.

"That'd be great!"

Sometimes, it's important to just have fun.

The next morning, we were all ready and about to leave the castle, when a voice called to us from behind.

"Excuse me, ladies."

It was the frivolous white knight. Behind him was the plain-looking white knight, looking rather out of place.

"Can we help you?" Colny asked in a voice that could shake the ground. She had mentioned that she wasn't a fan of this guy.

So what did the frivolous white knight and the plain-looking—no, what did Mr. Frivolous and Sir Nondescript want with us?

"Well, you see, our captain has told us to start going into the forest," Mr. Frivolous explained. "But we don't know our way around. So I was wondering, maybe you two would be willing to

be our guides?”

So they really were going in. Actually, they were late. Their comrades had already gone in a number of times.

“Oh, well in that case,” Colny said with a smile. I already knew what she was going to say. “In the square, you can sign up for beginner courses, so I’d encourage you to make your way over there.”

“Beginner courses?” the two knights said in unison.

“They’re indispensable if you want to enter the Mystic Forest. Be warned: You’ll be learning in a classroom and later in the forest itself. If you don’t hurry, they’ll run out of spaces for the day. However, your cohorts dispensed with tradition and headed straight in.”

And with a brief goodbye, we left the two befuddled men behind. I heard one of them say, “You took them too?” Presumably that meant the black knight had joined them. But hadn’t he already gotten permission to enter Layer Two? Well, it wasn’t any of my business where he went.

Though there were some unwanted guests, the Mystic Forest was its usual self. It only made sense. Nature didn’t care about our petty issues.

“My, look who it is,” Colny said.

I looked where she was pointing and saw Loks and Ville talking with someone.

“Oh.”

They were talking with Jilbayla’s older brother Tiient. He was in charge of the forest’s beginner courses, so there was nothing odd about him being in the square. The regional administration managed the beginner courses, and their employees conducted them.

Once their conversation finished, Ville and Loks jogged over to us.

“Colny, Lera.”

“What were you doing?” Colny asked.

“Uh, well…” Ville seemed like he didn’t quite want to answer. “Tiient snagged us and asked for our help with the beginner courses.”

So that’s it.

They were always short on instructors. Most people who were familiar enough with the forest to be a good instructor would be able to make more money as a hunter. So administrators were

always grabbing anyone related to Lord Peylon and asking them to help with the courses. But in the case of Loks and Ville, they were probably just being taken on as assistants. People their age wouldn't command any respect from their students.

"So you're once again conscripted to helping out?" Colny clarified.

"Pretty much," Loks groaned.

"But what a pain it is," Ville complained. "And you've seen the white knights from the capital in the forest, right? Since they went in without taking the courses, more people are whining that they shouldn't have to take them either. It's causing Tiient a lot of trouble."

Neither of the brothers were attempting to hide their displeasure.

"Ah, but the two knights from the banquet should be taking them," Colny said with a grin. "If at least those two are taking it seriously, some people might have a change of heart."

"Nedon? He's not so bad."

Ville didn't have it out for Mr. Frivolous. Interesting.

"Well then, you can be in charge of Sir Nedon," Loks said.

He never missed an opportunity.

"Stop right there. I'm not going to let you slip out of this."

"Well," Colny said to me, "this doesn't seem to be our problem, so let's head to the forest."

"Good idea."

We were about to leave them to their business when a very overprotective brother blocked us saying, "Wait. Just you two are going? You shouldn't—"

"Ville, I can go to Layer Five all by myself."

"And today, we're going to Layer Four to hunt for pearls," Colny added.

We were both grinning. Ville seemed unable to come up with any further objections. Hard to argue with raw results!

The forest got really quiet by the time we made it to Layer Four, save for some noisy folk in the distance.

"Now, where might those devil-tusk shells be?"

The shells didn't live in water—they affixed themselves to trees. If you ask me, that wasn't a proper place for any mollusk to be.

After a bit of wandering around, we came upon a large tree that seemed just right.

“Here we are, Lera.”

“Oh. Pretty good size.”

In front of us was a large trunk covered in devil-tusk shells. They were decently sized, and the color of their shells suggested that their pearls were likely to be gold.

“If they’re gold, then you should have them,” I said.

“Then let’s be sure to find some black pearls for you as well.”

Roger that.

Today would be a day for pearl hunting, catching shells as we came across them. Unlike the mollusks of the sea, devil-tusk shells were all but certain to develop a pearl once they reached a certain size. Also, the size of a pearl was directly proportionate to the size of the shell. But once they were big enough to form a pearl (roughly around the size of an adult’s fist) most mollusks got harvested before they could get any bigger.

I had been pondering the feasibility of raising devil-tusk shells. Once these little invertebrates got big enough to host a pearl, they instantly turned aggressive. Perhaps it was worth talking to the institute about.

“Just like we usually do?” Colny asked.

“Sounds good.”

Devil-tusk shells’ weakness was—of all things—water. They could *drown*. Honestly, what strange creatures these were.

Now, about the pearls. Removing a pearl after the mollusk had died would hurt its quality. So what did you do? You either paralyzed it or put it in a comatose state, then extracted the pearl from the open shell. That would kill them, so it was two birds with one stone. For me, the hardest part was holding back enough to not inflict a fatal blow.

“Right, here I go.”

These were some very violent mollusks. If you got too close, they would shoot poison or even chomp your finger off if you let them. Therefore, the best approach was to attack from a distance with magic.

I formed a bunch of water bubbles, then directed them at the mollusks. When they opened up in discomfort, I increased the pressure in order to snap their hinges.



After quickly extracting the pearls, we were all finished. The shells themselves were used for accessories, so we collected those as well. The innards couldn't be eaten on account of being poisonous all the way through, so we left those behind.

"Oh, these are some large pearls!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, but some of them are poorly formed," Colny remarked.

Baroque pearls, as they were called. But they weren't entirely useless; they worked well in necklaces. So I took them for myself.

"Still not enough," I said.

Luckily, Colny wasn't lacking motivation that day, and she announced, "Then we hunt some more!"

We continued to hunt and hunt some more until I accidentally came dangerously close to breaking my curfew. Though I called it that, my curfew only determined which hours I was allowed to be in the Mystic Forest. And just as we made our exit, the five o' clock bell began to ring.

"We made it," I sighed.

"I'd say we got a bit carried away back there."

But that's what allowed us to harvest so many pearls! Gold and black alike! We could make a whole jewelry box of accessories—a parure, as they called it.

"Colny, what should we do for designs?"

"Why not make matching sets?"

"I like it."

We often coordinated matching outfits, but matching parures would be a first.

"My social debut will be next February, and yours will be the year after that. I think we should use this time to have something made."

I hadn't considered that angle. I didn't think my debut was anything worth worrying about.

"Oh, but your birthday isn't far off. I hope we can make it in time for that."

"Oh, right."

I had entirely forgotten about my birthday. It was in July, and we had been having parties since I was ten, although we only ever invited close acquaintances. Since it was during the summer, the Aspozat siblings had always been able to join us.

So my birthday is this month. Huh.

"There's your birthday, then after that is the hunting festival.

Summer sure is a busy season."

She was right about that. Good thing our pearl hunting had been so successful.

"And you'll be participating in the tent socials, won't you?"

"Huh? Why would I?"

Tent socials were tea parties—typically held in tents—for the wives while their husbands were out hunting.

"I assumed I couldn't, since I haven't made my social debut and all."

"But academy students are treated as adults, so they're obligated to be present. I started participating last year."

I had forgotten about that. That was why I had spent last year all by myself at the carnival.

"And now that you're a student, you'll have to be there."

"Oh, the horror."

So even if I hadn't been aware of it, today's pearl hunting had been in preparation for this. It occurred to me that I had already been told that I would be participating in the hunting festival. But I didn't really think I would be part of the tent socials. Except, y'know, women couldn't join in the hunting.

As the name implied, tent socials were social events, so getting dolled up was required. Not dressing up would be rude to the host and other attendees. Or so they told me. What a chore.

My hair was silver, so I used black pearls as opposed to white ones. And that's what I had focused on today, but I still had plenty of white baroques. I could use them in a necklace.

"Let's worry about that later. First, let's take our pearls to the institute for processing," Colny said.

"Agreed."

That might seem like an odd choice, but the institute had an accessories department. There they were dedicated to developing accessories with all sorts of features. They made things like necklaces that toughened you, or bracelets that gave you resistance to poisons. They were expensive because most people who were interested in these sorts of wares had more money than they knew what to do with. In order to satisfy the tastes of the nonsensically wealthy, the accessories department put a lot of effort into their designs.

Pearls didn't have any magical effects, but the shells that housed them did. You could use them to make buttons and

earrings that warded off rain. Devil-tusk shells hated water just that much, even though they were mollusks. But it wasn't anything more than that, as accessories from their shells didn't offer much protection against water magic or the like. Still, its pleasant appearance and workability kept it popular.

We reached the square while chatting about design ideas, where we saw some very familiar scenery.

"So many slumped red figures," Colny said.

"Yeah."

There were dozens of weary people in the red coveralls worn by beginners. They were all on the ground, doubled over catching their breath or flat on their backs. Standing on the other side of the group were Loks and Ville, who didn't even look winded. So even other knights couldn't quite match the black knight's stamina. I offered them a silent prayer.

Now that they had taken the beginner courses, the two white knights donned their red coveralls and entered the forest the next day. It seemed they needed to enter the forest for their investigations, and entering the forest demanded that they fight monsters. They said they wanted to go as deep as they could, but what exactly did that mean? Layer Five could be considered fairly deep, and getting there wasn't easy.

I should mention that outside of the combo of Frivolous and Nondescript, the other white knights had already given up. Some of them had even been seriously injured. It was their own fault—they had skipped out on the beginner courses.

These two were only headed in for the second time, yet the light had already left their eyes. Were they going to be all right?

"They'll be all right," Ville said flatly.

"Will they?" I asked.

"If this land doesn't suit them, then they can head back to the royal capital."

Could they really do that? It didn't seem like they were going to be sent home when their boss had set up shop here.

"I'm a lot more curious about how long Lord Yulville will stay here," Loks said.

I had the same thought. I sure didn't want him overstaying his welcome.

"Are you two not going into the forest?" Ville asked when he noticed Colny and I were in our normal clothes. I was dressed

lightly so I could easily get around. I had a straw hat and a long-sleeved dress, because it was still a bit chilly even though it was early summer. In my hands was a wicker basket which was, of course, filled with pearls.

"After catching so many pearls yesterday, we decided to take them to the institute so we can decide what to make with them," Colny explained.

"We plan to make matching sets," I added.

So we took a break from the forest. It was also because we had taken too many pearls and got a stern lecture from Jilbayla when we got back. Devil-tusk shells were one of the monsters that had hunting limits. We had just gotten a little too absorbed in our fun. I was reminded why I wanted to look into raising them. That was another thing to take care of once we got to the institute.

Peylon's magic research institute was busy no matter when I visited. I thought research was supposed to be a quiet thing.

"Oh. Well if it isn't Lera and Miss Colnesia."

"Ah, Bear."

"Will ya quit calling me Bear?! Honestly. Now what can I do for you? Did you piss Kend off, and now you're hiding out here?"

"Nooo. What a rude assumption, Bear."

"Quit calling me Bear!"

"We wanted to have some accessories made. We've even brought our own pearls."

We hadn't hit upon good ideas yesterday, so we wanted to consult with the designer at the institute. Lots of people who commissioned accessories with magic features consulted a designer first.

"I see," Bear said. "Oh, Lera. Once you're done with that, make sure Nielle gets some sleep."

"Loud and clear."

Did she pull another all-nighter? She never learns.

Nielle could be considered the institute's most talented researcher, but she had a bad habit of neglecting herself whenever something caught her interest. As a result, making her get some rest had long been one of my chores. Thanks to her, I had learned many hypnosis spells.

"What's the matter with Nielle?" Colny asked me.

"It sounds like she's once again gotten obsessed with her

work and is forgetting to sleep.”

“Oh goodness.”

Even Colny was exasperated. Though I didn’t imagine that Nielle cared.

The accessories department was on the outer edge of the first floor. With the underground floors though, the deeper you went the crazier they got.

They said the worst was the lab deep within the sixth underground floor. I didn’t know what they researched, but there were lots of rumors concerning them and the occult. They said that at night, you could hear screams, children crying, and women singing lamentations. What was the institute thinking, letting a place like that exist?

As though to cover up these shady labs, the cleaner departments were put in the outer sections. We entered a welcoming room with a high ceiling and large windows that let in plenty of sunlight.

“Oh, I don’t often see you two around here,” the designer noted.

If either Colny or I wanted an accessory with special functions, we could usually just use our own magic to make something. After all, we had the skills to make our way through the Mystic Forest.

We explained why we had come and quickly got to talking about designs.

“You want matching parures, but with different color pearls, correct?” the designer confirmed.

“That’s right,” Colny told him.

“Do you have designs that can do that?” I asked.

“Mmm. If you plan to use different pearls, then I wouldn’t recommend using the same design.”

Color changed a lot about an accessory after all.

“Even if the design is the same, different color pearls will give the accessories drastically different impressions, won’t it?” Colny said. “But what if you made a design with that taken into account?”

“Consider it a chance to strut your stuff,” I added.

The nice man gave us a chagrined grin. But in the end, he accepted our request and told us he would have some sketches ready in three days.

“I’ll have multiple designs, so you can pick whichever you like best,” he told us. “If none of them strike your fancy, I’ll start over.”

I was looking forward to it. In the meantime, I broached the idea of breeding devil-tusk shells. The designer seemed surprised, like he had never considered it. These were still monsters, so all sorts of things could go wrong if you tried to keep them in captivity. But I thought they’d at least be easier than other monsters. They didn’t move very much, and anyone with a bit of skill could take them down.

We’d be returning in a few days for our main business, so I left the shell breeding as just an idea. A genuine attempt at it would probably require more than just the institute—it would need people all across Peylon. But the thought of having a reliable source for a unique product like pearls was hard to dismiss.

After leaving the accessories department, we made sure to tuck Nielle into bed, then we hung around the institute’s break room. We had developed hypnosis beams made to work on Nielle specifically, and *boy* did they work.

“I want to kill a bit more time here,” I told Colny.

“If you return now, Lord Yulville might catch you, right?”

Too right. If I even passed him in a hall, he might start saying some nonsense about taking me in, so I ran all over the place trying to avoid him. I really thought it was time for him to give up. Knowing when to quit is an important skill.

The snacks put out in the break room were made in Castle Varchudar. These were another thing that brought back strong memories of my previous life. Today we were having pound cake baked with dried fruit, and a strong aroma of alcohol wafted off them.

“I don’t think most people would come up with an idea like raising devil-tusk shells. Lera, you have a strange way of thinking.”

Did I? If you had creatures that produced something of value, then raising them seemed like a natural next step. But I knew that natural ones still fetched a higher price. I guess I had my past memories to thank for my funny ideas.

“Do you suppose those two white knights are being run ragged in the forest?” Colny mumbled while we enjoyed our tea and cake.

“You think so? The beginner courses are only for a day. After

that, you're let loose."

"That's true."

But I was pretty sure they were only going because their captain demanded it, even though he wasn't going in himself. I couldn't think of a single person I liked less than the type who sat back and made the subordinates do all the work!

After spending day after day enjoying myself, July was upon us. Time always flies by during vacations. During that period, Lord Aspozat—Thand, that is—finally arrived.

"It's great to see you, Thand!"

"Sorry I can't show my face around more often."

Lord Peylon and Thand were old friends, prominent members of the same faction, and brothers-in-law through Sheila. Talk about close bonds.

Sheila was of course happy to see him, as were their children. At first I had thought this was strange since they all lived in the same residence in the royal capital, but Colny and Loks lived in the dorm most of the time, and Ville's work meant that he mostly only saw his parents at the dinner table. And both Ville and Thand sometimes had to spend the night at their respective workplaces. They must have had real slave drivers for bosses.

"And it's good to see you, Lera. Have you gotten taller?"

"Have I?"

I wouldn't have noticed if I had. I was already on the tall side, so I was okay with not gaining any more height. I'd rather I gained a bit of depth.

"I'm relieved I was able to make it in time for your birthday," Thand told me.

Sparking my curiosity I asked, "Is there that much trouble down south?"

"The revolt in Resnund was suppressed, but the surrounding countries were doing everything they could to take advantage of it. Taking care of the other countries and then calculating the reparations took a long time."

Resnund was a small nation at the very southern edge of the continent. A number of other small nations neighbored them, and they were collectively referred to as the petty kingdoms.

With an Ozerian earl as middleman, Resnund sold much of its spices to our kingdom. Because of this partnership, Ozeria was an ally of Resnund. Apparently. Since Thand worked in foreign

relations, he was involved whenever there was trouble in the petty kingdoms.

"But enough about that," Thand said. "It seems you have some unusual guests."

"That we do," Lord Peylon said with a strained grin.

Do I have to say they were talking about the white knights? Besides Mr. Frivolous and Sir Nondescript, they had all entered the forest without taking the beginner courses and had been causing all sorts of people headaches. I really wanted them to pack their bags and get out.

"The Knights of the White Summit, huh? I've heard some unsavory rumors about them at the royal palace," Thand said.

Both Lord Peylon and Sheila jumped on this.

"Really?"

"What sort of rumors, dear?"

Huh? Why's Thand looking over here?

"I don't want students hearing what I'm about to say. Loks, could you take Lera and Colny back to their rooms?"

"Oh, you won't even let me stay?" Loks said. "No point in arguing I guess. Come on, you two."

"Very well."

"Damn."

I wanted to hear some unsavory rumors.

"Iiit's myyy birthdaaaay," I sang off-key.

After Thand's arrival, my birthday came before I had realized it. We held a party in Castle Varchudar's outer hall. It felt a little overdone, but I was glad to celebrate with the people close to me.

Though there was someone I could have done without.

"Oh, you look even more wonderful dressed like that. I might just forget what you normally look like."

Shove it, captain.

I almost let those words slip out, but Sheila came to my rescue.

"My, Sir Heridar, you're the same as ever," she said with a laugh. I didn't fail to notice the glare she gave him at the end. That sure scared the white knight captain. Well, most people would react the same way Lord Yulville did.

It was a birthday party, so I got plenty of presents. From Sheila, I got lots of lace. She told me to use it to make a dress.

Honestly, I already had plenty of fabric from my spider. Albion made the best silk.

Thand gave me a gem. I was supposed to use this to make an accessory. Only I had just recently had a set of pearl jewelry made, so when Thand saw my outfit, he nearly collapsed. The set contained a necklace, earrings, a bracelet, and an ornamental hair comb. They all had matching designs made with pearls and magic silver. Mine used black pearls and Colny's had gold. Getting this many pearls was normally a lot of work, but we managed to get them with relative ease.

As for other presents, I got a tea set from Ville, and Loks gave me a floral brooch meant for casual outfits. And from Colny, I got tons of ribbons. Their embroidery was incredibly pretty. Now we had more opportunities for coordinating outfits. It occurred to me that this world still didn't yet have fabric printing. There was another idea for the institute.

From Lord Peylon, I received a very ornate dagger. It was the type some women would wear with a dress. He told me I could use it as both an accessory and as a means of self-defense.

"I had planned to give it to you on your fifteenth birthday, but now we don't know what next year might be like," he said.

That was a good point. There could be an overflow around this time next year, and even if we were still preparing, we might not have time for something like a party. But I knew that even if we didn't do anything fancy, we would still get together, so I wasn't worried on that front.

From the heads and sons of the Peylon branch families, I got plenty of dresses, shoes, and accessories and the like. And wouldn't you know it, I even got something from the black knight. It was an engraved glass pen with some deep blue ink.

According to Loks's surreptitious explanation, it had become fashionable in the royal capital for men to give stationery to women. The implication was that they wanted you to write to them. When the black knight handed it to me, he looked somewhat expectant. Only problem was that I was *terrible* at this sort of thing. But hear me out! I had the transmitter! And I wasn't good at writing things by hand! My handwriting was atrocious.

I would have to write thank you letters for all these items. It was standard to also return the favor with a gift for their birthday, so that was another thing to consider. That said, I was still a minor, so that was all my guardian's job. But as an academy

student, I had to write my own thank you letters. My poor penmanship was about to become public knowledge.

"Since you'll have so many to write, you should start practicing," Loks told me.

"You can use that pen you got from Fezgahn," Ville chimed in. "Use it up, then smash it."

Did he hate Fezgahn that much? I was halfway exasperated, and Colny shared the sentiment.

"Oh, stop that," she said. "I don't care how much you don't want Lera taken away from you, you sound like a child."

"Let me be."

Hmm? He already hates the black knight, but is Ville also afraid the black knight might snatch up his other sister?

I suppose our meathead upbringing was the only reason I could assume there wasn't a love triangle here. After all, Ville and I were like siblings. Nothing more.

The black knight himself wasn't too far from us. He had been ensnared by Marquess Zokbahr, head of one of the royal faction's top houses and ruler of a southern Ozerian domain.

For generations, his house had produced excellent military men, and the marquess himself was a hawk and marshal of the royal army. He and the black knight seemed to be talking amicably, so maybe they were talking about the knights' orders or something. Even the white knight captain was enjoying the occasional conversation. He was surrounded by other white knights, but I couldn't see Mr. Frivolous or Sir Nondescript anywhere.

But then I spotted the former. He was having a good time chatting up some women. And Sir Nondescript was awkwardly standing next to him. You could tell this was normal for them.

Every knight, black and white alike, were clad in their uniforms. Those were considered semiformal, so they could wear them at parties like this. I appreciated it because I could tell who belonged to what.

While I stood vacantly next to Lord Peylon, listening to all the congratulations, I heard some noise from the entrance.

What's this?

"Looks like he made it in time."

"Lord Peylon?"

I tilted my head. Was there someone we were waiting on? I watched the sea of people parting and…

Ah!

"Louie!"

"Good to see you again, Lera."

It was my brother, Shivan Loutsie. He was Lord Peylon's adopted son, and set to inherit House Peylon. He was more of a brother to me than my actual brother. He was the same age as Ville, and the two had graduated from the academy together last year. But wasn't he supposed to be studying domain management elsewhere?

He wasn't studying in Peylon because he would do nothing but hunt monsters if he stayed here. Louie might have had a real princely aura with his blond hair and blue eyes, but on the inside he was a Peylon man through and through. He couldn't resist the urge to hunt. And now he was back. No points for guessing why.

"The hunting festival, I take it?" was all I needed to say.

"You don't think I came to celebrate your birthday?" he replied with a laugh.

"Nope."

He laughed even harder. "Honest as ever."

Yep, this was my brother. Of course, he was also good friends with all the Aspozats. This was in part because he had been adopted by Lord Peylon at a very young age.

"Well look who it is."

"It's been a while, Louie."

"It's wonderful to see you again!"

"I'm glad to see you three still get along," Louie replied. "Hm? Colny, does your jewelry match Lera's?"

Oh, he noticed.

Loks had also picked up on it, but Ville hadn't. That's just the sort of person he was.

"Lera and I caught the pearls together," Colny said with a smile. "This is the jewelry we had made with them."

"Oh, so the two of you are going to Layer Four now?"

"I'll have you know Lera's going to Layer Five."

"Really?"

Ha ha ha, that's right. I'm going to Layer Five all by myself!

I puffed out my chest, ready to be lavished with praise. But did he?

"I see. I can only imagine how worried father must be."

Hey.

To make things worse, Ville and Loks were nodding in

agreement! Can you believe them?!

The festivities were reaching their peak and large groups had gathered here and there. That's just what happens at a fourteen-year-old noble girl's birthday party. The nobles who came to gather in Peylon far outnumbered the acquaintances here to see me. All the houses present were people who planned to stay throughout the hunting festival, meaning they all were from the same faction as Lord Peylon.

But that caused the knights in their uniforms to stand out all the more.

"Wait, isn't that Fezgahn?" Louie asked Ville. "I also see Iyale and Rolfed. What are they doing here?"

I figured he would be puzzled by their presence, especially since this was my birthday party. If anyone from another faction were to come to Peylon at this time of year, it would be with the hunting festival in mind. But even if they wanted to arrive early for the festival, this would still be excessive.

"I'll tell you about Fezgahn later," Ville said, looking immensely unhappy about it. "On the surface at least, he's here to train in the Mystic Forest. The Knights of the White Summit, captain included, are here to conduct investigations. Or so they say."

"Investigations? Regarding the warning signs?"

"That's right."

So Louie knew that an overflow was coming up. He was set to one day inherit the region, so I supposed that made sense.

"I see. And the White Summit..." he said contemplatively.

"That's another thing we'll have to save for later," Ville said. "Their captain is glaring at us."

"What for?"

"Later."

