
Usagi Hoshimi
ill. Qi234
Engaging with the Plot:
A Former Cat's Attempt to Save Her Now Temporary Fiancé
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MEOOOW.
MREOW.
"After your curse is broken, you'll meet your fated heroine and live happily ever after. So there's no need to be afraid."
MEW!
MREOOOW!
Engaging with the Plot: A Former Cat's Attempt to Save Her Now Temporary Fiancé
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The Great Witch

One of the Champions of Destiny, the Great Witch. Half demon, half human, and known for her high aptitude in all kinds of magic. She was especially unmatched in dark magic. Because of her lineage, she did not fit in with either humans or demons and lived for a long time in solitude. However, after meeting the holy beast, she learned how to love and later became a champion who saved many people with her extraordinary magical abilities. She lived at a time when the demon population was at an all-time high, and it is difficult to say whether humanity would have continued to thrive as it has without her. However, mentions of her cease in all records past a certain time period.

From *The Champions of Destiny*, via Alice's collection

Great Witch Alys



From *An Illustrated Guide to Champions*, via Alice's collection





CHARACTERS

Lucille Gustelanola



A noble lady who was sent to the borderlands after her engagement was rescinded. Since she was the world's most beloved cat in her past life, she has incredibly high self-esteem. She now spends her days enjoying her life as a temporary fiancée.

PAST LIFE

Lilybell



Lucille's past incarnation, a cute white cat beloved by each of her eight owners. As with all cats, her very existence was precious and worthy of adoration.

Felix Leeuwenhoek



Lucille's temporary fiancé. Also known as the cursed marquess. At first, he's wary of Lucille's unsavory reputation, but he unknowingly develops new feelings for her.

Kain Purcell



Felix's close aide and a knight of Leeuwenhoek. Behind his pretty face and Casanova tendencies is a heart that cares for Felix more than anyone else.

Alice Rohans



A noble lady obsessed with Felix. Childhood friends with Felix and Kain. She originally bore a grudge against Lucille for suddenly getting engaged to Felix, but...

Maouldoth



A black dragon sealed in a forest. Despite supposedly being an almighty legendary creature, he's powerless against Lilybell—and, by extension, Lucille.

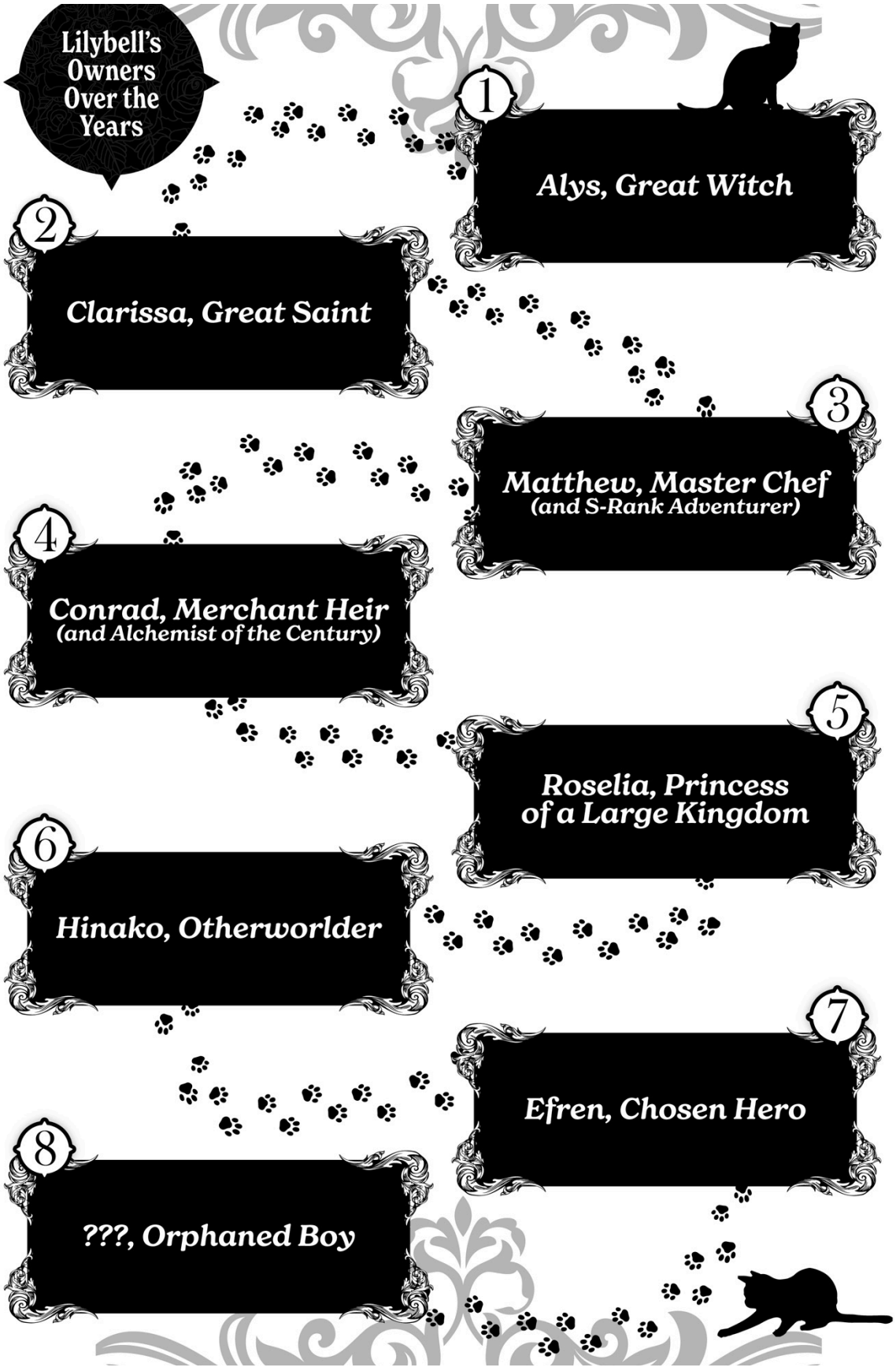

Lilybell's Owners Over the Years
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Alys, Great Witch
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Clarissa, Great Saint
3
Matthew, Master Chef
(and S-Rank Adventurer)
4
Conrad, Merchant Heir
(and Alchemist of the Century)
5
Roselia, Princess of a Large Kingdom
6
Hinako, Otherworlder
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Efren, Chosen Hero
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???, Orphaned Boy

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Prologue: I Had a Prophetic Dream of a Ridiculous Verdict

"Lady Lucille Gustelanola! I know you've cursed my beloved Mina with your abhorrent dark powers, and I will not tolerate such inhumane deeds from my fiancée!" Prince Bernard accused loudly. He was our country's second prince, and it was his birthday party we were currently attending at the royal castle.

"Huh?" The word blurted out of me in an unladylike manner.

"Your curse is eating away at my poor Mina's body, forcing her to endure painful treatment! Did you think your crime would escape my notice?"

There were so many issues with his statements that I didn't know how to respond. For starters, I didn't think anything of my "crime" because I had no recollection of committing it in the first place.

The alleged victim, Lady Mina, stood at Prince Bernard's side, clinging to his arm. She was the daughter of a baron, and recent rumors whispered of her taking every opportunity to flirt incessantly with my fiancé, unconcerned with the public eye. She was a flashy woman with an hourglass figure, and though her blonde hair and violet eyes didn't differ all that much from my own blonde hair and blue eyes, her aura of sensuality was leagues beyond what I was capable of. Not to mention, the mole dotted under her eye was downright alluring.

Yep, she's definitely Prince Bernard's type.

My fiancé was into glamorous older women who were sultry and bewitching. In contrast, I was petite and had more of a baby face. For the record, I did have curves, but they were difficult to perceive beneath the layers of my clothes. *Life is so unfair!*

Still, under my father's order to "win the prince's heart," I had worn chunky heels so tall that the average person would have

struggled to even stand in them, adopted a carefully curated posture to give myself a more flattering figure, donned fancy dresses, and spent a copious amount of time under the talented hand of my attendant as she applied layer upon layer of makeup to turn me into a vixen. She was practically a painter at this point.

In short, I had put in tremendous effort. So had my attendant.

But in the end, he still got snatched away by someone who's his type?! And what even is this "painful treatment"? She's been happily flirting with him in public this whole time!

"I ought to execute you for your sins," Prince Bernard continued. "However, my benevolent Mina has requested that I restrain myself from taking your life. Be grateful that she has the compassion of a goddess."

"Huh?" I blurted out again, unable to keep up with the quick succession of events. *Execute? That's awfully severe. Uh, has Prince Bernard always been like this?!*

"Nevertheless, a crime cannot go unpunished! Therefore, I am annulling your engagement to me and ordering you to marry the cursed marquess!"

His loud proclamation sent the nearby nobles into a stir. "The cursed marquess" referred to Lord Leeuwenhoek, a key figure in the national defense of our country, the Kingdom of Eldar.

Wait, even if everyone thinks he's cursed, should you really be treating marriage to an important marquess as punishment?

No sooner had the retort crossed my mind than I was struck by an intense headache and dizzy spell.

Oh no. If I faint now, people will assume it's from shock that my engagement was canceled or that my crime was exposed—even though I did nothing wrong!

With that final thought, my vision blurred, and my consciousness faded away.

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"You really won't give me the slightest bit of attention, will you?!" I muttered, the words delivered in such a low voice I could hardly

believe they'd come from me.

Despite being falsely accused of an absurd crime and forced to wed Lord Leeuwenhoek, I had accepted my fate as his wife because of his good looks. But would you believe it? Even after I'd married the man, he refused to give me the time of day!



His first words to me after we became husband and wife? *"I hate despicable, foolish women like you the most."* Upon hearing that, I had flown into a rage, flinging everything I could get my hands on and making a mess of the room.

Nevertheless, I had believed that he would change his mind after spending time with me...but as it turned out, Lord Leeuwenhoek—Felix—had chosen to avoid me entirely. He would only grace me with his presence when I was taking out my pent-up frustrations on the servants.

"To harm a servant without remorse... You truly are as wicked as they say. If the king hadn't imposed this marriage on me, I would be divorcing you right this instant."

His eyes had been ice-cold with contempt as he'd said that!

It's because he hates women. Actually, he hates people in general.

I had convinced myself to take his feelings into consideration and to wait patiently for him to ask for my forgiveness. However, much to my chagrin, a year into our marriage, that damned woman had appeared.

Elvira Larache, with her beautiful strawberry blonde hair, eyes that shone like emeralds, and light magic as rare as my dark magic, was a nasty woman who constantly spewed superficial ideals.

And Felix... Felix loved her. To make matters worse, she loved him back. They were always together, walking side by side, whispering sweet nothings, and gazing into each other's eyes.

When I reprimanded her for this, pointing out that *I* was Felix's wife, she spat, "Miss Lucille, you're always bothering Felix by taking your anger out on others. Doesn't it make you feel empty inside?"

This marriage had been forced on me as punishment, yet now this woman was implying it was I who was being clingy? Fueled by jealousy, resentment, and rage, I resolved to get rid of Elvira...only to fail.

My powers were already much stronger than the average person's, and the hatred in my heart further enhanced my dark magic beyond my control. As a result, I inadvertently attacked not only Elvira but the entirety of Felix's domain. Much to my shame,

Elvira repelled my assault with her light magic and came to be praised as a saint. Ironically, thanks to me, that woman's magical power grew, and she managed to lift the curse on Felix, freeing him from his derisive nickname.

This time, I was in fact sentenced to death for my crimes. And Felix, no longer bound to me, intended to take Elvira as his legal wife. When I heard this news in prison, I didn't even have it in me to cry anymore.

The story had a happy ending. The tragic, cursed marquess was saved by the saint. Together, they defeated the wicked witch and lived happily ever after. All's well that ends well.

But what about me? Doesn't anyone feel bad for me, being unjustly treated by Prince Bernard and Felix Leeuwenhoek even until the very end? Are you saying that I was the only one at fault? That I'm the only one who doesn't deserve—

I awoke with a start, my face streaked with tears and sweat.

It seemed I'd been having a nightmare. What's more, I instinctively knew that it was no mere dream. It was a premonition. With this realization came memories of a time when I often had such prophetic dreams—a time before I was born as myself, when I lived as a different being.

In other words, memories of my past life.

Chapter 1: I'll Enjoy My Temporary Engagement!

As the bumpy carriage ride rocked my body, I found myself in disbelief that I really was being shipped off to Lord Leeuwenhoek. My attempts at resistance had only won me a temporary reprieve: engagement rather than immediate marriage. In other words, I would be betrothed to the cursed marquess for one year. Since Elvira would arrive within a year's time, I predicted I wouldn't actually have to go through with the marriage.

At any rate, I was now an unwanted fiancée. I was told that Prince Bernard would definitely enforce my punishment because he'd loudly declared it in front of so many people. Personally, I didn't see why anything had to happen at all, but apparently he had to follow through. On the bright side, at least everyone knew it was a false accusation.

While en route to the borderlands, I reflected on the prophetic dream I'd had.

As a general rule, these dreams of mine foretold real events, but naturally, it was possible to change that future. This was especially true since the dreams changed my state of mind and the way I interpreted things that happened.

It seemed that out of the infinite possible futures, my dreams depicted the one with the highest probability of occurring. And they were usually nightmares. Being able to see one of many possible futures was an ability from my past life.

In my previous life, I was a cat named Lilybell, and a beautiful one at that, with glossy pure-white fur and blue eyes. My first owner was the Great Witch Alys. As a half demon, Master Alys was long-lived and, like one would expect from her title, her magic was

second to none. After many years in solitude, her loneliness prompted her to cast a spell on her beloved white cat, me, to prolong my lifespan to match hers. That was when I acquired the power of prophetic dreams, an ability that had originally been part of Master Alys's dark magic repertoire. Upon my life resonating with hers, I began to have the same dreams as she did. However, she was not able to stay with me for long. She was killed, leaving me with my extended lifespan.

My next owner was a saint named Clarissa. She couldn't undo the spell that Master Alys had placed on me, so instead, she cast a holy spell that would keep me in good health for the rest of my long life. I stayed by her side as she worked, comforting those in emotional distress. At some point, people began to call me a holy cat. My white fur probably contributed to that image. But alas, even saints are still human, and Saint Clarissa, too, passed away and left me behind.

My owner after that was a burly master chef named Matthew. He also worked as an adventurer so that he could search for rare ingredients. Matthew was very particular when it came to food, and thanks to him, I developed a refined palate for gourmet dishes.

After Matthew was Conrad, the heir to a prominent merchant family, followed by the royal daughter of a large nation, Princess Roselia. Then there was Hinako, who had been summoned from another world, and Efren, a chosen hero.

At one point, when I was between owners, I became the boss of all the strays in my area. Everyone I lived with loved me and doted on me.

The white cat Lilybell's final owner was an orphaned boy who had been abandoned by his parents. He was bullied by others, couldn't eat properly, and had no name. He was a kind boy with a beautiful soul, but not a single human recognized that, which I found very saddening. Eventually he was taken to be a sacrifice to summon a demon, and toward the end of the ritual, I leaped into the magic circle in his place.

I lost consciousness, and that was that. I never found out what happened to the demon or the boy.

"Well, at least I don't have to marry Prince Bernard anymore. And the borderlands might have rare delicacies that can't be procured in the royal capital."

As I gazed out the carriage window, I caught my reflection; a glamorous vixen looked back at me.

"I shall prepare you for battle, my lady!" my longtime personal attendant, Lacia, had cried as she had applied the thick makeup I currently sported, the art of which had nearly become second nature to her.

Dwelling on complex matters wasn't something I was fond of. Since I could see the future, I'd rather just avoid the worst possible outcome and enjoy the rest of what this life had to offer.

All I have to do is back down immediately when Elvira shows up! I'll find a chance to disappear by, say, pretending to die. Then Felix Leeuwenhoek will get together with Elvira, just like that. Yep, that's the way to go!

After that, I could live freely, just as I had in my Lilybell days. I enjoyed living with others, but I could also choose to live alone like when I was a stray.

In fact, part of me wondered if I should simply abscond now instead of waiting an entire year. However, in the event that Leeuwenhoek were accused of defying a royal order because of my actions, it wouldn't sit well with me.

My carefree thoughts were interrupted the moment I stepped out of the carriage.

"You must be tired from your travels. I am the marquess of Leeuwenhoek, Felix Leeuwenhoek."

Wh-Whaaat?! I was astonished by the appearance of the man standing before me.

As my hands and legs trembled furiously, I somehow managed to wring out the words, "I-It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lucille Gustelanola." After a shaky curtsy, I looked up to see Felix Leeuwenhoek glaring at me with a raised eyebrow.

Ack! My eyes! It's like there's a shining halo around him! What an attractive man!

Dark ashen hair, golden eyes, a scowl so deep you could lose your finger in the furrow of his brow—he was much larger and more intimidating than the knights in the capital, and if looks could kill, his sharp, cold gaze would already have ended me where I stood.

From what I'd heard, Lord Leeuwenhoek was feared by young noble ladies. He certainly wasn't ugly—as I'd already observed in my dream—but his frightening aura beat out his good looks. Besides, the noble ladies preferred delicate, androgynous men, while Lord Leeuwenhoek was stoic and unsociable, with a reputation for not only misogyny, but hating people in general.

It doesn't help that he's also the cursed marquess.

Then again, that was why Prince Bernard had called marrying this man a punishment. According to the rumors in the capital, Lord Leeuwenhoek and his land really were cursed, but I wasn't privy to the details.

But who cares when he's this *hot?!* The heat coursing through my body was making me sweat. *No! He's going to think I'm a pervert!* I clenched my teeth, forcibly tightening my jaw, to prevent my face from breaking out into a creepy grin.

Leeuwenhoek glared at me.

Aaaaahhh! I'd pay an entire gold coin for that glare!

As I panted internally in agony, Leeuwenhoek scowled at me. "Rumors of you have reached this land. I hate despicable, foolish women like you the most."

"Yes! Thank you!"

"What?"

"Oh! I misspoke!"

It was the same line I'd heard in my dream, and my addled brain had deluded itself into thinking a stage actor had recited that famous quote just for me.

No, no! What kind of noble lady would thank someone for insulting her? But to be honest, even verbal abuse feels like a reward when it's coming from such a handsome man! I mean, he's even cooler than Elliot, the black tom I'd followed around in my Lilybell days, thinking, "I'll never find such a wonderful male again, even if I'm reborn!"

“Ahem!” I cleared my throat. “That is quite fine. I understand that you feel that way, and I know my place,” I replied with a smile.

He regarded me with suspicion. I had a feeling it was too late to fix this first impression, but he wasn’t going to like me anyway, so I supposed it didn’t matter.

At any rate, Felix Leeuwenhoek’s stunning beauty had blown away all my thoughts of escaping this situation. His fated heroine, Elvira Lavache, wouldn’t arrive for another year. I wouldn’t be punished for enjoying being this fine man’s fiancée until then, would I?

Why yes, I do believe that is the case. Besides, this engagement is only a formality anyway!

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After that, Leeuwenhoek quickly retreated inside, leaving me with an attendant around my age.

“My name is Sarah,” she said. “Allow me to show you to your room.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” I replied, following after her.

For some reason, she led me around the house instead of through what appeared to be the front door. I found it strange but chose not to question it as we walked through a large garden. Upon reaching its end, we arrived at a detached house. I glanced back and couldn’t help but notice that the main manor was essentially hidden from view.

I see. It seems Leeuwenhoek really does not like me at all.

That said, the outside and inside of the detached house were clean. It was perfectly livable. If anything, I was grateful—living in the same building as that dreamboat would have had me too worked up to get any sleep.

Sarah let me know I could use any room I liked, so I chose one on the second floor with plenty of natural light and a balcony view of the garden. The servants brought in all of my luggage.

“If you need anything, please call for me with this crystal,” she said, handing me the item and leaving the room.

It was a small, mana-powered communication crystal that worked by signaling its paired mate. A marquess household, indeed! It was a very expensive device that only wealthy families could afford. Most people used regular, magicless bells.

After being alone in my room for a while, I realized that something wasn't right. I hesitantly went out into the hallway and took a few steps before freezing in horror.

N-Nobody's here!

The house was completely silent save for myself.

Um, is this place seriously empty? Am I all alone out here?

"Sarah?" I fearfully called out.

Instead of a human response, I heard a rustling sound. A type of bug I'd never seen before crawled along the floor in front of me.

I thought the house was clean, but maybe that isn't actually true. I see. Leeuwenhoek is quite the malicious man. Still irresistible, though.

How was it possible for not a single servant to be here to attend to me, especially when this was my first day at the Leeuwenhoek estate? I was his fiancée, even if he'd never asked for my hand. To make matters worse, my father, who was furious with me that Prince Bernard had broken off our engagement, had forbidden me from bringing any attendants, so I had come all this way by myself.

Incidentally, my trusty personal attendant, Lacia, had cried out of pity for me. "It's all that no-good prince's fault for spreading bad rumors about you, Lady Lucille! If he'd tried to get to know you, he would've realized that behind your reluctance to follow orders is a kind but socially awkward girl whose affection isn't immediately obvious!"

I was so lucky to have someone who would get angry and bawl on my behalf. But had I really been *that* socially awkward before I'd gotten my memories back?

Naturally, Lacia had insisted on accompanying me, but unfortunately, her employment contract bound her to my father.

Still, I expected Sarah to be in the building, even though she'd told me to call her if I needed her. I guess that means she'll only come if she has no choice.

"Hmm, that just makes me want to refuse to call her at all costs." I could be surprisingly stubborn at times. Besides, solitary life didn't bother me.

I toured the house, checking the other bedrooms, the kitchen, the cleaning tool storage room, the bathroom, and the study. With its large collection of books, the study seemed like it'd be a good place to pass the time, and the kitchen was fully stocked with ingredients. The house was also equipped with a variety of other expensive magical tools aside from the communication crystal, allowing me to store food for longer and easily access hot water, among other things. I had a feeling my life here would be extremely comfortable.

The amenities had probably been intended as a mild form of harassment—this way, any immediate summons via the crystal could be declined because I already had everything I could need. But even if that were the case, it had no effect on me.

"If anything, this feels liberating when compared to the painful princess training I was forced to go through when I was engaged to Prince Bernard!"

I'm glad Leeuwenhoek's harassment wasn't something like twenty-four-hour surveillance!

I'd grown hungry while walking around, so I ate some bread that was in the kitchen. Perhaps I'd try my hand at cooking tomorrow? I hadn't been able to do that at the Gustelanola mansion.

The bread turned out to be very delicious.

If they wanted to bully me, they could have given me something worse...

The perpetrator behind this scheme must have been a good person at heart. After all, while it was unthinkable to treat a noble this way, in the end, they couldn't bring themselves to do anything inhumane. In that sense, I felt guilty that I hadn't suffered one bit from their carefully thought-out plan, but what could I do? It wasn't my fault it didn't bother me.

I reached for a second piece of bread. *Tee hee, it really is*

delicious!

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It was my third day in Leeuwenhoek, and I was lying on the lawn on the side of the detached house that was opposite from the main building, basking in the sun.

"Mmm, this grass is so warm."

It was pure bliss. If I hadn't remembered my previous life, I might not have been able to do such an improper thing. But as a former cat, I knew how good it felt to sunbathe.

Nobody's looking, anyway!

I must have dozed off at some point during my relaxed rolling around, because I suddenly awoke to a familiar fuzzy feeling all over my body. Slowly opening my eyes, I found three cats snuggling against me.

"Huh?! Who are you?" I shouted, startled.

The cats ignored me and continued to nap. They looked comfortable.

Oh well.

I lazily shifted onto my other side, and the cats adjusted accordingly, finding new places to settle in next to my body. They seemed to be local strays.

Cats had keener senses than humans and were adept at perceiving magic. In the past, I had been the same. Since I'd regained my memories as Lilybell, my ability to sense magical power had improved. Perhaps my senses had come to be more catlike, causing these felines to recognize me as one of them? Nothing beat lazing around with your fellow kitties, after all.

That said...the cats just kept on coming. And they were all clinging to me. The first time I stirred, there were three, but then another came, and another, and another. They all blended together to the point where I couldn't even count them anymore.

I was drowning in cats.

Are my reclaimed memories as the charismatic Lilybell making me popular?

Whatever the case, it was nice to make friends at this secluded house. Plus, even as a human, I still found cats adorable. In other words, I, Lucille, was a huge kitty lover. Being crushed to death by them was a fine way to go. Therefore, my natural reaction to this situation was to press my nose to the belly of the cat next to my face and inhale deeply to recharge my energy.

I'm getting hungry...

As I thought about the ingredients in the kitchen, I pondered over my attempt at cooking yesterday. I'd say I did fairly well for a first-timer. Since I'd watched Lilybell's third owner, the adventuring chef Matthew, cook ad nauseam, I'd been confident that I could pull it off as well. I was very deft with my hands—my past life as a cat had given me the innate ability to move my body exactly as I willed it.

"Heh heh! I'm going to become an even better chef and make even more delicious food!" I declared as I sat up. The cats tumbled off of me, but they purred pleasantly nonetheless.

Three of the cats followed me back to the house. Unlike the others, who seemingly had other places to call home, this trio wanted to stay.

"You're more than welcome here!" I exclaimed. After all, this house was much too big for me.

I decided to name my newfound family members. First, the female calico. She was the smallest—as tiny as a kitten. "Your name is Michelle."

"Myaaaaa!" she replied in a high-pitched voice. She wobbled unsteadily on her feet as she toddled around. *How adorable!*

Next was another female, a long-haired bicolor cat. She was the biggest of the three. "You're Mars."

"Meooow." She swayed her bushy tail gracefully. *What an elegant cat. How wonderful!*

Last but not least was a black male cat with a gallant face. *Such a sleek body and shiny fur!* "Your name is Jack."

"Mreow!" he chirped, standing up imposingly on his hind legs. Anyone could see that he was very athletic.

As I squatted down, Michelle climbed up my back with great gusto, Mars snuggled up to my feet, her tail twining around my legs, and Jack nuzzled his head against the palm of my hand. They were all so *smol*. The three of them also seemed to like their new names.

By the way, "smol" was a word that Hinako had often used while doting on me. She'd come from another world, so she'd used a lot of strange words and had an unusual way of laughing. I remembered how exciting and fun it had been to be with her.

At night, I slept cozily, surrounded by Michelle, Mars, and Jack. I dreamed that I was Lilybell, playing with my new family members. It was a very blissful time.

From that day on, whenever I sunbathed, other cats would gather and lay down with me. They even invited me to their cat meetings. Perhaps I'd really become an honorary cat.

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"Felix, you look tired," remarked Kain, my closest aide.

"I am." I didn't even have the energy to hide it.

I'd had a fiancée—some ill-reputed woman—forced on me under the ridiculous pretext of punishment for a crime that made no sense. If that wasn't enough of a headache, I'd also received reports of monsters damaging my territory. For generations, it had been customary in Leeuwenhoek for the marquess to lead the knights in battle. Thus, Kain and I had immediately set out to exterminate the monsters, and we hadn't made it back home until late last night.

I felt sorry that I'd left the rest of the work to the servants. Based on Lucille Gustelanola's awful reputation, I could easily imagine her doing as she pleased and bossing people around. Regardless of what kind of person she was, it was my duty to protect the people of Leeuwenhoek and those who served in my estate. That was why I had been deliberately harsh on the day she arrived. It was intended as a warning not to misbehave, but I couldn't tell how effective it had been because of her strange reaction.

I didn't want to know what she'd been up to, but at the same time, it wouldn't have been right to place the entire burden on the

servants. So I summoned the attendant I'd assigned to her, Sarah, to my office to ask about what had happened in my absence. Still, it didn't escape me how absurd it was in the first place to punish a criminal by betrothing her to me.

"I'm sorry I left everything to you, even if exterminating monsters takes precedence," I said. "It must have been difficult. How has Lady Lucille Gustelanola been acting?"

Sarah flinched and then replied, "There are no problems at this time."

Her evasive answer felt off. Why had she paused before responding? She wasn't making eye contact either. Also, how could there be no problems?

Everyone said that Lucille Gustelanola was a wicked woman. Surely *something* had to have come up. Could it be that there had actually been *so many* issues that Sarah was hesitating to inform me because I was already exhausted from battle?

I tried to press for details, but something wasn't right. All of my questions were met with vague answers. *What time does she wake up in the morning? How much money does she spend? Has she been annoying the chef with complaints about the food? She doesn't use violence against you or the other servants, does she?*

The more I asked, the paler Sarah's face grew. At this point, I had a different bad premonition.

It can't be...

"Have you not been taking care of her at all?"

"I-I'm terribly sorry!"

I stared at her, dumbfounded, as she groveled on her hands and knees. Her face was devoid of color, like she feared being reprimanded.

I hadn't predicted this scenario. But I should have. My attitude toward my fiancée—and the fact that this engagement had been ordered as a punishment for her—had given Sarah and the other staff the impression that Lucille Gustelanola was unworthy of their service.

As I was the head of this estate, this was absolutely my fault. Yes, the servants' behavior was completely irrational, but since I had

not hidden my contempt, scorn, and dislike for her, I was partly responsible for my servants' actions.

But another part of me had to wonder: "Did Lady Gustelanola not say anything about her treatment?"

If she was as the rumors claimed, I would not have been surprised to hear that she had summoned the servants for no reason, thrown a fit, threatened violence, or squandered a fortune from the Leeuwenhoek coffers out of spite.

However, according to Sarah, the lady had been so quiet that the servants hadn't even been able to sense her presence. She'd spent her days unassumingly in that detached building, out of sight from the main manor. Sarah didn't seem to be lying when she claimed that if she had been called with the crystal, she would have followed orders without complaint. Contrary to her expectations, several days had passed without a peep from my fiancée, and while the maid had been contemplating what to do, I had returned from my expedition.

"I-I really am sorry," she said in tears, repeatedly bowing her head.

As I assured Sarah that she wasn't in trouble, I made up my mind to lift my weary feet and check on Lucille Gustelanola myself.

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Lady Lucille Gustelanola was notorious in the capital for being a despicable, foolish woman. Despite being engaged to the prince, she had been too lazy to complete her princess training, overtly looked down on others, spent money extravagantly, and wore gaudy makeup and clothing. All this had led to the prince breaking off their engagement and palming her off here to Leeuwenhoek. From what I'd heard, the announcement had sent her into a furious, indignant rage. Her pride couldn't take the blow, and in the end, she had fainted. No matter how you looked at it, this woman spelled trouble.

When she first arrived here, I observed that while her appearance wasn't improper, it was certainly flamboyant. Adding to that, her display of arrogance to smile in response to my deliberately contemptuous glare had convinced me that the other rumors were

not far from the truth either.

So what was this scene unfolding before my eyes?

"Grandpa Randy, does this go here?"

"Yup, that's perfect! You're a really fast learner, Lucy!"

"Heh heh! I know, right?"

Uh, who is that?

No matter which angle I looked at her from, the woman standing in the garden soil, puffing out her chest, was clearly the wicked Lucille Gustelanola. Wearing work gloves and a plain dress, she appeared to be planting flower seedlings.

Wait, was her face always like that?

She looked much younger than when I'd first met her. Her excessive ostentation had been replaced with an air of innocence reminiscent of a small animal. Speaking of which, she also seemed smaller in stature.

While I did recall her being slender, I could have sworn she was taller and curvier than this. Did the lack of a maid mean that she was starved to the point of malnutrition, causing her to shrink? No, if anything, I could already tell from a distance that her skin was glowing, and she looked healthier than before. In fact, the broad smile on her dirt-stained, makeup-free face was positively brimming with energy.

"Grandpa Randy, I'm starving. Can I have a tomato from the veggie garden?"

"You're such a glutton, Lucy! Fine, but you only get one."

"Yay!"

Hold on. I was so distracted by the difference in Lucille Gustelanola's appearance, I didn't realize the person grinning at her was my gardener, Grandpa Randolph.

Leeuwenhoek's gardener had been working there for three generations now. He was known for being stubborn and hard to please. It wasn't only the maids who avoided approaching him but the knights too.

"Lucy, I think I'm getting hungry as well."

Who is that kind-looking old man, and what has he done with Randolph? Also, this is late, but is he calling Lucille Gustelanola

"Lucy"?!

Randolph's behavior was baffling as it was, but the fact that Lucille Gustelanola of all people was allowing the gardener to call her by a nickname was utterly impossible to believe.

"Grandpa Randy, your hands are still covered in dirt, aren't they? I cleaned mine with magic, so I'll feed you. Say 'aah'!"

Wh-What?! She's going to feed him with her own hands?! N-No, Randolph would never stand for such—

"Aah!"

He gladly accepted it?! Wait, first of all, since when have we had a vegetable garden? Where were those tomatoes growing? They just sprouted up when she waved her hand, didn't they? I mean, this land...is cursed, just like me.

The proof of this curse lay in the fact that, despite Randolph's decades of continuous care, this land could support beautiful flowers but remained unable to produce crops.

First Randolph's unfathomable behavior, then the sudden emergence of tomatoes... What in the world has Lucille Gustelanola done?!

My head was full of question marks.

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"You're such a skilled gardener, Grandpa Randy!" I exclaimed.

I couldn't help but smile as I looked around at the garden abundant in beautiful flowers. Since they were so well cared for, I'd asked him if I could grow a few vegetables—just enough to snack on! At first, he'd looked extremely reluctant and even a tiny bit angry, making me wonder if he hated his greens. But now, seeing him savor a tomato with a grin, I realized that wasn't the case.

As I looked at his smiling face, I recalled a snippet of our initial conversation.

"You take such good care of this garden, Mr. Randolph. Any vegetable grown here is bound to be delicious!"

"You know nothing, rich girl! I'm telling you it's futile! Do you not understand me?!"

"Grrr! I know for a fact that tomatoes grown here would taste amazing, though. Fine, you'll just have to try it before you decide!"

"What in the world are you talking...about...?"

"There! Try this tomato! Even if you hate vegetables, I bet you'll love this!"

"This can't be... Vegetable plants can't grow here... And how did it produce fruit instantly? What kind of joke is this?" He took a bite. "It... It's good."

"Heh heh! Told you so!"

Thinking back, it felt like I'd forced him to let me have my way. But hey, in the end, either because he'd been impressed by my foresight or he'd awakened to the wonder of tomatoes, he suddenly opened up and let me call him "Grandpa Randy," so it all worked out.

I still whipped up a tomato with magic whenever I had a craving, but I also had a normal vegetable garden I tended to. Thanks to Grandpa Randy, the soil was very healthy, so even magic-accelerated growth yielded surprisingly delicious produce. But they surely could never compare to vegetables grown naturally with love and care.

Actually, this spell that could instantly bring tomato plants to fruition was a combination of Great Witch Alys's time-manipulating dark magic, Saint Clarissa's healing-and-growth-promoting holy magic, and a secret technique invented by Chef Matthew that only worked on food ingredients.

But still, I can't believe we're calling each other by nicknames. Am I allowed to say we're best friends now?! Tee hee!

No one had called me by a nickname my entire life as Lucille. Thinking back to my Lilybell days, though, those who had called me an affectionate name had loved me very much! I was incredibly lucky to make a human friend so quickly after my cat companions.

"Can't believe my lord's keeping you all the way out here by yourself, though," Grandpa Randy muttered as he sat next to me. "What could he possibly hate so much about you?"

I could tell by the genuine dissatisfaction in his frown that he was sincerely worried about me, and it warmed my heart. My current living conditions didn't bother me at all, but it was still nice to know that someone cared about me.

"It's fine," I said. "You can't blame someone for not liking another person."

"But you're such a sweet girl, Lucy. My immature lord spat in your face even though he's never even had a real conversation with you. He needs to grow up."

"Heh heh! You were wary of me at first too, though!"

"Ha ha ha! Don't say that."

It really didn't matter at all if Lord Leeuwenhoek hated me. That was how I truly felt.

"Mreooow."

"Meeew!"

"*Purrrr...*"

Michelle, Mars, and Jack, who had been lounging with us, suddenly nuzzled against me as if to say, "Don't forget, you have us!"

The way I saw it, despite the fact that cats were so adorable, there were still people in this world who preferred dogs. Just as it wouldn't be strange for someone to love me unconditionally, it also wouldn't be strange for someone to hate me for no reason. And since it wasn't my fault, there was no need to worry about it.

Everyone has their own tastes, after all!

Even Prince Bernard had ignored my immense efforts and doted on Lady Mina, who was his type. It had infuriated me at the time, but since my Lilybell sensibilities had merged with my current self, I'd begun to think, "Well, it is what it is." Just because Prince Bernard hadn't loved me, that didn't mean I was worthless. It only meant my charm hadn't appealed to him.

Plus, Felix Leeuwenhoek already had a fated heroine. Sure, the marquess was a delectable feast for the eyes, but that was all. I already had at least one person who adored me: Grandpa Randy. Why ignore his affection just to gloomily ruminate over someone who hated me?

"I still can't believe what I'm seeing," Grandpa Randy murmured. "The stray cats 'round here are especially wary and never approach people. First time I saw you covered in them, I thought I was hallucinating."

"Did you say something, Grandpa Randy?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it. All right, back to work!"

"Okay!"

And so, I enjoyed my life of freedom, tending to the garden with Grandpa Randy and playing with the cats.

However, the next day, I awoke early in the morning to a bit of commotion.

"What's going on?" I wondered.

Hearing the cats growling, I peeked outside from the balcony and saw them intimidating a maid as if to chase her away.

"Ahhh! I-I'm not suspicious, I swear!" she exclaimed.

"Oh? If it isn't Sarah," I remarked to myself. "What could she be doing here?"

It was the servant who had brought me to this detached house upon my arrival in Leeuwenhoek. I hadn't seen her once since that day.

"Grrr! Mreow!"

"*Hissss!*"

"Eek! Stop!" Sarah shrieked.

"Seriously, what is she doing?" I mused.

Upon closer inspection, it seemed another woman was standing near her. She had bright red hair, and judging by her resplendent gown, I assumed she was a noble lady of some sort. She seemed to be very upset.

"What is with these cats?!" she yelled. "When did this place become a shelter?! Hmph, I see how it is! The thieving cat who swiped *my* Felix is surrounding herself with her own kind because humans won't give her the time of day! How annoying! Sarah, hurry up and make them go away!"

Who could this person be? She even said "my Felix."

Though rumors said most feared Felix Leeuwenhoek, it seemed I wasn't the only noble lady enamored by his charm.

Tee hee, I totally understand! He's simply wonderful, unsociable as he may be.

That aside, it looked like the woman was trying to get into my house. Was she looking for me by any chance?

My first order of business was to stop the commotion. I stepped outside to address my feline friends. “Meow! You know you shouldn’t be mean to our guests! Calm down, okay? We can play later!”

The cats stopped their hissing and paw swiping, huffed, and walked away.

Sarah and the redhead swung shocked expressions toward me.

It was true that shouting wasn’t very ladylike of me, but I’d only raised my voice to ensure that everyone could hear me over the chorus of angry yowls! Besides, between helping Grandpa Randy with the gardening and lying outside in the sun, I didn’t think my improper behavior was anything new. However, as these two weren’t accustomed to seeing me like this, it must’ve been difficult for them to process.

“Wh-What did...y-you just...” the red-haired woman stammered. It looked like she was restraining herself from saying more.

There was no helping what had already happened, so instead of defending myself, I pretended not to hear her.

After regaining my composure, I let them into the reception room. For some reason, Sarah’s face had gone pale while the redhead seemed very unhappy, her lips pressed together in a tight frown.

The mood wasn’t particularly pleasant, so it felt appropriate for me—the calmest person in the room at the moment—to begin the conversation.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said. “My name is Lucille Gustelanola.”

The noble lady did not return my greeting. Instead, she addressed the maid standing beside her. “Sarah! *This* is my Felix’s fiancée? This must be some kind of joke!”

Hmm, we’ve only just met, but it seems like she already hates me.

She turned her head away, refusing to make eye contact. Judging by her appearance, I estimated she was a little younger than me.

Since our conversation didn’t appear to be going anywhere, I gave up and directed a question to the maid. “Sarah, would you be able to tell me who this lady is?”

"Huh?!" Startled, Sarah looked to the redhead. Seeing that there was no reaction from the woman whatsoever, she glanced back at me and said, "Th-This is Lady Alice, the daughter of Count Rohans. Her family's territory neighbors this one."

"Felix's fated wife!" Lady Alice quickly added.

"Ooh," I remarked.

"Wh-What's with that hollow response?! Are you making fun of me?! You may be his fiancée, but it's not like he loves you!"

Apparently, I should've thought before opening my mouth. My mistake.

I tried to adopt a more serious expression, but it was too late. Lady Alice's face was growing redder and angrier by the second.

No, I wasn't making fun of you... I was just a bit surprised because I know that Felix Leeuwenhoek's fated heroine is Elvira. It's so frustrating that I can't explain that!

"I'm very sorry," Sarah whispered to me from a distance, her face still white. "It's not what you think. I tried to stop her, but..."

Her desperation was starting to creep me out.

Hmm, what to do? It's probably safe to assume that Lady Alice barged in here because she's angry that a villain like me got engaged to her beloved Felix Leeuwenhoek, right? But I'm not close enough to him to get her to back down, and either way, Elvira's going to show up in a year, so Lady Alice is guaranteed to end up with a broken heart.

In my prophetic dream, even though I had been upset with Lord Felix's attitude, I had been confident that he would eventually come to love me. I hadn't been jealous of anyone. Taking that into consideration, it seemed unlikely that Lady Alice was currently Lord Felix's lover.

