Forget Being the VILLAINESS, I Want to Be an ADVENTURER!



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Chapter 1: Encounter with the Holy Beast

Noticing the cold, I looked outside my window. Large crystals of bright white snow were floating down from above.

Snow crystals? Where had I picked up that term at three years old?

Such thoughts had become a frequent occurrence recently. Tilting my head in confusion, I approached the window, stretched up to grip the frame with both my hands, and looked outside.

In front of the outdoor scenery, I saw myself reflected in the window, looking as I usually did. My straight, shoulder-length hair was jet black, matching my black eyes. I thought I looked rather plain.

I gazed further out at the vast lawn of the mansion courtyard being covered in white. It was the first time in my life I had seen snow on the ground. It would probably be up to my knees by tomorrow morning, and I'd be able to make a snowman. Would father be mad at me? Say, what was a "snowman" anyway?

Ah...there I went thinking of an unusual word again... I looked up at the sky and frowned pensively.

Just then, I heard the crunch of footsteps in the snow and looked back down.

The ground that had been pure white until just a moment ago was now dotted with a trail of red spots. At the end of the trail, something small, white, and fluffy writhed. Its front paw was covered in red.

Oh, no! Is it hurt?!

I grabbed the blanket from my bed and dashed outside. Leaving tiny footprints in the snow behind me, I ran toward it, breathing heavily. There I found...a tiger?

"Ah... Ahhh!"

High-rise buildings that shone silver, roads that intersected in multilevel crossings with cars driving down them at breakneck speed, a city that was brightly lit even at night; a series of images beyond my understanding sped through my mind.

Finally, a book came to the forefront of my memories. Dumbfounded, I cautiously took the sacred tiger in my arms.

I carefully wiped the blood off the baby tiger—who I now realized was the Holy Guardian White Tiger—using a damp towel. I disinfected the wound on its front right paw, applied medicine to it, and tore off a piece of the towel to wrap it with in place of a bandage.

I was a little too good at this for a three-year-old, don't you think? I would agree. It wasn't until just recently that I had been able to do this, but I could now that I had been remembering so much. It did take more time and effort on account of my smaller body, though.

"I was reincarnated in another world..." I muttered in my past self's language as I wrapped the White Tiger in a pink blanket, laid it on my lap, and stroked its head.

I hadn't been special in my past life, but I had been a self-sufficient member of society. I was around thirty, I think. My responsibilities at work had been increasing, and I had mentored a number of newer employees, except they soon quit after either finding other jobs or getting married. I'd had more and more work to do, and no time to meet anyone new, so the last thing I remembered was feeling totally worn down from everything I was doing on my own. I didn't even remember how I died. Overwork?

My one joy in that rough life had been reading. I'd escaped reality through fantasy novels, one of which had been *I Love You, My Wild Rose*. The heroine, Maribelle, was born in a working-class neighborhood—a "wild rose"—but she got into the best magic academy in the kingdom, where she not only developed her magical talent but was recognized by the holy guardian beasts. Her humble, earnest attitude won her the friendship of one top student after another, culminating in a happy ending where she married a prince. It was as conventional as stories get.

The villainess of the story was named Serephione Granzeus. She was the prince's fiancée, a powerful magician who acted as the heroine's rival.

"That's me..."

Not only was Serephione skilled in all kinds of magic, but she had even forced

the White Tiger to serve her, using its power to stand in Maribelle's way. After defeating Serephione, Maribelle released the White Tiger from its servitude, and she established an official master-servant relationship with it.

I petted the beautiful, exhausted creature lying on my lap.

This was probably the point in the story where I was supposed to make it drink my blood and turn it into my servant while its mind was dazed. That scene had been cut from the novel since it wasn't part of the main plot, though.

I didn't think the idea itself was necessarily mistaken. It was a good idea for a three-year-old; if the tiger drank my magic-infused blood, its wounds would heal immediately. I doubted that Serephione had intended to make it serve her at the time.

However, I was a woman of around thirty in a three-year-old's body, and I knew how the story went. I couldn't take the risk. The last thing I wanted to be was the villainess. Her fate was to be locked away in a tower, bled dry of all her magic, and left to languish. I couldn't let that happen to me.

By the way, my past life wasn't the only thing I remembered the moment I met this tiger. Many of Serephione Granzeus's memories also came back to me, including things that hadn't been written in *Wild Rose*: her true feelings, her suffering, the despair of being betrayed by her loved ones... It was like a cry of utter grief...

And I was meant to go through all that again? No way!

But the tiger's condition was worsening by the minute. I couldn't just let one of the few holy guardian beasts in the world die on my lap! It would only open another bad route. What was I supposed to do?!

"Does it hurt?"

I gently embraced the shivering tiger. It opened its eyes with a pained expression, as if reacting to my voice. Large teardrops spilled from its eyes; without thinking, I did as my father would do and sucked them up with kisses.

I was enveloped in a brief bright flash. It wasn't a good sign, but I couldn't let it bother me just then.

I looked into the tiger's big, round, sky blue eyes. They reminded me of my little brother's from my past life, although his were a different color. I remembered how I had always watched over him. Whenever he would take a sudden fall while toddling around and begin to wail, I would say...

"Pain, pain, go away! Come again another day!"

I rubbed the tiger's wounded front paw and then mimed taking the pain and throwing it out the window.

"There, now it's all better! Good boy!"

I rubbed its cheek up against mine and gave it a smooch. I was happy it was being calm, but I was at a loss for what to do.

Just then, the little tiger in my arms suddenly regained its strength. It didn't feel limp anymore, so I stretched my arms out and set it down on my lap. Its eyes blinked open.

"What's your name?"

It talked?! Holy guardian beasts can talk? And its voice is adorable!

"I'm Serephione...!"

"Sere? Your magic is great! I'm all better now! Thanks!"

I unwrapped the towel I'd used for a bandage, and the deep wound I'd just taken care of was...gone.

Huh...? It couldn't be... But there's no other way. It actually worked? Did my magic words work like some sort of video game cheat code?

"Your magic feels really good. I've decided I'm gonna stay with you! Okay?"

Can I even say no? I can't, right? Would I get the death penalty for defying a guardian beast? Does this count as him serving me? It doesn't, right? I'm not forcing him, am I? What am I supposed to do?!

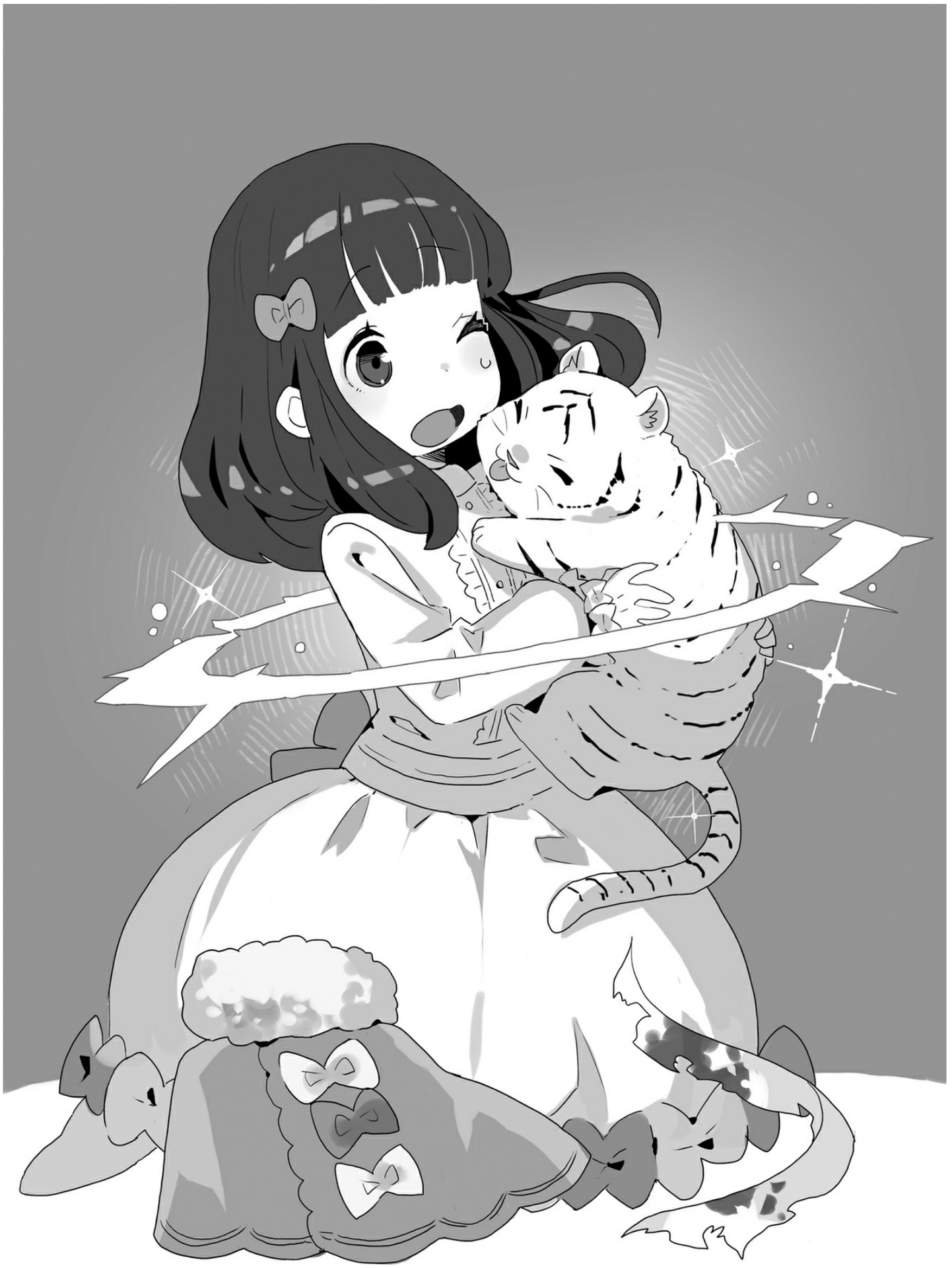
"Um... Can we start as friends?"

"Friends!"

"Eek!"

The tiger leapt onto me with gusto and started licking my face. Its claw dug into the back of my hand, drawing blood. It licked the spot as if to apologize.

Suddenly, a ring of light appeared above my head, surrounded me and the tiger, and quickly closed in around us before vanishing.



We ingested each other's bodily fluids... Uh oh.

A drop of cold sweat rolled down my temple, like in the so-called "manga" I used to read. The tiger innocently licked that up as well.

Flash!

Th-There's the light again! It circled around us again! This is not *good!*

I set the tiger on the floor and leaned forward onto my hands, crestfallen.

"Sere? What's wrong?"

The tiger tilted its head to the side, gave me a pat on the head with its little pink paw pad, and flashed me a smile.

All right, let's give my current situation a little once-over! Let's set aside the white fluffball that was bouncing around on my king-size bed for now—it was a good thing that he was feeling better, at least. Crisis averted!

I'm Serephione Granzeus. I'm the daughter of the Earl of Granzeus in the Kingdom of Judore. I live with my father, who is the kingdom's Minister of Finance, and my older brother. Sadly, my mother passed away after giving birth to me. Childbirth still entailed risking your life in this world.

Our family has an estate in the mountains to the north, but because of my father's important position, we spend most of our time in our mansion in the royal capital with our family of three and a few servants. Apparently, we had almost been betrayed by a servant in the past, so we each took care of our own needs individually, which was unusual compared to other noble families. This was why I could act freely as long as I was on the premises. That said, I was probably still being guarded to some extent or another.

"Um..."

"What's up, Sere?"

"Could you tell me your name?"

I didn't know anything about the tiger, so I had to have him introduce himself. He was the size of a puppy, and his snow-white fur had black stripes throughout. His eyes were as clear and blue as the sky on a sunny winter day.

“I’m Loudarylphena. I’m one of the four heavenly beasts born of the moon goddess. My predecessor passed away recently, so I took up the post.” He giggled.

“Lou... Daring? Little? Fluffy?”

“...”

“Can I call you Lou?”

“I guess... You’re little, after all.”

So are you!

At any rate, I now knew that he wasn’t the White Tiger from Chinese mythology. The White Tiger myth was only a concept I’d brought over from my past life in the first place.

“Is it okay for you to be here, Lou? Won’t your family be worried?”

“My father who came before me died, so I don’t have any family.”

“Um... What do you eat? What should I do for you?”

“I’ll stay with you and absorb your pretty magic! Okay?”

“Of course! We’re friends, after all!”

Lou jumped off the bed and onto my chest. I couldn’t blame him, since he was just a baby.

“Lou, how old are you?”

“Hmm, I stopped counting after a hundred.”

He’s my elder by far...

While I was stunned by that revelation, I heard a knock come from my door.

“Dinner is ready, Lady Serephione.”

My butler, Enrique, called to me. Apart from Enrique, my other main servant was the head maid, Martha, who acted as my mother figure. We also had skilled cooks and gardeners, but I spent most of my time with those two.

“I’ll be right there!” I replied. Then I asked Lou, who was dozing on my lap, “What will you do? Do you want to come eat with me? Or would you rather

stay here and sleep?”

“I’ll come with you!”

Lou then climbed on top of my head for some reason. He didn’t feel heavy, though, so I didn’t mind.

Our family ate at a small, round table, contrary to what would be expected of nobility; we sat close enough together that I could reach out and touch them. The dining table truly exemplified the earnest effort my papa put in.

My father, who sat next to me on my right, was a handsome man with black hair and emerald green eyes. He had a model-like build. Although he was busy with his work almost every day, the grown woman I was on the inside could tell that he doted on me enough to make up for my mom being gone. He wasn’t that far away from my own mental age, but it still made me emotional to see him working so hard as a single father.

My brother, Larouza, sat to my left. He was a bit far from me in age; he would turn ten this year. He was a pretty boy with identical hair and eyes to our father. I was pleased that we all had matching straight black hair.

All noble children underwent a magic exam when they turned six that classified them into one of three magic levels: Magicless, Normal, or Advanced. Our family possessed immense magical power, enough that we could have been descended from spirits. Naturally, my brother’s magic level was high enough to break the measuring scale. It was customary for children with Normal to Advanced magic levels to attend the national magic academy, so he was busy from morning to night with school, tutoring, studying, and martial arts training as a way to refine his sensibilities. We were in the same mansion, but we only saw each other at mealtimes.

Now that I had regained my memories, I realized that my brother might have resented me. Our mother died giving birth to me, after all. He was seven at the time and a bright kid, so he must have understood. I couldn’t blame him for avoiding his younger sister who had his beloved mother’s eyes.

But that actually may have been more convenient for me. In the novel, Larouza met the heroine, fell in love, and ended up opposing me. I was going to try my best not to become the villainess, but if things ended up going as they

did in the novel and I was very fond of my brother... Well, it would be awful. The feeling of being killed by my brother would be unbearable.

“Father, brother, sorry to keep you waiting.”

I took my seat as usual. Everything was as normal as could be, although I had a fluffball on my head.

When there was no reply to my greeting, I looked up quizzically. Papa and Larouza were both staring at the top of my head, their mouths agape.

Huh? Aren’t holy beasts supposed to only be visible to main characters and people they’re contracted with? Like in the book?

“S-Serephione, uh, you have something fluffy on your head...?”

So they can see him...

It wasn’t like I was doing anything to warrant feeling guilty, so I figured there was no need to lie. “Father, this is Lou. I found him hurt in the yard. We’re friends now.”

“But, Serephi... Isn’t that one of the holy guardian beasts?”

Hm, so the term “holy guardian beast” carries over to this world... I turned my gaze directly upward.

“Lou? Is it okay if I tell my father and brother about you?”

“I don’t sense any ill will, so I don’t mind. But only your family. My dad hammered it into me not to appear in front of people too much. He said they’d use me. Oh! And don’t tell my full name to anyone else either.”

I didn’t like this feeling of getting special treatment. I turned back to papa.

“Lou is one of the ‘heavenly beasts.’ He’s going to be my friend and stay with me. But we have to keep the secret to just our family. It’s a rule.”

Papa opened his eyes wide, stood up out of his seat, and knelt at my feet. *No way?!*

“Lou? Lou, what do I do?”

“Hm? Tell him he can sit down?”

“Father, Lou says to sit normally!”

Papa slowly lifted his face and hesitantly sat back down in his seat. *Wait, huh?*

“Father, can you not hear Lou talk?”

“Hah... No, I can’t hear him. I can see him, though. You must be communicating with him telepathically.”

“Lou, is that true?”

Lou moved to my shoulder. Our eyes met, and he gave me a nod.

“From what I can tell, you’re a very powerful magic user. By the way, I might reveal myself to other people who I trust. People can only hear me if our wavelengths match perfectly or if we’ve made a contract. My voice goes directly to your mind and is transformed based on how you imagine it.”

I heard him say “contract,” but I pretended I didn’t hear that.

“By the way, why were you hurt in our yard?” papa asked.

“I was running around because I was happy that it was snowing, and then some random weapon came flying at me. What a pain!”

He’s just a lost child, this one... I told my father and brother what Lou said.

“He was attacked in our yard?” father asked.

“I don’t know. Apparently, there was poison on it. I’m not sure.”

Papa’s expression was more severe than I had ever seen it. This really wasn’t something we could overlook. Had that assassin been aiming for our family, or for Lou? Who would hurt a holy beast, and with what weapon?

Lou was happily eating fruit, indifferent to papa’s concern. He sure ate a lot...

“Father, is it okay if Lou stays here with me?”

“Of course. I would like the holy beasts to be in good health. For Lou to live here would be a recognition of our family’s integrity; it would be an honor. Of course, nobody else will hear of this. I will see to it that the servants follow this policy as well, starting with Enrique. Do you agree, Larouza?”

“Of course.”

My brother made a deep bow to Lou. Lou wagged his white tail as a signal of recognition. But when I turned back to my family, my brother was glaring at me... It's scary to see an angry face on such a pretty boy.

I went back to my room and got in the bath with Lou. Both the toilet and bath were mostly the same as in my past life, and I was glad that they were sanitary. It didn't seem likely that there was a plumbing system, so it was probably cleaned using magic. Lou wasn't at all upset to take a bath; he happily let me shampoo him, and then he soaked in the bathtub up to his neck.

After Lou shook the water off himself, I rubbed him dry with a towel, but his fur was too long and didn't dry all the way.

"I wish I had a hair dryer..."

It was snowing outside. If I didn't get his skin dry soon, he would catch a cold.

"Dry faster!" I said while ruffling his silver-white fur with both of my hands.

Suddenly, there was a red heat at my fingertips, and wind started to swirl around me.

"Wow, that feels great! I'm all dry now. Thanks, Sere!"

I was dumbfounded. In the novel, Serephione was highly skilled in all kinds of magic. I hadn't taken my magic exam yet, so I had never used magic before, yet somehow I was using it without even intending to.

"Lou, do you think I can use magic?"

"You already are."

"Do you think I have talent for it?"

"That's why I chose you."

"I thought it was because my magic feels good."

"That's where your talent lies. You have a lot of magical power. You have plenty left even after I absorb a bunch of it. You're still fine right now, but most people would have passed out, you know? I'm glad I have you around."

Not only was this the same as in the book, but it had come to fruition before it did in the book... I had no choice but to develop this talent at this point. If

things went down the same route, I would need the strength to protect myself.

“Lou, could you teach me magic?”

“Huh? Me, your teacher?! S-Sure thing!”

Now I had a way to do magic training before I turned six! But at this rate, I would master magic, get Advanced on my magic exam, go to the magic academy, and meet the heroine—a route straight to doom.

“I don’t want to go to magic school...”

“Hm? Then just don’t go. I’m teaching you magic, aren’t I?”

“Thanks, Lou, but it’s not that simple...”

“Okay, so come on a journey with me when you get old enough. If I have an oracle suggest it, nobody can complain. We can just say you’ll do other training, right? It’ll be fun!”

So, Lou can control what oracles predict... That’s my hundred-plus-year-old super-fluffball!

It was a tempting idea to go on a journey with Lou. We could become adventurers, join a guild, complete quests, raise our ranks... It sounded great! I wanted a future like that... Just picturing it made me feel warm and fuzzy.

But Lou using the oracle was the last resort. It would cause way too big a fuss.

Thinking realistically, couldn’t I just study with a different organization? There’s one other option with similar benefits apart from the magic school.

“Lou, do you think I can go to knight school?”

“Hmm, I don’t know.”

Of course he didn’t. But for the meantime, I had no choice but to do my best to get into knight school. If I got lucky and made it in, I wouldn’t cross paths with the heroine, the prince, or any of the other characters who entered the magic academy at the same time.

“I’ll practice magic in private with you, and then I’ll try to get into knight school. Then I’ll become a knight who can use magic and go on a big adventure with you when I grow up! Woo!”

“Zzz...”

And he’s asleep...

I gently lowered Lou onto the bed and got ready to sleep myself. Giving my room another look around, I noticed it was mostly pink. It made the grown woman I was on the inside cringe. *I should change it to another color... Hmm, the clubroom is made of wood, and it has a natural feel to it... Maybe I should get clothes and accessories that are sky blue to match Lou’s eyes? That’s the color that’s resonated with my heart the most so far. I’ve only been alive for three years, though...*

As I was making plans in my head, somebody knocked on my door. It was probably Enrique or Martha, but what would they want at this hour?

“Come in!”

The door opened, and in came...Larouza, dressed in white pajamas. He was still pretty, even with freshly-washed hair and messy clothes!

“Wait, huh?!”

This was the first time I remembered my brother ever coming into my room. My eyes opened wide in surprise.

“So, you’re awake... What about the holy beast?” asked Larouza.

I pointed to the bed without saying anything.

“So, he’s already asleep...”

Larouza looked at me with a sharp glare. *What has him so angry that he came here at night? I’ve had enough of seeing his pretty face with that scary look. I’ve had a long enough day already!*

Lou woke up, as if he’d sensed my nerves, and jumped onto my shoulder. Then he silently looked at my brother. They were glaring at each other—the atmosphere was oppressive.

“Brother! Lou! What’s going on?!”

I couldn’t stand to stay silent. My brother turned toward me in response...then his facial expression contorted and he started to sob, as though

he had reached his limit.

“Brother?!”

He fell onto his knees and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, Holy Tiger... I’m really sorry I hurt you...” he cried.

It was Larouza?! So he *was behind Lou’s injury!* Lou’s eyes grew large in surprise as well.

“I wasn’t able to practice today because of the snow, so I made myself a new weapon... I practiced throwing it into the snow, but then I heard a scream... I rushed outside and there was blood everywhere...”

Lou and I listened quietly.

“There aren’t many burglars who can get onto our premises. That meant I had to have hurt someone who worked here...” Larouza sobbed. “I followed the trail of blood, and it led to your room, Serephione... I thought I’d killed my precious little sister...!”

Larouza covered his face with his hands and wailed. Lou and I sat down on the floor next to my sobbing brother.

“I was on edge waiting to hear a scream coming from your room. I was a coward... I was too scared to open your door. When I thought about you lying there cold like our mother, I just...”

That’s right... However cool and put-together he seems, Larouza is only ten. He would have been an elementary schooler in my past life’s terms. He’s making that frightening scowl because of how afraid and panicked he is.

“I was so scared to go to dinner, but then you were perfectly fine, and you had the Holy Tiger with you... And then when I heard that he got hurt in your place...”

It wasn’t in my place, though? It was only Lou that was running around and frolicking in the snow...

“The Holy Tiger was looking at me as if to say he knew everything... But he didn’t tell father about what I did... I thought he must be testing my courage.”

I looked at Lou through slit eyes. He was looking back and forth suspiciously.

“And I wasn’t able to apologize until now... I... I...”

His pretty emerald eyes looked like they were about to fall out along with his tears. *What am I doing, letting a child keep crying for so long?* I ran to my brother, removed his hands from his face, and gently wiped away his tears with the sleeve of my pajamas.

“Don’t cry, brother. Your eyes will fall out.”

“Serephione...”

“You were making a scary face, so I thought you didn’t like me anymore.”

“I could never stop liking you! You’re my adorable little sister!”

So he doesn’t resent me... That’s a relief. He just isn’t good at controlling his expression. But is it really true that he could never stop liking me? If things go according to the plot... Well, I don’t have to think about that right now.

“I love you too, brother.”

“Serephione...”

“You’re not mad, right, Lou? You love him too?”

Lou was fidgeting uncomfortably. I gave him a glare, and he hastily nodded.

Larouza bit his lower lip, and then gave me and Lou a big hug.

“I love you too, Serephione and Lou!”

I squeezed him back. Lou poked his face out from between us and licked my brother’s cheek.

“He he he. That tickles, Lou.” Larouza laughed through his tears in a way befitting his age.

“Larouza.”

We two humans and one fluffball lifted our heads to the voice. Our father was standing just above us. He spread his arms and embraced all of us.

It’s only natural he noticed the huge fuss we were making.

He gently stroked both my and my brother’s heads.

“F-Father...I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you the truth earlier!”

My brother started crying again, flustering me and Lou. Papa gave him a warm smile.

“If Lou forgives you, then all is well. But take this as a lesson to be more careful from now on. Think through what you’re doing before you do it. All right?”

“Y-Yes!”

That day, we all slept together in my father’s bed for the first time. I was in the middle, my father was on my right, my brother was on my left, and the fluffball was on top of me.

This must be what it means to have a beauty on each arm. I have no regrets in life!

But...now I’ve met Lou. I hadn’t forced him to do it, but we’d made a contract. This was no different from the story of Wild Rose. The first happiness I found in this world is like a skyscraper built on sand. My father, my brother, and Lou, who’ve found a place in my heart in such a short time... Will they all turn against me in the future? Will they abandon me and say bad things about me?

Tears came to my eyes. I pretended to yawn to hide them.

“F-Father! I want to ask you for something.”

“That’s unusual. What is it, Serephi?”

“I want to go to knight school in the future, so I want to start studying the basics now.”

“Serephione! Why?” My brother’s voice was high from surprise.

“We can’t go to magic school together because you’re too old. And mostly, I want to become a knight and be one of the two wheels carrying the Granzeus family.”

“But Serephi, didn’t Lou recognize your magical power?”

“Lou will teach me magic, and that’s why I’ll study fighting. I promised Lou I’d go on a journey with him in the future. Right, Lou?”

Lou opened one eye and then went straight back to sleep.

“So, the Holy Tiger would like you to attend him... Well, we can start by building up your stamina once the weather warms up.”

“Yes, Father. Brother, please be my mentor.”

“Hey, *I’m* supposed to be the one who protects *you*!”

Thank you, Brother! I appreciated the sentiment. They were understanding for now, at least! I could do my best to become a knight, and then an adventurer! I didn’t have any other path at the moment, after all.

With a fluffy tail curled around my neck while wrapped in both of their arms, I felt like the snowstorm outside was too warm to be true.

“Good night,” I said through a yawn.

“Good night, Serephione.”

“Good night, my Serephi.”

“Sere! Good night!”

What bliss! Please, don’t ever stop liking me!

Chapter 2: The Magic Exam

I was six years old now! Round of applause!

Not much had changed about me, except that I'd gotten a bit taller—I was as plain as ever. Well, as long as I was healthy!

I felt like everything had changed since I met Lou...yet I also felt like nothing had changed at all.

First, the things that had changed: 1) My brother had started to spoil me rotten.

His personality did a total one-eighty after that one day. For the past three years, he'd started teaching me martial arts himself despite being busy. He let me sit on his lap during snack time, he read to me before bed, and he gave me goodnight kisses on the cheek. Now that he was thirteen, he'd grown from a child into a gorgeous young man. Getting a kiss from a pretty boy excited me so much I couldn't sleep! Just kidding, I did sleep. Zzz...