This definitely was not the place to bring up how the white knight captain had said he wanted to take me in, got turned down, and now found it hard to approach me. Normally at an event like this, even strangers would come up to me. But during the first half, Lord Peylon had been with me to keep anyone I didn't know at bay, and the Aspozat siblings took that role for the second half.

Some of the white knights besides Mr. Frivolous and Sir Nondescript had boldly tried to come up to me, but they had been fended off. And the black knight hadn't tried to talk to me

at all. Was it because of our earlier conversation? About how he was still only allowed in the shallow layers?

"What's the matter, Lera?" Louie asked me.

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing."

In the end, what the black knight was thinking didn't make any difference to me.

The party continued on, but the younglings were moved to the inner section of the castle. It was still too early to head back to our private rooms, so we went to the parlor. This should've just been Colny and myself, but Louie, Ville, and Loks accompanied us for some reason.

"Uncle told us to stay with you," Ville explained.

This was a surprise. Was there some reason to be wary? When I voiced this question, both brothers gave me strained smiles.

"Lera, you didn't forget that Sir Heridar has his eye on you, did you?"

"I didn't forget, but I'm sure I'll be fine."

I was pretty sure I had the upper hand with magic, and I knew a bit about using a sword. The white knight captain appeared to be a typical mage and didn't seem to know much about weapons. And I had heard he wasn't even that great at magic.

"Wait, what do you mean?" Louie cut in. "The captain of the White Summit? Don't tell me..."

"Ah, no, no. It's not what you're thinking."

"Then what is it?!"

Louie needlessly lashed out at Ville. But he seemed used to it as he brushed Louie off with one hand.

"Sir Heridar is Lera's maternal uncle," he said. "And he's using that as a justification to try and take Lera in."

"*What*?"

A perfectly understandable reaction. Everyone here had felt the same thing—that it was awfully late to suddenly act like family.

"And I heard something very interesting from my father regarding that," Ville added with a vicious smile.



Was this that “unsavory rumor” that Thand had brought up? Only Ville had been allowed to hear it.

“It seems Sir Heridar is interested in Lera’s deep mana pool.”

Louie, Loks, and Colny all understood immediately.

“Ahh.”

“I see.”

“So that’s it.”

I understood too. I just thought it was a little late for that to come up.

“But isn’t he a little late?” Louie said. It seemed he had the same idea as me. “Lera’s high mana should have been apparent ever since she underwent the pigment shift. Why act now?”

“One reason is that Yulville is having something of a fall from grace,” Ville told him. “The other is that a little bird likely told him that Lera is set to inherit House Duval.”

“Huh?!”

“Not to mention His Majesty has given his approval for Lera’s inheritance.”

“What do you mean?” Louie asked. Like anyone would’ve, his face changed the moment the king was brought up. This helped confirm my suspicions that there was something off about the monarch being involved in the affairs of an earl’s house. Approval from the royal throne meant that this situation was good as settled. Not even my father would be able to overturn the decision.

But maybe that was all the more reason for concern? Still, I found it a bit hard to imagine that the people of that house would try to have me killed. I’m not talking about genetic bonds or anything; I just didn’t think a man who doted on Ribbons had the ability to come up with and execute a plan that involved homicide.

If they were to try anything, it would probably be with the encouragement of some outsider. But I was sure Lord Peylon and the other adults were well aware of that.

“Also,” Ville continued, “Sir Heridar was acting alone when he decided to try and adopt Lera.”

Interesting. Apparently he had a wife and child, but was acting without their blessing. He had a single son—who was probably my cousin—that would be inheriting his title. There was a lot we didn’t know about how the white knight captain wanted to take me in, but if he formally adopted me, that would

probably affect the succession in some way or another.

This was the sort of thing you usually discussed with your immediate family. But he hadn't done that, which meant he probably didn't plan to formally make me his child. Did he plan to make me just a houseguest? That wouldn't give him much influence over me, thereby defeating the purpose of taking me in.

"But if he doesn't plan to go with a formal adoption, he doesn't need the king's permission," Louie said after a bit of thinking.

"So then how does he plan to make use of Lera's mana?" Ville posed. "Does he honestly think she's the type to listen to people?"

Louie didn't say anything. He just gave me a look that I really didn't appreciate. And Ville! I understood what he was trying to say! I even agreed with him! But couldn't he have found a better way of putting it?!

"Hmm. Do you think Sir Heridar got ahead of himself?" Louie said. "This could mean there's a rift in House Yulville."

Ville nodded and said, "Actually, my father was approached by Sir Heridar's son Sir Karsane at the royal palace."

"Huh? Karsane talked to him? Right, right, I forgot he was from House Yulville."

So Louie knew my cousin. If they were in the same age range, then it wasn't odd that they might have met at the academy. That Ville used the title "Sir" showed that he didn't know Karsane. He always made it very clear when he liked or disliked someone. Meanwhile, the way Louie simply called him by his name showed that he knew this guy. My brother was a social super-butterfly who could get along with anyone.

"It seems Sir Karsane finds it suspicious that his father went off to Peylon. He asked my father what Lord Yulville is doing."

"Why didn't he ask his own father directly?"

"Supposedly the two aren't on the best of terms."

And here I was, an example of someone on the worst of terms with their father. I didn't know how my brother felt about our father, but I know I thought the worst of him.

"So let's summarize," Louie said. "Sir Heridar is interested in Lera's mana pool so he can use it to return Yulville to its former glory as a magic powerhouse. He hasn't informed his wife or son of this. And we don't know the specifics of what he's currently

doing in Peylon. Is that right?"

"That's the gist of it, yeah. One thing to add is that it sounds like Sir Karsane is eager to chase out his father and take control for himself."

What a terrible parent-child relationship. But maybe it wasn't so different from mine. The only difference was that it was Peylon, Aspozat, and the royal family driving me to take over my house.

After processing it all, Louie reached a conclusion that made my head hurt.

"But isn't this all House Yulville's problem? As outsiders, it would be impossible for us to interfere."

Per royal law, it was illegal for one house to interfere with the succession of another house. It would also lead to expulsion from high society. Nobody wanted people sticking their noses into their own family affairs, and nobody wanted to associate with the sort of people who did that.

"Normally I'd let them do what they want," Ville answered, "but things are different if they're going to drag Lera in."

This seemed convincing enough for Louie.

"Of course. No brother in Peylon would let his younger sister be used for someone else's ends," he said.

"Indeed. But taking direct action against Sir Heridar is the job of my father and uncle. All we can do is whatever they ask of us."

He had a point. Even if I was at the center of this, I was still a minor, so I was best off just letting them take care of it. After all, I was just a kid!

"Right," Louie said with a nod and a grin. "We might be adults, but we're still short on experience."

"Oh? Not often I hear you give in like that."

"I've grown up, in my own way."

I had been sad to see him head off to another domain, but it looked like it had been worth it. As his sister, this made me happy.

"Oh, right," Louie said out of the blue, "what's the other reason Fezgahn's here?"

Louieee! You had to ask?! I withdraw my previous sentiment!

Why was this social super-butterfly so dense at times like these? Aaand now Ville's mood was plummeting.

Seeing Louie's confusion, Loks picked up the slack and explained. "Sir Yuin has asked for Lera's hand in marriage."

“Huh?!”

Surprising, isn’t it? Even I was thrown for a loop.

But when Louie recovered, he said something unexpected.

“Fezgahn’s the same age as Ville and myself. And Lera’s just turned fourteen. Ah, but that’s about right.”

“*Huh?!*” Ville exploded.

“No, think about it, Ville,” Louie calmly said. “Fezgahn had good grades at the academy and he’s got a bright future with the Knights of Obsidian. He’s only about six years older than Lera, no? Isn’t that a good age difference, as far as noble marriages go?”

“Even still!”

“Even Lera will have to get married eventually. You need to accept that, especially since the same goes for Colny.”

“There’s no need for *either* of them to get married!”

Ville, you shouldn’t have said that. Look, even Colny’s exasperated.

The case with the black knight was a bit irregular, but talk of marriage wasn’t odd in itself. At the academy, I had a few classmates who were already engaged.

Oh, right. Some of those engagements were in jeopardy. But those were older students—nobody from my grade. But the girl causing it all was expelled, so that won’t happen again. Right?

“So about the Knights of the White Summit,” Louie continued. “They’re investigating the Mystic Forest, right? They’re personally going in?”

Loks and Ville looked at each other. And just like them, neither Colny nor I knew a thing about what they were doing.

“If nothing else, they are entering the forest,” Loks replied.

“They are? So they took the beginner courses?”

“Only two of them. Those two, by the way, were Sir Rolfed of House Rellogad and Sir Iyale of House Nedon. Sir Yuin took the courses as well.”

“He did? Ville, you really need to let go of your animosity toward him. That’s a bad habit of yours.”

“Leave me alone.”

Loks and Louie both smirked at his childish tone. Ville always played the part of the oldest sibling, but sometimes he showed this other side of him. Personally, I thought it added to his charm. Though I had no idea if all that many girls knew about it.

“So what’s your opinion on those three?” Louie asked.

Ville furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Their performance!” Louis cried, slightly overlapping with Ville. “Are they cut out for the Mystic Forest? What sort of monsters have they taken down?”

This was the brother I knew and loved.

“Well, Fezgahn rapidly made his way to Layer Three,” Ville answered.

Wait, really? That’s awfully fast. It hasn’t even been two months.

“Layer Three? How long has he been at it?”

“He was in Peylon when the extended vacation began. He started entering the forest just a few days after our arrival.”

“So about two months? Damn, talk about progress!”

Louie’s glee was in strong contrast to Ville’s anger.

“Progress my foot! He’s only doing it to sway Lera!”

“So he’s got an objective to motivate him. What’s wrong with that? But how’s that going to sway Lera?”

“My brother put him up to it.”

“Loks!”

“Put him up to it?”

“That’s right,” Loks said, ignoring Ville’s ire. “He told Sir Yuin that there was no point in trying to court Lera if he couldn’t even reach the same layer as her.”

That’s how he put it?!

I gave Ville an unamused glare.

“Hmm.” Louie folded his arms. “Putting aside his source of motivation, Fezgahn has a lot of promise. And what about the two from the White Summit?”

“They’ve got motivation, I’ll give them that,” Ville said.

“I see…”

The white knights didn’t seem suited for hunting monsters.

“They’re good with magic. The issue is how they use it,” Ville elaborated. “I get the impression they’re not used to combat.”

“They’ve only been in the White Summit for about a year, haven’t they? Maybe they’re just inexperienced.”

“That might be the case, but that’s no reason for us to be soft on them.”

“Indeed. Monsters don’t care how experienced someone is.”

Yep. The monsters didn’t hold back, not even for a complete amateur. If you valued your safety, you were better off not entering the forest at all. But these guys were going because they were ordered to.

“Sir Heridar himself hasn’t entered the forest, has he?” Louie asked.

“Not even a step,” Ville answered.

And he probably didn’t plan to change that.

“In that case, the investigations are probably just a front. His real objective is probably something else,” Louie suggested. The Aspozat siblings all looked directly at me. “No, I don’t think it’s Lera. Something tells me she would just be a bonus to him.”

“You don’t think he’s serious about taking her in?” Ville asked.

“I think it just isn’t high on his priorities.”

“But he talked directly with her and my uncle.”

“Exactly. If he was dead set on making Lera part of House Yulville, he would have instead gone to Lord Duval.”

Ohh.

My father treated me like a nuisance, so I’m sure he wouldn’t have argued with anyone wanting to take me off his hands.

“That wouldn’t have happened,” Ville argued.

Louie was just as mystified as I was.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked.

“From listening to my mother, it sounds like Lera’s father deplores Yulville. So much that he wouldn’t do *anything* in Yulville’s interest, even if it came at his own expense.”

“What’s up with that?”

Yeah, really. What’s up with that?

“Even though he doesn’t care for Lera,” Ville continued, “if Yulville wants her, then Duval wouldn’t give her to him over his dead body.”

“What a terrible personality your father has, Lera.”

“C’mon, Louie, I already knew that.”

If his personality had been anything but terrible, he wouldn’t have tried to replace me with Ribbons.

“So what is Sir Heridar’s real objective then?” Ville asked, bringing us back on topic.

“Goodness if I know,” Louie replied. “But even if he’s not going in person, it bothers me that he’s so interested in the forest.”

“Could it be a distraction?”

“Then don’t you think just sending his knights to the perimeter of the forest, not inside, would suffice? The Mystic Forest is a dangerous place. Have they had any casualties?”

“A few of them have been injured.”

“Even knights specializing in magic are at risk out there. I’m

sure Sir Heridar's at least heard that some of his have been hurt, but he's still sending them in, isn't he? There must be a reason for that."

The room fell silent when Louie said that. There appeared to be something major afoot, but none of us had any idea what. It was like *something* unidentifiable had crept up on us without making a sound. Louie let out a small sigh, but it sounded uncomfortably loud in the still room.

"I've just been offering suppositions," he said. "None of us have any way of knowing what he's up to. All we can do is trust in my father and his allies. As I said earlier, we're inexperienced. Let's keep that in mind and try not to get in their way."

And that was what we planned to do.

Summer had reached its peak. Though Peylon was situated in the northern reaches of Ozeria, it was still a hot season. With its monsters and massive trees, the Mystic Forest gave off lots of moisture which made its environs quite humid. But for everywhere else in the region, it was more of a dry heat.

During this season, the far reaches of the forest were especially rainy, and with thunder to boot. It was just like the Mystic Forest to have rain clouds that simply stayed in one place for some reason. And what happened to all that rainwater anyway?

"Ahh, another scorching year," Colny sighed.

"Yep. It's always like this during the hunting festival," I replied.

The two of us were planning our outfits for the festivities that would be starting soon. But where had all these unfamiliar dresses come from? Sheila made them? Huh.

With the festival all but upon us, the Mystic Forest was off-limits for just about everyone. Even the square was closed off and kept under tight watch.

Apparently, there had been an incident in the past in which some drunk festival goer sneaked into the woods. Needless to say, that fool was no longer among the living. Don't take the Mystic Forest lightly. That incident had taken place during the middle of the hunting festival and forced the event to come to an early end. Fatalities tend to do things like that.

To prevent any similar foolishness, the forest was sealed off and guarded closely. This covered the three days preceding and

the three following the hunting festival, for a total of thirteen days. For nearly two weeks, nobody was allowed to even enter the square. And so everyone went on a hunting spree right before the closure. Including me.

Woo-hoo, another big haul.

Lately, the monsters coming out from the inner reaches had decreased, leaving only monsters that matched their layer. I had been told that the overflow signs came in waves, so the monsters pushed from the deeper layers would probably start reappearing in the shallow layers soon. It was just that once summer was over, it would be back to the royal capital for me. But I wanted to stay! And hunt!

"Lera, you're forming wrinkles in your brow," Sheila chided me.

"Sorry."

We were having a private dinner in Castle Varchudar's inner dining room.

The hunting festival would start the day after the next. I previously hadn't been allowed to even get close to the venue, but now I was going to be a formal participant. And as a host no less. Frankly, I wasn't feeling very confident in myself. But according to Sheila, any mistakes I made would be overlooked since I was still a child. In fact, now was the best time to make mistakes that I could learn from.

I still wasn't feeling great about it. I had made a token appearance at a ball last February, but that had been among limited company. I was told that because this was my first appearance at the hunting festival, there were some ladies interested in meeting me. Whatever for?

"Those ladies are aware that you'll inherit House Duval," Sheila explained.

"Mother, wasn't that matter still a secret?" Colny asked.

"Officially, it is. But nothing can remain a secret forever, and the other faction members need to be able to prepare for her to take over. And if the husbands know about it, their wives are bound to find out."

Interspousal intel sharing. For the nobility, spouses weren't just family—they were also partners in battle. The husband operated in male society, the wife in female society, and both worked in the house's interests. Houses that couldn't do that would fall behind. Like mine had.

“That reminds me, has House Duval been invited to this year’s festival?” Louie asked.

My shoulders twitched. That was a problem I hadn’t considered. As far back as I could remember, House Duval had never taken part in the hunting festival. That was another reason they were losing ground within the faction. I didn’t really think my father was capable of hunting. He had always had a portly figure. I heard he had been in shape long ago, but there wasn’t a hint of those days in his current appearance.

“No, we opted not to invite them this year,” Lord Peylon answered. “He hasn’t participated once since Lera started living here.”

Oh?

This meant he hadn’t partaken for almost eleven years. Wasn’t that pretty dire? I didn’t think this would inspire the other members to tell him to get the hell out of the faction or anything like that, but wasn’t it pretty important to socialize with your allies?

The Aspozat siblings all offered their own incisive opinions.

“It makes no difference whether he’s here or not,” said Ville.

“After all, he hasn’t been here in so long,” Loks added.

“If you did invite him, he’d probably bring that dreadful daughter of his, so this suits me just fine,” Colny opined.

“Dreadful daughter?” Louie asked, tilting his head.

I realized he had never seen Darnir.

“My…uh, younger, I think, half sister,” I answered.

“Ah, that one. Yeah, I’d rather not see her.”

There was a lot I wanted to say, but Ozeria wasn’t kind to the illegitimate children of nobles. I might add that Ribbons’s mother was a commoner. But that hadn’t stopped our father from giving us the same name and trying to replace me with her. Did he really think he wouldn’t be found out? Only a moron would think that plan would work.

Chapter Three: The Hunting Festival

The skies were fair on the first day of the hunting festival.

The festival was held not in the Mystic Forest, but in Refyabeck Forest. Unlike the Mystic Forest, this forest had been altered by the hands of man. It was near Chenoan, the regional capital, and for the duration of the festival we would stay there, in Swanille Manor. The manor grounds were sprawling and the main building itself was grand. Altogether, it was quite beautiful.

The grounds contained a number of annexes. With so many available rooms, the manor hosted everyone participating in the festival. This included myself and Lord Peylon, but only the festival participants were allowed to stay on the manor grounds. Everyone else was kindly asked to find lodgings in Chenoan.

Everyone taking part had gathered in Refyabeck Forest, waiting for the opening ceremony. Nearby were six canopies meant for the tent socials. I stood next to one, looking up at the sky.

“Oh, it’s rather blue.”

During this time of the year, Peylon almost never saw rainfall outside of the Mystic Forest. The rest of the region had a much drier climate.

“It appears a warm day is ahead of us,” Colny mumbled.

“Yep,” I mumbled back.

I glanced at the participants and found Louie. Next to him was the black knight, Mr. Frivolous, and Sir Nondescript. At first I thought this was odd, until I remembered that those three were there as his friends. Even if you weren’t invited, you could directly participate in the hunting by having the right friends. Participants were allowed to bring some pals along with them—up to three to be precise.

However, since rooms were in limited supply, hunters had to share with their tagalongs. The thing was, this trio had been put in another room because Louie was Lord Peylon’s adopted son.

“They should toss those three in with the spectators,” Ville muttered, very, *very* unhappy to see them.

No, Ville. That might work for Sir Nondescript (sorry) but throwing in the black knight and Mr. Frivolous would create an uproar.

For those who didn’t have invitations, there were still spaces they could spectate from. But there weren’t any seats or anything, just roped off areas near the forest. There were noblemen from other factions, but the majority of the audience was women. They all had their eye on some man or another, giving them the same energy as fans at an idol concert. No penlights or hand fans though.

All the participants had gathered at the starting point. From there, they would enter the woods and the hunt proper would begin. Among them, I spotted the white knight captain. Someone had brought him in as a friend and I really wanted to know who. But then Lord Peylon finished the commencements and the festival began, preventing me from finding the culprit.

While the men had fun hunting, I had to make social calls with the other women. The tents were divided into those for the upper, middle, and lower echelons of the faction. Everyone had already gone off to their respective tents, and the conversations were getting lively.

Sheila, Colny, and I started with a tent for the higher-ranked houses. Many of the ladies here were about the same age as Sheila. They had come here to watch their husbands or sons hunt, and some had brought their daughters as well.

Naturally, the mothers were all dressed to the nines, but so were the daughters. Their hair, clothes, and jewelry were splendid, but not extravagant. This came as no surprise, as most nobles of their stature had ladies-in-waiting who specialized in ensuring their clothes and accessories were of fine taste. I didn’t know any of these ladies-in-waiting, but they had all managed to bring out the best of their mistresses.

Each and every one of the younger ladies was much more interested in what was going on outside. The tent’s curtain was open wide, permitting a view deep into the forest, so all eyes were on the hunters. As much as it was for hunting animals, the hunting festival was also an opportunity to hunt for a spouse.

The same thing was probably going on in all the other tents. Best I could tell, Ville had the most eyes on him? But Louie was pretty popular as well. The thing about Louie was that he could get along with everyone, but nothing more than that. Nobody was ever special to him. As his sister, I worried for him.

But from these tents, we couldn’t see that much. Maybe the

ladies would appreciate it if we had a camera affixed to a drone or something and set up a large screen near the tent. Or perhaps we could make something like bleachers that they could watch from. But these idle thoughts were interrupted by a commotion outside.

"Oh my, what could that be?" said one unsettled lady.

"I believe it came from the viewing section," said another.

"Sheila, shall I go take a look?" I asked.

"No, you stay here. Somebody, if you would!"

Denied. Damn.

I had wanted to use that as my excuse to get out. Instead, one of the maids was ordered to investigate. She quickly returned and whispered something into Sheila's ear. Whatever it was, it seemed to surprise her.

Oh? What could this be?

Sheila took me from the tents to the edge of the forest where the spectators were allowed to stand. It was nothing more than a space marked by ropes, so there weren't any seats or anything. Every year, there would be a few people who would complain about this, so I figured that's what was going on. But I was wrong.

"Why won't you let me in?! I'll tell my father about this!"

"I'll have you know I'm a daughter of House Duval! Now show me in this instant!"

Why were Miss Cucumis Melos and Ribbons here? One was enough to give me a headache, but now I had to see both of them. The guards from Peylon's branch family were giving them scary looks. Main or branch family, the Peylon line was very proud of their homeland, and House Duval was despised by more than just the other royalists.

Although I was a Duval, I had lived in Peylon since I was three. More importantly, I had been disowned by my house, which had earned me the sympathy of most of Peylon. Thus I had a place at the hunting festival, while Ribbons did not. She was even going out of her way to drop her family's name. Too bad she didn't realize that the effect would be opposite what she intended.

And hadn't Miss Cucumis been driven from high society? Ah, no, that was the otome game heroine, daughter of Baron Whoever. Miss Cucumis was just expelled from the academy. But getting expelled from the academy that all nobles attended was

still a big hit to one's reputation. Most people in her position would be too embarrassed to go outside, or so I thought. And invoking her father's name wasn't going to do a whole lot all the way out here.

"I'd heard the rumors, but goodness gracious," Sheila said. Not even Sheila could handle them without clutching her head. Both were total nuisances. With Miss Cucumis, her father was the problem. But then again, the same could be said for Ribbons. But Lord Nallison was a different breed of awful compared to Duval.

"Lera, can you make a record of this?"

"Certainly."

I had already made cameras and playback devices, though that had been done with security in mind. And look at that, back at the academy they had helped provide evidence.

"Then please discreetly record this. It'll be of use later."

Later, you say?

Sheila's grin was scaring me. This must've been why she had taken me from the tents and not Colny. Intending to use it to record the hunting festival, I already had a camera and plenty of mana crystals ready. It never hurts to be prepared.

From the shadows, I began recording, but it was just more of the same racket.

"How long do you plan to keep this up?! I'm the daughter of Earl Nallison! I can have you peasants removed from your posts!"

Not quite. That man is from one of Peylon's branch families. That's the second son of Baron Jicent. Oh my, Zosasim is about to blow his stack.

"Do I need to repeat that I'm from House Duval?! *Let me in already!*"

You too, Ribbons. Give up already.

Once again, she was almost more ribbons than girl. Hadn't her house been removed from the guest list? And where was our father? Had this girl come by herself? A miracle she didn't get lost.

But since I was recording, I had to keep these thoughts to myself.



“Ahh, let me in already! I might miss my chance to gaze upon Yuin’s glory!”

Ribbons, I thought you were after the third prince? And don’t tell me you’re referring to the black knight?

“Huh?! You have your eyes on Fezgahn too? I can’t permit that!”

Oh, Miss Cucumis still hasn’t given up I see.

“Oh, *you’re* telling *me* what can and can’t be permitted? How bold, coming from the daughter of a backwater earl.”

“*E-Excuse me?!*”

Except they were both daughters of earls. Oh, but maybe it was more a matter of prestige? In that case, Duval was definitely lower. But Nallison was hurting thanks to the screwup of Miss Cucumis herself. Wait, maybe that was reputation, rather than prestige?

“Did you get it?” Sheila asked as catfight began to seem imminent.

“Perfectly.”

“Then there’s no need to let this continue. Apprehend those two!”