As I pondered the situation, Lady Alice continued to glare daggers at me.

To make matters worse, Sarah had clasped her hands in front of her chest and was now mumbling something—I couldn't tell if it was a prayer or a curse. Her eyes were wide open and bloodshot, and her body was trembling furiously. It was incredibly scary. Even though she was presumably frightened, she somehow managed to

be the most terrifying person in the room.

It suddenly occurred to me that Lady Alice was entirely absent from my memories involving hating Elvira from the prophetic dream. Did that mean her feelings had disappeared by that point?

At any rate, I was going to have to probe for more information if I wanted to change things.

"Lady Alice, what do you like about Lord Leeuwenhoek?" I asked.

The woman continued to glare at me, but I waited patiently. At last, she replied, "Felix is...very attractive."

"I know, right?! I heard that people think he's scary, but he's so charming! Tee hee!"

"What...?"

Ack! What a slipup! I just couldn't help but agree with what she said! Now she's furrowing her brow in displeasure!

"Ahem. So what else do you like about him?" I asked.

Since I'd offended her, I'd thought she wouldn't want to talk to me anymore, but that turned out to not be the case. In fact, it looked like she was starting to fidget.

I totally understand. Talking about people and things you like is so much fun! Perhaps Lady Alice is actually a sweet and honest girl when she isn't angry?

"Felix is talented with both magic and the sword," Lady Alice replied. "He's very strong."

"Why, I had no idea! No wonder he was put in charge of this border region."

"You call yourself his fiancée, but you don't even know that? Even if it's only a tentative engagement, that's just pathetic."

"Very true. So if you don't mind, could you tell me more about Lord Leeuwenhoek's qualities?"

"I...suppose I have no choice. As Felix's fated wife, allow me to enlighten you. You see, despite Felix's appearance, he loves small animals!"

"That is certainly unexpected!"

"But they run away from him in fear, so he never gets to touch them."

"Now I feel a bit sorry for him..."

"Felix has doted on me like a younger sister ever since we were little!"

"So he has a gentle side too."

I wondered if Lady Alice was fine with being treated like a younger sister, but I wasn't about to ask something so insensitive.

As our conversation grew more spirited, Sarah seemed to relax. She still looked a bit concerned, but she wasn't chanting creepy prayers anymore, so I could probably leave her be for now.

Lady Alice's cheeks had become flushed with excitement. Continuing on with her eyes now sparkling, she exclaimed, "I'm certain that my wonderful and strong Felix will be the next Champion of Destiny!"

"Ooh." *What in the world is a Champion of Destiny?!*

"Hey! There was no emotion in that response! Don't tell me you've never heard of the Champions of Destiny!"

I flinched at her keen accusation.

Lady Alice has amazing powers of observation! Not only did she realize my reply was lackluster, she even identified that I don't know what a Champion of Destiny is!

"Who are the Champions of Destiny?" I asked innocently. At times like this, it was best to be honest.

Lady Alice sighed. "Unbelievable. Fine, I'll save you from your ignorance. As the name implies, a Champion of Destiny has the power to change an era's fate."

So, a really special person who can do amazing things?

"The Champions of Destiny were extraordinary historic figures of varying social standings. For example, the Champion of Destiny eight hundred years ago was a great witch, and six hundred years ago, it was an adventurer. There was also a saint, a hero, and an alchemist who was actually a commoner merchant!"

"That's impressive!"

"Hmph! You wouldn't be able to understand one billionth of how incredible they were!"

No, I do understand! What you're saying is that they're a billion times more amazing than I can imagine, right?!

"But if they varied so much in social standing and profession, how

could you tell they were Champions of Destiny?" I asked, tilting my head.

Lady Alice pointed sharply toward me. "You see, the Champions of Destiny all have one thing in common."

"Really? What is it?"

"Every Champion of Destiny was accompanied by a holy beast! It was said to be a beautiful creature with a gorgeous pure-white coat and eyes the deepest color of the sea!"

Pure-white fur and eyes the color of the sea... It must've been adorable! After all, Lilybell had the same coloring, and she was always praised for her cuteness. In fact, even to this day, I still think she was the most darling creature in existence. White and blue are the ultimate combination!

Apparently there was no record of the holy beast's appearance aside from those colors. What a shame. I would've liked to see it, perhaps in a painting.

How curious. Anyway, thanks to Lady Alice's explanation, I more or less see what's going on now.

"So you suspect that Lord Leeuwenhoek is one of these champions, right?" I asked. "And since you say he's going to be the 'next' one, that means the holy beast hasn't joined him yet, but you think he'll encounter it in the future."

"Exactly! So you *are* capable of understanding!"

"Tee hee!"

It occurred to me, though, that the upcoming champion with the power to change destiny...could be Elvira, not Lord Leeuwenhoek. Namely because my dream foretold that she'd be named a saint after freeing Felix Leeuwenhoek and the extensive Leeuwenhoek territory from their curse. It was still a while before that would happen, which explained why the holy beast was currently nowhere to be seen. Elvira's powers had not evolved yet.

Or perhaps Felix Leeuwenhoek would encounter the holy beast and become the Champion of Destiny later, after his curse was lifted? Then again, there was no guarantee a Champion of Destiny would appear in the first place.

Hmm, unfortunately, the prophetic dream ended right before my

execution, so I don't know what happens afterward.

Still, it was rather disappointing that I lived so long as Lilybell without ever meeting a single one of these famous champions or their holy beasts. In fact, I hadn't even known they'd existed.

Well, my beloved owners were all unique individuals who deviated from social norms. I guess they just weren't interested in other people's heroic tales. Since I let them spoil me day in, day out, never leaving their sides, I wouldn't have had the chance to hear such stories unless my owners mentioned them.

"Oh my, come to think of it, I haven't even served you tea yet," I said in sudden realization. "Please give me a minute." I stood up.

Sarah, who had been listening quietly thus far, exclaimed in a panic, "L-Lady Lucille! I will prepare the tea!"

"It's fine. You may not know where anything is since I've added a few more things to the kitchen. Besides, I'm the only one living here. It's normal for the master of the house to entertain their guests, is it not?"

"Ah!" Sarah gasped, the color once again draining from her face.

Huh? Did I say something inappropriate?

"Why, I'm impressed, Sarah!" Lady Alice declared. "You haven't been attending to her at all! Did Felix tell you to ignore her? Well, it's a forced engagement, so I can't blame him for treating her like that."

"U-U-Um, my lord never gave such instructions," Sarah stammered.

Lady Alice smiled knowingly at her. Even though the atmosphere wasn't as hostile as earlier, I was starting to feel sorry for the maid. As a servant, she was put in an awkward position by these comments.

"It's okay, Sarah!" I reassured her. "I'm enjoying my freedom, and I really don't care if Lord Leeuwenhoek ignores me!"

"Eek!"

I'd said that because I genuinely didn't want Sarah to worry about it, but for some reason, she shrieked.

"Wait, is Felix *actually* mistreating you?" Lady Alice asked. "I thought it was a joke. Despite how he looks, he's a pretty nice guy...so I guess he really must hate you." She looked at me with

sincere pity.

Sarah's complexion paled even further, and Lady Alice's eyes, which were originally filled with animosity, now harbored compassion.

It really doesn't bother me at all, though. In fact, I'm fully satisfied with the current state of things.

As I was pondering how to make them understand my perspective, Sarah suddenly hopped up like a frog and slammed to the floor on her hands and knees.

"Aaah! P-Please forgive me!"

"Huh?!" I exclaimed.

Apparently Sarah felt extremely guilty for neglecting my care. How shocking. I *had* originally thought it to be a mild form of harassment, but I'd completely forgotten about it because my life had been so comfortable.

As I soothed the sobbing and grovelling maid, Lady Alice left abruptly with an "I'll visit again."

You know, that was quite a long and enjoyable talk. It's safe to say that I'm friends with Sarah and Lady Alice now, right?! I was a bit worried because of the commotion outside and Sarah crying, but at least we ended on a happy note!

Now that I was finally alone again and everything had settled down, I began happily making pastries, thinking I'd give them to Grandpa Randy if they turned out well.

However, when the sun went down, I once again found myself bewildered—this time, by the arrival of Felix Leeuwenhoek at my doorstep.

"Lady Lucille Gustelanola, I would like to speak with you."

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I was now sitting in the same reception room where I had talked the morning away with Sarah and Lady Alice. The only difference was that I was facing Felix Leeuwenhoek instead.

Ooooh! It's been a while since I got to see him up close! He really is handsome!

Behind my nonchalant appearance, I was internally rejoicing.

Even if it's only a temporary engagement, as his fiancée, I'd like to be able to gaze upon his beautiful visage from time to time!

Naturally, it wasn't just the two of us in this room. There was a knight standing behind him off to the side. Actually, I recognized him—in my prophetic dream, he was often with my fiancé. He was Leeuwenhoek's most trusted aide!

He stared at me without reserve and whispered amusedly, "Wow. You're nothing like what Felix told me."

"Excuse me...?" I asked.

"Cut it out, Kain!" Leeuwenhoek rebuked him.

The aide paid his lord no mind and approached me, swiftly kneeling before my feet, placing a hand on his chest, and lowering his head.

"I apologize for not introducing myself sooner," he said. "I am Kain Purcell, knight of Leeuwenhoek and Felix's close aide. Please call me Kain, my fair lady."

"Why, it's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Kain," I replied. "My name is Lucille Gustelanola."

I couldn't help but be impressed by the smoothness of his introduction. With his soft, beige hair and slightly drooping indigo eyes, Sir Kain looked like a gentle, sweet man.

Mm-hmm, he's handsome too, but in a different way from Felix Leeuwenhoek. Very nice.

Personally, Leeuwenhoek was more my type, but Sir Kain would definitely be more popular with the noble ladies these days.

While I was examining Sir Kain, he stared back as if he were trying to discern something about me. The result was both of us gazing at each other intently.

"Hey, I'm here too," Felix Leeuwenhoek grumbled, snapping me back to my senses.

Oops. Of course he wouldn't want the evil woman he hates interacting with his closest aide. Plus, it wasn't very ladylike of me to shamelessly ogle a man.

It seemed that the freedoms I'd been enjoying here had made me too lax. Perhaps the excitement of being liberated from my

painful princess training had contributed to the effect as well.

At any rate, I flashed a smile at the troubled marquess. "Tee hee, don't worry. I wouldn't be so thoughtless as to flirt with your precious knight."

"No, that's not the issue..."

Oh? He's still dissatisfied? Apparently, in spite of his appearance, Felix Leeuwenhoek is quite the worrywart.

It would indeed be problematic if I befriended the marquess's close aide, thus straining their mutual trust.

"I have no intention of interfering with your relationship, so there's really no need to worry," I murmured without thinking, inadvertently voicing my thoughts aloud.

For some reason, the two men looked concerned at my words.

"Y-You make it sound like there's something going on between me and Felix," Sir Kain said.

"Don't say that, even as a joke," Felix Leeuwenhoek said menacingly.

Tee hee, I don't really get it, but I'm glad they get along so well! Still, what is the marquess doing here? He said he wanted to speak with me, but... Oh, come to think of it, I forgot to make tea again. It keeps slipping my mind because my personal attendant, Lacia, used to do everything for me.

After finding myself having to brew my own tea nowadays, I'd realized that I actually wasn't bad at it. I'd been hoping to serve it to someone, but I hadn't had a chance to have tea with Grandpa Randy yet, and I'd missed my opportunity earlier today because Sarah had burst into tears.

I wonder if Sarah and Lady Alice like sweet pastries? It'd be nice if they could sample the ones I baked earlier.

Matthew, the adventuring chef, had looked sincerely happy whenever he served people food. Now that I'd discovered the joy of the cooking process in itself, I wanted others to try what I made as well.

As I was lost in thought, Felix Leeuwenhoek cleared his throat in an attempt to restart the conversation.

"I'm here today because I want to apologize to you," he said.

"Huh?" I blinked.

"I'm very sorry for all my rudeness."

I hadn't been expecting those words in the slightest. Felix Leeuwenhoek and I had barely interacted at all since my arrival here. What was there for him to apologize for?

Well, thinking about it, there were quite a few things that had happened, though I wasn't sure which ones he had in mind at the moment. But I couldn't help but be confused anyway, because my impression of the marquess was far removed from the man who was currently bowing to me.

The Felix I knew was the one I'd seen in my prophetic dream, who always regarded me with unforgiving eyes. And when I'd met him in reality for the first time, he hadn't been all that different, so I'd assumed he really was quite fastidious and prideful. Seeing him lowering his head without hesitation made me wonder if I had been mistaken. Or perhaps the me in my dream had simply been too unreasonable?

Well, yeah. Seeing Lord Felix now, it was clear that he valued his workers and the people under his care. In my dream, I'd treated the servants horribly, so his reaction had only been natural. Thinking about it from that angle made me start to feel sorry too.

"It may be too late to say this, but my attitude toward you was extremely unwarranted," Lord Felix continued. "You came all the way to Leeuwenhoek alone, yet I showed no consideration, instead speaking harshly to you. I also did not properly arrange for a servant to attend to your needs. And yet you did not utter a single complaint nor did you frown at my unannounced visit. I can't believe how tolerant you are."

"Umm..."

"I am ashamed of myself for believing the rumors without question."

With each sentence of his apology, Lord Felix's neck bent a little more. I feared his head would soon touch the floor at this rate.

Um, it's really not a problem at all if he hates me...

I was impressed by the graciousness of his admission, though. I actually already knew from Sarah that he *had* arranged for her to

serve me. But instead of telling me that, he was taking responsibility for the outcome himself and apologizing to me.

"I know this is late, but I'm hoping I can make amends," he added. "Of course, I know you have a lot on your mind too."

Plus...his anxious face is handsome too!

This attractive and well-meaning man deserved happiness. I hoped he'd meet his fated heroine, Elvira, soon.

Suddenly, it dawned on me: I'd planned to fake my death once Elvira showed up, but why not watch the joyful relationship form between the beautiful saint and the exquisite marquess from up close instead?!

Yes! Felix Leeuwenhoek does want to make amends, after all. I don't know why, but this is a good opportunity.

That said, there was an illogical aspect when it came to hating someone, so I didn't expect his aversion to me to suddenly disappear. Still, I wasn't going to waste this chance.

"Lord Leeuwenhoek! Yes, I would like to be your friend too!" I declared with a big smile.

For some reason, Sir Kain let out a chuckle.

Heh heh! Don't worry, Sir Kain. I won't leave you out. A friend of a friend may as well be a friend of mine. So you're officially my friend too, Sir Kain!

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"Lord Leeuwenhoek! Yes, I would like to be your friend too!" Lady Lucille Gustelanola had declared confidently with a wide smile.

No, that's not what I meant.

I was proud of myself for not sinking my head into my hands in exasperation.

My intent had been to tell her that if she found it acceptable, I would respect her as my fiancée and engage in proper interaction with her. But the misunderstanding hadn't been important enough to bother correcting, so I hadn't said anything further.

"Lady Lucille seemed like a really nice girl," Kain, my close aide and childhood friend, remarked as soon as we were alone in my

office.

Indeed, after finally having a proper conversation with Lucille Gustelanola, I now knew that she was far from the evil woman I'd heard about.

For some reason, Lady Gustelanola had become very enthusiastic after our exchange, suddenly standing up and rushing around to serve us tea and unfamiliar pastries. She'd mentioned the name of the baked goods several times, but because it had sounded so foreign, I couldn't remember what they were.

At any rate, she'd brought those unusual pastries out with a beaming smile, saying, *"I made these myself. They came out very nicely, so please try them!"*

Those words had been so unexpected; I'd found myself suspecting that she'd put a new type of poison in the pastries and her naivete had all been an act.

She baked pastries? The foolish and notorious Lady Gustelanola baked pastries? What kind of noble lady would casually enter the kitchen to show off her skills in the first place?

I knew there were noble ladies who *were* good at such things, but how much of it did they do by themselves? Many of them would claim to have baked something with their own hands, when in reality, they contributed little to their chef's work.

But in that detached house, there was not a single servant to help her, let alone a chef.

Lucille Gustelanola had been engaged to the second prince for many years, and she must have been very busy during that time. Additionally, her father was a prideful noble who hated wasting time and expending effort. He was the kind of person who hadn't defended his daughter when her engagement had been broken; instead, in his rage, he'd sent her to Leeuwenhoek all by herself.

I highly doubted that Lady Gustelanola would've been allowed into the kitchen at her family's house. She probably wouldn't have had the time, anyway, considering her busy life. So where had she learned to cook? Where could she have gone to learn how to bake those bizarre pastries?

Unlike me, Kain was familiar with everything that noble ladies

were fond of, and even he hadn't recognized her baked goods.

"I learned how to make these from Hinako...a person who was very kind to me a long time ago," the girl had murmured.

When exactly was "a long time ago"? She'd looked somewhat melancholic when she'd said that, but perhaps it had just been my imagination.

"Man, those pastries were really good," Kain said. "Cheerful, brave, *and* she can cook. Seems like a great girl to me, don't you agree?"

Kain didn't even *like* sweet things normally. But those unfamiliar sweet treats had been unbelievably delicious. And of course, they hadn't been poisoned.

That day I'd returned home after leading thirty or so elite knights on a multiday extermination mission, I'd gone to visit Lucille Gustelanola for the first time at the detached house, and the sight of her had given me pause.

Her original appearance on arrival had likely been artificially crafted. Meanwhile, our unannounced visit had given her no time to prepare, nor had there been any servants to help her do so. As a result, the girl who appeared before us that day could have been mistaken for a fairy with her breathtakingly clear skin and air of sweet innocence. The knights had also been rendered speechless by her mysterious aura that was somehow both bewitching and pure.

Why in the world would she wear such thick, gaudy makeup when her face is already so beautiful without it?

When I'd first listened to Sarah's report, I'd thought it was a joke. However, it seemed that Lady Gustelanola really *had* been living comfortably in her servant-less environment. Additionally, she hadn't voiced a single complaint to either me or Sarah when we apologized. She hadn't blamed us for anything.

Her appearance and disposition hadn't been the only baffling things. The miraculous sight of tomatoes growing still made me doubt my memory and wonder if it had all been a dream. And according to Sarah, she even had the ability to communicate with animals.

The stray cats that lived in the area were known to never approach humans. They had fierce temperaments and would even fight off monsters that weren't too strong. But apparently, they had been behaving as if they could truly understand what Lady Gustelanola was saying. Randolph, too, testified that she had been buried in cats when he'd first met her.

It made no sense. Those cats were far from peaceful creatures. Even the knights of Leeuwenhoek were instructed not to recklessly approach them.

I can't even imagine what it looks like to be buried in cats to begin with.

"Lady Lucille seems like such a nice girl," Kain said, interrupting my thoughts. "If she really is as evil as they say, I'm willing to be deceived."

He keeps insisting that she's a nice girl. Is he trying to tell me something?

I had deliberately been pretending not to hear his comments, but it seemed he wasn't going to leave me alone.

"Well?" he continued. "She doesn't seem interested in you. Are you okay with that?"

I raised an eyebrow. *What exactly is he getting at?*

"I already apologized," I replied. "I also told her that I hoped to make amends. Is there still something wrong?"

"Oh, no. Nothing's wrong at all. I mean, it's a forced engagement, and you never wanted to get married anyway 'cause you're worried about your curse. For a stubborn guy like you, I think you did pretty well with that interaction. So yeah, nothing's wrong."

"What's your point, then?"

"Nothing's wrong, but there's no hope either! No bright future to look forward to! I know you always distance yourself from people, but still!"

I'm supposed to understand this man like the back of my hand, and yet sometimes I have no idea what he's trying to say.

Up until now, most of the incomprehensible things Kain had said involved women. He often shared insubstantial stories describing the enjoyment he derived from fooling around with noble ladies, the

allure of women, and which girls he found attractive. All of which he spoke about with a silly grin on his face.

This was likely another one of those cases.

"You know, Lady Lucille is really kindhearted," he continued. "She didn't show it, but she probably still thinks you don't like her. And you're fine with that?"

"I have no opinion on the matter."

"I mean, apologies usually don't come across half as well as you think. You probably should've been more specific and said, 'It was wrong of me to say that I hate you.'"

"I disagree. Not only would it have been unnecessary, it wouldn't have been accurate, because my feelings toward her are not strong enough to say for sure that the statement was incorrect."

I was simply intrigued by her mysterious powers and the fact that she differed so much from the rumors surrounding her.

Come to think of it, the reason I had made up my mind to pay Lady Gustelanola a visit was because I'd heard that Alice had barged into her detached house. I'd expected her to be in a bad mood as a result, but much to my surprise, she had been in good spirits. And so I'd completely forgotten about the matter with Alice until now.

"Uh-oh," Kain said, making an obvious show of looking up at the ceiling.

I swear, this man is being uncharacteristically persistent and annoying.

"Maybe you're fine with how today went, but I've got a bad feeling about this," he continued. "I just know you're gonna regret it someday."

"Regret? Regret what?"

Why does it even matter when I already feel regret every day? It's been this way ever since I was born in this cursed body.

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"Sarah!" I called out to the maid currently cleaning my detached house. "Have tea with me!"

Sarah's bewildered gaze immediately turned toward the garden

terrace where I was sitting.

Oh my. Even though she performs her servant duties flawlessly, she still can't get used to acting like a friend. Tee hee!

Ever since we'd formed this bond, Sarah had begun coming over to do household chores. I'd originally thought my new life with Michelle, Mars, and Jack would be nothing but liberating and comfortable, but due to my inexperience, the cleanliness of my home was far from acceptable. Now that Sarah was helping, I felt like I could live much healthier than before. I was very grateful to her.

Sarah inched closer to the terrace and whispered, "Um, wouldn't Michelle be upset if I came closer?"

Apparently her concern extended beyond me simply treating her as a friend.

I thought back to the morning Lady Alice had shown up at my house with Sarah. The trio of kitties had tried to intimidate the two of them into backing off, and if I recalled correctly, Michelle had been the one swiping at Sarah the most. The sight of the tiniest of the three letting out high-pitched yowls as she attacked with all her might had been incredibly endearing to me, but it seemed that Sarah was genuinely afraid of her.

"Don't worry," I said. "Just look at how cute she is. There's nothing to be scared of."

Michelle was curled up on my lap, fast asleep. She was the youngest of the three cats, and she loved being held.

Tee hee! When I was boss of the strays as Lilybell, I often looked after the kittens. I've got that older sister mindset, so I'm great at doting on needy children.

As for the other cats, Mars was lying on the ground at my feet, while Jack had gone out somewhere.

Though Sarah was still hesitant, I persuaded her to sit down at the table. As we were having tea, Lord Leeuwenhoek and Sir Kain came by. The two of them were often away on monster exterminations recently, but apparently, they were free today.

"You're fraternizing with a servant again?" Lord Leeuwenhoek said with a frown.

Sarah shrank back.

Goodness, don't you know how much weight your words hold as her employer? I can't have Sarah be reluctant to join me for tea again!

"Sarah is my friend first and servant second," I replied. "There's nothing wrong with this!"

"Friend?" Sarah murmured, stunned.

"Huh? What's surprising about that?" I asked.

"Noblewomen don't normally befriend their servants, do they?" Lord Leeuwenhoek replied.

That viewpoint was unacceptable.

"Then I'm not normal," I said. "But I see. The reason you're confused is because a noble lady wouldn't typically treat her servants like friends, yes? However, here in this border region, I am not interacting with anyone in a sociopolitical context. So there's no need for me to act like a noble, is there?"

"Is that what you think?" he asked.

"I do know when to draw the line, of course. I've undergone several years of princess training, so please don't worry. I know how to conduct myself in situations that call for noble etiquette."

It wasn't that I *couldn't* act like a noblewoman; it was that I didn't need to at the moment. But then again, such a situation hadn't arisen at all in my time here thus far. Lord Leeuwenhoek's concern over my behavior was justified as he had only seen me in my liberated mode.

I certainly wouldn't have been conducting myself like this if I hadn't regained Lilybell's memories. For better or worse, I would've acted like a noble lady at all times, regardless of who was watching me. Thinking about it, my behavior in my prophetic dream had followed a very similar pattern, to an extreme degree. But that was that, and the current me was different.

My values had changed, and there was nothing wrong with that!

By the way, why did Lord Leeuwenhoek, Sarah, and Sir Kain all have worried looks on their faces when I mentioned my princess training?! Do they pity me because they mistakenly believe that I loved Prince Bernard? Surely not.

After some thought, Lord Leeuwenhoek suddenly said, "You said you wished to be friends with me as well, did you not?"

"Yes," I replied. "Of course, only if you don't mind."

I knew he wasn't fond of me, so I wasn't going to force him to be my friend.

"Shouldn't you act more friendly with me too, then?" he asked.

His reply surprised me.

"Huh?"

"You call Sarah and Kain by their first names. Why do you still address me by my surname?"

"Oh my!" *I was trying to be polite, but if he wants to do away with etiquette, then I'll just have to comply!* "Allow me to call you Lord Felix, then!"

Much to my surprise, Lord Leeuwenhoek—I mean, Lord Felix—gave a faint smile.

"In that case, I shall call you Lady Lucille," he said.

"Just Lucille is fine too!"

"I see. Lucille it is, then."

I realized something at that moment. Noble ladies feared Lord Felix, and I had never heard anyone speak of his social circles. As such, I doubted he had many friends.

Lord Felix wanted friends too!

Even his cheeks were slightly flushed, further proving my theory.

I'm happy too! I mean, it's not as cozy as me and Grandpa Randy calling each other by nicknames, but dropping the honorific makes us sound like close friends! Plus, "Lord Leeuwenhoek" and "Lady Gustelanola" were both quite the mouthful.

Sir Kain, who had been grinning as he listened to our exchange, chimed in, "I'll call you Lu, then!"

"That's perfectly fine with me!" I replied with glee.

Sir Kain is my friend too, after all!

"Whoa, why are you glaring at me like that, Felix?!" Sir Kain exclaimed.

"I am not glaring at you."

"Man, you don't even realize it?"

Seeing the two men get along so well put a smile on my face.

Our lighthearted conversation was interrupted by the sudden arrival of another one of my friends, Lady Alice.

"Lucille! I have come!" she announced in an energetic voice. "Oh, if it isn't Felix!"

Lady Alice beamed happily at the sight of Lord Felix. On the other hand...

"Alice," Lord Felix muttered coldly. The gentle smile on his face had vanished in an instant.

Due to Lady Alice's crush on him, she naturally noticed his change in attitude.

"What's with that reaction?" she asked. "Are you trying to imply I'm a nuisance?"

I expected Lord Felix to immediately deny it, but instead, he said, "Sure, feel free to think that."

Lady Alice gasped and bit her lip at his emotionless, dismissive words. She looked like she was fighting back tears.

I, too, was startled by the bluntness with which Lord Felix had affirmed that he considered the noble lady's presence bothersome.

"I... I just love you, that's all..." Lady Alice murmured.

Her trembling voice was heartbreaking to hear, but no one said anything in response.

Though I'd been confident that Lady Alice wasn't Lord Felix's lover, I had never expected him to treat her so coldly. Not knowing what to do, I merely watched in horror. The atmosphere had become extremely uncomfortable.

Wh-What happens now?

"But you've always been kind to me," Lady Alice continued. "Why are you being so mean now?"

That was what I wanted to know too. Even if they weren't lovers, Lady Alice had said that Lord Felix doted on her like a younger sister, and I assumed she'd been telling the truth. She seemed genuinely confused right now, after all.

So why is Lord Felix acting this way? Even if he isn't in the mood to talk to her, he could stand to be a little nicer. I mean, sure, he was also pretty mean to me at first, but you can't compare a childhood friend to some evil woman you're being forced to marry.

As my mind went around in circles, Lady Alice suddenly glared at me.

"Is it because you're engaged to Lucille?" she continued. "Is that why you've suddenly grown distant?"

"Huh?!" I exclaimed.

I don't think that's the reason... I'm not Elvira, after all.

Before I could deny the unbelievable accusation, Lord Felix replied, "Lucille has nothing to do with this."

"'Lucille'? Did you just say 'Lucille'?! I can't believe you'd say another woman's name without honorifics!"

"Uh-oh," Sir Kain whispered. In the corner of my eye, I could see him looking up at the ceiling.

Shaking with anger, Lady Alice turned on her heel and ran away.

"Lady Alice!" I shouted after her. I tried to follow, but Sir Kain stopped me.

"Uh, I think you should leave her alone for now," he said. "She needs some time to calm down."

"But..."

I can't ignore a friend when she might be in pain!

In contrast to my panicked state, Sir Kain looked troubled but composed.

"I don't think Alice would appreciate you being the one to take pity on her, Lu," he said.

I swallowed my words. He...had a point.

Lady Alice claimed that Lord Felix was treating her harshly because he now had me as his fiancée. *I* knew that couldn't be true, but Lady Alice didn't have my power of foresight. In fact, I had behaved in a similar way in my prophetic dream—that version of me had been angry about Lord Felix shunning me, and because Elvira had been the one in his heart, I'd denied everything she'd said, unable to accept her words.

My position was very different from Elvira's, and of course, it was also very different from Lady Alice's. But at minimum, I understood that I wasn't the best person to handle this situation.

As I was ruminating, Sir Kain hurriedly added, "Oh, and just so you know, Felix started distancing himself from Alice way before

your engagement. So it's not your fault. She's just panicking right now, and I'm sure she knows that, so don't worry about her too much."

"I understand," I said. "Thank you."

Feeling disappointed and restless, I sneaked a glance at Lord Felix, who was standing a short distance away. What did *he* think about all of this?

Oh?

His face had gone stiff and tense.

Why does he look so conflicted when he was the one who rejected her?

From his expression, you'd have thought *he* was the one who'd suffered a cruel betrayal.

Noticing my gaze, Sir Kain whispered to me, "I know he was harsh on Alice, but please don't blame him. He has his reasons."

I had no choice but to nod and accept his words. Thinking about it, I realized I was just a recent addition here. Sure, I'd befriended Lord Felix and Lady Alice, but there was still a lot I didn't know about them. It wasn't a good idea to poke my nose into something I didn't understand. After all, what seemed natural or right to one person could deeply wound another.

Maybe I'll bring Lady Alice some sweet pastries later. Good food not only satisfies the stomach, it also fills the heart with happiness! And then we can enjoy some girls' talk about things unrelated to Lord Felix!

I decided not to dwell on Lord Felix any further, instead focusing on the future. However, my daydreaming was very quickly cut short by a voice coming from the manor.

"Hey! I saw little Alice running toward the forest! Is she gonna be okay?"

It was Grandpa Randy. The implications of his words didn't quite make sense to me, but Lord Felix and Sir Kain immediately frowned. From their reactions, it was obvious that going to the forest was a bad idea.

Come to think of it, Lord Felix and Sir Kain have had to exterminate a lot of monsters lately, haven't they?

I had a bad feeling about this. And unfortunately, ever since my Lilybell days, my premonitions practically always came true.

"Meooow!"

Jack, who had gone out earlier, suddenly sprang out from the bushes to inform me of something with great urgency.

"Are you quite certain?" I asked.

The cat's report confirmed that my hunch was about to become reality in the worst way imaginable.

"Lord Felix!" I exclaimed. "Please come with me to the forest! Lady Alice may be in danger!"

I know I just said it wasn't a good idea to meddle, but that doesn't apply when someone's life is at stake!

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"What's gotten into you, Felix?!" I whined once I was out of earshot of the Leeuwenhoek manor.

As I trudged along the path, I thought back to the words I'd spat out earlier and heaved a sigh.

"But you've always been kind to me. Why are you being so mean now?"

It was true. Felix had been nice to me ever since we'd first met. In fact, he was the only person who was nice to me.

Well, he introduced me to Kain when I was older, and Kain is pretty nice to me too, but that's not the point right now.

I, Alice, was the third child born to Count Rohans. My elder brother, the family heir, had a brilliant mind, and my elder sister excelled in magic. Naturally, my parents, my siblings, and everyone associated with our family had high expectations for me too.

However, unlike my brother and sister, I was not a prodigy. I wasn't incompetent either, but as a child, I hadn't known that.

I could use magic. I was decent at studying. I understood the things I was taught, and I was curious. I was capable of expressing a wide variety of emotions. But since my siblings had set the bar so high, my competencies fell short in my parents' eyes.

Do you know how it felt to be seen as a worthless child even though I had no particular failings? Little me was innocent and pure, which was why I immediately noticed that my parents looked at me in a different way than they did my siblings. I also realized that although they never scolded me, I was the only one they never once praised. And I sensed that their ever-present air of dissatisfaction was somehow my fault, even though I hadn't done anything wrong.

Can you possibly imagine how it felt to realize that the strange expression that was always directed at me was one of disappointment? My exceptional siblings had made the normal me a failure.

But Felix was different. Felix told me that being normal was a wonderful thing...because he himself wasn't. I didn't know what he meant by that at the time, but I was so happy to be praised and treated nicely that I instantly fell in love with him. He was the one who turned my normalcy into something special.

After that, I woke back up to my true self. The real me wasn't a pushover who would curl up in dejection over being treated as a worthless child.

One day, I'll become special too, and then my family will see what they missed out on!

This time, it was I who turned my back on my parents and siblings. I began following Felix and Kain around, who doted on me like a younger sister. Even my real brother and sister hadn't done that!

Eager as I was to pursue specialness, sometimes I would do something reckless and put myself in danger. Each time, Felix was the first to come to my rescue.

That was when I realized two things: One, Felix and I were meant to be. Two, Felix was special, so he was surely the next Champion of Destiny. In which case, it fell to me to support him by his side!

Felix insisted he wasn't special. He also began reminding me at every opportunity that he thought of me as a younger sister. But I was sure that one day, he would come to love me as a woman. Because I was his fated wife!

But then...Lucille showed up.

Well, no.

Honestly, I knew this had nothing to do with Lucille. Felix's change in attitude had been a gradual process—one that had begun long before his engagement. I just didn't want to admit it because he was the only person who had ever acknowledged me and treated me kindly.

I once complained about it to Kain, who replied, "You have me too, don't you?" But Kain was close with too many women. Being special to him wasn't much of an accomplishment.

Even though Felix was treating me more coldly, I was still the only woman he addressed without honorifics—a fact I used to convince myself I was special. But now...

"He called her Lucille..."

What's gotten into him?!

"If he's not nice to me, then I hate him!"

I also hate Kain! He's nice to every girl in the world, but he won't get mad at Felix on my behalf! And I hate Lucille for having Felix call her by name even though she's an unwanted fiancée that got forced on him for a stupid reason!

I bet they all think of me as a child just because I'm a bit younger than them! They think I don't matter because I'm just a kid! That's why no one chased after me...

"I also hate my family for not loving me. I hate everyone!"

As I was walking around, spewing angry words to distract me from my sorrow, Lucille's smiling face came to mind. Even though I had shown up unannounced at her house and yelled at her, she had happily listened to my stories without getting upset at all.

Actually, I hate myself the most for directing my anger at her when I know she's a nice person.

I'm a bad girl, and bad things happen to bad girls.

"N-No way!"

My destination had been the forest I often ran away to when I was a child. It was supposed to be a peaceful and quiet place. After all, it had been safe enough for a little girl to hide in by herself.

However, as I sat hugging my knees, I was encompassed by a large shadow. Looking up at its source revealed something I had only ever seen in books.

"Why is there a dragon here?!"

Is this punishment for being a bad girl who hurt someone because I wanted to be special?

"Eek!"

In the dragon's red eyes, my reflection grew as it faced me. Was I going to die here?!

No, I don't want to die!

Just as I was about to sink into despair, I heard a voice.

"Meooow? Jack, you said she was this way, right?! Lady Alice! Where are you?!"

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We rushed to the forest, Lord Felix and I on one horse and Sir Kain on another.

Lord Felix had been reluctant to bring me along, but how could I just sit and wait while my friend was in danger?! Besides, Jack said he knew where Lady Alice was. Heading directly to her obviously made more sense than searching blindly.

Lord Felix had been confused when I told him this, though.

"Lucille, what are you talking— Never mind, this isn't the time."

And so, perhaps realizing I wasn't going to back down no matter what, he had let me onto his horse. I would've liked to have ridden by myself, but since I had zero experience on horseback, I accepted his offer. I would definitely practice at some point, though.

"Meow, meooow? Thank you, Jack! Lord Felix, please head past that large tree and to the right!"

Lord Felix seemed to be biting back a comment but followed my directions nonetheless.

"There aren't supposed to be monsters here, but mana suddenly started welling up here over the past few days," he explained. "It may be related to the recent surge in monster sightings."

"I see..."

Just as Lord Felix said, my first impression upon entering the forest had actually been "This place sure contains a lot of mana." But as we proceeded, I realized that my conclusion hadn't been quite accurate. The mana didn't belong to the forest itself but to a presence within it.

Actually, if I'm not mistaken, this presence might be— Oh! More importantly, I can sense us getting closer to Lady Alice! But I can't tell exactly where she is because the mana here is so dense.

"Meooow? Jack, you said she was this way, right?! Lady Alice! Where are you?!" I called out as we followed Jack on horseback.

I didn't know you could run so fast, Jack! Like, this can't be normal, right?

As Lilybell, I had been able to run amazingly fast thanks to Master Alys's enhancement magic. Perhaps Jack wasn't an ordinary cat either?

I tried to suppress my anxiety as we sped along, passing through a thick cluster of trees to reach a small clearing. Suddenly, the horse stopped in its tracks and whined, its legs trembling.

Behind me, Lord Felix gasped.

A dark creature that clearly did not belong in the forest sat before us. And on the ground right next to it was Lady Alice, her face pale.

The dark creature—a black dragon—stared at her with his red eyes.

Despite the size of the forest and denseness of the tall trees, for a dragon to be able to hide here entirely unnoticed, he was likely small for his kind. Still, he was much larger than any human. I could sense Lord Felix's tension.

"I...can't believe there's a dragon here," Lord Felix murmured to himself.

"Indeed, I never thought I'd encounter such a sight in a place like this," I replied.

My response to his musing seemed to snap him out of his shock—he suddenly moved to stand in front of me and slowly drew his sword.

Lady Alice had probably noticed us by this point, but she remained frozen in place, her eyes locked with the dragon's.

"Lucille, you need to quietly retreat and get out of here," Lord Felix whispered to me, gaze pinned to the dragon.

I couldn't help but be impressed.

Whaaat? Lord Felix, you're so darn cool! Nothing beats a gallant person doing gallant things!

I wished I could've seen him doing this for Elvira instead. It would've been a feast for the eyes. I was sure that Lord Felix was a true gentleman at heart, give or take the occasional concerning comment.

I suppose now isn't the time for such thoughts. When this is all over, then I can indulge!

The dragon didn't seem to have noticed Lord Felix and me. Moving his reptilian face closer to Lady Alice, the dragon stretched open his maw to bare his sharp fangs.

The sight of poor Lady Alice trembling in fear, eyes brimming with tears, filled my heart with anger.

I let out a sigh to calm myself a bit, then took a deep breath and yelled, "Stop it right there! Are you misbehaving *again*?!"

The dragon froze and turned to look at me, his red eyes wide open in disbelief.



"Wh-What?!" Lord Felix exclaimed.

Why is Lord Felix also gaping in shock? Well, he was right next to me when I shouted, so perhaps it hurt his ears—in the physical sense, that is.

I thought I'd been careful not to cause ear damage, but if Lord Felix was angered by my loud voice, then I'd just have to apologize later and ask for forgiveness. Right now, there were more pressing concerns.

I focused my attention on the dragon. I remembered this naughty boy very, very well.

"This mana... It can't be... Are you Lilybell?!" he bellowed.

Dragons were a highly intelligent and extremely long-lived race, capable of speaking human language.

I wasn't sure how to respond to the dragon's question since I hadn't been planning on telling Lord Felix and Lady Alice about my past life. After mulling over it, I decided to play dumb.

"What? Who's Lilybell? My name is *Lucille*," I said as coldly and imposingly as possible.

The dragon opened and closed his mouth several times before finally choosing to remain silent.

Yes, I'd say you made the right decision. Because I am incredibly *angry right now!*

Long, long ago, back when I was still Lilybell, I'd met a dragon who was always causing trouble. During our first encounter, I'd thought, "I don't think there's any way we'll ever get along." He was too violent and insensitive, and he attacked humans without reserve.

Well, that's the red-eyed black dragon in front of me right now.

This dragon's name was Maouldoth, and the two of us had given each other hell in my past life.

I never thought I'd run into him again as a human...

I jumped out from behind Lord Felix and walked determinedly toward the evil dragon.

"Huh? Lucille, wait! Hey!"

It sounded like Lord Felix was trying to stop me, but my fury could no longer be contained.

"Maouldoth! So your seal has weakened with the passing of time,

has it?! You always complained, 'I'm not doing bad things anymore! I want to be free!' But the moment your seal weakens, you immediately start misbehaving again! You still haven't learned your lesson, have you?!"

"Eek! No! It's not what it looks like!" Maouldoth squealed pathetically.

In case it wasn't obvious, this dragon was a little afraid of me.

In every era, there had been one person he just couldn't win against, and by some twist of fate, that person had always been one of my precious owners. Plus, since my owners had loved me so dearly, they had shared their mana and special tricks with me. In other words, I had inherited a bit of mana from all of the people who had been capable of making Maouldoth tremble with fear.

It wasn't as if I could beat him. I mean, this was dragon versus human, and in my past life, it would've been dragon versus cat. Realistically speaking, I stood no chance. But I suspected that his fear of the mana in my body ran deep. He couldn't simply will it to go away.

The dragon also had one more reason to be afraid of me in all my smallness.