Maybe he stopped trying to be the perfect son after the thing with Lou? Maybe he loosened up after being able to cry a lot? It was a good thing either way. He was enrolled in the aforementioned magic academy, but the heroine and other main characters weren't there yet, so there was nothing in particular to worry about! Play well and study well!

2) My father had also started to spoil me rotten.

Our single father watched my and my brother's interactions with a smile and spent his little free time with his children. His face had lost its touch of grief, perhaps because he had recovered from the shock of our mother's death.

When we were at home, he usually let me sit on his lap, and when we went out, he would either carry me or hold my hand. I couldn't tell if he was deliberately trying to parent me using a lot of praise or if it was just because of my age, but he got excessively happy when I improved in magic or martial arts.

3) Lou had gotten a bit bigger.

He was puppy-sized before, but now he was about the size of a Shiba Inu—

and his ego had inflated to match. He was supposed to have only needed to absorb my magic, but he always ate the quality fruits papa bought and the good dishes the cooks made before we could get to them. What a gluttonous beast... For some reason, he didn't feel heavy when he got on my head or shoulder, though. He'd completely become a part of the household.

Meanwhile, the things that hadn't changed were: 1) My magic was way overpowered, just like in the book.

Any magic words I brought over from my past life, such as "pain, pain, go away," worked as long as they had a clear intention. Just the other day, a cold wave hit our estate, so I did the Japanese fortune-telling custom of flipping my shoes to see if they would land upright for sunny weather or upside down for rain. With Lou's help, I got my shoes to land upright, and a sunny spot immediately appeared in the sky. I got the sense I shouldn't say "cross my heart and hope to die." If I broke that kind of promise, I could only imagine...

Apart from that, I came up with a lot of new magic based on my memories from my past life. In this world, magic was divided into just the four main categories of water, fire, earth, and air, and people never considered otherwise. However, I was able to casually combine fire and air based on a hair dryer, picture vaccines and antibiotics to heal wounds, and even reference a certain robot cat's pocket from my past life to make magic that could manipulate space. As long as I had a clear image in mind, I could make all sorts of new magic. From there, I would have Lou train me to add and subtract things from the magic, judge whether it was useful, and put on the finishing touches. If we decided a certain type of magic suited me personally, we would think of ways to develop it.

"You're really fun, Sere. I never get bored with you around, and I can get stronger too—not to mention how tasty your magic is. It's nothing but good having you around. Sere, my shoulders are stiff, so do that massage magic thing!"

"The one combining supersonic waves and heat?"

"Yes, yes, heal your teacher."

"But teacher, all you did today was eat and sleep..."

If I continued to grow at this rate, I would gain the power to rival the heroine without question. Then I'd be blamed for plunging the kingdom into chaos, and they'd do everything they could to get rid of me...

2) I'd ended up making a contract with Lou like in the book.

Although the book had called him my "servant," Lou and my father were saying Lou and I shared a "contract." I guess the difference was that the former is forced and the latter is consensual? Maybe it would change if my relationship with Lou soured? I wouldn't know for another ten years.

In the end, although my relationship with my family and Lou had changed—along with my goals in life—nothing had happened that deviated significantly from the book. I was still on track to become the villainess.

So, that was my situation when it came time for my magic exam.

Ever since I'd set my sights on going to knight school, my family was focused not only on my magic and martial arts training, but also on thinking about how I could get Magicless on my magic exam. If the exam established that I had magic, they would force me to go to the magic academy.

"You still want to go to knight school, yes?"

"I do. I may not have accomplished a lot over the past three years other than gaining some stamina, but I still want to go to knight school."

In the end, it was decided that I couldn't risk letting strangers into the house and having them find out our secret, so we didn't hire any outside instructors. I was mainly trained by my brother, and my father as well on his days off. I couldn't even handle the assignments they gave me, so it ended up being too early to hire an instructor anyway.

"What do you mean, Serephione! You've already mastered the foundational skills. You can run twenty laps around our estate's perimeter, throw a knife right into the neck of a straw doll, and then run ten more laps. Not even most kids my age can do that."

"But brother, didn't you tell me anyone could do that?"

"I thought if anyone could do it, it was you!" He smiled and patted my head.

Something's a little off with that logic... I guess my brother won't always just dote on me.

Come to think of it, wasn't that assignment more like an assassination simulation than martial arts training?

The weapon he had given me was a shuriken specially made by him, and my training outfit was basically a ninja costume—apparently, it took inspiration from the clothing of other kingdoms. It fit my body well, it was easy to move around in, it was easy to carry, and it hid my figure so people couldn't tell if I was a boy or girl. He had happily presented it to me, saying that I could make all sorts of modifications to it and charm it with defensive magic.

I was becoming a little ninja. Just what sort of person was my brother raising me to be?

"I see... But Serephi, your magic is powerful. After the exam, they'll notify the kingdom, and they'll decide to enroll you into the magic academy whether you like it or not. What should we do?"

"If I really want to go to knight school, couldn't they make an exception, even if I have magic?"

"It's not technically against the law, but it wouldn't be possible in practice. The kingdom wants to keep its magic users under control by putting them in the magic academy."

"Are they keeping you under control too, brother?"

"I guess. But don't worry; eventually I'll end up on the side that does the controlling, like our father, just you watch."

Wow...he's so cool!

"What if we say I'm sickly? Like, I have magic, but I'm too weak to attend school? I don't really show my face in public much to begin with, so it should be okay."

"But Serephione, that would mean you can't go to knight school either."

"We'd say I got better by the time of the knight school entrance exams."

"They would probably dispatch healers if they found out a magic-using lady

was sick. That's just how powerful the influence of magic users is on the kingdom."

As we were discussing potential solutions, Lou looked up from the cookies he had been happily munching on.

"What's the procedure for the magic exam?" he asked.

"When I did it seven years ago, they put a stone tablet in our hands, and if we had magic, a score would float up into the air."

"Couldn't we just do something to the tablet?" suggested Lou.

"Lou, the exam area is empty and not very large, and examinees are surrounded by three magicians. It wouldn't be easy to cheat..."

"And magic doesn't work inside the building."

He was right. Other people must have tried to cheat in the past—people who really wanted to test as Advanced and go to the magic academy, the complete opposite of me. If it was observed by magicians from the government, that meant I would have to do the exam while being stared at by scary older men... I didn't see a way out.

But I absolutely didn't want to go to magic school, no matter what I had to do!

I took a shuriken from my ankle. "Should we take them out?"

"Hm? Yeah, I'll help. Anything for my precious Serephione." My brother smiled brightly and pulled a magical knife that shone blue out from somewhere or other. I taught him useful magic that I invented if he ever said he needed it. He had a good sense for it, so he got the hang of it quickly.

"Calm down, you two," father chided us.

"Don't worry, father," I reassured him. "We'll just blunt the blade and lace it with a sleeping drug."

"A sleeping drug? Serephione, where did you find nener grass?"

"I found a bunch of it growing in a crack in the cliff behind our estate."

"That's my Serephione, prepared for anything!"

“You two... You can’t lay a hand on the testers! It’ll only give them a bad impression!”

“Couldn’t we just do something to the stone? I can take care of it,” Lou chimed in.

“Lou?”

“I suppose Lou could get away with doing something to that stone.”

“That’s true. Since he’s a holy beast, he may know a way to make Serephi get a score of 0, even in an environment where magic is unusable. He’s the one who would like Serephi to be a knight in the first place too.”

That wasn’t actually the case, though...

“It’s okay! I got this!”

He puffed out his chest, cookie crumbs all over his face. All we could do in response was make bemused faces.

In the end, we couldn’t think of any other solution, so when the day came, we had no choice but to rely on Lou. The gluttonous fluffball showed no sign of nervousness, snoozing away in my bed with his belly up until the afternoon.

It was no wonder that I felt a tinge of anxiety...

◇ ◇ ◇

My father, Lou, and I visited the magic research center in the heart of the royal capital. It was actually our first time appearing in the capital as a family, since I hadn’t had any interest in going there and I wanted to avoid unnecessary contact.

We got out of our carriage at the gate to the research center. I held my father’s hand, set Lou on top of my head, and made my way down the path to the attached building.

My father had a severe expression, the likes of which I’d never seen before. I figured this was probably his resting face when in public. There was a saying I remembered from my past life that men have numerous enemies outside the home. He couldn’t afford to appear vulnerable. He had on his shoulders not only the fate of our family, but that of the warm residents of our cold domain.

But a handsome man was still handsome, however frightening his expression was. His silky straight black hair was brushed back and neatly trimmed at the nape of his neck. He had a slim, lean build, and he had put on extra muscle from helping me and my brother practice martial arts. His slanted green eyes were striking. Hearts were in the eyes of all the women who watched him go by through their windows.

“Father, it’s scary how everyone is looking at me.”

When I spoke to my father, a warmth appeared in his green eyes.

“I know, but I don’t think it’s that they can see Lou. There would probably be a bigger fuss. I think it’s because I brought you. You’re precious enough to turn anyone’s head.”

Saying that, he scooped me up along with Lou and gave me a smooch on the cheek.

“Eeee!” squealed some of the women in the area.

It embarrassed me how biased his aesthetic sense was. I was as plain as plain could be! My dress, which matched the color of Lou’s eyes, was pretty though. At least his affection had caused the hyenas to retreat, so I called it a win.

A small, flat building standing on its own came into view.

“That’s the place, right, father? How many people do you think are there today?”

“All six-year-olds born in the same month as you should be meeting at once, but I told them that I had a work conflict and had them move you to the very end, so you’ll be taking your exam by yourself. Whatever miracle Lou performs, I think there should be as few people in the gallery as possible for it.”

He gave me and Lou a wink. Lou climbed up onto papa and wagged his tail.

“Leave it to me! And have a special cake ready for me tonight!”

“Understood.” My father gently smiled in response to Lou and entered the room, still holding us.

“Welcome, Count Granzeus and Lady Granzeus.”

Inside the doors, a middle-aged man in a fancy-looking black robe was there to greet us. I'd been nervous going in, but he didn't give Lou so much as a glance. Lou was actually pretty capable!

"Hello, I'm Serephione, daughter of the Earl of Granzeus. Thank you for having me today."

I may not have gotten out much, but I could handle greetings just fine. I had experience in the business world from my past life.

"Oh, bright as well as lovely! I expect nothing less from the young lady of the Granzeus family!"

His words stunk of flattery. *Is he that afraid of the Minister of Finance? Is he concerned because the Ministry is in charge of the budget? Papa, why did you just make that sniffing sound?*

"Thank you for accommodating my busy schedule. We don't have much time. Proceed with the examination."

He ran the negotiation at his own pace. *Way to go, papa!*

"Now, Count, would you step out—"

"I refuse. Am I meant to leave my precious daughter here?"

"But sir, the regulations—"

"Magic is ineffective in this building. What would I be capable of? Do I, a lone civil official, pose a problem to three magicians of the state?"

He was plenty intimidating as a civil official!

"Now that I've lost my wife, my daughter is my treasure. Would you be willing to take responsibility for it if she collapsed? I promise not to take one step away from this wall. Now, get on with it!"

He bent the rules for me by acting like an entitled parent. As my father was a count, our family was only in the middle of the ranks in terms of nobility, so it wasn't his rank that they yielded to, but papa himself. It was a pitiful sight.

"R-Right this way, miss..."

Not only was the facilitator's voice shaking, he was calling me "miss" now. We

would never meet again, so I hoped he could forgive me.

I called out to Lou internally. He moved from my head to my shoulder and gave me a nod.

There was a square tablet on a small table in the center of the room. I proceeded to the table, and the magicians moved to form a triangle surrounding me.

“You may place your hands on the tablet now, miss.”

“Okay.”

I put my hands out apprehensively. Once I touched it, the tablet would detect my magic! What was Lou going to do?!

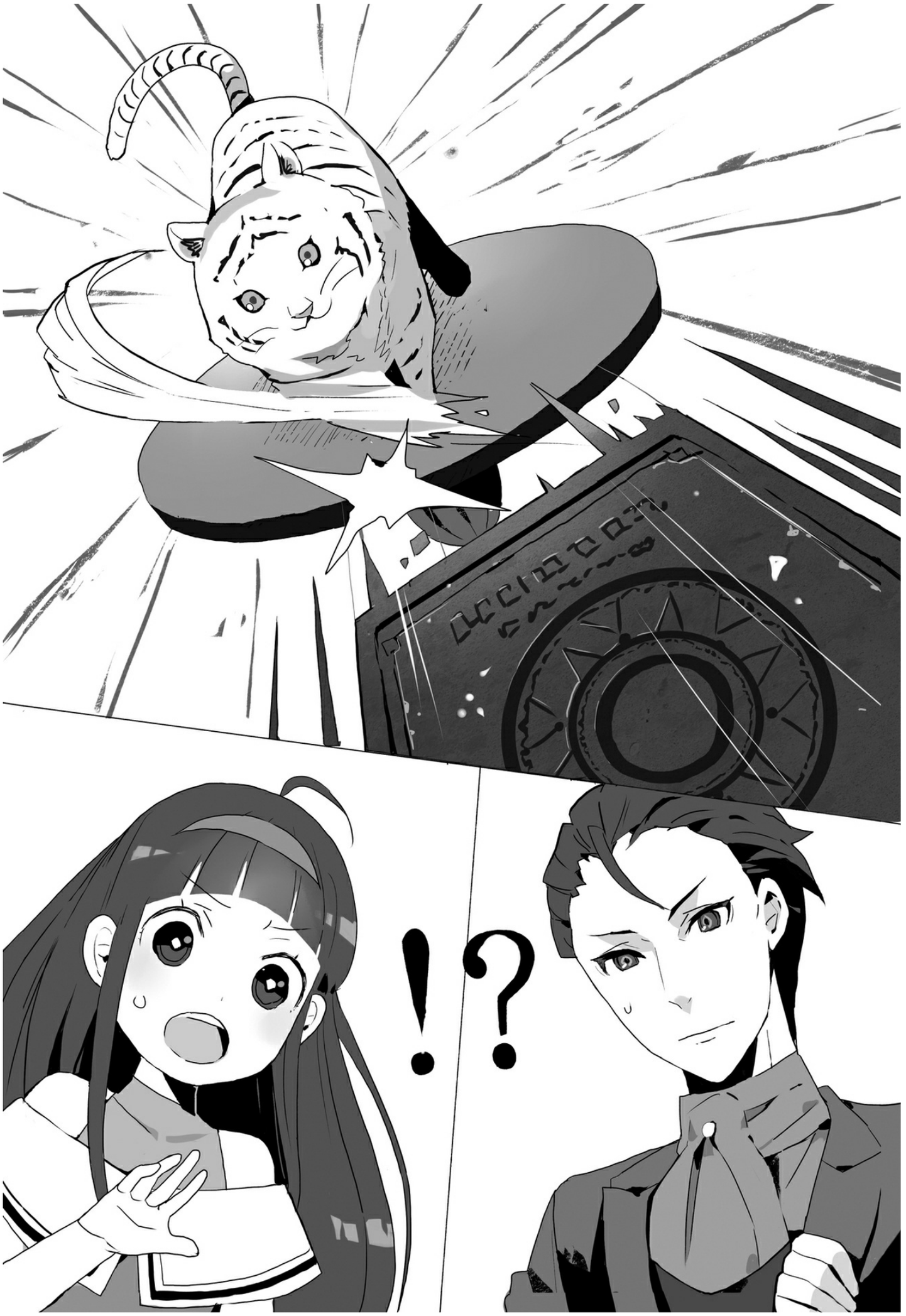
Just then, Lou hopped off my shoulder and onto the table. Then he swiped the stone tablet away with his right paw.

“Eh?!?!”

Crash!

The tablet flew away at high velocity, hit the wall, and shattered.

...He smacked it? A physical attack?!



All five of us in the room were left speechless as we tried to figure out how to react. Magician A, the oldest-looking of them, recovered first.

“M-Miss, did you touch the tablet just now?”

“No, it flew away when I tried to touch it...”

“I-I see... Please step back, miss. Bring out the spare tablet! Hurry!”

Magician B hastily brought in a new tablet and set it on the table. At that moment, Lou pushed it with his right paw again! *Swipe*! Even harder than before!

Smash!

Everyone fell silent.

There had been a lot of distance between me and the tablet this time, so they had no reason to suspect me.

“The tablet flew away... This is unheard of.”

“Do we have any more tablets?”

“Of course not! How could we have any more of such a valuable object?!”

It was valuable?! And we broke it into little splinters?! Twice, at that!

I staggered, and my father rushed over to me and picked me up in his arms.

“What do you think of this phenomenon, gentlemen?” my father asked.

It’s so cool-headed of him to make his enemies think!

“...This is beyond my understanding. All I can say for sure is that this has never happened before this young lady’s examination.”

Just looking at the broken remains of the tablets, it was clear that they couldn’t be repaired. *Will we have to reimburse them? This is a problem...*

“Father... The tablets... What do we do?”

Seeing tears in my eyes, my father immediately began projecting a threatening aura. Magicians A, B, and C simultaneously paled in fear.

“Sir! Your daughter is clearly not responsible for this! The second tablet in

particular was well away from her. Magic does not work in this room. Some unknown power must have caused this...”

“And what would that be?” my father pressed in a low voice.

“This may be the work of a being beyond human understanding...”

You’re not wrong, Magician A!

“That must be it. Some power made both the tablet and magical power avoid me...” I muttered, looking at Lou sitting on the table. Papa squeezed me close to him.

“So be it. I will protect Serephione whether she has magic or not. We have no more business with this dangerous place. You may record Serephione as Magicless.”

“But sir, that would reflect badly on her as a noble lady!”

“I told you, I do not care. I will not let this happen again. You may do as you see fit. Agreed?”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

Seeing that the conversation was over, Lou climbed up onto my head while my father held me. My father lightly raised his right hand, and we quickly exited the magic examination room.

As soon as we were out of the room, I put up a wall of wind around us to soundproof our voices.

“Lou...I was expecting something like a never-before-seen magic trick.”

“It’s no use playing tricks on humans. Humans have plenty of replacements. We gotta break the irreplaceable tablets!”

“That may be true...but didn’t you have some more dramatic way of breaking them? I guess your options were limited since you couldn’t use magic, though.”

“That was plenty dramatic, wasn’t it? By the way, it’s not true that I couldn’t have used magic. The anti-magic effect in that room was loosened. Should I have broken the tablets with magic?”

“Huh?! The anti-magic effect was that loose?” I said, interpreting for Lou.

“How did the magicians not notice? Do you think they were beginners?” I asked my father.

“No. Judging by their badges, one of them was a first-class magician, and the others were second class. They were at the top level in the kingdom.”

“Top level?! And they still couldn’t see Lou? Were you concealing yourself, Lou?”

“Hmm?”

“I mean, Enrique and Martha can see you, right? And lately, Matsuki the cook has been able to see you too... So why wouldn’t the experts be able to see you?”

My father smiled wryly. “Our household’s servants are actually all people of extraordinary talent. They have to be trained so they can protect us in an emergency, and each of them is probably well within the level of a military commander. As for Matsuki, well, he would see the dishes he’d lined up on the table floating into the air and disappearing and think he’d seen a ghost. For the past two years, he’s been hard at work studying magic so he’d finally be able to see Lou, and now his stress-related balding has gone away.”

Our gluttonous fluffball has been causing trouble out of my sight... Matsuki, I’ll buy you some seaweed on the way home!

So, not even professionals can see holy beasts. Just how OP is our household?

“The others in your household all have wavelengths similar to yours... Oh, it also helps that I lowered my guard to them.”

“Right... Father, shall we head home?”

“Yes, let’s get going.”

“I did my best, Sere, dad! Cake! Cake!”

My father grinned and signaled to Lou that he understood, then he went to call over our carriage that was waiting well away from us.

Lou and I gazed at the bright red setting sun as we stood around at the entranceway of the research center.

“Hey!”

I turned around at the sudden voice, and a boy in expensive-looking clothes with a sword at his hip was standing before me. He was clearly a member of the upper nobility. His build was slender, and his face was small; he looked to be about the same age as my brother. His curly blond hair was pushed back behind his ears, and he had handsome features, including a defined nasal bridge. There were so many beautiful people in this world, it was hard to live as an average person like me...

The boy’s clear gray eyes were...eyeing the top of my head suspiciously. Wait, the top of my head?!

Lou got down onto my shoulder and growled warily. I wasn’t certain he could see Lou, so I couldn’t make a move. I had to greet him like a normal girl passing by.

“Hello?”

“What’s that on your shoulder?”

He could see Lou. This was the first person outside our household that could see him. I’d been careless.

Lou was rather nervous as well. His beloved father had told him not to associate with humans other than those he’d contracted with, after all. Lou would most likely follow that rule and not hesitate to eliminate anyone who gave him a bad feeling. Lou was one of the four heavenly beasts; he didn’t care about human circumstances.

We couldn’t make a scene. I had to get this under control.

“What does it look like to you?” I stalled for time by answering his question with another question.

“...A tiger?”

“It’s not.”

“So, what is it? The aura I feel coming off it... It’s not just a normal being, is it?”

I said nothing.

“Answer me!”

Our family carriage finally entered my view. I was saved!

“This is...a very important friend of mine. I have to go now.”

I got into the carriage before the coachman could open the door. I didn’t want my father to come out because it would reveal my identity.

The carriage started moving immediately in response to my abnormal behavior and Lou’s unusually pointed aura.

“What’s wrong, Serephi?”

“Lou’s...been discovered.”

◇ ◇ ◇

The verdict of my magic exam was Magicless. Nobody questioned us about papa being in the exam room and pressuring the testers, and no one asked us about the poltergeist making the tablets fly away.

When it came down to it, our family wasn’t a ducal or marquisate family. We were mid-ranking nobility, and I was the plain daughter of that mid-ranking noble family. I wasn’t important enough to be watched closely. No nobles would bother to make a move on me, and noble society would leave me alone —as would the royal family, for that matter.

In the book, I’d been engaged to the second prince since the very beginning. The reason I, the daughter of a count, had been chosen as his fiancée in spite of the many higher-ranked ladies in my generation was probably because I swept the magic exam and got Advanced. Rumor had it that the second prince would be engaged in early summer to the daughter of a liberal marquis family.

I’d finally managed to deviate from the novel at least a bit.

1) I avoided enrolling in the magic academy.

2) I avoided getting engaged to the second prince.

It was a big success for me. It had been three years since I regained my memories; it was about time.

But that noble boy was still on my mind. Not only could he see Lou, he could

sense that Lou was powerful too. He was a magic user to rival my brother.

When I told my father about how the boy looked and about our conversation, he said, “He must be related to either the Granzeus family or the royal family...”

Nobody else in our extended family was the same age as my brother, so that left the royal family. However, the royal family of Judore had a long history, and the family tree was quite large if you included the minor branches. Their genes were probably strong, given how powerful their magic was.

That said, the current royal family hadn’t contacted us, even though it would have been as simple as figuring out whose carriage Lou and I got on.

I searched my memories thoroughly, but that boy never appeared in the book; if he did, I would have known immediately. Naturally, he wasn’t the second prince either since the prince would have only been a year older than me—still a child.

A boy of around fifteen who was related to the royal family yet not a character in the book... These clues were like grasping at clouds...

In any case, I had to try to minimize contact with high-ranking nobles if I wanted to follow Lou’s rule. I was nervous about whether I could make it in this world like that, but my father actually seemed refreshed to have that clear guiding principle.

“I’d almost like to give up my position as Minister and go back to our domain.”

My brother didn’t really seem to care as long as our inner circle was secure. “Hm? I don’t really get networking. Why would you want to make it to the top of the social ladder? Status is nothing but a bother if you have your own strength, you know. Well, no matter how things turn out, the least I can do is give you and Lou a life of luxury, so feel free to take advantage of that.”

S-So manly! I’ll stick with you wherever you go, my brother!

Although I might have thought that, all students at the magic academy lived in dorms, so my brother was only able to come back to the mansion once a month according to the residence guidelines.

Whenever he was back, he would rigorously check my training progress, show me and Lou the magic he'd learned at school, and reveal our shortcomings. He must have been pounding his classmates into the dirt in class... He was merciless.

After dinner, he would sit me on his lap, read me the new books he'd brought back as gifts, present Lou with the newest snacks, and then his break would be over. I had no clue how he was doing at school. He never mentioned a single friend's name. He was a loner! Not just that, but a loner who didn't realize it himself...

Anyway, this all meant that I didn't always have someone around to train me before I entered knight school.

Knight school was, at its core, based on raw skill. The entrance exams were held for eleven-year-olds, and there was both a paper test and a practical skills test. I thought I'd become pretty capable, but my skill set had become a bit lopsided. *Why'd I train like an assassin?! Why'd I get so good with concealed weapons? Isn't this going to be huge trouble? I have to be able to compete in a normal match!*

My father used a short lance, but I couldn't use a lance very well as a six-year-old because the hilt would drag on the ground. And all my brother would teach me when he came back on occasion was sneak attacks...

This meant...

"Serephiii!"

...a new character would enter my closed-off life—my grandmother! A new challenger appeared!

So, I do have an extended family, after all...

Intermission: Larouza's Determination, Erza's Oath My kind, cheerful mother was my pride and joy. She supported my busy father, but she still made time to nurse me and parent me. She introduced me to magic and martial arts in our nature-rich domain, where we spent most of the year. When the weather was mild and sunny, she would make us lunches from scratch and take me by the hand to go picnicking.

When I was seven, my little sibling began to grow in my mother's belly. All three of us anticipated the birth. There was no doubt that our family would only grow happier.

When the time finally came for my mother to go into labor, I was saying a prayer with my hands clasped when my father uncharacteristically ran into my room, his face blanched.

"Larouza, hurry to your mother!"

"O-Okay!"

I rushed to my mother's bedside. Her face was pale white, her breathing labored.

"Mother?"

"...Larouza. I love you more than anyone... Remember that...my darling Larouza..."

She let out a thin breath, and her soul passed into heaven. My father began to cry, and in my dumbfounded shock, I noticed that our head maid Martha was holding a little baby. I approached her softly and slowly.

“Young Larouza... This is your sister.” Martha, with tears in her eyes, crouched down so I could see the baby.

My sister looked so small and fragile, and she had the same black hair as me. Her eyes opened slightly as Martha rocked her. Her black eyes glittered like the starry sky, just like our mother’s.

I began to cry. My tiny sister would live without ever knowing her mother. I’d had the chance to experience our mother’s warm, gentle love, but my sister would never know that motherly love again.

“Waaah, ahhh...” I clung to my father and sobbed.

With my mother gone, my father worried for me and stayed with me as much as he could when he was home. He ate with me and read to me before bed, just like my mother had done.

“Father, please read to Serephione tonight instead of me.”

“Larouza, it’s okay. You don’t have to try so hard as an older brother. Serephione is still a baby, so she wouldn’t understand anyway.”

My father would tell me “You’re so kind” as he gently stroked my head. But I wasn’t. I just felt guilty. I’d had books read to me every day without fail since the day I was born.

My sister was raised by Martha and Enrique, and she grew into a lovely black-eyed little lady. She was low-maintenance, kept a low profile, and spent her time quietly in her room. Although I adored my little sister, whose features resembled mine in so many ways, I couldn’t take the initiative to play with her. I had already gotten so many things that my sister hadn’t and wouldn’t get; I felt crushing guilt whenever I looked at her.