The moment Sheila gave her orders, Zosasim and the other guards had surrounded and removed the two from the premises. While they were fading from view, I heard cries of “Yuiiiiin!” and “Fezgaaahn!” Very spirited, those two.

The ruckus marked the end of the first day of the hunting festival. But at least I didn’t have to return to the tent socials.

I handed the video recording off to Sheila. After those two had been arrested, they were sent to a lodge in Chenoan. The plan was to send them back to the royal capital first thing in the next morning, along with a copy of the recording. I guess the message was that the footage would start going around if they cause us another headache. It sounded like intimidation to me, but that was probably fine. We could just call it preemptive peacekeeping.

I said the day had ended, but the main event hadn’t even started. That was the feast, which would be attended by hosts and guests alike. We sat around long tables in a massive living room. Before entering, we were told the seating arrangements, which would change every day. It was possible you could be surrounded by people you had never met. It was said this was

actually one of the best parts of the festival.

Now where am I sitting today? Oh, near the corner.

The card I held contained my name, table number, and seat number. No trading allowed, and no funny business of any form, variety, or manner.

I had changed from my day clothes to my evening attire—a simple blue dress that matched the color of my eyes. It wouldn't be a good idea to risk looking cheap at an event like this, so white baroque pearls were sewn into the dress at various points. But they invited more attention than I wanted.

Once again, my brooch concealed an operating camera. The incident with Ribbons and Miss Cucumis had reminded me that there was no telling what might happen and when. I was considering having a camera on for the entirety of the hunting festival.

The order in which we entered the living room that served as a dining hall was based on our house's rank. I was in an odd position because my family's rank would've put me near the end, but Lord Peylon and the Aspozats were much higher up. In the end, I was put near the middle.

"Miss Lowell of House Duval."

That was my signal to go in. The moment my name was called, a storm of whispers kicked up.

"Is that her?"

"I guess so..."

"Didn't we see her at the tent social?"

"But she never came to our tent? Does she think she's too good for us?"

Hm? What's this tension? It's not my fault the tent social ended early.

But I was just a kid. Nothing for me to do about it but make my way to the living room. And when I did, I got a hit by a wave of stabbing glares. This was supposed to be my turf, but I felt like an outsider.

Following my card, I went to a seat at the edge of one of the outer tables. I didn't recognize any of the people around me, meaning they must have been low in the faction hierarchy. I found myself making eye contact with the man across from me and he returned it with a glare. Had he read my thoughts or something?

In fact, the men on both sides of me were also looking at me

with chilly gazes. Had I done something wrong? Ah! Had they heard about the fuss Ribbons had caused? But that hadn't been my fault. I didn't make that happen.

The three all seemed to be on good terms though, and began talking about that day's hunting. A topic I couldn't be a part of. Whee. Yay.

Feasts like this were a common social event, so I had to do my best to stick it out if I didn't want a lecture from Sheila later. But I didn't see what I could do. I bit the bullet and accepted that a lecture was incoming. I focused on my food and didn't say a word for the duration of the meal.

The winner of the hunting festival was determined by the amount of points they had accrued over the seven-day period. Catching lots of prey was important, but not all critters were worth the same amount. For instance, one fox was worth more than two rabbits. Therefore, people aiming for first place played the long game and didn't focus on individual catches. Or so Loks had informed me.

On the second day, I was blindsided by another guest. Granted, this time it was shocking for very different reasons. It was the second prince who had shown up. Granted, this was an important event for the *royal* faction. The royal family probably figured it was important to pay a visit to an event held by their most ardent supporters.

The crown prince and the king's younger brother had visited us in the past, but now it was the second prince. I refrained from asking if this was a downgrade. Anyone directly related to the king was a big deal.

At the time, the crown prince was busy making official visits to the petty kingdoms in the south. That was the only reason he wasn't here. I knew this because I had heard Ville griping about it. The crown prince had tried to make him come along, but he, Thand, and His Majesty himself all put a stop to that. Ultimately, the crown went off all by his lonesome self.

Those two aren't like that*, right? The prince is engaged. It's not what I think, right?*

I didn't think the second prince would participate in the hunting, but that expectation was blown out of the water. And he had brought his betrothed, Besheallina, with him. Naturally, she was part of the tent socials. Since she was going to be joining the

royal family, she of course was placed with the rest of the faction's top members.

And our social calls once again started with the higher tents, so Sheila, Colny, and I all found ourselves with her. And at the same table, no less.

"It's been a few months," she said. "Have you been well?"

"I've been very well, thank you for asking," I replied. "And it's wonderful to see you again."

When I met Besheallina under these circumstances, she was calm and composed just like you'd expect from someone of her status. She had been furious when I'd first met her at the academy, but that was simply because of what had happened to her friend. Now, she was genially mingling with the wives and young ladies. Had Sheila put me here in hopes that I would learn from Besheallina's example? What a cruel thing to ask of my muscle-laden brain.

"I hear Sir Yuin and Sir Iyale are participating," she said.

Oh, she mentioned the black knight. That's right, those two were accompanying the crown prince when he appeared during that mess in the cafeteria. And Ville was there too.

"They're here as Shivan's friends. That young man sure has a wide range of acquaintances. Perhaps he could share some with me," a lady said with a laugh.

This was Heuteria, wife of Marquess Rabizay, the third most prominent member of the faction. She was getting a bit rotund in her later years, but her facial features suggested she had been very fine-looking in her younger days. And she had sharp eyes, the sort that nothing could get past. I had to mind every little movement I made.

"Oh, and speaking of friends," she said before pausing and glancing at me for some reason, "That man Lord Beyholson brought, that's Lord Yulville, captain of the Knights of the White Summit, correct?"

So that's it.

"He comes from a house of renowned mages, doesn't he?" Besheallina asked.

"Indeed. As you know, Miss Ropuid, they've produced many exceptional mages, and some of them have been magic instructors to the noble academy."

"Do you suppose he's good friends with Lord Beyholson?"

"I suppose I've never heard anything to suggest they're

particularly close."

House Beyholson ranked in the very middle of the faction, so Lady Beyholson would've been in another tent. I'd have to ask her a few questions when I went over there. And I'd have to do it when Sheila wasn't around.

Bringing up Lord Yulville in conversation was simple when you thought about it, but I was still terrified by how intuitive Heuteria was. She was probably of the same mind as Sheila and wanted me to learn a thing or two about how the socials worked. And I'll say it again! They were asking too much of the muscles in my skull!

The tent socials were held in the exact sort of structures you'd expect them to. The only people allowed to move between tents were the hosts. In other words, Sheila, Colny, and myself. Something about that was a little off to me.

More importantly, I was feeling a lot of pressure to carry out the mission imposed by Heuteria. We had just finished our rounds at the tent for the most important figures and were now moving to the second tent.

"Lera, you look dreadful," Colny noted with a look of concern.

"I can't believe you'd say that, Colny."

Dreadful, she said. She could at least specify that she was talking about my complexion. But I knew that I had a grave look on my face, so I couldn't tell her she was wrong.

"Did Heuteria say something to you?" Sheila asked.

I flinched. I broke out in a cold sweat as I tried to think of something to say, but instead I just raised the white flag. No point in trying to fool her.

"She wants me to ask around and figure out the real reason Lord Yulville is participating in the hunting festival," I admitted.

"That sounds very like her. Do you think you can do it?"

"I'm drawing a blank for ideas."

Never send a meathead to a battle of wits and expect good results, but Sheila wasn't going to cut me any slack.

"Well, you must think of something."

"Urgh..."

"You don't have to take a direct approach, you know? Perhaps you can play to your strengths and use magic?"

What's that mean?

I looked at Sheila and saw that she and Colny were both giving me *very* big grins. Goodness.

“Don’t worry,” Sheila assured me, “House Beyholson sits in the very middle of the faction hierarchy.”

“But, mother, could this incident lower them?”

“It’s possible.”

Fear the menace that is internal politics.

Magic, she said? If she said I can use it, then I may as well.

Lady Beyholson was in the third tent we visited. This was where all the middle-ranked houses were. Once again, if glares were knives I’d have been stabbed several times over already. I glanced around, and sure enough, I didn’t see any familiar faces. First at the dinner party, now this. What was their deal?

“Everyone, allow me to extend my warmest welcomes,” Sheila announced the moment we entered, a beaming smile on her face.

Ah, right, I’ve got bigger concerns.

The ladies all stood from their seats and bowed. This was because House Aspozat was the top of the royal faction. Come to think of it, Peylon was pretty high up there as well.

Since Sheila knew about Heuteria’s request, she put me at the same table as Lady Beyholson.

Let’s get started, shall we?

If you wanted information from someone, you could do much worse than use confessional magic. However, for nobles, being subjected to one of these spells was terribly humiliating. Even if you didn’t do anything wrong, the fact remained that someone felt it necessary to use the spell on you.

So if you wanted to use a confessional spell, you had to fill out a document and get permission from the royal palace. I didn’t have time for that, so I had to consider other options.

So now what? Even if it wasn’t as effective as confessional magic, people became a bit loose in the lips if they were relaxed. So I just had to put everyone in the tent at ease!

“I imagine you’re all tired after your long journey,” Sheila said. “With your permission, Lowell here would like to use a spell to ease your weary bodies.”

I gave them a brief bow.

From throughout the tent, I heard many favorable words, but just one group voiced their opposition.

“Lady Aspozat, I appreciate the sentiment, but I’d like to express my hesitation.”

“Likewise.”

“Indeed.”

I got a clear recording of all three of them.

“May I ask why?” Sheila said.

“Well, I believe it should be obvious enough,” one of them said.

“If someone’s going to cast a spell on you, it should be someone you can trust,” said another.

So they didn’t trust me?

“I see,” Sheila said, clenching her fist. “Lera, can you ensure that those three won’t be affected? We can’t use magic on them against their will.”

“Leave it to me.”

It was quite easy. All I had to do was put up a barrier that covered everyone but those three, then cast the spell inside the barrier. All that really mattered was that Lady Beyholson received the spell, and fortunately, she was not among the objectors. I looked at her and realized she didn’t look too well. Maybe she needed the relaxing spell regardless of my information-seeking attempts.

I quickly had the barrier up and then followed up with the calming spell. The holdouts continued to glare at me.

“I don’t like those three,” Colny whispered to me. “Why doesn’t mother do anything about them?”

“She probably wants us to do something ourselves,” I whispered back.

Colny accepted this answer. It seemed like the sort of thing her mother would do.

My preparations were finished and by the sound of it, the spell was being received well.

“Oh, I feel as though a weight’s been lifted off my shoulders.”

“You’re right. I was so high-strung it was giving me headaches, but now they’re gone.”

“I’m pleased to see my efforts have paid off.” Offering those special words and a genial smile, I took a seat next to Lady Beyholson. “And you, Lady Beyholson, appear to have had your worries cleared away. I’m very relieved.”

“Oh, look at me, earning the concern of a lady younger than my own son,” she said.

“Think nothing of it. By your son, are you referring to your heir?”

“No, my second son—oh!”

Huuuh?

She suddenly started crying! What for?!

“Lady Beyholson, are you all right?!”

I tried to console her, but the tears didn’t stop. Per Sheila’s orders, the lady and I moved to the medical station. Crying in front of others made you a failure of a noblewoman.

The medical station was set up for healing injured hunters and was staffed with expert magic healers from the institute. The large tent was divided by partitions, but not of any normal variety. These partitions had magic barriers that kept noises and smells from spreading throughout the tent. Lady Beyholson looked so tired she might collapse at any moment, so I borrowed one of the beds and laid her down in it.

“Forgive me. I’ve made such a disgrace of myself.”

“Not at all. If you’re so inclined, I’d be willing to lend an ear to your troubles. They say talking about your problems makes you feel better, and you might not expect it, but I’m quite good with healing magic.”

Lady Beyholson chuckled when she saw me puff out my chest. That was good. If you can still smile, it’s not all bad.

“Not at all like the rumors,” she muttered.

“Huh?”

“Oh, just talking to myself. Now, I suppose I’ll take you up on that offer. You see, our second son has a passion for magic, and that led him to join the Knights of the White Summit.”

White Summit. That’s the white knight captain’s bunch.

“Frankly, my second son—Rojair is his name—he has no talent for magic. Still, he pursued his passion and was overjoyed when he managed to pass the exams for the White Summit.”

Wrinkles formed on Lady Beyholson’s brow. She lay on her back, a spiteful look entering her eyes.

“At the end of May, Lord Yulville came to our home to have a private discussion with my husband. I wasn’t informed of what they had discussed…until some time later.”

So it was just Lord Yulville and Lord Beyholson. That wasn’t unheard of or anything, but they were connected through the latter’s son, right? In that case, Lady Beyholson normally would’ve joined them. Similarly, it would’ve been standard practice for the white knight captain to be accompanied by his own wife. It wasn’t a violation of manners for a man to visit by

himself, but it was certainly strange.

"My husband clearly had something eating at him for days after Lord Yulville's visit. I couldn't bear it any longer and asked to know. And..."

"And?"

"He had asked my husband to arrange for his participation in the hunting festival."

So the white knight captain had been the one to suggest it? If the conversation she was talking about happened at the end of May, then this was before he had come to Peylon. Before there were any signs that the Mystic Forest might overflow. So the overflow had no bearing on his desire to partake in the festival.

"And your husband agreed to this request?"

Lady Beyholson silently nodded before saying, "My husband was told that Rojair's safety couldn't be guaranteed otherwise. Rojair wasn't able to come to the festival because he was given an assignment."

While speaking, Lady Beyholson had buried her head in her hands and began to sob. She was simply a mother concerned for her child.

By the sound of it, the white knight captain was using the young man as a hostage in order to intimidate his parents. What a scummy old man. I would have to tell Lord Peylon about this. But could I tell Heuteria about this? I'd have to ask Sheila first.

I guess you could say the second day of the festival went smoothly? If nothing else, there wasn't anything like the commotion of the first day.

Though I heard that Ribbons and Miss Cucumis would be kept in their inn for the rest of the festival. Originally, they were supposed to have been sent back in the morning. Something about the planned arrival of the second prince prevented them from getting sent back, and there wouldn't be anyone available to take them home until the festival was over.

They would be confined to their rooms, with the inn employees taking turns keeping watch. But don't think they were just some innkeeps—these were people who also regularly hunted in the Mystic Forest.

I handed the recording which included the conversation with Lady Beyholson over to Sheila. Heuteria gave me a look suggesting she wanted to be in the know, but I didn't think it was my place to decide that. I reminded her that I was just a child, to

which Sheila grinned wryly. I didn't know what Thand, Sheila, and Lord Peylon were going to think when they saw the recording; I just hoped the Beyholsons could be left in peace.

Our lodge for the time being, Swanille Manor, wasn't splendorous, but its straight-edged design had its own utilitarian beauty. It had an art deco style interior, prompting me to ask: Did someone from my old world have a hand in the construction?

My room, and those occupied by the Aspozats, were located in the space reserved for Lord Peylon's family. I had nothing to do until the feast and was hanging around my room when Sheebis came in.

"Young miss, Viltheoshila is calling for you."

"She is?"

Hm? I already gave her the footage. I played my part. What does she want now?

"Oh, I'll have to get changed."

"She said you can come in your loungewear."

It was that urgent? I followed Sheebis and found myself taken not to Sheila's room, but to Lord Peylon's. Did this have something to do with the white knight captain?

"Pardon me, I've brought the young miss," Sheebis announced.

"Enter," Sheila responded from inside the room.

When Sheebis opened the door, I saw the people I was expecting to, and one more. It was Marquess Zokbahr. He was a gruff old guy, somewhere around the age of Lord Peylon. Lord Peylon and Sheila's great-grandfather's younger sister had married into House Zokbahr, making them distantly related. Many children found him scary on account of his large stature and sharp gaze, although the beard probably had something to do with it as well.

Lord Peylon smiled and said, "Sorry for calling you out here before dinner."

"Not at all," I replied vaguely.

"No need for all the ceremony," the marquess said with a grin. "This is a private meeting. Relax a bit."

There was no point in loitering in the doorway, so I took a seat on the sofa.

"Lera, we called you to discuss what we heard from Lady Beyholson," Sheila said.

Were they talking about how the white knight captain was using her son as a hostage?

"You see, we've figured out what Lord Yulville is after," Lord Peylon explained.

That was quick. I was surprised, but then I noticed Lord Zokbahr nodding.

Hmmm? Could it be that the white knight captain is after Lord Zokbahr?! What a reckless move.

"I take it you've figured out that it's me he's after?" he said, looking at my face.

"Oh? No, not quite…"

"No, you've got the right idea. Or rather, that bastard has the *wrong* idea."

Lord Zokbahr was awfully easygoing about it. Honestly, what could incite the white knight captain to go after a guy like this?

"Your Excellency, what did the whi—what did Lord Yulville ask of you?"

"That I change factions. And man did that make me laugh."

Ohh, reckless indeed.

"But I'll give him credit, he did make a tempting offer," Lord Zokbahr added.

"Oh? May I ask what?" Lord Peylon said.

"Yeah, I don't mind. You know that the Yulville domain has mines that produce quality magic silver, yes? He said he'd hand the mines over to me."

"The rights to his mines? Has he gone insane?"

"Who knows? Maybe he wasn't planning to keep that promise."

Magic silver was extraordinarily valuable and hard to come by. It conducted mana well, so it was used in the making of magic circuits as well as many of the institute's magic tools. To be precise, the ore wasn't really magic silver until after it was processed. The steps involved were kept a secret.

For some reason or another, the Yulville domain had lots of magic silver mines. There was…probably a connection between his house and the mines. But saying this would be like the revealing production process, so I'll keep my mouth closed like a good girl.

So I had learned that the white knight captain was hoping to have Lord Zokbahr, a central figure of the royal faction, switch sides. In exchange for this, he would receive control over some

mines. Knowledge is power and I saw no harm in knowing this.

The white knight captain might've been on the right path, but he had picked the wrong person to try and sway. House Zokbahr were fervently loyal to the royal family. That would've been obvious to anyone who spent any time in the royal palace. Did the white knight captain not have any friends to tell him that?

"The rights to those mines is nothing to scoff at, but I still can't believe he thought that would be enough to sway you, Sir Revan," Lord Peylon said.

Lord Zokbahr, or Sir Revan, smiled dryly.

Ohoh? What's that for?

"Well, he also tried to bring my father into it," he said.

"The previous Lord Zokbahr?"

"As you know, my father and I, well, let me be blunt—we don't get along at all."

He went and said it. The animosity between those two was well-known and it didn't seem like they made any attempt to hide it. But wasn't that normally something you'd want to keep from getting out? It makes the house look bad and all.

"Lord Yulville has a tenuous relationship with his own father," Lord Zokbahr continued, "so I guess he thought he could use this common point to his advantage."

"A shallow move," Lord Peylon remarked.

"Got that right. My circumstances aren't anything like his. It's insulting he even thought we were similar."

Please restrain yourself, Lord Peylon. You look very scary when you're angry.

The white knight captain's offer seemed to have ticked him off severely. Getting on people's nerves was one thing that man seemed to be good at.

As he consoled Lord Peylon, Lord Zokbahr grinned as though something had occurred to him. "Well, rejecting his offer right in front of him was pretty good."

"What did you say?" I asked.

This was something I wanted to hear. And *boy* did I get an answer.

"Y'know, I looked him in the eye and said straight to his face, 'I decline. Simply put, I don't like you.'"

Pfff.

That sounded familiar. Lord Peylon burst out laughing and Sheila was leaning over, attempting to contain herself.

Yep, I had said something pretty similar. Congratulations to the white knight captain on his second blunt refusal. It didn't seem he got much respect.

"Do you think Lord Yulville is acting with the approval of the rest of the neutral faction?" Sheila asked.

"No, he's not," Lord Zokbahr answered.

What makes him so sure?

"If he was working with the rest of his faction, he would've offered something related to the other neutralists. Instead, he tried to give me mines from his own domain. Lord Yulville is definitely doing this on his own."

So that's it.

"The neutral faction isn't united like us or the noble faction. The change of faction was probably an indirect way of asking for me to aid his house."

If that was what he wanted, he should've just said so instead of trying to get Lord Zokbahr to change his allegiance. But asking for help doesn't come easy to nobles.

If these two houses were on friendly terms, then it would have been different. But otherwise, asking for help would put House Yulville in a disadvantageous position. Matters like this were why nobles built bonds through marriages and created factions. There wasn't much a house could accomplish on its own.

"What would happen if the other neutralists found out what the white knight captain is doing?"

"Do you mean Lord Yulville?"

Oh, darn. Slip of the tongue.

I got a small scolding from Lord Peylon, but Zokbahr was laughing.

"That's right," he said. "I forgot he was serving as the captain of the Knights of the White Summit. Well, it's fine. This is a private conversation and you're not technically wrong."

He really was an easygoing guy.

After brute forcing his way into the hunting festival, not only had the white knight captain not gotten what he wanted—he had made an enemy of Lord Zokbahr in the process. Would he continue to hunt for the remaining days? I got my answer from the marquess.

“He’ll stay. If he runs home now, he’ll just become a laughingstock.”

“It must be tough being a noble.”

“You’re a noble too.”

Oh, that’s right. I forget sometimes.

“Right, I hear that Fezgahn boy proposed to you.”

Ack, who told you that?!

“So how about it? Are you gonna take him up on his offer?”

“I will not!”

“What? Sheila says you have until next year to figure it out.”

Gnashing my teeth, I looked at Sheila and saw her grinning. I turned back to Lord Zokbahr and said, “I barely know him.”

“So take this year to get to know him. Unless there’s some other problem? Is he not good enough?”

“No…”

I didn’t like how hard this man was selling the black knight. Were they friends or something?

“You can really throw Yulville for a loop if you marry the Fezgahn boy. Doesn’t Yulville want you to get hitched to some other guy and take over House Duval?”

Like hell I’m gonna get married just to piss some other guy off!

The third day of the hunting festival opened with more commotion.

“AAAUGH!”

I was in my room getting ready when I heard the scream. Since it had reached my ears, I couldn’t just play dumb. Hadn’t even had breakfast yet.

I left my room and headed to the source of the scream, when I ran into Louie and the Aspozat siblings.

“What was that scream?” I asked them.

“Dunno,” Louie replied. “Don’t even know where it came from.”

“It sounded like it came from one of the annexes,” Loks observed. “They must have quite a voice if it carried all the way to the main building.”

That’s what catches your interest?

“That was amplified with magic,” Colny told her brother.

“It was? Hmm.”

Loks didn’t seem entirely convinced. But voice amplification spells were often used in emergencies. Sometimes, calling for help doesn’t work if your voice doesn’t reach very far.

Oh, maybe I should make an emergency beeper. With magic, that shouldn't be difficult.

When we reached the annex's entry hall, a crowd had already formed. Crouched down at the center was a woman I had seen at the tent social. It was one of the off-putting women who had turned down my relaxation spell.

"She's an off-putting one," Colny said.

"Yeah."

So Colny remembered her as well.

A gentle old lady made her way through the crowd and asked the sniffling lady, "What's the matter? I heard you screaming not long ago."

"M-My necklace is gone! It's an heirloom from my mother!"

"Oh dear."

The lady's necklace had been stolen, hence the amplified scream. During this time of the year, Swanille Manor's security was tight. They used every security spell the institute had to offer and every magic tool they could get their hands on. Basically, sneaking in from outside the manor wouldn't be easy; however, movement within the manor grounds was fairly unrestricted. So it was very likely the culprit was someone on the inside.

But that doesn't matter much. Thanks to the grand powers of confessional magic, this should be easy—

Before I realized it, the lady from the center of the crowd had gotten up and approached me.

"You stole it, didn't you?!"

"Pardon?"

"Nobody else here is so low as to resort to larceny!" she screamed. "It couldn't be anybody but you!"

God, that's one hell of an allegation. Worse than the time Ribbons accused me of stealing her grades.

The hunting was put on hold on account of the missing necklace. And we couldn't really have the tent socials under these circumstances.

Word of the incident had instantly spread across Swanille Manor. Lord Peylon and his people took charge of the search. However, I was sitting quietly in my room because I was *technically* a suspect. But I heard among the higher-ranked houses that not many people actually suspected me.

That necklace was a pearl necklace. It was something that woman, Lady Nachenohahg, had obtained from her mother. But those pearls were white. With my own hands, I could obtain black pearls and make any number of accessories with them. Most people aware of that saw no reason to think I would feel the need to steal a necklace. And who would steal without the need to?

And who would be affected by this? I would never do something that would reflect badly on Lord Peylon, or Sheila, or even Louie and the Aspozat siblings.

"This is kind of unfair," I muttered without realizing it.

I was doing a good job repenting in my room. Even though I hadn't done anything. Still, if I were to start wandering around the manor, that would've just further angered Lady Nachenohahg. I knew this was our best option, but it still felt pretty unreasonable.