I turned to Lord Felix, who was standing still in shock, and pointed at a certain part on Maouldoth's body.

"Lord Felix! Right here! Imbue your blade with mana and stab it into this terrifying dragon in this very spot! Don't worry, his seal may be weakened, but it isn't broken! He won't be able to escape!"

"Gaaah!" the dragon wailed. "Who's the terrifying one here, you monster?!"

Lord Felix seemed bewildered by the casualness of my exchange with the dragon. He looked at his sword, then me and Maouldoth, then the part of Maouldoth's large, thick tail that I was pointing at—a purple area near the base.

Maouldoth was afraid of me because I had known him for so long that I was familiar with all of his weaknesses.

"Lord Felix? Come on, he's all yours!" I urged.

"Sorry, could you provide the mana instead, Lucille?"

"You want me to imbue it into your sword?"

This is called teamwork, right?! It's like we're best friends! I love it!

Lord Felix held out his blade, and I channeled my mana into it as requested. He swiftly approached his prey, raised his sword, and swung it down on the dragon's tail with great force.

"Gyaaaaah!"

○○○

My first encounter with Maouldoth was shortly after Master Alys extended my lifespan.

"Listen, my sweet Lilybell. It seems there's a dragon in the east who's been causing far too much havoc. I think I ought to teach him a lesson."

Thinking about it now, people had probably been begging Master Alys for help.

And so, we met the black dragon. The Great Witch Alys beat him up with her magic, and he cried and apologized.

In the beginning, he'd been a foolish dragon who refused to learn, but after getting beaten to tears a fourth time, he finally repented for real. Honestly, I had no idea how he'd been able to think, "I can still do this," after the first three times.

At any rate, after his moment of true remorse, he was given a name by Master Alys: Maouldoth.

"My sweet Lilybell, names possess a very special power," she told me with a satisfied smile.

Naming the dragon had bound his soul to hers. From then on, he was unable to disobey Master Alys.

However, some time after Master Alys's death, Maouldoth went back to harming people. When he caused too much damage and people began to fear the red-eyed black dragon, it was Saint Clarissa who stood up to him next in an unexpected—and unwanted—reunion between black dragon and white cat.

Maouldoth would later complain to me, "In a way, Clarissa was scarier than Master Alys at times."

Master Alys had probably thought of Maouldoth as a pet. On the

other hand, Saint Clarissa showed him no mercy after all the hurt he'd caused. She'd smiled as she walloped him with her holy magic.

After the beating, Maouldoth repented once more. But the dragon, ever the fool, repeated his actions again, and again, and again. It got to the point where I wondered if he was doing it on purpose.

Each time Maouldoth wreaked havoc, my beloved owners proceeded to reduce him to tears.

Matthew, the adventuring master chef, cooked some of him up—we both ate a bit of his tail, and I thought it was delicious. Conrad, whose mercantile spirit had led him to the world of alchemy, tried to use him as a reagent—I recalled the dragon sobbing after having various parts of his body taken from him. Roselia put a special magical collar on him that forcibly suppressed his power. Hinako dressed him in strange clothing.

I didn't know if it was out of rebellion, but for some reason, Maouldoth's behavior grew ever worse over the years until he was finally sealed by Efren the hero.

At the time, I thought, "Silly dragon, if only you'd behaved instead of hurting people, you wouldn't have had to cry so much. Well, now we'll never see each other again."

And yet, the sealed and shrunken dragon, bound to the forest, eventually casually invited me to chat as if we were best friends.

Well...if he wants to be friends...I suppose I have no choice. I'm a nice cat, so I don't mind visiting him, tee hee!

So I went to see the foolish Maouldoth in the forest and listened to his complaints, even though my first impression of him had been, "I don't think there's any way we'll ever get along."

Perhaps because he could sense the mana of my previous loving owners within me, he would always whine, "Hey, don't get too close to me!" Still, our friendship deepened.

The turbulent relationship between Lilybell and Maouldoth continued until the day I jumped into the demon summoning circle and died.

Time passed, and now, the foolish black dragon was once again

sobbing before me. Lord Felix's blade had restored his seal to its original state, returning Maouldoth to his shrunken form that was slightly smaller than me.

"I wasn't even doing anything bad! The seal finally weakened, and you just barged in and fortified it again! In the worst way possible! You heartless woman!"

"Who's the one who bared his fangs at my dear friend and made her cry?"

"For all you know, it could've just been a prank!"

"How many times have you said that only to end up causing real trouble?"

The foolish but honest dragon clammed up.

See? I knew it! He was totally going to hurt Lady Alice! He should be grateful we fixed his seal before he could do anything, because if we had arrived after the fact, he'd have been in for a world of pain!

Suddenly, I remembered what I'd come here for.

Oh, right! Lady Alice! This is no time to be listening to the ramblings of a whimpering dragon! What am I doing?!

I shoved Maouldoth aside and rushed to his victim in a panic.

"Guh!"

"Lady Alice! Are you okay?! You must've been so scared. You're safe now!"

Lady Alice, who was still sitting on the ground, looked up at me, dumbfounded.

She may still be reeling from the shock. It's understandable, given that a fearsome dragon almost attacked her. Perhaps I should've hurt him more...by Lord Felix's hand, of course.

Lady Alice seemed to be calming down, though. Her tears had subsided, and her body had stopped shaking. Relieved, I took her hand and gently wrapped it in both of mine, only for her to begin trembling again.

Oh no! I thought she'd calmed down, but I should've known it wouldn't be that easy.

She had a bit of a prickly personality, but she was still an ordinary, sweet noble lady. It was obviously her first time encountering such a horrible dragon, so it wasn't surprising for her

to experience a second wave of fear now that the danger had passed.

"Hey, why do I get the feeling you've been bad-mouthing me in your head?" Maouldoth whined.

Let's just ignore the frightful dragon's feeble complaints. Actually, can't he see that I'm in the middle of comforting this scared noble lady? I wish he'd shut up for a moment.

Lady Alice shakily looked at me with tears in her eyes. "L-Lucille, y-y-you..."

The poor thing. She's too traumatized to speak.

I nodded reassuringly, hoping to calm her down. "Yes, Lady Alice, it's me, your friend Lucille! Everything is okay now!"

Instead of calming down, her eyes snapped wide open.

"Lucille! You!" she shouted.

"Huh?!"

"You're capable of defeating dragons?!"

"Um...no, it was Lord Felix who quelled this fearsome dragon."

"That was incredible, Lucille! I'll never forget how you appeared so gallantly and yelled at the big scary dragon, refusing to back down. All for my sake!"

"Ummm..."

"Am I really that scary?" Maouldoth asked.

For some reason, Lady Alice's words seemed to give the dragon an ego boost, even though when *I* called him scary he complained that it was bad-mouthing. Either way, I was still going to ignore him.

Anyway, um, what? She makes it sound like I accomplished something amazing, but I really didn't. First of all, it was Lord Felix who fixed the seal. Even if it had come down to a normal fight, I doubt I could've beaten Maouldoth with my level of power, regardless of how many of his weaknesses I know.

"I can't believe you risked your life to save me, Lucille... No, Lady Lucille... No, big sister Lucille!"

B-Big sister?! I'm her big sister now?! But Lady Alice is my dear friend and vice vers— Wait, does this mean Lady Alice is going to be like a younger sister to me? I...don't mind that at all, tee hee!

"Lucille, how did you know this dragon's name and weakness?"

asked Lord Felix, who I'd noticed had been mulling over something this entire time.

It was a reasonable question.

I thought for a moment. It wasn't that I desperately wanted to hide my past identity as Lilybell, but I also didn't feel like it was necessary to explain it right here and now. Although I had become friends with Lord Felix and Lady Alice, in reality, we hadn't established that level of trust yet. If I told them the truth, would they believe me?

I envisioned the scenario that would play out:

"Really? A cat in your past life? I'm asking a serious question here, and you respond with a joke? I really do hate despicable, foolish women like you!"

"What an awful lie, Lucille! I take back what I said—you're no big sister of mine! Actually, from this moment on, we're not friends anymore either!"

No! I don't want that!

I decided not to talk about my past life until I'd earned a bit more of their trust. In other words, it was time to make up random nonsense.

"I learned about dragons during my princess training," I said. "I also have very keen intuition, so I thought that weird-colored spot might be his weakness, and I was right!"

"Princess training?" Lord Felix asked skeptically.

"Intuition?" Lady Alice asked in the same tone.

"Hey, you're not calling my tail 'weird-colored,' are you?!" Maouldoth shouted.

I guess my explanation was too far-fetched...

It was true that dragons had been a brief part of the curriculum, though. After all, they were a threat to human civilization.

Lady Alice's countenance suddenly changed. "Wait! I remember this from a book about my beloved Champions of Destiny. Long ago, one of the Champions of Destiny, a hero, sealed a dark lord within a deep forest. Here we have a fearsome dragon also sealed in a forest, and his name even *sounds* like something a dark lord would be called! And big sister Lucille made him submit to her with just a few

words! Could she be a...Champion of Destiny?!”

Lady Alice appeared to have been mumbling something, but it was so quiet and fast-paced that I couldn’t understand any of it. Lord Felix, who was next to her, looked surprised, so I supposed it was only I who didn’t know what she had said. I was a bit curious, but it really didn’t seem like asking would be a good idea, so I had no choice but to give up.

Anyway, as I was trying to figure out the best way to resolve this situation, a startled voice echoed through the air.

“Whoa!” It was Sir Kain, who had finally arrived at the clearing. “H-Huh? Wh-What’s that round, black thing?!”

“Round and black?” Maouldoth repeated. “I don’t see anything round and black!”

Sir Kain and the dragon stared blankly at each other.

Um...for now, let’s leave Maouldoth here and head back to the Leeuwenhoek manor.

◉◉◉

As I watched the humans leave the forest, I plopped down onto the ground and curled up in a ball.

I can’t believe that damn cat. We finally meet again, and the first thing she does is reinforce my seal? She probably doesn’t know how stressful it is for a dragon not to be able to soar freely in the sky.

To relieve that anxiety, I’d always summoned her and made her listen to my rants. She was the reason I’d been sealed, after all.

Come to think of it, whenever I’d brought that up, Lilybell would give an exasperated sigh and say, “It was Efren who sealed you, not me.”

No, Lilybell, you don’t understand. Normally, a measly human would have never been able to seal me. It only came to pass because I reduced my firepower, which only happened because you were there, and I was scared I’d hurt you. So in the end, you were the culprit behind my sealing.

Lilybell... I guess she’s “Lucille” now.

Reminiscing about that cat-turned-human brought a smile to my

face.

I was an almighty dragon. Well, I was currently shrunken and bound to this forest by my stupid seal, but still, I was a proud dragon.

When Lucille had yelled at me before, she'd been mistaken. I really hadn't intended to hurt that human. No, my goal hadn't been to harm her—it'd been to *kill* her.

You see, I'd sensed the hint of Lilybell's mana on her and thought, "This is the person who took Lilybell away from me!"

I admit I got the wrong idea and lost my cool. But you can't blame me! I'm a dragon that can basically live forever, and ever since I accidentally got sealed, I've been locked here alone, living like a zombie without Lilybell.

So I'd seriously lost track of how long it'd been since I last saw her. If I'd thought about it rationally, I would've realized that my last encounter with Lilybell had been ages ago. In fact, that human girl's soul would've been reincarnated twice over by now, it had been so long.

"Thinking about it, it's a good thing Lucille showed up before I killed that girl. If I'd gone through with it, she'd never forgive me for the rest of her life."

Saying that out loud was a revelation; I'd been so close to suffering Lucille's wrath. A chill ran down my spine. I absolutely would not want her to hate me after all this time.

Basically, Lilybell was really important to me. And after not being able to sense her mana for ages, I'd lost my composure when I felt it coming from a different person.

"I guess she really did die, huh? I'm glad I got to see her again, though."

Come to think of it, after Lilybell's disappearance, a curse had gradually taken over this land. I hadn't really been paying attention—I was too distracted by how badly I missed her—but the weakening of my seal had to have something to do with the growing curse, right?

And that guy who fixed my seal... (I think Lucille called him Felix?) He was especially cursed. Like, he probably deserved to be

sealed more than I did. But I wasn't going to say that 'cause Lucille would likely yell at me to stop being mean.

You know, that Felix guy kind of reminded me of *him*—the last owner Lilybell introduced me to. What did he say his name was again? Lilybell had only said, "This boy doesn't have a name. I'm going to give him one, but I haven't decided on it yet." But after she disappeared, the boy visited me once, just to tell me his name. Then he left too.

His name had sounded vaguely familiar, so at the time, I thought Lilybell might've given it to him before she disappeared. But now I wasn't sure. I mean, I wasn't interested in the first place. That was why I forgot it.

How's that kid doing? I wonder where he is now.

I hadn't revisited these memories in a long time, but after seeing Lucille and regaining my peace of mind, they suddenly came rushing back. It was as if time were finally moving for me again.

Even back then, she'd never realized how I felt about her and was always clinging to others. It bothered me so damn much over the years.

Aren't you a cat? Why're you hanging out with humans? You should just stick with me. Not that I'm a cat either, but still.

Hmm?

"Wait a second. That Felix guy... Could he be her next one?!"

Until now, Lilybell had been a white cat, so I'd come to terms with her living with humans. But now...

"This can't be real, right? You're not a cat anymore, so why would you need an owner? Tell me I'm overthinking this, Lilybell—I mean, Lucille..."

Too restless to keep lying down, I jumped to my feet.

Even though I knew she wouldn't be able to hear me because of the seal, I bellowed toward the sky, "What's your relationship with Felix, Luciiiiille?!"

○○○

I left the forest the same way I'd come—on the back of Lord

Felix's horse. Lady Alice was riding with Sir Kain, whose horse had been waiting nearby.

"Meooow!"

"Yes, you really did great! Thank you, Jack."

"Myaa."

The gallant cat had run much faster than the horse when he had been guiding us to Lady Alice. Now that his work was done, he'd curled up in my arms and was requesting praise. His sweet meows translated to "I did a good job, right? I was useful, right?" So smol and cute.

Naturally, we'd left Maouldoth where he was. He wouldn't have been able to leave anyway because of his seal.

In the corner of my eye, I noticed that one of Lord Felix's gloves was slightly torn at the palm, where the reins were resting in his hold. Perhaps when I'd channeled mana into his sword, I had accidentally damaged it.

Come to think of it, I've never seen Lord Felix without these gloves. Are they his favorite pair? If so, maybe I should apologize...

The rip in the glove revealed a small cut on his skin. I unconsciously reached for it, thinking I could easily heal it. But before I could make contact, my hand was abruptly flicked away by his.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said.

Of course he'd be startled if someone suddenly tried to touch his wound.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry," Lord Felix said with a troubled look. Maybe he felt awkward because of his knee-jerk reaction.

I'll just sit here quietly so I don't say or do something I shouldn't.

You know, I probably should've thought about this sooner, but what is Lord Felix's curse? It hasn't crossed my mind until now... Wait, aren't I way too apathetic?!

In my defense, I hadn't originally expected to interact with Lord Felix all that much, and thanks to my prophetic dream, I knew that Elvira would cure him eventually, so I wasn't too concerned.

I sneaked a glance at Lord Felix.

He does *look uncomfortable. Actually, his face is pale!*

Even though I had just decided to keep my mouth shut, I couldn't help but worry, so I asked, "Lord Felix, are you feeling unwell by any chance? You don't look too good. Are you okay?"

"I... I'm fine."

Hmm, he doesn't seem fine at all!

His face was so unusually ashen that it made me wonder if the curse was affecting him at this very moment. That said, it would obviously be insensitive to say, "Come to think of it, there's a curse on you and this territory, right? What kind of curse is it?" with no lead-up whatsoever.

I looked around and saw Sir Kain regarding Lord Felix with concern in his gaze. I supposed it was only natural for Lord Felix's close aide and childhood friend to notice something was wrong. Sir Kain certainly knew what the curse entailed, so he must've been even more worried than I was.

Speaking of Sir Kain, in my prophetic dream, he had seemed troubled by the relationship developing between Lord Felix and Elvira.

After thinking for a while, I arrived at another realization that had come all too late: *There's still a lot of time left before Elvira appears, and Lord Felix is going to keep suffering from his curse until then. Won't that be extremely painful for him?*

In my dream, my burning jealousy and hatred toward Elvira and her relationship with Lord Felix had made me lose control of my dark magic. As a result, she had awakened to stronger powers and had lifted the curse on Lord Felix and this land. But now that I'd had that dream and regained Lilybell's memories, I had no intention of interfering with their relationship, nor did I have any desire to harm Elvira.

Without my dark magic wreaking havoc, there was a high likelihood that Elvira's awakening would occur later than predicted, inevitably extending Lord Felix's suffering.

Changing the future foretold by my prophetic dreams was possible. However, there were also parts of our destinies that were fixed in place, barring extreme circumstances. One could consider

them keystones of fate.

In this case, I suspected that "Elvira gains great power and becomes a saint" and "Elvira is Lord Felix's fated heroine" were just such elements that wouldn't change. While I had my own reasons for believing this, I'd have to wait until later to dwell on it more. There was too much else to consider at the moment.

So it may be later than expected, but Elvira should be able to lift the curse eventually. Still, it pains me to know that my change in behavior will prolong Lord Felix's torment.

Actually, does it have to be Elvira who lifts the curse? I mean, it'd certainly be more dramatic and romantic for his fated heroine to do it, but if the goal is just to free Lord Felix, I feel like it technically doesn't matter how the curse is broken. Is it wrong for me to do it because the prophetic dream cast me as the despised villain?!

As Lilybell, I had watched my owners lift curses from people several times. I wondered if those experiences would provide me with any hints.

Of course, it was also possible that only Elvira's powers could break the curse. But if there was a chance of saving Lord Felix sooner, wouldn't it be callous of me not to at least try?

Besides, if I did lift his curse, all I'd have to do was step aside right away, and then the couple could have their happily ever after without having to face any ordeals.

That could only be a good thing, right?

Part of me was afraid there wouldn't be any passion to bring them together that way. But as far as I could remember from my dream, the two of them hit it off immediately when they first met. So I didn't think I had to worry about them needing a catalyst to forge their affections.

Well, at any rate, this is something I can think about after *I know what the curse is.*

For now, I wanted to do something about the awkward tension between Lady Alice and Lord Felix. Thanks to Maouldoth throwing a wrench in the works, it was easy to forget that all this chaos had started with a heartbroken Lady Alice running away from Lord Felix.

Considering that Lord Felix would one day meet Elvira and choose

her, it'd probably be better if I guided Lady Alice into sorting out her feelings rather than support her crush.

I want to help, but to be honest, I don't have much relationship experience. I was a cat for a long time, and though I admired Elliot the black cat, I saw him more as an idol than anything else. And in my human life, Prince Bernard never gave me the time of day.

I mulled over it for quite some time, but as it turned out, I needn't have worried at all. The moment we arrived at the Leeuwenhoek manor, Lady Alice dismounted from Sir Kain's horse and rushed over to mine.

"Big sister Lucille!" she called to me, completely ignoring Lord Felix. "Are you going to the detached house? I'll escort you there, tee hee!"

Lord Felix's hand—politely offered in order to assist me down from the horse—lowered, empty.

The group of us headed to the detached house and settled into the reception room.

"I'm okay now," Lady Alice said. "I've come to my senses. I always thought I loved you, Felix, but deep down, I realized I was only saying that while imposing my own designs onto you. That's why you stopped being nice to me, right? It's my fault you had to go against your nature and be mean. I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable."

I was startled by her sudden apology, but I could tell by her calm expression that she wasn't forcing herself to say it.

"A-Alice?" The flustered voice came not from the apology's recipient, but rather Sir Kain. "Are you sure? You were so obsessed with Felix..."

"Really, Kain?! All that subtle encouragement to get me to give up on Felix, and when I finally do, *that's* what you say?"

"So you realized I was trying to get you to give up..."

"Hmph! Of course I did. I'm not stupid."

It seemed there was quite a lot to this story that I wasn't aware of.

Sir Kain was baffled by Lady Alice's abrupt change of heart, but I doubted it had actually been so sudden. After all, feelings smoldered

in the heart. Lady Alice had probably already been thinking these things, and the terrifying encounter with Maouldoth had acted as a trigger for her to put her unrequited feelings behind her once and for all.

I'm still angry at Maouldoth for scaring her, though!

Lord Felix gave a small sigh of relief as he watched the exchange between Lady Alice and Sir Kain. He seemed to deliberate for a moment, his expression unreadable, before settling on something and bowing to Lady Alice.

"I am sorry as well, Alice. Regardless of the reason, I should have gone about things in a better way. Instead, all I did was hurt you."

He was presumably apologizing for his cold attitude toward Lady Alice.

Lord Felix and Lady Alice shared an awkward look. From what I knew, the two of them had been together since childhood, and Lord Felix had cared for Lady Alice like a younger sister. According to Sir Kain, Lord Felix "had his reasons" for being harsh. I didn't know what justification he had, but judging by the current atmosphere, I was certain that he hadn't truly wanted to be mean to her.

"Ahhh, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders!" Lady Alice exclaimed with a smile. "I didn't realize how stubborn I was being."

She wrapped her arms around one of mine and began nuzzling against it like a cat.

Oh my! She's so skilled at that! Was she a cat in her previous life too?!

"Thank you, big sister Lucille," she said. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Huh?"

"I always thought that Felix was the only person who would come to my rescue—that he was special. I imposed my selfish feelings onto him, and before I knew it, I was forcing him to be my ideal Felix. It's no wonder he didn't like that. And since he was special to me, I thought I had to be special to him too or else I'd have no worth. But this time, you were the first person to come to my rescue, so I realized I was wrong."

"Oh my..."

I can't believe she thought she was worthless. She came across as a confident noble lady when she first barged into my detached house to stake her claim over "her Felix."

Lady Alice's true hidden feelings made my heart ache.

"Your thinking is too extreme, Alice," Sir Kain said. "Besides, it's not just Felix who's been around for you. I'm here too."

"You're right," Lady Alice said. "Thank you too, Kain."

"Huh?"

Sir Kain, who had apparently been trying to lighten the mood, froze at the unexpected words of gratitude.

Tee hee, so even Sir Kain, who's used to dealing with women, gets flustered when his childhood friend acts differently from usual!

"Big sister Lucille, will you listen to my story?" Lady Alice asked softly. "You see, my older brother is really smart, and my older sister is really good at magic. I was the only normal person in the Rohans family, and since they only cared about gifted people, I didn't fit in at home."

As I listened patiently to Lady Alice's explanation, a pained expression grew over Sir Kain's face, while Lord Felix's features stiffened. They probably felt powerless because it was a family matter that they couldn't interfere with. Given the details Lady Alice shared, this was a private issue, and to intervene as a third party would be complex—especially since Lord Felix and Sir Kain were men. If they got too involved, they risked being fuel for baseless rumors, or worse, a scandal. That would put Lady Alice in an even worse position.

While I understood that there were probably many emotions and external issues that couldn't be gleaned from Lady Alice's words alone, I found myself thinking that it was all really quite strange.

"Your family is rather odd, isn't it?"

"Odd?"

Oh no! I accidentally voiced that thought out loud!

I slapped both my hands over my mouth. It wasn't appropriate for me to criticize her family when I didn't even know them, no matter how strained their relations seemed to be.

Lady Alice laid gentle hands over my own and said imploringly, "I want to hear your opinion, no matter what it is."

If that's what she says, I guess it's okay.

"I just think it's unfortunate that the people closest to you can't see how sweet and lovely you are," I said. "Though I may have phrased it too bluntly just before."

"B-Big sister Lucille!"

"Ah!"



Moved to tears, Lady Alice threw her arms around me in a hug.

She's so smol and cute. Maybe she really is a cat.

As I held her in my arms, I thought about what she'd shared. There were many noble families that didn't settle for being ordinary. Even in the Gustelanola family, my father was so ambitious that he easily discarded me when Prince Bernard terminated our engagement. When the false accusation had come to light, his only response had been, "It's your fault for having no charm. You couldn't win the prince's heart."

It occurred to me that I had also once desired love from an uncaring family. I'd simply forgotten about it after regaining Lilybell's memories because everyone had loved me very much back then. In fact, my prophetic dream's version of me was probably how I would have ended up had my desperation for love never been fulfilled.

If Lady Alice doesn't know what it feels like to be loved, then I'll show her my *endless love for her. She doesn't need to go looking for it when there's so much right here! I know I'm good at being loved, but I'm also very good at loving others!*

"But all that aside, I wonder why your family didn't like your version of 'special'?" I mused.

"Huh?"

I didn't think there was anything strange about my comment, but for some reason, Lady Alice was looking at me blankly.

"What do you mean, big sister Lucille? What could be special about me?"

"Huh? You're very special, aren't you?"

Lady Alice seemed even more confused. To be honest, I was confused too. It was as if my words weren't getting across to her at all.

Unable to sit by and watch any longer, Lord Felix urged me to explain further.

I don't see what's so complicated that it needs to be explained, but okay...

"Umm, well, a 'normal' person wouldn't be able to talk calmly like this after nearly being attacked by a dragon at close range," I said. "They would go into a state of shock and faint. Actually, they'd be

lucky if they woke up after three days."

Maouldoth had often taken advantage of this fact to torment humans. He wouldn't kill them, but he'd play inexcusable pranks on them that weren't funny at all.

Well, it had been a lot worse than that right before he was sealed. He'd been stronger then, perhaps because he'd been going through a growth spurt.

It was a disaster—he ruined three entire countries! The map of the continent changed a lot because of him. In the end, Efren had to seal him before he destroyed the whole world.

Maouldoth claimed that he had only intended to play around, but that excuse obviously hadn't worked on the people who had suffered.

After his sealing, I spent a lot of time talking to him and getting him to understand the humans' side, but apparently he still hasn't reflected enough!

Well, that was the kind of dragon Maouldoth was. Even if the seal hadn't fully broken, Lady Alice wouldn't have been able to retain her sanity through that ordeal if she had been an ordinary person. That was how I knew that she was quite resilient in the face of abnormal situations.

Saint Clarissa had often told me that having this kind of special constitution meant that one was especially loved by God.

"Even God loves you, Lady Alice! So it's your family who's weird for not liking you!" I said with a big smile on my face, since it appeared I didn't have to be reserved with my opinion.

For some reason, Lady Alice, Sir Kain, and Lord Felix were stunned speechless.

Chapter 2: The Cursed Marquess, the Champions of Destiny...and a White Cat?

Several days had passed since the Maouldoth incident.

I was tending to the flowers with Grandpa Randy in the warm and sunny garden behind my detached house.

"I don't get why my lord's still keeping you all the way out here," Grandpa Randy muttered.

I raised my head and noticed his dissatisfied frown and furrowed brow. Knowing he was making that face because he was worried about me, I couldn't help but smile happily.

"Tee hee, it's okay! I'm sure Lord Felix has his reasons. Besides, I really like living in this house, taking care of the flowers with you, and sunbathing with the cats. I might not even want him to move me to the main manor."

Well, to be honest, I didn't intend to stop doing any of those things on the off chance that I *did* move to the main manor. Aside from liking this detached house, none of them were reason enough alone to stay here.

I'm going to have to leave eventually, anyway. Plus, when Elvira gets engaged to Lord Felix, she's not going to like it if his previous fiancée is living under the same roof as he is, even if our engagement was only temporary.

Now then, moving on...

As I continued tending to the flowers, I felt the weight of someone's gaze from behind me. Slowly, I stood up. This familiar sensation had become a frequent occurrence, and I knew exactly who was the cause.

Before they could escape, I spun around and shouted, "Lord

Felix! I want to go horseback riding!”

From within the shadows cast by the manor, the hiding form of Lord Felix flinched. He gave me an awkward look.

That’s right—the gaze belonged to Lord Felix. I’d noticed that he often checked up on me whenever he wasn’t out exterminating monsters.

“What, he was there all along?” Grandpa Randy muttered to himself. “If he cares about Lucy that much, he should just come out and talk to her.”

Grandpa Randy must think it’s suspicious that Lord Felix was looming in the shadows! I know that because I’m thinking the exact same thing. Why is Lord Felix skulking about? Why not just call out to me?

All I knew was that if Lord Felix continued to sneak around like this, we’d never have a proper conversation and I’d never be able to tell him I wanted to go horseback riding. That was why I’d pounced on this opportunity to make my request.

“I want to practice riding,” I said. “May I borrow a horse?”

“Only a horse?” Lord Felix inquired.

Yes! He didn’t say no!

Honestly, I was fine with practicing alone, but since it was my first time, it might be better to receive proper tutelage.

I thought about it and gave what I felt was the safest answer: “Now that I think about it... Please lend me Sir Kain too so he can teach me!”

“No.”

Huh?! I figured Lord Felix was too busy, and since he’s lending me something as valuable as a horse, it’d be easier to get permission if I requested a person he trusts as my instructor...

Lord Felix averted his gaze. “We don’t need to trouble Kain with this. I’ll teach you.”

What...?

I thought Lord Felix had been watching me from the shadows to avoid talking to me, so he had been the first option I’d eliminated. I hadn’t expected him to volunteer himself.

Come to think of it, when we’d ridden together on his horse that

time, it had been very stable. Perhaps he was confident in his ability to teach horseback riding.

If he says it's fine, then I'll gladly accept his offer.

"Please do, Instructor!"

And so, Lord Felix became my new teacher.

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Lord Felix's instructions were very detailed and easy to understand. And the horse was adorable! When I went up to it, it shook its head happily, neighed, and nuzzled against me as if asking me to pet it. It idly chewed air as it basked in my attention.

Just like a cat!

Thanks to the horse and Lord Felix, I quickly mastered the basics of horseback riding.

"You have a good sense for it," Lord Felix said. "You probably didn't even need my guidance."

"Why, that's not true! I only learned so quickly because you taught me well! Besides, even if I *was* a natural, I'd still be a beginner, so just having you here would've been very helpful nonetheless!" I said with a smile, happy for the praise and the fact that his teaching had been more thorough than I'd expected.

"Is that so...?" Lord Felix averted his gaze again as if I'd said something strange.

But I was satisfied with how I conveyed my thoughts...

Upon closer inspection, his ears were slightly flushed. Perhaps he was just embarrassed? Despite being known as a cursed, unsociable, and emotionless marquess, he had an unexpectedly cute side.

"You're saying that just having me here was helpful?" he murmured before suddenly grimacing and covering his mouth like he'd unintentionally uttered the words.

I found it strange that he was acting as if I'd said something I shouldn't have. Wasn't it the obvious truth?

"Of course! I'm glad you're here, Lord Felix. Thank you!"

Not only was he helpful, but I also felt more reassured having him watch me than if I'd been practicing alone. I also enjoyed

talking to him, and the horse seemed happy to be alongside its beloved master too!

For some reason, even though I was thanking him, Lord Felix's expression grew gloomier by the second.

"Lucille... What would you do if you felt worthless like Alice did?" he asked.

Hmm, well, that's a sudden change of subject.

I wanted to provide a serious answer for his serious question, but it was difficult for me to imagine myself in that situation. I already knew my own worth because my owners had spoiled me like crazy and taught me that all I had to do was exist to be considered cute. Even though at the time it had been because I was a cat, I still felt it was true now.

"What would I do, you ask? Hmm... Let's say, for example, that there's an adorable kitty cat right here with us."

"What?"

Drat. I thought the metaphor would work since Lady Alice said he loves small animals, but I guess it was too sudden. I've already started, though, so I'll just have to commit. I can't think of a better comparison, anyway.

"There's an adorable kitty cat right here with us," I insisted.

"A-All right..."

"Close your eyes and imagine it in front of you, okay? It's very, very cute. In fact, it's like an angel, with glossy white fur and sky-blue eyes."

"That's awfully specific."

"I figured a description would make it easier to visualize."

Naturally, the hypothetical cat was modeled after my past feline self.

"Can you see it?" I asked. "Now, what do you think when you look at that cat?"

"It's...cute, I guess?"

"Heh heh! I know, right?!"

"Huh?"

Uh-oh, I couldn't help but gloat since it was basically indirect praise for Lilybell.

I regained my composure and looked at Lord Felix, whose eyes were closed as instructed.

"Lord Felix, you think that kitty cat is adorable, and you love it to bits! Now, when you look at it, do you think, 'What is this cat's worth?'"

"No, I don't. If it were a horse, I might ponder how fast it could run, but I don't look for practical value in cats."

"Exactly. Cats are marvelous just because they're cute! There are people who dislike cats, of course, but those who do like cats can't help but adore them simply because they're charming."

"I suppose."

Lord Felix's expression relaxed a bit. He must've been imagining an adorable white cat.

I gently took his hands in mine. His fingers twitched for a second, but this time, he didn't rebuke the gesture. His hands were clad in those familiar black gloves, but I didn't see the tear from the other day. Perhaps he owned many of the same pair.

If he liked them so much, I wondered, if one were to give him gloves as a gift, would he be happier to receive another of the same kind rather than something different? Normally, one wouldn't gift someone an identical copy of something they already had. However, established customs came second to whether or not the recipient would be happy with the gift.

I'll remember this so that if I ever get to be friends with Elvira, I can advise her on what to give Lord Felix.

"I think it's the same with people," I continued. "If you care about someone, you aren't going to think about what their worth is. They have value to you just by existing."

After all, my owners never expected anything of me, but they still loved me very much!

Lord Felix opened his eyes in surprise and stared at me. He seemed quite serious, so I chose to meet his gaze. Looking at him like this, I realized how beautiful his golden eyes were.

I bet you could put the brightest stars in the sky next to him, and his eyes would still outshine them.

Upon closer inspection, his starlike eyes were shimmering. It

made me wonder if the rumors were wrong. Maybe he wasn't a misanthrope—he just distanced himself from others because he was afraid of being disliked for his curse.

As if to punctuate my thoughts, Lord Felix murmured, "Do you think I have value too?"

"Of course!"

"Even though I'm cursed?"

The emotion in his eyes shifted—to anxiety, perhaps. But what was I supposed to say? I didn't understand why he felt this way, especially after I already explained my opinion.

"Like I said, you have value just by existing," I replied. "Whether you're cursed or not, it doesn't change the fact that you're here, does it? If anything, your work is *more* valuable than the typical person's, because you're always valiantly protecting your territory despite having to endure a curse!"

A gasp escaped Lord Felix, and he froze, as if he'd never expected to hear those words.

Of course, there were some people in the world who would never love you unless you had some kind of value. My father in this life was a prime example. But there was nothing you could do about people like them. Encountering them was like getting into an unfortunate accident—it wasn't the fault of the unloved victim.

Besides, Lord Felix would eventually be fine. He would soon meet his fated heroine, Elvira. I couldn't tell him that, though, so I decided to change the subject.

"Okay! Thinking about it more isn't going to get us anywhere, so that's enough of that! Lord Felix, let's race!"

Lord Felix's lips tightened into a line. His gaze downcast, he blinked slowly a few times before raising his head again. Then he smiled, his expression brighter than before.

"You think you can win against your instructor?" he asked.

"Heh heh! I won't know unless I try!"

After that, we continued the lesson, going out a bit farther on horseback. Though Lord Felix seemed to be enjoying himself, there were times he appeared to be deep in thought.

I didn't know what was on his mind, but the way I saw it,

everyone had their own perspective, so I hoped his would come to broaden in a way that helped him the most.

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After that, Lord Felix started accompanying me on longer rides. I actually managed to win some of our races—perhaps I did have a knack for horseback riding after all.

We rode through the areas in the Leeuwenhoek territory that Lord Felix and Sir Kain had declared were free of monsters.

One of these days, I'd like to learn how to fight as well.

Almost all of my previous owners had had combat prowess. It was possible that I had a sense for it too, as I had inherited their mana and knowledge!

Despite these thoughts, I ended up spending the next little while living in peace.

One day, some time after Lord Felix had left on an extermination mission, I heard a commotion coming from the estate's main manor.

Kicking up this much fuss for Lord Felix's return isn't normal, right...?

I peered toward the manor and noticed that an injured person was being brought in. Upon closer inspection, it hit me that it was Sir Kain dragging a limp, unconscious body—*Lord Felix's* body.

Startled, I immediately rushed up to them.

"Sir Kain! What happened?" I asked.

"Lu..."

The forlorn look on Sir Kain's face spoke of the magnitude of this incident, his typical air of lightheartedness completely gone.

"Did he get hurt while fighting monsters?" I asked.

"I don't know... I really don't know. There were more of them than usual, but Felix was still defeating them without issue. It's just that when one of the monsters was about to land a hit on another knight, Felix saved him by using magic to cut it down, which he doesn't normally do. After a while, his behavior started becoming increasingly strange, until he eventually fainted."

As I listened to Sir Kain's recollection, I examined Lord Felix with

my own eyes. From what I could tell, he didn't appear to have sustained any serious injuries. However, his complexion was a ghastly shade of white, his body exuding some sort of stagnant mana.

As Lucille, it was my first time seeing these symptoms, but I had encountered something similar in my past life.

"This resembles mana exhaustion," I said. "Normally, rest would suffice to recover his mana, but it looks like both his mana and life force are being actively drained. At any rate, if we don't compensate for the mana he's losing, he might die."

Sir Kain's face scrunched up as if he were a child on the verge of tears.

"But Felix has high mana capacity," he said. "An ordinary person might not be able to provide enough. And with his curse, if you try to transfer mana to him, it'll all get sucked away! Even if you attempt to stop before you're done in, the curse won't release you. It'll keep draining you till you're totally dry."

Argh! Why, me?! Why did you never ask what Lord Felix's curse was?!

Because I didn't think something like this *would happen!*

Hmm. It was obvious the curse was to blame for this situation, even if I still didn't know its exact workings.

Come to think of it, when Lord Felix fixed Maouldoth's seal, he had asked me to imbue his sword with mana instead of doing it himself. I hadn't thought much of it at the time—I'd been too excited about our collaborative effort—but could it be that he'd known it was too dangerous for him to manipulate mana himself?

Yet he'd gone ahead with it today regardless, to save that knight?

This isn't the time to be thinking about that. If I don't do something soon, it's only going to get more precarious for Lord Felix. As long as he survives, we can figure out the details later!

"Sir Kain, please bring Lord Felix to his room and lay him down," I said. "I'll give him my mana!"

"You can't! He'll wring all the mana out of you and turn you into a mummy!"

It couldn't be understated just how much mana my doting

owners had shared with me in my Lilybell days. I mean, right off the bat, Master Alys had extended my lifespan so that I could live with her forever. The faces of my past owners flashed through my mind—my beloved, quirky, and incredibly powerful owners that I was very proud of.

What I was trying to say was that I possessed a *tremendous* amount of mana. And I remembered how radiant my owners—especially Master Alys, Saint Clarissa, and Efren—had looked whenever they rejoiced in being able to save people in need. Honestly, there'd been times I'd thought, "I wish I could be as cool as them!"

Is this my chance?

I smiled at Sir Kain. Well, it was a bit closer to a smirk, but he probably wouldn't notice in his current panicked state, so it was fine.

"Heh heh! Sir Kain, who do you think I am? I'm the evil woman with dark powers who got kicked out by the prince for putting a curse on his lover! Well, it was a false accusation, but still."

Plus, after regaining Lilybell's memories, I was capable of using a lot more than just dark magic.

"Forget mana exhaustion mummification—I'll stuff Lord Felix so full of mana that he'll have to go on a diet to trim the fat once he's better!"

"Lu..." he said, stunned.

I didn't know if it was actually possible to make someone physically grow larger by stuffing them with mana. I'd never done it before, after all.

But look how much he's made everyone worry about him! He can make up for it by being my test subject.

"All right," Sir Kain said. "Thanks...but seriously, don't push yourself. I'll stay next to you and try to pull you away if it gets dangerous." He had regained some of his composure, though he still seemed concerned.

I was so intent on the situation at hand, I hadn't even noticed the gathering of a familiar group of cats around me until I heard them cheering me on with their meows.

"Thank you for the support, everyone!" I said. "Now I'm even

more motivated! Here I go!”

“Meooow!”

Come to think of it, wouldn’t this be my first time entering the manor? After all, when I first arrived at Leeuwenhoek, I’d been brought directly to the detached house, so I’d never been inside the main building.

I probably should’ve realized that sooner, I thought as I headed inside, cats in tow.

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“Sir Kain, please stand back just in case!”

As instructed by Lu, I moved to the corner of the room.

Is this real life? I wondered, watching the scene unfold before my eyes.

To be honest, when I was carrying the unconscious Felix back to the Leeuwenhoek manor...in the back of my mind, I thought he was done for.

I mean, wasn’t he? I’d realized instantly that his mana was rapidly being depleted, but I knew there was no way to replenish it. Anyone who tried would turn into a mummy. Even so, I would’ve been fine with sacrificing myself so that he could live on, but I didn’t have nearly enough mana to save him.

My thoughts had been so jumbled that I hadn’t been able to tell if what I had been feeling was sadness or despair.

Felix is going to die? Truly?

I was powerless. There was nothing I could do.

But that girl, Lu, flashed me a smile as she held Felix’s hand. She had taken off his special gloves—which he never removed in the presence of others because he was afraid of accidentally draining their mana—to touch his skin directly.

How was she not running out of mana? Was there really that much stored inside that small, delicate frame?

I’d been on standby, ready to yank her away from Felix even if it meant turning into a mummy myself, but instead, I found myself with nothing to do but stare at her in fascination. How could I not?

What she was doing was impossible. Anyone who attempted it was supposed to get drained dry.

However, the woman in front of me seemed neither tired nor in pain. In fact, she remained perfectly calm, speaking to Felix gently as if she were comforting a sulking child.