At that point in time, our father was in a lower position, and his work had been increasing due to his sharp mind, so he wasn’t able to come home very often. Ultimately, he’d had no choice but to take the position of Minister of Finance, leave our domain, and stay in the capital indefinitely.

After he came home from his long absence, he explained to us that we were going to move. At that, Serephione said, “Father, you can leave me here. I don’t want to burden you.”

Our eyes opened wide. We hadn't known my two-year-old little sister could speak so well. And what she said... That she was a burden...

"How could you think that...?" Father hastily scooped up Serephione from her little chair and held her close. "Of course you're not a burden, my Serephi. Don't say things like that!"

She tipped her head to the side with innocent eyes, just like our mother's.

"But...I'm not useful for anything. I'll just stay here and be a good girl and listen to Martha. I won't do anything bad."

She was too smart—she'd reached a sad conclusion unbefitting a two-year-old.

"Oh, Serephione! Your mother put her life on the line to give you to me! ...No, it's not that! Serephi... I'd be hopeless without you, my Serephi. Please, come with me! Please!"

"But..."

As our father wrapped Serephione in a tight hug for the first time, she wore a bewildered expression.

After we moved to the capital, our father started to take my sister on walks while holding her hand when he could find the time. I was relieved. He would invite me to come along, but I would decline and say I had to do homework. I wanted her to feel loved by our father, and I had no idea how to act around her.

I'd wanted to give her affection so she would never get the wrong idea that she was a burden again, but up until now, I'd hogged our happiness for myself and left her by her lonesome. I didn't know how to start acting like an older brother at this point. The more I'd thought about it, the more grim my face had become, and Serephione avoided me by staying in her room.

"Mother...what should I do...?"

But then the situation took a sudden turn.

I at least wanted to have the magic and fighting skills to protect my sister from anyone, so I was putting in serious effort to obtain them, but it wasn't enough—until, at last, I'd developed a weapon of my own.

On that snowy day, I'd developed a weapon that was sharper and easier to throw than a knife (my sister told me later that it was a "shuriken"). I coated it in poison and a numbing medicine I extracted from shivir grass and gave it a test throw, aiming for the big camphor tree in the yard.

My thoughtless action had almost hurt my sister who I was meant to protect, and the holy beast was badly wounded in her place. The holy beast wordlessly rebuked me, and I finally apologized for all the mistakes I'd made up until then. My sister forgave me—she told me she loved me.

Even so, Serephione had been chosen by the holy beast at only three years old. She had even healed his wound within moments, whereas his natural auto-purification abilities hadn't been enough. My sister wasn't just as cute as a fairy, she was also amazingly talented. I'd expect as much from my dear sister!

Then Serephione said she wanted to be a knight in order to keep the Granzeus family at peace and to accompany Lou, the holy beast, on a journey. On that night when the four of us slept together, when Serephione was already fast asleep, I discussed her ambitions with our father. Lou's eyes were closed, but an ordinary person like me couldn't tell if he was really sleeping or not.

"Father, why do you think Serephione suddenly wants to be a knight?" I asked. "And what is this journey she's talking about?"

"A spiritual pilgrimage, perhaps? She must have discussed something with Lou. But Serephione is only three. As I said before, we have to start by training her body and mind. Also, if Lou's existence is confidential, then that makes their contract and Serephione's abilities confidential as well. It will be hard to find a tutor who can keep the secret...but it's the sacred beast's idea. I'll try to find someone. Until then, you'll be her teacher. I trust that you'll do a good job."

My father grinned at me as he patted both my head and Serephione's at once.

"Okay!"

"We can raise our dear Serephione together. You did well today, Larouza. I love you."

"Father...I love you too. Good night."

As the weather got warmer and the snow melted, I taught Serephione the basic physical conditioning that I had learned as a child. It was harder than I had imagined to teach and guide another person. It was good experience for me as the future successor to the earlship.

I didn't have to fear my sister anymore. I could just pamper her. My sister had already tasted hardship, and she was a smart girl. She had a holy beast at her side too. Nothing would lead her astray. I could pass on what my mother did for me to my sister.

Our slightly-tanned Serephione was my treasure. I couldn't do as much as the holy tiger, but I wanted to aid her as much as I possibly could.

I swore to my late mother that I would support Serephione for all my life.

◇ ◇ ◇

On an afternoon where the daffodils had bloomed, yet spring was still far away, I, Erza Trundle, received a letter from the man I most detested. The sender was Count Granzeus, the man who was unable to protect my precious only daughter, Liruphione, after he had stolen her away.

I considered crumpling it up, but then I remembered seeing my beautiful Liruphi standing at my bedside where I'd dreamt last night, and I sighed. This was the first time he'd contacted me in the six years since Liruphi's funeral... It had to have been an emergency.

While my family, the Trundles, was part of the nobility, we had no court rank. We had been a warrior family for generations, and though we'd often received court titles for our achievements, we placed little importance on titles. The Trundles placed the most weight on honing our skills until we were satisfied; we would find a master we could respect and support them for life. Once we had established a master, we would fight dauntlessly for their sake. Even when we faced death, we had no regrets.

My husband, Geintz, chose the king as his master, made it through numerous battles with him, and rose to the rank of General.

We'd met as commander and aide-de-camp in the Second Battle of Burlage. I had successfully secured some victories after graduating from knight school,

and I was making it in the world. However, I bonded with him, my superior who had courted me so passionately and seriously, and I decided to leave everything behind to marry him.

The gods blessed us with a daughter like a little flower: our treasure, Liruphione. While her appearance and soft demeanor embodied femininity itself, she was still a direct descendant of the Trundles. Even as she danced gracefully in a dress, she absorbed my skill with the short lance and my prowess in military advising, as well as my husband's swordsmanship. We treated her with tender, loving care.

Liruphione fell in love with the heir to the Granzeus family, a magical family that opposed the warrior Trundle family, at the height of the war. Liruphione laughed as she declared that she had truly lost everything to the Granzeuses, and that if she were to swear to a lifelong marriage, there was no better option than Sir Granzeus, who was stronger than her and kind as well.

In turn, Granzeus vowed he would make Liruphione happy, no matter what. He vowed to protect her.

My husband and I were disappointed that we couldn't adopt our son-in-law into our family and live together, but we respected our beloved daughter's decision.

But then my daughter lost her life in childbirth. *They already had Larouza, so what were they so greedy for?!*

Without seeing the child our daughter had given her life for, my husband said to the count at the funeral, "You broke your promise. The Trundle family will never forgive you as long as we live." With that, we cut off ties.

Our master had long since crossed over to the underworld. Less than a year after our daughter's death, my husband followed her due to complications from a cold.

"Mother, I sincerely thank you for heeding my wish and visiting our humble estate."

Count Granzeus knelt before me and greeted me with the utmost deference. I nodded coolly.

I'd decided to meet with him, and I'd mobilized all of my past connections to find out as much about his current circumstances as I could. I'd learned that in the past several years, the Granzeus family had become distant from society and was in an isolated state.

Have they become weak at social interaction without my daughter? Are they a bad actor in noble society? I'm not exactly one to be talking, though, isolated Trundle that I am.

The other thing was that, while she had Granzeus blood, the child was Magicless, even though she was the daughter of my talented Liruphione... Frankly, I was disappointed.

Why did my Liruphione have to die for a Magicless child...?

"Please come this way, Mother."

Granzeus beckoned me to the window. The yard of the estate, isolated from the outside world, was larger than I had expected.

There she was, in the middle of the vast lawn.

"Liruphione..."

My Liruphione had chestnut-brown hair. This black-haired girl couldn't have been Liruphione. But still...I could only see her as the daughter I had longed for all this time. Her eyes sparkled black just like my husband's and daughter's, proof that our Trundle blood ran strong in her. Her sky-blue dress suited her well. I raised my eyebrows at it being ankle-length, though.

She spun a ring around her wrist and then threw it high above her head. At the same time, she and...a shadow? Something that was too fast for me to make out jumped after the ring.

"Huh?"

She leapt as high as the third story of a building, and the other thing caught the ring. They exchanged kicks for a moment, and then at once it touched down to the ground. Then, as if she had given up in the middle, she made a vortex of wind around her, dropped her speed, and touched down on the ground lightly, one foot at a time.

How did she use wind magic? Wasn't she Magicless?

As I observed her actions, perplexed, the thing from before came up to her feet. She picked it up and hugged it, then began to speak to it affectionately.

My entire body began to tremble. Sweat ran down my back. I hadn't felt this fear since I had come close to death from being stabbed in the stomach on the battlefield.

When I'd once escorted a research team to an imperial tomb in the western desert, I'd seen this exact thing carved into the wall—an incarnation of a god.

"Serephione is too much of a tomboy. I don't know what to do with her."

I turned back at Granzeus's voice. He examined my expression with a serious look on his face. This certainly wasn't a trivial matter.

"Why...is his holiness the Guardian Tiger of the West here?"

"So, you can see the holy guardian beast..."

Granzeus sat me down and gave me a chronological explanation. He told me how Serephione was even wiser and more beautiful than she had been as a young child, and how the holy beast Lou had discovered how remarkable she was at the age of three and had made a contract with her. He said he'd been teaching her magic, and he claimed her skill had surpassed even a top-level magician. He explained that Lou had decreed that the two of them would go on a journey in the future and that she had to go to knight school to prepare for it, which entailed deliberately getting Magicless on her magic exam. He said that since Larouza had entered the magic academy, nobody was around to teach her the martial arts. He told me Lou's existence, the truth of his contract, and Serephione's talent all had to stay secret within the family, and that this prevented him from hiring any outside tutors.

"...Why are you revealing such an important secret to me?"

"Serephione is your granddaughter. We're family, even if you don't keep contact with me."

I was silent.

"Serephione's current weapon is a short lance. Larouza has drilled her on it,

just as Liruphione drilled Larouza."

So, just as I drilled Liruphione...

"I'm biased as her father, but I think she has considerable skill. However, the Trundle method of short lance handling isn't a frontal attack style. I think it may be a disadvantage in knight school."

The holy beast had chosen Serephione—my grandchild. She was learning the way of the short lance. Joy began to well up all throughout my body. *How foolish and shallow I'd been to be disappointed in her until meeting her today!*

There was a knock on the door, and at the same time, a girl entered the room, led by an unfamiliar butler.

She took my breath away. Her eyes were like stars twinkling in the darkness of a warm spring night. Her jet-black hair was tied into a high ponytail, and vitality emanated from her well-balanced body. Her lovely ankles were visible, a must-not for a lady. Was it so she could move more easily? Frighteningly, the holy beast's tail was curled around those very ankles.

A holy beast and a young maiden. An unusual wave came off of the tiger, turned to a ring of light, and surrounded the two. It was a scene straight out of a myth.

As a matter of course, I approached the holy beast, got down on one knee, and assumed the obedient pose of a knight.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance. My name is Erza Trundle. I am the mother of Serephione's mother. I am visiting today at the invitation of Isaac Granzeus, Serephione's father."

The holy beast stared at me as if evaluating me. Having lived to this age, I'd committed my fair share of dirty deeds and mistakes. The biggest of those mistakes was how I'd dealt with the girl in front of me right now, looking at me with wide eyes and covering her mouth with both hands. I felt like crawling into a hole.

I dipped my head even lower. My mouth was as dry as sand.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed. Something soft then touched my

head. When I looked up, the holy beast was gently patting my head. Then he lightly climbed onto my grandchild's shoulder. Had he...given me his blessing?

"F-Father?"

"Serephi, speak to your grandmother."

"Um, grandmother, Lou would like you to sit down."

Serephione took my hand and led me to the couch.

Have children's hands always been this small? Not only that, her hands were hard. Her palm was callused from grasping her lance, as though it had blistered and healed many times over. She sat down next to me with the holy beast still on her shoulder and spoke to me with sparkling eyes.

"Um, nice to meet you, grandmother! I'm Serephione!"

"..."

"This is my first time talking to a woman other than Martha!"

"..."

"My big brother told me that he would protect me since girls are weak! So I'll protect you, grandmother. I mean, you're so nice, and you smell good too. What was that, Lou? Grandmother, Lou says he's glad to meet you too."

I couldn't take it anymore. I scooped up Serephione along with the holy beast in a hug. Her slightly-elevated body heat penetrated into my limbs. Had I...really been this lonely? I couldn't bear to let go of this warmth.

When I looked up, the holy beast's endlessly clear, sky-blue eyes urged on my determination. I quietly nodded.

"Nice to meet you, Serephione. I'm your grandmother. Just as you will protect me...I, too, will protect you and the holy beast Lou to the extent of my ability. I offer you my loyalty, my life, my everything."

I, the last remaining Trundle, had finally met my master at this age.

When I glanced over at Count Granzeus, he was smiling. I, the former top military advisor in the kingdom, had played right into this man's plan. *Of course... This is the man who had chosen Liruphione, after all.*

“Serephi, first of all, forget that way of holding the sword. Hold it with one hand like this! Pay attention to the joints and muscles in your shoulder!”

“Okayyy!”

“Observe Lou’s right shoulder, torso, legs, and timing, and strike in turn! Don’t drop speed!”

“This sword is heavy, grandmother!”

“It’s supposed to be! Okay, next! Deliver a roundhouse blow to my side, then drive your dominant hand in with the grip and knock my weapon out of my hands. The image is what’s important! Repeat it until it becomes muscle memory!”

“Hiyah!!!”

“Too slow!”

Swoosh!

“Agh...”

“S-Serephi!”

“Grandmother, is this comb a different color from your hair? It’s so sparkly and pretty!”

“He he. If you twist it like this, a needle comes out. You can use this to protect yourself from foolish men if the time comes. You can even coat the needle with poison. Speaking of which, just one drop of the Marre bee’s venom can kill. Your mother kept this on her when she was a bachelorette. Put it like this, and twist the hair at the back of the neck... There! How lovely!”

“Wow! I get to match both you and my mother? Thank you, grandmother!”

“I can’t believe Liruphi had such a dangerous comb...” Count Granzeus grimaced.

I took up training once again so that I could accompany my two new masters when they went on their pilgrimage someday.

My dear husband, my dear Liruphione, it looks like I’m not going to be joining you for the time being.

Chapter 3: The Magic Tournament

It had been a while since my grandmother had come into my life. It seemed like there had been some hard feelings after my mother died, but once she understood the situation had nothing to do with my father, her feelings completely flipped.

As for the rest, might made right! She prostrated herself before the incomprehensible great being that was Lou. She also shed tears for me and my brother as we cooperated in the pursuit of strength. It seemed she felt extreme empathy for us.

Well, at this point in my development, I was going through some changes that only girls understand, so I was glad to have my grandmother around now!

That aside, I had no idea my mother's family, the Trundles, was a line of prestigious warriors. They would do anything to win, and my brother had inherited a lot of that blood—for example, you could see it in his fondness for concealed weapons and sneak attacks...

Apparently, my grandmother had been number three in the military when she was young. However, she rose to that rank based on her fighting strength and knowledge; her magic was only just good enough to manage in daily life.

How could she see Lou? According to him, "She's exceptionally perceptive. She probably thinks she just has 'good intuition,' but isn't she always making accurate judgments two steps ahead thanks to her perceptiveness?! It's an impressive talent. Not to mention she's extraordinarily strong! And, of course, her wavelength is similar to yours."

We received training from our superwoman of a grandmother from then on, and when my brother came home, the three of us would go to the Trundle domain and shoot off some large-scale new magic attacks, making sure not to damage the environment.

The Trundle domain was a day's travel away from the royal capital, and it served as the last stronghold remaining to protect it. Nobody dared to enter the domain without permission. Anyone who served a thug was bound to be a thug

themself. We were ready to kill any poachers the minute they tried anything; it would be great for our secret training, after all.

Then, one day, grandmother came skipping to the Granzeus mansion with an interesting piece of information.

“Larouza, you were selected to enter the academy-wide magic tournament this year? I heard you’re the only first-year who’ll be participating!”

Our grandmother’s intel-gathering operation had no blind spots!

“Yeah, I am. What about it?”

An awkward silence briefly filled the room before my grandmother decided to continue pressing forward. “That’s wonderful, Larouza! Congratulations! When I was a student, only second-years and up were able to participate!”

“It’s not like I was chosen for accomplishing anything. My teacher just told me to enter last week.”

As always, my brother was apathetic to the 359 degrees of his circle that didn’t involve his family. Pride and prestige meant nothing to him.

“A tournament?” I asked.

“Students enter the magic academy at thirteen years old, and the school goes from Year 1 up to Year 5 at eighteen. The magic tournament is held once a year among the most skilled students regardless of year, and they choose the strongest student as the winner.”

“Wow! That’s awesome! You have my support!”

Was there an event like this in the book? Maybe it had been cut short in my time because of the conflict with the neighboring kingdom.

“Thank you, Serephione. I appreciate it, but it’s going to just be a bother to be grouped into the ‘academy level’ where we can’t use new magic or combination magic. I can probably manage by brute forcing the competition with single-type magic, but considering the future, it would make me stand out in a bad way.”

Well, if you break right into the top level in your first year, it might make the rest of your school career difficult. Hm, wait... My brother wasn’t the type of person to care about that, was he?

“I just want to have a quiet, simple life—until I’ve completed my conquest of all the books in the academy library, that is.”

Hmm, so it’s not pressure from upperclassmen that’s the issue. He just doesn’t want to be talked about.

“Larouza, you frightening little boy!”

Grandmother, you’re grinning!

Our father was smirking. “I understand how you feel, Larouza, but you can’t keep your skill hidden forever. I think it would be a better plan to put up a proper fight and show your skill so nobody has any complaints. That would mean you could be a surface-level shield for Serephione and Lou. Your grandmother and I will support you from the shadows. Consider it.”

“Okay, I will.”

Sorry for being such a high-maintenance daughter and fluffball...

“I want to see my brother fight people outside of our family, though... Maybe I should go watch in disguise?”

“Should I use perception-altering magic so nobody remembers us?” suggested Lou, resting his adorable toe beans on my lap and looking up at me.

“No, don’t worry about it. That would be asking too much. Everyone is already putting in so much work to protect me.”

“Well... Why don’t we go as support? It would be unnatural to keep Serephi too hidden. We’ll make her presence known, and then we’ll make sure everyone knows to keep their hands off her because we’re protecting her. But Serephi, you’ll get some derisive looks as our Magicless daughter. Are you okay with that?”

“How fun! I’ll put on my best act as a sweet little weakling!”

“Huh? No way you’ll get derisive looks if I have anything to say about it,” my brother declared. “We’d just attract troublesome insects that way. Serephione, come looking as plain and unremarkable as you can.”

Got it! I’ll make sure it doesn’t get out that my brother has such a plain little sister! I won’t bring shame upon him!

“Interesting. Things are starting to get exciting.” My grandmother chuckled.

With that, it was decided that we would go on a family outing to support my brother.

The magic academy was in the south, far from the capital.

When my father helped me out of the carriage and I looked at the magnificent gate, tears unconsciously came to my eyes. Because I was nostalgic for it? No! Because I was frustrated!

In the book, after I was consumed by the war with the neighboring kingdom that would begin in just a few years, I put my power to full use as the prince’s fiancée. But then the prince, my friends, and even my brother... All of them turned on me when the heroine showed up.

“Fighting won’t resolve this! Let’s talk it over!”

“If anyone can create a world where we don’t have to hurt each other, it’s you!”

All that came out of their mouths were empty, sugar-sweet words.

What Maribelle, the heroine, had said was righteous, and when I read the novel, I had taken her at her word. But now that this world had become reality and I was in the shoes of the villainess, I couldn’t agree with her any longer. Talking it over was the job of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and government officials; it wasn’t a little girl’s place to stick her nose into politics!

In times of war, it was essential to operations to separate the soldiers and the brains. The army wouldn’t function if the soldiers asked “Why?” or “How come?” at every turn. The staff, the diplomats, and the soldiers each had to fulfill their own roles. As a student of the magic academy at the time, my role was to be a soldier, a pawn. All I did was earnestly fulfill the role I was given, yet I was assaulted by their criticism.

“Doesn’t it hurt your heart to kill people so casually?”

“You’re so coldhearted.”

I’m coldhearted? But it was your heartless words that made me get blood on my hands!

“You’re not worthy of being in the royal family.”

Huh? It was your dad who gave me the extermination order, though!

That was why I’d sold myself to the neighboring kingdom— “S-Sere...? Serephione? You’re spacing out... What’s wrong?”

“Oh... It’s nothing.”

It surprised even me how much I’d absorbed the feelings of the book version of myself. It was as if I’d walked her path myself. Were all reincarnations like this?

Between my current self, my past self, and my self from the book, my mind was at once in order yet muddled together.

I couldn’t have my head in the clouds. I couldn’t let this consume me. I was entering enemy territory. I couldn’t afford to let my guard down.

“Sere?”

“Sorry, Lou. I’m okay.”

For the first time in this life, I stepped foot into the academy that I had such mixed feelings about.

The instant we stepped into the spectator area of the elliptical stadium, a buzz ran through the crowd. *Was the discord between my father and grandmother more infamous than I expected?*

The two were friendly as they entered. My father, wearing a spotless navy suit, and my grandmother, looking good in a sleek lavender gown, each escorted me by the hand. Though I was the cause of the discord between my grandmother and father, she firmly held my hand with a serene smile. *She can put on a classy smile after all!*

All I wore was a completely unremarkable ivory dress with a black satin ribbon around the waist. My hair was loosely gathered to one side in a platinum hair clip decorated with emerald and agate, matching my grandmother’s.

Lou was riding on my shoulder (the one I didn’t have my hair resting on, of course), having used illusion magic on himself, me, and my father. His eyes darted around suspiciously.

We immediately devised illusion magic following the boy discovering Lou after my magic exam. It refracted the light in front of Lou to make what was behind him look like it's in front of him, like a lens. He concealed himself with it whenever he left the Granzeus residence.

Normally, magic users who were experts in all four types of magic, such as military commanders and leaders as well as the nobility, would be able to at least see Lou's outline. There were probably about ten such people in any given kingdom. But with his illusion magic, Lou should only have been visible to either Granzeus-level exceptional magic users or people he allowed. We had no way to prove this, though.

I heard whispers from all around the venue.

"Psst... Why haven't the Granzeuses shown their faces much recently?"

"Psst... There's the Magicless girl everyone's been talking about. The poor earl."

"Psst... Is that the lucky goddess of the Trundles?! That gorgeous lady took a thousand heads?"

"...Grandmother, what do they mean you 'took a thousand heads'?"

My grandmother chuckled. "Young Serephi, a secret makes a woman, woman."

That's a famous line from a female thief in an anime from my past life! It carries over to all lands!

The person in charge of organizing the venue came over to us. We told them that we were the family of a tournament entrant, and they led us to the front row in the middle of the stadium. I sat down with a handsome man and gorgeous witch on either side of me.

"We stand out here. It's like we're a spectacle," I said.

My grandmother smiled, opened her large fan with a *fwup* sound, and hid half of each of our faces. *That sounded heavy! That fan must have something crazy built in!*

My father suddenly moved the pointer finger on his right hand; he was using

soundproofing magic. Yes, papa could use newly-made magic too, so what?

“Serephi, do you see that section at 2 o’clock surrounded by the red curtain?” my father asked. “The royal family is in there. His and Her Majesty aren’t in attendance today, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea to remember their faces.”

“I heard a member of the royal family will be in the tournament today,” my grandmother grumbled. “It would be better if they disappeared before our Larouza puts them to shame, though. What a pain it would be to get into conflict with them!”

“Lou, is the boy from before here?” I asked.

“Hm... He’s not.”

I saw a few children and their servants. Among them was him—His Highness, the Second Prince Gardner. His blond hair and blue eyes screamed “prince.” In the book, he was my fiancé, but he was a stranger to me in this life. I was relieved. The current Gardner was innocent, though, being a young child.

“Serephi, do you think you can knock that off? You look like you’re about to kill somebody,” my grandmother chided me.

“...I’ll be careful.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed the inner corners with my fingertips. I noticed that papa seemed concerned, though.

The magic tournament began at the scheduled time. My brother appeared bored as he racked up victories, not even using his dominant hand.

The matches apart from my brother’s were uninteresting. All they did was yell magical incantations they learned in school, like “Firewall!” or “Avalanche!” and the strength of those individual attacks decided the match. Even if it was single-type magic, I thought they should have used tricks like timing their repeated attacks, positioning them to corner the opponent, or rapid-firing—but the fact that they were using incantations at all was bad. All it did was show their cards to the enemy.

“Father, is it a rule that they have to use incantations?”

“At the academy, they use incantations when studying magic. They think

that’s just what magic is. And transitioning to incantation-less magic would require them to reconstruct all the concepts they’ve learned so far. It might not be possible for them yet.”

“They don’t realize that incantations are for fools until they enter a real battle. They’ll sure learn in a hurry when their lives are in danger, though... What fools they are, taking peace for granted. We haven’t gone fifty years without war once in recorded history.” My grandmother gave a bitter smile behind her fan.

Last year’s winners and high-level students are apparently seeded, so maybe we can have high expectations going forward?

As we paid attention to the match in short glances, Enrique served us, and we began to eat our packed lunches.

Under the clear, sunny sky, free from my hellish routine training sessions, surrounded by my beloved father, sweet grandmother, and the hopeless fluffball dribbling crumbs from atop my head, I watched my handsome brother calmly and collectedly mowing down his enemies from on high. The lunches Matsuki had put his whole heart into preparing shone with energy.

What a delightful day! If this isn’t happiness, then nothing is! I bit into my little sandwich, smiling from ear to ear.

“Yum! This is delicious!”

A stir suddenly passed through the crowd. *Huh? Did I miss a good moment in the match?*

Papa suddenly took on an intimidating aura. *What, is there an intruder?*

“Father, is there a scoundrel?”

A troubled expression flickered over papa’s face, and he plopped me onto his lap. His hands were occupied from holding me, so I fed him his favorite roast beef sandwich.

“Eee!”

“Psst... The angel is feeding the demon lord?”

“Psst... It’s too much, I’m dying from cuteness overload...”

“Psst... So not even the demon lord can prevail before the young twilight fairy...”

“...Tch, what vile pests.”

P-Papa?! What are you clicking your tongue for?!

“Father?”

“Don’t worry about it, Serephi. Let’s have dessert.”

“Wow! Chocolate cake!”

The crowd buzzed in excitement.

“Hm?” I was confused.

“Sere, hurry and pass it!”

“Okay, okay, here you go.”

“Oho, Serephione’s joy has destructive effects,” my grandmother chuckled. “You must understand how my husband felt now. Fathers with daughters always have to be on guard!”

Huh? Did I destroy something?

The matches proceeded as scheduled, narrowing the entrants down to four. It was finally time for the semifinal matches.

My brother was one of the semifinalists, of course. I imagined him thinking that he should make his skill known as our father said.

The crowd inside and outside the venue went wild at the fact that my brother had advanced to the semifinals as a first-year, and the underground high-stakes betting saw a lot of activity as well.

When my grandmother gave me this information, I told her “I bet he wins,” and handed her ten thousand gold.

Even though my brother’s won fight after fight, given he’s just a first-year, his odds should be ten-to-one! If I can’t avoid becoming the villainess in the future, he’ll need some money saved for his sister’s escape! Win this one for me, big bro!

My brother appeared to the sound of trumpets. Loud cheering enveloped him. I mouthed “Go for it!” to him, and he gave me a wink in return as if to say he understood. *Oh, the girls behind me are swooning now...*

Anyway, getting back on topic, I was trying to figure out who my brother’s opponent was. His robe color indicated he was a fourth-year. He was a tall, slim boy with unusual silver hair. *Oh, he finally looked this way.*

“Ah...”