If we really have to, we can use confessional magic on everyone here.

I knew that was absurd, but the thought crossed my mind as I searched for ideas.

It wasn't just the hunting that was canceled. Out of consideration for the victims, the feast was canceled as well. While this came as a relief to me, I didn't enjoy the gloomy atmosphere that hung over the manor. But I had a number of adults working to help me, so I couldn't get involved myself. I was, after all, a suspect, though I couldn't say it with a straight face.

With the feast called off, dinner that night was just family and a guest. It was Lord Peylon, Louie, the whole Aspozat family, the black knight, and myself. We refrained from inviting Mr. Frivolous and Sir Nondescript. I felt bad about it, but they were too close to the white knight captain.

"What are you doing here?" Ville asked, not at all happy to see the black knight.

With some confusion he replied, "I was invited by Lord Peylon?"

"Uncle!" Ville barked.

"What are you bristling about, Ville?" Lord Peylon said. "Sir Yuin is courting Lera, so we may as well treat him like family for the time being."

“I think you’re jumping to conclusions!”

Years of dealing with the brutes that ventured into the Mystic Forest had made Lord Peylon accustomed to being hollered at. Watching them from the sidelines, I let out a small sigh in spite of myself.

“Not the most enjoyable day, was it?” Sheila asked me, taking notice.

Of course not. I was locked up in my room the entire time.

“I hope they hurry up and find the thief,” I said. “If they really need to, can’t they just use a dog to track the scent?”

“A dog? Perhaps. I have heard that their sense of smell is greatly superior to a human’s.”

Everyone seemed to have been caught off guard by my suggestion. Ozeria must not have police dogs.

“Um, so our scent tends to rub off on things we keep close to us. Though the scent fades over time,” I explained. “If we had a dog trained to seek out scents that matched an item presented to them, we might be able to find the necklace.”

“Really? But surely this requires training?”

“Yes. It does.”

It seemed like a good idea at first. Because of the festival, Peylon had plenty of dogs trained for hunting. But I was just now learning that there were no dogs trained to track scents specifically.

Ahh, back to square one.

“But where did you hear about such things?” Colny asked.

A very astute question!

“Huh?! Uh. I just overheard it. Somewhere. You could say.”

It was a poor excuse, but Colny accepted it. I couldn’t just say, “Oh yeah, it’s something I picked up in a past life.”

During this conversation, the black knight seemed to be staring at me, but I wouldn’t learn why until later.

Even after a full day of searching, the necklace hadn’t shown up. So on the fourth day of the festival, the hunting was once again canceled. Similarly, the tent socials were canceled. In their place, a small tea party for houses close to us was held in the manor garden.

Colny, Sheila, and I were enjoying our tea with sweets made by the specialist—the *pâtissier*—from Castle Varchudar. Today we were having madeleines, cookies, and financiers. While I was in

the midst of relishing these tasty treats, I overheard a very ominous conversation.

“Honestly, this is getting on my nerves. The necklace ought to be returned.”

It sounded like there were people on the other side of the hedge. More than that, it sounded like the theft victim and her cronies. Colny and Sheila were both holding still.

“Indeed. How long does this lie need to continue?”

“This has always bothered me. That girl’s a Duval, yet she was taken in by Peylon and Aspozat. They should just be rid of her!”

Wooow.

These people really didn’t like me. Or maybe it was House Duval that they had a bone to pick with? Couldn’t blame anyone for not liking my father. Not to mention my grandfather was said to be something of a moron to boot. Honestly, two successive generations of bad Lord Duvals. What were they doing over there? They really needed to think about what they were doing to their kids and grandkids. But perhaps that was asking too much.

From what I could tell, my grandfather had taught my father some nonsense that made him think he could neglect his faction. It was also my grandfather who had put the house on a path of decline. What a joke.

Besides, my grandfather was deceased, and my father wasn’t here at the festival, so why did I, their unwanted heir, have to inherit the resentment aimed at them? It was unfair in the extreme.

“Colny.”

“On it, mother.”

That seemed to be all the indication Colny needed. She quietly conjured a barrier around the three of us. This didn’t just block incoming sounds—it kept the outgoing sounds in.

“What terrible things to say from baseless assumptions,” Sheila remarked.

“They seemed none too fond of Lera. That’s because she’s Duval, isn’t it?”

“By the sounds of it. They’re terribly ill-informed.”

“Those voices belong to Ladies Nachenohahg, Lugiyos, and Egolin, right?”

“The other middle houses quite dislike those three.”

Really now? So I’m unpopular among other unpopular people. I

can live with that.

According to Sheila, the necklace woman and her cronies had allowed being part of the royal faction to go to their heads. That was fine and all, but they were all too sensitive to where people stood on the hierarchy; they curried favor with those above them and they disdained anyone below them. Your typical climbers.

"The result is that both the lower and upper houses have less than favorable views of them," Sheila told us.

"Oh, just the opposite of what they were hoping for. And that's why they dislike Lera so much."

"Indeed."

Whaddya mean "indeed?"

I was totally out of the mother-daughter loop here.

"I take it you don't follow, Lera?" Colny said.

"Yeah."

"Those women want to be friends with the ladies of the upper houses. That means people like my mother, Lady Zokbahr, and Lady Rabizay. But their efforts haven't exactly paid off. Instead, they're being kept at a respectful distance. Meanwhile, the ladies of the upper houses have all taken a shine to you."

"They...have?"

"They have! And you didn't even need to lick their boots to make it happen."

Well, yeah. The ladies of the upper houses all seemed like the type to be repelled by obvious fawning. With their status, they probably had to deal with people trying to curry favor with them all the time.

"And that's why these three despise you. Do you see now?"

"Umm. Because without any real effort, I attained something that they want. Is that it?"

"So you *do* get it."

For some reason, Colny puffed out her chest. I certainly didn't mind, what with the ultra grade stat line she was flaunting.

Damn it all. Just half that size, that's all I'm asking.

Once we were done with our tea, I headed back to my room and ran into the black knight on the way.

"Miss Lowell, were you in the garden?"

"Yes. I was enjoying tea with Colny and Sheila."

I also got to hear some terrible slander while I was at it. Some people, I swear.

“Allow me to walk you back to your room,” he offered.

“Just partway is fine.”

My first instinct had been to turn him down. Although, I had been taught not to do that, because it would make him look bad. It didn’t matter anyway. The top floor of the main building was only accessible to people close to Lord Peylon. It had the same sort of door as the one installed in Castle Varchudar. He could only go as far as the staircase, so I would just let him take me that far.

There were a few staircases within the main building, but only one went all the way to the top floor. While this was a good security measure, I had my concerns about emergency evacuations. It was to that staircase that we went when I spotted a suspicious figure wandering around. There were plenty of security cameras in place, so I could have the institute check them later.

“Can I help you?” I called, and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

Hm?

The shady person, who looked like he was one of the festival’s hunters, quickly corrected his posture and called back, “What?! I have business up ahead.”

“Up ahead?”

“Is there something wrong with me being here?! And aren’t you that thief?! Do you really have any right to tell me how to act?”

Excuse me?

If he had kept quiet, I would’ve let him go. Except he hadn’t. Point is, I wasn’t happy. Just as I was about to respond, something black obscured my vision.

“Please, withdraw that statement.”

It was the black knight. He was standing in front of me.

“Just who do you think you’re—”

“I don’t care who you are. I want you to withdraw that statement and apologize for spouting slander based on nothing more than hearsay.”

It was at this point that I realized this was one of the guys who had sat near me at the first dinner party. I recognized him now. Him and his condescending glare.

“D-Damn you, just stay out…” the man’s voice was trembling. I didn’t know what he was hoping to accomplish, but he swung at

the black knight, who easily caught his wrist.

"Your withdrawal and apology," he stated flatly.

"Ow, owowow."

The black knight must've really been clamping down, but this guy had it coming. Things usually turn violent when you attack people who swing a sword as part of their job. The man became teary-eyed, but he still refused to offer any apology. The black knight wasn't relenting, and I was at a loss for what to do.

Then we heard a scream from somewhere behind us.

"What was that?"

"Something must've happened."

Well, let's go see.

The black knight let go of the man's wrist, letting him fall to the ground. We weren't supposed to run in the halls, but he took my hand and off we dashed. If Lord Peylon or Sheila caught us, we'd have a lecture incoming. I heard the man tell us to wait, but I ignored him. Who's stupid enough to actually wait just because someone tells them to?

The scream had come from the main building's second floor, where the visitors from the upper houses were staying. I hoped it wasn't actually anything serious.

When we arrived, there were already plenty of rubberneckers. And someone I knew.

"Lord Peylon."

"Lera? Follow me."

He took me to a secluded spot, away from potential onlookers. For whatever reason, the black knight tagged along.

"Has something happened?" I asked.

"Another theft. This time it was something belonging to Lady Bulbson."

Ohh. That's one of the faction's upper houses. At the socials, she was in the tent for the ladies at the very top.

One of Lady Bulbson's accessories had been stolen. It was her favorite brooch, and like the necklace, it was a piece made with pearls.

"She didn't just misplace it, right?" I checked.

"They say she's a diligent character who always makes sure to put her jewelry in the same place."

So it was almost definitely another case of larceny. But after the last incident, security was supposed to have been tightened.

"Should we check the security cameras?" I said.

“Yeah, they might’ve gotten something.”

Off we go then.

Even during the hunting festival, the institute was busy doing their thing. Of course, it’s not like they had much overlap with the hunters.

“Oh, my lord, welcome,” the kind lady at the front desk said when she saw the three of us arrive. “What brings you here?”

“Is Jian around? I have something to ask him.”

“Certainly. Bea—*the chief* is presently in his office on the third floor.”

She was totally about to call him “Bear,” wasn’t she? I mean, that’s fine.

The office was neat and tidy as usual. Bear was a fastidious fellow.

“Oh? What brings you here, Kend?”

“I want to check the security cameras of Swanille Manor.”

“Something happen?”

“Theft.”

“Hold up. Again? Stealing from that manor during this time of the year is borderline lunacy.”

He had that right. That manor was filled with super scary people. In some ways, the criminal was pretty brave.

The camera footage was all kept in the recording room.

“What number was Swanille Manor again…” Bear mumbled. The cameras all had assigned numbers, and their footage was sorted correspondingly. “Ah, here we go.”

Bear held up a mana crystal. These were made using monster materials and could hold reserves of mana. Lately though, I had been using them to store visual and audio recordings. With a spell I could project their contents straight from the crystal, or use a variety of projection devices to display them.

Since we were just doing a precursory check, I opted for a spell. When the image appeared, I heard the black knight gasp. Seemed like he had never seen something like this before.

“The inner area of Swanille Manor’s second floor, right?”

“Right. Show us everything after the start of the hunting festival,” Lord Peylon answered.

“Roger that.”

We would’ve been there for days if I simply showed the

footage normally, so I played it at three times the normal speed. And soon enough, we spotted a suspicious figure. And it was one I was very familiar with. I could clearly see her enter and leave Lady Bulbson's room.

"*Hm?*" Bear said. "Isn't this Earl Nallison's daughter? She caused a real fuss at the academy, didn't she?"

"Yeeep."

Honestly, Miss Cucumis, what in the world are you doing?

Chetasokia, daughter of Earl Nallison, or Miss Cucumis as I called her, was being confined to an inn for the trouble she and Ribbons had caused. Somehow, she had managed to sneak out and steal jewelry from Swanille Manor.

You are the daughter of an earl! Why would you resort to theft? The hell are you thinking?! Cucumis you melodramatist!

I was about to pull my hair out, but the two adults in the room were far more serious.

"Is that girl skilled enough to infiltrate Swanille Manor on her own?" Lord Peylon asked.

"Nah," Bear replied. "I never saw it in person, but they said she wasn't an exceptional mage. Her electives were all maidenly courses."

"Which means she has an accomplice."

"What a headache."

That sounded bad. But we were dealing with a crime, so things were already pretty bad actually.

Huh? Something just passed through my brain. What was that? Something about this being bad? Or was it—ah!

"The security cameras!" I blurted.

"What are you shouting about, Lera?"

"Lady Nachenohahg's necklace! If we check the security cameras, we might see who entered her room!"

Bear and Lord Peylon exchanged glances.

What?

"Lera, that was the first thing we did when the necklace went missing. But we didn't see any suspicious figures."

"Huh?"

"The only people we saw were the other people in her annex, Lord and Lady Lugiyos, and Lord and Lady Egolin, and Lord Nachenohahg."

So how did the necklace go missing?

Lord Peylon dispatched some people to apprehend Miss Cucumis. But when they got to her inn room, they found that not only was *she* missing, but Ribbons was gone as well.

"Don't tell me Ribbons is giving Miss Cucumis a hand in this," I said, clutching my head.

"I don't want to think about it," Lord Peylon replied, doing the same.

"Excuse me," the black knight said. "What do you mean by 'Miss Cucumis'? And 'Ribbons'?"

Crap.

I had another slip of the tongue. But Lord Peylon hadn't thought anything of it.

"I heard about it from Colny," he explained. "She told me about the odd names you have for those two."

"They're not odd! It's just how they appear. Miss Cucumis has a chest of cucumis melos, and Ribbons is always covered in ribbons."

"Forthright as ever. And by *cucumis melos*, you mean melons, correct?"

"Lord Peylon, how vulgar! But, yeah, you're right."

Then I heard the black knight muttering, "Ah, I see. Melons," to himself! I guess he remembered that part of her! *Men*.

But more important was the whereabouts of Miss Cucumis. This wasn't like the kidnapping case at the academy festival. I still didn't have a spell to seek out specific individuals.

Maybe we could still do something with the police dog idea?

"Do you think we should head over to the institute and ask Nielle to make a spell that can track scents?" I proposed.

"To search for Lord Nallison's daughter? Peylon's pretty large, and formulating a new spell takes time we don't have."

He was right. So what were we to do? I began to think it over, when a suggestion came from an unexpected source.

"I may be able to help."

It was the black knight, much to my and Lord Peylon's surprise.

"Oh, Sir Yuin, we can hardly trouble you with—"

"It's not widely known, but some members of my bloodline are born with special powers."

Whaaat?

To think the black knight would suddenly say "Truth be told, I

have extrasensory perception!" But this world had magic, and I guess magic and ESP are often hand in hand?

Lord Peylon and I both looked at him agape, but he just smiled awkwardly.

"You may not believe me, but I can sense other people's mana."

"Oh, that makes sense," I said. "There are people like that at the institute."

Such as Nielle. She once told me she could sense the flow of mana and whatnot. But according to the black knight, his abilities were a few grades above the norm.

"In my case, I detect it through olfaction," he continued.

"*Olfaction*," I repeated.

"I can distinguish people's mana through scent. However, it's almost unbearable when I meet someone with unpleasant mana."

Is that really his sense of smell at work? Does my mana stink?

I began to sniff myself, but when I did, the black knight grabbed my hand.

"Miss Lowell, your mana has a wondrous aroma. It's sweet and refreshing, like the finest flower."

Aaahhh, I'm going to die of embarrassment.

I know, he was complimenting me, but it was *awkward*. Embarrassing. I had to resist the urge to yell and flail my arms.

Lord Peylon cleared his throat and said, "Ah, so to put it simply, if you follow the scent of the Nallison girl, we might be able to find her?"

"Most likely."

"Right. Lera, go with Sir Yuin and find the girl."

"Huh?"

"We can't leave this to Sir Yuin alone, now can we? Apprehending people is one of your specialties."

He must've been referring to the hypnosis beam. That was made to put Nielle to sleep, so if anything, it might've been too effective against an ordinary person. Nielle would get up after an evening, but someone else could be out for two or three days.

But then again, we were going after Miss Cucumis, a suspected thief. Maybe there was no need for holding back. Maybe she was actually hoping her *beloved Sir Yuin* would come looking for her. Probably.

The two of us headed to the inn in Chenoan. That is, the inn that was supposed to contain Miss Cucumis and Ribbons. It was impressive even by Chenoan's standards, famous for serving monster meat caught by the innkeeper themself. With all the inns being packed for the duration of the festival, it couldn't have been pleasant having those two troublemakers shoved off on them.

When we explained that we were searching for the girls at the behest of Lord Peylon, we were shown to the room they had been in.

"Have you figured anything out?" I asked.

Without saying anything, the black knight entered the room, his face contorting after the first step. Was he all right?

"I get the feeling," he said, "that the occupants of this room are terrible people."

"Yeah, you could say that. But wait, you can tell?!"

"To a degree. A person's mana is influenced by their personality."

"Oh?"

I had no idea. Nielle probably didn't know either. I'd have to tell her.

From the inn room, we had learned that those two possessed terrible personalities. And I learned that strong scents fade slower, making them easier to track.

But this can't be fun for him if he's tracking an awful scent.

"There's no need to worry," he said.

"Huh?! H-How..."

...did you know what I was thinking?

Those words dissipated in my throat when the black knight smiled at me. It was a bright one, unlike any I had seen from him.

"I appreciate your concern, but the pride of being helpful far outweighs any displeasure. I'd like to continue assisting you."

A-Aaahhh. What do I do?

I wanted to run away. This wasn't something the *Meatheadidae lunaticus* had evolved to handle.

Searching for Miss Cucumis via her mana was a good idea, but it had one hitch—there were two people occupying this room. We had no way of knowing which scent belonged to who.

"This might be difficult," the black knight said.

Looking at his troubled expression, I was ready to agree with him.

Isn't there anything we can do to identify the owners of the scents?

"I've heard traces of a person's mana sometimes clings to their possessions. Could we use that?"

"I'll give it a try."

Looking at their clothes, it was immediately apparent whose was whose. I won't say what gave it away. That their luggage remained suggested that they had left in a hurry.

"Can you tell what belongs to the Nallison girl?" he asked as I rifled through their luggage.

"Probably! Ribbons's stuff is covered in ribbons. Even her underwear should be obvious at a glance! And Miss Cucumis got her nickname for a reason!"

"Their underwear..."

Oh hell.

The black knight was still a young man. Suddenly talking about some girls' underwear probably put him in an awkward position.

"Um, just to be clear, you won't, well..."

"Ahh, don't worry. I won't make you smell it or anything."

I got the sense that the black knight was very relieved to hear this. The underwear was just my metric for knowing whose luggage belonged to whom. And after a little investigation, I was certain I knew which luggage belonged to Miss Cucumis.

My god. The size is one thing, but what does she plan to do with stuff this ornate?

"Right here," I said. I placed an inoffensive article on top of a tightly packed leather trunk. I had made sure the underwear was all near the bottom.

"Thank you." The black knight approached the trunk, then stumbled back. "Augh!"

Is it that bad?

"A-Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I can say with confidence, I won't easily forget this scent."

Must've been intense.

The black knight kindly endured the smell and off we went in search of Miss Cucumis. But our trail took us somewhere

interesting.

“The scent is this way.”

“Huh?”

In front of us was Swanille Manor, meaning Miss Cucumis had someone hiding her. This was to say nothing of the fact that it was only other royalists left in the manor. Well, there was the exception of Mr. Frivolous and Sir Nondescript.

The other white knights were staying in a town not far from Chenoan. We couldn’t keep them in Castle Varchudar, as the castle was closed for the duration of the festival. We couldn’t let outsiders into an otherwise empty castle. And why hadn’t they packed their bags and gone home yet?

The only other exception was the white knight captain, but he was staying with Lord Beyholson on account of being his “friend.” If he was in the same annex as the Beyholson couple, could he hide Miss Cucumis from them? No, but he didn’t need to since he was holding the couple’s son hostage. The lord and lady were willing to turn a blind eye if it saved their child.

But enough about that! Our first priority was finding out exactly where Miss Cucumis was!

“Fezgahn!” I exclaimed, looking up at him. “Let’s go and find Miss Cucu—the Nallison girl!”

He looked at me glumly. What for?

“Um, if you don’t mind, please call me Yuin.”

He’s blushing like a maiden! Why’s this so bittersweet?!

“Um. That can wait! Right now, we have to look for Miss Cucumis!”

Yeah, this is no time for saccharinity.


Piyo
Piyo
Piyo
Piyo
Piyo
Piyo
Piyo
Piyo

After a bit of searching around Swanille Manor, it came as no shock that we ended up before the annex hosting Lord and Lady Beyholson.

“Let’s leave the rest to Lord Peylon,” I said.

“That’s a good idea.”

I was sort of expecting Miss Cucumis to catch sight of the black knight and come dashing out at us.

“YUIIIN!”

And I wasn’t disappointed! I had no clue where she had been watching us from, but she barreled out of the front door.

“It *is* you, Yuin,” she cried. “You came to see me, didn’t you?!”

“That I did.”

His face was bereft of any emotion, with not a hint of that bittersweet expression from earlier. I considered contacting Lord Peylon, but knowing the security in Swanille Manor, there were probably already people on their way to us. All we had to do was use a confessional spell on Miss Cucumis and the white knight captain’s crimes would be clear as day! Or so I thought.

“Oh, I just knew you’d understand. That bumpkin could never compare to me. Hey, why don’t we slip off to somewhere we can be alone?”

She tried to lean into him, but he stepped to the side. She nearly fell over, but managed to keep her footing. That was when she finally noticed me.

“What are *you* doing here?!”

Had she forgotten about the time I sent her crying? It seemed I had better remind her.

“How’s your wrist?” I asked. “It didn’t bruise, did it?”

“Excuse me?”

“You tried to whack me with your fan, back at the academy. Don’t you recall me grabbing your wrist?”

“Ah…”

I watched the blood drain from her face and her legs began to shake. Was she all right?

“I hope I didn’t leave a bruise. If I did, please notify me. I’ll heal it right away.”

“N-N-No, I need no s-such thing!”

I didn’t think there was any need to be so afraid.

I looked around and realized armed men had surrounded the annex in the time we’d been speaking. They were all from Peylon branch families or other friends of the house. None of them

were qualified to participate in the hunting festival, so they were in charge of the security. It took them only a moment to arrest Miss Cucumis.

“Nooo! Let me gooo! Yuiiin!”

Even while being taken away, she remained fixated on him.

“Was I of any help?” the black knight asked, showing up right in front of me.

Whoa. When did you get there?

When I glanced up at his face, for some reason he looked like a big dog hoping for a reward. But I would have thought he was more of a cat than a dog.

That’s besides the point, Lera.

“You were,” I answered. “Thank you very much.”

He had indeed helped us, so thanking him was the least I could do. But I wasn’t sure what to do about the nonexistent wagging tail that I hallucinated.

With Miss Cucumis apprehended, we were able to recover the stolen brooch. That was also done with the help of the black knight. I was beginning to think he really did have the nose of a dog.

I felt bad for the Beyholson couple, but we had everyone move to another annex. Naturally, that included the white knight captain. As he left, he glared at the black knight for reasons beyond me. I pretended not to notice this and watched him go.

After he passed, the black knight whispered to me, “Her scent is on him as well.” Meaning exactly what it sounded like. I didn’t know what he was thinking by using Miss Cucumis to conduct another theft, but now the black knight had ruined those plans. So of course he was a bit ticked off.

Whatever his plans, I was just glad it had been resolved. I could leave the rest to the adults and take it easy. The black knight offered to escort me to my room, so I took him up on that. It was only temporary, but he obtained permission to enter the top floor.

“This time, I’ll see you all the way to your door,” he said.

“Why thank you,” I said with a laugh.

He was so pleased, I didn’t know what else to say. We returned to the main building and were making our way to the staircase when I noticed a suspicious person beneath it.

Huh? Didn’t we just see something like this?

The man was looking up the stairs and ran off when he saw

us. He wouldn't have run if he wasn't up to no good, would he? So I used a spell to trip him.

"Waaaugh!"

A splendid dive into the hallway. And as he flew, something fell from his pocket.

"Is that a necklace?" I said. "Oh, it's made of pearls. Ah."

Was this the stolen necklace? Did that mean this guy was the thief?

"Y-You've got it wrong!" he said. "I don't know anything about this necklace!"

"But it just fell out of your pocket."

"C-Can you prove that?"

"Yes, I can. Audio, video, the whole shebang. But first, you and this necklace will be going to Lord Peylon."

"Eee!"

All I was doing was grinning at him, yet he shrieked. What a rude old man.

With the black knight restraining the old man, we went to see Lord Peylon. According to one of the provisional servants, he was on the first floor parlor with some guests, so off we went.

The parlor had about ten people, give or take, all of them men. I recognized Lords Zokbahr and Bulbson. In the same beat, I wondered if the brooch stolen by Miss Cucumis had been returned yet.

"Lera? Is something wrong?" Lord Peylon said when he saw us. "And Lord Lugiyos. Sir Yuin, what's the meaning of this?"