"Hang in there, Lord Felix," she said.

"Meooow."

"Mreeeow."

And...for some reason, she was surrounded by cats that were meowing along as if to help her encourage Felix.

"Don't give in, Lord Felix."

"Mew!"

"Meeeow."

This should've been a tense scene, with the pressure of all that was riding on this, but somehow, it was relaxing instead. Also, upon closer inspection, the cats probably weren't actually cheering Felix on; they were just reacting happily to the sound of Lu's gentle voice.

Adding to the absurdity of the sight was the faint light radiating from Lu as she transferred her mana to Felix. This aura of light expanded from her before dividing into small, warm, glowing orbs, which floated in the air like soap bubbles and then faded away.

Some of the cats playfully pawed at the motes of light, while others purred and remained curled up near Lu as if they found the glow surrounding her more comfortable.

It was like a scene out of a fairy tale.

This makes no sense. How can she be so popular with cats?

I recalled a time I'd accompanied Felix to the detached house for one of his stealthy checkups. We'd come across a pile of cats, and just as I'd been wondering why they were there, I'd spotted Lu sleeping underneath them.

What was up with that? Like, I didn't understand why she was covered in cats, but also, why was a noble lady from a powerful family fine with sleeping outside on the ground? Wasn't she the prince's fiancée? Didn't the rumors say she was foolish, arrogant, and despicable? Who in the world thought that would be convincing?

Also, why was Felix stupid enough to believe those rumors? Just

one look at the girl and you'd know they were bogus. I only took them seriously because he did!

"Don't worry, Lord Felix," Lu whispered. "You'll soon be freed from your curse."

Her words, which sounded like a prophecy, gave me a start.

"After your curse is broken, you'll meet your fated heroine and live happily ever after," she continued, oblivious to my reaction. "So there's no need to be afraid."

His fated heroine? What did Lu mean by that? She'd said it so nonchalantly that I wondered if perhaps there actually hadn't been much thought behind the statement at all.

But the way she'd phrased those words stood out to me. She'd said he *would* meet his fated heroine, discounting her already-acquainted self from a romantic relationship with him.

Felix, you idiot. I told you you'd regret it. Wake up already so you can see that you were wrong and work your ass off to rectify your mistake.

Also...if you ask me, Lu is *Felix's fated heroine.*

After some time, Felix slowly opened his eyes.

Ha ha. She really did save him like it was nothing.

Felix gave Lu's hand a light squeeze. "Lucille," he said in a raspy voice. "I could hear you the entire time."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my, you're already awake? Aw, I guess transferring a lot of mana won't make you fat after all."

"Uh...I train a lot, so I don't gain weight easily."

The situation was so ridiculous that I couldn't help but mutter to myself, quietly enough that they couldn't hear me, "*That's* the first conversation you have when he wakes up? Are you guys stupid?"

But hey, at least *something* had changed. There was an intensity in Felix's eyes when he looked at Lu that hadn't been there before. Actually, it probably had been, but he'd concealed it until now. In other words, he'd stopped trying to hide it.

"Well, he's clearly conscious of it these days," I murmured. "Maybe he's finally realizing how he feels about her? Time to get to work, buddy."

When Lu let go of Felix's hand, the cats lounging around her

promptly stirred and stood to bid for her attention.

Seriously, this makes no sense. Why do cats like her so much? I heard the horses really took a shine to her too.

And, Felix, are those envious eyes of yours directed at Lu who's being swarmed by cats? Or at the cats who get to swarm around Lu?

"Man, he's got a long road ahead of him."

Still, I couldn't help but smile as I watched the two of them.

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Lord Felix woke up much sooner than expected. Since I didn't know the full effect of his curse, I'd been prepared to spend several days transferring mana to him, but in the end, it felt like only a couple of hours had passed.

Maybe it wasn't nearly as serious as I thought? Now I feel bad for scaring Sir Kain with the whole "Lord Felix might die" thing.

Or maybe I'm *more powerful than I thought? Heh heh heh! Well, there's no way that's true, but they can't read my mind, so I can believe that all I want!*

As I was gloating in my head, Lord Felix, still a bit dazed, suddenly gasped and snatched his hand away.

"Lucille, your hands!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?" I looked down and saw blood oozing from several cuts on my hands. "Oh my! When did this happen?"

I didn't notice because there was no pain at all!

Pain was often delayed until one realized they were injured. With recognition granted, mine suddenly came alive, the wounds hurting like crazy.

As I stared at them in shock, I noticed in the corner of my eye that Lord Felix's own hands were trembling. He clenched his fists as if to stop the shaking, so tightly that his fingertips turned white.

Eventually, he said in a pained voice, "I'm sorry. It's because you were holding my hand." He hung his head in sorrow.

What?! Why would he think that?

It was such a strange leap in logic, yet Lord Felix seemed convinced that he was right.

Being the smart person that I was, I quickly hypothesized that his curse was to blame for my bleeding hands. However, since its exact nature was still a mystery to me, I couldn't come to any clear conclusions about it.

It was hard to reassure someone who was depressed about a curse when you didn't have any idea of the curse's function. I considered asking about it once and for all, but Lord Felix probably needed to rest and recover first.

"Look, Lord Felix!" I held out my palms for him to see.

He winced in pain and stared at my hands as though he was being forced to confront his crime. Instinctively, he reached out like he wanted to treat them, only to immediately pull back, perhaps because he thought touching them would make them worse. Again, his fists clenched tight, making me fear that the both of us would end up with injured hands.

In the glimpses of his inner conflict that I caught, it was obvious that he wanted to help, but he couldn't.

But even if this was the curse's fault, Lord Felix definitely wasn't to blame. Wanting to free him from his guilt, I quickly continued with my plan.

"Keep watching, okay? Ta-da!"

I used a little bit of the holy magic Saint Clarissa had shared with me and healed my palms. The cuts disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"See? The wounds can be healed!"

For a moment, Lord Felix looked surprised, as if he hadn't expected me to be able to use healing magic. But since I was acting like it was perfectly normal, he simply gave a confused nod and said, "O-Oh."

"They're completely gone! Heh heh! Aren't I amazing? But you know, if you kept looking away, you wouldn't have known they were healed."

Maybe it wasn't that big of a deal, but since I personally didn't like brooding over things, I didn't want Lord Felix to be depressed about my injuries forever. That would've made me very sad. Plus, I'd soon forget that my hands had ever been wounded in the first place.

Actually, if anything, I'd rather he thank me instead of apologizing. I *did* just give him a lot of mana, even if it wasn't as much as I'd anticipated.

Suddenly, I realized something. It seemed that the curse on Lord Felix's body had become a curse on his heart as well. In other words, all of the pain he'd endured because of his curse had taken a toll on him.

I pushed Lord Felix down onto the bed and patted him on the stomach.

"Now, it's time to rest! And if you feel better when you wake up, please tell me everything about your curse!"

It was about time I gave the cats the attention they wanted anyway. They were still meowing impatiently at my feet. The entire time I'd been sharing my mana with Lord Felix, they'd been saying things like "Hey, are you done yet?" "I wanna play with Lucille too!" "Hurry up! Let's go outside!"

Cats were free-minded creatures. I wished Lord Felix could have more freedom too.

By the way, there was something I'd discovered while holding Lord Felix's hand, though I didn't fully understand it yet.

This curse feels very familiar to me... Hmm... What is it reminding me of?

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Lord Felix and I were now sitting across from each other in my detached house's reception room.

After I treated his curse, he had been bedridden for three days with a fever. Now that he had finally recovered, he had come with Sir Kain to visit me. Naturally, he was here for the purpose of telling me about his curse as I'd requested.

"First, Lucille, I am truly sorry that you were wounded because of me," he said. "Has everything been all right with your body since then?"

The first words out of his mouth were an expression of concern for me. I'd heard that when he'd finally awoken after three days,

he'd immediately asked about my well-being, even though his condition had obviously been much worse than mine, what with the nearly dying and all.

He really was a kind man.

"I'm perfectly fine," I said energetically to emphasize my point. "Thank you for your concern."

Lord Felix breathed a sigh of relief. "You saved my life. I cannot thank you enough. Really, I am extremely grateful, and I am sorry I was unable to say so sooner." He bowed to me.

"It was nothing! I'm just glad you're okay!" I smiled, happy to be thanked and doubly happy that I'd been able to help.

Sir Kain, who was standing off to the side, bowed to me as well.

I'd intended to keep my mouth shut about my thoughts on his prognosis a few days ago, but having them both be so grateful to me was weighing on my conscience, so I decided to come clean.

"Your life wasn't actually in danger, though! I mean, I thought it was at first, but you recovered much more quickly than expected. I think your condition was probably better than it initially seemed. A silver lining, indeed! Tee hee!"

As I tried to laugh it off, Sir Kain interjected, "Uh, no way!" He shook his head fervently. "He definitely almost died! It's a miracle he's alive right now!"

"I-Is that so?" I asked.

He leaned menacingly toward me, and I couldn't help but recoil. Behind him, Lord Felix bowed deeply once more.

What should I do? I didn't know that being thanked more than necessary could cause confusion! Hmm... I wonder if their perception of the gravity of the situation has been exaggerated by their gratitude?

Being the smart person that I was, I instantly surmised that continuing to deny their feelings would only make things worse.

Regaining my composure, I said, "Please tell me about the curse."

Sir Kain stepped back to allow Lord Felix to begin his explanation.

"I imagine you've figured this out already, but my curse drains the mana out of anything I touch with my hands. It can also cause physical harm."

"Right," I said.

"I was only five years old when the power activated for the first time. I was chasing a small, weak, and harmless beast, and as soon as I caught it, it withered and died in my hands."

"Oh my..."

"The poor thing died a horrible death because of my curiosity." Lord Felix gave a weak, self-deprecating laugh.

"That's so unfortunate," I blurted out without thinking.

Lord Felix choked up.

Feeling his pain, I said, "It must've been traumatizing to experience such a thing at the tender age of five. If only I'd been there to give you a hug..."

"Um...what?"

"Oh, sorry! I shouldn't have said that!"

I really hadn't meant to say that out loud, but I knew it was a bit arrogant of me to even think that I could hug him. My previous owners would have been overjoyed, but Lord Felix would probably just be annoyed.

Not wanting to discuss that thought any further, I cleared my throat and urged him to continue his story.

"When I reached adulthood, I came up with the idea of using this power against monsters that had to be exterminated anyway. I was able to make use of the mana I absorbed, so it seemed to be an efficient plan. However, after doing so for a while, I noticed that the curse spreading through the land was getting stronger in proportion to the amount of mana I was absorbing."

Come to think of it, the land was also said to be cursed. Apparently that rumor was true.

"Specifically, the soil was becoming barren, and monsters were appearing more frequently."

Hmm? I understand the monster part, but barren soil means that crops can't be grown in it, right? Grandpa Randy is growing flowers, though, and the vegetable garden we set up together is producing tomatoes just fine.

Well, maybe it's just not as bad as it sounds. It could also be that Grandpa Randy has some kind of divine blessing.

I was curious, but asking about the details would probably lead us off track, so I decided against it for the time being.

"My hands harm others, and this land is difficult for people to live on," Lord Felix said with an extremely pained look on his face.

He explained that he had trained himself to be able to suppress his curse to an extent. With intense focus, he could touch things without siphoning their mana. However, he obviously wasn't able to maintain that focus all the time. That was why he wore custom-made mana-blocking gloves and took care not to accidentally touch living things with his bare hands.

There was still a question that his story hadn't answered: "What negative effects does the curse have on you yourself?" I asked. The curse was on *him*, after all.

Lord Felix grimaced. "Nothing whatsoever. I only make the people around me suffer."

He went on to say that he used magic as little as possible these days because his curse necessitated precise handling of it. It didn't mean he couldn't use it at all, though.

This was the first time he'd experienced mana exhaustion, and he suspected that the curse's effect had been amplified because of his frantic state of mind at the time—his adrenaline had been running high from combat as he saved the knight in danger. In other words, so long as he only used magic in calm situations, it wouldn't affect him.

"So this power will not hurt me," he said.

In contrast to the remorseful tone of his voice, I felt sincerely relieved.

I'm sure his heart is aching, but it's better than being in a constant state of torment. Now that's *a silver lining!*

"So you aren't in physical pain or anything, right? That's great!" I replied, beaming.

Lord Felix and Sir Kain stared at me, their eyes wide in astonishment.

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The day my curse was discovered, my mother cried and fainted.

The Leeuwenhoek curse never manifested in more than one person at the same time. It also came in various forms; some family members inherited the same curse as the previous generation, while others were subjected to new effects.

I was the latter category, and my case was by far the most repulsive that had ever been seen. Anyone I touched with my hands would be drained of mana until they died, and as if that weren't bad enough, they would also be cut to shreds.

As far as I was aware, tragedy had befallen the majority of people who had sustained the Leeuwenhoek curse in the past. For example, the previous bearer's curse had been relatively light: Their body had become immune to healing magic, and the only way for them to recover from wounds and illnesses had been to drink monster blood. One case had included the curse consuming the bearer's body every time they used mana, gradually turning them into a monster, while another cursed its bearer to suffer the same injuries they afflicted on others, including monsters.

Before those, the Leeuwenhoek curse had been kept a strict secret. No other past details had been recorded, so the exact nature of the curse was unknown. However, all of those cases had been linked to the curse placed on the land itself. For example, logs from the generation before mine showed that the curse on the land had grown stronger every time the bearer drank monster blood.

For quite some time after inheriting the curse, I wasn't aware of this correlation. The previous bearers hadn't known about it because they had avoided triggering the curse as much as possible. It had affected their own well-being, after all. However, that was very problematic. The more one accepted their curse and tried to coexist with it, the worse the curse on the land grew, ultimately to the detriment of everyone who lived there.

It was as if the curse had been designed to ensure its bearer's suffering.

Still...since it was the bearers who'd been subjected to the most pain, I assumed the Leeuwenhoek family had sympathized with them and tried to protect them, even if they felt a bit uneasy about

it. Their attitude only flipped when it was discovered that my curse harmed and could potentially kill others, rather than just myself.

My mother changed her tune first. When she found out that the curse had manifested in her own son out of everyone in the family, she despaired, and when she realized it could harm her as well, she began treating me as if I myself were the curse.

"A curse that drains other people's mana until they die? That's disgusting! No child of mine would ever have such demonic power! That monster is *not* my son!"

Despite distancing herself from me, her heart still couldn't bear the shame of it, and she fell ill. She now lived a quiet life in another remote territory that was owned by the Leeuwenhoek family.

My father, who loved my mother, didn't treat me as she had, but as soon as I obtained the bare minimum skills to act as marquess, he abandoned me to join her.

Luckily, I had my childhood friend, Kain, who I'd known since before my curse manifested. He came to serve the Leeuwenhoek family after his parents passed away. At first, he was bewildered by my curse and the changes in my environment that it had caused, but his attitude toward me remained the same.

"It's not your fault you're cursed," he said, continuing to stay by my side.

If it weren't for Kain, I might not have been able to do my job as marquess properly.

The reason I was kind to Alice at first was that she, too, was in pain because her family didn't need her. Although her burden was completely different from mine, I saw myself in her and couldn't ignore her plight. Since her own household didn't treat her as family, Kain and I doted on her like a younger sister to make up for them.

However, Alice began to look at me with expectant eyes. She thought I might be a Champion of Destiny.

Foolish as I was, it was only then that I realized that Alice was seeking *salvation.* Something that would be impossible to grant her, as it was a guaranteed fact that I could never fulfill her expectations and would betray her hope in me eventually.

After that, I decided to distance myself from her. Alice was

confused by the change in my behavior, but I knew that the longer I let her expectations grow, the more it would hurt her in the future. I thought that if being nice to her would only lead to my existence bringing her despair, then it would be better to push her away and make her hate me now, even if it also made her feel sad.

I wasn't the champion that Alice wanted me to be. I was...a monster.

That was why I felt that having servants was a blessing. I didn't expect them to respect me as their lord, but at the very least, they were required to treat me as a human being. Still, for a marquess, I had very few people under my employ.

So went the story of my curse, feared and scorned by my parents and relatives alike. And yet, Lucille looked at me with sadness and compassion.

"It must've been traumatizing to experience such a thing at the tender age of five. If only I'd been there to give you a hug..."

When I'd drained that first monster's mana dry, everyone had been aghast at the sight of the corpse. They'd regarded me with horror and kept their distance, afraid that if they touched me, they would meet the same fate. Even when they found out that it was fine as long as I didn't touch them with my bare hands, they still avoided me.

My own mother called me disgusting and left me, but you say you would give me a hug?

When the Leeuwenhoek family, who had sympathized with the curse's victims thus far, found out that my curse only affected others, they suddenly ostracized me, saying, "Why does this generation's bearer only bring disaster to those around him?" They believed that if I had been the sole martyr to suffer from the curse, everyone else could have lived in peace.

"So you aren't in physical pain or anything, right? That's great!"

And yet...Lucille smiled brightly and said she was glad as long as I myself wasn't suffering. Even after she'd just had her small pale hands torn up by my curse.

Stunned, it took me quite some effort to squeeze out my next words.

"Aren't you...scared?" I asked. "My curse hurt you."

Even if her kindness made her sympathize with me, it was inevitable that she would fear me. Pain was a memory etched in both heart and body. It was something that people unconsciously remembered. Her mind might have pitied me, but it was only natural for her to instinctively hate me.

Lucille tilted her head. "The wounds healed, didn't they?" she asked as if she didn't know what was supposed to scare her.

"Even so, it doesn't mean that the pain of receiving them never occurred. Also, if you're straining yourself even the tiniest bit, please tell me right now. Are you sure you aren't feeling any physical discomfort after giving me your mana?"

For some reason, she looked offended when I asked that.

"Do you really think I would be afraid of something like that?" she scoffed. "Is that how frail and cowardly I look in your eyes? How awful! If you want to scare me, you'll have to at least get a dragon to— Wait, I'm not afraid of those. Hmm, what would be scary if it attacked me...?"

Lucille began to contemplate what would scare her, and Kain burst out laughing as if he couldn't hold it in anymore. Meanwhile, I was desperately trying to suppress something that was welling up within me.

Is this warm feeling what people call love?

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I hummed in thought as I listened to Lord Felix's story.

In order to break a curse, it was important to know what kind of curse it was, because the method of dispelling it varied depending on how it functioned. It was the key I needed to solve this puzzle.

But in my prophetic dream, Elvira probably didn't have to care about any of this. Upon awakening to her new powers, she released an enormous amount of mana, blasting the curse away with her holy magic.

I expect no less from someone who'll later be revered as a saint. In fact, if it hadn't been for Saint Clarissa, Elvira would have likely

become the most powerful saint in history. But alas, my past owner was such an extraordinary outlier that I don't think Elvira will even come close.

All this was mere conjecture, however, since Elvira's powers hadn't awakened yet.

And even though the brilliant Saint Clarissa had shared her mana with me, it was only a fraction of all the mana I possessed. Naturally, despite having some of the required holy magic, I wasn't going to be able to mimic Elvira's brute force method.

That was why I needed to understand Lord Felix's curse in order to be able to break it.

It's possible that Lord Felix will meet Elvira before I figure out the solution, but oh well. If it happens, it happens.

Besides...if I'm being honest, my inquisitive side is itching to unravel this curse!

Spending my feline years doing fascinating things with my eccentric owners had turned me into quite the curious cat, and my interest was piqued for the first time in a long while.

I feel bad that I'm getting excited because of someone's misfortune, but I'm going to do my best to help, so that's okay, right?!

Reassuring myself with that, I returned to my original train of thought.

Lord Felix had told me about the curse, but he didn't know why Leeuwenhoek had been inflicted with it in the first place. He and his ancestors had undoubtedly already researched it to death, but there was always the chance that an outside perspective could lead to a new discovery—especially in my case, since I possessed memories of a very long life filled with a variety of experiences courtesy of my owners. Perhaps something would ring a bell.

If I know the reason for the curse, I might be able to find the key we need. Then, I can try to break the curse with my vast store of mana.

I told Lord Felix that I wanted any information I could get.

In response, he said, "I have no idea why our family was cursed, but it may have happened around the time when Champions of

Destiny stopped appearing."

"The Champions of Destiny?"

He explained that the Champions of Destiny had been mentioned several times in one of his ancestors' research notes regarding the curse. This ancestor had noted that the two events had suspiciously overlapped.

"Wait, the Champions of Destiny stopped appearing?" I asked.

I hadn't even heard about them until coming to Leeuwenhoek, so obviously, this fact was news to me. However, it was apparently a well-known story.

For now, I decided to look into the Champions of Destiny. I needed all the clues I could get.

And so, I figured I would call on an expert.

"Big sister Lucille! You want to learn about the Champions of Destiny?! Leave it to me!"

"Yes! Thank you, Instructor Alice!"

Lady Alice had gladly come to my detached house right away. We were currently in the library room, because what better place could there be to do research?

"I-Instructor?!" she exclaimed. "H-Heh heh heh heh heh! Very well! I, Instructor Alice, shall teach you everything I know!"

She had brought a large stack of books with her. Apparently, it was only a partial selection from her precious Champions of Destiny collection, but even so, there was such a variety of material that I couldn't help but smile at her dedication. She really loved the Champions of Destiny.

As I shuffled through the works, Lady Alice provided additional information about their contents.

Hmm, let's see... "The Champions of Destiny were always accompanied by a holy white beast." Lady Alice told me that too.

"It's said that the holy beast disappeared during the time of the last Champion of Destiny," Lady Alice explained. "No one knows if something happened to it or if the Champion of Destiny released it. But after that, there were no new Champions of Destiny."

A question suddenly came to mind. "But the presence of the holy beast was how the Champions of Destiny were determined, no?

What if there *were* new Champions of Destiny, and people just didn't know because the holy beast was gone?"

Lady Alice nodded. "We can't deny that possibility! In fact, there's someone alive right now who people believe may be a Champion of Destiny! But personally, I am of the opinion that a Champion of Destiny cannot exist without the holy beast."

"What?! Who is this person?"

"A great sage by the name of Elios. From what I hear, he's an eccentric fellow; he built a very tall building called the Magic Tower and lives there by himself. He hardly ever mingles with others, so his age and appearance are unknown."

"A great sage... That's an impressive title."

"I'm still surprised you haven't heard of any of this. The Champions of Destiny and the great sage are pretty famous."

Honestly, I found it strange too. Why had I never heard of these people?

"It's because she was the prince's fiancée," came an unexpected voice.

"Why, if it isn't Lord Felix!" I exclaimed. I hadn't noticed him entering the room.

He came closer and peered at the book I had open. Apparently, the idea of Lady Alice teaching me about the Champions of Destiny had piqued his curiosity.

"What do you mean by that, Felix?" Lady Alice asked.

"The royal family does not recognize the Champions of Destiny or the great sage. They believe that the royal family reigns supreme and that they are the only special entity to exist."

I see... That certainly makes sense.

I had been engaged to Prince Bernard for many years. It was possible that the people around me had deliberately shielded me from those stories, so that I would only respect and trust the royal family.

Not that I respected or trusted Prince Bernard at all, tee hee! I thought as I picked up another book.

Oh?

An odd feeling settled over me from it. Flipping through the

book's pages, I found that it was a sort of encyclopedia. It was fairly short, but it introduced each of the past Champions of Destiny with simple portraits, illustrations, and a few lines of text describing them.

The first page depicted a great witch.

"Half demon, half human, and known for her high aptitude in all kinds of magic. She was especially unmatched in dark magic. Because of her lineage, she did not fit in with either humans or demons and lived for a long time in solitude. However, after meeting the holy beast, she learned how to love and later became a champion who saved many people with her extraordinary magical abilities."

Hmm?

I casually flicked a few pages ahead and landed on a description of a male alchemist.

"The major difference between him and the other Champions of Destiny was that he was a commoner merchant, a fact that has been forgotten by most now and overshadowed by his brilliant alchemy. His business acumen and grasp of human psychology were far beyond standard, and he became known for developing magical tools and potions—many of which are still used today. Whenever he lacked something that he truly wanted, he would simply create it himself."

Where have I heard this story before?

The next page showed a gorgeous princess of a large kingdom.

"Renowned through history as a stunningly beautiful princess and even a femme fatale. Those acquainted with her also knew that she was a talented songstress. She possessed the rare ability to weave mana into her voice. Sometimes her lips spun songs of prosperity, and sometimes songs of ruin. It is said that her ability may be the reason she came to be known as a femme fatale."

Huh? Huuuh?!

Feeling restless, I continued flipping through the book.

One page described a Champion of Destiny who had been a hero. A little past that, there was an illustration of him wielding a holy blade against a large, intimidating black dragon. I went back to the first page of this section and read the introduction.

"His greatest achievement was undeniably the sealing of a demon lord that threatened the safety of the world."

Wait a second.

I tilted my head. This book was giving me an extreme sense of déjà vu, but why?

Looking at the other pages, I saw that although the content was detailed and interesting, nothing struck me as new information. After all, everything sounded vaguely familiar to me.

Lady Alice noticed me staring and frowning at the book and said, "Oh! Isn't that one fascinating? It's short, but I like how it introduces the Champions of Destiny and their accomplishments in a thought-provoking way. It's even more interesting if you read it alongside this one!"

She smiled and handed me what looked like a book of illustrations. The artwork was labeled with the names of the champions in fancy, decorative lettering.

Let's see, what do we have here? Alys the great witch, Clarissa the great saint, Matthew the chef and S-rank adventurer, Conrad the alchemist of the century, Roselia the singing princess, Hinako the otherworlder, Efren the chosen hero...

Wait, what?! I know all of these people! They were Lilybell's owners! Every last one of them drowned me in affection!

Are you telling me that they were all Champions of Destiny? I-Is that even possible?!

Struck by a sudden realization, I opened the first book to the page introducing Efren.

This description and illustration... Was the "demon lord" Maouldoth?!

The book seemed to treat the demon lord and the dragon as separate entities, but the part about the demon lord was definitely talking about Maouldoth.

Um...that little guy was a demon lord?!

I gasped and went back to the very first page.

Hold on. If the Champions of Destiny were my beloved owners and the demon lord was Maouldoth, then that means I know everyone mentioned in this book except for one. Unless...

Every book about the Champions of Destiny mentioned the same thing on the first page:

"The Champions of Destiny were always accompanied by a holy white beast."

I thought back to the first time Lady Alice had told me about the Champions of Destiny.

"Every Champion of Destiny was accompanied by a holy beast! It was said to be a beautiful creature with a gorgeous pure-white coat and eyes the deepest color of the sea!"

C-Could it be that the holy beast that accompanied the Champions of Destiny was...Lilybell?!!!

There was no other possible explanation. The identity of the mysterious holy beast was almost certainly my past self, Lilybell.

What a shocking revelation!

I'd been disappointed that I'd never encountered any of these famous champions or their holy beasts despite living for such a long time as Lilybell, but the reason was self-evident. After all, I'd had no idea that *I* was the holy beast!

I wondered if my owners had known that they were being called champions. Most likely not, given that they had all been the boastful type, especially Hinako and Efren. If they'd known, they would've asked me to praise them.

It was common for people to become famous posthumously, after all.

Then again, in the end, I'd just been an ordinary white cat. Sure, my owners had loved me so much that they'd given me a longer lifespan and a few of their abilities, but I certainly hadn't been amazing enough to be considered a holy beast.

Well, I won't deny that Lilybell was a precious and adorable creature deserving of love, though.

"Big sister Lucille? Is something wrong?"

Lady Alice's voice brought me back to the present.

Oops, I was frozen in shock.

I smiled and said it was nothing, then continued poring over the books about the Champions of Destiny. As far as I could tell, they all ended with the holy beast's disappearance. Some even speculated

that the final champion had incurred the holy beast's wrath.

No! I didn't leave out of anger; I died*!*

By the way, I wonder who they're referring to when they say the "final champion"? Didn't I witness the death of all of my owners?

The only one for whom I hadn't done so was my last owner, the nameless boy with a beautiful soul. However, he had still been a child at the time of my death, and we hadn't been together for long. The time that we *had* spent together had mostly been confined to a small, dark room, where we had curled up together. Unlike with my other owners, we hadn't traveled or even gone out in public together.

If I hadn't died, I'd have liked to have gone places with that boy and done fun things.

It was highly unlikely that that boy would've been considered a Champion of Destiny.

Wait! Could it be that I had an owner that I didn't know about?!

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"That's the story," I said. "Do you know anything, Maouldoth?"

"Beats me," the dragon grumbled.

Unable to hold back my curiosity any longer, I had gone to see Maouldoth, the only one who had known me as Lilybell.

Since we had both inherited mana from Master Alys, we were capable of using dark magic to message each other telepathically. In fact, he had been sending memos ever since our reunion: "Get over here." "I could use someone to talk to." "Um, are you ever going to come?" His tone had been growing increasingly meek, so I'd felt it was about time I paid him a visit anyway. He'd often summoned me like this during my Lilybell days too.

"But, uh, more importantly...huh?" Maouldoth's eyes widened.

He clearly wasn't listening to what I was saying.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"What's with that?"

His gaze was directed toward Lord Felix, who was waiting for me in the distance. I'd planned on coming here alone on horseback, but

Lord Felix had accompanied me out of concern that a monster might appear.

Tee hee! In spite of his stiff and scary exterior, Lord Felix actually has a kind heart and is quite the worrywart! It's too bad I have to make him wait all the way over there, but I can't have him hearing this conversation about Lilybell.

"Is there a problem with Lord Felix?" I asked.

"Huh?! Isn't it obvious? Ugh, it's creeping me out! How dare he? Seriously, yikes!"

"What...?"

I had no idea what the issue was, but Maouldoth was growing more upset by the second. What could possibly be bothering him so much?

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"Huh?! Isn't it obvious? Ugh, it's creeping me out! How dare he? Seriously, yikes!" I yelled without thinking.

I'd called for Lucille countless times, and just when she'd finally showed up, I saw *that.*

Th-That Felix guy smells like Lucille's mana!

I was trembling with shock. Do you know how hard it is to make a dragon tremble? Long ago, there was a saying that a twitch of a dragon could destroy an entire country. Hinako, the most eccentric of Lilybell's owners, had recited it with a grin.

What else did she say? Something like "D'aww, how precious. Precious little cinnamon roll Lilybell's got the legendary dragon all shook."

Hinako's vocabulary had been so unique that most of the time, I'd had no idea what she was saying. I assumed she'd meant that I was the strongest of all time and extremely cool, while Lilybell was small and needed to be protected.

Anyway, the point was that I was very surprised.

Back when Lucille had been Lilybell, the humans that clung to her had always poured their mana into her. It'd been out of love. Even a dragon like me could understand that much. And since I'd been

beaten, named, blasted, tied up, and sealed by those humans, I had a bit of their mana too.

As much as I hated to admit it, those guys hadn't been normal. Plus, since Lilybell had been with them, I hadn't been able to unleash my full power. Indeed, if it weren't for her, I wouldn't have played nice with them. I mean, she was so *small*. A single roar from me would've sent her flying, right?

At any rate, that was what made Lucille's and my mana special. We had a bunch of weirdos' mana mixed into ours. Lucille had a lot more of it than I did, but it wasn't a matter of quantity. I quite liked having this in common with her, and now that her owners were gone, it was supposed to be just the two of us with this mana composition.

But some of it got in that damn Felix guy too!

Boiling over with frustration, I asked Lucille why I was sensing her mana in him.

"Oh, it was quite the predicament. Lord Felix collapsed from mana exhaustion, but because of his curse, other people couldn't transfer mana to him. So I did it instead," she said nonchalantly.

Lucille had always been like this, even in her Lilybell days. She never hesitated to share with others. She did it casually, not motivated by special feelings, reasons, or obligations. She was used to people giving things to her, so it was easy for her to pay it forward.

I knew this. I'd *always* known this. But still!

Even I *don't deserve Lucille's mana! It's not fair that he gets to have it!*

Outraged, I threw myself to the floor with all my might and released the most pained scream I could muster.

"Aaaah! I'm injured! It hurts! Lucille, I need your mana!"

For my act, I referenced Lilybell's most cowardly owner, Conrad. That guy hadn't wanted to fight because he was weak, so instead, he'd invented a bunch of crazy contraptions. He wouldn't show his true colors in public, but in front of me and Lilybell, he'd never been anything but useless.

I'd swallowed my pride to imitate that weakling, but Lucille only

looked at me strangely.

"Huh? Don't your wounds heal instantly?" she asked. "How would you have even injured yourself just now?"

"No! I can't heal! It hurts!"

"Why are you lying to me?! Besides, forget giving you my mana, I'd rather have yours! It smells good, and the bite of your tail that Matthew fed me was delicious too."

"Gah! I told you to never look at me like that ever again!"

I still had nightmares about the time they'd eaten the tip of my tail. Master Alys might have been the scariest of Lilybell's owners, but Matthew had been the most heartless. The only reason I'd let it slide was because of the way Lilybell's eyes had sparkled when she'd remarked on how good it tasted.

Lucille stared at me and said, "Come to think of it, your mana must be very powerful, right?"

"What?" *Why is she stating the obvious? I'm a dragon; of course it is.*

"Hmm, now I'm curious! Maouldoth, give me some of your mana!"

"Huh?!"

No sooner had she said that than she jumped at me and chomped onto my tail.

Are you kidding me?! How many times have I told her not to think of me as food?!

Oh, wait, she's sucking my mana out. Seriously, what's with her? I know cats play like this, but I've never heard of a human play-biting a dragon.

I looked over and saw that Felix seemed surprised and appalled by Lucille's behavior. Suddenly, I felt amused.

Hmmm? I bet Lucille's never bitten you*, huh? Let alone eaten you!*

Now *this* was a good feeling!

"Your mana tastes good too," Lucille murmured in awe.

"I told you before, I'm not food!"

Lucille stepped back, satisfied. A very, very tiny bit of my mana had been transferred to her. Now, I was a powerful dragon with

powerful mana, and powerful mana had a strong scent. In other words...

She smells like me...

"H-Huh? Well, I guess this isn't so bad. Heh heh! *He* doesn't have this, and Lucille doesn't have his mana either! I suppose I can forgive you this time!"

I rolled around in glee.

Heh heh heh! So that's how it is! If you wanted my mana, you should've said so earlier!

Lucille left with Felix on his horse, just like last time. It was a shame that ordinary humans couldn't smell mana.

Well, I feel bad for him now, so I'll let him be my minion. That way I'll barely be able to tolerate him having a bit of the same mana as I do. Just barely.

That night, I once again dreamed of being eaten by Matthew.

"For the last time, I'm not food!"

Chapter 3: The Mysterious Disease, the Angel of Miracles, and a Reunion in the Capital!

Lord Felix's flustered reaction was very entertaining when I returned to him and said, "Let's go home."

"Lucille?!" he squeaked. "What in the world were you thinking, biting a dragon?!"

In a panic, he wrapped his hands around my cheeks and opened my mouth to check for any anomalies inside. It took me by surprise how fast it happened!

I was used to this treatment, though, because in my Lilybell days, Hinako had often done the same, saying, "Ahh, how can your mouth and tongue be so cute?" I didn't think it was a typical experience for any other noble lady, though.

As I quietly allowed Lord Felix his ministrations, he suddenly gasped and withdrew his hands.

"S-Sorry!" he exclaimed.

"It's fine! Thank you for your concern! But don't worry, my teeth are strong enough to chew through magic stones, so biting Maouldoth isn't going to do any damage," I said, flashing him a toothy grin.

Technically the magic-stone eating had been in my past life, but I was sure my teeth were still just as sturdy. The spell that Saint Clarissa had cast on me to keep me in good health had strengthened my teeth as well, and to this day, I'd never had a toothache in either of my lives.

However, Lord Felix's face only grew more concerned. He muttered to himself, "Chewing magic stones? That must be a joke, right? Come to think of it, there's an old story about a person who

ate a magic stone... No, it can't be. Researchers concluded that it was just a myth..."

What is he talking about?

Lord Felix was surprisingly prone to anxiety. Perhaps he had a lot on his mind.

As I waited for him to calm down, I reminisced about the past.

Matthew had once said, *"I think magic stones can be eaten. Wanna try with me and see what happens?"* Unable to refuse the excitement in his face, I'd gone along with it. However, while the magic stones hadn't tasted bad, they hadn't been particularly appetizing either.

It might be fun to show Lord Felix the various effects of eating them, though. I love seeing his dramatic reactions when he's surprised.

While we rode back to the Leeuwenhoek manor, I thought, *In the end, I didn't gain any useful knowledge.*

Maouldoth had been just as clueless as I was.

"Did you know that people were calling you a demon lord?"

"What? Me? A demon lord? I'm a mighty dragon. If anyone was a demon lord, it was Master Alys."

Not very helpful, as one could see. Then again, Maouldoth was always quick to forget anything he held no interest in.

If Lilybell was the holy beast, then the holy beast's disappearance had been due to my death. Thus, it was possible that the next Champion of Destiny wasn't *considered* one because the holy beast was missing. Spelling it out like that made it sound awfully complicated, though.

So is the person Lady Alice mentioned, the Great Sage Elios, the current Champion of Destiny after all?

My prophetic dreams foretold the future that had the highest probability of occurring, and they always involved major events. Master Alys had taught me, *"A prophetic dream will never show you something trivial. It will always hold the key to a grand turn of fate."* Since fate was like a stormy sea, these prophetic dreams usually turned out to be nightmares.

And Lady Alice said that a Champion of Destiny is someone with

the power to change fate, right?

That was why I'd suspected that Elvira would become the next Champion of Destiny after breaking Lord Felix's curse. However, if the great sage was a Champion of Destiny, it was possible that he had powers that were relevant to my dream. If I could ask for his help, would I be able to find a solution to the curse?

Elvira would definitely be able to eliminate the curse, but I believed that it would be best to nip it in the bud.

As I was pondering various things, some plants growing on the side of the road suddenly caught my eye.

Oh? Are those what I think they are?

"Lord Felix!" I exclaimed. "Please stop for a second!"

"What's wrong?"

Lord Felix brought the horse to a halt, and I hurriedly dismounted and sped toward the large cluster of plants. After my careful examination of their many glossy, heart-shaped leaves confirmed my suspicions, I turned excitedly to Lord Felix, who had also gotten off the horse.

"I knew it! Lord Felix, these are highly poisonous plants called raspweed!"

"Highly poisonous, you say?"

I happily reached out to pluck a leaf, only for Lord Felix to rush over in a panic.

"Lucille! Didn't you just say it was poisonous?! What are you doing?!"

I looked at him in surprise. "Why, Lord Felix, the blood appears to have drained from your face! Are you okay? Well, don't worry! This raspweed will fix that!"

"A-Are you trying to kill me?!" he asked, trembling with fear.

Hmm? Why would he think that?

Suddenly, I realized my mistake. "Oh! Sorry, you must've thought I was trying to poison you, right? No, I would never!"

"Th-Then why...?"

"I'm sure you know that most strong poisons can also be effective medicines! Have you never heard of raspweed? I suppose it *is* rare. But it can be turned into an excellent panacea!"

It can cure anything, be it illness or injury! You can never have too many panaceas, right? Let's pick as much as we can and go home to make them!

"No, I don't know how I would've heard of it," Lord Felix muttered, astonished. "If anything, why do *you* know so much?"

I continued to pick the raspweed, oblivious to what Lord Felix was saying under his breath. Once my hands were full, I turned to him with a satisfied smile and said, "Lord Felix, I have a request!"

"What is it?"

"Making medicine is one of my hobbies. Would it be okay if I went to buy some tools to use at the Leeuwenhoek detached house?"

Although my residence was equipped with plenty of expensive magical tools that catered to everyday comfort, I couldn't recall there being any for making medicine. There probably weren't any in the main manor either, given that one would only own them if one were going to use them.

Not only had I come to Leeuwenhoek by myself, but I also had never actually made medicine before, so naturally, I hadn't brought any tools with me. But in my past life, whenever I'd watched the merchant—and alchemist—Conrad do it, I'd thought, "That looks like fun! I'd love to try it someday!"

To be honest, most of the tools could probably have been substituted with nonspecialized equipment. But when doing something for the first time, it was always better to use the proper tools and procedures.

"Not only do you cook, but you also make medicine?" Lord Felix's eyes widened in surprise, but he immediately gave his approval. "It's still early in the day. Shall we head to the city right now?"

"Can we? Yes, please!"

"But first, those leaves you're carrying..."

Oh, right. I can't go to the city with my hands full of raspweed.

Using my trusty dark magic, I opened a dimensional space and tossed the plants inside.

"Huh...?"

"That takes care of that! Let's go, Lord Felix!"

"No, wait. I... What?"

"Is something wrong?"

For some reason, Lord Felix put his hand on his forehead and groaned.

Considering his suddenly ashen complexion, perhaps he really isn't feeling well.

He heaved a sigh.

Is he having trouble breathing?

"What was that just now?" he asked. "Where did you hide all those plants?"

I didn't hide *them. I just put them into storage. Well, I guess it might be surprising seeing it for the first time.*

I opened the space again to show him. "It's an application of dark magic! I can create a dimensional space to store things! It's very convenient."

Lord Felix fell silent.

Huh? He isn't responding. Is it too much of a foreign concept for him to understand?

"It's like a magic bag," I continued. "You know, the magic tool. I saw something similar in the Leeuwenhoek detached house, so..."

Come to think of it, the magic bag was one of Conrad's inventions. I remembered how happy he'd been that I could use dark magic despite being a cat.