I recognized his face. He was quite young, but his features held the groundwork for a face that would later be described as carrying an unparalleled ruthlessness. His sharp blue eyes had a freezing gaze. An artificial smile played at his mouth.

It was Emperor Gillain of the Galé Empire. He was the only person who needed me after the Second Prince Gardner abandoned me—the wartime emperor of the neighboring kingdom.

“You’re exceptional,” he’d said. “Come to my side. I’ll make a place for you that doesn’t exist in Judore.”

There was nothing in it so sweet as love or romance. Emperor Gillain was as honest as he was cruel. I’d understood that he merely needed me as a weapon. Even so, he was my salvation in the book. Although he’d thoroughly washed his hands of me and I thus became a prisoner of my mother country, I had no regrets for taking his hand...

“The imperial prince of Galé?! He’s studying abroad here?”

“Ahh, how naive of the royal family. How can they just let a Galéan walk around freely in the epicenter of Judore’s magical development? Their sense of danger is too weak.”

Ah, that’s right—before he succeeded to the imperial throne, he was just one of many imperial princes. Galé was a meritocracy. Emperor Gillain would go on to kick his many siblings to the side and take the imperial throne. He was exactly ten years older than me. At sixteen years old right now, he was most likely studying abroad to gather information in preparation for battle.

“My time studying abroad in Judore felt like soaking in lukewarm water,” I

remembered Emperor Gillain saying. I rather liked his biting derision, even in the book. Regardless, I had chosen another path: I wouldn't go to the magic academy, I wouldn't go to war, and I wouldn't meet Emperor Gillain.

"Sere, your heart rate is too fast."

I looked up in surprise. Lou was looking at me with concerned sky blue eyes. *How can their eyes be the same color yet look so different?*

"Lou, will you really come on a journey with me?"

Lou licked between my eyebrows. "What are you afraid of, Sere? Our hearts are one. We'll always be together. If you go on a journey, I'll go too. If you fall over, so will I. I can feel your pain. It's heavy, Sere. Relax." He nuzzled my cheek with his head and ears.

I felt like crying. "Sorry, Lou. I shouldn't have doubted you. You're my companion. I'm glad."

Just when I thought Lou had tilted his head, he nibbled my neck.

"Huh?"

Lou's magic coursed through my body. The sensation was stark and refreshingly cool, like a snow-covered mountain in midwinter. The murky-black anxiety inside me dispersed. It felt like an embrace from a silver goddess.

"I'm always absorbing your tasty magic, Sere. I should return the favor."

Transferring magic to someone, a part of your life force, was the ultimate symbol of affection. Furthermore, this was from one of the four heavenly beasts, an object of awe and fear.

Pathetically, it was just then that I understood for the first time that I was unique and special to Lou.

Lou... Loudarylphena would never run to the heroine.

"Thank you, Lou. I love you." I held back tears and squeezed Lou in a hug.

"Is everything okay, Serephione?" My father was looking at me with concern.

"I was just feeling a bit down because he seems scarily strong."

"I see... Serephi, sorry in advance."

With that said, my father shot a thin magical needle from his pointer finger at my brother's neck. He nodded at my brother when he turned back. My brother gave a long blink. This exchange took only a moment. Nobody should have noticed.

It was a signal to change plans. My grandmother and I were expressionless, but we understood my father's intent. There was nothing to be gained by winning against royalty from another kingdom. Done unskillfully, it would only land him on Galé's blacklist.

The starting whistle blew. After they sized each other up motionlessly for a moment, the emperor, the edge of his mouth turned up in a smirk, created a net of lightning and surrounded my brother with it at once. Naturally, he didn't use any incantations or any easily understandable movements.

My brother instantly created a wall of earth inside the net to guard himself. Then he shot fire projectiles from its gaps, but a barrier in the holes of the net bounced them back off.

A barrier that deflected attacks—I had never seen that in this world before. Had Galé's magic made more progress than ours? Or was it unique to the prince?

My brother electrified the knife he was holding and threw it. Could a combined physical and magical attack break through the barrier?

It broke through! The knife went for the emperor's hand inside his robe. *Oh, that's right, the emperor is left-handed. He's rapid-firing magic with his left hand.*

Bam! The emperor reacted in an instant, kicked the knife down, and looked back at my brother before closing the lightning net all at once and destroying the wall of earth. My brother was trapped in a golden net.

"I lose."

The crowd went wild for the best match of this year's tournament!

"Now, isn't that a passable way to lose?" my grandmother said with a smirk.

"Grandmother, the way you're smiling is suspicious!"

“Everyone seems quite taken with Larouza’s honorable defeat... I appreciate the sentiment, but the truth is, they’re quite mis-taken.”

“Is this really the time for puns, Grandmother?”

My brother literally leapt in front of me. “Sorry, Serephione. I promised you I would win.”

We spoke with the awareness that the gallery was listening in.

“You were amazing out there, brother. But since you lost... Would you give me all of your next break?”

I’d make him pay me back the ten thousand gold I lost with his body!

“Aw, Serephione, you leave me no choice.”

He picked me up from papa’s lap along with Lou, touched his forehead to mine, and smiled.

Oh, the girls behind me are getting nosebleeds again! Judging by the amount, it looks like they need a trip to the nurse’s office!

As my brother and I were fulfilling our mission as actors, a wind carrying a massive magical power blew past us.

Just as my father and grandmother took hold of the weapons under their clothes and stood up, a young man appeared directly in my line of vision, which was higher up with my brother holding me—it was Emperor Gillain.

After assessing the situation, my father narrowed his eyes and slowly yet coolly lowered himself to his knees.

“I am honored to be graced by your presence, Your Highness, Prince Gillain of the Galé Empire. I am Count Isaac Granzeus of the Kingdom of Judore. I am accompanied by my family. What may such a minor noble family as ours do for you today?”

“I came to see the face of the first-year who disrespected me by holding back in our match—but now I’ve found something more interesting. You. What’s your name?”

Emperor Gillain never raised his voice. It was composed, deep, and

commanding.

The emperor wasn't taking his eyes off me. He'd found me. I didn't want to make contact with him in this life. Could he make even fortune bend to his will? I quietly got off of my brother's arm and knelt down.

"It's an honor to meet you, Your Imperial Majesty. My name is Serephione Granzeus. I am the daughter of Count Granzeus."

"Show me that thing on your shoulder, Serephione."

It couldn't be! He shouldn't be able to see him. Lou used three layers of illusion magic. Does this mean he's sensed a holy beast who's subdued himself as much as possible? I pushed down my shock with all my might.

I glanced at my shoulder with Lou on it, then the one without, then tilted my head.

"Is there something strange about my shoulders?"

He chuckled. "You're playing dumb to *me*? I like your nerve. Serephione, this kingdom is a waste of your potential. Come to my side! I'll make a better place for you than what exists in Judore."

I nearly forgot to breathe. It was strikingly similar to what he'd said in my past life.

"Your Imperial Majesty..."

"Your Highness, she is but a Magicless girl!"

Looking in the direction of the voice, I saw a fancily-dressed girl from the academy. I awoke from my reverie.

Is she trying to get with Emperor Gillain? I'm telling you this for your own good... You should stop. He's too much for you to handle.

"'Magicless'...? So you can already perfectly manipulate your magic at this age. I like the sound of that even more."

Emperor Gillain took my tiny hand and brought me to my feet as if he was dealing with a proper lady. Even though I knew only misfortune awaited me if I took his hand, my chest felt tight knowing that he still wanted me even when

my magical talent was limited. This was the one person who expressed desire for me, even in this world.

“Your Highness, my daughter is only six years old. She has no remarkable talents and merely spends a quiet life at our home. I request you refrain from toying with her.”

“Who’s toying with who? You even have a Trundle playing along... Well, so be it. It’ll be brought to light eventually.”

As soon as he made this dangerous statement, he made three shallow cuts on his left hand. I had no idea what made that necessary.

Suddenly, a ray of bright light shone down from the heavens! The light fell onto Emperor Gillain’s right shoulder and began to take shape.

Rainbow wings, a golden crest, tail feathers like flame itself reaching from the emperor’s shoulder all the way to the floor—it was a noble crimson bird. Based on my knowledge from Japan...it was the Vermilion Bird!

I wondered how many people in the area had witnessed this scene.

My father, brother, grandmother, and Enrique all went pale in the face, knelt down, and hung their heads. As far as I could see, nobody else in the vicinity was prostrating themself.

Only magic users go to this academy, right? Could the other people in the gallery only see a bright light? I suppose the emperor understood that when he chose not to use any particular concealment or illusion magic.

No, that’s not it. He’s taking this opportunity to make a distinction between all of these people: who can see the Vermilion Bird and who can’t—that is, who in the Kingdom of Judore is a powerful magic user that’ll trouble him in the future, and who’s just part of the disorderly masses. It was bold and effective. He had caught not only Lou, but the rest of us as well.

Regardless, I hadn’t known Emperor Gillain had a holy guardian beast. Was he able to find me in this life precisely because we were fellow holy beast owners? Did he want me back then because I had one? A needless sense of loss raced through my heart.

“Sere, we can’t hide any more now that that’s here. We have to go.”

I put up strong illusion magic around us. We didn’t have the luxury of living as self-assuredly as the emperor. Lou and I weren’t in the mood to come out to all these strangers. It didn’t seem that anyone here could see Lou, but we couldn’t let down our guard.

I made it so that we appeared to be behind a thick layer of mist and didn’t draw anyone’s attention. Then I nodded to Lou. His silver-white figure wavered into view like a mirage.

“...So, Magan has passed.” A mature voice, one not belonging to Lou, resounded in my head.

“I inherited his position just recently.”

It seemed that the Vermilion Bird was senior to Lou. Lou’s response was dispassionate and curt. I got the sense that they weren’t friendly with each other.

“Oh, you two have a contract. That’s unusual,” commented Gillain.

“Do you not?”

“I captured him and made him submit. He’s my servant. It’s easier that way. He does what I want.”

So that really is the difference between a contract and servitude.

I looked at the Vermilion Bird. His eyes were clear and lacked any trace of despair. “He doesn’t really look like he’s being forced.”

“I’m fond of his power,” the bird explained.

The two holy beasts and I looked at the emperor together, and he flushed slightly. Now, *that* was unusual.

“Hm... So he’s the guardian of the West. I’ll tell you one more time. Come to my side.”

An encounter with the emperor could only spell disaster, but I decided to count it as lucky that I got the chance to see him in a young and humanlike state.

“I’m happy that you acknowledged me and expressed a need for me, Your Imperial Majesty. But I don’t think going with you will make me happier than I am now. I’m rather satisfied at the moment.” *Unlike in the book.* I was telling the truth, so my smile was natural.

“Serephione, is there some reason you’re calling me ‘Your Imperial Majesty’?”

“That’s the only future I can see.”

Pain flashed through the emperor’s eyes for a moment. He closed them briefly, as if to hide it, and when he opened them again, they held his usual unrevealing coldness...and also the complete opposite, a hotly burning determination.

“You have ten years, Serephione. I’ll defer it for you. When you turn sixteen, I’ll take you. You’re my empress. Prepare yourself.”

...Huh?



This completely unexpected declaration shocked me so much I couldn't close my dropped jaw.

Who was the emperor's consort in the book again? ...There was nobody! I can't recall a single description of one. In the book, I'd been treated like a disposable sacrifice! What is he talking about? Our family statuses are too far apart, anyway. Does he want Lou so badly, knowing that Lou would come with me?

My brother slipped in front of me as I was in confusion from this high praise.

"Serephione is my treasure. It's only natural that you'd want our angelic Serephione, but taking her against her will? Ha ha ha, should I demonstrate my unrestrained skill for you right now?"

My brother took out a poisoned shuriken from thin air. My father acted in concert with him by standing up, taking my left hand, picking me up, and kissing my cheek. He produced the pointer finger and thumb of his right hand with terrifying speed. He was just waiting for the chance to activate his dangerous magic. It seemed he had no intention of hiding his cheat code.

An amused glint appeared in Prince Gillain's eyes after seeing that. "It seems I'll have a more lively time taking my wife than I expected. I'm looking forward to it."

When he smiled like the teenager he was... Darn it, he was cute!

My grandmother pointed her closed fan at him. No doubt if she pushed something somewhere, missiles would come flying out of it!

"It's about time to put a stop to this conversation. Your Highness, my master Serephione is contracted. She is your equal in every way, and has no reason to take orders from you. If you wish to take Serephione as your wife, I recommend that you make the appropriate efforts. You heard what she said, did you not? She sees no merit in becoming your consort. Don't forget that Serephione could replace you with any number of men. Do try not to get on her bad side! Oho ho ho!"

Nooo! Don't antagonize him, grandmother!

“Your Highness, it is time to prepare for the next event. Please return at once!” Someone called from outside the spell. Even with illusion magic, if someone had a clear objective, they could tell where we were with no problem.

I snapped my fingers, and the spell broke. As it cleared like mist, I sat in my father’s lap. My brother sat in my seat, and my grandmother drank tea next to him. Emperor Gillain stood quietly in front of us with a soft smile. My, how fake of him!

“I enjoy being around you, ‘Magicless.’ I’ll be seeing you again.”

He gracefully kissed my fingertip and strode away at his attendant’s order.

Ah, all the screaming from the peanut gallery is so irritating! And brother, you don’t have to cast cleansing magic on my finger!

“Jeez... I’m exhausted. Since brother’s match is over, can we go home?”

“Let’s. We need to have a little discussion,” my grandmother replied.

“I’ll join in next time I come home,” added Larouza.

“Well done, Larouza. You did a good job,” my father praised him.

Cheers rang out. I looked at the field to see that the players for the second semifinal match had come out.

Lou’s claws suddenly dug into my shoulder. *Lou, that kind of hurts?*

“Sere... It’s him.”

I followed Lou’s line of sight at the sound of his serious voice.

He was right. It was the boy from that one time. He was quite a bit taller after only half a year, though.

“Brother, it’s him. Who is he?”

My family fixed their gazes on him, having inferred what was going on.

My father sighed deeply. “That’s the first prince of our kingdom, Prince Schneider,” he said with a resigned tone.

We left the magic academy quickly, acting disappointed at our family’s loss. The truth was that I wanted to hide myself before Prince Schneider noticed me.

I didn’t need any more new characters introduced today. I was already on the verge of panicking.

As the carriage rocked me, I shut my eyes and remembered some information from the book.

The first prince’s name hadn’t come up even once in the book. It just glossed over him, saying that he was the sickly child of a royal mistress, so Prince Gardner was next in line for the throne as the accomplished (both academically and in battle) child of the true queen. Prince Schneider was nothing more than a background character.

Once I got home, I changed into a comfortable dress and made my way to the lounge where my father and grandmother waited.

“Father, for some reason I don’t know very much about Prince Schneider, even though he’s the first prince... I think I remember hearing that he was sickly at some point, at least.”

“Being sickly is just a front. He doesn’t often appear in public to keep it up. To put it politely...he’s staying one step back for the sake of the queen and Prince Gardner.”

So, to put it rudely, if he stuck out, he’d get hammered down like a nail. Scary!

“However, as you can tell based on the fact that he could see Lou, he’s quite the magic user,” my grandmother said. “He came off as very intelligent in your last interaction with him as well. On the other hand, Prince Gardner didn’t notice two holy beasts right in front of his nose. Hmm, if the first prince is avoiding standing out, why would he go to a grand event like the magic tournament?”

Enrique entered the room following a quiet knock.

“Lady Erza, here is a letter for you.”

“Thank you, Enrique. Let’s see... Prince Schneider is a second-year student. Last year, he led a quiet life and didn’t stand out for anything in particular, so he naturally didn’t participate in the magic tournament. However, it seems he’s changed since about half a year ago and has started to throw himself into magic quite voraciously. He doesn’t worry about how he looks to others, not even the

queen. The queen herself is keeping a low profile as well, for the moment; considering the second prince is so much younger than the first prince at the moment, the second prince simply can't compare. It's likely the first prince encountered some great force that made him change his way of life."

She found all that out in this short time... Grandmother's spying is outstanding! She's pretty scary herself.

But now I knew that I really had triggered an event back then. I was crestfallen. I wondered if he would eventually stand in my way, either as royalty or as Gardner's older brother.

I popped a bite-size cake made especially for Lou into his mouth. He munched on it with a more humble expression than usual.

Prince Schneider, nothing more than a background character in the book, had now come to the forefront with a name. This was proof that the plot had gone off the rails. Wasn't this something to be grateful for?

"At any rate, I'm glad we know who we're dealing with now. Once we know who it is, we have a way to avoid them," my father noted. "We'll have Larouza inquire about his movements as naturally as we can, and then we'll cut off contact as before."

My grandmother and I nodded silently in response to my father.

"Do you think Prince Schneider has deduced the truth about me and Lou?"

"There's nothing wiser than always presupposing the worst-case scenario is true," my grandmother replied. "You can't afford to be optimistic, Serephi. If you assume he knows, it'll make you more cautious."

"Yes, grandmother."

"Also...we can safely ignore Prince Gillain's ridiculous proposal, yes?"

Papa, you look like you're about to blow your top! It's scary!

"For one thing, father, I'm not interested in lolicons. But Prince Gillain has a holy beast as his servant, and he knows all our secrets. I don't think we can disregard him."

"Lolicons?"

My grandmother chuckled. “You have to have confidence, Serephi. At least tell him something like, ‘If you let my secret out, I’ll never talk to you again.’ In love, the first person to fall loses, you know.”

No, grandmother... Even supposing there is love, it’s Lou that Emperor Gillain fell for, not me. But wait, doesn’t that have the same result? If he makes me mad, can I just tell him I won’t let him see Lou?

“In any case, we’re dealing with the royalty of a large empire,” I said. “I think it would be better to be careful not to provoke him and avoid stances like ‘She’s a child, is this a joke?’”

My father and grandmother nodded in agreement.

“Regardless, Serephi, you’ve hooked a big fish right out of the starting gate. Don’t you think the Prince of Galé was head over heels for you by the end? You make me a proud grandmother!”

Head over heels? No, if anything, he was so fired up that it put me off!

“Mother, that is absolutely not a funny joke!”

“Oh, my.”

“Don’t worry, father. Lou and I are going to be adventurers. Someday we’ll head out from the mansion in our domain, and then we’ll come back to you no matter what. I can’t get married if I’m going on a journey. Right, Lou?”

“Yeah, neither Sere nor I wants to marry that guy and live with Asu!”

“S-Serephione!”

Squeeze!

My father and I hugged each other tightly.

Chapter 4: Knocking on Trundle Guild's Gate Good day, everyone. I, Serephione Granzeus, had now turned eleven years old.

I was shorter than average, as I always had been. I had barely gained any weight either, thanks to my grandmother having me run so much.

I'm a petite shut-in with black hair and black eyes—can't I just live an uneventful life as a hermit in a corner of our mansion? Do I even have to go on an adventure?

On the other hand, I would have been around forty in my past life now. I would start to worry about aging and pensions soon. I really would have to get serious about saving cash.

It had been five years since my brother's magic tournament. Our family situation was now as follows...

1) My father was in the process of transforming from a handsome young man into a dandy gentleman, with sexy crow's feet beginning to form at the corners of his eyes.

He received attempts at flirtation from a wide age range of women telling him they were looking for a husband, but since he only had eyes for my mama in heaven, he paid them no consideration. The range of new magic he could use was steadily increasing. He isolated himself as a rule, as usual, but he unfortunately couldn't give up his position as Minister of Finance. He was a family supremacist.

2) My grandmother, the beautiful witch, was somehow looking younger with every year.

She was causing a revolution in the fashion world in the capital, and she was designing more and more intricate hair accessories as well. Her stamina was increasing with her consistent training, and she was training up some apprentice spies apart from me and my brother. The Trundle army could have taken on the kingdom's guard force with ease. She was a fluffball supremacist.

3) My brother had graduated from the magic academy at the top of his class.

He received job offers from the government, the military, the magic department, and all sorts of other places, but the place he chose to work was the Royal Library. Pretty much the only reason he went to the magic academy was to read the library books, anyway. He cast illusion magic and read as many top-secret books as he could get his hands on. He was difficult to deal with as an employee and worked strictly from only nine to five. He declared that he would quit after he'd read everything. All the rest of his time belonged to his family. He was a little sister supremacist.

4) Loudarylphena was a cake supremacist.

I discovered something about Lou that I should have known a long time ago. At the end of last year, an avalanche had occurred in our domain that couldn't be prevented by magic in time. Just then, Lou instantly grew to full size, set me on his back, effortlessly kicked aside the fallen snow, and carried me to the top! I got to ride on the one who was always riding on me!

"Lou, don't tell me you can actually change your body at will?"

"I can, actually! But I'm too bulky when I'm large, so it's inefficient. And people give me more cake when I'm small."

So, basically, he just thought walking was too much effort and liked that he got more treats at fluffball-size?! How sly can a holy beast be?! But from then on, as long as we were in a place nobody could see, he could carry me on his back and run. He was fast! Oh, but he always demanded cake when we got back, so it was a lot of work for Matsuki.

And then there was one more sly holy beast. It irritated Lou to no end that he'd shown up without making an appointment!

After my brother's magic tournament, Gillain proposed to me through formal diplomatic channels. It set off a huge commotion. Why would the prince of a large nation want a Magicless girl ten years his junior, after all?

I thought he would reveal the truth about me and Lou, but apparently he told our kingdom's foreign affairs officer, "I have no need for any more magic, and she'll be all the easier for Judore to let go of if she's Magicless. This union will

establish a friendly relationship between our nations.”

I was shocked to hear him talk about “a friendly relationship.” He might have been trying to curry favor with me by not spilling my secret, but since he put unnecessary attention on me, I gave him my most childish temper tantrum! I rejected all his requests to visit me or take me on dates! As my grandmother would say, a little selfishness just adds spice to a girl, heh heh heh!

My father adamantly rejected the proposal as well. He said he had no intention of marrying his beloved daughter into another nation. It wouldn’t hurt or bother the Granzeuses even if either nation kicked us out; our family could get by living anywhere. With our power, we could even have taken our domain with us.

That meant the case was closed! Or so I’d thought, until Gillain sent the Vermilion Bird, whose nickname was Asu. He was a holy beast, so he easily broke through our estate’s numerous defenses and made himself at home. That brought us to the present.

“What you’re eating there looks tasty as usual, Lou.”

“Asu... Don’t come back. I’ll run out of treats! Go be a good little servant to His Majesty!”

Asu chuckled. “Gillain is happy to be without me temporarily if it means I’ll check in on you when he can’t come here himself.”

“Damn it...”

Asu preferred ice cream to cake. Was it because he was the heavenly beast of the south? Matsuki’s eyes grew red from the effort of increasing his ice cream repertoire. Sorry!

When Gillain graduated at seventeen with flying colors and concluded his time studying abroad in our kingdom, Asu came with a letter requesting a visit. I knew it was a bad idea to get involved with him, but I gave my consent since this would be the last time. I owed a lot to him in my past life, so I couldn’t help but cut him some slack.

We were to meet at midnight, on the roof of my house.

“I understand that you’re strong, but I have no intention of making a lady walk outdoors at night. And if I came into your room, we would lose time listening to the earl complain about it. This is the best of both options.”

The roof is? But the stars were beautiful. Gillain, Asu, the fluffball, and I sat next to each other, draped in all black to blend in with the night. Asu matched Lou’s size while he was here. *You sly little things, scheming to win my heart...! Fine, I admit defeat.*

Contracted people could pick up on holy beasts’ voices, and the same seemed to go for people who had one as a servant. As soon as he arrived, Gillain had been making moves at Lou and whispering about something or other. *Is this solicitation? Darn it, he’s serious!*

“Have you come around to being my bride?”

“How can you even ask that? I’m just a child.”

“I don’t think of you as one. You’re a fellow human being and my equal. I want *you*, Serephione.”

“Don’t you already have enough power?”

“I’m not after Lou, although it would be endlessly entertaining to watch Lou and Asu together. It’s you that I want. At only six years old, you told me without a doubt that I would become emperor. You believed in my future when not even I could.”

I didn’t believe, though. I just knew.

“It’s not like you to be vulnerable...”

“I’m not going to lie to you. I don’t want to lie just to hear what you have to say in response to a lie. It would mean nothing. It’s important to me to know what you really feel.”

It’s lonely being a politician. My voice may not be very useful to you, but I swear to be honest, so you can trust me. Emperor Gillain would walk down a much lonelier path in the future—a path where he couldn’t trust what anyone said.

“Ah...”

It was a shooting star.

“Do you know how to wish on a shooting star, Your Majesty?”

“I don’t.”

“If you say your wish three times while it’s in the sky, it will come true. What do you wish for?”

“For you to be my empress.”

“Nuh-uh! I’d have assassins after me as an empress, right? Too much stress.”

Gillain burst into laughter. “Ha ha, I’ll have to give you some special privileges to make it worth your while.”

“Can’t you think of anything else? Oh, there’s another one! Make a wish!”

A star streaked through the sky from the heavens.

In that instant, I clutched his hand and whispered—*I wish for your wish to come true. I wish for your wish to come true. I wish for your wish to come true.* I knew it would; I was overpowered, after all. What could he have wished for? I could only pray it wasn’t a path of violence. I hoped that would be enough to repay him for what he did in my past life, although it was really nothing more than self-indulgence on my part.

I looked back from the sky to his face. I couldn’t make out his expression in the darkness with the moon behind him, but his demeanor was more serene than ever before. *Apart from the crappy personality, he’s pretty handsome,* I thought to myself—and just then, he pulled me close to his large body, took down the hood covering my head, and kissed my cheek.

“Ah...”

His magic flowed into me. The emperor’s magic had a melancholy bitterness to it—it resembled coffee from my past life.

I...loved coffee. I accepted the emperor’s magic. It spread through every inch of my small body.

“Good night, Serephione.”

With that, Emperor Gillain disappeared, accompanied by Asu and the wind.

It had now been several years since then, and he was facing the final battle for the imperial throne of Galé, a battle against the first prince.

I hadn't come across Prince Schneider since back then either, but the premise that he was sickly was a thing of the past. He was now well-known as the first prince and an excellent magic user. He was good-looking and well-liked by the people.

It seemed he had stopped living in the shadows. Did that mean he had gained the confidence to take on the queen and the reformists?

And it was almost time for my knight school entrance exam! Ahh, I was so nervous. Help me, gods!

◇ ◇ ◇

The knight school, which was located on the coast south of the capital, trained top-class young leaders to carry the military of Judore. Students took the entrance exam at eleven years old and started school at thirteen if they passed. They then studied for four years and graduated at seventeen. After graduation, a student might become a guard, a police officer, or even suddenly be made the commander of a public order squad, depending on their goals and their particular level of skill.

Almost a hundred percent of people who got Normal or Advanced on their magic exam at six years old went to the magic academy, so almost a hundred percent of students at knight school were Magicless. Why "almost?" For one thing, there was my irregular presence, but there were also occasionally people whose magic awakened after their magic exam. The heroine was one of those people.

I figured I'd go with that as a cover story if it came out that I had magic. I was an actress!

Knight school offered a chance to make something of your life even if you were Magicless, so commoners flocked to it. The exam was free, and your living expenses would be paid for if you were accepted, so it drew kids from all around the kingdom who took pride in their strength.

"Don't be so stiff, Serephi. You can act normally."

My grandmother, an alumna, accompanied me.