"Look," I said, showing him the necklace. I was holding it with a handkerchief so as to not touch it directly.

"The pearl necklace. You don't mean...?"

"This man had it on him. I believe it might be the one stolen from Lady Nachenohahg."

"She's lying!" the man said. "It wasn't me! This girl set me up!"

Trying to pin it on me this late in the game? Listen, old man—er, Lord Lugiyos, I guess. Be careful, the man holding your arm isn't getting any cheerier.

"Believe me, Lord Peylon! I didn't—owowowow!"

The black knight must have twisted his arm good.

No, bad black knight. Bad. Calm down.

Lords Peylon and Zokbahr both sighed when they saw tears form in Lord Lugiyos's eyes.

“Ah, young Fezgahn,” Lord Zokbahr said, “you can loosen your grip. You don’t even need to hold him.”

“But he sullied Miss Lowell’s good name.”

“And that’ll be taken into account when he’s punished.”

The black knight briefly paused before reluctantly relaxing his grip. The thief was still a mess though, eyes and nose running a river.

“If you’re scared this easily, maybe you should have avoided that stupid plan in the first place. You got off easy because Fezgahn was there, but it would’ve been a lot worse if it had been just that young lady.”

“Eee! H-Help me!” the old man pleaded.

Zokbahr sure was mean, and Lugiyos was very unclean. These old men didn’t hold back.

In order to have someone confirm the contents of the security footage, Bear was called to Swanille Manor.

“First time being here,” he said. “So this is what this place looks like on the inside.”

“This is really your first time?” I asked.

“Yep. This place is only really used during the hunting festival.”

So that was it. Bears weren’t allowed to participate in the hunting festival after all. But hold on a minute. Institute employees must have entered the manor in order to install the security cameras. Hadn’t they had a supervisor on-site? Oh, forget it.

Some other persons of interest were called to the parlor. That included the victims, Lord and Lady Nachenohahg, and the culprits, Lord and Lady Lugiyos. They also called in Lord and Lady Egolin, who had been in the same annex. Lord and Lady Bulbson were also present.

“Right, let’s get to it,” Bear said nonchalantly. He had brought a retractable projection display. A screen, in other words. This didn’t receive projected images; it just displayed them like a monitor of sorts.

Looking at the screen, we could see the staircase as it was not too long ago. There was Lord Lugiyos loitering beneath the stairs before the black knight and I came upon him.

“Dear, what are you doing in such a place?” Lady Lugiyos asked her husband.

He didn’t answer, just hung his head, his pallor growing worse. This said it all. His wife looked at him incredulously. I didn’t think she should look away when the climax was imminent.

“Wh-What do you mean?” he asked.

“Huh?”

Heedless of those two, the film continued on. We reached the moment where Lord Lugiyos tripped and dropped the necklace. Now it wasn’t just his wife—Ladies Nachenohahg and Egolin were also looking at him in disbelief.

“Let me say it now,” I told them, “this is from a magic tool that simply records what it sees. Meaning, what you just saw veritably—”

“Impossible! My friend would never steal a necklace from my wife!”

“Lord Nachenohahg.”

“This is a conspiracy to drive us apart! What devilry. This is why I said they should hurry up and get rid of the Duval girl—”

“Enough of this nonsense!” Lord Zokbahr roared, uninterested in hearing Lord Nachenohahg try to pin the crime on me. It was only us in the parlor, but anyone in the hallway could’ve heard that. “Oh what a mess. And I imagine you played a part in the disappearance of your wife’s necklace.”

“Your Excellency! You may be one of the upper houses, but that doesn’t give you the right to say whatever you please!”

“I don’t need to listen to someone who would steal from their own wife to ruin someone else.” Lord Zokbahr was a very devoted husband. “Tell me, if you weren’t trying to pin the crime on the girl, then what was Lord Lugiyos doing under that staircase?”

“Perhaps he was trying to reach someone on the second floor?” Lord Nachenohahg argued.

“Then why not take a staircase closer to the entry hall? Why take the farthest one?”

“Maybe he just happened to pass by…”

“The entry hall is the only way to enter the main building from the annexes. There’s a staircase to the second floor right nearby. Why wander around near the staircase farther in?”

“W-Well…”

“That staircase is the only one that leads to the top floor, where Lowell Duval’s room is. You were trying to plant the

necklace in her room, weren't you?"

"N-No—"

"Would you like to try a confessional?!"

"Eeep!"

I said it earlier. The manor was full of scary people.

Intimidated by Lord Zokbahr, Lord Nachenohahg admitted his guilt, prompting Lords Lugiyos and Egolin to follow suit. It appeared they couldn't accept that I, someone they didn't much care for, was in a place out of their reach. So they plotted to frame me for larceny in the hope that I might get kicked out of Lord Peylon's house. What a harebrained scheme.

Still, if it weren't for the security cameras and the black knight's special abilities, it would've been hard to prove I hadn't done anything. Without the cameras, those three men might've gotten their wish. I took this as a lesson that I needed to prepare more security implements.

The men were being kept separate from their wives. While the women were returned to their annex, the men were locked up in one of Chenoan's inns for disrupting the hunting festival. It was the same one that Miss Cucumis and Ribbons were in.

I let out a sigh of relief as I watched their departure from the parlor.

"I'm glad they're gone, but what the hell's the matter with this year's festival? Makes my damn head spin," Lord Zokbahr said once they were gone.

"Well, it worked out in a way," Lord Peylon said. "Think of it like draining excess pus."

"Eugh! So, Kend, what's gonna happen to those three?"

Lord Peylon, Lord Zokbahr, the black knight and I are still here. This isn't the place to talk about super important faction stuff.

"Umm, if you'll excuse us then," I muttered, trying to escape.

"Wait just a moment," Lord Zokbahr said with a grin. "Stay and listen 'til the end."

So he deliberately brought it up in front of us!

"If it concerns the entire faction, we shouldn't leave out Lord Aspozat," Lord Peylon said.

"That's right. Here, I'll go call him over. You two, don't go anywhere, you hear?"

He wasn't going to let us go. Accepting my fate, I sat down in a comfy chair and the black knight took the one next to me. The

parlor had several of these chairs and the occasional low table. There was a servant assigned to the room, so you could have tea or snacks if you wanted.

I had done a lot in the name of Peylon's snacks! At first, there were only hard things that could barely be called cookies, but I did my best. These new cookies had plenty of butter in their making, and a fair bit of sugar and egg. In fact, I couldn't even figure out how they had managed to make those old cookies so much like rocks. But the people didn't think of those as treats. They were more like emergency rations.

Then I moved on to things like pound cakes and tarts. Now we were testing cakes made with fresh cream. Unfortunately, it wasn't easy to get fruit in Peylon, which was a bit of a roadblock. There was a family in Chenoan that had run a restaurant for generations. Their oldest daughter worked in the kitchen at Castle Varchudar, so I was always giving her new ideas to test out. She was the sweets specialist I mentioned earlier. Thanks to Lord Peylon, we got ingredients straight from their producer.

These sweets could even captivate Sheila. Starting this year, they were the desserts served at the hunting festival feasts. Except that had only happened twice so far.

I ordered some tea to go with the sweets, which I soon found out were scones and jam. I'd have to get my hands on some clotted cream. If only I hadn't forgotten how it was made. I split open the scone, layered on the jam, and dug in. Delicious.

"Lera's absorbed in her sweets," said a voice.

Oh, it's Thand.

"She sure makes it look good," Lord Zokbahr said from behind me. "Let me have a try."

"No. Please, get your own."

"Don't be stingy."

"Ah!"

I had been robbed of a scone. Meanie marquess. Despite this old man's gruff exterior, he had a real sweet tooth. He was the first man to realize that new treats were being served at Swanille Manor.

"Is it okay for these two to be present?" Thand asked.

"I don't mind," Lord Zokbahr said. "The Duval girl's a victim in this case."

"Understood. Shall we get started then?"

They were going to decide what would be done with the

houses that had caused this incident. First, all three would be barred from participating in the remainder of the hunting festival. We certainly couldn't tell them to keep going, after all the trouble they had caused.

They would also be demoted. They wouldn't be instantly kicked all the way to the bottom of the faction, but they wouldn't be far off. Because they were all the heads of their respective houses, this punishment wouldn't be overturned even after they stepped down.

Changing house heads was a tactic sometimes employed to dodge penalties incurred by the previous head, but Lord Peylon and the others were trying to prevent that. Awfully harsh of them.

"Do you find that harsh, Lera?" Lord Peylon asked.

"No..."

It wasn't my place to say. While they did try and frame me, their failed efforts meant I was effectively unharmed.

"Listen, Duval, given what they did, they easily could have been expelled from the faction."

"Really? It's that serious?"

Lord Zokbahr furrowed his brow and said, "Of course. Anyone who would try and defame their fellow members out of mere personal distaste is a hazard to the group. Stopping at lowering their rank was an act of mercy."

I had just been thinking of this as a failed plot, but the fact that they made such a plot suggested that these guys were no good.

"I suppose we'll also require them to apologize to you specifically, Lera," Thand added.

"You're not gonna make 'em apologize in front of her?" Lord Zokbahr asked.

"No, we'll just ask for financial compensation."

"You're going with money?"

Money is no small thing, Lord Zokbahr! There's not many problems you can't solve with money!

"We'll calculate the sum, if that's fine with you," Thand said to me.

"I'll leave it to you!"

I won't say no to money! Bleed them dry, Thand!

Two days had been wasted by the uproar, but the hunting

festival was set to continue. They even decided to extend the festivities to make up for the lost time. For the people staying at Swanille Manor, two or three days was no big deal. During this time of the year, there was very little going on in the social world of the royal capital.

But the same didn't go for the people who had come to spectate. They had their hands full trying to extend their inn reservations and whatnot. However, they were here of their own volition, not out of obligation, so they didn't have much room to complain. Still, these people were a valuable source of income for the region.

"Isn't there something we can do for them?" Lord Peylon asked at breakfast.

I had sort of forgotten about the spectators. The last few days I had been so busy with the stolen jewelry incident that it was hard to believe that all that had happened over just two days.

Something for the spectators? Hmm. I've got it.

"They're here to watch the hunting, right?"

"Yeah, that they are."

Lord Peylon looked confused, like he didn't see why I was repeating something so obvious. But this was important.

"Then why not make it easier for them to see what's going on?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, you see..."

He seemed surprised, then doubtful.

"Don't worry," I assured him. "I'm certain this won't interfere with the hunting."

"All right! We'll try it out. If the response is good, we'll formally implement it next year."

"Understood."

Hehehe. I might be looking at another payday.

We had two days before the festival resumed, and there was work to be done.

In Chenoan, Lord Peylon personally asked the people with boarders to consider housing them a few more days. Though he couldn't do the same with the inns. This wasn't a demand—nothing more than a request. But everyone saw this as an opportunity to make more money, so they were open to the idea. Thank goodness.

The traveling carnival and theatre troupes were kind enough to stay as well. They were paid accordingly, but this still affected their schedules. In the end, they were willing to stay since Peylon was a long time patron of theirs.

Meanwhile, I finished up my own preparations. The spell wasn't too much, but I had been flummoxed over how I might set up the cameras. With all the trees, I thought we could place the cameras on those, but in the end, I went with preparing drones. I already had a similar magic tool, so I just had to mount cameras and fiddle with the drones so they could be moved via remote control.

These drones were originally made so you could call for help in the forest. You never know what might come in handy later down the line. They were controlled by trained institute employees, but now we didn't have time for extra training.

Do you suppose they'll know anything about camerawork?

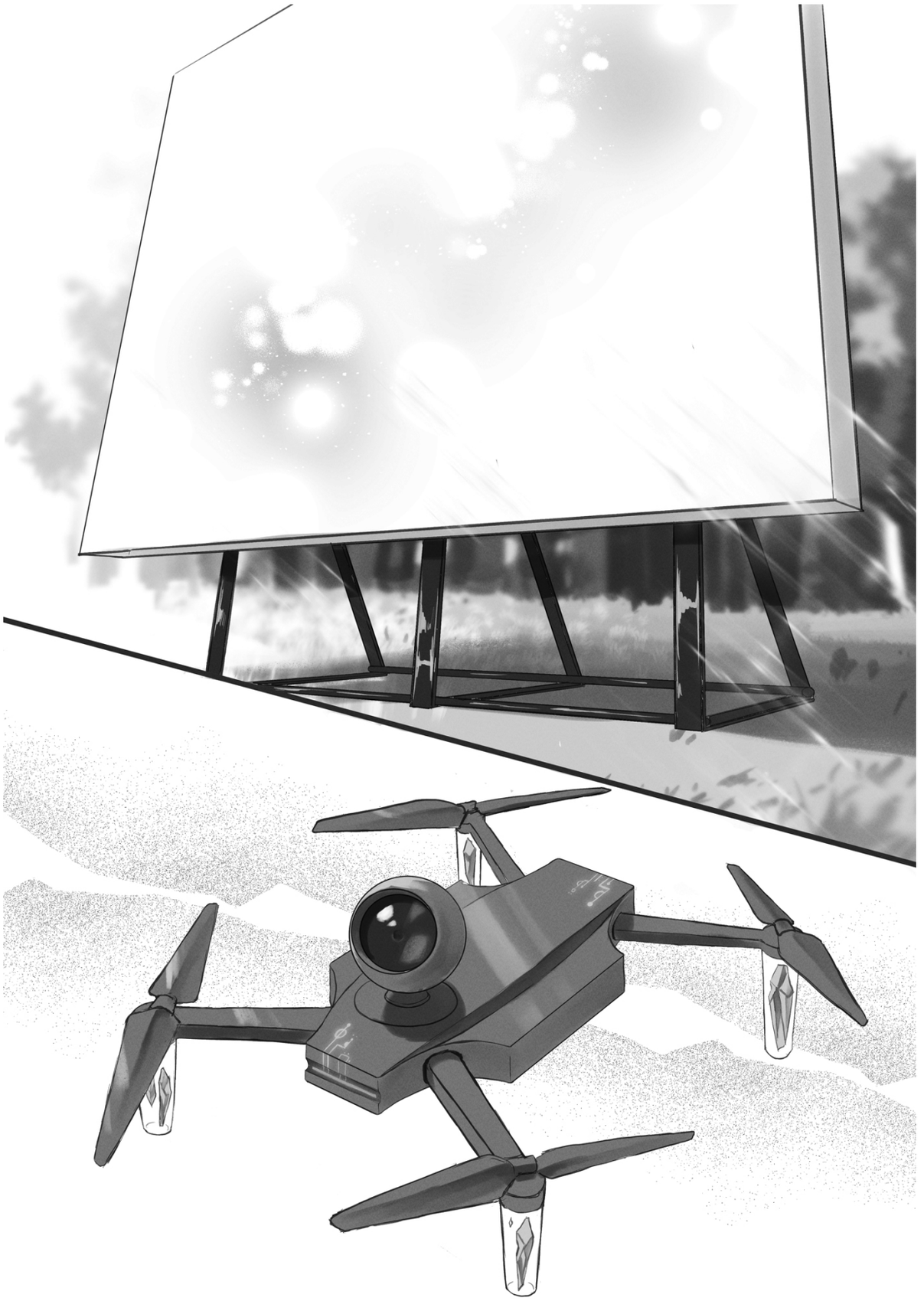
There would be one large screen in front of the general audience, and one for each of the tents. When I say these screens were large, I really mean it. They were ten meters tall and sixteen meters wide. These were made with monster materials and what was called "secondary silk," which was a slightly inferior form of spider silk.

Access to the screen was limited to the paying spectators, so we used iron poles to lift the screen high off the ground. That way even people in the back could see. Call it a public screening.

Though they weren't anything fancy, we also put out chairs for the paying customers. The sudden cancellation had brought lots of complaints and passive aggressive remarks our way. So we gave them something to sit on. However, the public screen only showed the view of a single camera. We couldn't just let them have the same experience as the ladies in the tents.

If the reception was good, we'd go further with the cameras next year. Maybe also have proper chairs. We could charge a pretty penny for those seats, which would let us increase the festival's budget.

The hunting festival was the largest event among the royalists, but just about every aspect of it was handled by Peylon. The cost was managed by donations from the other houses, particularly from the upper houses. Some people just had money to throw around.



Chapter Four: The Festival Continues

And so came the day for the hunting festival to resume. It was another beautiful day, and a spectating day for the ladies. On spectating days, we watched from inside barriers that kept us safe. Chairs and tables were placed at an elevated position while the barriers blocked excess heat, UV rays, and harsh sunlight. Very elegant.

Spectating days were nothing new, but not many women had participated in them. Until this year, it had just involved placing some chairs and tables outside, which, frankly, many of the women didn't care for. So this year, the institute did everything they could to improve the viewing experience. And now all the wives and daughters were taking part.

The barrier wasn't the only new feature used here. Unlike the public viewing, there were multiple screens showing multiple perspectives. It would've been a waste to not use all those drones. These screens were the same as the ones that were going to be installed in the tents, though those were a tad smaller.

So, I thought this was just more of the tent socials, just not necessarily called that. I was wrong.

"Look at my husband go!"

"Oh, that son of mine is incredible!"

"For heaven's sake. My brother let his prey get away."

No socializing here. Everyone was glued to the screens. I found myself looking at Sheila and she gave me a wry grin. Nobody was interested in hobnobbing today; they were much more concerned with their loved ones' performance.

"Ahh! Ville!"

"Loks is quite adept with that bow!"

"Oh, Louie! I'll follow you anywhere!"

"Yuiiin!"

"Iyaaale!"

I guess I know who's popular.

They seemed less like smitten admirers and more like idol fans. But that didn't make the girls' ardor any less intense. If those five formed an idol group, they could dominate the

industry.

Come to think of it, I don't hear anyone calling Sir Nondescript's name. Um, h-hang in there, pal.

I glanced at Colny and saw her looking conflicted, probably because she was hearing her brothers' names called. Sheila, however, didn't seem to be bothered. She was probably just glad to see her sons succeed. The hunting field was divided into thirty-two sections, with multiple drones allotted to each one. They allowed us to watch the hunting in real time.

"I never knew illusory magic could be used for something like this," Sheila said.

I smiled dryly. This was all because of the hard work of the institute. Back in the violent days when illusory magic was invented, these spells probably would've gotten more respect if it had been known that they could be used to transmit battlefield conditions to a commander.

The only weapons used in the hunting festival were bows. Taking down prey with a bow while on horseback was supposedly the gentleman's way of doing things. Some of the participants, such as Lords Zokbahr and Peylon, specialized in weapons besides the bow and arrow, but swords, spears, halberds and the like were all banned.

Magic, of course, was banned as well, but not without loopholes. The rules prohibited using offensive magic against prey and other hunters. In other words, you could still use illusory magic to mess with your rivals. But not many people knew how to use these sorts of spells. Some people had tried to get around this with magic tools, so magic tools were similarly banned.

This was a competition between nobles, so having *too many* rules would be considered less than graceful. The guidelines could be loose and had oversights. I wanted to take advantage of this, but, unfortunately, girls weren't allowed in the hunting festival.

It was a given for a noble to be able to use magic, but the higher their status, the less likely they were to have a job that made use of it. Many of the men working at the institute were noblemen who already had a few older brothers.

Working at the institute despite being the oldest daughter of a baron made Nielle something of a unique case. Ever since she was young, she had loved magic and aspired to dedicate her life

to it. But her parents wanted her to marry. If anything, I thought they were the more normal party in this disagreement.

Nielle refused the marriage, and after constantly feuding with her parents she went to Peylon, the domain of an acquaintance of her parents. They allowed her to stay there for the summers while she attended the academy. This was how she learned about the institute.

Once she graduated, she didn't return home, but instead applied to join the institute, passed the exam with flying colors, and made a name for herself as a researcher. Without Nielle's talents, these screens wouldn't have been possible. And that was nice and all, but I still wished she would stop forgetting to eat and sleep.

My reminiscing was cut off by a wave of cheers. I looked at the screen and saw that Ville had killed a rabbit. The Aspozat brothers were just as skilled with bows as they were swords, consistently putting them in the top ranks of the hunting festival. But they always made sure not to take first place. This struck me as patronizing, but maybe things like that were necessary for getting along with people.

Louie took to blades, but wasn't so great with archery. He said he prefers cutting things down, rather than shooting arrows from a distance. I didn't think it was good to be picky when it came to hunting things.

Again, my reminiscing was interrupted.

"Oh! Incredible! Look at the size of that deer!"

"I knew Yuin could do it!"

Like with other crowds, the black knight was very popular here too. I felt a warm gaze from Sheila, but chose to ignore it. Listening some more, I realized that bickering among fans happens no matter where you go.

"And what gives you the right to speak Yuin's name like that?"

"I'd ask the same of you! Surely you don't have his permission. But I know a little secret. I know that last February, you asked him to dance, but got rejected immediately."

"Wh-What was that?!"

"Oho ho. It might be all over for you, Miss Reject, but I still have a chance."

Then I heard a voice whisper, "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

Colny, stop that.

Not that those girls heard her or anything. There was no need

to put a barrier around us when their clamoring drowned out everything else. But I wasn't sure we should just let them continue to heat up. That was when Sheila appeared behind them.

"Pardon me," she said. "But you are aware this is no place for verbal altercations, aren't you? Three houses have already been removed from the festival. Are you trying to increase that figure?"

"N-No..."

"P-Please forgive us."

Overpowered in an instant! Incredible!

With the bickering girls made an example of, we enjoyed the rest of the event without any squealing or screeching. Though I guess that made it harder for everyone to celebrate when their relatives pulled something off.

After lunch, we entered the afternoon portion of the event. Everyone was talking about the hunting to some degree or another. The noisy girls from earlier had fathers and brothers participating in the hunting. Colny told me that they would probably both get an earful from their fathers later.

"You heard my mother, didn't you?" she said. "'Are you trying to increase that figure?' She was threatening to give them the same treatment as the houses involved in the theft."

Ohhh. Holy cow, Sheila.

It made sense though. This was an event exclusive to the royalists, which made it a bit different from the usual ball or whatever. As fellow allies, this should be a chance to renew our sense of friendship. That makes this a very bad place to start a fight with someone you're supposed to be on good terms with. So of course they'd get scolded for doing that.

Watching Sheila made me realize how much trouble came with being a noblewoman. Houses had their bonds, connections, temporary shows of kindness and more. I would never be able to handle it. In my case, I was set to inherit my house, which set me apart from most of the other women. But if I took over House Duval, I wouldn't be able to run from my social obligations.

How did I end up here?

A sigh was about to escape my mouth when I heard some excitement. I looked up to see what it was.

"Oh, splendidly done, dear," said a dainty woman. My guess

was she was in her early thirties. Or something like that? I could tell she was an adult, but there was something childish about her. “Peylon is home to some wondrous technology.”

I was quite shocked to learn that this genial woman was Lord Zokbahr’s wife. That gruff old dude was with this warm and fluffy woman. It just didn’t add up.

“Yuzalena’s right. Now we can enjoy the festival in an entirely new fashion.”

This came from Heuteria, lady of House Rabizay.

Sheila, Yuzalena, and Heuteria were all very different, but they seemed to have no trouble getting along. Opposites attract, as they say.

More shrill cries. It sounded like someone had made another kill. I looked at the screen and saw it was once again the black knight. I glanced at another table and saw one of the noisy girls from earlier was covering her mouth as tears poured from her eyes. Had she been moved to tears?

Different participants took very different approaches to the hunting festival. Some strove to be at the top, while others took it easy, willing to let the rest enjoy themselves. Being from one of the faction’s top houses, Ville and Loks fell into the latter group. Like House Peylon, Aspozat emphasized results over appearances. The hunting festival was a big deal, but they didn’t put much value on winning it.

Louie, likewise, didn’t feel any need to try to do his very best, and he was one of the event’s hosts. As his younger sister, it fell on me to play hostess for the ladies.

I-I’m doing my best over here. I really am.

There was a feast every night of the festival, but while everything had been on hold, we only ate with our friends and relatives. It had only been three days since the last feast, but it felt like more than that.

Despite the high old man population, everyone was eating and drinking to their heart’s content. It crossed my mind that some of them might get stomachaches, but the institute could just send some healers if that happened.

The prey caught during the day was served at the feasts, so these were meals laden with meat. You could also use the menu to get a glimpse of everything that had been caught that day. Today was rabbit and venison. Foxes weren’t eaten; they were

hunted for their pelts.

We had venison pie, roast rabbit, cooked vegetables, soup, and fish. The feast was held in an older style in which the food was loaded onto enormous plates which were set on the table. You just took what you wanted. However, this time we had servants who took your plate and asked you what you desired. My stomach was bothering me, so I focused on the fish and vegetables.

It was our first feast since the resumption, but I couldn't come to terms with these seating arrangements. In front of me was Lord Zokbahr, to my right was the black knight, and to my left was Mr. Frivolous. *Who did this?!* Who made this awkward arrangement?!