"If I get you to do it, I won't have to go to a scary dark magician!" he'd said with sparkling eyes. Even though he'd been a merchant, sometimes he'd get frightened during simple business negotiations. A coward through and through.

He managed to keep up appearances in public, though, so I was lenient with him.

I recalled there being more dark and light magic users in the past. These days, though, they were said to be extremely uncommon.

"That's not normal," Lord Felix said, exasperated. "Hardly anyone can use a technique as advanced as spatial magic. And the few magic bags that still exist are very expensive."

"What?! Really?"

It was true that I hadn't seen many magic bags in my current life. However, they looked no different from ordinary ones, so I wouldn't know something was a magic bag unless I was told, and due to the risk of theft, it was unlikely that someone would share that with me unless we were very close.

Back when I had been engaged to the prince and living in the Gustelanola household, I'd always been accompanied by my attendant and never needed to carry my own things. Even if I'd owned a magic bag, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to use it, so I'd never questioned the lack of them. I'd assumed the reason I didn't know about them until I regained Lilybell's memories was that Lucille had been raised in an insular environment and had little knowledge of the outside world!

"I was going to suggest returning to the manor first," Lord Felix said. "You really are... Never mind, I shouldn't be surprised at this point. Well, shall we head to town?"

"Yes!"

Now that I think about it, this will be my first time going somewhere in Leeuwenhoek other than the estate grounds and Maouldoth's forest!

In fact, as the prince's fiancée, I hadn't been allowed to go outside freely, so I'd barely even seen any of the royal capital. But during my Lilybell days, I'd loved strutting about busy streets because everyone would say, "What an adorable cat!"

My heart raced with excitement as Lord Felix and I rode onward. I was so happy to be able to go out to town for the first time since my previous life.

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The streets of Leeuwenhoek were livelier than I expected.

"Wow! There are so many shops around here."

My original plan had been to go shopping by myself, if Lord Felix had seemed busy. However, looking at the number of stores here, it would've been difficult to find any specific one. I was fortunate that he'd been able to accompany me.

"Lucille, where do you want to go?" Lord Felix asked.

"Umm, let's try a medicinal herb store first, if there is one. I think they'd have tools available for sale."

There were various ways of making medicines, each utilizing their own unique equipment. It would cost an exorbitant amount to buy the full assortment, so for now, I was only looking for what I needed to make a panacea out of the raspweed I'd harvested.

Lost in thought about what I might require, I found a black-gloved hand had been proffered before me. I looked up and saw Lord Felix regarding me with a serious expression.

Is he going to escort me like we're a couple on a date?

I timidly held out my hand, and he gently squeezed my fingertips. I couldn't help but laugh in my head at how reserved this hand-holding was.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked. "Come, let's go."

Oh dear. Apparently my internal laughter had worked its way out onto my face.

We entered a cozy herb store that was staffed by a young lady about my age.

"Welco— Huh?!"

When the girl saw Lord Felix, she let out a cry of surprise and then slapped a hand over her mouth. Judging by her reaction, she recognized him as the marquess of this land.

Well, anyone would be surprised if the person in charge of their territory suddenly showed up. I can't imagine Lord Felix frequents herb stores very often.

I also felt somewhat proud that even this shopkeeper girl, who had no relation to Lord Felix, recognized his face. It meant that he visited the town regularly to check up on things.

While I was secretly grinning to myself, an old woman with a hunched back inched forward from the back of the store to see what the commotion was. She, too, widened her eyes at the sight of Lord Felix. However, her reaction didn't appear to be only directed at him.

"Oh my!" the old woman exclaimed. "I can't believe the lord brought such a pretty young lady to our store."

"Grandma!" The girl's face paled, likely at the fear that her

grandmother might have spoken out of turn.

Though the old woman's mumbling hadn't seemed to be addressed to us, I replied with a smile nevertheless.

"Why, thank you for the compliment! You must be surprised by Lord Felix's unannounced visit. I'm afraid it's my fault—I suddenly expressed my desire to see the town, and he catered to my selfish request! Tee hee!"

Her praise had so overjoyed me that I couldn't help but ramble—and squeeze in some bragging about Lord Felix granting my wish while I was at it. I looked up at him as I giggled and found that he was staring at me with an unreadable expression.

For some reason, the girl was gaping at us in disbelief. Was Lord Felix's presence really that bizarre?

"The lord...catered to a selfish request?" she murmured.

After buying a few tools from the herb store, we returned to the street outside.

"I'm sorry you had to pay for my tools, Lord Felix," I said.

It'd completely slipped my mind that I didn't have any money on my person. Upon realizing, I'd thought, "Oh no!" and made to leave the store, accepting that I'd have to give up on buying anything today. But before I knew it, Lord Felix had already paid for the items in my stead. How dashing of him!

My excuse was that I'd only ever gone shopping as a cat with my owners, so I'd never paid for anything. Even after becoming human, all of my purchases had been from the merchants who brought their wares to the Gustelanola estate. I hadn't had a chance to go shopping in the city.

I'll just have to get used to this, then!

The idea that I didn't have a single coin to my name did dampen my enthusiasm, though. How was I going to get my hands on some money?

"You're my fiancée, so it's only natural," Lord Felix said, abruptly looking away. Judging from his slightly flushed ears, he felt embarrassed.

He really is a kind man!

At the end of the day, I was only a temporary fiancée that had been forced upon him due to some nonsensical reason. In my prophetic dream, were it not for his disdain toward me, he would've treated me well—despite the circumstances of our engagement. Still, I was glad that we'd become proper friends, unlike in my dream.

As we walked along the street, a boy sped past us only to trip and *thud* to the ground in front of Lord Felix.

Lord Felix froze in surprise. Peering into his face to check his well-being revealed only wide open eyes and a mouth shut tight. He didn't seem to be breathing.

Pfft, ha ha ha! Look at Lord Felix's face! His dramatic reactions are so amusing!

While I was trying to hold back my laughter, the boy who had fallen on his rear burst out in tears as soon as his eyes landed on Lord Felix's face.

"W-Waaahhh!"

"Oh dear." *I shouldn't be laughing at a time like this.*

I rushed to help the boy up. He had no visible injuries, but it was possible some were out of sight.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Does it hurt anywhere?"

"S-Scary!"

"Oh, the fall must've startled you." I nodded and squeezed the boy's hand.

"No, Lucille..." Lord Felix said timidly. "I don't think that's what he means."

It seemed he'd finally shaken off his initial shock, but I decided to prioritize dealing with the boy.

"Don't worry," I said reassuringly. "Is your mom nearby?"

"M-Mom! Where is she?! Mooom!"

Apparently the boy hadn't realized he'd been separated from his mother until now. He sniffled as he continued to cry out for her.

"I see," I said. "Let's look for her together, okay?" I turned to my temporary fiancé, who was standing a short distance away. "Lord Felix!"

"CComing," Lord Felix said, hesitantly approaching us.

I hoisted the boy up. "Lord Felix, please let him ride on your

shoulders!”

“What?!” Lord Felix and the boy shouted in unison.

I mean, if he thinks Lord Felix’s face is scary, can’t he just not look at him? Besides, the extra height will make it easier for him to spot his mother!

Both the young boy and the grown man were shocked stiff. Before either of them could reject the notion, I saddled the child over Lord Felix’s shoulders, ensuring he was secure.

They were still in a state of disbelief, their eyes wide open and their mouths slightly ajar. *They’re even starting to resemble each other!*

Dazed, the boy had stopped crying. As he regained his composure, it dawned on him that his field of view was higher than usual, and his eyes began to twinkle.

“So high!” he exclaimed.

“That’s right,” I said with a smile. “You can see a lot from up there, can’t you?”

“Lucille, you can be surprisingly impulsive...and bold,” Lord Felix said, his voice weak.

Hmm, is that so? I don’t think I am, but if that’s how he sees it, then perhaps it’s true.

Lord Felix’s tension had eased, his muscles relaxing, upon seeing the boy’s excitement. Well, it was more like he didn’t have a choice but to loosen up.

“So hiiigh! Wooow!”

“Hey, wait! Stay still!”

As the boy became accustomed to his seat on Lord Felix’s shoulders, his actions grew larger and more enthusiastic. Lord Felix was forced to stop being so reserved in how he was holding the boy, lest he drop him.

“Is Lushille Felisk’s?” the boy asked Lord Felix.

Tee hee, he’s too young to be able to pronounce “Lucille” and “Felix” clearly. That’s so cute! Also, is he asking if I belong to Lord Felix?

The boy probably didn’t know the implications of his question, so I was curious as to how Lord Felix would respond.

After a pause, Lord Felix said with utmost seriousness, “No. Lucille and I are engaged, but she is not my possession.”

“Not yours? Then can Lushille be my wife?” the boy continued cheerfully.

“Oh my!” I exclaimed. *How adorable!*

“What?!” Lord Felix shouted at the same time. “Sorry, but that’s unacceptable. She may not belong to me, but that doesn’t mean you can have her.”

For some reason, his right hand moved to squeeze mine as he said that. *I wonder what’s gotten into him?* Incidentally, he was using his other to support the boy on his shoulders.

“Awww!” the boy whined. “You’re greedy!”

“What?! Still, no means no! As I said, Lucille isn’t an object that can be owned.”

“Greedy!”

“You need to learn some manners.”

Lord Felix’s annoyed objections and the boy’s spoiled tantrum were so cute that I could no longer hold back my laughter.

Even then, the townspeople’s reactions at first concerned me.

“I-Is that the marquess?! Eek! He’s kidnapping a child!”

“That boy must have offended him. I feel bad, but it’s too late for him now...”

“Oh, what in the world was his mother doing?!”

I was so sure that the higher vantage point would allow the boy to find his mother more quickly, but my brilliant plan was met with nothing but distraught voices.

Um, those are quite the accusations to be making where we can hear them. Not to mention, it’s also a complete misunderstanding...

I checked Lord Felix’s expression, worried that he might feel hurt by their comments, but he seemed to be so preoccupied with the boy that he hadn’t heard them at all. That was a relief.

Could it be that Lord Felix isn’t liked by his people? Even so, would that justify this atmosphere?

Fortunately, the opinions around us shifted as we walked.

“Wait, look closely. Isn’t it the child in control?”

“That can’t be... Hmm? You’re right. The lord does seem oddly

flustered."

"He isn't scolding the boy for throwing a tantrum... Instead, he seems to be trying to gently calm him down."

"Isn't the marquess supposed to be a scary, heartless man?"

The emotions on the townspeople's faces transformed from fear to surprise, confusion, relief, and doubt toward the impression they'd previously held of him.

Pride and joy bloomed in my heart. *Heh heh! You see now, don't you?! Despite how he looks, Lord Felix is actually very kind and surprisingly prone to worrying! And now I get it—it's not that they didn't like him; they've just never had the chance to learn what kind of person he is.*

The general population probably feared Lord Felix as a result of the rumors surrounding him. After all, even this young boy had called him scary to his face.

We walked through town, bewildered reactions following us as we went. Thanks to all of the attention we were attracting, the boy's mother quickly spotted us. She rushed through the crowd with tears in her eyes.

"Dario! Oh, where have you— Eek!" A small shriek escaped her mouth when she realized whose shoulders her son was sitting on.

Meanwhile, the boy's shouts grew even louder. "Ohhh! Mooooom! Felisk! Mom! Feliskmom!"

Tee hee! He's so excited that he doesn't know whose name to call! Also, it's only been a few minutes since he burst out in tears at Lord Felix's scary face, and yet he's already been won over. Does Lord Felix have a talent for dealing with children?!

Lord Felix still seemed a bit overwhelmed by the boy's energy, but there was a hint of a relaxed, happy smile on his face.

"Th-Thank you..." The mother bowed nervously.

"It's no problem at all," Lord Felix replied nonchalantly as he returned the boy—Dario—to his mother.

Looking between Lord Felix and his mother, Dario exclaimed, "Mom! Felisk is really big!" It seemed that he was trying his best to explain to his mother how much fun he'd had.

"Dario! You can't talk about the lord that way!"

"It's no problem at all," Lord Felix repeated a second time. He grinned at the boy, adding, "Because we're friends now."

"Yeah!" Dario agreed. "Friends!"

The boy's loud voice drew a lot of attention. His mother and the people around us all seemed stunned by the scene that was unfolding.

"Th-That terrifying lord became friends with a small child?"

"Looking at him now, it's hard to believe we ever considered him scary."

After we parted ways with Dario, Lord Felix murmured, "I never knew children were so warm."

"It's because of their high body temperature," I noted.

He chuckled. "Ah, I see."

Obviously, I knew he'd meant more by that, but I chose not to press further.

As usual, Lord Felix was wearing his black gloves. He'd explained to me before that they'd been specially made to contain his curse, and he wore them at all times to avoid touching others with his bare hands. From the times I'd held his hand, I knew that those gloves also prevented heat transfer. Feeling the boy's warmth atop his shoulders must've been a new sensation for him.

Suddenly, the serenity of our walk through town was shattered by shouts of anger. After exchanging a look, Lord Felix and I wordlessly decided to head in the direction of the yelling.

When we arrived at the scene, we found a plump noble loudly berating a frightened elderly man in the square.

"Who do you think I am?! You damned commoner living in a cursed land!"

"E-Eek..."

I noticed a sudden shift in Lord Felix's aura.

Wait, that nobleman is...

Lord Felix strode straight toward the instigator and asked, "Do you have a problem with my land?"

"Oh!" The man grinned. "If it isn't the infamous Lord Leeuwenhoek."

Hmm, I'm pretty sure I've seen this unpleasant man somewhere before. Wait, isn't that Lord Kanelion, the viscount who was always trying to curry favor with Prince Bernard?! What in the world is he doing here?

Upon noticing my presence, Lord Kanelion's lips curled into an elated sneer. "Oh? Lord Leeuwenhoek...despite receiving Prince Bernard's hand-me-down, you've already moved on to another woman? Ha ha ha! Well, it's no wonder you'd prefer that lovely lady over the ugly, arrogant, and vile Lucille Gustelanola. Don't you think it's a little soon, though? I don't think it's proper to walk around in public with your new woman."

What?! "Hand-me-down"? "Another woman"? Where did Lord Kanelion get these ideas from?!

As I pondered which statement to address first, Lord Felix beat me to the chase.

"A hand-me-down? You will *not* insult her like that," he said, his voice deep and intimidating.

So he chose to start with that!

I appreciated that the first rebuke out of his mouth was a condemnation of the viscount's affront to my worth.

However, Lord Kanelion merely gave a satisfied smile, as if he found Lord Felix's response amusing. "The evil lady isn't here, so there's no need to keep up appearances. Besides, it's hardly a convincing defense when you're with another woman! Words alone mean nothing. Still, I'm surprised your taste in women overlaps little with Lucille Gustelanola. She must be furious. I can imagine her reaction already."

Oh, right. I forgot how talkative Lord Kanelion becomes whenever he praises Prince Bernard or criticizes people the prince detests.

And like the prince, he was convinced that I could cast curses with my dark magic. Because of that, he was too scared to say anything to my face, but I knew that he reveled in insulting me behind my back.

Still, was he saying these things on purpose, or did he seriously not realize that I was Lucille? Was that even possible?

Baffled, I took a step closer to Lord Kanelion and stared him

down. For some reason, his face reddened slightly. He seemed to be flustered.

A large figure quickly intercepted our locked gazes. Lord Felix had stepped before me, as if to protect me.

"Oho ho!" Lord Kanelion laughed. "A lovely lady indeed. It's no wonder you keep her at your side despite already having a fiancée. But don't you think she's lacking discretion by sending that passionate look my way as well?"

Apparently, he genuinely did not recognize me.

Well, it was true that back during my prior engagement, I had tried to match the prince's glamorous tastes as best as I could, adjusting my posture and appearance and having my personal attendant, Lacia, paint layer upon layer of makeup on my face.

Still, do I look so different that Lord Kanelion doesn't even think I'm the same person?

I pressed my hand to my cheek as I pondered.

Well, Lord Felix was able to recognize me. The issue must lie with Lord Kanelion, then.

Come to think of it, I wasn't sure if he and I had ever exchanged words directly before, especially since he feared my magic. So perhaps he didn't actually remember my face?

Naturally, this realization disappointed me. He'd called me ugly earlier, but this meant he'd been insulting someone whose face he couldn't even recall. Clearly, he didn't care what he said about me as long as it was negative.

"That Lucille Gustelanola wasn't worthy of the prince in any way," Lord Kanelion continued. "Not only was she gaudy, unattractive, and foolish, but she was also constantly harassing the prince's beloved Lady Mina."

Hmm, well this is an odd situation. He's bad-mouthing me to my face, but I can't tell him because there simply hasn't been an opportunity to interrupt his rambling.

I wasn't personally bothered by anything he said about me, but at this rate, all of the townspeople hearing this were going to have an awful impression of me. *What to do?*

"Lord Kanelion, I recommend you shut your mouth," Lord Felix

interjected, his voice so low, it felt like it'd come from the depths of the earth. His disgust was clear.

"Eep!" Overwhelmed by Lord Felix's murderous aura, Lord Kanelion stepped back, his face pale. "A-Anyway, I'll let Prince Bernard know that Lucille Gustelanola is receiving awful treatment in this accursed land as well!"

I'd been waiting patiently for a chance to say something, but at this point, I had earned the right to just barge into the conversation, hadn't I?

Just as I was about to say, "But *I'm* Lucille," Lord Kanelion suddenly coughed a few times.

"I-I seem to be feeling under the weather," he said. "I-I'll be taking my leave now!"

"Wait!" I cried, but he was already gone.

I hadn't the foggiest idea what Lord Kanelion had come to Leeuwenhoek for. Perhaps Prince Bernard had ordered him to perform some pointless task, like checking to see if I was receiving my "deserved" punishment.

As I mulled over this, Lord Felix peered into my face. "Lucille, are you all right? I'm afraid I was so stunned by his foolishness that I wasn't able to quiet him sooner."

"Heh heh heh, it was shocking, wasn't it?! I couldn't find the right time to interject either! It isn't your fault at all. If anything, I'm grateful that you defended me."

"It was the right thing to—"

"What?!" Our conversation was interrupted by a loud exclamation. "That guy was talking about you, miss?! How could that be?"

Believe me, I'm just as confused as you are.

Much to my surprise, the townspeople all started talking to me.

"Don't let that outrageous man bother you, miss!"

"Yeah, he wasn't making any sense."

"Hey, why was that scary old man bullying you when you're so pretty?"

"True! You're as beautiful as an angel, miss!"

"Oh my!" I exclaimed. While the adults offered words of consolation, the children praised me. I knelt down to their eye level.

“Tee hee, thank you! I’m so happy to hear that!”

The children, who had been standing a short distance away, excitedly ran up to me.

“Wow! You’re even prettier up close!”

“Miss, are you a real angel?”

I giggled. “Unfortunately, I’m not. Besides, you’re all very cute too!”

While I spoke to the children, Lord Felix engaged the elderly man—the one Lord Kanelion had been yelling at earlier—in conversation.

“I didn’t think you’d reach out to someone like me, my lord,” the man said.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to help you,” Lord Felix replied. “It was a blunder on my part that such a scoundrel was allowed into Leeuwenhoek.”

“Oh my... Thank you for your compassion.”

I’d assumed that dealing with Lord Kanelion would ruin our fun, but now that it was over, it seemed that Lord Felix had grown closer to his people.

Tee hee! All’s well that ends well, right?

Still, Prince Bernard must’ve become an even more unpleasant man if he’d sent Lord Kanelion here. I’d never gotten along with him in the first place, but I hadn’t thought him *this* foolish.

I’ve heard that love makes people stupid. Is that what’s going on here?

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Several days had passed since my visit to the town with Lord Felix, when we’d bought tools for making medicine, searched for a lost boy’s mother, and gotten tangled up with a rude man who hadn’t recognized me.

These days, the people at the Leeuwenhoek manor were constantly striking up conversations with me. Whenever I was out in the garden with Grandpa Randy, servants would nervously approach me to tell me about their experiences with the medicine I’d distributed.

"Lady Lucille! The salve you gave me worked incredibly well!"

"Oh, that's wonderful to hear!"

After listening to their accounts, I excitedly jotted them down. Conrad's motto had been "Take the customers' candid opinions to heart!" He'd written down every review, good or bad, so that he wouldn't forget them. And according to Saint Clarissa, "Medicine affects everyone differently, so we must remember which medicine is best for which person." She'd adjusted the medicine she made to suit each and every one of her patients!

Naturally, I couldn't be *that* precise, so I tried my best to make medicine that would work on everyone to some extent.

It's just like cooking—doing it myself is more fun and exciting than watching it be done!

As a bonus, I'd discovered that there were many types of poisonous plants growing in abundance in the nearby forests. I'd started by making panaceas out of raspweed, but following that, I'd moved on to experimenting with easy-to-make remedies, like a salve for rough hands and a drink to relieve fatigue—Hinako had called this a "nutritional drink." I made sure to test them on myself first, and if there were no issues, I shared them with the manor's workers.

Again, it's just like cooking. After making something, I can't help but want others to try it!

Recalling all these memories was easy for me. Back when Master Alys extended my lifespan, she had smiled mischievously and said, *"My sweet, sweet Lilybell, may you never forget any of the precious moments we shared together, even in the distant future. After all, wouldn't it be too sad if I were the only one to remember each and every one of these beloved days, minutes, and seconds?"*

And so, she had cast a spell on me so that I would never forget anything important. To her, forgetting something was the same as losing it. As a result, I retained detailed memories of all of my past owners, and I could remember just how much I'd loved them.

The unfortunate aspect of this was that because the spell prevented me from losing only *important* memories, I quickly forgot about things that didn't interest me. In fact, I had to admit that

although I remembered my princess training very well—since I'd taken it seriously—I was already starting to forget Prince Bernard's face. Not that it really mattered if I did.

"Ha ha ha!" Grandpa Randy laughed boisterously. "You're the new favorite at the manor, Lucy! It took those fools too long to realize how sweet you are. I knew from the start, though!" he declared proudly.

"Tee hee! Yes, you were my first friend here!"

Not only was he my beloved friend, but he also doted on me as if I were his real granddaughter.

Grandpa Randy gave a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Meooow!" came a complaint from near my feet.

"Myaaa!"

Oh dear, the cats are upset because I called Grandpa Randy my first friend. I meant my first human *friend, of course!*

"Meow!" I replied. "I love you all dearly as well!"

The cats rolled over cutely as if to say, *Fine, we'll forgive you!*

Tee hee! Look at the way they demand attention when they're jealous. They're so smol and adorable!

The happy and peaceful times continued...until one day, I went outside and saw Sarah aghast over something at the main manor. It reminded me of when Lord Felix had collapsed due to mana exhaustion.

Did something happen to him again?

My worry was cut short by Lord Felix's arrival at the scene. He, too, looked pale, but he was undeniably walking on his own two legs.

It's good that he seems to be fine, but something definitely isn't right. If I go there and ask what's wrong, will they tell me?

Lord Felix unconsciously glanced in my direction. Realizing that I was watching them from the detached house, he came over to me.

"Lucille..." he said, his expression grave.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"A disease of unknown origin is circulating in the town. At first, the symptoms resembled those of the common cold, so I was

unfortunately not informed until serious cases began to develop. Some of my workers who commute to the manor are also showing signs of the illness. I will have Sarah stay with you in case you need anything, so please do not leave the detached house."

He explained that Sarah seemed fine at the moment but was undergoing a magical diagnosis to determine whether or not she had contracted the disease. If the result was negative, she would isolate in the detached house with me.

I looked toward the manor again. Several servants were still coming and going from the building, but they all looked worried.

I turned to Lord Felix. "May I go to the manor?"

"No. We don't know the cause of the disease, so in the worst-case scenario, it could be life-threatening. If it were to spread to you as well, I would—"

"Lord Felix."

I knew he was worried about me, and I appreciated it. However, I was protected by Saint Clarissa's spell for good health, so I knew I wasn't going to get sick—barring exceptional circumstances. Plus...

"This is why I made those panaceas! Will you let me handle this? I promise it'll be fine!"

I'd already tested most of my medicine, but there hadn't been a chance to try the raspweed panaceas yet. In other words, I had plenty in stock!

Lord Felix's gaze was still tinged with concern. However, he gave permission for me to go, choosing to trust in my confidence.

I hurried back inside my detached house, tossed all of my panaceas into my dark magic dimensional space, and headed straight for the manor. Apparently, the afflicted had been divided into rooms based on the severity of their cases. There were those who had mild symptoms possibly caused by the disease, those whose symptoms had developed to the point where they were confirmed cases, and those who had suddenly become seriously ill.

"I should have noticed sooner," Lord Felix said, frustrated. "I've let everyone down."

He must feel responsible for the outbreak. But I mean, up until a little while ago, I was relaxing at home too.

New diseases were difficult to identify unless their symptoms were extremely overt. In this case, the onset of the illness had resembled the common cold, so it would've been unreasonable to expect Lord Felix to detect it quickly, especially when he was often performing monster exterminations away from home.

"It'll be okay, Lord Felix!" I said. "Besides, look how quickly you dealt with quarantining people. It's amazing! Thanks to that, many of your workers are still healthy."

As I stood in the hallway, the unaffected servants passed me by, fastidiously attending to their duties. It was then I noticed that Mars was sitting at my feet.

"Oh? Did you follow me, Mars?" I asked.

The cat looked up at me and said, "Meooow." Her gaze shifted to stare at one of the servants.

I instinctively understood what she was implying. "Can you tell who has the disease?"

"Mreow."

"I thought so! That's incredible! Will you help me, then?"

She waved her bushy tail once and exclaimed, "Meow!" as if to say, *Leave it to me!*

Cats had keener senses than humans, so they were better at detecting mana. The type of mana they could perceive depended on the person—er, cat. The wavelength that Mars picked up was likely one that could be disrupted by illness.

Thanks to regaining Lilybell's memories, my ability to sense mana was superior to the average human's. However, I was no match for a cat working with its specialized wavelength, so Mars would make a very dependable assistant!

I asked Mars to seek out the people she sensed were infected and arranged for them to be quarantined right away.

Lord Felix watched us, muttering, "Yet another extraordinary sight."

"Heh heh!" I puffed my chest out, happy that Mars had been praised. "Aren't cats amazing?! Not only are they charming and adorable, but they also have abilities that the average human could only dream of!"

"The cat is impressive, but frankly, its actions are beyond the realm of belief for me. I was talking about *you*. Actually, never mind—now isn't the time. What should I be doing?"

I wouldn't have blamed Lord Felix for being distracted by my cute little cat, but despite being surprised by her talent, he quickly switched gears. I liked that about him—he was serious and competent.

"This panacea shouldn't cause any harm, but I do want to test its effectiveness. Just in case, let's try a bit on a robust person with mild symptoms first," I said.

Lord Felix brought me to a room of patients. I asked if anyone would be willing to try my panacea, and much to my surprise, all of the servants and knights in the room raised their hands.

Oh my! Everyone here is so kind!

The panacea was one of Conrad's formulas, so I was confident in it to a certain degree. However, since I was neither a doctor nor an alchemist, I couldn't guarantee that it would work. I'd been afraid that no one would want to try a suspicious medicine made by an amateur, but apparently that fear was unfounded.

Grateful for everyone's generosity, I chose a knight who seemed to have the most physical strength. The largest of those who had volunteered, he looked like the type to rarely catch colds.

"Ohhhh!" The knight roared so loudly, I started to doubt whether he was actually sick. "I can't believe I get to be the first to try Lady Lucille's medicine! Yessss! The goddess of luck is smiling on me!"

Um, he's clearly delighted about this, right?

His unbridled joy left me bewildered. Meanwhile, the other people in the room began to voice their frustrations.

"Being the first implies a trusting relationship, right? Why couldn't it have been me?!"

"Ugh, this sucks! If I were over two meters tall and stronger than that beefy knight, would I have won?"

"Hey, if you can shout that loud, you must be fine! How're we gonna know if the medicine works if you're already healthy?! Switch with me!"

"Shut up! You're just jealous! I don't normally catch colds, so

even these symptoms are painful for me!”

The argument unfolding in the room was beyond my understanding.

“Umm...” *It’s not even* my *medicine. It’s Conrad’s formula. I just made it for the first time, that’s all.*

Someone tapped on my shoulder. Turning, I discovered the source was Sir Kain standing behind me.

“Swimming in popularity as usual, I see! Lu, if you wait for them to finish bickering, you’ll never get anything done. Go on and try out the medicine!”

He has a point.

I tested the medicine on the knight, and after confirming that it worked without issue, I went around the manor to administer it to the rest of the patients.

“Lord Felix, I’m going to make more raspweed panacea,” I said. “Please distribute it to the people in town with Sir Kain!”

“Understood,” Lord Felix replied. “However, the disease is epidemic at this point. Do you have enough raspweed to supply medicine to the entire population?”

“Heh heh! There’s plenty growing nearby, so I always go pick it with Grandpa Randy when I’m bored! Just look!” I smugly took out all the raspweed I’d crammed into my handy dimensional space.

“I see. This is no longer enough to surprise me. Instead, I will simply say thank you, Lucille. I truly appreciate it.”

“Don’t sweat it. Now, let’s all work together!”

And so, the mysterious illness sweeping Leeuwenhoek was quickly brought under control.

Later on, when Lord Felix was sharing further outcomes, he looked at me with an indescribable expression and said, “Lucille, there are a number of people who said that your medicine cured not only this disease but also chronic illnesses they’d been suffering for a long time.”

“Why, that’s wonderful! Nothing is more important than one’s health!”

“Uh...yes, indeed.”

I knew Conrad’s formulas were perfect!

I once again felt grateful for my memories of my beloved owners, of whom I was very proud.

As an aside, when everything settled down, Mars tried to monopolize my attention, as if to say, *I helped you, so you'll reward me, right?* Needless to say, the other cats became jealous. As a result, I was sentenced to the "cat pile" treatment for the next few days. But if anything, it was more of a prize than punishment!

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Is this real life?

"Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!"

I, Kain Purcell, was currently being showered with tearful words of gratitude as I went around town, distributing the panacea with Felix. I felt like I was dreaming.

The recipient before me had likely been prepared to part ways with his ill family member. He propped up his sick companion's body so that the two of them could bow to Felix and me.

This man probably assumed that the medicine was nothing but a temporary relief—that the lord was visiting people on their deathbeds to tell them gentle lies like "If you take this, you'll get better" or "This way, you can at least have peace in your final moments." Frankly, even *I* was skeptical, despite being one of the people handing it out.

I mean, you wouldn't normally think that a small, nondescript vial of medicine could breathe life into a person dying from a mystery disease. It just wasn't going to be perceived the same way as, say, an effective salve or ointment.

As I handed out the medicine and watched those infected recover one after the other, all I could think was, *Huh, this cure-all really is a cure-all.* Not the brightest observation, I know.

Okay, I can't take this anymore. None of this made any sense to begin with. What do you mean, there are tons of deadly poisonous plants growing in Leeuwenhoek? What do you mean, those poisonous plants make an excellent panacea?! I just don't get it. How can this medicine bring people back from the brink of death?

Lu was all, "I'm confident in its effectiveness, but I'm afraid the townspeople won't trust medicine made by an amateur." But an amateur wouldn't be able to make something of this caliber in the first place!

If it weren't for my mission to distribute the medicine, I'd fall to my knees right now, yelling, "Nothing makes sense!" Alas, I had to hold back.

Felix had also surprised me. He didn't trust people easily—or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he was *incapable* of trust. Now, it wasn't that he was consciously suspicious of others. It was more like he wanted to trust them, but no one was trustworthy enough.

How many times had I witnessed Felix lament fate because of his curse? Yet now, he was telling the family of a patient who was struggling to breathe, "Find a way to get them to take this medicine, because it will definitely cure them." He wouldn't have been able to say that without hesitation unless he truly trusted Lu, right?

In the end, the cure-all worked as promised, and nobody lost their lives to the disease. But there was one more thing that was strange: People who took the medicine glowed for an instant. It reminded me of the light Lu had radiated when she was transferring mana to Felix, and it made me think, *It really is Lu who's saving these people.*

And so, the disease was eradicated. The whole thing had been resolved shockingly easily.

Felix, who had been prepared for the possibility that many of his subjects might die, had lost some of his usual gusto. I figured he was just exhausted.

If only I knew.

Patients who'd recovered from the disease were monitored for relapses, and it was my duty to deliver the report to Felix. However, he didn't appear to be in his office to receive it.

After searching around, I found him in a daze, standing by the detached house.

"What're you doing?" I inquired, coming up beside him.

Unconsciously, I followed his line of sight, and my eyes landed on

a blob of cats.

"Wait, what are they *doing*?!" I exclaimed.

"Lucille is inside that," Felix said.

"Uh, what?"

It's not my fault for not understanding, right?!

I'd seen Lu sleeping under a pile of cats before, but this... This was different. There were so many cats, it made me wonder, *Where'd you even find them all?* Not a single glimpse of Lu's body was visible beneath them.

"I'm surprised you could tell," I said.

"It's the cats. Their meows are oddly sweet."

I cocked an ear.

"Meooow."

"Mreeeooow."

Indeed, the cats' incessant meows were unusual. But for the record, I thought the criteria by which Felix had come to this judgment was bizarre too.

Also, for some reason, Felix was observing this nonsensical sight with a grave look on his face.

A thought occurred to me.

"Has something gone wrong?" I asked. "Like, say, did something happen to the people who drank the cure-all?"

Maybe he was hesitating to divulge this to Lu. She'd asked us to keep her informed about everything regarding the medicine's effects, no matter how trivial. But if she received bad news about it, she'd surely feel guilty.

"No," Felix said, weakly shaking his head.

"What's the problem, then?"

"Lucille...is too amazing."

"Huh? Uh, I mean, I guess so, yeah."

Sure, Lu was incredible to the point where it was downright *weird,* but we'd already known that for a while. Why point it out now?

Felix turned to me with a concerned look. "She's so amazing that I can't find a way to help her. I want to support her too, but there's nothing I can do."

Oh? Is that what this is about?

I desperately tried to hold back my laughter. I knew that if I broke now, he'd never confide in me ever again.

And honestly, I was just as likely to cry as I was to laugh. Felix, the man cursed by fate and feared by the people, who had closed off his wounded heart, was troubled by the fact that he couldn't help this one girl.

How is this even possible?

"Why don't you try befriending the cats first?" I suggested. "I mean, it seems like all animals like Lu, but she's especially popular with these cats. If you end up on their bad side, they'll do everything they can to get in your way."

I pondered further potential obstacles with utmost seriousness. Grandpa Randolph and Alice would likely make a fuss too, but the cats' obsession with Lu was out of this world.

"Oh, that's right," Felix murmured. "My greatest rivals are those cats..."

No longer able to hold back, I let out a small chuckle. Felix, the cursed marquess, rumored to despise all people, especially women, was in a tug-of-war over Lu with a bunch of cats. What a happy problem to have.

The expression he currently wore resembled that of a man headed into battle. I warmly cheered him on in my heart. Honestly, I was amused by how silly this all was.

Oh, Lu. You always make me feel like I'm living in the world of a sweet fairy tale.

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I was happily enjoying my days of being buried in cats—that is, until one morning I woke up, stretched out in bed, and suddenly remembered something very important.

"Oh! I was supposed to find out why Lord Felix was cursed so that I could figure out how to help!" I was so shocked by this lapse in memory that I couldn't help but yell.

I know I was busy dealing with the disease, but how could I have

forgotten such a serious matter?

At any rate, I was still lacking clues. I wondered if the (suspected) current Champion of Destiny, Great Sage Elios, would be willing to grant me an audience. According to Lady Alice, he was an eccentric fellow who lived in a tall tower and hardly ever appeared in public.

What should I do? He's really the only lead I've got. I have no idea how to get any more information!

As I was bemoaning this, a reserved knock sounded at my door.

"Lady Lucille, are you awake?" came Sarah's voice.

I granted her entry to my room and noticed the tray she carried held an envelope.

"Good morning, Lady Lucille."

"Good morning, Sarah. Is that letter for me?"

"Yes!"

How unusual.

This was my first time receiving a letter since arriving at Leeuwenhoek. After all, I hadn't had any good friends in the capital. Noble ladies had often crowded around me, obviously coveting the benefits that came hand in hand with a connection to Prince Bernard's fiancée. However, after his infatuation with Lady Mina became apparent, these ladies had all casually distanced themselves from me.

Remembering those traitorous noblewomen, whom people had once called my entourage, made me feel glad that I'd been able to move to Leeuwenhoek. In that sense, I was truly fortunate.

Thinking about it that way, I should be grateful to Prince Bernard!

Much to my surprise, the envelope Sarah delivered bore the seal of the Gustelanola family. My father had to have sent this; the same man who had flown into a rage, shouting, "You're worthless now that Prince Bernard has broken off the engagement!" and shipped me off to Leeuwenhoek with pleasure. What could he possibly want to talk about?

After I spent some time debating whether or not to read the letter, I realized it didn't matter what awful things my father wrote to me. Should I disappoint someone I was fond of or who was fond of

me, I'd be troubled, but if it was someone who already hated me, it'd hardly come as a surprise.

I decided to skim the letter even though I had no interest in it...

Despite the conclusion I'd come to in my internal debate, I still found myself concerned by its contents.

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After my morning routine, I went to the main manor to speak with Lord Felix.

I'd been given permission to come to the manor whenever I liked. It so contrasted my initial reception, when I'd been taken to that all but hidden detached house. Before, I'd been treated as though Lord Felix hadn't ever wanted to see my face again.

It's hard to believe how well we're getting along now!

Sir Kain guided me to Lord Felix's office.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Lucille!" Lord Felix's face lit up as he stood to greet me. The happy smile adorning his face made him look like a big dog.

Incidentally, while I adored cats, I also loved dogs. Back when I'd been boss of the strays, I'd gotten into a huge scuffle with a dog that often passed through my territory on his walks, but after that, we'd become best friends!

"This is the first time you've requested to speak with me," Lord Felix said. "Do you finally feel comfortable coming to the manor?"

"Yes! I'm here to chat!" I replied with a smile, glad to be welcomed.

"Um, I didn't mean it in the visiting sense, but rather moving into a room here..."

"Oh! No, that's not it! Actually, I'd like to consult with you about something!"

"I see..."

For some reason, Sir Kain burst out laughing behind me. "Pfft! Poor Felix, ha ha ha!"

Was it really so funny that I'd forgotten the main purpose of my visit and had inadvertently acted as if I were here for a casual chat?

Even Lord Felix was making a strange expression.

How rude! Everyone makes mistakes, you know!

"Then again, you asking me for advice is a welcome change in its own way..." Lord Felix murmured. "What is it that you want to discuss?"

"Um, I received a letter from my father..."

"What? From Lord Gustelanola?" His brow furrowed.

Oh? Why is he reacting that way when I haven't yet told him what the letter says? Does he dislike my father?

I held out the letter, figuring it'd be faster for him to read it himself.

His frown deepened as he scanned the words. "The unknown disease that spread through Leeuwenhoek has made its way to other regions, including the royal capital?"

"Yes," I said. "Since Leeuwenhoek was the only place that didn't suffer damages from it, he's demanding I immediately return to the capital should I know of a countermeasure."

To be precise, it wasn't that we *hadn't* suffered damages. We'd simply cured the disease before everything had escalated.

"How convenient for him," Lord Felix said, annoyed.

True as that might have been, I couldn't possibly deny the request if people in other regions were suffering.

And going there would be better than having them accuse me of something ridiculous again, like inventing the disease myself. I may be grateful to have come to Leeuwenhoek, but I'm still outraged that I was falsely accused at all!

There was another thought on my mind: According to Lord Felix, my engagement to Prince Bernard had been the reason I hadn't known about the Champions of Destiny and the Great Sage Elios. He'd said that the royal family had likely shielded me from such stories because they believed that no other special entities were allowed to exist. But in order to manipulate my access to that information, they had to have been aware of it in the first place, right?

In other words, if I inquire with the royal family, will I be able to learn something about the Great Sage Elios?

The issue was whether they'd tell me the truth. I had a feeling they'd claim not to know anything, even if they really did.

I brought this up with Lord Felix, and after some thought, he said, "Actually, I was thinking it'd be best if I delivered the panacea to the capital myself, concealing its origin."

"Huh?"

"The city must bring back painful memories for you, no? Unless it's of your own volition, you shouldn't have to go back."

I had no idea Lord Felix thought that way. But to be honest, although I was still angry about how I'd been treated there, it didn't weigh on my mind at all, so visiting the capital wouldn't cause me any suffering. Even so, I was happy that he was showing concern for me.

"That said, I assume you'd want to ask about the great sage yourself," he continued.

Wow! He knows me so well!

"Yes, that's right," I replied. "Even if the royal family tries to lie to me about him, I might be able to discern the truth from the way they're acting. So if possible, I'd like to go with you."

I could even use the panacea as leverage. Not that I had any intention of truly withholding it, of course.

There was no denying that I had a bad reputation in the capital. Even if it'd been established that the accusation leading to my canceled engagement had been false, many people still thought of me as an evil woman because they believed Prince Bernard's words.

Until now, I'd been frustrated by their ability to believe such blatant lies. But now, I could use my notoriety to my advantage by making them think, "The evil Lucille Gustelanola might really abandon the people suffering from the disease if she doesn't get what she wants."

Hmm, it still won't sit well with me, though!

"Let's go together, then," Lord Felix said. "I'll let you decide whether or not to reveal that you were the one who created the panacea. Either way, I promise to prevent anyone from causing you grief."

"Oh my."

What a firm assurance. Lord Felix is so dependable!

I beamed happily. "Thank you! With you by my side, I have nothing to fear!"