“But grandmother, you didn’t prepare me for the written test at all! Look at how many people are taking it. There must be fifty people here who are smarter than me.”

Fifty people were being accepted this year, incidentally.

“Don’t worry, Serephi. You have the skills down. Trust me as your grandmother.”

“But... I feel everyone looking at me is like, ‘What are you doing here, you idiot?! You have the wrong place!’”

Everyone’s been pointing at me and whispering rumors about me. Sniff... We’re all Magicless here, so they wouldn’t be making fun of me for that.

“Well...you *are* in the wrong place in a way. They’re all thinking, ‘What’s this tiny, adorable girl doing here?’ The tables will turn when the test results come back.”

“Erza.”

Lou called out to my grandmother and jumped onto her shoulder. He wasn’t going to accompany me into the exam venue. Although my grandmother couldn’t hear him, thanks to her sharp intuition, she perceived that he had addressed her. She began to tear up, moved that he had chosen her shoulder.

“Your Holiness! I’m honored...!”

Huh? Does having Lou on your shoulder warrant tears of joy? He’ll get crumbs all over your dress while you’re waiting, you know?

I found that my nerves had disappeared.

“Okay, see you two later!”

“I’ll be praying for your victory, Serephione.”

“Sere, this is the next step toward our adventure! Go for it!”

Yeah, it’s time to take hold of my dream!

I nodded and entered the venue.

The written test went exactly how my grandmother said it would. I used math and physics simulations to calculate the projectile range of a cannon and set its angle. Many of the problems asked for the amount of supplies necessary to execute a given battle plan, and I was able to solve them using middle-school-level formulas from my past life.

I'd unconsciously picked up an understanding of biology and geography through real-world experiences with my family. Be it the vital points of humans and how to do first aid, the topography of the kingdom, the climate and soil quality of each region, or where and why to set up camp in the mountains, I'd studied it all multiple times while practicing with my family. It was all knowledge I was already putting to use.

Thank you, everyone! And thank you Tenjin, god of learning! I'll plant your favorite plum tree in my yard in your honor!

I neatly bowed twice, clapped twice, and gave one last deep bow at the end, as was customary when visiting a Shinto shrine in my past life. Then I ate the boxed lunch Matsuki made me; it had plentiful breaded pork cutlets, upon which he had written "You can do it!" in ketchup.

Next up was the skills test! I changed my outfit and made my way to the circular arena.

The test-takers were split into multiple groups and lined up. We were surrounded by spectator seating, and the guardians who came along were finding places to sit down where they could see their family.

I looked for a familiar sign of Lou—and there he was, at the very top! He was eating something in the shadows behind my grandmother and Enrique. My grandmother was casting cleansing magic on herself about once every three minutes; no matter how much she respected Lou, she couldn't handle the crumbs and drool.

Hey, wait, I thought you were here to cheer me on! That just looks like a picnic! I shot the two a murderous glare, and they hastily waved to signal to me. They both had cream on their mouths!

I was wearing a white shirt, pants in Lou's sky-blue, and tall black boots. My hair was tied back tightly so it wouldn't catch on anything.

I wasn't in my ninja outfit, of course; that was for when I got really serious. I'd added improvements upon improvements to it, so it wasn't something I could show off in a place like this anymore. Even the shoes were top-secret.

My weapons were a one-handed sword and a knife in a holder attached to my left thigh. It wasn't like short lances were prohibited; using a one-handed sword was simply worth more points. I planned to use the knife and sword at the same time if I couldn't finish things with just the one-handed sword.

The rules were simple. Two entrants fought, and the match ended when either someone gave up or the referee stopped the fight. The time limit was five minutes. We would stop just before, of course.

"Numbers 125 and 376, come forward!"

Finally... I was about to fall asleep. I was so tired of waiting, I didn't even feel nervous anymore.

I bowed politely and entered the arena. My opponent was an orange-haired boy who appeared to be a commoner. The blade of his sword was chipped, but there was a fierce glint in his eyes. *That's right; his future rests on this. But so does mine, so I can't lose.*

"Begin!"

He closed the distance between us at once and swung his sword down toward my face. He was holding nothing back, all the more so because his opponent was a girl.

Clang! *Swoosh*!

I deflected his sword and landed a kick on his solar plexus. *Oh, he didn't collapse!* He bent over at the torso, but he still put some distance between us and coolly considered his next move. He warily circled to the right to close the gap.

When the arena wall was next to him, he broke into a run right up the wall and jumped off right above my head! With the sun now behind him, he swung his sword at me from above. He was using the sunlight against me! *So, we're fighting with street rules... Interesting.* I drew my knife in my right hand and pointed the naked blade at him.

“Ahh!”

The sunlight reflecting off the knife hit his eyes directly. I took advantage of his moment of hesitation and hopped a step back, jumped behind him, and tapped the base of his neck with the back of my sword. If that had been the sharp side of the blade...his head would have come right off. The boy speechlessly sank to his knees.

“Your match is over. Stand by for your results.”

It would have been embarrassing if I’d failed, so I went to the results board by myself. About two hours had passed since the skills test, and the results were posted at the front entrance.

125, 125, 125... There it is!

“Lou! Grandmother! Enrique! I did it! I passed!” Crying tears of joy, I dashed to Lou and my grandmother, who were waiting at the gate.

“Congratulations, Serephione! Your hard work paid off!” My grandmother had tears in her eyes.

“Sere, congratulations! Congratulations!” Lou came back onto my shoulder and licked my cheek.

I was so happy! I’d taken another step away from the book and toward my dream! I couldn’t stop crying.

Enrique, his eyes red, handed me a handkerchief.

“Lou, grandmother, Enrique, thank you! This is—”

“Colonel!”

There was suddenly a hoarse yell that drowned out my voice. I turned toward the sound to see an old man in a military uniform covered in medals dashing toward us, kicking up dust. As soon as he reached us, he assumed a soldier’s stance with his heels together and saluted.

“Colonel, I’m glad to see you after all this time!”

Oh, he’s talking to grandmother. Wait, grandmother?! Your eyes! They’re upside-down triangles!

“You’re interrupting an emotional moment with Serephione, you dumb bastard! How many times do I have to tell you to take a goddamn hint?!”

Her iron-ribbed fan made a clean arc through the air. *Clang*!

The old man went flying about twenty meters, hit the entrance...and started to swoon?

N-Nice swing!

“I’m terribly sorry!”

The old man—aka General Avenger—apologized profusely to my grandmother. *He’s the one who got hit, so why is he apologizing?*

After the results were posted, I went back to the school building and sat with my grandmother on a three-person sofa in the reception room. The general sat on the sofa across from us, his right cheek gradually turning blue. *Shouldn’t we put ice on that?*

“If you have something to say, Lieutenant, spit it out. You know whose daughter she is, don’t you? What do you think will happen if it gets out that a military officer held her up?”

The fluffball on top of my head was impatient to go home. *Hey, quit poking me!*

The general gasped. “Minister Granzeus...?! C-Couldn’t you mediate between us, Colonel...?”

“No can do. Just get to the point!”

This man dripping with cold sweat was actually the head of the kingdom’s military. The Kingdom of Judore only had one general. The head of the national magicians was a different person.

The general who came before General Avenger’s predecessor was my late grandfather Trundle. When my grandmother was in her prime, General Avenger had been a young novice officer. Judging by how terrified he seemed of her, I wondered just what kind of orders she’d given him...

“I’m here today as a consultant to watch the knight school entrance tests. I heard that there was quite an unusual test-taker, so I came to see—”

“Unusual?!”

“I-I mean, quite a wonderful test-taker! I came to see her, and you happened to be here, Colonel Erza, so I knew then...”

“Yes, Serephione is my granddaughter, a direct descendant of the Trundle family. That will be all.”

“W-Wait! I’ll just ask directly. Your granddaughter is a magic user, isn’t she?”

“She wouldn’t be here if she weren’t Magicless.”

“I remember your magic, Colonel. And I sense another very strong magical presence coming from your granddaughter.”

Wow, the general notices Lou! If not for the illusion magic, he definitely would have seen him. I smiled in satisfaction, even as I started thinking of ways to get out of this situation. It was a relief to know the head of our military was a capable person. If he *hadn’t* noticed anything, I would have been seriously concerned for the state of our kingdom.

“You’re imagining it, Lieutenant. I put her through hellish training to bring her here precisely because she’s Magicless.”

So she knew it was hellish...

The general looked at me and gave me a woeful smile. I nodded silently. *We...are comrades!*

“I believe your granddaughter and I have a lot in common. That aside, I can tell she has magic. I reached my rank by virtue of being able to sense enemy magic precisely. Why are you doing this?”

“You said you’re a consultant here, right? That makes you an educator. When an educator has a successful applicant who sincerely wishes to study at their institution, is it proper for that educator to pry into the student’s individual situation and nip their potential in the bud?”

She changed the subject from whether I have magic or not to his ability as an educator!

“Certainly not!”

“Then be silent.”

The general turned to me. “Serephione, is this talent of yours from practice?”

“I... I’ve always wanted to become a knight, so I started training with my father and brother from a young age, and then my grandmother became my teacher when I had the basics mastered. My feelings about this are sincere.”

I could avoid stating it outright, but I wouldn’t deny it either. I couldn’t know what cracks would show up in my story during my time at the school.

“I see. I’d love to have a student as skilled as you. If you develop magic in the future, I’ll support you, so please let me know. I want to believe that someday...magic and the sword can come together as one to protect our kingdom.”

“Magic and the sword, combined?”

“Yes. This kingdom’s magicians fence in all the children who have magic. It’s impossible to raise a child who can study magic and martial arts at once and combine them. You see, I developed magic while I was a student in knight school. My power was rather weak, so they didn’t send me to the magic academy, but I’ve been researching in the time I have outside my military duties what would happen if a child with similar circumstances to mine happened to come along. If we could raise children who understand both, we could fight with fewer troops, meaning fewer sacrifices for both the army and the people. If I just had one apprentice who could put my research into practice, I could die with no regrets.”

“I’m down!”

“Huh?” The general was shocked.

“Serephi?”

“I’ll make your dream come true, General.”

I snapped my fingers, instantly cooling the bruise on the general’s cheek.

Sorry for the snap decision, grandmother! The general’s feelings touched me, and it also just seemed like it would be interesting. If I’m going to involve someone, it’s best to make it someone of high status, and if I have an ally on the

school's side, he could support me if trouble comes up.

He hasn't noticed Lou; it should be okay because he thinks Lou's magic is mine.

"Ahh, Serephi, you're too easily convinced!" my grandmother scolded me.

"How...wonderful..."

"Tch. Listen here, Lieutenant Avenger. Do not speak a word about Serephione's abilities to anyone else, don't pry into them, and don't make her join the military when she graduates. If you can't keep those promises...I'll seal off your memory where we stand. You don't think I can? Trust me, the Granzeuses can. Your response?"

"Understood!"

"If you betray us or stand in Serephione's way...I will waste no effort in crushing you!"

"Understood!"

"Okay, Lieutenant... Let's rekindle our old friendship. Agreed?"

That meant she was going to keep a close eye on him. *Huh? General Avenger is dripping with sweat again. Should I install a wind-magic-powered air conditioner?*

Anyway, for the time being, I could rest satisfied that I'd gotten the head of the military—and my grandmother's manservant—on my side!

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My family had a big celebration for my passing the knight school exam.

I had to practice some predetermined subjects on my own in preparation to enter school at thirteen, but after having withstood the hell that was being trained by my brother and grandmother, I could have done that with my eyes closed.

Basically, I was spending my days exactly as I had before, training and creating new magic. During that time period, I had a wish granted, one that my father and grandmother had promised to fulfill if I got into knight school.

On this day, I was to take my first step as an adventurer. I, Serephione Granzeus, was going to knock on the gate to an adventurer's guild!

The role of adventurer's guilds in this world was to support adventurers, certify their ranks, serve as an intermediary for commissions, trade goods, and provide a mutual aid system if someone got hurt and was unable to continue their activities.

There were adventurer's guilds everywhere in the world. The Kingdom of Judore, for example, had guilds set up in every domain and area under control of the state, and in more heavily populated places, there were as many as three. To become an adventurer, you would have to undergo a test to prove your skills and be issued a plate at some point, or you couldn't proceed with your activities.

But where would you get this plate? The choice of which guild to make your home base was crucial. It was always best to enter a guild in your area, of course. Most guilds were simple yet good quality.

However, there were as many guilds as there were stars in the sky, and just as many different individual management styles, objectives, and levels. There were some guilds that would exchange plates or levels for money if a noble family wanted to add to their prestige, and this was tacitly understood. The guilds in the capital were a good example of this; the shiny plates that nobles were often seen hanging ostentatiously around their necks were mostly from guilds in the capital, and people who knew the situation snickered at them.

It would be so embarrassing if people laughed at me behind my back for a plate I tried my absolute best to obtain! Even though people who buy plates with money are just a small subset... I'm glad I found out this insider information.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there was a place that issued plates that could make anyone tremble in their shoes—where I was now, Trundle Guild! The front entrance was decorated with boards written by many generations past of Trundles, stating things like "Sincerity and Fortitude" and "Strength Comes First." *Keep out, meatheads!*

"Salutations!"

“Salutations! Wait, what does that mean?” Lou chimed in.

I swung open the heavy wooden double door with both my hands and greeted everyone loudly. The tall middle-aged men who had been drinking in the lively bar space until just then were now staring at us—although they couldn’t see Lou—with their mouths hanging open.

They looked like bad guys you would see in a drawing! Awesome! One was a bald guy with no eyebrows, one had an eyepatch and wild long black hair, and one had a jagged scar across his cheek and intimidating sanpaku eyes—I was obsessed! It was so endearing! I could just eat them up!

“Hello! Nice to meet you!” I said with a smile.

A good greeting is essential! ...Wait, why is everyone looking down and red in the face? Did they drink too much? Not a good way to start off.

A flustered woman came running out from behind the counter. “What are you doing in this lowly place, little lady?! Are you lost? Where are your mother and father?”

I was embarrassed to be called a little lady. If anyone were a little lady it’d have been her, given that I was forty-ish years old. The lady, who I assumed was the receptionist, looked to be in her late twenties. Her blonde hair was clipped in a barrette, and her brown eyes were round and cute.

“Are you the receptionist? I came to ask for an adventurer’s plate. I don’t have my parents with me.”

When I turned ten, I got permission to go out on my own, so long as I stayed in either Granzeus or Trundle territory. They could rest easy knowing that Lou was always with me.

“You...want to be an adventurer? Well, um, it’s great that you have ambition! Yeah. But would you mind coming back when you’re a bit more grown up?”

She implied that I was little again! Grrr!

“Um, I’m already eleven years old. I’m over the minimum age of ten to join the guild.”

“No, that’s not... You see, you have to fight really big, strong people to get a

plate for this guild. So I don't think it would be a good idea for you to try, little lady."

I gave her a bright smile.

"May I see the guildmaster?"

Get me your manager!

"I think I can handle a child just fine on my own. I'll treat you to some juice over there, so come back when you're a grown-up!"

This wasn't going anywhere. I jumped up and grabbed a long sword that was on the wall close to the ceiling. Then I spun it around with my wrist, pointed it at the wooden mug in her hand, and threw it with a light snap.

Swoosh! *Crack*!

The mug broke cleanly in two. Half of it clattered to the floor, and the other half remained in the receptionist's hand as she helplessly ducked down. The sword stuck straight into the wall across from me.



“Z-Ziek!!!” the baldie shouted. A small, kind-looking old man with white hair came out from the back.

“What’s going on? You could cut the tension in here with a knife.”

“That young lady just threw the Sword of Zagarte!”

The Sword of Zagarte?

“It’s kinda like a cursed sword?” offered Lou.

Oh no! What does that even mean?!

The old man looked over at me.

“The black-eyed fairy...! The time has come already...”

The old man slowly looked up to the ceiling and blinked his eyes. I heard somebody gasp.

He turned his gaze back to me and smiled. “Welcome to Trundle Guild. If you wish to become an adventurer, prove your strength to us.”

The old man, who I now knew to be Guildmaster Ziek, raised his pointer finger to his lips to shush me. “In this guild, you will prove your strength by fighting a specified guild member without giving your name first. Understood?” It seemed he had realized who I really was.

His conditions made sense. Knowing someone’s name gave you preconceived notions about them, and people might assume I was treated differently if my opponent knew mine; after all, I was the granddaughter of a lord. My pride wouldn’t allow me to let anyone think I got this plate through nepotism.

I silently nodded and followed the guildmaster through the door in the back of the building. Inside was a large wooden-floored room that reminded me of an elementary school gymnasium. This was where my strength would be tested.

The red-haired man from the bar who had a scar on his cheek came out. I carefully looked him up and down, evaluating him.

“Your opponent will be Kodak, a B-rank plate-holding member of our guild. Fight to your utmost capacity. Your witnesses will be me, the guildmaster; Matt, a C-ranker; and Gilbert, an A-ranker.”

Adventurer ranks went from E at the lowest followed by D, C, B, A, and then S. Trundle Guild's ranking system was stricter compared to other guilds, however; Kodak would most likely have been an A-ranker at any other guild. I couldn't take him lightly.

So, the baldie is Matt, and the man with the eyepatch is Gilbert. If he's A-ranked, that means he's at S-rank level... Amazing! Wait, he's looking at me with pained eyes. Is he pitying me because he thinks I'm weak?

"There's no time limit. Are you ready?"

Kodak readied his two-handed sword. It looked heavy.

I took off my mantle, set it next to me, and gripped my knife in my right hand. "Let's go, Lou!"

"This is your first step, Sere. Go for it!"

"Begin!"

Kodak suddenly jumped and swung his sword down. I blocked it with my knife and absorbed the shock into my side. It was heavy, as I expected. I turned my left leg and tried to kick the open spot on his left side with my heel, but he stepped back out of the way. I didn't like dealing with our height difference...but could I take advantage of it? I returned my knife to its sheath quickly.

I jumped high over his head, took five of the shurikens I was hiding at my wrists into each of my hands, and threw all ten shurikens at Kodak's head. While he was busy deflecting them with his knife, I got behind him. When he finished blocking the shurikens and turned back to swing his sword diagonally from his shoulder, I slipped between his legs and thrust one of my blades at his throat, the other at his heart.

"Stop!" the guildmaster's voice rang out.

"You're a shuriken user too..."

Kodak sat down on his behind with a thump and gazed in my direction, looking fed up. The fact that he reacted to shurikens meant he must have encountered either my grandmother or older brother before.

“Do you agree we can consider this match a win for the challenger?” the guildmaster asked Matt and Gilbert.

“No objections!”

“No objections!”

“Did either of you notice any cheating?”

“No cheating!”

“No cheating!”

“Very well. I deem the challenger befitting of a conditional C-rank.”

“I won against Kodak, a B-ranker, so would B-rank not be an appropriate rank?” I asked.

“I agree on a conditional C-rank.”

“I hereby certify this challenger as a conditional C-ranker. Congratulations, milady.”

“Yay! I got C-rank!”

“Congratulations, Sere!” cheered Lou.

As I bounced in delight, the scary men tossed me up into the air in celebration! Woo!

We relocated to the guildmaster’s room behind the reception area. I sat across from the guildmaster, and the others either stood against the wall or brought chairs in from the bar area. Lara, the receptionist, brought us tea, but her hands were trembling severely, spilling the tea everywhere.

“I apologize for acting violently before, Ms. Lara,” I said before the applications on the table could get any more wet.

“N-No, it was my mistake. The receptionist who came before me passed down this information...that when the black-eyed fairy appears, I should give her the exam, no matter how cute her appearance is. I’m a failure as a receptionist for not realizing...” she said with a sniffle.

“She called you a black-eyed fairy, Sere!”

Just because you're a holy beast doesn't mean you can give me that devious look and snicker! And that nickname sounds too much like foreshadowing to mean anything good...

"Now, new adventurer, may I ask you to introduce yourself?" Ziek requested.

"I'm Serephione Granzeus. I'm glad to make your acquaintance."

"Ahh, I knew it! You *are* a Granzeus! What's your relationship to Larouza?"

"Larouza is my older brother."

"I had a feeling... Shurikens and I really don't get along. You have similar facial features too. How did I not figure it out earlier?" grumbled Kodak.

"So, Serephione... Are you Liruphione's daughter?"

"Yes, Mr. Gilbert. She was my mother. I don't have any memory of her, though."

"You're so much alike... Your face and the way you use your sword..."

I see... Gilbert is seeing my mother through me. Grandmother sometimes looks at me with the same sad eyes too. Stop, I'm not my mother! Look at me!

I didn't really think like that, though. Now that my mental age was about forty, I had developed the capacity to sympathize with other people's life experiences.

Go ahead and look at me like that all you want, I don't care! ...And if possible, I'd like you to change your perspective on it like my father. My mother's life may have been short...but it was happy.

Anyway...

"Um, what does 'black-eyed fairy' mean?" I asked Ziek, who seemed the most upfront.

"You see, milady, once about every twenty years, a lovely fairy-like girl with black eyes appears at Trundle Guild. The story that's been passed down claims that these girls are exceptionally strong despite their appearance, and that the pattern will continue in the future, so it's best to give them the examination without question."

One thing stuck out a bit to me and stayed in the back of my mind. *Hey, Ziek, why do you keep calling me "milady?"*

"So that means...the last black-eyed fairy was my mother?" I asked Ziek. He nodded quietly.

"Black-eyed people who come to this guild are of the Trundle bloodline. When a young lady is born of the Trundle family, she comes to test her strength within several years. That's all it means."

"Th-That means this young lady is..." Matt pointed a quivering finger at me.

Ziek gave a sunny smile. "A grandchild of Lady Erza Trundle, who has inherited her jet-black eyes—the lone legitimate successor of the Trundle line. Lady Serephione, our next master, trained by Erza herself. It's been ten years since Lord Geintz and Lady Liruphione passed away... We have been waiting for you, our honored lady." Still smiling, Ziek shed a tear.

Succession? Trundle? Lords and ladies? Nobody told me about this!

In shock, I lowered my forehead down onto the table with a thump and sat motionless for a moment.

"Wait, Sere, you didn't know? It's no big deal!"

How can you take this so lightly, Lou?!

"Hey, our next master is bowing to us!"

"So, this is how she greets us... How refined..."

"I see. Liruphione, your daughter was raised well..."

You have it all wrong!

"U-Um, why don't we set all that aside for the time being...? She came to become an adventurer today, after all," suggested Lara.

"Ahh, you're right! We shouldn't be blathering about succession issues like this."

"Yes, I imagine Lady Erza is keeping her mouth shut."

"You mean because if the nobles who are after this domain find out Lady Serephione is the successor, they'd go after her? They'd have to have some guts

to pick a fight with the Trundles.”

“They’d dare try to eliminate Liruphi’s daughter?!”

Yay, I get to see an S-ranker’s bloodlust!

“Um, for now, I’d like you to teach me the ropes as a new adventurer.”

“Guildmaster, she wants us to treat her as any other adventurer! How modest of her!”

“And she wants us to teach her as her seniors! Truly great people are so humble.”

Matt, when did I ever call you my seniors? Ahh, whatever, I just have to change the way this conversation is going!

“I have a question! What does ‘conditional C-rank’ mean?”

“It means you have B-rank level skill, but you haven’t completed the requirements to rank up. You’ll start at C-rank for now, but once you complete the required commissions, you can become a B-ranker without another examination.”

Thanks for the explanation, Gilbert. I suppose they want to make sure I’ll be useful in real combat.

“What commissions are those, specifically?”

“Let’s see... Here. You’ll advance one rank once you complete five out of these ten tasks.” Kodak the shuriken hater took a piece of paper out of a file and gave it to me.

Let’s see... Oh? Hm?

“Um, can I submit items I already have for these collection tasks? Or should I go out and find new ones?”

“What do you have? Show us.”

I reached into my mantle, acting as if I was reaching for my bag, took out a few items from my “Magic Room (Perishables),” which used quality-preservation magic to keep things I put inside fresh, and lined them up on the desk. All together, I had twenty bundles of nener grass, ten bundles of

blackvigor weed, two orlox horns, one shell from a broadshell turtle, and one nest of live Marre bees.

Everybody fell silent in shock.

“Lara...could you check the conditions again? Milady, did you collect all of this by yourself?”

“Well, occasionally my brother comes with me, but he’s been busy lately, so I’m mostly on my own.”

“Where did you find the nener grass, milady?!”

“Stop calling me ‘milady’! And why would I tell you where I got it?”

No old woman worth her salt would tell you where she forages for mushrooms, would she?

“What about the orlox? Aren’t they ten times your size?”

If I remembered correctly, Lou had come across an orlox and asked to have its horns next time they fell out and regrew. Their horns were hard and easy to imbue with magic, so they made the perfect material for throwing tools. When I fed the orlox the sponge cake I had on me, it even gave me its friends’ horns when their horn regrowth season came around. I ended up having to pay with a hundred sponge cakes; I think it took two all-nighters with Matsuki and Martha...

“It was an epic struggle to the death...” I responded with a thousand-yard stare.

Matt took my hands, his eyes glittering in excitement. “And the Marre bees?”

“My grandmother wants them, so I always make sure to get them when I see them.”

“I knew it! Erza is the one who asked for this item as well. They do say the honey of the Marre bee is a good beauty product.”

Wrong! Grandmother, how much poison do you plan to put in your hair ornaments...?

“Guildmaster, these are all top-quality, perfectly fresh items. The total value

comes to 1,548,277 gold. Amazing job, milady! You have great skill! The men here never undertake this kind of delicate collection task. This is a big help! Ahh, our new master is the best... A fairy, a savior, and strong as well!”

Ms. Lara... Did your personality change? And don’t call me your new master! Also...

“Um... Isn’t that too high of a price estimate? That’s over a million...”

“Most of it is from the turtle shell. Using them as a decoration in the entryway is a status symbol among nobles right now. All the nobles who don’t have one want one. Why don’t you hang it in your own entryway? And how did you carry one that big with you?”

I ignored the last question. The turtle shell actually belonged to Lou before he met me; he would flip it over and use it as a bathtub. He was able to use the bathtub at my house now, so we’d just put it in my Magic Room for safekeeping...

I checked with Lou.

“Whoa! But broadshell turtles give off a smell that reptiles like... If you hang it up, you’ll get snakes and lizards,” Lou informed me.

“I’d like to sell it! Please, take it off my hands! Overcharge the nobility for it!”

“Ahh, my lady, you’re so generous! Thank you very much! Being able to distribute S1 materials will raise our guild’s prestige once again!”

“What a quick decision for such a valuable item...”

“For the guild, and for the domain... She’s already taken her position as master to heart... Liruphi...”

“...Are we all in agreement?” Ziek checked with the others.

“No objections!” they responded at once.

“You have fulfilled the conditions, milady. From now on, you are a B-rank adventurer. Let us engrave your plate at once.”

I’d suddenly gotten a B-rank plate. So why couldn’t I feel genuinely happy about it?

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The B-rank plate that I'd gotten through that strange series of events was very cool-looking. S-rank plates were made of platinum, A-rank out of gold, and B-rank out of silver, with the adventurer's name engraved into them in Ziek's own cool-looking handwriting. I took his advice and kept my last name to just the initial G of Granzeus—the fact that I came from nobility could be seen as a bad thing for an adventurer, and adventurers usually lived by only one name, anyway.

Both the front and back were carved with the TG logo for Trundle Guild, and my father gave me a platinum chain to hang it from. *Why platinum?* I wondered, until he said, "It's a shame that only the chain is platinum, isn't it, Serephione?" Basically, it was his way of spurring me on to become S-rank as soon as I could.