You don't need to tell me. I know it was Lord Peylon.

I could see the gracious host from my seat, so I gave him a nasty look, but he was out of range. I felt a stabbing glare from behind me, which I assumed was coming from one of the bickering girls from earlier in the day. I would've loved to trade seats with her, but that wasn't allowed.

I wasn't in a great mood, but Lord Zokbahr was having a grand old time. "Oh, this pie might be from the deer you took down, Fezgahn."

"Kind of you to say that," the black knight responded.

"He took down two of those deer," Mr. Frivolous chimed in. "He's got a good arm."

"Indeed," I added with a strained smile. From my right I sensed a burning desire for praise, and from my left I thought I heard laughter. I ignored both and just offered empty responses to the guy across from me. Was that rude of me? I was just a kid, so what would you expect?

I had planned on just having fish and vegetables, but the black knight seemed a bit saddened by the fact that I wasn't trying the venison pie. I figured I might as well give it a try, so I had a servant bring some over. The spices were excellent and harmonized perfectly with the sauce. I just wish I had gotten a smaller piece. This was a serving fit for a man.

"Not a big eater, Duval?" Lord Zokbahr asked me. "All of my nephews have much bigger appetites."

"I don't think it's fair to compare my appetite to a boy's."

Especially when those boys were related to Lord Zokbahr. They were probably all military men. I might have been raised in

a community of meatheads, but I stuck to magic.

"What? No, eat up. If you don't, you won't get bigger," he said while holding his hands to his chest and making a lifting gesture.

That's sexual harassment. I'll see you in court, old man.

Besides, it's not like there was any guarantee it would be my chest getting bigger!

After the feast, the men and women were split up and spent the evening with their respective groups. The men drank liquor, smoked, and played card games. I heard that they had a board game that was akin to chess or shogi.

Whatever it was, the women weren't allowed to play. We got to enjoy tea, snacks, and conversations. I wasn't sure if I'd have room for sweets after all the food, but I assumed they would be light ones meant to go with tea.

"Colny, you and Lera can be done for the evening. Return to your rooms," Sheila told us.

"Okay. Good niiiiight," we both said.

My social debut was a ways away and Colny's wasn't until next February, so we were exempt from the evening gathering. Academy students were treated like adults, but not in every aspect. Though I got the impression we were allowed to go to bed simply because the ladies would only be talking about matters of high society, which we wouldn't be able to follow anyway.

"So they've all made their debuts?" I said.

It didn't seem like anyone else was heading to bed.

"So it would seem," Colny replied. "I noticed some of them are still students."

"Really?"

"Lera, you didn't recognize them?"

I didn't, much to Colny's disbelief.

"You must have come across them in the dorm once or twice, no?"

Generally speaking, I wasn't good at remembering faces. It just wasn't my strong suit. And if they weren't in my grade, I probably didn't have any reason to remember them. I gave Colny my list of excuses, but she only became more exasperated.

Looking at it from above, Swanille Manor was shaped a bit like a rectangular eight, with the bottom square being larger than the other one. The top square was the only one with three floors.

The lord's room was at the very top of the eight, and so was his successor's. So this was where Lord Peylon's and Louie's rooms were. My room was along the right side of the top square, and the Aspozats' room was on the opposite side, with a courtyard between us.

Only members of the higher houses were allowed to stay in the main building. It was a necessary measure when there were only so many rooms available. Everyone else had to stay in the various annexes scattered across the manor grounds.

It was about nine in the evening, a bit too early to go to bed. So we went to Colny's room. Sheebis even brought us tea and sweets, the same being served to the ladies. But after such a big dinner, I just had some tea. The drinks came not in a cup and saucer, but in a tumbler made by the institute. We could sit on the bed and just let it roll around.

This tumbler was specially designed so it wouldn't spill if knocked over, but was still easy to drink from. It was also insulated. It was originally made for going into the forest, but we were making good use of it in my room.

"Tomorrow will be the hunting festival's middle day," Colny said. "I wondered how the delay might affect things, but they said they'll continue as usual."

"They will? I wonder if that'll affect the halftime results."

On the middle day, the results from the previous days were added up and announced. Hunters could use this to plan their strategies for the remaining days. The middle day was a break from hunting, where everyone instead enjoyed games, such as a scavenger hunt on the hunting grounds, and something that reminded me of croquet.

Participating in the games wasn't compulsory, and some people opted to relax in Chenoan or watch some of the theatre troupes. There was also the traveling carnival, which was beloved by the local children. These attractions were delightful to people of all stations and were open to invitees, spectators, and, of course, locals.

If Ribbons and Miss Cucumis had managed to remain in the area, maybe they could have enjoyed the attractions. Had the investigation managed to prove that it was the white knight captain who had let Miss Cucumis into Swanille Manor? That wasn't a crime, so he wouldn't be arrested, but it might serve as a reason to kick him out of the hunting festival and would hurt

his reputation in the royal capital.

I was hoping for a definitive conclusion, but that was Lord Peylon and Sheila's business, so I was left in the dark. They didn't want a child getting involved in something like this. Even though Miss Cucumis was about the same age as me.

"So what do you think?" Colny asked me as I rolled around on the bed.

"Huh? About what?"

How was I supposed to answer an abrupt question like that?

"Augh! About Yuin!" She seemed pretty frustrated. "You sat next to him at dinner, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I did."

I hadn't forgotten about the feast. Especially not where Lord Zokbahr was concerned.

"Did you talk to him?"

"Not really. But, y'know, Lord Zokbahr is just the worst! He seems to think that eating more will make your chest bigger! This implies he thinks I'm flat because I don't eat enough! But that's now how it works! And what a terrible place to bring it up!"

"Lera..."

Colny was looking at me pitifully.

Agh! It's because she pulled a UR on the chest gacha! I'm not jeal —no, I'm totally jealous.

"Do you think I can use magic to give myself more bust?"

"Quit being stupid. Now, tomorrow's the middle day. You must keep an eye out."

"Whaddya mean?"

I sat up and looked at Colny. She had sounded serious and sure enough, she looked it too.

"You don't appear to have realized it, but there are several men besides Sir Yuin trying to get close to you."

"What for?"

To be clear, there were a lot of people in the faction who had it out for me. It wasn't just the three houses from the larceny case —there were plenty of people who didn't want anything to do with me. I was saved by the fact that the higher houses accepted me. The other houses had to follow suit, even if they didn't like me.

I cocked my head. Were there really people trying to get *close* to me?

"Lera," Colny sighed, "you're the most likely successor for

House Duval. Nothing's set in stone yet, but that's all the more reason."

It is?

"Second and third sons with no hope of inheritance are said to be always looking for a house to marry into," she continued. "To those people, you'd make an excellent choice."

"I-I see."

I still thought House Duval was a shaky pick.

"There's a lot to gain from marrying into an earl's house," she continued. "And let's be up front, Duval is declining. Some people see that as an opportunity to make a move."

I get it now.

There was also my awful relationship with my father and the passing of my mother to consider. No "third parties" to get in the way.

"And there's you yourself."

"Huh?"

"I don't think you realize it, but you're really quite pretty."

"Wha?"

I wasn't sure what to do with this. Me? Pretty? I barely had any assets to speak of.

"Your silver hair is lovely, and so are your blue eyes. On top of that, you have very nice facial features. Though maybe it's best they don't know about what's on the inside."

"You meanie."

"I'm not mean at all. If you don't like it, you can try becoming more ladylike."

Impossible. I'll wave the white flag on that front.

"Why do you think Lord Peylon hasn't made it public?" I said, referring to the matter of me inheriting House Duval.

Everyone concerned seemed to already know. If my brother wasn't going to take over, then the options were me or adopting a relative. But according to Lord Peylon, Duval's relatives weren't much to speak of, so adopting one of them wasn't going to happen. That left me as the main suspect, even if I was a girl.

"Honestly, I don't understand what my mother and uncle are thinking," Colny replied. "But I don't think they would avoid making it public without good reason. Perhaps it has something to do with your father."

"Oh, that could be it."

If people started asking him what he plans to do about his successor, there was no telling what he might do. It was no wonder Lord Peylon was wary of my father after he had proved himself to be a rash man by trying to swap me out for Ribbons. We might already have the blessing of the royal family, but even they couldn't easily interfere with the affairs of nobles, especially an earl's. Unless Duval's weak position provided an opening?

I could see why Lord Peylon might be keeping matters private if it might invite resistance from my father. Even if he heard of what was going on, it would be through hearsay, which could be dismissed as such.

But there was still one thing bothering me: Why did they want me to inherit House Duval so badly? If we wanted to consider the violent angle, it was possible they wanted to use my father's treatment of me as a reason to bring down the whole house. The Duval Earldom was west of Peylon and one of the northernmost domains in Ozeria, but it was fairly large. If House Duval was gone, that land would become property of the kingdom. That'd be a pretty large gain.

"What are you thinking, Lera?"

"Hmm. I think Duval still knows something I don't."

"What might that be?"

"I dunno."

Don't look at me like that.

I didn't even have a hint. Trying to guess at what they might know was impossible.

"Well, putting all that aside," Colny said, "there will be lots of eyes on you. On the middle day, there will be dancing in the afternoon and evening. There will be young men in search of a partner at those dances. I want you to be aware that some of those men might ask you to dance, and if you're really unlucky, they might ask for your hand in marriage."

"Huuuuuh?"

Oh, no more drudgery. PLEASE.

"But we're in Peylon, and word of your feats in the Mystic Forest has gotten around. I don't think anyone will get too forceful with you."

"If they do, I'll make sure they regret it for the rest of their lives."

"Just do it in moderation."

But this explained one thing. Now I understand why I had

been put with those three at the dinner party. Now I was wishing I had socialized with the black knight more. He was preferable to some guy I barely knew.

I know it's late to be saying this, but I really might inherit House Duval. That's a hefty burden.

For the middle day, I was free until around lunchtime, so the *plan* was to sleep in until noon.

"Lera! Get up, you're oversleeping!"

"Colny? Let me sleep a bit more."

"I most certainly will not! Now get up! Breakfast is already being served."

Uuurgh. Farewell, my slumber encore.

Breakfast was served in a dining hall much smaller than the one used for the dinner parties. This one was for family, so it was only used by Lord Peylon, Louie, the Aspozats, and myself. The guests staying in the main building were all being served in their rooms.

"Oh, you're finally up," Ville said when I stepped into the dining room.

Sure, I was the last person to arrive, but I didn't know why he seemed to be in such a bad mood. Then I saw the black knight. Maybe that had something to do with it. But why was he here?

I figured the matter could wait.

"Good morning, everyone. Colny dragged me out of bed."

"Excuse me, I did not drag you."

"You may as well have."

And then she really did drag me to my seat.

Ouch.

My seat was across from Louie and between Lord Peylon and Colny. The black knight sat opposite of her.

"What's he doing here?" I whispered to my friend.

"He helped resolve the jewelry incident, so they invited him."

That made sense. Trouble within our faction had been resolved with the help of a young man from a major house of another faction. That was certainly a good reason to roll out the red carpet.

The previous night's meal had been quite rich, so breakfast was comparatively light. Small slices of toast, salad with poached eggs, yogurt, and diced fruit. Colny, Sheila, and I all had the same meal, but this wouldn't be enough for the men, so they had extra toast or a serving of something hot. Just looking at

those piles of bacon made me feel full.

"Is something the matter?" Louie asked me.

I didn't feel like I could tell him I got stomach pains just by looking at his plate.

The day's agenda contained a midday garden party at Swanille Manor, games on the hunting grounds in the afternoon, and a ball in the evening. The ball would be where they would announce the hunters' scores. Everyone's fatigue was starting to catch up with them, so the morning was reserved for rest. As for me, only the garden party and ball were mandatory.

"Then I won't join the games," I announced after breakfast.

I had to make this clear, or else Louie or someone would make me join them. The games themselves were like ones from my previous world. There was a ball tossing game similar to pétanque and a scavenger hunt that involved looking for scattered stones. There was also a game reminiscent of croquet.

Participants in the scavenger hunt were scored by the number of stones they had found and those with the highest scores got prizes. To prevent cheating, the stones were marked with a special paint developed by the institute. That same paint could be found with a certain magic tool, thereby preventing any stones from being left behind. We didn't want to litter in the hunting grounds.

"So what will you do until evening?" Colny asked.

"I'm going to the carnival!" I answered without delay.

This was the thing I looked forward to most every year. There were no roller coasters or anything in that vein, but there was a small ferris wheel. There was also a merry-go-round and a swing suspended really high up. Previously I hadn't been part of the hunting festival at all, so I had been able to enjoy every last bit of the carnival.

"So you prefer the carnival to the games?" Ville asked.

"I guess Lera's still just a kid," Loks said.

The nerve of those two.

"All right, Lera, your big brother will join you!"

How old did Louie think I was? Okay, I was going to the carnival, but I had my reasons. I wasn't just going to play. Really, even Thand, Sheila, and Lord Peylon were bent on giving me a hard time.

"You're going to the carnival for the afternoon?"

“Oh, I was hoping I could take you to the theatre with me.”

“Ha ha, she can still be a bit childish.”

Ahhhh, leave me alone. Hmph!

After breakfast, I had some spare time until the garden party, so I decided to explore Swanille Manor since I rarely got to see it. If I went to the carnival, I probably wouldn’t be able to make it back in time for the party, so that had to wait until after.

The exploration team consisted of Colny and myself…and Ville, Loks, and Louie. On top of that, we had the recurring trio of the black knight, Mr. Frivolous, and Sir Nondescript…by my brother’s invitation.

Louieee!

“Last night, the six of us enjoyed some drinks together,” he explained. “We broke down some barriers, so I thought I’d bring them along.”

Did that six include Ville and Loks? I noticed Ville’s brow wasn’t wrinkled quite as much as usual in the presence of the black knight. He had been pretty dour earlier in the morning.

“Louie, what did you do?” I asked.

“What? I didn’t do anything.”

“Liar.”

“*Believe*. I just thought there must be a reason Ville doesn’t like Yuin. It turns out Ville finds Yuin unnerving because he can never tell what the man’s thinking. As for Yuin, he hasn’t had a history of taking an interest in other people, so he hasn’t been very expressive. A very Yuin thing to do.”

At some point, Louie had started calling the black knight by his first name. Damn social super-butterfly.

When Louie said the black knight hadn’t had a *history* of taking an interest in people, did that mean things had started to change? The black knight said he was one of those people who could smell mana. Did that ability have something to do with it?

I glanced at him, but he didn’t look any different than usual. He wasn’t furrowing his brow with displeasure like he had been during the search for Miss Cucumis. Did that mean it was fair to assume nobody here had unpleasant mana? Whatever the case, I was just glad Ville wasn’t making a sour face every time he saw the black knight now.

“So, you said we were going to look around Swanille Manor? Where are we going?” Ville asked.

“Hmm. Well, we only come here during the hunting festival, so I haven’t seen much beyond the third floor. I wanted to look around the rest of the manor.”

Despite coming here every year, much of the manor was a mystery to me. I would spend most of my time at the carnival or watching street performers.

That said, I had a basic idea of where everything was. The third floor was for the lord, his family, and his close guests. The second floor had more guest rooms and the large parlor that was being used as a dining hall. The first floor had a parlor, games room, lounge, meeting room, library, study, and more. Swanille Manor was huge, so there was plenty of space to go around.

Since the second floor was just guest rooms and the dining hall, we went straight to the first floor. Partway through, the men got absorbed by the games room, so Colny and I left them for the library.

Mmm. I love the smell of books.

“Mother said there are quite a few old books here,” Colny told me.

“Did she? Oh, look.”

I was holding a copy of *Gossamer Manor*.

“Ah, that’s from the festival,” she said. “Your performance was based on that book, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t expect to find it here.”

“It’s hardly mysterious. That’s a famous work.”

I see.

I recalled hearing about how it had been adapted for the stage a number of times. This meant there were lots of different versions and compiling them had been a pain. I saw the library contained all the other titles those instructors had recommended to me. But who had bought them?

“Hey, Colny.”

“Yes, Lera?”

“Do you know who purchased these books?”

“Who? Wouldn’t that be Lord Peylon?”

Had it really been him? On top of *Gossamer Manor*, there was also *Dawn’s Blaze*, *My Heart Rests in the Distant Lake*, and *The Reaper and Me*. It was all romance novels. Well, not *all*, but that was the dominant genre present. Could this really have been Lord Peylon’s doing?

“The gap is melting my cerebrum,” I moaned.
“What’s a cerebrum?”
“It’s like the big part of your brain.”
That might not be right, but whatever.

Time flew by during our exploration of the manor, and soon enough, it was time for the garden party. After finding the library, Colny and I had both found ourselves buried in books. Then Sheebis found me and I got a whole lecture while getting ready for the event.

“Honestly, don’t hide yourself in such obscure places! And what were you doing on top of the bookshelf?! That’s no place for a lady!”

It was the best place in the library. And I had even made sure to dust it before going up. I used magic for that, of course.

Colny and I were both bathed and thoroughly scrubbed. Once that was done, next came the clothes and hairdressing. Being both a daytime and an outdoor event, the garden party attire was fittingly on the casual side. The dress covered the neck, shoulders, and top of the chest, the sleeves were long, and the skirt wasn’t flared. It was here that I learned that even the shoes were different.

“I can’t think of a bigger waste than changing clothes just to have lunch,” I grumbled.

“It’s only natural. This is just the life of a noble,” Colny chided me.

She was right. I hadn’t paid it much thought, but my life in Peylon was fairly expensive. The dress and shoes I had on, even the handbag—it was all stuff procured just for this garden party. What extravagance. But if we didn’t spend our money, it wouldn’t circulate. This was a form of economic stimulation.

The regional economy did really well during the hunting festival. It wasn’t just Lord Peylon and his house, but all the guests and tourists spending money like mad. That’s why there were measures taken to cater to the spectators as well. Even the hunters spent money. Though their needs were seen to by the servants of Swanille Manor, they often went shopping in Chenoan.

But that wasn’t just any shopping. When nobles opened their wallets, they could very well buy out the whole store. The higher houses in particular liked to buy souvenirs for the servants at

their manors or residences in the royal capital. For some shops in Chenoan, their earnings during the festival were comparable to what they earned during the rest of the year. Truly something.

The participants' desire to buy souvenirs was affected by how well the festival went. I had to be the best host I could so they might be a little more inclined to start spending.

The gathering was held in Swanille Manor's well-kept garden. Though it was called a garden, the ground was laid with stone, so nobody had to worry about their shoes getting dirty. And I said I was going to try and be the best host I could, but there wasn't much a child had to do at events like these. Which was fine with me.

"And my defenses are solid," I observed.

I was surrounded by Louie, Loks, Ville, and even the black knight and the Frivolous Nondescript Duo. My fortress was impenetrable.

"Didn't I tell you last night?" Colny said. "You're going to be a popular target."

That struck me as odd. Just like me, Colny wasn't married. Not to mention she came from the house of a marquess. I asked her about this and she gave me a very blunt answer.

"Whoever my partner is, I'll almost certainly marry into their family. There are probably some people who want a connection to our house, but the hunting festival is still a royalist event."

There were many steps involved when it came to marrying someone of the same faction, but Duval was a member of that faction. If anything, we came with a lot more baggage.

"Let's be clear," Louie added, "Duval is not a respected name. The head's absence at the festival is proof enough of that. And some people think the daughter of that house might be easy prey."

Thank you, Louie. That explains it.

So it wasn't just my house, I was being looked down on too. Well they could come at me if they dared. I could hold them off!

"I see that bloodthirsty look in your eyes."

"Ow!"

Louie hit me on the head! And after Sheebis had gone to all that trouble with my hair.

"We're in the middle of a garden party, not hunting monsters in the forest."

“I know that.”

“Then control your bloodlust and battle fervor.”

Damn.

There I was, hoping I could just wipe out anyone with a funny idea. But with Loks, Ville, and Louie around, I didn’t have to worry about any guys getting close anyway.

Being surrounded by familiar faces, we were chatting like we usually did, but some people didn’t quite get that.

“Louie, what do you think you’re doing, hitting Miss Lowell like that?” the black knight said. “Have you forgotten how a gentleman is supposed to behave?”

“Huh? No, we’ve been like this since we were kids,” Louie replied.

“That was when you were kids. As a student of the academy, she’s considered to be an adult, and a proper lady at that.”

Stop that.

I knew he was trying to cover for me, but these three were people I was all too familiar with.

“*Lady*,” Ville echoed. “Did they change the definition of that word when I wasn’t looking?”

“Ville, you’re going too far,” Loks said. “Lera’s, well…she’s, uh, y’know?”

“Both of you!” Colny scolded. “You’re being awfully harsh. Lera’s trying her best.”

Way to add insult to injury! Can I cry now?

Tears in my eyes, I joined in the dancing, but only with my six acquaintances. There was no holding involved as it was a traditional folk dance from the region. Some people looked like they wanted to ask me for a dance, but I was just a young kid, so my wards kept them off.

Yep. Because I’m just a kid!

After the garden party, we went to the carnival. I had an idea and it required that I take a good look at things.

Our group consisted of Louie, the Aspozat siblings, the black knight, and the white knight duo. Sir Nondescript seemed to always be with Mr. Frivolous, but he never received any squeals of delight. Even at the garden party, the rest of our group was awash in requests to dance. But he didn’t give in to despair! He lived on! Don’t worry, Sir Nondescript! Not being popular with the ladies isn’t the end of the world!

“Why do you keep giving me pitiful glances?” he asked.

“No reason.”

I couldn’t offer him any direct encouragement, but I knew exactly how he felt. Everyone who tried to dance with me had only been interested in my family circumstances.

I won’t give in to despair either.

But first, I needed to look closely at this carnival if I wanted to make my own. That’s right, I was examining the traveling carnival, because I wanted to make my own amusement park. This was, of course, something that was still a ways off. I knew I couldn’t get started immediately. This was just research.

The carnival was set up in Chenoan’s town square. It was on the small side, something that all the little ones appreciated greatly.

“What a relaxing place this is,” I said.

The only ride causing anyone to scream was the giant swing. The chairs were attached in a circle around a spinning pole, so there was no need to pump your legs. It took you pretty high up, which children found absolutely thrilling. There were also measures to prevent you from falling off.

The merry-go-round, however, was smaller than I remembered.

Huh? Was it always like this? I remember it being bigger.

Well, memories can be unreliable, and I had been pretty small the last time I rode it.

“Do you like the carnival?” the black knight asked me.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I do.”

I hadn’t noticed him walk up beside me. Similarly, we had gotten separated from the others, who were off riding ponies. Those were another part of the carnival.

But why did they leave me with this guy? Oh, I guess it’s fine.

“Inviting a traveling carnival to a hunting festival is a strange choice,” the black knight said, looking a bit mystified.

However, this carnival was very important.

“It hasn’t always been like this,” I told him. “The current Lord Peylon was the first to invite them. The rides are all free and everyone can enjoy the carnival.”

“So this is financed entirely by House Peylon?”

“It is. Peylon normally lives on the frugal side, but we treat money as no object during this time of the year. The carnival, the theater troupes—Peylon covers it all.”

Before the current Lord Peylon, the children brought to the hunting festival were left with a sitter in Swanille Manor. Similarly, some adults who came to spectate brought their children with them, but there was nothing for those kids to do.

"For participants and spectators alike, it wasn't rare for them to come as a family. But most young ones weren't interested in hunting, especially not the girls. Lord Peylon wants those children and the locals who are afraid of monsters to at least be able to enjoy the festival."

That applied equally to all children, whether their parents were participants, spectators, or locals. Lord Peylon was more than willing to spend a little to keep all the rides free, so it didn't matter whether they were poor or rich. I wasn't sure this quite classified as noblesse oblige, but I thought Lord Peylon was a wonderful ruler.

"That's a great idea," the black knight said.

Hehehe, isn't it? Lord Peylon's the best.

"You've given me a lot to think about. I'm glad I came here."

He looked unusually gentle as he said this. He had nice facial features, but his constant stoic expression meant that even a small change made him appear a different person.

It was enough to make Ribbons or Miss Cucumis squeal with delight.

"Ah! There you are!"

I thought about her and lo and behold—Ribbons. I didn't know where she had been hiding, but she was somewhat disheveled. Miss Cucumis had been with the white knight captain, but Ribbons must have just broken out the inn on her own.

And now here she was.

"Because of you, I—wah! Fezgahn! I've been hoping to see you!"

Holy cow, what a performance.

She had just been giving me a glare that could leave puncture wounds, only to manage a total one-eighty. Even the black knight was taken aback. I noticed his brow was furrowed. His hand immediately went to cover his mouth and nose, probably because of her scent, but I wasn't sure if that was her physical scent or that of her mana. I felt bad for him, so I put up a barrier.