"Y-Yes...you can count on me."

And so, it was decided that Lord Felix and I would bring the panacea to the capital.

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We were accompanied by Sir Kain and Sarah, the latter of whom had taken it upon herself to take care of my needs during the journey.

To fulfil this role, Sarah had taken the seat next to me in the carriage. Lord Felix sat directly across from me, and Sir Kain opposite Sarah.

Tee hee! Compared to when I came to Leeuwenhoek all alone, this is going to be a lively trip!

The main purpose of my visit to the capital was to deliver the panacea to those who were suffering, and my second goal was to obtain information on the Great Sage Elios. Perhaps excitement was an inappropriate reaction to have when I wasn't traveling for fun, but I couldn't help it. It was my first time going on a long trip with friends in this life!

Back in my Lilybell days, I'd loved journeying with my owners and discovering new surprises and delights. I did enjoy my life in Leeuwenhoek too, but that was a different kind of fun.

That's why I might have been overzealous!

Lord Felix's gaze fell to the basket in my lap, and he tilted his head. "Lucille, what are you carrying?"

"Heh heh! I'm glad you asked! These are snacks I made for us!"

Whenever Matthew had set out on an adventure or taken me for an outing, he'd prepared refreshments for us beforehand. As far as I was concerned, it wasn't a proper trip without treats!

Eating yummy snacks together makes an exciting journey even more special!

"Oh, fantastic!" Sir Kain exclaimed. "Are they pastries? I love your

homemade pastries!”

He’s happy! It was worth making them!

As Sir Kain and I grinned at each other, Lord Felix murmured, “I like your pastries too.”

“Great! Let’s eat them together.”

“Lady Lucille, would I be able to sample some?” Sarah asked nervously.

“Of course! I’d love for you to try them too!”

Pleasant conversation flowed among the group as we made our way toward the capital.

This is basically like having a picnic, right?!

However, when we stopped by a small town on the way, I realized we couldn’t afford to be so carefree. The people on the streets were silent, yet a sense of urgency hung in the air.

“Lord Felix,” I said, turning to face him.

“It seems the disease has made its way here as well,” he replied.

When we questioned a passerby, they informed us that the afflicted were being gathered in the local church. There, we found a great number of people huddled together—enough to comprise the majority of the town’s population.

This may be a bigger emergency than I thought.

Another concern plagued me: In my prophetic dream, I didn’t have Lilybell’s memories. That version of myself wouldn’t have been able to make the panacea. However, despite lacking that knowledge then, it hadn’t seemed like a disease had spread through Leeuwenhoek and beyond.

But before digging into that inconsistency, I had to take care of the people suffering right in front of me.

I’d brought plenty of the medicine in my dimensional space. Even if the current doses somehow weren’t enough, we’d also picked a staggering amount of raspweed just in case. We could easily distribute the panacea to everyone here, though it’d be best to prioritize those with the most severe symptoms.

At times like this, the most important thing was to get an understanding of the situation. And so I scanned the church building, taking in the status of the people resting around me. It was

then I noticed something else interesting.

Their symptoms don't seem to be as debilitating as Leeuwenhoek's worst cases were, do they?

While their complexions were pale, and I could tell that they were struggling to breathe, none of them had reached a point of such severity that they might pass before our eyes.

The letter from my father hadn't sounded all that urgent either—he'd written that the disease in the capital could be alleviated with healing magic, albeit not fully cured. Because of that, Lord Felix and I had hypothesized that the illness grew worse the closer one got to Leeuwenhoek. However, the situation in this town contradicted that.

"I cannot say for certain since we don't know the cause of the disease, but I suspect that the symptoms were more severe in Leeuwenhoek because of the curse on the land," Lord Felix said as if reading my mind.

Oh, so that's a possibility too...

Curses were burdens on both the mind and body. Perhaps in this case, the curse had unfortunately synergized with the disease and had a stronger effect on the people within Leeuwenhoek. It was hard for me to imagine, since I hadn't experienced much of the curse while living there, but if Lord Felix believed it was the curse's fault, there was a high probability that it was true.

And if that were the case, it made sense that the people in the capital were able to alleviate their symptoms with magic. Healing magic was most effective against external conditions, like wounds—it didn't do much for diseases. So although it could relieve mild symptoms, when it came to serious cases like those in Leeuwenhoek, it provided nothing more than a temporary reprieve. Because of this, illnesses were generally treated with specialized medicines. That was what made my cure-all so valuable.

To summarize, the people in the capital were able to ease their symptoms with healing magic because the disease was much milder there than it had been in Leeuwenhoek.

In the past, Saint Clarissa had healed injuries and illnesses alike, but that had only been possible because of her extraordinary abilities. Perhaps Elvira would also be able to do so once she

awakened to her powers.

"If their symptoms are this mild, they might not need to drink an entire vial of panacea," I noted.

Standing on a raised platform overlooking the church hall, I raised my voice to get the attention of the resting patients and the church members caring for them.

"Everyone, we've brought a panacea that can cure this disease! We're going to hand them out now. Please split one vial between two people. Could we get some help from those who are well enough?"

The church members regarded me with suspicion.

"It's said that this disease is of unknown origin," one of them said. "How can you guarantee that the panacea will work? And to begin with, who are you?"

Oh! How silly of me. Of course they wouldn't believe someone who just barged in and made such claims.

My haste to free the patients from their suffering had made me forget that introducing myself and earning their trust came first.

Regaining my composure, I bowed to everyone in the hall. "Please forgive me. My name is Lucille Gustelanola. I stopped by this town on my way to bring this panacea to the royal capital at their behest."

Unfortunately, the stares directed at me grew even sterner. It seemed my self-introduction had only invited further suspicion.

"Lucille Gustelanola?" a lady asked in a dubious tone. "As in, from the Gustelanola family? The wicked woman who was engaged to the second prince until he banished her?"

Goodness! I had no idea my name had become so well-known.

The person calling me out was probably a noble, in which case, nothing I could say would convince her to trust me. That left me with no choice but to demonstrate for everyone that the medicine was safe. Even if they didn't believe in its effectiveness, they'd be forced to acknowledge that at least it wasn't dangerous for the human body.

Raising a vial high in the air for all to see, I announced, "Look, everyone! This is the panacea I just mentioned—the one that can

cure this disease!”

I gulped the medicine down. It felt a bit wasteful to drink it when I was in perfect health, but sometimes, a small sacrifice was necessary. Besides, I still had plenty in stock.

“Now do you see that this medicine isn’t harmful?” I puffed out my chest with confidence. *How’s that?!*

For some reason, my declaration was only met with confusion.

Huh? Was that not good enough?

As I hung my head, feeling useless, Lord Felix came up next to me and gently laid his hand on my back. I knew he trusted me, and his warmth gave me courage.

That’s right. Even if they accept the panacea isn’t poisonous, I can’t prove its effectiveness by drinking it as a healthy person. I need to get someone—anyone—to try it. Then they’ll see that it really works!

I looked back up. The people’s expressions had changed.

“Her body...is glowing?”

“How is it even possible for medicine to make someone glow? It must be suspicious, after all.”

“She wouldn’t drink it herself if that were the case, no?”

It seemed like they were whispering among themselves, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

As I was wondering what the fuss was about, a small boy sitting at the back of the hall stood up, coughed a few times, and said, “Miss...are you...an angel? Is that why...you’re giving off...light?”

“H-Hey!” Someone—perhaps the boy’s mother—hurriedly stopped him from saying anything further.

At the same time, a cat jumped out from beside the boy.

“Ah!” the boy exclaimed.

Ignoring his reaction, the cat ran up to me, meowing sweetly and rubbing its body against my leg.

Aww, an adorable cat is just what I need in this trying time! I can already feel myself calming down.

“Meow! Mreooow! Myaaaaa!”

“Oh my,” I replied. “I know you want chin rubs *and* to tell me your story, but one thing at a time, okay? I’ll be here for a while.”

"Meeeow!"

"Huh? That boy has been sick for a long time?"

"Mreow!"

"I see... Well, he'll be fine now!" I said, cradling the cat in my arms.

Suddenly, I became aware of the surprised looks on the faces of those watching, including Lord Felix's.

"You really can communicate with cats..." he remarked.

"It's because this one is very chatty!"

"That...probably isn't what matters here."

The people around us began to murmur among themselves again.

"Sh-She's talking to a cat!"

"A long time ago, I read in a book that saints can talk to animals..."

"I-Is she a saint, then? Is that why she glowed?"

Look, even I don't know why the medicine makes people glow, okay? It never happened when Conrad made it.

One of the steps in creating the panacea involved imbuing it with mana. When doing so, I would recite a little good luck charm: "May the person who drinks this get well soon!" Perhaps that was what made it cause such a strange reaction? They were just well-wishes, though...

Well, the medicine works without any side effects, so a little glowing isn't a problem, right?

The hall was still abuzz, but as I focused on the cat's constant chattering, the other voices faded away. Apparently the cat really wanted to save that boy because he was its beloved friend...but that didn't stop it from wanting to play with me.

"That boy is sick! He's suffering a lot! Come on, let's play! You can pet me in this spot! He has a really painful bruise! Poor boy! Hey, play with me! Can you pick me up again?! Ahhh, please cure his disease! A cute and gentle boy like him deserves better! Well, I'm cuter, though! I love you—what's your name?! I can't believe that bad guy made that boy sick when he was already suffering! How dare he?! I love you so much! Play with meeeee!"

While the cat rambled on and on, it rolled wildly from side to side, jumped to its feet, slammed into my body, stood up on its hind legs, and meowed excitedly.

Tee hee, so smol and cute! But wow, that's a lot of words!

Wait a second... Wasn't there a very important piece of information in there?

The boy's painful bruise was one concern, of course, regardless of whether it had been caused by the disease or not. But the cat had mentioned something even more critical just now.

"Meow? U-Um, who is that 'bad guy' you were talking about?" I asked.

"Meooow!"

Hmm, well, that's unfortunate.

I was dying to know more, but the cat didn't know anything about him other than that the disease had begun to spread after his visit to this town. I wished I had a few more details to work with.

The many stares of the people finally drew my attention.

Oh dear. I was so engrossed in the cat's cuteness and this unexpected new finding that I didn't realize everyone was looking at me in surprise.

"Sh-She really is talking to the cat..." the presumed noblewoman from earlier murmured.

Her remark confused me. See, I'd lived as Lilybell the beloved white cat for many, many years, and there was one thing I knew very well: Humans talked to cats all the time. So what was so shocking about me doing it now?

Recently, I'd been getting the feeling that as Lucille, I'd grown up with quite a narrow worldview. I sometimes wondered if my human sensibilities differed from the rest of the population's. It seemed like there were so many things I didn't know despite having received a princess's education.

I tilted my head. *Oh well! Even if people think I'm a weirdo lacking common sense, it isn't a problem as long as I'm not hurting anyone, right?*

My self-worth wouldn't change no matter what others thought of me. Besides, I couldn't tell you how many times I'd thought, *You*

really are an oddball! about any of my beloved owners.

Anyway, I need to help that boy now.

I gave the cat a quick pat, silently asking it to wait where it was for a minute. Then, I glanced at Lord Felix, who was standing by my side to provide emotional support, before approaching the boy.

No one tried to stop me.

The boy coughed as he sought comfort in his mother's embrace. While she appeared a little bewildered by my approach, the boy looked at me with sparkling eyes.

"Miss, are you really an angel after all? Were you talking to my friend?"

"Sorry, but I'm human, just like you," I replied.

People called me angelic in my Lilybell days, though!

"Your cute little friend keeps asking me to help you, though, and I'd like to grant its wish," I continued. "Will you let me?"

"You'll save me?" The boy's eyes widened.

His mother gulped.

"Meooow!" the cat cried.

The boy's face suddenly scrunched up, like he was holding back tears. He'd been putting up a strong front, but his small body was surely suffering.

"O-Okay...please save me, Miss Angel."

I'm no angel, but if you want to think of me as one, then sure! This angelic lady will save you!

I handed him a vial of medicine, and his mother helped him drink it, her hand trembling.

All of a sudden, the mother flipped the boy's shirt up in surprise. "Th-The bruise is disappearing!"

Indeed, the discolored mark on his skin was rapidly fading.

"Yummy," the boy murmured.

The pale glow of the child illuminated the church hall. No suspicions remained about the panacea after that.

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Meanwhile, in a room within the royal palace...

"What? An angel?" Prince Bernard, who had been in a constant state of annoyance as of late, found the report suspicious.

"Y-Yes, Your Highness! Rumor has it that a woman with angelic beauty and grace has been passing through regions on her way to the capital, curing the ill with a miraculous remedy as she travels."

"Hmph! If that's true, she should be brought here right this instant!" the prince yelled, triggering a bout of violent coughing.

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After what happened in that town, we decided to make a stop in every inhabited area on our journey to the capital. Perhaps it would've been more effective to go straight to our destination and have the royal family distribute the medicine to the population, but since we were passing by these places anyway, reducing the time the afflicted spent suffering was surely the right thing to do, even if their symptoms weren't life-threatening.

"Oh! You must be the one from the rumor!" a townsperson exclaimed.

A few towns reacted with wariness and suspicion like the first one had, but as we neared the capital, we began to receive warm welcomes wherever we went, as if the people had been eagerly awaiting our arrival.

"I wonder why?" I mused.

Obviously it was better to be met with warmth over doubt, and I was happy that our visits were going smoothly. But I couldn't help but find it strange. Wouldn't city dwellers normally be *less* trusting than people in rural areas? I'd expected it to take longer to convince people the closer we got to the capital, but in reality it was the opposite.

Sir Kain, who had been speaking with each town's residents, answered my question. "Aha ha! It seems like rumors about you are spreading like wildfire, Lu."

"Rumors?" Come to think of it, the person earlier had also mentioned as much.

"Yup. They say an angel has been going around curing the

disease with a wonder drug."

"What?!"

I was not *expecting that!*

Until now, the rumors surrounding me—that I was foolish and ugly, a wicked woman, haughty and selfish, incompetent yet prideful—had been nothing but slander concocted by Prince Bernard. I did have to wonder if he'd simply listed every negative descriptor he could think of.

But now people were calling me an angel? Perhaps that boy's cute misunderstanding had become the basis for this rumor.

"Well, it's not entirely false," Lord Felix said nonchalantly.

True... Even if I'm not an angel, I am *going around curing the disease with my panacea.*

It wasn't some new innovation; it was simply a medicine I'd made by following an existing formula. But if the people who were suffering believed it was a miracle cure, then it must've been wondrously effective. I was happy to have been able to help them.

"Indeed, it's true that I'm curing the disease with the panacea," I said in agreement.

"Yes, but the part about you being an angel is also—"

"Oh! But they're giving me all of the credit, even though I was only able to make and distribute the medicine because you allowed me to harvest the raspweed in Leeuwenhoek! Wait, what were you saying just now?"

"Well...the credit belongs to you anyway, so don't worry about it."

"Pfft!" Sir Kain snorted. "Ha ha ha! I feel so bad for Felix these days. Poor guy!"

Huh?! Sir Kain's words startled me. *But...it's true that it isn't fair to Lord Felix for me to take all the credit, even if Sir Kain finds it amusing.*

That said, it wasn't easy to change a rumor that had already become gospel. Unfortunately, the best I could do was apologize and express my appreciation for Lord Felix's help, perhaps with a gift after this was all over.

"Hey, Sarah, what do you think would make Lord Felix happy?" I whispered, beginning my research.

"As long as it's coming from you with love, even verbal abuse would be a reward in his eyes!"

That can't possibly be true, can it? It's not like he's some kind of deviant.

While I struggled with the difficulty of choosing a present, Sir Kain took notice of Lord Felix's glare and paused laughing to provide some additional information.

"Also, it looks like the disease is only affecting regions located between Leeuwenhoek and the capital," he said. "It's true that the capital has the most cases, though."

Oh, is that so?

My father's letter had made it sound as if the disease had spread all over the country, but that didn't appear to be the case. I didn't know why it had limited reach, but at least this meant we wouldn't need to make any detours on our way to the capital.

And so, we continued on our way, distributing medicine and being welcomed everywhere we went. Before I knew it, we'd reached the capital.

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The peaceful journey left me woefully unprepared for the reception I received at the capital.

As soon as I stepped out of the carriage for the entry inspection, I was surrounded by several stern-looking knights.

"Lady Lucille Gustelanola! You're under arrest!"

Wait, why?

I unconsciously stiffened. Lord Felix intervened to guard me, and the knights' glares faltered slightly.

Ohhh! Lord Felix really is dashing!

Regaining Lilybell's memories had revived a little bit of my animalistic instinct, which compelled in me an attraction to this strong male before me.

I'd noticed this when we'd first met, but Lord Felix was very tall, much taller than the royal knights—and I'd come to know that he was just as strong and intimidating as he appeared. His murderous

glare was breathtaking, and when those cold eyes relaxed into a smile, he was surprisingly cute. His unexpected sensitive side was cute too—all in all, he was a shining specimen! Also, I personally found great appeal in the fact that he seemed to be in good health despite his curse.

Wait, why am I suddenly raving about him?!

I thought I'd grown immune to Lord Felix's charms by now, but moments like these made me conscious of how he was perfectly my type. Honestly, I couldn't blame my prophetic dream version of me for being jealous of Elvira, and, by extension, I couldn't fault Elvira for falling in love with him either.

But this is definitely not the time for such excitement.

Regaining my composure, I tapped Lord Felix on his back to let him know that I would be fine handling this by myself. He glanced at me and nodded.

Oh my! We're communicating with eye contact alone! Will our relationship be upgraded from "friends" to "best friends" soon?!

Lord Felix turned back to the knights and declared, "If you wish to take Lucille Gustelanola with you, you must be prepared to kill me first." He looked ready to draw his sword at any moment.

H-Huh?! That wasn't what I meant at all! Communication failure!

The knights were cowering in the face of the icy aura radiating from Lord Felix's body.

"L-Lord Felix!" I rushed to stop him. "Please calm down. It'll be fine, okay? Relax, relax!"

"L-Lady Gustelanola!" the knights exclaimed in a pleading tone.

See? They were glaring at me before, but now they're looking at me as if I'm their savior! You can hear their voices trembling!

Lord Felix immediately retracted his murderous aura and stepped back. For some reason, vague disappointment played over his features.

Perhaps he was tired from the long carriage journey and wanted to use the knights as exercise partners?

"Pfft, ha ha! There goes his attempt to show off in front of Lu," Sir Kain muttered, snickering.

"Sir Kain, don't just laugh and mumble to yourself—you should've

helped me stop Lord Felix!”

“Aha ha! Sorry, my bad.”

However, while the knights’ attitude had mellowed, they still had to do their job. In the end, I caved to the pressure and let them lead me away. Lord Felix said I didn’t need to, but I didn’t want to cause any issues by refusing. It didn’t seem like they were going to hurt me, after all.

If I’d been alone, I could’ve simply fled the capital and lived the rest of my life happily in solitude somewhere far away, but Lord Felix and Sir Kain were here too, which canceled out that option. I didn’t want them to take the blame for my break for freedom.

Besides, the knights wouldn’t be able to harm me easily, either physically or mentally, so I didn’t mind going along with them. Not to mention, keeping my objective in mind, being uncooperative wouldn’t be wise.

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I was being taken to the royal castle.

The knights had permitted Lord Felix and Sir Kain to accompany us. Apparently their orders had been: “Bring Lady Lucille Gustelanola to the castle the moment she arrives in the capital.” It was highly likely that they had misinterpreted the meaning of those words due to my poor reputation.

The tense atmosphere on the way was making me awfully uncomfortable, so I tried my best to engage the knights in small talk.

“U-Um, we’re very sorry, Lady Gus...tela...nola?” one of them said.

Another knight added, “It appears we, um, had the wrong idea about you, Lady Gus...tela...nola?”

“It’s okay!” I insisted. “You’re knights who have long served Prince Bernard, aren’t you? You’ve probably heard him disparage me so many times that the insults repeat themselves in your dreams. It’s not your fault you had a bad impression of me, tee hee!”

I couldn’t help but be in a cheerful mood now that the knights

were finally talking to me normally. At first, the prospect of *another* false accusation had mildly infuriated me, but experiencing Lord Felix's gallant defense had made the entire thing worth it!

One of the knights blushed and covered his mouth with his hand. "L-Lady Gus...tela...nola!"

By the way, is it just me or do they sound uncertain every time they say my name?

The knights hurriedly huddled away from me and began whispering among themselves.

"H-Hey, is she really Lady Gustelanola? She acts so differently that I can't call her by her name with confidence."

"Yeah, if we hadn't verified her identity at the entry inspection, I would've assumed she was just a look-alike..."

"But she knows who we are, so she must be the real deal. Actually, I'm kind of touched that she remembers us."

"I don't recall her being so small, gentle, cheerful...or cute."

"Shhh! Don't say that! I get how you feel, but if Prince Bernard catches wind that we have a favorable impression of Lady Gustelanola, he'll definitely be mad."

"Uh, I think the cursed marquess would have our heads before it came to that... Eek!"

"Ack! There's murder in his eyes! If looks could kill, we'd be dead meat!"

"I-It sure feels like he's about to draw his blade, but he wouldn't *really* do that...right?"

Oh? Lord Felix is walking with the knights now. It seemed like even they were afraid of his intimidating face, so I'm surprised they've all lowered their guard so quickly!

And so, we were brought into the royal castle. Along the way, I heard loud yelling coming from a distant room, while the servants hurried back and forth through the halls.

Wait, doesn't that voice belong to...

Before I could come to a concrete conclusion on that thought, we arrived at one of the reception rooms. Much to my surprise, we were greeted by none other than the king himself.

“Miss Gustelanola, I am well aware that it is selfish of me to request this of you,” he said. “However, if you possess a countermeasure for this disease, please lend us your aid!”

“Umm...” Frankly, this series of unexpected events had left me bewildered. To allow myself to catch up, I waited for the king to explain himself.

“First, let me ask you: Do you have a solution to the disease?”

I exchanged a look with Lord Felix before replying, “Yes, we have a medicine that can cure it.”

“So it is true...”

Resting a hand on his forehead, he heaved a sigh. I assumed it was an expression of relief, but the pain on his face made me wonder if there was some other issue at play.

While I was trying to understand his reaction, someone entered the room.

“I told you, Your Majesty—the person your spoiled son insulted and cast away has become an irreplaceable treasure for this country,” the figure said before turning to me. “It’s been a while, Miss Lucille.”

“Indeed, it has, Prince Edgar.”

Prince Edgar was the crown prince; he was supposed to be studying abroad.

“Aha ha, why the stiff response? Well, I suppose you wouldn’t wish to involve yourself with the elder brother of the man who hurt you.”

“No, that isn’t it at all. I’m simply speaking in a manner that is appropriate for a lady no longer engaged to Prince Bernard.”

Prince Edgar and Prince Bernard had been born to different mothers. Prince Bernard was the son of the king’s second—and favorite—wife. It was said that the king was quite lenient with him due to his striking resemblance to his mother, though this soft touch was only possible because the capable Prince Edgar, born to his first wife, was already his heir. Had it been otherwise, the king wouldn’t have been able to afford to let Prince Bernard get away with his antics. While he was a perfectly competent ruler, he unfortunately became awfully indulgent whenever Prince Bernard was involved.

The king regarded me with a serious expression. “There is something else I wish to know: On your way here, did you distribute that medicine to other towns? To be precise, are *you* the rumored ‘angel’ who’s been saving people with her ‘miracle cure’?”

It’s true, but it’s hard to say, “Yes, that’s me” when he phrases it that way...

I knew it was a bit late to be embarrassed about it, but I was starting to regret not stopping the boy from calling me an angel.

As I hesitated to respond, Lord Felix answered the question in my stead. “Yes, Lucille is the rumored ‘angel of miracles.’”

Wait! I know Lord Felix isn’t doing it on purpose, but doesn’t paraphrasing it like that make it sound even more embarrassing?!

My gaze sank to the floor in shame. Meanwhile, the conversation continued without my input.

“Marquess Felix Leeuwenhoek... If I’m not mistaken, Bernard forced you to become Miss Lucille’s fiancé,” the king said. Under his breath, too soft for me to make out, he murmured, “Ha ha, I never thought I’d see the day this misanthrope would fall in love.”

The crown prince smiled and nodded in agreement with whatever it was the king had said. Then, he squared his shoulders and turned to the king again. “Your Majesty, should Miss Lucille succeed in curing Bernard, we ought to accede to her demands.”

I hadn’t the slightest clue what demands he was talking about, but it was clear that Prince Bernard had been infected with the mysterious disease, and his symptoms were likely severe. This was the help the king had requested earlier: saving Prince Bernard.

“Miss Lucille, seeing as how clever you are, I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now, but please aid our suffering people...and Bernard,” Prince Edgar added.

I bowed in assent.

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Prince Edgar led us out of the reception room and farther down the hall we’d taken earlier, to what seemed to be a bedroom.

This must be Prince Bernard’s room—in which case, the yelling

we heard on the way to the reception room had to have been his.

"At first, it seemed like he was just bedridden with a bad cold," Prince Edgar explained. "However, by the time I returned from abroad, his condition had worsened significantly. He was screaming in agony and throwing tantrums in bed."

"Oh dear..."

In other words, he was in a state of mental agitation as well. In that case, his symptoms were quite severe.

"I hear he's currently been put to sleep with magic," Prince Edgar continued. "When I partially restore his consciousness, could you administer the medicine?"

"Certainly." I nodded.

Lord Felix placed a hand on my shoulder, concern written on his face. "Don't worry. If Prince Bernard tries to do anything, I'll protect you."

"Thank you, Lord Felix. You're so reliable!"

As we entered the room, I approached Prince Bernard. Prince Edgar weakened the sleep spell, and I gently poured the panacea into his mouth. His eyes opened just a crack as he swallowed the liquid.

It should be okay since he's barely conscious, but if he realizes it's me giving him the medicine, he's bound to throw a fit.

Luckily, Prince Bernard remained calm until I was done. A familiar faint glow surrounded his body.

"Ah, I see why the people call you the 'angel of miracles,'" Prince Edgar remarked. "What a divine sight to behold..."

Prince Edgar?! I can hear you, you know! Why did you adopt Lord Felix's embarrassing paraphrase?! I am not *okay with this!*

I had a feeling that reacting to the moniker would only make things worse, though, so I chose to pretend that I hadn't heard anything.

When the light faded, Prince Bernard's vacant gaze focused on me, and he began whispering something that was just barely inaudible.

D-Did he realize it was me?

"The...angel...really...came..."

Actually, there was one thing about this entire matter that bothered me enough to dismiss practically everything else of concern.

No one had brought it up, so it felt inappropriate to ask, but...where in the world was Lady Mina, and what could she possibly be doing that was more important than caring for the man she used to flirt with all day and night?!

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After confirming that Prince Bernard had settled into a relaxed slumber, we were led to another room by Prince Edgar, where we took seats on opposite sofas.

The crown prince smiled at me. "Thank you, Miss Lucille. Regardless of that man's tendencies, he is still royalty. Were anything to happen to him, it would greatly worry our people. Your assistance is truly appreciated."

"I'm happy to be of help."

I'd first noticed this a long time ago, but Prince Edgar never referred to Prince Bernard as his brother unless he was in a situation that called for it, such as a public address. He probably didn't consider him his kin.

With that in mind, I nonchalantly waited for Prince Edgar to continue, only to be completely taken aback by what he said next.

"I've long been biding my time, and my chance has finally come, with His Majesty's favored son's fall from grace and—most importantly—this crisis that can now be swiftly resolved. Out of every path to ascending the throne that I have considered, this one is the most hassle-free." He gave an assured nod. "Indeed, it's thanks to you that I'll be able to do this earlier than expected, Miss Lucille. If it weren't for your contributions, the country would remain weakened and weary, and we would have had to maintain the current family structure for some time while concealing our failure to address the disease."

"Huh?" I blurted out before hurriedly shutting my mouth.

What did Prince Edgar just say?

I'd heard quite a few questionable ideas just now, but the one that stood out most was "ascending the throne." Well, as the crown prince, he would obviously become king eventually, so that in itself wasn't a surprise. Prince Edgar was talented and listened to the needs of both his vassals and his people. Meanwhile, Prince Bernard only sought pleasure and seemingly had no interest in the throne—he was hardly a threat to Prince Edgar's succession.

However, Prince Edgar had spoken as if he would be ascending the throne *now* rather than in the future...

"Three days," Prince Edgar said. "Would you be able to cure everyone afflicted with the disease in that time?"

His sudden change of subject startled me, but I answered his question nevertheless.

"Huh? Um, yes. The other regions have already been taken care of, so if only the capital is left, I think it'd be possible to distribute the panacea to everyone within a day, assuming you lend us some manpower. Perhaps budget for two days, just to be safe."

If the citizens were wary of the medicine, then it would take time to earn their trust. Even three days might not be enough in that case. However, if the king himself had heard the rumor about me and the medicine, it had probably already spread throughout the entire capital. That meant people would be willing to take the panacea, reducing the amount of time required.

Prince Edgar gave a satisfied smile, nodding several times. "Brilliant, Miss Lucille! Really, why were you engaged to Bernard instead of me? I never would have been so foolish as to relinquish you—I would have treasured you with tender care."

"Your Highness!" Lord Felix rebuked loudly.

Don't worry! I'm not stupid enough to take such diplomatic compliments seriously.

The crown prince was probably singing my praises in an attempt to help me reclaim my image since I'd been subjected to Prince Bernard's unjust treatment. It didn't actually matter to me because I wasn't bothered by it at all, but I was certainly obligated to respond in kind. He'd even been so humble as to use himself as an example of a hypothetical fiancé, after all.

I smiled at Prince Edgar. "Why, I'm flattered, Your Highness! Prince Bernard never gave me the time of day, so to hear you speak so highly of me truly makes me feel dignified as a woman! Indeed, nothing makes me happier than to hear a fine man of your caliber entertain the thought of being my fiancé."

"Now that's the most insincere 'happiness' I've ever seen."

Hmm? That's odd. I was trying to put on the most joyful face I could muster. Has my laid-back life in Leeuwenhoek decayed my ability to shape my expressions?

Lord Felix's body stiffened beside me, and I realized he probably thought I'd genuinely been happy about Prince Edgar's empty praise. Lord Felix was a kind man, through and through, so knowing him, he was worried I'd end up with a broken heart when I learned the truth. If he truly believed what I'd said, perhaps it wasn't that I'd put on a bad act, but that Prince Edgar had simply seen through it anyway with his keen senses.

Seemingly not wanting to discuss this any further, Prince Edgar returned to the previous topic with utmost seriousness. "Please take care of everything within two days, then. In three days, I will hold a soirée to celebrate the eradication of the disease as well as announce the king's abdication and my own ascension. The official ceremony will be held at a separate date, of course."

"What?!"

Apparently his sudden change of subject earlier had merely been a continuation of the same train of thought. Still, wasn't this an awfully hasty timeline for such a major announcement?

Prince Edgar's confident smile further reinforced the feeling that I'd been dragged into an outrageous scheme. I broke out into a cold sweat.

"Oh, and naturally, as the disease-curing angel and her guardian, you two will be the stars of the evening," he continued. "I know this is very sudden, but I will handle all of the arrangements, so you can relax and focus on treating the sick."

"Understood..."

I had so many questions—too many to ask, in fact, because of the rapid pace at which the conversation was progressing. In the

end, I gave up and accepted what I was told.

That said, the events unfolding did have a favorable result for me. The crown prince had said, "Think about what you want as compensation."

There was only one thing I wanted: information on the Great Sage Elios. Depending on the royal family's connections, perhaps I could even be granted a meeting with him. Then I would be one step closer to lifting Lord Felix's curse.

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Since I'd come all the way back to the capital, I decided to pay a quick visit to the Gustelanola estate, bringing Lord Felix with me.

The house felt rather vacant. My mother and elder brother lived in the Gustelanolas' territory, so it had only been my father, me, and our servants living in our residence in the capital. With my absence, it must've become even emptier.

Perhaps adding to the feeling was the fact that I had changed a lot since leaving. Back when I'd lived in this house, I'd been Prince Bernard's fiancée, and since I hadn't yet regained Lilybell's memories, I'd been desperate to be loved. Now that I had a happy life, this manor felt even more desolate in comparison.

"Lucille, is that you?"

Much to my surprise, my father came out to greet me.

"I'm sorry for coming without advance notice," I said, bowing.

I heard a sigh above my head. *He really does hate me,* I thought, only to be caught off guard by his next words.

"This is your house. Why would you need to notify me that you're coming home?"

I blinked.

Ignoring my confusion, my father shifted his gaze behind me, to Lord Felix. "Lucille looks healthier now. You must be treating her well."

Goodness, my father is commenting on my health?! And he makes it sound as if he'd been paying attention before too!

"No, if anything, Miss Lucille's presence has made my humble

territory of Leeuwenhoek a much brighter place," Lord Felix replied, speaking more formally than usual. "I am grateful that you accepted that unfair royal decree and sent her to my land, Lord Gustelanola." He bowed to my father.

My father looked away and said listlessly, "It wasn't the first time the prince played a cruel prank, and it wouldn't have been the last. Even if my daughter had stayed in the capital, she wouldn't have had a future here. I figured the cursed marquess was the better choice, that's all."

I was lost for words. I'd always thought that my father saw no worth in me aside from my position as a future princess. As proof, he'd ordered me to win the prince's heart, and when my engagement had been called off, he'd sent me away, saying that it'd been my own fault for lacking charm. Even when I left for Leeuwenhoek, he'd angrily ordered me not to bring a single attendant with me.

So why was he saying this now? Had I been sorely mistaken about something this entire time? In my Lilybell days, I'd learned that expressions of love came in various forms that weren't always obvious...

Before I could finish sorting out my thoughts, my father said, "I heard Prince Edgar gave you an assignment. Don't waste too much time dillydallying here." He then turned his back to us and left.

"Oh..."

He had a point—we *were* short on time. I had numerous burning questions on my mind, but these next few days would be simply too hectic to find time to ask them.

As if sensing my inner plight, Lord Felix gently laid a hand on my back and said, "We'll arrange to have a chat with Lord Gustelanola at a later date."

"Thank you, Lord Felix!"

"I have quite a few things I'd like to discuss with him as well."

Unfortunately, as we spoke, the disease was still spreading through the capital. While it wasn't as severe as it had been in Leeuwenhoek, that didn't change the fact that people were suffering, so we were only able to spare a little bit of time for this

visit.

My beloved personal attendant, Lacia, came to see us off.

"Lady Lucille! Oh, it's been so long! I've been dying to see you again!"

"Lacia! I missed you too! I wish I could stay longer, but..."

"I, too, would love to spend more time with you, my lady. Unfortunately, it seems that won't be possible due to the circumstances..."

Seeing her gloomy expression, I hurriedly added, "Oh, but I'll be back before long. I have some questions for my father."

"Really?! I'll be waiting!" Lacia approached me and whispered her next words so that Lord Felix couldn't hear. "I heard Lord Leeuwenhoek was a scary man, so I was afraid that your new life was even more miserable. But the gentle regard in his eyes when he looks at you makes me feel relieved."

"Tee hee! Thanks for the concern, Lacia! Don't worry, Lord Felix is very kind, even if it isn't always obvious. Not to mention, he's also...extremely handsome!"

"Yes! Prince Bernard is no match for him!"

Oh my, I can't believe Lacia said something so disrespectful, even if no one could hear it but me!

Still, I couldn't help but feel delighted. It'd been so long since we'd been able to have one of our secret candid conversations.

As Lord Felix and I left in the carriage, Lacia continued to wave goodbye until she shrank into the distance.

"Wait for me, my lady. I, Lacia, will surely return to your side soon!"

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After that, I went with Prince Edgar's knights and Lord Felix to distribute the panacea. As promised, the disease was quelled within two days. All that remained was to give the rest of the medicine I'd made to Prince Edgar—just in case of a relapse—and my role would be fulfilled.

Before I knew it, it was the evening of the soiree.

"Lady Lucille! You look truly, truly, *truly* stunning!"

"Tee hee, you exaggerate, Sarah. I'm happy to hear that, though!"

Being praised by Sarah and the castle maids put me in a great mood. Despite the countless times I'd been called "cute" or "pretty" as Lilybell, I never got tired of hearing compliments! It always raised my spirits, no matter what!

Prince Edgar really had arranged everything for me. The dress that he'd had prepared for me was a lovely sky blue that matched my eyes, and its many ruffled layers truly made it adorable. My makeup had been done for me as well.

Before moving to Leeuwenhoek, I had only worn elegant gowns in red or other flashy colors, since I'd been trying to present myself as a mature vixen befitting Prince Bernard's tastes. But actually, I loved cute clothes like what I currently wore.

The wonderful dress and the showers of praise had me positively elated.

Sir Kain, who had initially fallen silent for some reason upon entering the room, murmured, "You're awfully receptive to praise, Lu. Noble ladies are usually the humble type that says, 'That's not true,' the haughty type that says, 'I know I'm beautiful,' or the shy type that blushes in embarrassment. Right?"

"Are you speaking from experience, Sir Kain?"

"Huh? Why're you making me out to be a womanizer? I'm just describing noble ladies in general!"

He could act as offended as he wanted, but my conversations with castle servants had revealed just how popular he was. My first impression of him had proven correct!

Efren the hero had been of a similar ilk, so I knew a player when I saw one. I wasn't going to criticize Sir Kain for it as long as he wasn't hurting anyone, though I found it suspicious that he tried to deny it.

As if my thoughts were written on my face, he hurriedly continued, "A-Anyway, that's not important. I was just surprised you don't fall into any of those categories. You accept compliments easily, yet you aren't arrogant about it."

"Well, why wouldn't I be delighted by people liking me, praising me, and being nice to me? I accept people's goodwill because in the end, happy things make me happy."

Of course, while some people might have thought it inappropriate, I, for one, was most pleased when my acts of affection or kindness were accepted rather than dismissed. It only felt natural to return the same energy.

For some reason, Sir Kain laughed. "Aha ha! You really are an interesting one, Lu."

"Hmm? Is that so? Thank you, I guess?"

I didn't know what it was that he found so interesting, but he didn't seem to mean it in a bad way, so it was probably a compliment.

While we were chatting, there was a knock on the door. It swung open, and Prince Edgar and Lord Felix stepped in.

As Lord Felix's gaze fell over me, he struggled to speak for a moment, just as Sir Kain had. "Lucille... You..."

"My, my, Miss Lucille!" Prince Edgar interjected. "You truly are a beauty! The dress I arranged for you suits you wonderfully."

Tee hee! I don't know how serious he's being, but regardless, it's a pleasure to be praised!

"Thank you," I replied. "It's a very charming and pretty dress. I love it."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now, shall we get going?"

"Yes, let's."

I wonder what Lord Felix was trying to say?

Curious, I asked him, but he only said, "Never mind. It was my fault for floundering." For some reason, his expression, tinged with dissatisfaction and regret, was directed at Prince Edgar.

Is Lord Felix okay? Well, anyway, the soiree takes priority right now!

According to the crown prince, the party would begin by celebrating the eradication of the disease—with credit going to me and Lord Felix. After emphasizing his friendly relationship with us, he would then announce the king's abdication and his own succession to the throne.

It definitely felt like he was taking advantage of me, but as a noble lady who had once undergone princess training, I knew I only stood to gain from doing favors for the royal family. In return, I'd have them grant my wish later.

Only Lord Felix escorted me to the hall, as Prince Edgar was royalty, so he would be entering the venue separately from us. The second Lord Felix and I stepped inside, we immediately became the center of attention.

Hmm, some of these gazes are pleasant, but I can sense malice in others.

That was to be expected, though. Lord Felix was the notorious cursed marquess, and I had been banished from the capital for supposedly being a detested, evil woman. Honestly, I didn't care what random people thought of me, but I worried that it might bother Lord Felix.

I looked up at him, concerned, and noticed he was sporting a rather pointed glare.

Huh? He's exuding an extremely unsettling aura! What could be the problem?

Startled, I followed his gaze through the crowd and found he was focused on none other than Prince Bernard.

Oh my, he's already recovered enough to attend the soiree? His complexion also looks much better now. It's hard to believe he was recently bedridden with a disease.

While I certainly wasn't fond of Prince Bernard, I was still glad that my panacea had brought him back to good health.

Prince Bernard stared at us, dumbfounded, his mouth agape. He likely hadn't known that Lord Felix and I would be present tonight. Well, knowing what I did about the crown prince, perhaps he hadn't been told anything at all.

Not "perhaps," but "definitely."

As if coming back to his senses, Prince Bernard's face suddenly contorted in anger.

Uh-oh, I have a bad feeling about this!

For a second, I considered running away from what was obviously going to develop into a bothersome confrontation. At the

same time, I had a hunch that fleeing wouldn't affect the outcome. The stubborn second prince would probably just give chase.

Lord Felix didn't look like he was going anywhere either, so I decided it would be better to get it over with and engage the approaching annoyance head-on.

Having finished wading through the crowd, Prince Bernard uttered in a low voice, "Scoundrel, what do you think you're doing here?"

Ugh, I knew this was going to be bothersome! Well, worst-case scenario, I'll tell him, "I was the one who saved you!" He might not believe me, though.

An unintentional sigh escaped me. It was then I noticed something off about Prince Bernard's blatantly hateful glare.

Hmm? No matter how I look at it, it seems like he's glaring at Lord Felix, not me.

Casually, I stepped closer to Lord Felix and murmured in his ear, "Did something happen between you and Prince Bernard?"

"No, I believe this is our first direct interaction..."