The plates also functioned as "dog tags," as one would call them in the military in my past life. They came in sets of two. If a companion died and you weren't able to take them back with you, you would put one of the plates securely in their mouth and take the other to their family. Then, when their corpse was eventually discovered, they could be identified by the plate in their skull.

I instinctively straightened my posture when I hung it from my neck.

Speaking of plates, my papa had an S-rank plate from Granzeus Guild in our domain, and my grandmother and brother both had S-rank plates from Trundle Guild. *Brother, when did you get that? Kodak must have been easy prey for your challenge...*

With that, I was set to take as many commissions as I could as an adventurer before I entered knight school!

"Ms. Lara! Any good task requests?" I called out.

"Hmm, to tell you the truth, requests at your own rank are the most efficient choices...but the only B-rank requests we have at the moment are to escort merchants. You can't exactly take commissions that require you to go away overnight... Would you have any objections to doing work from the rank below yours?"

“Huh? No, I wouldn’t.”

I need the money... Frankly, I’d do anything if you paid me for it!

“Her stance toward work is not picky... Another item to discuss... I’ll make a note of that.”

“Ms. Lara, could you speak up? I can’t hear you.”

Bring it on, whether it’s babysitting or hunting devil boars! I’ll take over for my busy papa and ride on Lou to defend our domain in the north too! Just leave it to me!

I was on my way to getting a platinum plate! Oh, and the “next master” thing? That’s on hold for now!

Intermission: Guildmaster Ziek's Thoughts

I was born the son of a woodcutter in the Trundle domain. I followed in the footsteps of all those who live in Trundle territory by pursuing strength; I went through a variety of experiences, and I became a full-fledged adventurer in my teen years.

Around that time, I hit it off with a black-eyed man named Geintz who I met at the guild. We teamed up when we had time to complete commissions together, and soon we were known as the Wind and Thunder Gods of Trundle.

My friend was actually the master of our domain, which I found out after he went into the military, but I never thought too much of it. Strength meant everything in Trundle Guild. I respected Geintz because he was strong, and I was proud that a strong man like him was our lord. That was all.

Geintz eventually married a frightening woman who used a short lance. I couldn't have done that even if I were offered a million gold. I respected him for being able to sleep next to a woman like that.

As we grew older, Geintz was often called to leave the territory as the general, and he asked me to manage the guild in his place. I retired as an adventurer and devoted myself to mentoring the next generation.

"Hello!"

One day, a lovely, cheerful voice resounded through the guild. I turned from the counter to see a girl who looked like my best friend, but younger and much more beautiful. She had chestnut hair and black eyes, and she stood smiling brightly with a large longsword on her back.

"I've been waiting for you, young black-eyed fairy." The previous guildmaster knelt down.

However, those fulfilling days came to an end without warning. Lady Liruphione, beloved by all the people of the domain, died with the family she married into. Geintz fell into a deep grief and thinned out rapidly, and the formerly strong man died soon after.

I continued to protect Trundle Guild, just as I had promised Geintz. At the end of the year, I had a meeting with the master of our domain with a yearly report detailing the updated ranks of all the adventurers.

Erza, after all this time of not seeing her, was full of energy, her eyes sparkling with life. I hadn't seen her like this since before Liruphione got married, when we were drinking tea together cheering on Geintz and his daughter as they crossed swords.

"Has something good happened, Lady Erza?"

Erza chuckled. "I can't keep anything from you, Ziek. You see, I've finally fulfilled my life's calling, this late in my life."

"Your...life's calling?"

"Yes. I can finally complete my duty as a Trundle." Erza's eyes sparkled fiercely.

My heart was going wild. "What do you mean?"

"It's too early for you to know, Ziek. They'll come running from afar when the time is right. You'll be missing out if you die early, Ziek. My husband was a fool. Strengthen the guild more than ever. This is an order. We must be strong to protect them."

Five years had passed since then. I'd rebuilt the guild, per Erza's orders, into an organization with no weak points. Erza created an invincible private army of her own in her domain through her hellish training.

And then, the second black-eyed fairy came into my life.

After I saw Serephione off as she clutched her silver B-rank plate and jumped for joy, I called an emergency meeting with the guild's executives.

"Lady Serephione is extremely shy and reserved, so we shall use an informal, friendly nickname with her as she wishes. However, keep in mind that she is still the hope of Trundle, our one and only master!"

The twenty other executives nodded in silence. I heard some of the more senior members begin to cry.

"She must be the strongest in history in terms of both magic and

swordsmanship.”

“How wonderful...!”

“Lord Geintz...”

“However, there are some who would harm our lady. The fact that Lady Erza has hidden her until now is proof!”

“Hurt Lady Serephione?! Unforgivable...”

“Please permit us to subdue them, Guildmaster Ziek!”

“Wait,” I demanded. “Lady Erza wishes us to watch silently and prepare ourselves for the time being. Our greatest duty as a guild from now on shall be to protect Lady Serephione’s life. Do not tell anybody outside the guild about her! And if she is ever in danger, we must come to her aid at all costs and fight for her with all our might. If anybody objects to this, you would do well to leave the guild at once. I will give you a letter of recommendation to a guild of your liking.”

“No objections!” they all responded.

“You really were a fool.”

I stood grinning on top of a small hill overlooking the Trundle domain, facing my best friend’s grave.

“It looks like I’ll get to have one last rampage! Ha ha ha!”

My life had suddenly become a lot more interesting.

Chapter 5: Starting Knight School

The day was finally here! I had turned thirteen, and now it was time for my entrance ceremony into knight school.

“Next up is the representative for incoming students, Serephione Granzeus.”

“Okay!”

I was the representative; I’d gotten the highest score on the entrance exam by far. I walked toward the stage calmly in my school uniform, a deep navy button-down with a standing collar. Both boys and girls wore pants with it. It was simple and designed to be easy to move in, but it also stressed discipline; students weren’t permitted to dress the uniform down.

The uniform requirement was a relief for me. Considering I was going to be living on my own in the dorm from now on (with Lou, of course), it would be too much extra work to pick out a dress for myself every morning, and I didn’t know how to dress my clothes down and still look fashionable. But with my uniform, I was ready to take on anything! Yay for military style!

There was also a rule that girls had to keep their hair out of the way. I went to the guild and asked Matt, who had recently gone from bald to having a mohawk, to chop my hair short, but he started crying and stopped.

“Are you trying to get me killed?!” he’d asked. I had no clue why.

Everybody I pointed my scissors to refused, quivering in fear. They’d mutter vague things like “The demon lord...” or “Bloody shurikens will come down...” before running away as fast as they could.

I had no other option, so I asked Lara to show me some trendy braided hairstyles that would stay put even during fighting classes. Braiding my own hair made my hands cramp so badly...it would have been so much easier to just cut it.

When I got onto the stage, I saw my papa and Lou waving at me from the back and smiled. Looking over at the visitor’s seats, I saw General Avenger crying and my grandmother sitting next to him with a clearly faked serious

expression. That meant all the employees already knew who I had at my back...

Was I nervous? Of course not. I was close to forty! It wasn't like I'd get fired or die if I screwed up this speech. Compared to the scary-face gang at the guild, big shot old men looked almost cute to me.

"...I vow to continue my unrelenting hard work. This has been Serephione Granzeus, representative of the incoming first-year Class 1."

All right, done!

The parents and guardians left as the ceremony came to an end; however, I was able to see off my father and grandmother with a simple bye. Even though I was going to live in a dorm from now on, the break schedule wasn't as strict as at the magic academy. Half the students at knight school were commoners and had to help out at their family's shop, farm, or other business. I myself planned to go home every weekend so I could show my face in my domain and guild and sharpen my skills.

Lou went off to explore the school. He would probably come back to my room once he got hungry.

The new students headed toward the classrooms. The first-year class had fifty people, split into two classes of twenty-five. I was in Class 1. I stepped into a room full of people I'd never met in the book. It was exciting and nerve-wracking.

When I went into the open back door, the mood of the classroom suddenly shifted. *We only started school today, but people are in groups already! Did they all form cliques when the test results came out? Shoot, I'm late...* I decided to just say something to the group near the entrance for now.

"Um, is there assigned seating?"

Nobody said a word. *Hmm, what to do?*

A boy from another group suddenly raised his voice. "Hey, you're short, so go sit up front. You're not gonna be able to see the blackboard otherwise! Ha ha ha!"

Well, he's not wrong... I walked past the boys and sat down in the window

seat in the front.

I looked outside to see Lou having fun chasing little birds. He seemed like he'd settled in.

So peaceful...

The fact that Lou and I had entered knight school equaled a significant departure from the novel. Now that I was here, it was nearly impossible that I'd be made to withstand the peril of enrolling in the magic academy.

The magic academy started its new semester at this same time, and this was when the book began. According to my father, a commoner had enrolled on a scholarship for the first time in years. It was the heroine, no doubt.

Now that we were in different schools, there were many fewer opportunities for the heroine and I to cross paths. After all, the reason I tried so hard to get into knight school in the first place was to be as far away from her as possible while still being with my beloved family.

I rested on one elbow and watched Lou frolic outside, stifling a yawn. *So sleepy...*

"...Hey! You!"

Oh no! I fell asleep for a moment! I hastily looked to my side where the voice came from as I checked to make sure I wasn't drooling. There was a boy standing there with short, sunset-orange hair who was rather large to be the same age as me. His brown eyes widened as I met his gaze.

"Hey, were you crying?!" he asked.

"No?"

"Damn it... Hey! You guys!" He raised his voice so loud that it echoed throughout the class. "Are you jealous of her or something? If you got a problem with her, you gotta go through me first! Got it?"

Having said that, he decisively sat down in the seat next to me. He was sticking up for me, I guess?

"Um, thank you... But you don't have to get involved? I can handle things on my own."

“Yeah, I know full well you’re strong. I lost, but I got in anyway ’cause you’re out of my league. But this is different from showing your skill, right? You’re tearing up right now.”

No... I was just yawning... Huh?

I stared at him wordlessly. He flushed red all at once.

“I mean... You may be strong, but you’re still a girl.”

He said he lost? And he got in? Oh!

“You’re the boy from the skills test! The one who carried the sun!”

He put his head down on the desk. “I did not! But I know I was a coward back then. I wanted to apologize to you first thing after I got in. I’m Nicholas. You can call me Nick. Sorry I aimed at your face. My parents gave me a good thrashing for that after I got my results and told them about it.”

Huh? He thought that made him a coward? To me, that was preschool-level... What a nice kid!

“Don’t worry about it. I’m Serephione. It’s a long name, so you can just call me Serephi.”

“You’re a noble, right? A commoner like me can’t just call you by a nickname.”

“Huh? But they call me that at the guild.”

“You’re already in a guild?”

“Yeah! I need the money!”

“M-Money...? I guess I have heard about ‘starving nobles’ before... Which guild in the capital?”

“Oh, I’m not in a capital guild. It’s a bit far away, but I’m in Trundle.”

Suddenly there were frantic whispers everywhere. The others had been listening in. So even students knew about Trundle.

“T-Trundle... Yeah, I guess titles would be meaningless over there. They treat each other as equals by using each other’s names regardless of status... That’s really cool. Got it, I’ll call you Serephi too! I wanna be in that circle someday.”

“Hm? I don’t get it, but sure! Nice to meet you, Nick!”

Serephione befriended Nick! The jingle when a new companion joins your party in an RPG played in my head.

The bell rang, so everybody got in their seats. Shortly after, the door opened. It was the teacher.

“Huh?”

It was a drunkard I knew who had a scar on his cheek, red hair, and sanpaku eyes. The students paled at his intimidating face.

“That red hair... The scar on his cheek from the battle with a junk bear... You’re the Red Devil of Trundle!” Nick said, his mouth hanging open in shock.

Kodak had an impressive nickname. The Red Devil far overshadowed the Black-Eyed Fairy!

“So, I’m Kodak. I’ll be in charge of this class. I’d been a fieldwork instructor for all four years up till now, but I’ve been forced to become a teacher this year. I’ve got four years of military service followed by six years of academic service under my belt, and I’m a gold plate. Any questions?”

Yes, Kodak had risen to A-rank! The A-rank promotion test was conducted by someone higher than A-rank, naturally. That meant his examiners were Ziek and my grandmother, both S-rankers. His opponent was my S-rank brother. Ziek and my grandmother both certified him as A-rank just for not dying in the face of my brother’s ridiculously skilled shuriken attacks.

We held nothing back in tossing the blood-covered Kodak into the air. It was a moment to celebrate!

Remembering that time, I shot Kodak a wink. He flushed red, put one hand on the table, and covered his face with the other. *Aw, is he nervous since he’s not used to being in front of the class?*

“Do you know him?”

“Yeah, we’re drinking buddies.”

I was good at sneakily refilling drinks from my past life. I had been playing with Kodak like that when Gil got angry and told me not to hide my presence

just to fool around.

“Yeah... Trundle really is the place to aim for...” Nick nodded as if he’d come to understand something.

Kodak sighed. “Okay, let’s go over how things are going to work starting tomorrow!”

School was six hours a day, five days a week. Upperclassmen had extra practice on top of that.

Courses were half compulsory and half elective. We had compulsory lectures in this class on general education subjects, management and strategy classes to become a military leader, and education methods. We were also to select a martial art suited to us personally. We had to fully master one by graduation.

“Lastly, this school isn’t a place for spoiled brats to kill time. You’re living off the kingdom’s money, the people’s taxes. If you have a problem with somebody, don’t just gossip behind their back, make them submit upfront with strength! Got it? Okay, go unpack your belongings and get to sleep.”

Thanks for the wonderful meathead speech! I figured I would do as he said and go rearrange my room to be easier to live in, but just as I stood up...

“Serephione, Alma, stay after for a minute!”

My teacher suddenly told me to see him after class! Ahh!

I waved Nick goodbye, and then there were only two people left in the classroom. *This other person must be Alma.*

I looked up at Alma. This person was huge! Around 170 centimeters? For reference, I was 150 centimeters... That was normal for a thirteen-year-old in my past life!

They had short yellow-green hair, caramel eyes, and when I glanced down—gigantic boobs! *I-I’m not jealous! I’m gonna get bigger and catch up... Wait, boobs?*

“Alma, you’re a girl?”

Alma nodded, quite literally looking down on me.

“Ugh, let’s get this over with,” Kodak groaned. “You two, arm wrestle each other.”

Arm wrestling was the standard way to settle a fight between two drunk men.

Why this out of nowhere? And Alma is glaring at me for some reason?

“Give it your full power, got it? All right, you’re both right-handed. Ready, go!”

I still didn’t understand why, but I listened to my teacher, put my elbow on the desk, and... *Bam*! Instant win for me.

“W-Wait a second...”

I heard Alma speak for the first time. *She’s thirteen, right? What’s with the sexy voice?*

“One more time, Alma?”

“Yes, please.”

“Go against her again, Serephione.”

I don’t get it... I quietly put my arm out.

“Ready, go!”

Bam!

Yeah, I one-shot her again, what of it? I looked up at Kodak and at Alma, whose arm I was still holding down on the desk.

Alma’s mouth was half-open as she wordlessly stared at our clasped hands.

“You get it now, Alma? Serephione didn’t cheat to get into this school. Regardless of her gender, she’s a new student with exceptional strength. Speaking of which, Serephione has a silver plate at Trundle Guild. Trundle is impartial. Just look at how the king has a wooden plate.”

Alma was silent.

“That means you have the potential to make it to the top, even as a girl. Don’t put yourself down just because you’re female! Go up against the guys and give them a good beating!”

Alma...had tears in her eyes.

“You two are the only two girls in the incoming class this year. Support each other for these four years!”

My huge lone female classmate bit her lip and shed a single tear... The sight was truly that of a thirteen-year-old girl.

I couldn’t just stand and watch as the middle-aged lady I was! I took hold of both of Alma’s hands.

“Nice to meet you, Alma! Let’s do girl stuff together, like taking walks, and eating sweets, and catching Marre bees in the forest, and going wolf-hunting!”

Alma didn’t meet my eyes, but she gave me a small nod.

“Miss, those last couple were...not girly at all. Well, whatever. I’ll show you two to the girl’s bathroom and changing room. Follow me!”

“Okay!”

“...Okay.”

After Kodak showed us the girls’ facilities, Alma gave a neat bow and ran off.

“Kodak, you only became my teacher because my grandmother forced you, right? Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it, miss. It’s true that the master asked me to. But I’m also coming up on thirty, so I need to learn to do desk work. I can’t enjoy myself outdoors forever.”

“I can get behind having you as my teacher, though. You’ve been looking out for me in little ways ever since we met. When I saw you come into the classroom, I was like, oh, he got me!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“So, what was the deal with Alma just now?”

“You got the idea, didn’t you? She was born and raised in an aristocratic environment with a patriarchal attitude, and then, after she tried her absolute best to be recognized and make it into knight school, the class representative was a weak-looking girl who probably got in through connections. She identified

you as an enemy on sight. Well, you'll probably get similar treatment from the boys. That's one thing, but there are only two girls in this class, so I figured I'd clear the misunderstanding up between you two before things got complicated."

"Me, a weak-looking girl? Alma gives off that impression way more than I do! She even has those gigantic boobs going for her!"

"Well, I can't deny that..."

Bam! I kicked my teacher in the shin.

"Ow... Well, anyway, you're small, and people have preconceived notions about you since you're from the magical Granzeus family. Keep in mind that they'll think you're weak. They'll quiet down when skills tests start, though."

Kodak accompanied me to my dorm.

"Thank you, teacher! Looking forward to learning with you." I dipped my head, waved to him, and entered the dorm.

"A job change is nothing...as long as it keeps our lady alive..." muttered Kodak, too quietly for me to hear.

There were two dormitories, one in the east and one in the west. The entire third floor of the west dormitory was a girls' dorm, and the girls' bathrooms and bathing areas were on the same floor. The cafeteria was on the first floor, and it was co-ed. The menu had two options which changed daily, and we could eat for free if we went within certain times.

My castle for the next four years was a tiny single bedroom. It was a bleak place with nothing more than a bed and a desk on a bare floor, but it was all paid for. It was more than enough for somebody who had struggled to pay rent in Japan.

That said, I was a girl, so I had to have a curtain. After I tidied up the small room, I took a curtain and a fluffy rug out of my Magic Room. Both of them were heartfelt handmade gifts from girls in my domain in celebration of me entering school.

Lou and I had received some kind of blessing from the territory just for

walking around in it. I did heal the children's wounds with medicinal herbs I had on me, I suppose. It was probably as thanks for that. I was grateful.

When I put out the curtain, which was inspired by the blue mountain ranges of the north, and the rug, which reminded me of fluffy fresh snow, the room suddenly felt familiar. This was officially a no-shoes zone! I set my shoes next to my door and plopped down onto the rug.

"Lou, time to eat!"

Lou appeared a couple minutes after I called out to him. "Are we going to the cafeteria?"

"Matsuki made us celebratory lunch boxes, so let's eat those. We can do cheers together!"

"Sounds good."

The lunch consisted of a salt-grilled sea bream, head still attached, enshrined in the center, surrounded by an assortment of delicately arranged vegetables cut into decorative shapes. *Whose engagement gift is this?*

"Matsuki's improved."

"You're right. I wonder where he's headed?"

"Where he's headed?! No! Don't let go of Matsuki, Sere!"

"That's not what I meant."

Lou had formed an extraordinary attachment to Matsuki...

"Today's cake is a fruit roll cake. I also have enough chocolate cakes from Matsuki to last you until the weekend, Lou. They're in my Perishables bag. He says to eat those when I go to the cafeteria."

"Matsuki..." Lou teared up.

We said our thanks to the chef and ate our food. Lou had patrolled the school all day, and apparently, he didn't sense any danger.

"Should we go to the seaside next time? There might be some good materials. I'll check the guild commission requests."

As we were cheerfully exchanging information, there was a small knock at my

door. I met eyes with Lou. *I don't remember inviting any visitors...* I cast illusion magic on Lou just in case.

"Hello?" I opened the door to see two girls I didn't know and Alma behind them. *Wait... They're all huge!*

"Nice to meet you! We live on this floor, and it's just us four including you, so we came to say hello. We've gotta stick together since there are so few of us, right?"

A girl with long black hair in a sleek ponytail and cool sky blue eyes stood before me, the corners of her mouth turned up in a smile.

It was a...a samurai!

"U-Um, my room isn't anything special, but please, come in..." I stuttered.

I cleaned up the Dream Bream meal, cut the fruit roll cake into pieces, and served it with tea. I felt Lou staring daggers into my back. I couldn't blame him; he'd been eyeing that cake. *I'll send Enrique a request for a cake refill!*

"I-I've never seen a cake that looked so much like a jewel..." The girl with curly blonde hair and red eyes was looking longingly at the cake.

I know, right? Our Matsuki is out of this world.

"Wait, we can eat afterwards. Let's get what we came to do out of the way first!"

The samurai cut snack time short. *What they came to do?*

"Shall we start with arm wrestling?"

Yeah, I beat them instantly, what of it?

"Wow, sorry I doubted you, Alma. This girl really is strong. Well, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Elise, and I'm a fourth-year. I come from a family of priests, and I'll probably be a temple guard after I graduate."

The samurai's name was Elise. I took a mental note.

"I'm Sasara. I'm also a fourth-year. Elise and I have been the only two girls for so long, so I'm glad to have newcomers! I'm a commoner, and I'm thinking of joining the military for a few years after I graduate in return for them letting me

study here. After that, I'll probably go back to my orphanage."

The one with the curly blonde hair was Sasara. I made another note. If we were going clockwise, that made it my turn.

"My name is Serephione. I'm a noble, but I'm training in a guild, so please just call me Serephi. Oh, and thank you for taking off your shoes."

"I'm Alma. I'm also a noble, but you don't have to use a title for me. I want to be a military advisor in the future. It's nice to meet you."

After we finished our round of greetings, we all ate our cake without a word. Everyone looked happy... It warmed my heart as an adult woman! And sorry again, Lou!

Sasara gave me and my room a once-over and smirked. "Ahh, that was good. Your room looks nice. It's hard to think it's the same layout as ours. Also, those...pajamas you're wearing? I feel exhausted just looking at them."

Did something look weird? I checked my own appearance. I was in a soft, loose, blue terry cloth tunic that reached to above my knees, and I also had on loose pants that came to just below the knee. Basically, I was wearing the platonic ideal of PJs! I made the pattern myself since the floor-length negligees in this world weren't comfortable to sleep in, and Lou complained that it was immodest that he could see my butt through them. My hair was down, pulled back in a matching headband.

The other three girls in front of me had only taken off their uniform jackets. They still had on the white shirt and pants.

"Should I not change into pajamas?"

"Well, it's not that you *shouldn't*... How can I put this...? Personally, I don't really feel comfortable relaxing like that and giving the boys an easy target. I don't want them to make fun of me for being girly," Elise mumbled.

I know my appearance is relaxed, but it's not girly... There's no lace or ribbons...

"Hmm. I think you're overthinking it! My grandmother is really strong, and she loves these. I know! Do you want to try on some of my pajamas? They're

really comfy!” I retreated into a corner and took my extra pajamas out of my Magic Room.

“Serephi, I appreciate the thought, but our sizes...”

“It’s okay! I have some in your sizes!”

“Why?”

“I plan to grow into them!”

The other girls said nothing.

I forced each of them to try on a set that matched their eyes—sky blue for Elise, deep red for Sasara, and soft beige for Alma.

“Wow... It’s so soft.”

“This feels so nice... So comfy... These might turn me into a lazy person...”

“...”

“He he, you all look nice. My grandmother says variety is the key to getting stronger. You have to do something you like along with training—whether it’s fashion, or baking cakes, or something else—or you won’t improve. You won’t make any progress if you feel constrained and stressed.”

As I went on with the air of an expert, Alma suddenly stood up and glared at me.

“Wh-What would you know? You can only say those things because you’re talented and pretty and everyone likes you! And who is your grandmother to talk like she knows anything, anyway?!”

“A-Alma!” Elise hastily stopped her.

I screwed up... I went on a preachy monologue to somebody I just met. I was just glad to have a girls’ night after all these years, so I got ahead of myself... I feel bad...

“I’m sorry, Alma, I didn’t mean to patronize you! My grandmother is Erza Trundle. If I seem talented, it’s because she’s trained me since I was six. Would you like to visit the Trundle domain together sometime? I think she would be happy to meet my fellow students from knight school.”

“The Wicked Lady Erza...”

“Trundle’s Mother of Devils...”

“Lady Erza? The... The undefeated tactician? The one who my grandfather couldn’t defeat... My...My ultimate goal... Waaaah!”

“Alma...”

Alma must have been fighting alone to get here.

All girls who came to knight school came from a similar background. In order to break through, they went through many times more struggles than a normal girl would have to, and they made it here through their own determined efforts.

When Alma was done crying, I made another pot of tea and passed out chocolate cake to everyone. She gave me a bashful smile, perhaps having come around. We were going to become strong girls who still loved cake and pajamas!

The knight school girls’ pajama party ended up being a great success...

“Sere!”

...apart from the way it upset a certain angry fluffball with steam coming out of his ears...

◇ ◇ ◇

“S-Serephi, what’s wrong? You look tired.”

“Yeah, I didn’t get enough sleep...” I collapsed onto the counter of the guild as I answered Lara.

I hadn’t slept the night before. The heavenly beast who had been watching me hand out his cakes one after the other to the girls blew up on me.

I, his poor, lowly servant, donned my ninja outfit in tears as soon as the night before break came, slipped into the night to go back to my home in the capital, and shook Matsuki and Martha awake. I baked chocolate cakes, cheesecakes, tea cakes, and matcha cakes on the open stovetop with all the ingredients I could find and spent three hours whipping cream. Then I prostrated myself in apology to the other two for leaving without cleaning up and ran back to my

dorm before the sun came up.

Lou was intently eating the cakes at my feet. “Learn from this mistake and don’t do it ever again, Sere... Nom, nom...”

Yeah, I’ll never do it again... I won’t let anyone see Lou’s stash...

“I haven’t seen Larouza lately. How is he?” Lara asked. “He has commission requests for him specifically.”

“He’s been going to the western desert to catch red scorpions for the last ten days. Apparently, he can make some kind of new medicine with the poison from a hundred of them? He’s been reading secret books and going off to collect them in the name of ‘research.’”

“Oh... I see. You two are a hardworking pair as always. Let’s see, milady—I mean, Serephione—the requests that would fit your schedule today are...an E-rank fruit collection request in the Hier Forest and a C-rank snake hunting request in the swamp. Oh, actually, even this is too far.”

I peeked at the map in Lara’s hands. The swamp was on the edge of Trundle territory and would take two days to reach by horse. However! I had a super fluffball on my side!

“I’ll hunt the snake! I can probably get the fruits too, based on the geography, and it’s just inside Trundle territory.”

I made it into knight school just fine, and I met some nice female friends. I’m off to a great start! I’ll ride this wave, take a bunch of requests, and save up some cash!

“...Spares no effort in solving issues within Trundle territory... Noted.”

“Lara?”

“Okay, time to get down to business!”

As usual, I put adequate distance between myself and the guild, checked that nobody was around, and took off my mantle. I appeared in my all-gray ninja outfit, and Lou, who had been resting on my chest, stepped onto the ground.

“Lou, let’s go!”

“Got it, Sere!”

Lou’s body shined in rainbow colors, and he instantly grew to full size. He was about the size of a large motorcycle, to put it in my past life’s terms. There was a sense of stability to him.