Oh, that seemed to help.

"Ow!" Ribbons yelped. "What's this? It's like a wall. *You're* doing

this, aren't you?! What a terrible person you are, trying to get in between us!"

"I think you're much more terrible," I replied. "Do you realize you've been banned from Peylon?"

She and Miss Cucumis had both been banned for life for the trouble they had caused. I thought it was pretty kind of me to let her know.

Cut off from the black knight by my barrier, Ribbons could only cry and shout. It was getting obnoxious and people were staring, so I also put up a soundproofing barrier.

"*You!* This is all your fault!" she shrieked when she realized her struggling wouldn't break the barrier. She raised her hefty bag in the air, probably with the intent of hitting me. I was about to put up a barrier for myself, when someone grabbed her hand from behind. It was one of the security personnel.

There were lots of children at the carnival, so the houses related to Peylon pitched in and supplied security guards. It was the same arrangement that provided security for the hunting spectators.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Ribbons cried. "Let me gooo!"

"Quit thrashing!" the guard barked.

"You can't do this to me! I'm a daughter of House Duval!"

"And what of it? This is Peylon. Not many people out here are gonna back down when they hear that name."

"I beg your pardon?!"

The pitiful Ribbons was dragged off by the security guard. This time, they'd probably send her home by force. Her father might protest, but Lord Peylon could easily brush him aside.

"Lera! Are you all right?" Colny asked.

"I'm fine," I told her. "Did you call security? Thank you."

What a kind girl she was.

"I thought that if things weren't solved, you might lose control and destroy half the carnival."

Correction: What a rude girl she was.

What does she think I am? Can I take a brief hour to ask her?

"Um, Miss Lowell, would you be so kind as to undo the barrier around Yuin? He can't get out."

I turned toward Mr. Frivolous and saw that the black knight was indeed trapped. He seemed a bit sad, unless I was just imagining it. Was he vexed that he couldn't break the barrier himself? When I let him go, he fell to his knees.

Why?!

"A-Are you all right?" I asked.

"It's nothing you need to worry about," he said.

His voice was grim, like he was speaking to me from rock bottom. Had I done something? Was there something I should say to him? I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Louie.

"Lera, give him some space."

"Huh?"

"There are some things a man has to come to terms with on his own."

"Wha?"

What was he talking about? Even Ville was nodding in agreement. I thought those two were enemies!

That evening there wasn't a feast; this was the night of the ball. At the event, food was put out banquet-style, but I was told I wouldn't have time for eating, so I ate beforehand.

"That was your fault, Lera."

"Huuuh?"

I was telling Sheila about the event at the carnival. I was in an outfit that even included matching underwear and munching on some sandwiches.

Oh, these chicken sandwiches are great. I'll take another.

"Under those circumstances, you should have let Sir Yuin protect you."

"What?"

That man had been about to pass out from the stench of Ribbons's mana. If not for my barrier, he would've hit the dirt.

"Even still, it's natural that boys wish to protect the girl they like."

I didn't get it. It seemed like Sheila was saying that a good man would've tried to withstand the urge to fall down.

"So the black knight was acting like that because I put up my barrier?"

"The black knight? Oh, yes, he is a member of the Knights of Obsidian, isn't he? Lera, you have such an odd way of naming people."

Really? I think it's easier this way.

"My point is, next time this happens, leave matters to the gentleman."

"And what if he loses?"

“You make sure he’s unconscious, then wipe out the assailants.”

Ohhhh. Good to know.

At the ball Louie and Ville got lots of favorable attention. I hadn’t even realized there were so many young ladies at the festival. Some of them were in the market for a good husband and a little too determined to find one. I didn’t recall high society being so savage.

“Incredible.”

“Indeed.”

Colny and I watched from the sidelines. We had Thand and Sheila with us, so we didn’t get bothersome invitations ourselves. It was nice having powerful friends.

“I hear the two of you spent the day at the carnival. How was it?” Thand asked us.

“Oh, father, the animals they had were adorable.”

Colny had been riveted by the animals. Fluffiness is justice.

“And you were there as well, Lera?” Thand asked, turning the question to me.

“I was. It was a very useful outing.”

“Useful?”

You’ll just have to wait and see. I’m still in the planning phase.

Fleeing from the ferocious women, Ville, Loks, and Louie used us as shelter.

“This isn’t good…” Louie muttered.

“I never knew women could be so overbearing.”

Loks was looking at his mother while he said this. Which women was he talking about again?

Even Louie was frayed. I thought this was a good chance for him to use super social skills and find himself a wife. That was one of the reasons people held these sorts of events.

“Those are some frightening looks we’re getting,” Colny noted.

Just like she said, we were getting some awful stares. Apparently they didn’t realize that wasn’t going to help their chances with the object of their affections. They were probably miffed to see three top picks come here all at once. Still, the ball had only just started, so these boys would have to hang in there a bit longer.

Oh, the music is starting.

Suddenly, I was pulled from my aimless thoughts by a hand thrust out in front of me. Was it the black knight?

"Would you honor me with a dance, Miss Lowell?"

Unless I was mistaken, he looked a bit gloomy, like he still wasn't over what happened at the carnival. But turning him down wasn't the best choice here and I didn't see a problem with one dance.

The first song was a waltz. I was dead certain this was something brought over by another reincarnated spirit. There were a few other pieces I recognized. Tracking down the source of these compositions seemed like it could be interesting, but I had a million other things I wanted to do before that.

During our dance, we exchanged a bit of chatter.

"I hear there's silver coral in the Mystic Forest," he said.

"That's right. But it's only in Layer Six. Getting it isn't easy."

"I see."

It was a little too late to be saying things like "Why in the world is there coral in the forest?" so I didn't. There were sharks and mollusks, so there may well be coral to boot. Probably. I was willing to bet the oceans were filled with birds besides penguins.

Silver coral was a monster that waited for its prey to come to it. It grew on rocks, so even with the potential overflow, there wasn't going to be any in the lower layers. It was really pretty when polished, so people were willing to pay high prices for it.

"If I obtain some, please let me send it to you," he said.

"Oh. Thank you very much."

Does he know what he's saying?

In the language of gemstones, coral was used to offer one's eternal love. It's why lots of people sent coral rings or bracelets when proposing. Had Louie or someone else put the black knight up to this?

Once the song was over, we separated and I got another hailstorm of stares.

Please, just stop with the stares.

I thought it was because I was with the black knight, but not quite.

"Who is that girl?" one of them said. "It's not just Yuin, she has Winville, Loksusad, and even Shivan looking after her."

"Awfully bold of her. Does she know what her father's done?"

"She can't. She wouldn't be out there if she did."

Wow. Talk about rude.

I didn’t know if it was because they were jealous or because they despised Duval, but those latter statements were bound to get them in trouble; it wasn’t my job to tell them that. I left that matter to the adults, like I was supposed to. If Lord Peylon or someone heard them, there would be crashing lightning. Or at least a lecture.

But then, a shadowy figure sneaked up on the gossiping girls.

“Keep those inconsiderate thoughts to yourselves,” she said.

“Oh!”

“I-I wasn’t…”

Who was the woman who told them off? I couldn’t see her face, but her dress and hairstyle told me she was someone young. At these events, a woman’s hair and outfit could be used to discern whether they were married or single. I didn’t quite like that this only went for women, but Ozeria was still a nation favorable to men.

Covering her mouth with her fan, the young woman said, “Did you not hear of the three houses that had their ranks lowered for slandering someone they didn’t like?”

“W-Well…”

“I just need you to know that even your words could be grounds for your house’s status and reputation to drop.”

The other girls didn’t have anything to say to her. Losing ground on account of some jealous bad-mouthing was a very real possibility for them.

I watched them absentmindedly, when the young woman suddenly came my way.

“Good evening, Sir Yuin. We haven’t seen each other since graduation, have we?”

“That sounds about right, Miss Zokbahr.”

Zokbahr?!

The pretty woman having her hand kissed by the black knight was *that* guy’s daughter? Well, Lady Zokbahr was petite and endearing, so this girl probably just took after her mother. But on closer inspection, I realized she definitely had her father’s eyes! A beauty with the eyes of a hawk.

“Sir Yuin, may I ask a favor of you?”

“What would that be?”

“Would you introduce me to the young lady at your side?”

Me?!

The black knight was giving me furtive glances and I couldn’t

really refuse the daughter of one of the faction's top houses.

After a brief silence, the black knight sighed and said, "Miss Zokbahr, this is Lowell of House Duval. Miss Lowell, this is the daughter of Lord Zokbahr."

"You forgot my name, didn't you?"

"Please forgive me."

"This isn't something you make up for with just an apology. Honestly, no lady likes a man who can't keep a name in his head."

"Mmgh!"

These two get along. I think?

"Well allow me to introduce myself, Miss Lowell. I'm Twakasna of House Zokbahr. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I-I'm Lowell of House Duval. It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Is this the result of Sheila's lessons?"

Twakasna was giggling to herself. The formal way to introduce yourself was to give your house's name, rank, and your father's name. But this was the ball held for the hunting festival, which was far more casual than any event held in the royal capital.

But what I wanted to know was why I hadn't seen this girl at the tent socials.

"Oh, that look suggests you're confused as to why we're just now meeting."

"Huh?!"

Was I that obvious about it?

Amused to see me so flustered, Twakasna said, "It was just a guess, but it seems it was the correct one."

"Lady Zokbahr, I'd appreciate it if you'd stop teasing Miss Lowell," the black knight said, then stood between us.

He sure is tall.

"Oh, and you have the right to ask that of me?" Twakasna replied.

"This isn't a matter of rights."

"It very much is. You're no longer her dance partner, are you? Now, step aside."

She doesn't back down easily. Not much of a surprise, considering her family.

"I—"

"Very well. Now, I'd like to answer this young lady's question.

It’s a simple matter, but there’s no point explaining it while standing around here. Shall we step off to the side?”

As with every ball, there were sofas against the wall for people who needed to rest. They were also a gathering spot for people with nobody to dance with. Apparently we would be using them for their intended purpose.

“That would be fine,” I replied. “I’ll follow you.”

“Miss Lowell—”

“Then it’s settled. Ah, Sir Yuin, there’s no need for you to join us. Instead, could you bring Shivan and Winville over?”

Oooh!

When she said that, something about the black knight changed. He seemed to be shaking, if only slightly.

“Now, don’t delay. But feel free to snag any young ladies you meet on the way.”

“If you’ll excuse me then!”

And off he went into the throng of attendees.

“Now shall we head to the sofas?” Twakasna said.

“Let’s go.”

She was being very gracious to me. Given the house she was from, I was *fairly* confident this would be a normal conversation.

The rest space was occupied by a handful of people, but they all scattered like spiderlings the moment they saw us.

“Oh, they don’t have to be so obvious about it. But those people are all from the lower houses, so I doubt it’ll make much difference.”

Twakasna was right. Of the women who had gotten up, I recognized most of them from the lowest tents. I got a lot of stern looks in those lower tents.

“Now, let’s take a seat.”

“Let’s.”

Twakasna took an empty spot like it was the most natural place in the world for her to be. You could just do that when you came from one of the upper houses.

“The men aren’t here yet, but let’s get started. I was delayed because I was visiting my maternal grandmother.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Yes. Normally my mother would have gone, but it’s the hunting festival. For the mother of the house to be late would look much worse than if it were the daughter.”

I could understand that. A wife had many responsibilities similar to her husband, but their daughter would be treated as more of an accessory. So it fell to the wife to be present at important engagements.

Even if Lady Zokbahr had wanted to prioritize seeing her mother, her husband's circumstances forced her to instead go to the hunting festival. A personal visit could be entrusted to one's daughter, but the same couldn't be said of a major event. That could only happen if the wife was severely ill, injured, deceased, or had been separated from her husband.

"Um, so is your grandmother…"

"Oh, she's just fine. She fell down the stairs and broke her leg."

"What?!"

She broke her leg?!

That sounded serious. If she had fallen down a staircase, she was lucky to be alive. Yet Twakasna simply giggled.

"There's no need to worry. The institute lent us a healer, so all she needs to do is rest. She's well enough to complain that she's bored."

That was good. She sounded like a tough old lady, but she was Twakasna's maternal grandmother? If I hadn't known better, I would've assumed she was on the other side of the family.

"Durable, isn't she?" Twakasna said.

"Oh. Yes."

I didn't know what to say. I struggled to maintain a polite smile. Even the people who married into House Zokbahr were warriors. We didn't even do that in Peylon, and we were called a community of meatheads. Well, the women here were still pretty damn tenacious.

"Then, once my visit was over, I headed to Peylon. But before I made it here, my father contacted me, telling me there was trouble and that I should delay my arrival."

That was probably referring to the jewelry incident. There were spells besides portals that could send letters. Only, you couldn't send anything too long. They were convenient, but only to a degree.

"You see, I've taken an interest in you."

"Hm?"

There was no hiding my surprise at this statement.

"My father has told me all about you. You might not have

noticed, but I've kept an eye out for you every year."

She has? But until this year, I haven't—oh, she saw me during the middle day.

"On the middle day, I'd see you running around the carnival. You were just adorable."

Ahh, that's embarrassing.

I now knew what it was like to want to disappear. Good thing I had a fan to hide my crimson face. Whereas I was struggling to stay put, Twakasna was completely calm.

"You can probably tell from my father, but House Zokbahr is on your side. That is, as long as you don't betray the Kingdom of Ozeria."

This must've been what she really wanted to tell me. Even among the royal faction, House Zokbahr was known for its hawkishness and loyalty to the throne. It's why they were in charge of commanding the troops in the south. Having such a house take my side, meant that things could ugly if I made the wrong enemies. That was a little nerve-racking.

"Twakasna, please refrain from harassing Lera."

"Oh, Winville. And Loksusad as well. Good evening. And to you as well Shivan. And is that Sir Iyale? I'm so used to seeing you with Sir Yuin."

Wow, the whole gang is here. It gets really sparkly when you have them all in one place.

"Excuse me, Twakasna, we aren't together that frequently," Mr. Frivolous protested. "Please, don't try and invite misunderstandings."

"Am I? You were always together at the academy. In fact, I was shocked when I learned you two joined different orders."

"We have different skills, so of course we went in different directions!"

She really had him riled up. But in doing so, she had managed to break away from the heavy atmosphere that had been hanging over us.

I didn't think I'd ever say it, but thank you, Mr. Frivolous.

"Well then, now that Lera's protection is here, I'll excuse myself," Twakasna said and stood up. "It probably isn't my place to say it, but there's something I think you should know." She turned around, facing me. "Watch out for Lord Yulville. I think he's still up to something."

With that, our little group was an island of silence amid the

noisy ocean of the ball.

With the arrival of the next day, the hunting festival was now in its latter half. Everyone was still participating, with the exception of the three houses that had been removed. Indeed, despite his plot with Miss Cucumis, the white knight captain was still part of it.

He had tried to approach me during the ball and the feasts and other gatherings, but my stalwart defenses had kept him at bay. But his real objective was Lord Zokbahr, so maybe I didn't have anything to worry about.

Granted, there was still the matter of what Twakasna had said to me. What had she meant? She would be part of the tent socials for the rest of the festival, but this wasn't a good place to ask about personal matters. The tent socials were for socializing.

"Goodness, Twakasna, you've grown up to be such a pretty young lady," Lady Rabizay said to her.

"You're too kind," she replied flatly.

"Perhaps it's time you should forget the previous man and move on to someone new. Surely someone like you has no shortage of options. A new fiancé hasn't been found, correct?"

"I'm leaving it all to my mother."

What was this talk of a previous man? Had Twakasna been previously engaged? Actually, given her house, that wasn't a strange idea at all. She could easily be married if she was in the same age range as Ville and Louie.

I stopped myself there. Digging any deeper would have been uncouth. Besides, even though I had a prospective suitor, I had no need for talks of marriage for a while yet. Still didn't know what to do about that.

After that, Twakasna remained the center of attention in the higher tent. What an exceptional person she was.

The viewing screens were received very well. Lots of people were pleased to be able to watch their relatives or darlings compete.

"The institute has been producing one marvelous tool after another. I can't wait to see what they come up with next."

"Quite so."

Oho ho ho? That sounds like a business opportunity.

"The institute strives day and night to improve your daily

lives," I jumped in. "To further this noble goal, may I be so bold as to request a small donation? We're always accepting contributions and we have gifts to thank our highest donors. I have a list complete with pictures, so please take a minute to look it over."

"Oh, you do? But *gifts*..."

"I was under the impression donations didn't involve getting anything in return."

They're having trouble understanding it! They require further explanation!

"They're called thank you gifts, but please think of them as nothing more than tokens. As you're no doubt aware, magic research requires ample time and funds. You can view the gifts as nothing more than a small gesture of appreciation for your help with the latter."

"Oh my."

"Is that so?"

Woo! Looks like we might have something!

I'd have to contact Bear later. Sheila was giving me a spine-chilling smile, but this was all in the name of Peylon's magic research institute. If she wanted to tell me off, then so be it!

Even the spectators were enjoying the viewing screens. Without the screens they could still enjoy the atmosphere or peek into the forest, but now they could see the hunting grounds from new angles. As long as they were happy.

I really thought the hunting festival was a great way to bring in sightseers. Initially, it was an event for our faction, but it had evolved into something more. So once this year's was over I had lots of ideas for how we might make the experience better.

The festival was divided into two halves, with the middle day sitting in between. Whoever had the highest collective score at the end was declared the winner. Very easy to understand.

"I think it's nice how they declare a winner and all, but there should be special prizes for getting big targets or lots of a certain species or stuff like that," I said.

"Well, as the name implies, it is a festival," Colny reminded me.

After the feast, the two of us were having tea together. Someone must have caught a boar today, as there had been roast boar at dinner. They cut it into really tiny pieces so everyone could try it, but that was just the right size for me. It

was a simple taste, but incredibly delicious.

Food aside, I thought they should have awards for more than just first place.

"They could have a participation prize," I said.

"I don't think you should hand out prizes that easily."

No? I think it's a good idea.

"But I think you're onto something. Let's talk about it at breakfast with my parents and Lord Peylon."

Woo!

The next morning, I proposed my idea to Lord Peylon and Sheila. Thand didn't join us. It was just these two because the official host of the hunting festival was House Peylon. Sheila fulfilled some of the roles of the lady of House Peylon until Louie got married.

"A variety of awards, you say?" Lord Peylon said.

"Well, considering that it's a festival, having a few different awards to give out might not be a bad idea," Sheila said.

Oh, is that a favorable reaction?

"But it's too late for this year," Lord Peylon pointed out.

"I know that. I was thinking of the future."

"Yes, but I'm more interested in improving the premium spectating areas," Sheila said.

Since I had their attention, I also mentioned the seating, but I thought they might take more of an interest in the awards.

"Well, currently, we're using the screens to make it easier to see what's going on, right?" I said. "So we could widen the viewing area, install seats, and make it easier to watch them. Of course, the paid viewers would get special angles not available to the free viewers. If possible, I'd like the premium spectators to see about as much as those at the tent socials."

"But that would reduce the gap between the festival invitees and the spectators, wouldn't it?" she asked.

"The spectators are only watching. Their lodgings are all over Chenoan, and they aren't invited to the feasts or the tent socials. I think there's already a wide enough gap."

Sheila thought about it. She hadn't immediately shot it down, which meant she probably thought the idea had some merit.

"How about we sell refreshments to the spectators too?" I offered. "We can sell regional foods and sweets produced by Castle Varchudar and Swanille Manor."

“Offer *those*? Isn’t that going a bit far?”

The sweets put out by the castle and manor were popular among the ladies and even some of the lords! But that was all the more reason.

“I think we should use this as a chance to give the people an opportunity to try them out,” I said. “We’re thinking about opening up a shop in the royal capital.”

“You’re going to have Shalty set up a shop? And in the capital?”

Sheila was naturally surprised. Turnover in the royal capital was *fierce*, especially among the culinary industry. It wasn’t easy making a restaurant survive out there.

Shalty, I might add, was a woman who worked in the kitchen of Castle Varchudar. For generations, her family had run a restaurant in Chenoan. She specialized in making sweets and always managed to fulfill my silly requests. She was going to be a top-rate pâtissier.

“That’s why I want to lay the groundwork here,” I said. “If they got a taste of our treats, then learned that they could buy more in the royal capital…”

“They’d flock to the shop.”

Because those sweets were really, really good! They were like nothing this world had seen.

Ha ha ha, my past life knowledge comes in handy once again!

And I wasn’t done yet! There was whipped cream in my future. And cakes decorated with it! Cream already existed, but it hadn’t occurred to anyone to sweeten and whip it. Thank you, whoever invented whipped cream in my previous world. Because of you, I could carry out my confectionary revolution.

“I want as many people as possible to be able to try Shalty’s creations. Once they get a taste for them, they’ll be unable to resist the desire for more.”

“Brother, I think we should listen to Lera! Starting next year, let’s renovate the premium seats, and offer meals and sweets!”

I had Sheila’s vote. Sweets were a big priority for her, so that was practically inevitable.

If the shop in the royal capital did well, I could enjoy the local confections even if I wasn’t home in Peylon. The fare served by the academy cafeteria was good, but I got tired of eating it everyday.

As for the awards, they asked for some time to think about it,

but we settled on the other matters easily enough. Starting next year, there would be tickets sold for premium seats where you could watch the hunting event on screens, actually sit down, and buy refreshments.

There would be tickets just for the people who wanted to spectate, but also tickets that included sweets, drinks, and meals. Although by the end of the conversation, Sheila and Lord Peylon were just shaking their heads.

The institute would likely be busy producing drones and screens, as well as training drone operators. They also had to make tickets that couldn't be counterfeited. Bear and his employees would just have to give it their all. And since it was all my idea, I could just collect my dues.

Ha ha ha, go, my workhorses.

I thought I heard Bear crying in rage somewhere, but it must've just been my imagination.

The hunting festival had started off with some bumps, but the latter half went along without incident. Which is to say, it went how it was supposed to go. Now we were on the final day, and graced with more good weather.

Being in the last stretch, the tent socials were abuzz with guesses as to who might take home first place, their giggles and chuckles echoing about.

"It seems this year was dominated by the younger hunters."

"The average age of the victors might start going down."

"Is that not preferable to the award going to some old man?"

"Oh, don't say it like that."

Oh, I see.

Most of those young men were probably second or third sons. There were first sons at the festival, but they didn't have time to focus on the hunting. They were using the festival as a chance for diplomacy. No rest for anyone it seemed.

On the final day, hunting would be cut short, ending at noon. The afternoon would be used for cleanup, so the hunters got to rest until the ball in the evening. That event would continue until late into the night, and even those who didn't dance would be drinking, socializing, trading information, and all that stuff.

Even the tent socials were relatively laid back. Everyone had had the discussions they needed to, so now they just watched the last leg of the hunting.

Just as noon was approaching, a horn was blown, signaling the end. The day's scores were going to be added up and a winner would be declared later in the afternoon. In the meantime a garden party would be held.

It might have been called a garden party, but it was still part of the hunting festival, so there was a lot more focus on eating. It reminded me of the barbecues of my previous life. Previously, many ladies had refrained from partaking in the food out of fear of getting their clothes dirty, but now that we had spells that quickly eliminated stains everyone enjoyed the grilled delights.

Since this was a garden party, standing and eating was a-okay, but you could also sit at the tables placed around the edge. Some ladies actually enjoyed the rare opportunity to enjoy a meal while standing around. The main dishes were made from the festival catches, grilled with salt, spices, and special sauces. In addition to the meat there were plenty of grilled vegetables, and fruit for dessert.

And once that was mostly done, there were other sweets. It was summer, so it was all treats that could be served cold. Among the offerings was raspberry mousse, triple-berry mousse cake, pudding, and fruit jelly. They were all adorned with fruits cut in decorative styles, making them pleasant just to look at. And goodness did the women go for the sweets. Especially the mousse, which they had never seen before.

"Oh, it just dissolves on my tongue."

"I might be addicted to this sweet and sour flavor."

"It's so sweet! It's incredible!"

"I wish I could have this everyday."

I was just glad I had captured their taste buds.

We didn't have to move after the garden party; the award ceremony came to us. A simple stage was set up, where the winner would be granted something that reminded me of a laurel wreath. They said the wreath was based on something believed to have been worn by a goddess fond of hunting and that these wreaths were used in all sorts of hunting-related manners.

Until last year, the hunting goddess who bestowed this crown had been Sheila.

"So why am *I* doing it now?" I asked.

I had been abruptly abducted from the garden party, brought

into one of the nearby tents, then suddenly been forced into the role of the goddess! For some reason, they even made me change clothes. It was an old-fashioned, pure-white robe. The soft texture told me it was made from spider silk—very fine spider silk.