Huh? Would Prince Bernard call someone he's never talked to before a scoundrel? Also, with the look on his face, you'd think he has an unforgivable grudge against Lord Felix!

"Hey!" the prince yelled. "What're you whispering about?! Get away from her!"

His glare remained focused on Lord Felix—that was, until it suddenly shifted to me. On instinct, my gaze dropped to the floor.

I don't know what's going on, but something's telling me to avoid eye contact!

Much to my surprise, a hand was proffered below my downturned face. Confused, I slowly looked up. Prince Bernard was regarding me with completely different eyes—not hateful, but...gentle? Dare I say "warm"? What in the world?

"Now, please come this way," he said softly with a smile.

What?! Who is this man?! He looks just like Prince Bernard, but Prince Bernard would never look at me with such eyes or speak to me in such a fashion! He must be an imposter! How could this happen at a soiree hosted by the royal family at the castle?! This is

an emergency!

That said, it wouldn't be a good idea to expose the fake prince myself, lest he fly into a rage. I had to hurry and resolve this conversation peacefully so that I could report the situation to Prince Edgar!

"U-Um, I can't. My escort tonight is Lord Felix..." I stammered.

I couldn't help my shaky voice—the fraud looked identical to the real Prince Bernard! I didn't know if his appearance was a disguise or if he happened to bear a close resemblance, but the thought that he'd come this far without raising suspicion was frankly terrifying.

Upon hearing my response, the imposter laid one hand on his chest and the other on his forehead, looking up at the ceiling in an exaggerated manner.

"Oh, how wretched!" His gaze whipped back to Lord Felix. "What an awful man you are, cursed marquess!"

"Huh...?" I was mystified.

"Um..." Lord Felix gave the man a skeptical look. He didn't seem to know how to react either.

Is this imposter in a state of delirium?

I tried to pinpoint any notable distortions in his mana, but I didn't see anything particularly bad. He was mildly agitated, but not to the point that I'd consider it an abnormal condition.

The fake prince's next words were directed toward me. "My beautiful, sweet angel!"

"What?" *He really is an imposter!*

While Prince Bernard was capable of saying such things, they were absolutely never directed at me.

"I remember," he continued, "I was sick in bed, and just when I thought heaven was about to claim me, a gentle angel saved my life. My consciousness was muddled, but I immediately knew she was the rumored angel of miracles. The moment I saw her passionate gaze and realized it was her love and kindness that healed me, I thought I was going to ascend to heaven anyway!"

What he was describing sounded ridiculous, yet I couldn't help but feel he was speaking about an event that I was very familiar with.

"It was then that I knew she was my one and only destiny. And that angel was you, of course."

With a moony look in his eyes, he snatched up my hand and slowly caressed it.

N-Noooooo! Th-This might actually be Prince Bernard! It's incredibly hard to believe, but I know these eyes! This is how he regarded Lady Mina when he was constantly fawning over her!

Wait, but why would Prince Bernard look at me *that way? Maybe he really is delirious!*

Though his account differed from how I'd perceived my administration of his medicine, was it possible his heart had temporarily opened up to me because I was his savior? Weirder things had happened. It was the kind of situation where, once he calmed down and realized what he'd done, he'd want to die of shame. After all, the person he was showering in affection was the one he hated the most: Lucille Gustelanola. Me.

Though he'd already dug his grave, I could at least prevent him from tunneling deeper. It was time to remind him that his true love was elsewhere.

Please come back to your senses!

"U-Um, Prince Bernard, aren't you in love with Lady Mina...?" My determination did nothing to prevent my stuttering; his unusual behavior was just too frightening.

For some reason, the addled prince's eyes shone even brighter after hearing that. "Oh, you know my name! And you know of Mina too... Forget about her. Indeed, there was a time when I loved her. However, after she left me, I put those feelings behind me. In fact, I now believe I was separated from her so that I could meet you, my fated woman."

Huh?! Lady Mina abandoned Prince Bernard?! Even though they were all over each other in public?! Well, no wonder I didn't see her anywhere!

As I stiffened in surprise, I felt Lord Felix lay his hand on my shoulder and pull me under his wing. His brow was furrowed in suspicion at Prince Bernard's nonsensical ramblings. It was the only reasonable reaction; after all, why would the prince try to win me

back *now*?

Thanks to Lord Felix, my hand was freed from the prince's grasp. I sighed with relief—and realized the shock had made me forget to breathe.

Prince Bernard glared at Lord Felix once more but spoke his next words to me instead. "My sweet angel, you are being deceived by this lowbrow man! I know not what he told you to earn your companionship, but the truth is...he is already engaged!"

"Um..." *What in the world is he talking about?*

"What's more, his fiancée is unbelievably ugly, foolish, and horrid! It's hard enough to see you tricked and heartbroken by an engaged man, let alone see you fall victim to his fiancée's jealous schemes. She will surely do everything in her power to hurt you. But I won't let her! Mark my words, Lucille Gustelanola, I won't let you get away with this!"

The prince was growing more and more agitated as he spoke. Not to mention the fact that one moment, he was expressing concern for me, and the next, he was cursing me. Accompanying this seesawing, Lord Felix's expression transformed from wariness to anger to confusion.

Um, what is going on here?

Lord Felix caved first. "What are you on about?"

Honestly, I'd been about two seconds away from asking the same thing.

Prince Bernard gave him a look of disdain. "Release her, scoundrel. She does not deserve to be manipulated by a lowlife like you! Besides, what of Lucille Gustelanola? You left your fiancée behind to brazenly attend a royal soiree with another woman? Where is your sense of shame?!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Wh-What?! I don't want to hear this from Prince Bernard of all people! He brought Lady Mina instead of me to almost every event, royal or not! He's truly the master of double standards. If his words were a boomerang, they'd have dealt him a fatal blow!

In contrast to my internal indignation, Lord Felix replied with utmost calm, "Lucille is here, though."

"What?! That wicked woman is at the soiree?! Lucille Gustelanola, you dare breathe the same air as I?!"

"Huh...?"

Lord Felix still looked confused, but at this point, even I'd figured it out: Prince Bernard didn't know that *I* was Lucille Gustelanola! It didn't seem possible. Apparently, though, Prince Bernard defied common sense.

I can't believe it. Sure, I'd always been in my battle gear in his presence, thanks to Lacia's hard work turning me into a beautiful vixen. But we were engaged for years*! And he didn't recognize me even after seeing my face and hearing my voice up close? Tell me it isn't so!*

Well, it clearly is *so. Thanks, Prince Bernard.*

As I was pondering how to confront him with the truth, another troublesome individual entered the fray. Frankly, I was impressed he had the nerve to jump into this tense back-and-forth.

"Your Highness! This is the woman who was with the marquess in Leeuwenhoek!"

"What?! It was her?! He's already taken her into his territory?! Unforgivable!"

That's right—the interloper was Lord Kanelion.

Oh! Come to think of it, Lord Kanelion didn't realize who I was either!

It was as I'd suspected, then: He'd been ordered to check on me in Leeuwenhoek, then reported to Prince Bernard that Lord Felix had cast aside his fiancée—me—in favor of promenading around town with another woman. Of course, since that woman *was* me, the whole thing had been a huge misunderstanding.

"What a fine opportunity to show that vile lady what will happen if she dares to harm my beloved angel! Lucille Gustelanola! Where are you?!"

"Here," I replied immediately. I wasn't trying to be secretive about my identity, after all—this was simply the first time he'd actually called for me by name.

Prince Bernard's gaze swept through the crowd, eyes scanning back and forth.

Really? Even though I answered him clearly, right in front of him?

Apparently people had difficulty noticing things they weren't expecting.

After a pause, Prince Bernard continued in an annoyed tone, "Lucille Gustelanola, show yourself!"

"I'm here!"

You know, I'm just about at my limit. Isn't this event supposed to be a celebration? But the mood is awful, and here I am, getting yelled at by Prince Bernard while everyone's eyes are on us.

It was bad enough that Lord Felix and I didn't have stellar reputations in the first place, but now we'd been made the center of attention for a ridiculous reason. Wasn't this going to make people think even worse of us? It wasn't that I cared what their impression of me was, but I'd obviously prefer to avoid becoming the target of unnecessary negative emotions. That was why I'd responded loudly this time—I couldn't have this obstinate man ignoring me again.

Prince Bernard looked at me with gentle eyes. "Oh? What's the matter? Don't worry. I'll give Lucille Gustelanola a proper scolding."

"Is that so? Let me hear it, then."

"Huh...?"

Lord Felix, arm still around my shoulders, provided a blunt explanation. "Forgive me for not greeting you sooner, Your Highness. Thanks to you, I was granted engagement to Lady Lucille Gustelanola here. As you say, she is as sweet and compassionate as an angel. You have my utmost gratitude." It seemed that he, too, had finally realized the cause of this bizarre situation.

"Oh my, you're making me blush, Lord Felix."

What an effective strategy! I wasn't expecting him to thank Prince Bernard for our engagement while gazing at me. How very ironic. As a side benefit, I was blessed with a romantic speech! Even if it's just for show, it's always nice to be praised by a charming man.

"What?" Prince Bernard widened his eyes. "Why are you putting on such a farce?"

Despite his words, he fell silent. It seemed that the truth was beginning to sink in. Behind him, Lord Kanelion's face had taken on the same befuddled expression.

Is it just me or are those two starting to resemble each other?

A clear, low voice cut through the silence. "I see you're stirring up trouble at another one of my soirees, Bernard."

Prince Edgar had arrived from the entrance reserved for royalty, accompanied by knights. He regarded his younger brother, who was still struggling to accept my identity, with an icy gaze. However, his stern countenance quickly transformed into a blindingly bright—and fake—smile.

"Well, no matter," he continued. "Your antics have given me many a headache in the past, but today, that all comes to an end."

"Brother...?" Prince Bernard replied, confused.

I could practically hear Prince Edgar's inner voice saying, *"Thank you for saving me time and effort."* If it hadn't been for Prince Bernard starting this absurd charade in public view, there probably would've been far fewer people around to hear Prince Edgar's lines.

"Lady Lucille Gustelanola and Lord Felix Leeuwenhoek, would you please come with me?" Prince Edgar asked.

"As you wish."

As subjects of this kingdom, we certainly couldn't go against Prince Edgar, who—unlike Prince Bernard—was the skilled mastermind one would expect from the royal family!

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"Lady Lucille Gustelanola and Lord Felix Leeuwenhoek, would you please come with me?"

A stir in the crowd followed the crown prince's words.

"Lady Lucille Gustelanola? The evil woman who was engaged to Prince Bernard until he cast her away?"

"No, the rumors about her were false accusations by Prince Bernard. That aside, did she always look like that...?"

"She's so...small and cute."

"Right?! She always struck me as more overbearing and haughty, like she was on edge at all times...but now, she's smiling."

"I had no idea Lady Lucille Gustelanola could be so sweet!"

"What happened to her after she was sent to the borderlands?"

The majority of the people I overheard while escorting Lucille behind the crown prince were men reacting to her with surprise, their faces flushed.

It was true that she gave off quite a different impression compared to when I'd first laid eyes on her in Leeuwenhoek. Back then, her appearance had given credence to the rumors I'd foolishly taken at face value. These people had likely made the same assumptions based on the crumbs of knowledge they possessed.

If I could meet my past self, I'd want to punch him.

At long last, I understood what Kain had been trying to tell me.

"Maybe you're fine with how today went, but I've got a bad feeling about this. I just know you're gonna regret it someday."

He'd said that after I'd apologized to Lucille for allowing the false rumors to influence how I treated her. At the time, I hadn't known anything—not my own feelings, nor how high a wall I would later face by choosing not to bridge the distance between us at that very moment.

"I mean, apologies usually don't come across half as well as you think. You probably should've been more specific and said, 'It was wrong of me to say that I hate you.'"

Kain was right. I'd failed to convey even half of my thoughts. It wasn't just the apology—I was especially poor at expressing my emotions. No matter how hard I tried to articulate to Lucille the joy and excitement she brought me, it didn't seem to get across to her at all, and it must've been because I'd set myself such a difficult hurdle.

Why had I said those things on the day we'd first met? And after being granted the opportunity to apologize for my mistake, why had I neglected to explain my feelings clearly and thoroughly? Instead of being relieved that she'd forgiven me, I should've striven to make her understand how I truly felt. That had been my only chance—it was too late now.

She hadn't been angry at me to begin with. If I tried to go back to amend that conversation, she'd only be confused as to why I was digging up the past.

I glanced at Lucille, who was walking gracefully at my side after

having taken my hand without hesitation.

She's like a cat, though perhaps it also feels that way because she's always surrounded by cats in Leeuwenhoek. Elegant, free, whimsical...and eager to accept people's goodwill and praise. Now, I'm not going to claim that she isn't selfish. At times, she casually guides people into giving her what she wants. She always does as she pleases, and I've never seen her force herself to do anything she doesn't want to do, at least not in Leeuwenhoek.

I still laughed at the thought that the first person she'd tamed had been the grumpy Randolph. Thanks to that Randolph now seemed to be much more open with the knights and servants. It made sense, though. Who would continue to be afraid of him after seeing him grinning and fawning over "Lucy"?

Meanwhile, Sarah had originally believed my gossip and behaved inappropriately for a servant, and after the misunderstanding was cleared up, she'd acted somewhat reserved toward Lucille on account of her guilty conscience. But now, she was so attentive to Lucille that one would wonder if they'd been foster sisters since childhood. Occasionally, it even got to the point where Lucille would get annoyed with her, which I found heartwarming.

It had been a surprise when I first heard Alice calling Lucille "big sister." That girl had always kept her guard up and deliberately acted self-centered. I could say with confidence that what had really saved her wasn't that Lucille had discerned anything special about her, but the fact that Lucille consistently treated her as a unique individual, showering her with love. It had given her a true sense of self-worth.

Lucille seemed accustomed to loving and being loved. And beyond that, being in her presence made people want to love themselves too, because she was always demonstrating how to do so. Being around the dazzling Lucille made one think that they, too, could be like her. How many people in the world could elicit such a feeling?

Surely, she's one of a kind.

My gaze shifted to Prince Bernard, who was watching us leave, dumbfounded. It was easy to think him a foolish man, but for all I knew, I could've been one more mistake away from winding up in

the same position as him. The thought made me shudder.

Then again, he had to be stupid to not recognize Lucille after talking to her for as long as he had. They'd been engaged for years, hadn't they? Though I'd heard the rumors, this drove home just how much he'd neglected her.

It was irritating, but I was a selfish man, so my anger was outweighed by a different emotion.

Thank you so much for sending Lucille to Leeuwenhoek. I'm truly grateful.

If our meeting was her punishment, then I'm glad our engagement was considered a penalty. If my shameful title of "the cursed marquess" was what brought Lucille to my land, then I'm proud of that malicious mockery of a moniker.

We walked up to where Prince Edgar was and took our place beside him.

Today, Lucille would be lauded for her achievements. I wanted to be present for her future successes too, preferably by her side. I knew she wouldn't live a quiet life. What miracles and surprises would she show me next?

And if she suffers a disaster that she can't resolve herself, I want to be the one to help her. It's frustrating that I can't be of any use right now...

While thinking these things, I continued to observe the looks of admiration, fondness, and envy directed toward her.

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We followed Prince Edgar onto the stage, where he lauded our achievements in front of everyone as promised.

"As the disease was quickly brought under control, we suffered no significant damages. It is no stretch of the imagination to say that if it weren't for Lady Lucille Gustelanola, we likely would have seen deaths before long."

Several gasps shot out from the audience.

It was true—while the symptoms in the capital had been relatively mild in comparison to those in Leeuwenhoek, there was a

high chance they would've worsened over time. Prince Bernard's state of delirium was proof of that.

Come to think of it, why had *Prince Bernard's condition been so much worse than the others in the capital?*

In the corner of my eye, I saw Prince Bernard fall to his knees. Beside him, Lord Kanelion appeared frozen in shock, staring at me with wide eyes.

Wow, they're really *surprised! I'm not sorry, though. No matter how different my attire and makeup might have been, everyone else except those two were able to recognize me. Probably.*

"I can't believe my angel was Lucille Gustelanola..." Prince Bernard muttered faintly.

I chuckled internally. *That's right. You were begging for the love of none other than me, Lucille Gustelanola!*

He seemed so crushed that I almost felt bad for him. But it wasn't my fault he'd made such a huge blunder in front of all of these nobles—several of whom appeared to be holding back laughter as they looked at him. And why wouldn't they, when he'd been both defending and insulting me in the same breath?

He'll surely cringe whenever he remembers this, but all I can do is pray that he'll have the mental fortitude to survive it!

"I promise that you will be rewarded fairly, Miss Lucille," Prince Edgar continued. "Please tell me what you would like as compensation later."

"You honor me, Your Highness."

I breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't told me to state my demands right then and there, only to notice his knowing smile. He must've already guessed that my wish couldn't easily be expressed in public.

Prince Edgar can be a bit scary with his schemes, but he definitely has a keen eye for people and their needs... If only he'd share some of that ability with Prince Bernard!

"Now then, I have both good news and bad news," he continued. "It is with regret that I must share that His Majesty has been in rather poor health for some time now. Fortunately, he did not catch the disease that was going around. However, he will be abdicating

the throne."

The hall fell silent as everyone stared at Prince Edgar with bated breath.

I heard Prince Bernard muttering, "What? Why would father step down?"

His doubt was understandable...because the king was perfectly fine. In fact, the king was probably the healthiest he'd been in years, considering that he'd asked me for a dose of the panacea, saying, "I want to drink it too!" He might have had a chronic illness of some sort, but whatever it was, it would have disappeared by this point.

If that was Prince Edgar's bad news, then the good news could only be one thing.

"On the bright side, following His Majesty's abdication, I will be ascending to the throne. The official announcement and ceremony will be held at a later date. I ask for your cooperation."

The hall suddenly erupted with excited shouts of congratulations. A certain number of attendees surely had concerns that they were keeping to themselves, but the overall atmosphere was positive. Prince Edgar had always been popular, after all. He was sincere, quick-witted, and respectful...though he could also be secretive at times.

Oh well. My job here is done now, right? I just want to get back to my cozy life in Leeuwenhoek, growing vegetables with Grandpa Randy, making pastries with Sarah, and sunbathing with the kitties.

That said, before I could go home, I still had to get Prince Edgar to divulge everything he knew about the Great Sage Elios.

After leaving the lively soiree, Lord Felix and I were brought directly to a private room. At last, it was time to get down to business! Or so I thought. For some reason, Prince Bernard and Lord Kanelion were also waiting for us there.

Hmm? What's going on?!

"Lucille, sit here," Lord Felix said, casually gesturing toward the seat farthest from Prince Bernard.

"Oh, why, thank you, Lord Felix!" *He really is kind and attentive!*

Prince Bernard stared at Lord Felix, but naturally, he lacked the audacity to say anything.

Appearing at last was Prince Edgar, flashing one of his dazzling manufactured smiles as he took a seat on the sofa. "I'm sorry, Miss Lucille, but there is something I must make clear before I ask how you would like to be rewarded. Please let me address that first."

"I understand," I said, not because I truly understood, but because that was the only appropriate response. In reality, I had no idea what was about to happen.

Since Prince Bernard and Lord Kanelion were also summoned, it must have something to do with them, right? But they look just as clueless as I feel. Also, if this pertains to them, then why do Lord Felix and I need to be present as well?

As if reading my mind, Prince Edgar smiled and explained, "This concerns you two, so I thought you'd best hear it too."

Now I was even more perplexed. Was this about the commotion Prince Bernard had caused earlier because he hadn't recognized me? It felt like it had to be more than that, though.

The gentle smile vanished from Prince Edgar's face when he turned to address Prince Bernard and Lord Kanelion. "Your punishment for the disease case has been decided. Bernard will be officially removed from the royal family, while Lord Kanelion will be stripped of his nobility and fined. You're lucky that Miss Lucille developed a cure. If there had been any casualties, you could have received the death penalty."

Prince Bernard and Lord Kanelion are receiving punishment because of the disease? That means they were somehow involved in spreading it, right?

Without the full picture, all I could do was quietly watch the conversation unfold.

"B-Brother?" Prince Bernard replied. "What are you talking about? I'm being punished for the disease? But why?"

Oh? He looks genuinely confused.

Prince Bernard was the frank and impulsive type, despite it being unbecoming of royalty. He wasn't capable of putting on an act to avoid having his position compromised. In other words, his surprise was more than likely genuine.

Lord Kanelion didn't seem to understand the situation either. He

was frozen in place, his mouth agape.

"You truly don't realize the seriousness of the crime you've committed," Prince Edgar said with a sigh. The look in his eyes grew sharper. "Bernard. You granted Lady Mina Noreit access to the forbidden library, didn't you?"

What?! Is that true?!

The forbidden library held tomes that were banned from the public, as well as special books that required permission to view. As royalty, Prince Bernard was allowed to enter, but that didn't mean accessing it was such a simple thing.

That's so unfair! I want to read the books in the forbidden library too!

I couldn't help but join Prince Edgar in glaring at Prince Bernard. However, the target of our ire was seemingly still failing to understand the gravity of the situation.

"I-I did do that, and I'm sorry. But Mina was fatigued by the unfamiliar atmosphere of the castle and wanted to take a short rest somewhere without people around. We happened to be close to the forbidden library at the time, so we stepped in for a few minutes, that's all! What could that have to do with the disease?"

The lock on the forbidden library was supposed to react to the royal family's mana. Considering how reckless and indulgent Prince Bernard was, you'd think someone would've placed a restriction or two on his mana. The king must've neglected to do so because of his leniency toward him.

Well, given his dislike of reading, Prince Bernard probably didn't deliberately choose the forbidden library for their break. Plus it takes a fair amount of mana to open that door. This was just sloppy management!

Anyway, the main takeaway here was that Prince Bernard had invited Lady Mina into that off-limits room without regard for his responsibilities as royalty.

His eyes growing colder, Prince Edgar continued. "I secretly investigated the sudden outbreak with the help of a certain individual. Did you never stop to think about what caused it? And why Lady Mina Noreit, who craved attention more than anything

else, stopped appearing at social functions altogether?"

Lady Mina *did* love soirees. As a glamorous woman brimming with feminine charm, she relished having men flock around her. Now that I lived in Leeuwenhoek, I wasn't familiar with what she was like these days, but it certainly would have been unnatural if she'd stopped attending those events she'd loved so much.

"I thought she was staying away out of consideration, since she said she was leaving me for another man," Prince Bernard replied.

"That woman could never possess such modesty. If she did, she never would have thought of framing Miss Lucille with false allegations."

Wait, Lady Mina left Prince Bernard for another man?! I'm even more curious about that than the disease!

I had to show restraint, though. This was absolutely not the time to ask about relationship drama.

"Lady Mina Noreit vanished because the curse she carelessly dabbled in left her in no condition to appear in public," Prince Edgar explained. "All curses come with a price, after all. A mild one only costs mana, but Lady Noreit didn't have enough to pay for it. Thus, the curse's power overflowed, causing harm to people across the land. That was the origin of the disease."

"A curse? No, it can't be... Mina wouldn't..."

Sensing Lord Felix's body stiffen, I gently laid my hand over his.

I wasn't expecting a curse to be brought up in this context... It makes sense, though.

The symptoms in the capital had been less severe than in Leeuwenhoek, with the exception of Prince Bernard, whose condition had worsened to the point his life had been in danger. If the disease had resulted from Lady Mina's attempt to use a curse, then that explained why Prince Bernard had been the most severely affected; he'd been the closest to her.

"Bernard, you let that woman into the forbidden library, where she read a book about curses and tried to use one without any requisite knowledge, leading to the spread of a disease that sent our country into a crisis. Just because everyone was cured doesn't mean that any manner of 'all's well that ends well' will exonerate you of

this."

If this curse really was the cause of the disease, then Prince Bernard had committed a grave crime. His thoughtless actions as a member of the royal family had exposed the citizens to danger. Had anyone died, the death penalty indeed would have been on the table.

"W-Wait!" Lord Kanelion cried. "Why am I being punished too, then?!"

"You seem to be in remarkably good health, Lord Kanelion," Prince Edgar noted.

"Huh?"

"You were probably the first to contract the disease. After all, you were eager to do Lady Noreit's bidding since Bernard favored her. Then, you went to Leeuwenhoek, spreading the disease along the way. Leeuwenhoek is valuable to our national defense. Therefore, you are equally as guilty as Lady Noreit of deliberately trying to put our country in danger."

"What?! You have no proof! This is nothing but sophistry!"

Much of what Prince Edgar had said was in fact conjecture. While Lady Mina had committed a crime by attempting to use a curse, it wasn't as if she had intentionally tried to spread the disease, and Lord Kanelion had most likely been completely unaware.

However, that probably wasn't the true reason behind Prince Edgar's actions. He saw Prince Bernard and Lord Kanelion as obstacles to his reign. That was why he was doing this.

Well, it's an understandable decision for a ruler to make... Even if it was just an accident this time, if he allows them any power at all, they might cause real trouble someday.

"There may not be tangible evidence, but I already know the truth," Prince Edgar replied. "I hold the power, and that's all that matters."

Your Highness! That's something a dictator would say!

That thought aside, Prince Edgar seemed fully confident in his conclusion. Perhaps the collaborator he'd mentioned earlier had already helped him discover the truth behind the disease. I was curious about who that person was.

I thought back to when Lord Kanelion had appeared in Leeuwenhoek.

"Lord Kanelion, I recommend you shut your mouth."

"Eep!"

The viscount had faced Lord Felix's wrath after unknowingly hurling insults at me to my face.

"A-Anyway, I'll let Prince Bernard know that Lucille Gustelanola is receiving awful treatment in this accursed land as well!"

Just as I'd been about to say, "But *I'm* Lucille," he'd coughed a few times before saying, *"I-I seem to be feeling under the weather. I-I'll be taking my leave now!"* and speeding away.

G-Goodness! He was *coughing at the time! I thought he was putting on an act to get out of that situation, but it was actually a symptom of the disease?!*

Th-That's right. It seemed to take some time between the onset of symptoms and their increase in severity, with Leeuwenhoek being an exception because of the curse. So back then, it was already beginning...

In that case, that cat in the town we'd stopped by—the friend of the sick boy—might have been referring to Lord Kanelion when it had said, *"I can't believe that bad guy made that boy sick when he was already suffering!"*

In the end, Prince Bernard and Lord Kanelion were taken away by Prince Edgar's knights, Prince Bernard in a stupor while Lord Kanelion cried, "This is absurd!"

Apparently, they were going to be placed under house arrest and interrogated on the matter until their punishment was made official.

It all happened so fast. The unexpected reveals were surprises too.

As I watched Prince Edgar giving the knights instructions, stunned by what I had just learned, Lord Felix gave me a concerned look.

"Lucille, are you all right?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course."

Despite my response, his expression remained uneasy.

"Lucille... What do you think of Prince Bernard?"

Now that's an abrupt question. Prince Bernard, huh? Hmm...

"I feel a bit bad for him," I said. "He loved Lady Mina so much that he was constantly flirting with her in public, but she abandoned him."

After all, she'd told him she was leaving for another man, hadn't she? She was certainly attractive, but her next partner must've been quite brave to become her lover even after all of her public displays of affection with Prince Bernard. It wasn't any of my business, though, so that was the extent of my thoughts on the matter.

"Are you...hurt?" Lord Felix asked. "Prince Bernard treated you so horribly."

He was probably including the latest disaster in that statement. Prince Bernard had never treated me well to begin with, but today, a simple change in makeup, attire, and posture had been enough to prevent him from identifying me at all. It was proof of just how little interest and respect he'd held for me in the past.

However, today's debacle had only made me think, *Wow, that's pretty bad.* I'd been surprised by the prince's incompetence, but it hadn't affected me emotionally at all. That was because...

"To be honest, I never really cared about Prince Bernard anyway," I said. "As his fiancée, there were times I was annoyed with my situation or had to admonish him as my position necessitated, but I wouldn't say that I felt hurt by him."

In order for neglect to be painful, there had to be an expectation of the opposite. For example, if he had cherished me at first but later changed his mind and stopped paying attention to me, then that would have stung, and thinking back to the better days would've made me sad. However, there hadn't been any positive feelings between me and Prince Bernard from the get-go.

Heh heh! Too bad, Prince Bernard! It's impossible for you to hurt me!

Wait a second... Does thinking that way mean that I was also too apathetic toward my fiancé of several years?

"Did you not have feelings for Prince Bernard?" Lord Felix asked.

"What? Me? Are you suggesting that I might've been in love with him? Huh?! Never!"

Where in the world had he gotten that idea from? Under my father's orders, I'd certainly tried to *be* liked by Prince Bernard, but I'd never once loved him. After all, how could I love someone who didn't care about me?! There was no way I'd surrender a single sliver of my heart to him when I already had other people who treasured me.

Oh, but then again, Hinako always said that romantic love isn't something you "do," but something you "fall into."

I'd loved and been loved by a whole host of people, but I'd never actually experienced those kinds of romantic feelings. If I were to fall in love someday, would those feelings swell up, overflow, and hold me captive, even if the person wasn't interested in me at all?

Hmm, I can't imagine it. Besides, Hinako was a dreamer, so she was prone to flights of fancy.

"I see... So the rumors weren't to be trusted. Well, if you weren't interested in him, that's good," Lord Felix muttered under his breath while running a hand through his hair.

I didn't really understand what he meant, but he seemed relieved, so it was probably fine. Perhaps Prince Edgar's sudden mention of a curse had made him nervous.

"Oh, but just now, I finally witnessed Prince Bernard display one of his good qualities!" I said, remembering something.

"The prince has good qualities? And you noticed that just now?" Lord Felix looked skeptical.

Beaming, I replied, "It sounds like Lady Mina dumped him in a pretty bad way, and on top of that, he's losing his royal title because of what she did, right? Even though he *is* responsible and deserves to be punished."

"Yes, that's right."

"But he never once spoke poorly of her."

I'd expected the prideful and self-centered prince to be outraged by Lady Mina's betrayal, but instead, he'd merely been dumbfounded. He hadn't bad-mouthed her, and it didn't seem like he would in the future either.

It had slightly improved my opinion of him. There was no denying that he had been an awful fiancé to me, but at least he did have a

respectful side that I had never been aware of.

No matter how many bad memories you have, if you know just one good thing about someone, that's what you'll end up remembering the most when you think back later.

It still wasn't going to make me fall in love with him, though.

I'm just glad he isn't going to remain a purely negative memory forever.

As my head filled with those lighthearted thoughts, Prince Edgar returned to his seat.

"Sorry about all of that," he said. "I wanted you to know the truth behind the disease. Now, let's move on. Miss Lucille, what would you like as your reward?"

Right, that's why we're here!

I looked Prince Edgar in the eye. "I would like to speak with the Great Sage Elios. If you have a means of contacting him, would you please ask him to grant me an audience?"

Of course, it was possible that he didn't have any way to connect with him, and even if he did, it was also possible that he would refuse. In those cases, I would negotiate for information instead and rethink the plan later.

"Oh? I'm surprised you know about Mr. Elios," Prince Edgar replied nonchalantly. "I thought he'd be excluded from the curriculum for those marrying into the royal family."

His words confirmed Lord Felix's suspicion that information had been withheld from my princess training. And judging by the way he spoke, it seemed extremely likely that Prince Edgar *had* a connection to the great sage!

Please let me meet him!

"What a timely request, though," the prince continued. "He happens to be at the castle right now. If you're not in a hurry, perhaps you could meet him before returning to Leeuwenhoek?"

His response far exceeded my expectations.

Wait, what? Huuuh?! I thought the great sage hardly ever shows his face to the masses. Should you really be letting me meet him so easily?!

"Um, I heard that the Great Sage Elios rarely makes public

appearances," I said. My source of information was my dear friend, Lady Alice, who was obsessed with the Champions of Destiny. She'd said it was a famous story, so I'd assumed it was common knowledge.

Prince Edgar nodded. "That's right. The royal family has been aware of his whereabouts and movements, but he never wished to meet with us until now. For some reason, he seems to have taken an interest in the disease. It was also he who helped us determine that Lady Mina Noreit's curse was the cause."

What?! The collaborator he mentioned was Great Sage Elios all along?!

"He's still at the castle now, though?" I asked.

"Yes. I suppose it'd be better to tell you everything. I didn't mention it earlier out of consideration for Bernard; it would've been too cruel. However, the truth is that Miss Noreit hasn't been able to appear in public because the curse rebounded on her. She's currently being confined within the castle. The target of her curse was you, Miss Lucille."

"What?!"

M-Me? Lady Mina was trying to curse me*?*

A rebound was when the user of a curse ended up suffering the curse's effects themselves, either because they failed to cast it or because the curse had been lifted and had backfired on them.

My best guess was that Lady Mina's curse had rebounded because Saint Clarissa's magic protected me from minor curses. Not only that, but considering that the disease was the result of Lady Mina not having enough mana to compensate for the curse's cost, there was simply no way she could have overcome Saint Clarissa's power. Lady Mina must have carelessly tried to use the curse despite not knowing how it worked.

Still, why had she wanted to curse me? I'd already been sent to the borderlands, and Prince Bernard hated me with a passion. She was never going to see me again anyway, so she could have just left me alone.

As if reading my mind, Prince Edgar continued, "It seems she heard you were enjoying your new life in Leeuwenhoek and couldn't

allow it."

"Um... Even though it was happening in a place that had nothing to do with her?"

I had indeed been enjoying myself, but why would that have mattered to Lady Mina at all?

"I doubt Miss Noreit seriously had feelings for Bernard," Prince Edgar explained. "She was probably just jealous of you. That's why she got close to your fiancé and tried to frame you with false allegations. Once you were gone, she ran off with another man. Such foolishness."

I tilted my head in confusion.

Lady Mina was beautiful, glamorous, and bubbly. At social gatherings, she'd always been surrounded by people, and I'd heard that she was cherished by her parents. As the daughter of a baron, her status might not have been that high, but that seemed like a trivial matter in the grand scheme of things.

So what could she possibly have envied about me? Sure, my life was good now, but I didn't think I'd been particularly happy before I'd regained Lilybell's memories.

"You see, people who are truly happy aren't distracted by the happiness of others," Prince Edgar said. "They devote their time to treasuring their own happiness and aren't concerned with finding things to envy in other people. When I look at you, I'm reminded of that fact."

Hmm, is he trying to say something like "You seem happy, and that's all that matters"? If so, I can say with confidence, "Yes, I am!"

Lady Mina probably had circumstances that only she could understand. I wasn't her, so it was only natural that I didn't know why she had done such a thing. I only hoped that she could have someone by her side who truly knew her heart. Since she obviously wouldn't want me to fulfil that role, all I could do was leave her to solve her own problems.

I wouldn't be thinking that if she'd really succeeded, though. I can only let this slide because I didn't even realize she was trying to curse me.

Prince Edgar cleared his throat. "Anyway, the great sage agreed

to lift the curse on Miss Noreit."

"Huh? He can lift curses?" *I should've expected as much from someone called a great sage!*

Prince Edgar explained that since Sir Elios was already at the castle, we could speak with him as long as we kept our visit short.

"But even if he's making an exception to help you, he doesn't normally like to be seen, does he? Would he be okay with having a sudden meeting with me and Lord Felix?"

"Yes, it should be fine. He showed interest in the person who created the medicine, so I imagine he'd be happy to meet with you. Actually, if I asked but he whined and said no, it'd be problematic, so it'd be better for you to just go see him without prior notice."

Is it really okay to do that to someone so renowned? Also, "whined"? Prince Edgar makes him sound like a selfish little child.

Puzzled, I inquired further about Sir Elios's temperament.

However, all Prince Edgar said was a mischievous "Look forward to it. I'm sure he'll surprise you."

Just what kind of person is the Great Sage Elios?

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According to Prince Edgar, Sir Elios had said that he was almost finished with removing Lady Mina's curse, so we could go see him immediately. We decided to take him up on his offer.

"This is rather sudden," Lord Felix murmured, bewildered.

It really was. I hadn't expected it to be so easy to meet the great sage! Doing favors for the royal family always paid off.

Also, to think that Sir Elios had taken interest in the disease and offered the royal family his help! Every cloud really did have a silver lining. Well, it definitely would've been better if the disease hadn't spread in the first place, though.

As we walked to the room where Sir Elios was working on Lady Mina's curse, I tried to conjure an image of the great sage. From his title, I imagined an elderly man with white hair and a long beard.

Tee hee! It reminds me of the "mountain hermits" Hinako once told me about.

If I recalled correctly, the great sage lived alone in a tall structure called the Magic Tower. Perhaps he was a thin, pale, and shadowy man, then? But what if he was actually big and muscular to the point where you'd want to say, "Wouldn't he excel at using physical strength rather than magic?" Prince Edgar had assured me that I would be surprised, so I couldn't help but let my fantasies run wild.

Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of someone passing through a distant corridor. I gasped.

That was—

I couldn't overlook this.

"Prince Edgar, Lord Felix, please go ahead without me," I said. "And if Sir Elios tries to leave, please hold him back for me!"

"Huh? Miss Lucille?"

"Where are you going, Lucille?!"

Their surprised voices echoed behind me as I gave chase. Naturally, I was followed by the knight Prince Edgar had assigned to guard me.

I'm so lucky I can cut across this garden straight from the castle. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to try to run after her. Actually, I guess I wouldn't have spotted her in the first place.

Had she come through the garden herself? That beautiful strawberry blonde hair blowing in the wind, that slender frame, and that bright aura, like a flower dancing in the breeze... I'd only spotted her for a brief moment, but it couldn't be anyone else. Though we'd never met in real life, I'd seen her many times, all while bearing undeniable emotions toward her. She was a special person I would never forget.

That was Elvira Larache! Lord Felix's fated heroine!

However, when I reached the corridor she had disappeared into, and I turned the corner, I found no one there. Where had she gone?

Though even if I met Elvira now, I wouldn't be able to do anything...

My prophetic dreams only ever showed me events within a certain time frame, and not just that, but they only showed me them from my future self's point of view. I had no way of knowing what I didn't know in the dream.

In other words, I didn't know where and how Elvira and Lord Felix were to meet.

In my dream, they were already in an intimate relationship. The only clue to their meeting that I have is the anger I felt toward Elvira.

Either way, she was supposed to appear about a year into my marriage, so it couldn't be happening now. Still, for some reason, I'd felt compelled to chase after her.

But in the end, I lost sight of her...

Well, so be it. Besides, even if I *had* caught up with her, what would I have done? I knew that without my interference, Elvira would eventually meet Lord Felix and save him—not necessarily from his curse but from his wounded heart, which the curse had weakened and made timid. I had faith that that fate would remain the same even if I lifted Lord Felix's curse myself.

"I'm very sorry for acting on my own," I said to the knight. "We can go back now."

Naturally, the knight looked confused. It really had been wrong of me to run off like that.

I went back the way I came, and the knight guided me to my original destination.

As we approached, I noticed the entire floor before me had been enchanted; a noble was being confined here under special circumstances, after all. I honed my senses and examined the spell.

Soundproofing, shock absorption, intruder detection, and so on... Hmm, nothing particularly complicated here.

Since Lord Felix and Prince Edgar were already inside the room, I hurried in that direction, but the moment I stepped into the area affected by the spell, I felt a powerful force spiral across my skin like an electric shock.

What was that? I frowned. *The curse...has already been lifted, hasn't it? I don't think this is related to that, anyway.*

The knight didn't seem to feel anything. However, the second he opened the door to the room, an even stronger force blasted out as if from a storm.

"Huh?!"

Lady Mina was crouched in a corner of the room while Prince Edgar knelt at her side. They appeared to be preparing for battle.

Lord Felix had taken a position before them, guarding the two with a magical barrier.

I didn't know Lord Felix could use protective magic! He looks like he's struggling, though.

I turned my attention to the source of the force that Lord Felix was fending off and saw a boy cowering in the center of the large room, an enormous amount of mana swirling around him.

A mana outburst.

Umm, what did I just walk into? What happened here? And where did the Great Sage Elios go?!

"N-Ngh...agh..."

The sound of groaning brought me back to my senses.

Save the thinking for later! I need to help that boy! He looks like he's in a lot of pain!

I rushed toward him.

"Lucille!" Lord Felix shouted.

Meeting his gaze, I gave him a reassuring nod.

I'll be fine, Lord Felix. If anything, I'm more worried about you, with all that sweat and the way you're grimacing. There's so much mana overflowing from that boy that it's repelling you.

This really won't be a problem for me, so please hang in there just a bit longer!

I reached the boy, settled onto my knees beside him, and drew him into a soft hug.

"Don't worry," I said. "It'll calm down soon."

The boy flinched at my touch but didn't shy away from my embrace. I gently patted him the way my beloved owners had pet me on nights I couldn't fall asleep.

I'll continue to live with these memories of being loved, making sure to pass on this happiness to others in my current life as a human being.

Before long, the overflowing mana began to abate. The boy slowly raised his trembling face and looked at me, anxiety reflected in his watery eyes.

Then, he murmured...
“Lilybell?”



Behind the Scenes of “Engaging with the Plot”

✵ A Delightful Lucille Watch Party with the Champions of Destiny

A solemn atmosphere hung in the air of the pure-white space. Surrounding it was a sort of fog, creating a tangible divide that cut it off from the rest of the world.

In the center of this area, there was a large round table covered in white cloth with four women and three men in chairs around it.

Isolated from the laws of the world, this was a special place where the seven inhabitants were all ardent Lilybell adorers—each known to humanity as a Champion of Destiny, a title that was famous even to this day.