I hopped onto his shoulders and started rubbing my cheek against his fur despite myself.

“Sere, that tickles! Come on, where are we going?”

“Ah, sorry! Um, let’s just head in the direction of those ginkgo trees for now. Let’s go!”

“All right!”

My silver-white partner kicked off the ground powerfully.

The swamp was deep in the forest, just at the territory border. All throughout it, trees had been torn down, and something had trampled the grass and flowers.

“Lou, I heard a giant snake attacked some hunters around here. How do you think we can draw it out? If it bleeds, it might attract other animals, so should we take it out with one lightning blast? Since it’s probably water-based?”

“Sereee, I’m tired! I’m hungry!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. Did you already burn off that cake from earlier?”

I wearily took a tea cake and a sealed container of cream out of my Magic Room.

“This is a new creation of Matsuki’s. He said to tell him how sweet it is afterward.”

“Ooh, cream on the side. That way we can move around and it won’t make a mess. Good idea, Matsuki. I trust him unconditionally on matters of sweetness.”

What kind of trusting relationship is that?

Lou returned to fluffball size and sunk his teeth into the cake on my lap. I looked for Hier fruits on the map that I’d made using new magic after becoming an adventurer. Hier fruits had a cooling effect when broken open, so if you

mixed some with flour and applied it as a paste to an injury, it acted as a painkiller.

Found them. There were some at the top of some shii trees. Hier fruit was good for Martha's hips, so I figured I'd take some extra.

"Sere, we have a visitor."

"Hm?"

There was a tiny snake, about ten centimeters long, in front of us, and it had the same blue-green color as the swamp. It was staring at us, its sickle-shaped neck lifted. I really wasn't a fan of snakes...but this one was tiny, so it was okay.

"Um, hello... A visitor, you said?"

"Apparently, this little one's dad got hurt and needs a doctor. Let's go, Sere. It'll lead us there."

The holy beast Lou was one hundred percent a friend to all creatures of the forest. I obediently followed the snake and fluffball.

I followed the snake in a half-circle around the swamp, crawling on my hands and feet through the gaps where vines covered the trees. It wasn't the intended purpose of my ninja outfit, but it fit the job perfectly. I would have been covered in scratches from the thorns and sharp twigs without it.

We entered an empty space about the size of a small room.

"Eek!"

At the base of a cedar tree in the very back, a gigantic snake—about thirty centimeters in diameter—was curled up, collapsed with its head to the ground. This was no doubt the snake from the commission.

The baby snake slithered up to its papa's side and gave his face a little lick with its thin tongue. A dim light came to his eyes, and he tried to lift himself up, maybe because he saw Lou, but he collapsed all at once again.

"Stay quiet for now, Sere." Lou turned to the snake. "What happened?"

I sensed that the snake was responding to Lou. As Lou listened to the snake's story, I examined him. About two-thirds of his body had the skin peeled off, and

he was covered with deep gashes that appeared to be caused by lightning magic. Lightning magic does tend to do the trick, after all.

“I’ll explain afterward, Sere. You need to heal him first.”

“Okay!”

It didn’t matter that I had a commission to hunt this snake. I obeyed Lou no matter what. He didn’t make mistakes. I turned my magical power up to max so as to not prolong the snake’s pain.

“Pain, pain, go away! Go away from papa snake!”

A bright white light shot out from my hands and surrounded the snake’s body. It looked as if the snake himself was emitting light. The light gradually faded over the course of about five minutes—and then it was gone.

“How do you feel?” I asked the snake.

“Amazing... My pain is gone! I feel like a new snake.”

Uhh... Did I just hear a snake talk? I vaguely remember there being a protagonist from a fantasy movie in my past life who got into some crazy situations just because he could hear snakes...

I clutched my head.

“Sere! He received some of your magic, so he should be able to communicate telepathically with you now.”

“Really? So my ‘magic words’ are directly transferring magical power?”

“Your magic words are your thoughts themselves. It doesn’t work the same as normal magic, which activates using magical power; your magic words grant what you wish using a direct flow of magical power.”

So that was the difference. I’d been unknowingly transferring magic all this time. Magic transfer was the utmost act of love! I couldn’t give it away so easily! But I didn’t think I’d used magic words on anybody except myself, Lou, and this snake, so it shouldn’t be a problem... I’d be careful when using it from now on.

“So, papa snake, could you tell me what led to you being hit with lightning

magic?”

“I have long lived here with my clan. We and the others in this forest have coexisted peacefully with humans.”

“Okay.”

“A few days ago, there was a commotion beyond the western edge of this swamp. I went to investigate and was suddenly attacked by many bursts of lightning magic.”

“From the capital?”

The swamp was the border, so west of it was the capital region.

“I heard cheers from the humans. I managed to escape here. Humans from this side of the swamp are not cruel to us. However, I had lost much of the water in my body and was resigned that I would not live much longer. I owe my life to your and the holy beast’s arrival.”

Of course. My grandmother’s faith in Lou was hundreds of times stronger than most new religions. Now that Lou had forbidden killing the forest creatures, nobody in Trundle territory dared to lay a hand on them.

It was an overconfident gesture to shoot magic from the capital region into Trundle territory at what was most likely the guardian of this swamp and forest. They would most certainly be back—what to do about it?

But don’t they say if you mess with a snake who hasn’t done any harm, you get cursed? Was that just a saying from my past life?

“I came here because I was told you attacked some Trundle hunters.”

“I have an agreement with the holy beast not to attack humans. However, I am aware that I became violent and out of control from the pain after being attacked and escaping here. I may have accidentally hurt them.”

“So he says, Sere. What should we do?”

“One second, Lou! ...Finished! Baby snake, can you get on top of papa snake? Yes, like that! Let’s go!”

I pictured a flat rectangle and used both my hands to cut it out. A piece of

glass appeared in front of the two snakes, shone rainbow colors, and transformed into a mirror. It was then absorbed into their bodies.

“Ooh, you’re going to bounce it back?”

“Yep! I call it magic reflection. Next time they hit you with lighting magic, it’ll bounce back to the user at triple strength! I made the saying come true that if you harm a snake, you get cursed!”

“Quite nefarious of you, my lady.”

“No, you, my governor!” I giggled sinisterly.

Now that I had the swamp protected, I had to do something about that hunter who hurt the snake. I had no plans of offering papa snake up. I glanced at his body and saw that while the wounds were healed, there were well-defined scars remaining, and the scales around them were peeled up. Apparently, snakes of this size had scales.

“I’m sorry you have scars left. I don’t mean to offend, but would you mind giving me your scales that are peeling off? If I take those back, I can present them as proof that I completed the mission.”

“My scales? Of course. Now that you mention it...my skin is itching now that my wounds are healed. Wait a moment.” The papa snake suddenly stretched high into the air and curled around a large tree. He was ten meters long altogether! And then...

Swish!

His skin came off all at once, starting from his head.

“Shed skin!”

The white, scarred snakeskin in front of me was the length of about ten carp streamers.

“You may take that back with you.”

Didn’t they say in my past life that if you keep a snakeskin in your wallet, you’ll gain money? Could I give it to the hunters with those magic words used on it? But I could take enough for a thousand... Couldn’t this make me a lot of cash? I see wealth in my future...

Hm? I can hear papa snake more easily now, I think? I looked from the shed skin back to his body itself.

“No way...?”

Curled around the tree was no longer the blue-green snake covered in blood and pus from before, but a magnificent silver-scaled snake.

“Oh, so this was your ten-thousandth time shedding your skin,” Lou observed. “The silver scales are a gift from the goddess for only those who have lived a good life. Congratulations. Your days as a snake are now over. From now on, you are a lesser dragon.”

“Holy beast, contractor, it is thanks to your kind magic that I have lived to see this day. My daughter and I pledge to serve you both as our masters for the rest of our lives.”

So, the baby snake was a girl... Oh, her skin is turning silver too!

Wait...they pledged what now?!

“Good for you, Sere. Snakes can hide anywhere. They’ll make perfect spies!”

I’m not recruiting spies, Lou!

“Lady Sewephi? I’m Miyu. Thank you vewy much!”

Her name is Miyu? And she can talk now that her papa’s leveled up? What an adorable voice!

“Sere, if we don’t hurry, we’ll be late to dinner, and Matsuki will be mad.”

Lou, he only gets mad because he worries when we’re late coming home!

But we didn’t have time to dawdle, so Lou and I parted ways with the lesser dragon and Miyu, promising to meet again. I put the Hier fruits I collected and the snakeskin that smelled of money in my Magic Room for safekeeping.

“Let’s go, Sere!”

“Wait! I want to investigate the west side of the swamp.”

Lou had been standing by at full size, so I had him go back to fluffball size and covered us both with illusion magic just in case. The swamp there was still Trundle territory, but it had dried footprints from multiple people in it. The

footprints were fresh, and one set was about the same size as mine. A child? A girl?

“Four people. Judging by the scent, they were here yesterday.”

“Papa dragon’s injuries were from a week ago, so does that mean they come here often?”

“It would seem so... Speak of the devil. I smell something strange.”

I applied a new layer of perception-disruption magic and ducked into the grass, silencing my breath.

I heard voices approaching, chatting away with no sign of apprehension.

“I don’t see it today either. Shouldn’t it be dead by now?”

“You shot so much lightning at it, after all. It should be burnt to a crisp!”

I twisted my face at their unpleasant conversation. There were three men in black robes. The robes meant they were national magicians.

“You need to learn to hold back some, Maribelle. Just because we’re here to see how strong your magic is doesn’t mean you should use it like that! You won’t be able to control it at the academy.”

Maribelle?

A young girl with fluffy, curled pink hair came vividly into view from the shadows of the dark adults. I felt goosebumps rise all over my skin.

“Well, you’re the one who told me to take it out with all my power!”

“Think about the money like the commoner you are! It’ll be worth more intact than as a burnt corpse!”

“Well, it’s not like I’m going to be a commoner in the end. I already had the meeting event with the prince, after all! Hey, it’s probably in the back of the swamp. Take me there!”

“This is the border, stupid! Trundle territory starts at this swamp! Go ahead, step in without permission, and don’t come crying to me when you get killed.”

“I’m not stupid! You are! There’s no way I’ll get killed. I’m the heroine! Hurry up and go! Who knows, that snake could be a holy beast. Well, I’ll get a super-

strong holy beast anyway, but the more the better.”

A holy beast?! Right, Lou!

I forced my brain out of its frozen shock and looked at my feet to see Lou.

Lou was quivering hard, putting one foot out and then back, over and over. His sky-blue eyes were bloodshot red.

“Lou?”

His voice was strained. “Sere... Something isn’t right... Some force is pulling me toward this girl I’ve never seen before... My heart and body are both screaming to go to her... Even though...I know...this isn’t the right time...”



The heroine has finally made her appearance...

Lou originally found mutual love with Maribelle, not me. This was the plot trying to force itself back on track.

Lou growled in distress and gazed fondly at Maribelle. He stared at the ground as if to swallow his feelings, drool dripping from his mouth.

Everything that had happened since I met Lou flashed through my mind. It had been ten years—not a short time at all—yet I still couldn't beat the heroine. Lou would soon fall to Maribelle.

His eyes, which were only on me for so many years, were now reflecting Maribelle. The gaze he directed at her had an unmistakable heat, completely different from the calm looks he gave me.

Why? Why...? Lou... Why her? Am I going to lose to her? But I love you hundreds of times more than the heroine ever will!

No...Lou was resisting for my sake. He knew this wasn't the right destiny after our ten years together. He was standing firmly by my side. It confirmed what I already knew—Lou would never betray me. He dug his claws into the ground and shook his head violently. Was he masking his impatience? Clearing his thoughts? This was no good...

But... There was no need for Lou to suffer like this. Even on Maribelle's route, Lou would be one of the powerful, amazing heavenly beasts... He would live a happy life. He had a happy ending in Maribelle's world.

It was selfish of me to want him to stay with me. I wanted Lou to be able to run and play happily all the time...because I loved him. I adored my confident, straightforward, egotistical Lou—my Lou who surrounded me with warmth even while being a supreme being.

As long as I have the memories of being loved for these past ten years...I can live on. Even if my fate leads me down the same dark course as last time, these unmistakably real ten happy years with Lou will give me warmth in the end.

I knelt down in front of Lou. "Lou? No—Loudarylphena. You can go to her. Don't make yourself suffer."

Lou’s reddened eyes opened wide.

“Thank you for everything... Thank you...for resisting fate...” Tears were helplessly running down my face. “You can erase our contract, Lou... I love you... Good...bye...”

It probably didn’t have the intended effect while I had tears streaming down my cheeks, but I smiled. I smiled, so Lou could go to Maribelle without feeling bad for me. So he wouldn’t resent me.

My vision was blurred with tears, but I heard Lou growl. “I see how it is.”

Rip!

I heard an alarming sound, and at the same time, the scent of blood reached my nose. I hastily wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

Before me was Lou, his clear blue eyes shining fiercely—and his mouth awash in crimson, blood gushing from his front right leg.

“Lou!” I leapt to his feet to stop the bleeding.

“Don’t touch me, Sere!”

I flinched and recoiled slightly.

“Don’t heal me! This will keep me in my right mind. You can heal me when we get home!”

I knew that Lou had bitten off his own paw...but I couldn’t understand why.

“Lou... Why...?”

Lou set his bloodied leg on my lap. “Sere, do I disgust you?”

I shook my head. “No one could ever be more beautiful to me than you, Lou.”

“Then kiss my wound, Sere.”

I still didn’t understand, but I didn’t hesitate to kiss his still-bleeding injury. The taste of iron numbed my tongue.

A bright ring of light appeared above me and Lou. This was the second time we’d seen this light; the first time had been when I met Lou. The light descended to surround both of us, closed tightly around our bodies, and

vanished into us.

I stood dumbfounded.

“I received your blood a long time ago. Now we have a mutual blood contract, the strongest and most equal kind of contract. Sere...don’t cry. I’m yours.”

Lou smiled serenely and then collapsed toward me.

“Lou!”

Just as I squeezed him into a hug, I heard Maribelle shouting. “What was that light?! Could that be a heavenly beast descending? Magicians, let’s go!”

The four misguided people stepped into Trundle territory. Without taking my eyes off Lou, I shot a combined magic attack at them, one that was akin to bullets of light.

Boom!

“Ahh! What was that?!”

“Crap!”

“Get out!”

“Aahhh!”

The four were surrounded by several people dressed in ninja outfits before they could react. They were my grandmother’s spies.

I released the illusion magic around just my immediate area, leaving the perception-disruption magic.

A man in a black ninja uniform appeared and knelt before me.

“My lady.”

“They’re intruders. They harmed a silver dragon who protects this swamp. Please take care of the rest.”

“As you wish.”

I cradled Lou to my chest and dashed off at full speed.

I used both physical-strengthening magic and illusion magic and bounded toward the Granzeus mansion in the capital as fast as I could, mustering every

last bit of strength in my body. I passed through the entryway with Lou in my arms; he was covered in blood.

“Welcome back, miss—Lou!”

I rarely heard Enrique raise his voice, but I couldn’t worry about that right now.

“I have to heal him right away... I need to concentrate, so don’t let anybody in my room,” I said softly before I dashed to my room on the second floor.

“Haah... Lou, we’re home...” I said through ragged breaths. “I kept...our promise... I’ll heal you now...”

The second I entered my room, I sat down on the floor, supporting the limp Lou with my left hand. I used my other hand to release a large amount of magic at once while chanting my magic words.

“Pain, pain, go away! Pain, pain, go away! Pain, pain, go away!” I struggled to get the words out. “Pain, pain...”

When his bleeding stopped, I gently embraced him and prayed for him to get well, stroking his back. He’d lost a lot of blood. Picturing an anti-anemia medicine, I transformed my magic into something similar to iron and folate and sent it into him to increase his red blood cell count.

“Lou! Lou, get better! Please!” I begged through tears.

About ten minutes later, I felt something soft and wet against my cheek. Lou’s blue eyes were giving me a piercing gaze. He licked my cheek, wiping my tears away.

“Lou...”

“Sere...let’s get in the bath first and wash this blood off. We can talk afterward.”

Lou and I got in the bath attached to my room and washed off the blood and dirt. Then I put on my soft blue pajamas, brushed Lou as I always did, and dried him off with my hairdryer magic.

Somebody knocked softly on my door.

“Will you be having dinner, young miss?” asked Martha.

My chest felt tight with all manner of emotions. I didn’t feel like I could eat.

“I won’t have any tonight. Sorry. You can go back down.”

“All right... Let me know if you feel like eating anything, okay?”

After Martha went back downstairs, I realized that I hadn’t considered Lou. “Sorry, Lou. Were you hungry?”

“Of course not! You transferred about two months’ worth of magic to me. I’m stuffed.”

We sat down on the fluffy rug by the window. Lou lay in my lap, and I slowly stroked his back out of habit.

“Do you feel like talking now?” he asked.

I didn’t answer.

“Ever since you were little, you’ve had times where you get a troubled look on your face beyond your years... You keep silent, put a wall up around your heart, and your magic rages violently throughout your body. Whenever that happened, you’d always start being even stricter with your training the next day.”

I remained silent.

“You didn’t say anything, so I figured it was fine... But all the heavy feelings you’ve been bottling up finally erupted into the open. You were always crying in your heart, but today they finally came out as tears.”

“Lou...”

“My one and only contract partner was sobbing in front of me and telling me to break our contract... Doesn’t that sound like the right time to intervene?”

“I... You’re right.”

It wasn’t like telling Lou the truth would change anything, but I definitely didn’t want Lou to distrust me for hiding it. Also...I was tired. Tired of resisting the plot all on my own.

“Lou...you know how I always take my shoes off and sit down when I enter a

room? That's because it's a habit I can't break from the world I lived in before."

"Hmm... So, you're a Reborn."

"There's a term for it?"

"Yeah. I hear they appear extremely rarely. You're the first one I've met. So, your open-mindedness is because of your past life... Makes sense."

"He he. Does it bother you?"

"Why would it?"

"Because it's heresy."

Lou gave my cheek a light smack with his left paw. It was the first time he'd done anything like that... It shocked me.

"Open your eyes, Sere! I chose you because your magic feels nice. That's all there is to it. Don't you remember what that snake said today? Your magic is gentle. Magic is the person themself—it reveals everything about their character. Now look: I'm Loudarylphena, one of the four heavenly beasts. Us holy beasts are never anything less than fully honest and upright. Your magic is suitable for me. *I* chose you. Understood?"

Tears welled up in my eyes.

"You're my one and only, Sere. Nobody could ever replace you!"

"Waah, aaahhhh! Ahh..." I broke down crying. Lou licked up all my tears, covering my face in his saliva.

I opened up to Lou about my past life. I told him about how my past life was in a completely different dimension than this one, and how I died at around thirty. I explained that this world was the exact same as a book I read in my past life, and how I awakened to it all on that snowy day when I met Lou.

I told him how, in the book, I had been a powerful magician and had gone to the magic academy. I recounted how I was then thrust into the role of the villainess and how everyone close to me cut off ties with me only to gather around the protagonist, Maribelle. I described how I was persecuted—captured, incarcerated, sucked dry of my magic, and left alone to wither away and die.

I told him that, after my awakening, I'd been struggling to avoid that fate by choosing the opposite path at every possible opportunity.

I told him everything I thought of as I thought of it.

"So, when you have those times where you look troubled or like you're going to cry, is it because you're feeling bad about your past life?"

"Not really. I had a fulfilling life, I think. But it's strange... The things written in the book became like things I'd experienced myself, and I have emotions associated with them now. When a person or a place or what have you triggers a memory, the way things were back then comes back to me, and...it's disturbing, and it's painful... It feels like I have two past lives. I'm not making any sense, am I...?"

"When you said 'everyone close to you,' does that include your father and Larouza?"

I nodded.

"And me too?"

I no longer felt up to the task of choosing words. I just nodded again.

"That would explain what happened earlier... You were afraid that the good guys had shown up and the time had come for me to turn on you."

My chest stung just remembering it. "I know you won't betray me! But...there was obviously something wrong back there! You were looking at Maribelle so lovingly, and suffering so much... I thought I had to free you from it..." I began to cry again.

"Don't cry, Sere. I understand. Well, I don't get what all that was about, but I understand how you feel. I'll think about what happened back there."

I had no response through my tears.

"Sere, what are we?"

I paused to collect myself. "One and the same."

"Exactly." Lou abruptly began to shine, and he grew to his full size. He wrapped me in his silver-white fur and rested his head on my neck. "Time to get

to sleep, Sere!”

Lou nibbled my neck. His pure magic flowed into me.

“Lou?”

“Hm?”

“When you told me you would go on an adventure with me...I was so happy... It gave me the courage to struggle as much as I can.”

“I see. Good night, Sere.”

“Good night... I love you...”

A sudden drowsiness overtook me, and I couldn’t hold my eyes open any longer. My body and mind sank into Lou’s beautiful soft fur.

In the last moment before I shut my eyes, I saw Lou, his clear blue eyes gleaming gold and his fangs bared. He was more furious than I had ever seen before.

Was I dreaming?

◇ ◇ ◇

When I woke up, I saw Lou at his usual fluffball size, sleeping with his belly out. The sky outside was cloudy, but my heart felt far clearer than I’d expected. *Is it because of the magic I got from Lou, or because I had a good cry?*

“Good morning, Sere.”

“Good morning, Lou.”

A usual day for us began.

“Good morning, father.”

“Morning, Serephi.”

I sat down at the breakfast table and greeted my father, but he looked pale and worn out.

“Father, you look tired.”

He gave me a forced smile. “When I came home, I heard that Lou was hurt and you were hard at work trying to heal him. Of course, I’d get a bit worn out

from worrying.”

I rushed over to him. “I’m sorry, father.”

Papa picked me up and held me on his lap for the first time in a long time. “Please, Serephi. Don’t hide away in your room any more. My heart can’t take it.”

I’m the one whose heart can’t take getting a hug from a handsome gentleman this early in the morning!

I noticed dark circles under his eyes, so I gave them each a smooch. It was a spell to absorb his exhaustion. His dark circles were for my sake, so I would bear them myself.

“Your magic really is gentle, Serephione...”

Wait, it was an absorbing spell, but it still transferred magic to him? I don’t get it.

“Serephione, Lou! I imagine you’re hungry? Matsuki made plenty of pancakes!”

“Good morning, Martha! Thanks for the food!”

“Extra cream for me, Sere!”

“Roger!”

After we finished breakfast, I left the house along with my father, who was on his way to work. I got on top of Lou; I had to go report what happened yesterday to the guild.

“...So, the snake was out of control because he was hurt. He apologized and gave this to me to bring back. It increases your financial luck if you put it in your wallet. Do you think the hunters could forgive him? Oh, and those Hier fruits... Here they are!” I doled out the shed skin commemorating the snake’s ten-thousandth shed and the Hier fruits like I was pulling kids out of the emergency exit chute during a natural disaster drill.

“Serephione, I’m floored... I’ll check with the hunters, but I don’t think there should be any problem. This completes your commission for the guild! Thank you for your service!” Lara politely handed over the agreed-upon

compensation, so I signed for it and accepted it from her. Eight gold coins sparkled in the palm of my hand. I'd done it!

"Miss! I see you've wrapped everything up. Nice work! Are you raising your win rate by ten percent?" Kodak, my drunkard of a teacher, held up the glass that he'd been drinking out of since morning. He couldn't drink at school, after all.

I got a cup of tea from the counter, sat down next to Kodak, and clinked our cups together. "Teacher, I managed to execute my mission successfully again! Thanks!"

I pretended I was drinking alcohol, letting out a big breath with a self-satisfied smile.

Kodak quickly turned away. W*as that a nosebleed I saw? He must have drunk way too much!*

"Could you come this way, Serephione?" A smiling Ziek appeared from the back, waving me over. I left my things with Lara and Kodak and went into the guildmaster's office.

On the sofa where Guildmaster Ziek had been sitting last time I was in this office sat my stern-faced grandmother, wearing a chic dress with impeccable posture. As soon as the door clicked shut, the serene expression fell from Ziek's face. My grandmother motioned for me to sit across from her, and Ziek approached the desk.

"So, milady, I'll get right to the point. Could I ask you for a detailed report of what happened yesterday?" Ziek inquired.

Interrogation time. Well, I knew this was coming.

"First of all, grandmother, I'm sorry I had to make use of your private army."

"I can't judge that action until I've heard the whole story. Start from the beginning."

"Okay. I went to the swamp on the outskirts of the territory for a guild commission, and I found a large snake there, a guardian of the area, who had been hurt by lightning magic and was on the verge of death. I healed him

quickly and asked him what happened, and he said he was attacked by intruders from the capital. Thinking it was likely that they would come back based on the situation, I waited to see what would happen, and three national magicians and a young girl came. It seemed they were targeting the snake. The girl had trespassed onto our territory many times over to hurt him, and she came back yesterday when he was weakened to retrieve his body. The moment she stepped into Trundle territory, I called on your private army. After that, the snake went through his ten-thousandth regeneration and became a silver lesser dragon. I decided it would be bad if anything happened to him in the future, so I cast an armor spell on him." I left Lou out of the report.

"Milady, you use healing magic as well?"

"Ziek! What's said here stays here. And Serephione, I was told you were covered in blood when you got home?"

"None of it was my blood, grandmother. I wasn't hurt."

It was Lou who was hurt. I doubted I could fool my grandmother, but I wanted Ziek to think the blood was from the papa dragon.

"I see..."

There was zero chance she wouldn't make a big deal over Lou being hurt.

"I'll just ask you point-blank, Serephione. It seems likely that they were targeting *you*, does it not?"

It seemed Maribelle only hurt the dragon opportunistically, and her future goal was to have a holy beast under her control. What she ultimately wanted was Lou, one of the supremely strong holy beasts—and Lou and I were two hearts beating as one.

I shot Lou a glance and then made eye contact with my grandmother. "That may be the case."

A burst of bloodlust erupted from my grandmother! And wait, another source of bloodlust? Z-Ziek? He had a devilish expression on his face in place of his usual gentle smile! A tornado was whirling behind him!

"Erza, permission to kill them?"

“Let them live for now. We’re still interrogating them. They can’t die until they’ve been of full use to us,” she responded.

“Um, are the four people from yesterday still here?” I asked.

“Terribly sorry, milady. We left them alive because we failed to consider that they were targeting you.”

“So, did you both meet them?”

“Yes. Erza watched from behind as her private soldier interrogated them.”

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me what they had to say?”

Ziek humphed. “They said the girl’s magic manifested after her birth, and they were teaching her the basics in the capital so she could keep up with the classes at the magic academy where she had newly enrolled on an exception. They claimed they didn’t mean to stray into Trundle territory, which is a blatant lie given how many footprints they left. The fact that they aimed attacks at Trundle territory in the first place is an act of war. As for the girl, she babbled on that the snake was hers and that she should be allowed to come get her own things. Are all magicians in the capital this idiotic?”

“Serephione, the Trundle family issued a declaration over two hundred years ago that we would slay anyone who entered our territory without permission. It’s even a notarized document. We went out of our way to warn people so they wouldn’t put themselves into danger... How reckless of them.”

Somebody knocked on the window frame. My grandmother stood up and took a letter from outside it.

“My, how frightening... It says, ‘We will only ask you to spare the student. The magicians accompanying her are adults, so they can face the consequences of their actions.’ It seems they have no intention of compensating us for instigating war...”

If we let them go after declaring that we would kill them, people would look lightly on Trundle in the future, giving others an opportunity to take advantage of us. My grandmother’s face was icy cold. She had far more resolve than me... I was in no place to share my opinion.