Once I was fully changed, Sheila gave me a wry smile. “This is normally the job of Lady Peylon or her daughter.”

And as she used to belong to House Peylon, this had once been her job. The current lord had no wife, and naturally had no daughter. But he had something *like* a daughter. So they snagged me.

“Can’t Colny do this?” I asked.

“She’s a daughter of House Aspozat.”

“And I’m from House Duval.”

“Exactly.”

Oh, so that’s how it is.

That house—or rather, my father specifically—had long neglected the hunting festival, and this year they had stopped inviting him altogether. This was an attempt to improve the house’s bad image and to pave the way for my inheritance of the house. It was also a way of saying the successor of House Duval was willing to get along with the rest of the faction.

Conveying two or three things by playing the goddess once was a pretty good bargain.

I was taken from the tent to behind the stage. I had a floral wreath to signify my godhood and held in my hand the winner’s wreath. In front of the stage, Lord Peylon was offering his compliments to this year’s victor.

“Now, allow me to introduce our venerable champion!” he said. “Sir Yuin of House Fezgahn!”

Oh, the black knight won?

It wasn’t too uncommon for the victor to be someone outside the faction. However, because this was an event for the royalists many people objected to their participation. That was because some of these people took the hunting festival super seriously. This year had its fair share of tryhards, but the black knight had managed to beat them. That couldn’t have been easy.

Come to think of it, he had been the only one at the beginner course that had kept up with Ville. Those two white knights were run ragged.

“Now then, the goddess of the hunt will bestow your crown upon you.”

Oh, that’s my cue.

Holding the wreath, I stepped onto the stage, where Lord Peylon and the black knight were standing.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“Thank you very much,” he replied.

With those formalities over, he knelt down so I could place the crown on his head.

This is sort of embarrassing. Who came up with this?

But with our difference in height, I wouldn’t have been able to reach his head easily otherwise. And with the wreath handed off, my job was done. Good work, everyone.

With the crowning completed, I was free to do what I wanted until the ball. I was told I wouldn’t have time to eat at the event, so I had a light meal in advance. It was becoming a tradition for me.

“I think it’s a waste to put out food if nobody’s going to eat it,” I said.

“The leftovers will be offered to the servants, so it won’t go to waste,” Colny told me.

“Ohh.”

Sure, they were leftovers, but they were dishes the servants never had under normal circumstances, so they understandably had no objections to this arrangement. The people who worked in view of the guests were all servants from Castle Varchudar, while those who worked behind the scenes were locals who had been hired temporarily. More economic stimulus.

Colny and I were chatting while getting ready for the event. Once again, I would be wearing a new dress. It was rose pink with a flared skirt, something atypical for me. The whole thing was covered in gold embroidery, making it quite extravagant. Still, it didn’t look too garish, which could probably be attributed to the mellow shade of pink.

Colny’s dress was light green with occasional patches of dark green. The only embroidery for her was some subtle silver on her sleeves. We both had jewelry made from the pearls we’d caught, mine being black and hers gold.

“Kind of an obvious thing to say, but I’m really glad we made these sets,” I said.

“Truly.”

We weren’t so absurd as to only use jewelry once, but when it came to dresses, there really were people who refused more than one use. Old habits die hard though, and the words “what a shame” nearly slipped from my mouth. However, the gowns wouldn’t be thrown away—they’d be given to charities or their materials reused, so it was all right in the end.

While Peylon was doing well enough, most other territories still had only basic laundry methods, making stains difficult to remove. *Stains.* Long ago, removing dirt had been the bane of my existence. Why did I have so many dirt stains? Because I was always in the Mystic Forest! Everyday I’d incur Sheebis’s wrath. So I’d thought it would be a good idea to make spells that clean out dirt.

But now the institute has put out stain-removing spells, so what was I getting excited about? Oh, that’s right.

“Colny, if I sold a washing machine that could remove any stain, do you think people would buy it?”

“Washing machine? Is that a sort of magic tool?”

“Yeah, something like that. It would be a machine—uh, a magic tool that would wash clothes for people.”

“Another magic tool, huh? Most houses have a servant who does the laundry, so wouldn’t that take their jobs?”

I hadn’t thought of that. Making convenient magic tools could eliminate dreary work, but it would remove a source of income for people who did that work.

“Hmm, then maybe a machine that just removes stains! How does that sound?” I tried.

“Whatever you do, I think you should consult with Lord Peylon and my mother. Is the tool complete?”

“No, not yet.”

“Then you should also talk to the chief and Nielle.”

I’ll do that.

The ball was held in Swanille Manor’s great hall. This year would be my first time participating, now that I was old enough.

“That’s a lot of people,” I commented.

“This is what happens when you gather all the festival invitees in one place,” Colny replied. “When you include all the family members brought along, it adds up quickly.”

It seemed pretty obvious when she put it like that, especially

when you considered the number of seats at the feasts.

Louie was going to escort me when we made our entrance. We were siblings, in a sense. And as usual, Loks escorted Colny. Ville entered alone, reminding me that he didn't yet have a partner for these sorts of occasions.

"Nobody bats an eye if a man is unaccompanied at a ball, but…" Colny seemed reluctant to finish her sentence.

"But?" I asked.

"There'll be no end to the women who will see this as an opportunity to get close to him," Loks answered for her. "I bet he's in for another nettlesome evening."

I see, I see.

"Be honest: When will Ville settle on a partner?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm sure mother and father are thinking hard about it."

So even Loks didn't know, but that's just how these things went. Being the heir to such a notable house, Ville wasn't the only one who had a say in whom he married. The circumstances of both houses had to be considered.

"But at the moment, it'll probably be someone from another faction. Most likely, they'll be from the neutral faction."

"That makes sense."

The neutral faction was large, including houses favorable to the royal faction, entirely neutral parties, and those that leaned toward the noble faction. Chances were Ville's partner would come from a house neutral but favorable to the royalists.

We were met with lots of stares when we entered the hall. That was because the siblings came from the faction's top house, and Louie and I belonged to the house hosting the event. Lord Peylon himself had been the very first person to enter the hall so he could greet the guests. But shouldn't Louie and I have been with him?

"The only other person who should accompany the host is their spouse, but Lord Peylon is single," Louie whispered to me.

Ohh.

Once again, Louie and Ville provided sound protection, not letting anyone approach me.

"Hey, young ladies, what a lovely evening it is," said one exception.

Colny's mood dropped like an anchor. It was Mr. Frivolous. Oh,

and behind him was Sir Nondescript. I hadn't seen much of him lately. He seemed really apologetic.

"Good evening," he said. "I'm sorry for Iyale's incessant behavior."

"I get the feeling it pains you too, Rolfed."

Sir Nondescript responded with a dry laugh. He was always bearing the brunt of the trouble caused by his frivolous friend. Also, when had Ville started calling Sir Nondescript by his name? Was this Louie's social super-butterfly powers at work?

"By the way, what happened to your captain?" Ville asked while looking around the hall. "I don't see him anywhere."

"Oh, he left. I heard he received some urgent news from the royal capital, or something to that effect."

"Did he now?"

I was glad to hear that. But what about the subordinates he had left behind?

"Look at him, making his investigations someone else's problem," Ville said with a smile.

Ville, you shouldn't smile like that. You look evil.

"That forest isn't something we're suited to investigate," Sir Nondescript replied, smiling bitterly. "I'm sure the people of Peylon are a far better choice for that."

"Yeah? But it was the White Summit that pushed their way in."

"I can't argue with that..."

"Ah, sorry. I wasn't trying to lay the blame on you."

"Don't worry, I know."

Ville's frustration wasn't with the white knights—just their captain. Sir Nondescript seemed to understand this.

"Well, whatever you try, next time we'll make sure you take the beginner courses."

"Oh, those..."

I smiled faintly when I saw how forlorn Sir Nondescript looked at the mention of the courses. But those courses were important, so we couldn't let people skip out on them. I just hoped they wouldn't hold it against us.

Good luck in the forest.

"Oh, the guest of honor has arrived," Loks said, a round of shrill cries overlapping with his observation.

Entering the hall was the black knight. During the festival, he had donned brown hunting gear, but now he was in black formal attire. Black suited the black knight.

He kept an eye on us as he walked further into the hall, but first, he had to say a word to Lord Peylon.

“He’s the guest of honor, so at least humor him.”

The moment Colny finished her sentence, the music started. And as I expected, the black knight came up and held out his hand to me.

“Would you accompany me for just one song?” he asked.

“Certainly.”



This time, Ville didn’t say anything. Louie smiled as he let me go, and both Colny and Loks were grinning. I didn’t catch the reactions of the two white knights.

By this point, I had sort of gotten used to dancing with the black knight. I had also gotten used to the razor-sharp glares.

Once the hunting festival was over, Peylon returned to normal. The invitees all left and so did most of the spectators, but some of them stayed to go sightseeing around the region. Now that their captain had gone home, all the white knights followed after him. I thought it awfully insulting that they left without saying a word, but Lord Peylon told me to let it go.

That said, Mr. Frivolous and Sir Nondescript remained. The former spent some time with the black knight, and the latter...well, he was there too, gradually growing despondent. I asked Mr. Frivolous about this, and he said that his friend probably missed the royal capital.

So he was homesick. To me, that seemed like all the more reason to let him head back. But Sir Nondescript apparently had his own reasons for staying here. I just didn’t know what those were.

With the festival done, I was spending every day in the Mystic Forest.

“Forest shark obtained!”

With monsters showing up in layers they shouldn’t have been, I was recording what I had caught and where. This was per Jilbayla’s request. She wanted to get an idea of where the monsters were venturing. Thanks to the old records left in Peylon, these numbers could be used to calculate when the overflow might occur.

I had caught the forest shark in the shallows of Layer Five. Normally, these monsters were found deep enough that you’d have to stay overnight if you wanted to catch one. Its wide maw was filled with sharp teeth. One bite from them was enough to ensure you’d never make it back from the forest.

Their weakness was ice, but cold water did the trick just as well. The water found around the boundary of Layer Five was enough to incapacitate them. So long as you followed the steps necessary, a forest shark was easy prey for a mage. In this case, I just took the shark down by immersing it in ice water. Easy as

pie. The shark was a pretty big one. Its body was around five meters long. Thank goodness I could just *fwoop* it inside the storage bag.

Since I wasn't yet an adult, I had set times I could be in the forest and wasn't allowed to stay overnight. I didn't like this one bit, but Lord Peylon wouldn't budge, so I had no choice but to obey my curfew. Hence why I was trying to find ways I could travel deeper into the forest.

"And you're trying to use magic to get around faster?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

I was getting Jilbayla's advice while she looked over my catches. I had wanted to make a magic-powered vehicle, but had given up due to my own inability to implement or explain the idea. Besides, with all the underbrush and tree roots, the Mystic Forest wasn't an ideal place for a vehicle. There were paths, but those were more like animal trails at best.

Maybe some sort of hovercraft will work. I guess I'll have to give it more thought.

Putting that aside, I was currently using spells that increased the length of my strides so I could run through the forest. It drained my stamina, but I had been running around there for years, so I could manage it. If I could move faster, I could reduce my travel times and get deeper into the forest. Layer Five was fairly wide.

"Have you submitted that spell to the institute?" Jilbayla asked.

"Mmm, not yet. Should I?"

"Certainly. I'm sure it'll sell."

That would bring tax revenue to the region—something very desirable for someone who worked for the regional administration.

"Well, if I sell it, it'll be through the institute."

"That would help us."

If I were to sell it on my own, I'd pay taxes to whatever domain I happened to be in, which would soon be the royal capital. But if I sold it through the institute, the taxes would be paid to Peylon, and Jilbayla would prefer that. I also wanted the taxes going to Peylon, and working with the institute meant that they'd take care of any paperwork and inspections.

But would people really buy a spell formula that made foot travel faster? Anyone looking to go a long distance could just use a horse or a carriage.

I'd come to associate the end of the hunting festival with the end of summer, and that meant my extended vacation was coming to its own dreaded end.

"Starting this fall, you'll be a second-year," Lord Peylon said to me. "I know I'm late, but have you gotten used to life at the academy?"

Lord Peylon, Louie, the Aspozat siblings, and I were all having dinner in Castle Varchudar's inner dining hall. Sheila and Thand had already headed back to the royal capital. They were busy people.

"Mmm. I think?"

"Why was that a question?" Louie chuckled.

"I guess I'd say I'm used to it. There was just so much trouble in my first year."

"Such as with your room?" Colny asked, unnecessarily.

"Or with Chetasokia?" Loks chimed in, equally unnecessarily.

There had also been Ribbons and Lineka Hogultar. That baron's daughter had seduced every boy she could, including the heir to the house that had the biggest stake in Peylon's monster material trade.

"Well, you could say a lot happened," I summarized.

"I just hope next year is a little less turbulent."

I wholeheartedly agreed with Colny on that.

"So are those two white knights still entering the forest?" Lord Peylon asked.

"They are. They were thrilled when they got permission to enter Layer Two."

The black knight, Mr. Frivolous, and Sir Nondescript had moved from Castle Varchudar to an inn for hunters. It was much closer to the forest, providing guests with easy access to the first layer.

"And Sir Yuin made it to Layer Two in record time, didn't he?"

"Sounds like Yuin," Louie added.

"He should probably learn when to take a break," Ville sighed.

And I had thought those two were getting along better. Though I sort of agreed with Ville. The black knight really pushed himself.

"Well, Sir Yuin has a goal he's working toward."

I really didn't care for the way Loks looked at me when he said that. Even Lord Peylon was looking at me expectantly.

“One more year, is it?” Lord Peylon said. “What do you think he’ll do?”

“What’s this about another year?” Louie asked.

“Ah, nobody told you? You see…”

There’s no need to tell him!

The plan was to return to the royal capital a few days before the end of the vacation, meaning I had only three days left in Peylon.

“So here’s the accelerated movement spell,” I said. “I’d like to keep the usual arrangement.”

I was at the institute, giving Nielle a document outlining the spell.

“Understood,” she replied. “I must say, you come up with some interesting spells, Lera.”

“I just wanted a way to get around the forest quickly.”

“Ah, I see.”

She laughed, but her hand kept on writing. There were a lot of obnoxious steps you had to go through before you could start selling a spell. The variety and number of forms you had to fill out was immense.

The document I had handed over was a documentation template. This would be used to form a design document, and to submit and register the spell. Nielle normally took little interest in anything besides her research, but she could breeze through these documents like it was nothing. I began to wonder why.

Wait, no, there’s more important matters.

“Did Lord Peylon talk to you about the screens?”

“That he did. Bear was ticked off to see our workload increase again.”

What was he getting so mad about? Didn’t he see more work as a good thing?

“I just had an idea regarding those screens,” I said.

“Why not bring it up with Lord Peylon?” she suggested.

“Before that, I’d like to get some technical advice.”

“Oh? Is this a new spell?”

Nothing lured Nielle in like new magic. But this wasn’t a new spell—just a new application of an existing one.

“Right now, a camera can only transmit to one screen. I was wondering if there was some way a camera could transmit to multiple screens.”

“One camera for multiple screens, you say? Honestly, this sort of illusory magic is still new. I’m sure there’s room for modifications, but I’m just not sure about this one.”

Nielle groaned and crossed her arms. I guess this wasn’t enough to really grab her attention.

If we could transmit to multiple screens, we could have live broadcasts. It wouldn’t just be the spectators’ seats, we could also set up quasi-sports bars where people could watch the hunting festival. That was just what I had in mind, but there were probably other uses.

“Right now, you’ve got the cameras linked to their screens with mana?” she confirmed.

“Yeah. That was the simplest way to do it.”

“Maybe you could set up a magic tool that could connect to multiple displays?”

“Like an intermediary…”

Ooh, she’s onto something. Maybe it’ll work after all?

When she got like this, Nielle shut out external stimuli. She’d just be in the way if she was left in the entrance to the lab, so I gently guided her to her room. Now I just had to wait for the results.

Do your best, Nielle.

Epilogue

My delightful vacation had ended in the blink of an eye, and now I had to bid farewell to the Mystic Forest.

Until next year!

We were to head for the royal capital once breakfast was over. There was still a bit of the break left, but the journey would take time and I was told it was best to return to the dorm early. There was always a sudden rush of students returning at the beginning of the new term and arriving early was the best way to avoid that.

We had sent our luggage to the Aspozat residence via portal, but the people would be going by carriage. We could've gone by portal as well, but we didn't want anyone knowing we could do that just yet.

"Do I really have to go back already?!" I lamented.

"It'll be the start of a new year," Louie said with a grin. "You won't be the youngest there anymore, so be sure to act like it."

"Do I *have* to?"

There might be new students, but there weren't necessarily any related to me.

"Do you suppose any of the new students will be from our faction?" Colny asked.

"Three, if I'm correct," Loks told her. "During the festival, some fathers gave me their regards, asking me to look out for their young ones. I believe all three of them are boys."

It was normal for older students to look after the younger kids from their faction. And if they were boys, then they would in part be Loks's responsibility. If there were any girls, someone probably would have approached Colny during the tent socials. It wasn't always easy leading the pack.

When we departed Castle Varchudar, Louie came with us. He had to get back to the domain he was studying in.

"You're in a good mood," I observed.

"And so are you," he replied. "Oh, before I forget, don't cause those siblings too much trouble, okay?"

"Urgh."

I avoided looking him in the eye. It pained me to admit that I couldn't rule out the possibility.

"Oh, you're all here," said a voice from behind us.

"Ah, Bear."

"Quit calling me Bear!"

But you are a bear.

Cheerfully following behind him were Lord Peylon and Nielle. I thought they might be here to see us off.

"I'm going with you," Bear said.

"Really?"

"Don't give me that. We're headed to the same place."

"Look after him, will you?"

"If Nielle says I should, then I suppose I have no choice."

"Give me a break, you two."

The longer someone worked at the institute, the better they became at bear-wrangling, and Nielle had a long history there.

"Be careful on the road," Lord Peylon warned us.

"And have a lovely trip," Nielle added.

And with that, we all got in, and off the carriages went. Louie was headed in a different direction, so he waved to us from his window. We had Bear in one carriage; Ville, Loks, Colny, and myself in another; and a few for the servants.

I realized I hadn't seen the three knights around. I didn't know if they were still in Peylon, or if they left without anyone telling me.

"I hear Sir Yuin plans to stay in Peylon a bit longer."

"Wha?"

Goodness. Did Loks read my mind?

"Yes, it seems he's determined to reach the deeper layers," Ville replied.

It turned out, Loks actually just wanted to chat. I noticed Ville could now talk about the black knight without getting quite so dour. This was probably Louie's doing.

Hearing his brother's response, Loks looked at me and smiled. I don't know why.

"I think he wants to get to Layer Six as fast as he can," he said.

"He does?" I said.

"He needs to *at least* get to Layer Five."

"If he wants to be accepted, he does."

Hold on, what are you two saying?

"Why does he need your acceptance?" I protested. "Who I

marry is my decision."

"Can you even decide on your own?" he countered. "Besides, I don't think you'll pay any heed to someone who can only enter the lower layers."

Agh. I can't argue with that.

Sure, a person's hunting abilities were important to me, but that didn't mean I fully agreed with Ville! I tried to conjure up a counterargument, but Loks said something first.

"Ahh, so that's why Sir Yuin's in such a hurry."

"You think so? Well, with his skills, he should get to Layer Four soon enough."

"So you *do* acknowledge his skills."

And that's in spite of Ville's dislike for the black knight. Well, he's softened on him a bit.

Ville looked the other way, ending the conversation.

Colny hadn't been part of this discussion because she put herself to sleep with a spell the moment we had entered the carriage. She said she found these long rides boring. A straight trip from Peylon to the royal capital took ten days. Just sitting for that long was indeed difficult. We could have gone faster, but nobles weren't supposed to hurry. I found that dubious.

"Going too fast also makes some people nauseous," Loks told me.

That was true. This was a highway, but it wasn't paved, so the carriage rocked quite a bit. This revived my idea of making a carriage with suspension. I hadn't taken a long journey since my first trip to the royal capital, so I had forgotten all about the idea.

Maybe I could propose the idea to the institute? But it didn't involve magic. Though it *could* involve monster materials. Maybe we could make something even better than what we had in my previous world. I'd also have to make tires. These carriage wheels were made with iron—no shock absorption at all, which let me feel every little shake and tremble.

Let's see, we can move faster with a smaller contact patch, right?

The institute would just have to deal with the stuff I didn't know. I was already excited for next summer.

We reached the royal capital in five days. If that sounds fast, it's because we used magic on the journey! We cast spells to help the horses recover and did what we could to reduce the carriage's vibrations. In the end, I made cushions of air beneath

our seats. That didn't do anything for our legs, but that would be a project for next time. Still, I was exhausted. Being rattled around in a carriage is more draining than you might think.

When we reached the royal capital, we headed straight for the Aspozat residence. By the time we arrived, we were all too tired to speak.

"Well, this is where we part ways," Bear said.

"You aren't staying here?" I asked.

"Instructors have their own lodgings on the academy grounds. I'll be there."

"Oh."

"Yep. Well, see you when the new term starts. Oh, and don't forget to make general magic one of your electives!"

"So much for electing!"

Bear just grinned and headed off.

Goodness' sake.

At the residence, Sheila greeted us with a smile. "You arrived awfully quickly. You must be tired. You should rest tomorrow and return to the dorm the day after that."

"We will," we all said gratefully.

There were still a few days until the end of break, so we didn't have to return immediately.

We went back to the dorm three days before the start of the new school year. This was around the time people began to return, with the final days of the break being the most congested.

"And here we are," I said.

"The new term hasn't even started, yet you sound so down," Colny replied.

Of course I was. I had too much fun in Peylon. Except for the occasional bit of trouble. The thought of which reminded me that while I wasn't going to be running into Miss Cucumis (she had been expelled), I would more than likely be seeing Ribbons. Especially if she picked general magic again.

First she had aimed for the third prince, then the black knight. She just couldn't settle on a target. Either way, she wasn't going to be anymore than just a fan, but she still managed to cause plenty of headaches. I didn't know what the third prince thought of her, but the scent of her mana meant the black knight didn't want much to do with her. But I wasn't kind enough to tell her

that.

Now, let's go back to my beloved attic room. I just hope this year is a mellow one.

Afterword

Volume 2! Complete!

Once again, it's the author, Riko Saiki. Whether this is our first meeting, second, or beyond, thank you for buying *Disowned but not Disheartened Volume 2.* It took some time, but we successfully published another volume! Thank goodness.

A lot happened while this volume was in the works. First, the manga! It's begun! It's incredible! As the original author, I have the opportunity to check it over. Every time, I look forward to seeing how every little scene turns out! And sometimes I get to see characters who haven't yet been illustrated in the novels! I love it.

Now, about this volume. If you've read it, then I'm sure you know it's almost entirely about the hunting festival. If you were surprised by this, then may I assume you're a reader of the webnovel? I hadn't expected this either. I was taken aback when my editor first suggested it. But here it is. Humans can do anything when they put their mind to it!

As this was the published work, it naturally differs from the web version. I'm sure some of you thought "Is this person or that person going to appear here?" If you did know, I hope you enjoyed it. For those who only read this edition, you'll see the difference if you read the web novel. It's on Kakuyomu and still being updated.

As for personal announcements, I got a giant refrigerator. I needed a new one and I somehow ended up with this. I never realized how hard it can be to reach all the way in the back of these big ones. I apologize for the prosaic outburst.

Finally, I'm incredibly grateful this book was able to be published. This is all thanks to the people who have supported me. I have my editor, the illustrator, book designer, and more to thank for this. I'm immensely grateful to everyone involved in this book.

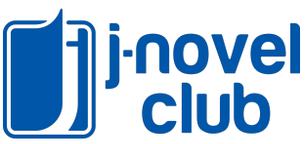
And you, who read the book, I hope you'll do me the honor of reading the next one too.


2
Riko Saiki
Illust.
Baracan
Disowned but Not Disheartened!
Life Is Good with Overpowered Magic


Lera's home and enjoying her days hunting! But could more trouble be in store for her?!
Riko Saiki
Illust. Baracan
Disowned but Not Disheartened!
2
Life Is Good with Overpowered Magic


Colnesia
Bornir Aspozat
Affectionately known as "Colny."
Lera's childhood friend,
older than her by one year.
Tafelina Lowell
Lera Duval
Reincarnated from another world.
Specialized education in the countryside
left her with more muscles than brains.
Oldest daughter of House Duval,
but was disowned at a young age.
Water magic
makes it easy!
Pearls galore in the
Mystic Forest!


A case of larceny
interrupts the
hunting festival!



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Disowned but Not Disheartened! Life Is Good with Overpowered Magic: Volume 2
by Riko Saiki

Translated by Grant U
Edited by Ribeyrolles

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