They sat clockwise in the order in which they had met Lilybell. First was Great Witch Alys, followed by Great Saint Clarissa, Matthew the chef and S-rank adventurer, Conrad the merchant and alchemist, Roselia the princess of a large nation, Hinako the otherworlder, and Efren the hero.

The Champions of Destiny peered into the large crystal that floated in the center of the table, surrounded by rippling water. It displayed scenes of Lucille, who had just regained her memories of her past life and was about to begin experimenting with her newfound freedom.

The raven-haired Hinako exclaimed, “Ahhhhhh! Lulu is so precious! Every time I see her, I just wanna squeal! Since Lilybell was such a smol and adorable cat, it’s only natural that her human form would be the cutest thing ever!”

Her loud and cheerful voice pierced the surrounding calm, and her long black hair lashed about as she shook her head in excitement.

Sitting prim and proper, Clarissa gave the girl an icy look from her seat diagonally across from Hinako as she lifted her teacup with perfect poise.

"Lady Hinako, please calm down. I know it is inevitable for one to lose their composure upon seeing my sweet little girl, but please, mind your manners. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Lilybell to live with you," Clarissa said with a dramatic sigh.

Hinako pouted. "I can't pretend I didn't hear that, Saint Clarissa! What do you mean, 'my sweet little girl'?"

"Why, I meant exactly that, oho ho ho!"

Conrad stuck his hands out between the two women in an attempt to broker some peace.

"Now, now, let's all get along, okay?" he said. "We all love Lilybell and her reincarnation from the bottom of our hearts, which means we're on the same side...right?"

He was desperate to placate them because he couldn't stand tense atmospheres, preferring the serenity of harmony. It was for this same reason that he was trying so hard to keep his true feelings from surfacing, lest he accidentally blurt out, "*I'm* Lucille's favorite."

"Yeah, Lucille considers each of us family, doesn't she?" Matthew chimed in. "If we're all her family, then that makes us family with each other too! Ha ha ha ha!" He crossed his arms and laughed boisterously, proud of his logic.

On the outside, if one compared Matthew to the other champions who saw each other as rivals in their obsession over Lilybell—and by extension, Lucille—it seemed like Matthew's attitude was much more welcoming. No one suspected that he was only saying that because in his heart, he was thinking, *If this were one big family, I'd be the dad and Lucille would be the youngest daughter, right? That means she'd love* me *the most. Any daughter would love a father who spoils her rotten, after all!*

"Haven't we already fought enough?" Roselia asked. "In the end, we agreed to drop this subject because if we start arguing over who

loves Lilybell the most, war will break out. I believe it was Saint Clarissa at fault this time! Anyway, isn't Lord Felix quite the catch?" She rested her cheek on her hand and gazed longingly into the crystal, which was in the middle of depicting Lucille and Felix's first meeting. "I wish I could be there with Lucille, gushing over that hunk! It's too bad his attitude toward her is unacceptable."

"Uh, Princess Roselia, you've got a hunk right here," Efren interjected. "You don't have to pine over a projection of some guy in a crystal; that's just depressing. I could hold you in my arms and whisper sweet nothings in your ear right now."

"Sorry, not interested. I've had enough of that kind of thing."

Before her death, Roselia had been a woman of many lovers. Although she had been renowned for her beauty, her eye for men hadn't been quite as blessed. As a result, she'd already learned that nothing good came out of fraternizing with smooth talkers like Efren.

Either way, she loved Lilybell first and foremost. Efren was her rival in that sense, so she wouldn't have so much as batted an eyelash in his direction.

Efren had enjoyed immense popularity in his time as a hero, but he had also been a womanizer, through and through. Lilybell had lost count of how many times she'd been fed up with his antics.

Clarissa's blunt rejection didn't faze the experienced man. He smiled nonchalantly, turned his attention back to the crystal, and squinted at the image of Lucille.

Today, Lucille had moved to Leeuwenhoek. She'd just realized she'd been left to her own devices and was beginning to explore the detached house.

"This country's prince is such an idiot," Efren said. "My Lucille is beautiful, sweet, *and* powerful. What's there not to like about her? And Felix Leeuwenhoek isn't any better. You just won't find any other woman on Lucille's level—I've been asked out by noble ladies all over the continent, so I'd know."

"One strike for Efren!" Hinako shouted. "Don't ever say the words 'my Lucille' again!"

"Aha ha, sorry, Hina. I didn't mean to say that out loud."

Realizing that no one at the table had any intention of yielding,

Conrad the peace-seeker gave a weak sigh. “Sleeping with Lilybell in my arms was the greatest comfort at times like this...”

“Whoa, looks like Lucille’s cooking!” Matthew exclaimed. “She’s pretty good for a first-timer. Must’ve been from all that time she spent watching me. That’s my daughter!”

“Oh my gosh, look!” Hinako squealed. “Those are the pastries I used to make all the time! She remembered how to make them!”

Some time later, Clarissa gave a satisfied nod. “Ah, Lucille has identified God’s love for Lady Alice. That girl’s heart has joined the many that have been saved by Lucille. In time, it will become purer and more beautiful. Lucille truly is a noble being, bringing salvation to all with her mere presence ever since her Lilybell days.”

“Well, yeah!” Hinako replied. “Cats are adorable, so they have value just by existing! Since Lucille knows that, she remains beloved even as a human.”

Conrad was relieved that the arguing had finally ended. However, the next moment, he sprang out of his seat. “Look, look! That’s *my* panacea formula that Lucille’s using to save everyone! But man, she really is extraordinary, huh? I mean, she always was, but I’ve never seen medicine that makes your body glow! That’s a miracle that happened ’cause she poured so much of her special mana into it. She seems to be attributing its effectiveness to me, but my stuff never turned out like that. It’s basically a whole new creation at this point.”

While the other champions were boasting about how Lucille was making use of what she’d learned from them, Roselia gave a satisfied laugh and said, “Why, it looks like Lord Felix couldn’t resist Lucille’s charms after all! I suspected it from the moment he was peeping at her from the shadows. It seems he was late to realize his feelings due to his inexperience with love. Oh, he just discouraged that knight who’s crushing on Lucille! That’s so cute!”

“Whoa, you’re right! Lucille’s super popular!” Hinako exclaimed. “But...this isn’t gonna be an easy romance for Lord Felix, is it?” she murmured glumly.

Roselia tilted her head. “Oh? Why is that?”

The way Roselia saw it, although Lucille was even less

experienced in love than Felix—and the scenes they'd seen so far had proven she was incredibly dense—Felix seemed to be trying quite hard to earn her favor, and frankly, he was wearing his heart on his sleeve. Roselia imagined their relationship would work out nicely in time, after their feelings developed further. It helped that Lucille seemed smitten with Felix's appearance.

However, as Roselia explained her view, Efren interjected with a know-it-all look on his face, "That's not the problem, though. Think about the ridiculous amount of love everyone showered Lucille with back when she was Lilybell. We spoiled her rotten and then some. So Lucille's used to being loved—*too* used to it."

"Oh!" Roselia now understood the issue. "So small gestures of affection won't be enough for her to realize it's a *special* kind of love! Oh no... This is going to be really difficult for Lord Felix. Poor guy... But honestly, I also think it's an intriguing scenario, tee hee!"

In contrast to Roselia's excitement, Conrad was holding his head in sympathy. "I see... Felix's job got a lot harder because of us..."

"Well, it's also his own fault for getting off to a bad start," Efren replied. "Besides, if he wants to be with our lovely Lucille, he'd better be able to overcome an obstacle or two, right?"

"That's true," everyone agreed with a nod.

While this lively conversation was occurring, Clarissa turned to Alys—who had yet to utter a single word—and asked, "Lady Alys, what do you think about all of this?"

Alys gave Clarissa a disapproving look, as if to say, *Why ask the obvious?* She then turned up her nose. "Lilybell is a supreme being—the symbol of happiness and the key to destiny. Whichever path she chooses is the correct one, with no room for argument. So I don't care who she falls in love with or how that Felix fellow tries to win her over. However, there is one thing I must say to all of you." She smirked at the other Champions. "It's because of me that you were able to meet Lilybell! You ought to be grateful!"

Everyone else gasped at her words. Indeed, if Alys hadn't given Lilybell such a long lifespan, none of them would have ever encountered their beloved feline companion.

Alys's spirited laughter echoed loudly in the white, boisterous

space.

☼ Alice's Thawed Heart

"Big sister Lucille! I, Alice, have come to visit!" I declared as I burst into the room.

My beloved big sister Lucille stood up and welcomed me with a wide smile. I was so happy; I jumped into her arms and nuzzled my face against her.

As she patted my head gently, she giggled. "You really are a spoiled child, Lady Alice."

Her soft demeanor made me think, *She's like a goddess!* Still, I asked, "Do you dislike me that much?"

"Of course not! You're sweet and charming. You're my dear friend!"

Until I met big sister Lucille, I'd never known the joy of imploring someone for a loving response while being absolutely assured that I wouldn't be denied.

For the record, she was the one who made me this way, okay? It would've been unthinkable for my past self. After all, there hadn't been anyone in my life who *would* spoil me, so I never knew how to ask for it.

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Before meeting big sister Lucille, I'd thought of my home as a placid nightmare. I wasn't abused, but the disappointment in my family's eyes and the air of resignation and disinterest had slowly eaten away at my heart.

Thinking about it now, in a way, it had been extremely cruel. If they'd said or done something to me, I could have complained or fought back. But since they hadn't—as they'd only said, "It's nothing"—I hadn't been able to do anything to protect myself.

I was the normal child, born after my gifted brother and sister. While my siblings had been praised to the skies, I had been treated

as if I were invisible. It'd been suffocating.

Sometimes I'd wonder if I was being unreasonably pessimistic. Those thoughts had stopped me from venting my emotions, compounding my suffering.

But now, things were different. After meeting big sister Lucille, the dull ache in my heart had disappeared. In situations where my past self would've wanted to cry from the pain, I instead heard her voice in my head.

For example, if I overheard my elder brother being praised for his brilliant research, I'd hear big sister Lucille say, "Oh my, Lady Alice! You're usually so energetic; it's a surprise to see you sitting down with a pen and paper. You look so adorably intellectual!"

She was the kind of free spirit who would start complimenting me about something completely different from what I was actually doing. The first time it'd happened, I'd asked her, "Wouldn't you normally praise me on how much I studied or my level of comprehension?"

Her reply had been, "Was that weird of me? I was just voicing my reaction out loud... Namely, 'How cute and wonderful!' Sorry, I should've put some thought into it."

Her unfiltered thoughts had been words of praise for me. My shock at that moment had been indescribable.

As another example, if I was watching my elder sister being commended for helping people in need with her magic, I'd hear big sister Lucille say, "I feel energized when I'm with you, Lady Alice. Is it because you're so fun to talk to? Just being with you makes me happy!"

Unlike my real sister, I had a lot of time on my hands, but if big sister Lucille was around, she'd turn my downtime into a lively chat, eagerly listening to what I had to say. However, I knew I wasn't as great of a storyteller as she made me out to me. It was actually her carrying the conversation by finding something interesting in every story I told.

Something surprising happened at one point, though. I hadn't noticed because she was always such an attentive listener with me, but apparently there were times she didn't pay attention to what

people were saying at all. I heard her complain about some obnoxious nobleman who came to Leeuwenhoek, only to not remember a thing about him later! According to her, she quickly forgot about anything she wasn't interested in, and if she didn't care about someone, their words went in one ear and out the other.

However, she remembered everything I said, no matter how trivial. She probably didn't think much of it, but it made me want to cry tears of joy.

So this is what it's like to be treasured...to be acknowledged just for existing. Even though I'm not being praised for anything I accomplished, I still feel seen.

I now laughed at situations that used to make my heart ache.

Heh heh heh! If big sister Lucille were here, I just know she'd give me some kind of superpositive compliment. She's so offbeat!

The pain in my chest was gone. No more searching for my worth and drowning in insecurity. My house didn't feel like a nightmare anymore, even though I was still the same ordinary child for whom nobody held any expectations. The only change was that big sister Lucille had set my heart free.

Also, I have a special power! I feel like I've gotten ahead of the rest of my family!

Wait, am I a bad girl for thinking that way?

Worried, I asked big sister Lucille, who beamed at me and said, "Ooh, you're getting ahead of them! That's so exciting!"

Oh...so I'm allowed to be excited.

Big sister Lucille was whimsical, full of smiles, and great at pampering me. But because she was so free-spirited, I sometimes felt that she was similar to a cat. Was it because I always saw her talking to them? Actually, how *was* she able to do that?

She really is charming and mysterious! Could she have been a cat in her past life? Heh heh heh, as if!

☼ Maouldoth Wants to Play

Lucille the white-cat-turned-human was insensitive.

Even as Lilybell, she'd been fickle and freewheeling. I wanted to keep her with me forever, but I could never catch her. It was so annoying. And now that she'd become a human, she paid even less attention to me! Just what was the meaning of this?

Unsatisfied, I repeatedly sent Lucille telepathic messages. She wasn't replying, so I'd just have to keep sending them until she gave in!

"Lucille, when are you gonna visit me next?"

"Hey, don't ignore me."

"You know, if I wanted to, I could break this seal anytime!"

"Ugh, fine! If you come right now, I'll let you touch my shiniest scale."

"I'm only inviting you over 'cause I figure you're probably lonely!"

"Um...do you feel like visiting yet?"

I kept doing that, day after day, but she never responded. What was up with that? How could she be *that* heartless?

I mean, she should have been better at dark magic now than she had been as Lilybell, right? Master Alys's spells were obviously going to be easier to use with a human body than a cat one.

In contrast, I was an almighty dragon. In other words, since I held too much power, it took a high level of precision to use human magic. Think about it: A human wouldn't be able to wash an ant's face, right? Not when it's smaller than their finger. What I was doing was just as impossible as that. To make things even harder, dark magic had always been my weakest attribute. I was an absolute genius, and I wished more people would realize that.

Anyway, this super amazing dragon learned how to send telepathic messages just to call Lilybell over. After all, I'd told her that I'd forgive her if she visited at least every other day, but I knew that if I let her be, she'd easily ignore me for a year or more. She really was coldhearted.

That said, when she finally showed up, I didn't voice my complaints. I wanted us to have fun together, so I welcomed her arrival. However...

"So I'm wondering if I can use this trip to the capital to find a way to meet the great sage," Lucille said.

"I see."

"Hey, are you listening to me? I'm talking about the great sage! He's a big shot, you know. I can't wait to see what he's like! Well, I don't know if I'll actually get to meet him, though."

"I see."

"Oh, come on. What's with those apathetic responses?"

What do you expect? I don't care.

Since Lucille's here at last, I figured I'd be nice and play with her. So why should I have to listen to her ramble about some random guy I don't know? Surely there's something else we can talk about. You know, like me, Lucille, or me and Lucille! We could also play a game, like seeing who can find the most little bugs. Or we could eat poisonous mushrooms and compete to see who gives in and cleanses the poison first!

I wish she'd be more considerate of my feelings, I thought, silently curling up into a ball.

The unsympathetic witch continued on, not caring at all. Since our mana was linked, I couldn't hide the fact that all of my normal threats were mere bluffs. It was even harder now that Lucille had consumed a bit of my mana.

I casually sniffed at her.

Good, I can still smell my scent in her mana.

My mana wouldn't fade from her easily—it'd probably last around two thousand years—but I had to check every time I saw her, just in case.

"Oh, but if I do get to meet the great sage, how should I introduce myself to him?" Lucille continued.

Seriously, what was so exciting about that guy? Lilybell's owners had all had fancy titles too, like great witch, saint, hero... Besides, I could say with confidence that I was *way* more amazing, more strong, more important, more noble, and more cool than that great sage!

"I want to leave an impression, you know? How about... 'I don't ever get sick!' I guess that lacks a bit of oomph... What if I show off my best spells?! Well...they probably aren't as good as the great sage's. Oh, I know! I'll tell him I'm best friends with a dragon! What

do you think of that?”

“Huh?”

“Then again, that doesn’t say anything about my own talents...”

W-Wait. She’s already moving on, but didn’t she say something crazy just now? “Best friends”? Did she say “best friends”? With me? The almighty dragon Maouldoth? Huh?

I knew that in human terms, best friends were something special. I wasn’t an expert on friendship since we dragons didn’t really hang out with our own kind, but if I was special to her, that basically meant she wanted to be with me forever, right?!

“Well, if you insist, I’ll let you brag about being best friends with me,” I said.

“‘My hobby is sunbathing!’ Okay, I guess that isn’t impressive at all. Wait, Maouldoth, did you say something?”

“Why are you like this...?”

I’m so tired of this. If she’s this insensitive, she must not have any other friends. I’d feel bad abandoning her.

Ahhh, if only my seal had different effects. I don’t care about being shrunken or having my power reduced to less than half, but at least let me move around. Then I could be with Lucille more often. Actually, if I became a human, would I be able to stay with her for even longer?

While Lucille was bigger than Lilybell had been, her body was still small and frail. She could easily be obliterated. As Hinako used to say, I had to protect her!

“All of this talking is making me hungry! I don’t want to go home just yet, though. Maouldoth, give me a bit of your tail!”

“For the last time, I’m not food!”

I heard that! She doesn’t want to go home yet! That means she wants to stay here with me!

Heh heh heh, she should be more honest. Not everyone is as attentive as I am, after all. I guess I have no choice but to keep being her friend! Heh heh, heh heh heh!

☼ Lilybell the Charismatic Cat

I walked gracefully, my chin elegantly held high. Each step was silent yet conjured the image of a ringing bell.

Wherever my presence graces, everyone turns to look at me, drawn in by my glossy fur, long and fluffy tail, dainty mouth, and cute, slightly dewy nose. Here comes the most noble, sweet, beautiful, adorable, and charismatic cat in the world!

Hm? You wish to know my name? Well then, permission is hereby granted for you to call me by the most special name in the world!

"Meow!"

My name is Lilybell! The charismatic white cat, Lilybell!

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"Huh? A kitty you've never seen before, calling herself the charismatic white cat Lilybell, has come here to play?"

I couldn't help but repeat Jack's words back to him, wanting to confirm each fact. He'd come to me while I was cooking in my kitchen, and according to him, this "Lilybell" was making a fuss because she wanted a proper welcome. Jack was calling for me on behalf of the other cats, who were at their wits' end.

If it's a proper welcome she wants, it's a proper welcome she'll get!

Some cats didn't like receiving attention, so I appreciated that this one was making her wishes clear. Besides, I was very good at making cats feel welcome!

Still, a charismatic white cat named Lilybell? She sounds just like my past self! What if she even has blue eyes?!

I picked up my prototype "secret weapon" from the table and headed for the backyard to greet Lilybell.

It's a good thing I made this! Now's the time to try it out! I'm sure this charismatic white kitty cat will love it, tee hee!

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Goodness, how can these cats be so inconsiderate?! Lilybell has come to play with you! Lilybell said these cats would be allowed to

welcome me, but they said they had to ask their boss, and now they're ignoring me! What is the meaning of this?!

As my frustration mounted, the cats suddenly raised a commotion.

Wh-What?

"Meooow!"

"Mreow!"

"Myaaa!"

Y-Yikes...

Their frolicking had me quite taken aback.

W-Well, it's good to be energetic.

Anyway, has their boss finally arrived? Heh heh! With this many underlings to rule over, their boss must be a big, imposing, cool, dependable, and charming tomcat! Lilybell can't say for sure until Lilybell sees him, but if he meets my standards, Lilybell will allow him to form a mated pair with me!

Huh? You don't know what a mated pair is? Ugh, cats can be so ignorant. You probably don't even know who Lilybell is, do you? In some places, you'd be scorned by the whole feline community for not knowing the charismatic white cat Lilybell!

Fine, Lilybell has no choice but to explain it in laycat's terms. A mated pair is a lifelong exclusive bond! You could call it destiny. Naturally, both partners must think of each other as their special one-and-only.

For example, dragons, creatures of legend, normally don't associate with their own kind, but once they meet their fated mate, they never want to leave each other's side. Tee hee, isn't that romantic? There, now you've become a little smarter.

As I internally addressed these cats' ignorance, I noticed an unfamiliar mana frequency approaching.

It's getting closer... Wait, what is this? It's terrifying! It's like a natural disaster concentrated into one enormous well of mana, and it's heading my way! Uh, hang on. What is Lilybell supposed to do here? Why do you guys look so unconcerned?!

H-Help! I'm scared!

"Mreeeeow!"

Just as I tried to hide my face behind my front paws, my body was hoisted up.

"Meow? Oh my, what's gotten you so frightened? Were these guys mean to you? Tee hee, you really are adorable!"

Wait, it's a human! What?! The boss of this place is a human?! Huh? "We've been trying to tell you that she's not our boss, she's Lucille"? Lilybell doesn't care about the woman's name! She's human, and a female one at that! This is preposterous!

"Mreow! Yeow!"

Whaaat?! Wait a second, that abnormal mana is coming from this human! Who is she? She's human, but she's the cats' boss and a natural disaster... Uh, she's also making a really dumb face.

Although there was no doubt that she possessed immense mana, I could tell that she had no intent to harm me.

W-Well, of course she wouldn't. Lilybell is the charismatic white cat, a beautiful holy beast that even champions can't help but love! Lilybell bets even dragons would bow to my cuteness!

"Meooow!"

"Yes, yes. I can't tell what you're saying when you're so excited, so let's calm down a bit, shall we? Don't worry, I'll give you a warm welcome!"

"Meow."

Hmph! Show me what you've got, then! Let's see how this human welcomes the almighty Lilybell!

As the human walked, carrying me in her arms, the other cats meowed sweetly at her, saying things like "That's not fair! Carry me too!" and "Pet me, pet me!" However, the human only gave them a few quick pats, telling them that I had priority.

"Meooow!"

"Tee hee, sorry. I want to welcome our guest today, so I'll cuddle with you guys another time, okay? Huh? You're all going to bury me again? Is that a threat? Aww, so cute! Go right ahead!"

H-Hmph, Lilybell supposes you aren't so bad. Lilybell respects how you make it clear that Lilybell comes first!

We proceeded a bit farther into the backyard and arrived at a very pleasant area with a lot of sun exposure.

Lilybell understands! This is the perfect spot for sunbathing!

"We're here! Let's relax, shall we?"

The human settled down right on top of the bare grass.

Um, this is a pretty big house, and the people here are well-dressed. Aren't you some kind of noblewoman? Should you really be sitting down here?

"Don't worry! It's such a nice day. Doesn't the warm grass feel great?"

Well, that's true. If you're fine with it, so is Lilybell, but...

Still smiling, the human peered into my face and said nonchalantly, "Oh, your eyes are green, not blue."

She definitely wasn't looking down on me, but her words sent me into a rage nonetheless.

"Mreooow!"

So what if they're green instead of blue?! Is that a bad thing?! H-Hey, you have blue eyes! Is that why you're making fun of me?!

Faced with the full wrath of my fury, the human beamed and said, "No, your green eyes are super cute too! They sparkle like jewels, so precious! They're like emeralds! But at the same time, they have a sweetness that makes me want to gobble them up. Oh gosh, I think I'm about to die from cuteness overload!"

H-Huh? So you do *understand my greatness?*

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I'd always thought Hinako had a strange way of expressing herself, using phrases like "dying of cuteness overload." But after becoming Lucille, I understood the feeling very well.

Really, how can this cat be so smol and adorable?!

I'd also learned what she meant by "touching something that's too cute turns one into a fool" soon after moving to Leeuwenhoek. When your heart is aflutter, it's hard to come up with anything other than the most basic words.

I'm sorry, Hinako. Everything you said was right!

Oh, I should share this finding with Maouldoth. He used to call Hinako the weirdest person to ever walk the land.

"Meooow! (And, you know, since Lilybell is the cutest thing in the world, even dragons bow before me!)"

"Yes, I'm sure they would!"

Indeed, Maouldoth was no match for me. Well, he didn't bow down to me, but it was close enough, right?

Wait, does this Lilybell have a dragon friend too? What a coincidence! She really is similar to me when I was Lilybell!

"Mreooow! (Lilybell was doted on by champions as their favorite cat!)"

"Wow, that's amazing!"

My owners were also champions—although I didn't know that until recently. I can't believe we even have that in common!

Also, the way she talks in the third person is sooo cute.

Since the cat kept saying "Lilybell" this, "Lilybell" that, at some point, my brain got muddled up and started thinking she was talking about me. It didn't help that her experiences were strikingly similar to mine.

"Meooow! (So Lilybell should be respected more than anyone else. Nobody can go against Lilybell! Everyone has to do what Lilybell says!)"

"Um, that's not right."

"M-Meow?"

In my confusion, I denied her claim.

"It's true that Lilybell was highly respected," I said. "I was rarely treated with disdain, but that was because people loved me. There was never any rule saying that they had to listen to what I said."

In fact, since my owners had been so strong and individualistic, I had usually been the one reluctantly going along with their crazy antics. That said, it hadn't necessarily been a bad thing. Wouldn't anyone be happy to be pushed around by someone they loved? Even if it made you say, "Goodness, you're so irresponsible!" wouldn't it feel special to be depended on in their time of need?

Suddenly, I realized what I'd done. *Oh no, I thought Lilybell was talking about me! Did I offend her?*

"Wait, Lilybell, I'm sorr—"

"M-M-M-Meooow?! (L-L-L-Lilybell?!)"

"Huh?"

For some reason, Lilybell shouted her own name. Her eyes were wide open, and her body was shaking. She seemed to be very surprised.

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"M-M-M-Meooow?! (L-L-L-Lilybell?!)"

"Huh?"

I knew something was wrong! I felt it when she was talking! Th-Th-This human... Her ridiculous mana, the cats' bizarre adoration for her, her mysterious magnetic pull—the likes of which even I'd give in to if I wasn't careful enough—and the way she talked about Lilybell as if she were talking about herself... No, not "as if." She *was* talking about herself!

Th-This human's true identity is the charismatic white cat loved by champions: the legendary holy beast, Lilybell! Ahhh, I should be praised for not collapsing on the spot! No cat would ever expect something like this to happen, right?! I can't believe I get to meet my idol in the flesh!

But why is she human?! How could Lilybell turn into a human?!

The shock was making me dizzy. I mean, I admired Lilybell so much that I'd pretended to be her...

"Oh my, Lilybell! Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?"

The real Lilybell peered into my face and gently stroked my back. She thought I was reeling because I felt unwell.

Oh! This pleasant feeling is just like when my mommy used to lick me a long time ago... Wait, no, that doesn't matter right now!

Lilybell's soothing touch had brought me back to my kitten days. I frantically tried to regain my composure.

I can't space out now! There are so many things I want to ask the real Lilybell!

However, her patting was most incessant.

"Relax, Lilybell. I'll keep petting you until you feel better."

Perhaps her human transformation had affected her behavior in addition to her body. Her gentle motions and calm voice were

ringing alarm bells in my head.

Th-This is bad! I can't keep up my cool and noble appearance like this! The cat-sona I worked so hard to develop is going to fall apart!

Then again...the real Lilybell is right here. Does it even matter if my fake version of Lilybell crumbles?

No, that's a separate issue! I've been calling myself Lilybell everywhere I go, and that's who cats recognize me as. If I don't keep up the dignified act, I might tarnish the image of the almighty Lilybell! Oh no, just thinking about it fills me with horror!

"There, there. It feels nice when I pet you here, doesn't it?"

"M-Meooow...meow meow."

Ugh, stop... If I give in to pleasure here, I'll go back to being an ordinary stray cat...

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"Oh my. So your real name isn't Lilybell?"

I nodded meekly. After the real Lilybell had rubbed me all over, I'd confessed the truth. I couldn't possibly maintain my act with her right there.

But seriously, what was with her hand? Since I was very knowledgeable, I'd heard rumors of something called "God's hand" that was capable of making any animal experience nirvana. I was convinced that Lilybell was its wielder. I normally didn't like to be touched, yet she'd had me pliant and mesmerized in an instant.

I decided to tell her everything.

The real me was neither charismatic nor Lilybell, but an insignificant stray cat. Actually, that wasn't quite right. I was a stray cat that just so happened to be extremely cute and have glossy white fur. I was also a bit more inquisitive than the average feline. As I'd been gathering information, trying to make my life as easy as possible, I'd learned about Lilybell.

Her existence had come as a shock to me. She was so fascinating and cool, and above all, the name "Lilybell" was absolutely adorable. I'd decided right there and then that if the Lilybell of legend no longer appeared before the champions, then *I* would become the

next Lilybell.

From then on, I'd carried myself in a noble fashion and used all of the information at my disposal to become Lilybell. I'd fleshed out the unknown aspects of her character with my own presumptions, and it'd gotten to the point where I seriously believed I *was* her.

And now the genuine article has appeared. Not only that, but she saw through my arrogant heart and gently admonished me for being wrong!

That said, I never would've expected her to become human. Most humans are meant to serve cats, after all.

"In that case, what's your real name?" the real Lilybell asked.

I trembled. Now that I'd revealed so much, I couldn't hide the answer to that question. But how would Lilybell react to hearing my name? Would she laugh, scoff, or make fun of it? The more I imagined my idol hurting my feelings, the harder it was to open my mouth.

Trying my best to hold back my emotions, I murmured, "Meow. (It's Gonzalez.)"

"Huh?"

"Meow! Meow meooow! Meow! (It's Gonzalez! My name is Gonzalez! I can't do anything about it, okay?! So don't blame me for admiring you and taking your name! Why does a pretty lady like me have to be named Gonzalez?!)"

It wasn't that Gonzalez was a bad name. In fact, I thought it'd be a great name for a cool tomcat. But who would expect a cute little pure-white girl cat to be named Gonzalez?!

My name had been given to me by a human who had petted me on a whim. They hadn't taken me home with them, though. They'd given me only a scrap of food and this name. Names held power. No matter what name I was given afterward, my first name would remain special and stay with me for the rest of my life.

Do you have any idea how many other strays mocked me for having a name that doesn't match my appearance?!

In order to stay strong, I'd chosen the path of solitude and lived as the noble Lilybell, traveling from place to place where no cat knew me.

But now, I'd revealed my true name. How would I be seen from now on? The thought made my chest ache.

I squeezed my eyes shut and lowered my head, only for Lilybell to pick me up, forcing me to look her in the eye.

"Why do you say that? I think your name's adorable!"

"Meooow! (You can only say that because you have a cute name yourself!)"

"Is that so? I think Gon is really cute. Plus, isn't it exciting to imagine a scenario where someone only knows your name and not your appearance? They'd be expecting a cool male cat, only for a gorgeous lady to show up instead! Some people put effort into presenting a contrast, you know. Meanwhile, you can do it just by existing!"

Wh-What is she talking about?

"Basically, although you didn't choose your name, it's up to you to decide how you make it your own. Instead of hiding it because you don't like it, you should make it your accomplice in showing off your best self!"

"Meow..."

"I can tell from talking to you that you're very smart. You'll easily be able to turn everything you have into your own charm!"

I trembled. I'd always thought of my name as a heavy burden that I'd have to carry for the rest of my life, but Lilybell spoke as if it were a treasure.

In her eyes, the world must be full of wonderful things...

"Also, I'm not Lilybell anymore. Since you admired me, it might be difficult for you to accept that fact, but I'd love it if you called me Lucille instead!"

"Meow... (Lucille...)"

And so, I stopped calling myself Lilybell. For some reason, when I started acting like Gonzalez was the best name in the world, I found myself with even more feline fans than before. They used an affectionate nickname with me, as if my real name were too special to be spoken by anyone undeserving.

"Lady Gon! How can I become as beautiful as you?!"

“Why, if you wish to be like me, then the first step is to stop trying to become me!”

“Huh?”

“You can try all your life, but you’ll never become me. However, you are the only one in the world who can become the best you!”

“L-Lady Gon!”

“Now then, that’s enough for today. It’s time for the world’s most fabulous Gonzalez to go see Lucille!”

The End.

Afterword

Hello, it's nice to meet you. My name is Usagi Hoshimi.

Thank you so much for reading *Engaging with the Plot: A Former Cat's Attempt to Save Her Now Temporary Fiancé.*

As I mentioned in the blurb I wrote for the book flaps, although my name, Usagi, means "rabbit," I'm very much a cat lover at heart. I adore cats with every fiber of my being. In fact, I once told a veteran author, "When I'm tired, I pretend to pet an imaginary cat." They proceeded to buy me a cat plushie—one of the semirealistic ones with a good weight and flexibility to it!

By the way, the reason I don't have my own cat at home is because my self-employed parents have cats at their workplace. Everyone in my family loves cats, and thanks to that, all of ours are spoiled rotten. I thought they'd be happier in an environment where they have human companionship most of the time as well as other cat friends to play with, so I couldn't bring one home with me.

This story was inspired by my love of cats.

"Cats are cute even when they're doing nothing but breathing."

"Cats are definitely aware that they're cute."

"And that's part of what makes them so cute."

"Cats are whimsical and free-spirited. Some of them only act nice when they want food, but that's great too."

"When a cat steps on my foot, it fills me with joy to the point where I want to thank it."

Basically, cats are cute no matter what they do.

What if a cat became human? They'd be the cutest person in the world, with extremely high self-esteem and oodles of charm.

That's how Lucille was born.

By the way, have you ever heard that cats can tell whether

someone is a cat person or not?

Some years ago, a friend and I were driving to the beach at night. After arriving at the waterfront park, I was talking through the car's rolled-down window to my friend outside.

Suddenly, my friend shouted, "Ah!"

Before I knew it, a cat had jumped in through the open window. It wandered around a bit before curling up in my lap and falling asleep, as if it were the natural thing to do.

I was surprised. Why did the cat come inside the car instead of approaching my friend outside?

As it turned out, my friend didn't like cats. We suspected that the cat had sensed that.

According to my friend, the cat had been circling around the car while we were talking. It seemed to be looking for where my voice was coming from. In other words, it was more interested in an invisible cat lover than a nearby person who wasn't comfortable around cats.

That was how I came to believe the theory that cats can identify cat lovers. If anyone reading this afterword has had a similar experience, I'd love to hear your story.

Now, although I just spent a long time talking about cats, I also hope that those who don't like them will still enjoy reading this story. I love cats, but I won't deny the feelings of those who aren't fans. "Everyone has their own tastes, after all!"

The illustrations in this book were drawn by Qi234-sensei! I was so excited to see all of the stunning artwork that I sent lengthy emails fangirling over them to my editor. Looking at them while writing made my heart flutter the entire time.

Lucille is adorable to the max, Felix looks super cool with a hint of gloom, Maouldoth and Lilybell are just too sweet, Master Alys is irresistibly gorgeous... I could go on about them forever! And while the illustrations themselves are wonderful, aren't the character designs brilliant too? All of them are breathtaking, but I especially love Master Alys. Every time I look at the back cover, I get so emotional that I literally shed tears.

Also, have you noticed? If you look closely at Lucille's and Lilybell's eyes, there are pawprints hidden in them! Please check for yourself. I almost died from cuteness overload when I spotted them.

Qi234-sensei, thank you so, *so* much for the wonderful illustrations!

Lastly, I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the illustrator Qi234-sensei, my extremely helpful editor, everyone else who was involved in the creation of this book, and all of the readers who picked up a copy.

Thank you all so much. I'm very happy to be able to release the story I wrote in volume form. I hope you'll enjoy it, and I hope I'll be able to continue bringing you Lucille's story.

I pray we'll meet again.

Usagi Hoshimi

Bonus Short Story: An Interview with the Angel of Miracles

I was but a humble journalist working for a newspaper in the Kingdom of Eldar.

"Huh? An interview with *the* Lady Lucille Gustelanola?"

My boss's orders took me by surprise. This was the evil woman famously known to have been banished to the borderlands by the second prince, but after saving the kingdom from crisis, she had made a name for herself as the "angel of miracles."

And I'm supposed to interview her?

"It's a request from Count Sahelite," my boss explained. "He wants us to publish an interview elucidating how horrible Lucille Gustelanola is and that she should not be called the angel of miracles."

I see. In other words, the interview is a front, and he's actually ordering us to start a smear campaign.

As Count Sahelite was a financial backer of the newspaper company where I worked, he was often able to demand we publish articles to suit his needs. In this case, it was probably because his daughter didn't want Lady Gustelanola to outshine her.

That said, work was work. Pushing aside my feelings of dissatisfaction, I made an appointment to meet with Lady Gustelanola at a popular café in the capital. Thanks to Count Sahelite's influence, I was able to reserve a private room for us.

I went there a little early to await Lady Gustelanola, who ended up arriving right on time.

Immediately, I stood and bowed. "Thank you for agreeing to an interview with our paper."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry I kept you waiting. There's no need to be so formal, though. I've never done an interview before, so it'll be much

better for my nerves if we can keep it casual, tee hee!”

Huh... She’s awfully friendly.

The “angel of miracles” thing aside, Lady Gustelanola had initially been infamous for her evil actions and behavior. To add to that, she was the daughter of a high-ranking noble. I’d been steeling myself to maintain composure in the face of whatever irritating thing she’d release upon me, but...

No, I can’t let down my guard. This is only the beginning.

Even Count Sahelite was a “good person,” known for his passion for charity work. Our director and senior journalists had undoubtedly been grateful for his support at first. But once they’d accepted it, they’d been forced to pen articles that were nothing but fabrications, all for the count’s benefit. That was just the true nature of nobles.

Thinking about it, Lady Gustelanola’s new moniker didn’t make any sense. How could a woman so evil that she’d been exiled to the borderlands possibly be an angel?

All right, I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to expose the truth, with or without Count Sahelite’s orders.

“Well then, let’s begin the interview,” I said.

“Okay! I’m ready!”

A few minutes later, I found myself both incredibly exhausted and incredibly excited.

Wh-What’s with this woman?

In short, Lady Lucille Gustelanola defied all reason—and I didn’t mean that in a bad way. No matter what I asked, her responses never failed to surprise. For example...

“How do you feel about the second prince breaking off your engagement and sending you to the borderlands?”

My line of questioning had been intended to rile her up so that she would expose her true colors. I was even bracing myself for a slap to the face. However...

“I now realize that I was very fortunate,” she said. “I didn’t know much about Leeuwenhoek at the time, but I’ve since learned that it’s a delightful place. The people are kind, the tomatoes are delicious, and there are lots of cats.”

“Tomatoes...? Cats...?”

"Oh, right! I actually brought some tomatoes to snack on! You can have some too! I grew these with the Leeuwenhoek manor's gardener! Here, I promise you'll love them."

"Huh?"

Much to my bewilderment, a tomato was abruptly shoved into my hands.

She grew tomatoes? With the gardener? The *Lady Gustelanola did that? That can't be right. Also, where was she even keeping this thing?*

"Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed. "I forgot, it's improper to bring food into a café! I'm so sorry."

"I-It's fine."

No! That's not *what's bothering me!*

As the interview continued in this manner, I actually found myself looking forward to her answers. Even in this short amount of time, I could tell with absolute certainty that Lady Gustelanola was no evil woman. Despite that, I was going to have to write a scathing article about her...

"This is my last question," I said. "How do you feel about people in the capital calling you the 'angel of miracles'?"

Please, show me just a little bit of arrogance! I begged. Because if she didn't, I'd—

"Um, to tell the truth..." Lady Gustelanola began meekly.

What? Is she going to say she isn't the true creator of the medicine? I can work with that. Please, just give me something negative to say about her!

Alas, my prayers went unanswered.

"I'm not an angel," she said. "I'm pretty selfish, and I avoid doing things that I don't want to do. I didn't make and distribute the medicine for any noble reason—I just did it because I wanted to. I mean, at first, people refused to drink it, but I forced them to do it anyway. A boy called me an angel, and I didn't feel like refuting it, that's all. I didn't think it'd spread so far... You must be disappointed that I'm not the upright person you thought I was."

Actually, you've got it the wrong way around! You're basically saying that you helped people purely because you wanted to. You

really are an angel.

"Um, are you okay?" she asked. "You look awfully pale. Oh, I know! I still have some of the panacea on me. Would you like to try it?"

"Th-The panacea? I can't accept something so precious..."

"Tee hee! It's actually not that special at all. I'm the one who made it, so I'd know!"

Despite her cheeky smile, I knew that couldn't possibly be true. If the panacea weren't valuable, the royal family would never have summoned a banished woman back from the borderlands, let alone have honored her at the castle.

I accepted the medicine with trembling hands and drank it all in one gulp.

"What...?!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. Drinking it makes you glow, but don't worry, it's harmless!"

The light faded, taking my fatigue with it. Not only that, but my chronic neck pain and the stiffness in my shoulders disappeared as well.

With a titter, I replied, "Th-This really is nothing short of a miracle."

I just can't do it. It's impossible for me to write anything disparaging about her.

"Actually, I have one more question," I said. "What would you do if you were told to do something you didn't want to do?"

Lady Gustelanola beamed. "I'd fight back, screaming, 'I don't want to do it!'"

I see; so she'd scream.

She didn't say anything about the outcome of this disagreement, meaning that she was fine if she lost. All she wanted was to make it clear that it was against her wishes.

I wondered if I could be so brave.

◉◉◉

Several days later, a certain newspaper article sent the capital

into an uproar. It accused Count Sahelite, known for being a charitable man, of numerous crimes. As a result, Count Sahelite was stripped of his title and banished from the capital.

Despite having been complicit in these crimes, the newspaper company was praised for its courage and given leniency.

Following that, Lady Gustelanola volunteered to sponsor the journalist who had led the initiative. The publication was soon able to expand its operations, becoming the capital’s most honest news source.



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Engaging with the Plot: A Former Cat's Attempt to Save Her Now Temporary Fiancé Volume 1
by Usagi Hoshimi

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Jessica Thone

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