“Grandmother, can I ask you one thing?”

“What is it?”

“What did you think of that girl?”

“Well... She was vapid, frankly. I don’t know where she learned about them, but she kept whining about holy beasts, denying that she did anything wrong, and making excuses for herself. It might be that the magician’s association can’t get rid of her because her magical power is so much greater than the other magicians.”

“Were you, um...drawn to her at all?”

“What about her is there to be drawn to?”

“Uhh...how wild and free she is?”

“Freedom is a privilege earned only by fulfilling one’s duty. You know that, don’t you?”

What she said was too reasonable—tears came to my eyes.

“S-Serephi?”

“Thank goodness, Sere.” Lou nuzzled my cheek.

My grandmother hadn’t fallen to Maribelle’s charm...

Lou and I returned home immediately after the interrogation was over and shut ourselves away in my room.

“My grandmother and Ziek both met Maribelle up close, but neither were affected by her spell! What does it all mean...?” I deliberately called it a spell since Lou wouldn’t understand if I called it a “plot correction.” In the back of my mind, I had thought everyone who loved me would be captivated by Maribelle the second they saw her and that the plot would correct itself such that they would betray me.

The effect seemed unrelated to distance. There had been plenty of room between Lou and Maribelle, and my grandmother would have been much closer to Maribelle when she looked at her in the jail room.

“Was she choosing the targets of her spell?” I mused.

“Not possible. She wasn’t aware of me at the time,” Lou replied.

He was right. And if she could choose, she wouldn’t have left out my grandmother. My grandmother was extremely strong, close to me, and could cause the most damage if she turned on me—she would be the most relevant person to choose.

“She seemed to really want a holy beast. Maybe she targeted it at holy beasts in general.”

“Now that you mention it, Maribelle was awfully focused on holy beasts in particular...and Erza had that impression of her too. Sere, try to remember in detail what else she was running her mouth about!”

That’s right, I’d been too unsettled to properly assess what she’d said. Let’s see, what hurt me most was...

“I’ll get a super-strong holy beast anyway.”

She meant Lou. Maribelle knew about Lou and the fact that she would get him eventually.

And when the magician warned her against entering Trundle territory...

“There’s no way I’ll get killed.”

She didn’t understand the status my grandmother and the Trundle family have in this kingdom.

“I’m the heroine!”

She knew that she’s the heroine.

“Lou?”

“Hm?”

“I think Maribelle is a Reborn too.”

“So basically, she’s also a Reborn who read the same book of prophecy as you did?”

Wha? Since when was Wild Rose *a book of prophecy?*

“Yeah. The word ‘heroine’ comes from my past life, and she also mentioned

‘clearing an event.’ She was talking like she knew what comes next in the story.”

“Sere, did the book have any details about Erza or the Trundle family?”

“Huh?” I didn’t even have to think about it. It wasn’t a fantasy novel with very much worldbuilding at all; it didn’t describe the protagonist’s background in detail, let alone the villainess’s. “It didn’t. To be honest, before you and I met her, I didn’t know my grandmother even existed. The book didn’t mention the name Trundle, not even as an initial.”

“Then why did you think Erza and Ziek would turn against you?”

“I mean, everyone close to me betrayed me, and I ended up all alone! I didn’t have a single person left!”

“But neither Erza or Ziek were in the book, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And they definitely weren’t at the scene of any of the crimes?”

“They weren’t.”

“You know what that means? Maribelle only knows what was written in the book of prophecy. She can’t use her spell on somebody she doesn’t know.”

“Is that...what that means?”

Can I safely consider the influence of Wild Rose *to be limited?*

What was written in the book evidently holds some degree of influence over the people and things described within its pages, but if somebody isn’t in the book, does that mean it can’t influence their actions?

On the same token, the book only described a fraction of the details and events of this world. The vast majority of the people in this world are *unrelated to the plot of* Wild Rose*, and some of those unrelated people* will *inevitably cross paths with the characters that appeared in the novel. Doesn’t that entail that the course of each character’s life—including* mine*—will shift, since the many people not in the story can act according to their own whims?*

Even now, Lou and I have had encounters and experiences that weren’t in the book and gone down a different path. That meant things couldn’t possibly go

one hundred percent the same as the original plot.

In any case, I don't know the extent of the plot's influence. I can't take it lightly.

"Sere, think about that prophetic book right now and pull out every character who was mentioned in it, down to the smallest appearances. Anyone who's mentioned by name. That would give us a list of everybody who could possibly be included under her spell."

I silently nodded, went to my desk, and thought back on *I Love You, My Wild Rose*. I wrote down the name of every character I could remember who was mentioned by name, down to the gatekeepers and the daughter of the flower seller.

If I marked every person Maribelle was likely to come into contact with, avoided areas they would be in, and involved myself with a lot of people other than them, it should allow me to grow up peacefully—so I wanted to believe, at least.

Prince Gillain was a special case. I labeled an additional sheet of paper "Exceptions" and wrote Gillain's name on it. After some consideration, I wrote "helps me after my conviction" next to him.

As I was lost in my work, a shadow loomed above me.

"'Isaac Granzeus. Becomes furious when I break my engagement with Prince Gardner. Disowns me from the Granzeus family and tells me he never wants to see my face again.'"

A voice I shouldn't have heard resonated above my head. I hid my notes under my hands, but it was too late. I turned to look back, and my father was there, on the verge of crying.

"Father...why?"

I glared at Lou. He should have stopped my father from sneaking up behind my back. Lou quietly returned my look. "I let him in on it," he said.

"You did?!" I stood up, moved away from my father, and squeezed my arms around myself. I didn't know what to do. *I* can't *look at his face! What do I do?!*

Just as I was internally panicking, my father stepped in front of me and pressed me close to his chest.

“I’m sorry, father... I’m sorry...”

“Serephi, you haven’t done anything worth apologizing for. You poor thing, going through this suffering... Serephione, Lou told me everything. It’s okay. I won’t betray you. Lou promised he would stop me before I betray you.”

I lifted my face and looked at my father wordlessly. He was breathtakingly handsome with tears in his eyes.

“Would you include me when you make your counter-strategy, my dear Serephione?”

Holy beasts never made mistakes. If Lou made the decision, it must have been right.

I buried my face in my father’s chest again. He stroked my head, just as he had done when I was little.

“I was told that what happened in the book of prophecy feels as if it happened to you yourself. My betrayal must have hurt you most of all. Serephione, as long as I live in this world, I’ll never leave you alone. You may not be able to believe me when I say that, so I’ll vow it to Lou right now.”

Lou growled. Making a direct vow to a holy beast was tantamount to giving up your life. If you made a mistake, divine punishment was guaranteed. My father was truly resolved.

I gripped his jacket hard enough to crease it and cried into his chest.

Intermission: The Regret of Isaac Granzeus

As I, Isaac Granzeus, sat in the royal castle, checking budget-related documents one by one and giving instructions, a light flashed outside the window. It was Enrique's messenger magic—a rare sight. I opened the window apprehensively and took the butterfly-shaped object. After confirming its receiver's magic, it turned into a letter.

"The holy beast is badly wounded. Serephione is shut away in her room healing him. Return immediately."

I immediately went weak in the knees. What had happened to Serephione after she went off to her guild in high spirits this morning?!

"Sir, you're back!"

"What's going on, Enrique?! I need an explanation!" I demanded as I rushed to take off my mantle and head to my daughter.

"Serephione returned about two hours ago holding the holy beast, who was covered in blood. Her face was wet with tears, and she looked exhausted. She ran to her room and instructed me not to interrupt her."

"Serephione... And she hasn't come out since then?"

"Young Isaac, I just asked her if she would like dinner, but she said she didn't want any tonight..." Martha had tears in her eyes as she wrung out her apron. Something huge must have happened for Serephione to brush off Martha, her mother figure since she was young!

I ran up to the second floor and stood helplessly in front of Serephione's room.

I heard a conversation going on inside. Apparently, Lou had recovered enough to be able to talk. I felt somewhat relieved. But who in the world had hurt the holy beast? And what guild commission was Serephione on in the first place that led to this? As I stood perplexed, questions floating through my head with no answers at hand...

"Waah, aaahhhh! Ahh..."

The anguished wail seemed to come from her soul itself.

“My young miss is crying...” Martha sat on the floor next to me, as if the strength to stand had left her.

Serephione was crying. My daughter’s wail, a new sound to me, echoed through the mansion.

Serephione didn’t cry. She was low-maintenance as a child. No. She still was. She kept her feelings to herself and handled them on her own. She lived quietly yet strongly, not relying on her parents, just taking what she could get on her own. At times, she wore a mature, pained expression, but when asked what was the matter, she would brush it off by saying it was nothing and that she was fine.

Her agonized cries were like a knife in my chest. I felt disgusted with myself, having never heard her scream before and not knowing what the reason behind it was. I was so ashamed to know that my daughter, the person I loved most in the world, was crying, and I couldn’t do anything about it.

As I bit my lip in anguish, the pained cries gradually died down, and I heard a quiet conversation going on. Then, I no longer heard anything at all—and the door swung open.

“S-Serephione!”

I gasped. Standing before me was the holy tiger at his full size, the first time I had ever seen him thus. I could feel the power emanating from his body, and his face was sterner than ever before—he looked truly godlike. *This* was his true form. I assumed a kneeling position as a matter of course.

Lou quietly closed the door to Serephione’s room.

“Your Holiness, are you hurt? Is Serephione okay?”

Still frowning, he nodded to me.

“What happened, Your Holiness?!”

He gave me a scrutinizing look.

“Please tell me, Your Holiness! Why was Serephione crying like that?!”

Lou glanced at me before beginning to descend the stairs. I crawled over and hung onto his back leg.

“Please wait! I don’t want to make any further mistakes. I became too cowardly after my wife’s death to treasure Serephione when she was a child as I should have! I want to be closer to her now!”

Though I said that, Lou’s voice was inaudible to me, given that we weren’t contracted. Realizing I had acted impolitely, I let go of Lou and gazed wordlessly into thin air.

Just then, Lou’s face appeared before mine, and he nodded once. I hastily stood up and followed Lou down the stairs.

Lou brought me to my study. He gestured for me to sit on the sofa, bared his fangs, and growled. Thinking he wanted to confirm my resolve, I quietly nodded.

At once, he closed the distance between us and bit my neck. His magic flowed into me.

“Agh, ahhhh!”

A pain like being stabbed with thousands of needles shot through me, sending convulsions throughout my body. Feeling nauseous from the sheer pain, I involuntarily covered my mouth. I collapsed onto the sofa, clutching my head.

“Hah, hah... Gh... Hah...”

When I had lost my sense of time passing, I strangely grew accustomed to the pain and was able to open my eyes slightly.

“I see you’re still conscious. I’m impressed.”

Lou’s voice—the voice of a being equal with the gods—resonated directly in my head.

“My magic is more toxic the more impure the receiver is. Everybody amasses some level of impurity by adulthood, and you killed people in the last war, did you not? I’m surprised your reaction wasn’t worse, but then, you *are* Sere’s father.”

“Your Holiness...” My voice was rough.

“Sere tells me my magic feels crisp, like a snowy mountain. She enjoys the sensation. I feel the same about her. She is a truly immaculate girl.”

“Serephione...”

“You wished to speak with me, so I gave you my magic. This will only last temporarily, however. Any objections?”

“Thank you for your special consideration.”

“Do not speak of what I tell you to anyone else. I will tell you because you’re her father. I’ve become...somewhat attached to you after spending so long together. Understood?”

“As you wish.”

I shook at both the honor of speaking with a holy guardian beast and the knowledge that my beloved daughter’s secrets would soon be revealed to me.

As I lay pitiful and helpless on the sofa, Lou stretched his large body before me, seemingly unconcerned with my state.

“To start with the conclusion...Serephione is a Reborn.”

“A Reborn?”

“Yes. I couldn’t ask for many details tonight due to her exhaustion. She was rambling through tears, so I filled in some gaps with my imagination, but I imagine I’m not far off. Serephione was born in this world with her memories of her past life still present. She lived in a world with a far different value system from ours, and there she met with an early death. It may be that she was summoned by the gods to this war-torn world for her wisdom.”

I was at a loss for how to respond to this information, something I had never imagined in my wildest dreams.

“In her past life, Sere read a book of prophecy.”

“Prophecy...?” A chill ran down my spine.

“This book wrote of this world in great detail. She was then reborn as Serephione in this world, met her family and me, disciplined herself, and went on to contribute to this world with her powerful magic ability. So far, things

have gone largely according to the prophecy.”

“Okay.”

“However, this is the problem. According to the prophecy, Serephione becomes the target of some conspiracy as soon as she enters the magic academy, and all her loved ones turn against her. She is then executed without mercy.”

“It can’t be!” I tried to lift myself up, but collapsed again.

“Sere remembered the prophecy on the day she met me. Ever since, she’s been struggling to defy that fate. She’s been living in constant fear, thinking of when she’ll be betrayed, when she’ll be killed. She is but a small child, struggling to make a path for herself despite despairing at the prediction of a death more cruel than beheading.” Lou looked into the distance as if remembering the past.

“I refuse to allow that! Anyone who threatens Serephione will face death at my own hands. When should I use my magic, if not to protect my beloved daughter?!”

Lou held my gaze silently.

“Don’t tell me...”

“You too will betray her, Isaac.”

“No... *I* will? I’ll betray Serephi?”

“Hmph, don’t worry. You’re not the only one. We all will. Including Larouza and me.”

“Does... Does Serephione believe that I’m going to betray her?”

Is that why she doesn’t confide in me? Is that why she smiles despite looking so pained?

“I think it’d be more accurate to say that she’s resigned to it.”

“Why? How can that be?! Lou, please, do anything you can to help Serephione. You’re my only hope!”

“I already told you. I’ll betray her too, according to the prophecy.”

My vision went dark.

“The despair and loneliness is deeply ingrained in her heart.”

“Let’s...return to what happened today. We went to the border of the Trundle domain on a guild commission, and there I met a girl.”

I couldn’t immediately follow the sudden change in subject.

“As soon as I saw her, I lost my senses. My entire body yearned for her. My thoughts filled with the urge to throw myself at her feet, to do anything she wished, despite never having seen her before.”

“She affected your mind?”

“Yes. My heart sought her with great passion, while my head was filled with questions. It was bizarre that I should be so drawn to someone I’d never met. I was confounded by what was happening to me. Nothing like it had ever happened before in my hundreds of years of life.”

“How could that be...?”

“When I came to, Sere was in front of me, shedding her pure tears. She said to me, ‘I don’t want to see you suffer. You can go to her. Break our contract. I’ll always love you.’”

“Serephi...”

“I finally realized that it was a trap to pull me and Sere apart. I bit off my own paw to regain my sound mind.”

I had no words.

“According to the prophecy, everybody becomes enamored with this girl, starting with the royal family, and condemns Sere. To her, I suppose Sere, her superior in every way, is nothing more than a hindrance. The prophecy states that I will dissolve my contract with Sere and give myself to that girl. Looking back now on what took place, I can see that the girl had an unusual fixation on holy beasts.”

“But... That’s...”

“Sere told me she decided she had to set me free. She gave up on our life together so that I could be at peace. She smiled through her tears, not realizing that as her contractee, I could hear her inner voice crying ‘Don’t go. I’ll miss

you, but I love you.’”

Once again, Serephione had held in her feelings...

“Who is that girl? What does she plan to do after gaining the power of a holy beast and the prince? What is behind her spell? There are too many unanswered questions. Given that her spell took control of *me,* you humans would be mesmerized without the chance to put up a fight. However, from what I saw of her, she didn’t have the same amount of magic or the same qualities as Serephione, which makes me question, is someone behind her? And if so, is that someone human?” Lou closed his eyes pensively.

In the next moment, his eyebrows creased tightly together, and his open eyes glimmered gold with a strong resolve. “Whatever it may be, I will not condone it. Not only did she trap me, but Serephione is the only one I, one of the four heavenly beasts, have ever contracted with in my life. She is my dear child, who I have raised since she was but an innocent youth. Anyone who dares to track down and torment Serephione, the girl I have watched over with great care and affection, deserves to die.”

Lou was at once filled with a fiery determination. The entire mansion creaked. A god who was never troubled by the petty affairs of humans—whose mind was as clear and still as a placid lake—was enraged.

“I have put Sere to sleep with my magic. For the first time in her life, she was close to depleting her vast store of magic. She must have rushed home and worked very hard to heal me. She will not wake until morning. That was wise of me... I imagine she will put today’s events in the past and force herself to smile tomorrow. Isaac, do not let her near the magic academy, and try to inconspicuously learn about who Maribelle is and what she does. Don’t look at her for a second, even through a window. You’ll fall under her spell.”

“Lou, please allow me to at least tell Larouza and my mother-in-law.”

“You may not. Larouza and Erza are impulsive. We can’t have her catch onto us if they act conspicuously. If they approach her carelessly, we may fall under her spell. And don’t underestimate the significance of Serephione keeping this secret for all this time. Do you not understand that she wanted her family to remain at peace and not involve themselves in her problems?”

“Serephione was guarding my feelings this whole time...”

“You and I will guard hers from now on.”

“Your Holiness...I have one favor to ask.”

Lou raised one eyebrow.

“If I ever fall to the spell and turn against Serephione, please kill me.”

“You would ask me, a holy beast, to break a taboo...? Hmph, it depends on how you live your life until then.”

Of course I would. I can’t just give Serephione up to the fate of the prophecy. I need the ability to repel any mysterious spell that’s thrown at me, as soon as possible!

“So she’s a Reborn. That would make her an old soul.”

A grand voice resounded in my head—one that wasn’t Lou’s—while I was deep in contemplation. At the same time, the windowsill began to shine brilliantly, and I sensed another large aura.

Lou stood up and began to growl. When the light faded away...it was the Guardian Beast of the South.

“I wasn’t aware you enjoy eavesdropping, Asu,” Lou sneered.

“I have no choice. My master could not very well remain still after hearing Serephione’s agonized cries.”

His master? Does he mean Prince Gillain?

“What is the meaning of this?” I asked.

Asu glanced at me. “Gillain has transferred magic to Serephione. She is the only other person apart from me who holds it. His magic within her sends her soul’s suffering to him as if it were his own. It’s similar to being contracted, although it requires talent at least as great as Gillain’s.”

“I had no idea...”

...that he was so fixated on Serephione as to transfer magic to her...

“Will you tell him what was said here?”

“Naturally. He wouldn’t let me off easily if I came back without an answer. Serephione is the one anchor tying Gillain to humanity. He would be furious to know that there are those who would try to bring her down.”

“Tell him not to make any unnecessary moves! Serephione doesn’t want that! If there’s a stir now, it’ll only disturb her more!”

“I’ll tell him, but...I can make no guarantees. I’m only his servant, after all.”

Asu spread his graceful rainbow wings and flew up and away through the ceiling.

Chapter 6: A Special Ally

I went back to school after my break, still exhausted from the frightening event that would influence my life from now on.

“Change of plans! We’ll be hand-to-hand fighting in the arena for first period! Get changed and meet me there!” rang out Kodak’s voice.

“S-Serephi, do you want to walk to the changing room together?”

“Alma!” Having Alma speak to me lifted my mood.

We made it to the arena. Hand-to-hand fighting was compulsory for all students. We had to be able to fight without a weapon if the time ever came. Other martial arts were elective, so hand-to-hand was the only fighting discipline that everyone was ranked in, no exceptions.

We wore clothes that were easy to move in for fighting classes. Most of us were in our usual long-sleeve shirts and trousers, including Nick, although his were baggy on him. Alma wore a khaki training outfit, as was common among the aristocracy, but it was a bit too large for her; it may have been a hand-me-down from one of her brothers.

My ninja outfit was naturally...*not* my outfit of choice. I wore a long-sleeved shirt and pants, both black and made of cotton. My main focus was how easy it would be to wash. It looked like something that could be sold in the area, but it was equipped with my brother’s defensive magic. “You’re a girl of marriageable age, so I won’t let a single scratch get on you!” he’d declared.

“Nick, this is my sweetheart, Alma. Alma, this is Nick, the sun kid!”

“Nice to meet you. And Serephi, quit it with that nickname!”

“N-Nice to meet you too. You can call me Alma. I’d prefer you gave that nickname a rest too, Serephi.”

“Wait... Wouldn’t it be a bad idea to not use a title for you around your family?” Nick asked Alma.

“Huh? Why?” I asked back.

“You don’t even know that...?! I guess it wouldn’t matter to a Trundle guild member. Alm—I mean, Miss Alma is from the MacGregor family, a marquisate family with a long line of military commanders in the imperial guard.”

“Th-That doesn’t matter! It would be so embarrassing if you used a title for me and not Serephi, when she’s stronger than me!”

“If you say so, I guess.”

The imperial guard...? MacGregor...? Marquisate? I gave Alma a scrutinizing look.

Yellow-green hair... Tall and poised... Caramel eyes...

“Alma, this is just a wild guess, but would you happen to have a brother who’s prideful, stupidly tall, loves spearmanship and Prince Gardner, and has the same color hair as you?”

“I have three older brothers who are prideful, stupidly tall, and love spearmanship and the royal family. But the one who loves Prince Gardner in particular and has the same color hair as me is over there.”

I followed Alma’s line of sight, which led me to a familiar face—someone who looked just like Alma, but bigger, was giving me a condescending glare.

“Oh, you’re twins... Sorry. Even though he’s not in our class, I have a feeling he might pick a fight with me anyway.”

The day had finally come—my first encounter with an enemy in around seven years.

It was Cecil MacGregor.

I thought back to my list from last night. Cecil was the grandson of the commander of the imperial guard, so he had been Prince Gardner’s crony—or rather, classmate—since he was little. He was extremely prideful because of his status as part of a marquisate family and his decent skill. As for why his skill was only decent, the imperial guard’s job was to protect the royal family—the position of commander was in name only, a title for noble boys to inherit for added prestige. None of them ever fought on the front lines.

He was enemy number three from the heroine’s side, after my brother and

the second prince. I'd messed up—I'd assumed they would all go to the magic academy, but if he wanted to join the imperial guard, it was no wonder he'd go to knight school. I'd been careless.

I've only just encountered Maribelle! What's with this one-two punch?! I don't want to involve myself with them any more than I already have!

But I can't just distance myself from Alma at this point! She's my only female classmate. I don't want to let go of the first female friend I've made in this world.

A scene from the novel came into my mind...

I was being attacked at the magic academy. Cecil grabbed me by the hair and shoved my face into the dirt.

"Someone as cruel as you isn't worthy of being with the prince!"

"If killing in a war is a crime, then try me in a military tribunal. I only followed the orders I got from His Majesty. Can *you* say *you're* innocent, when you're hurting a girl who hasn't done anything wrong off of the battlefield? I thought imperial guards were supposed to be the most noble group."

"Shut up! You don't get to talk with all that blood on your hands!"

He'd punched and kicked me until my face didn't look the same anymore. He was a stupid, sadistic boy...

"Sere! What's wrong?!" Lou rushed up to me with a serious look on his face. He was especially protective today after what had happened just yesterday.

I'm starting to hyperventilate... Let's take a deep breath...

"Hey, you're scaring me with that look on your face," said Nick.

Once again, I'd been unable to control my feelings from this spur-of-the-moment encounter. I looked up at the ceiling.

"Sorry, Nick. I just overreacted to Alma's brother glaring at me. I always accept any fight someone picks with me... It helps resolve any misunderstandings as fast as possible. I might not be able to get along with your brother, Alma. Do you mind?"

Unexpectedly, Alma laughed. “I don’t get along with him either, so don’t worry about it. Actually, this is the first time I’ve met a girl who doesn’t like Cecil. I’m a little touched!”

Kodak interrupted my relief at hearing that with a smack on my head.

“Hey, rein in that bloodlust of yours! Let’s let off some steam. You’ll go first. Gather around, you all! The first year classes will be sparring today. No weapons. Match is over when someone either gives up or gets knocked down. I won’t give any directions today, so go at it with all you’ve got! Serephione will go first from Class 1. Who’ll volunteer from Class 2?”

“I’ll go.” Cecil stepped forward with a pompous air.

Lou checked my facial expression. “Is he on the list?”

“Yeah... I’ll tell you about it later.” I turned to Alma. “Sorry. I’m so sleepy today, I might not be able to restrain myself.”

“I told you, don’t worry about it!” Alma saw me off with the biggest smile I’d ever seen on her.

“Girls are scary...” muttered Nick.

I ignored Nick’s mumbling and proceeded to the center court.

Before me was a cocky, high-class-looking boy with a corner of his mouth turned up in a smirk. His features were the same as Alma’s, but he looked completely different from her cute face. If they were twins, why was he wearing nicer clothes than Alma? It ticked me off even more. I’d have to get Alma some new ones to match mine.

I didn’t have any grievances against Cecil in this life, but I planned to crush him thoroughly; I’d beat him so black and blue that he would never oppose me again—I didn’t want him to show his face around me ever again.

This is for my own self-protection, so, uh... Sorry?

When the starting whistle blew, I immediately leapt into the air, far above Cecil’s 180 centimeters of height. From there, I accelerated downward, readied my right foot, and slammed my heel down—right into Cecil’s empty head!

Thump! Cecil’s face hit the ground so hard it made a dent. Having touched

down, I grabbed his green hair, turned his motionless head to the side, and checked his pulse on his neck.

“He’s alive.”

“Match over! Aid, take him to the nurse. Serephione, I see you were able to hold back nicely. Do you all get the idea? Let’s keep this going! Next!”

“That was impressive restraint,” commented Lou.

“I guess. But it hurt just seeing his face...” I looked down at my feet.

“It hurt, huh...? You’re finally saying it out loud. Don’t worry. You have my sympathy!” Lou inexplicably smiled softly.

Why? When you say sympathy...all you really mean is you’ll let me have a few bites of the cakes I give you, right?

The sparring took more time than expected, and the day ended with everyone only getting in one fight each. Alma was as strong as I’d figured she’d be, given that she’d intimidated me the first time we met—she OHKO’d the agile boy she was facing with a blow to the back of the neck. The only thing was that her movements were too linear. She had plenty of room to grow, though, so she was bound to transform during our four years at this school.

Nick was as strong as I remembered him. He dodged his opponent’s attacks just by stepping out of the way for three whole minutes, and when said opponent was completely exhausted, Nick delivered a straight punch to the chin with his right arm to end it.

“Weren’t you bored with how basic that was?” I asked him.

“I wanted to prove I can do the basics too!”

That put me, Alma, and Nick firmly in the winning half of the sparring pecking order. Everyone around us *should* have been quiet, but when Alma and I entered the cafeteria to get dinner, the room broke out into a commotion.

Alma sighed.

“Is something wrong, Alma?”

“Nothing. Oh, look, Serephi! Today’s meals are herb-grilled fish or barbecued

meat. Which are you getting?”

“Wow, they both sound so good, I can’t choose. I don’t know what to do!”

“He he, do you want to get one each and split them?”

“Ahhh, thank you, Alma! I’ve never gone halfsies before! Yay!”

My first time going halfsies with a friend in my life! I’ll never forget this day!

The people around us began to chatter.

“S-Serephi! Keep it down! It’s not that big of a deal.”

“S-Sorry.”

Apologies for making a fuss during your mealtime, everybody.

We took our trays of food from the cook, found Nick sitting by the window, and sat next to him without asking.

“Nick! Check it out! Alma and I are splitting our food! We get to have both!”

I wish I could take a picture of this plate to commemorate my first halfsies experience!

“I’m eating both too, you know.”

I looked at Nick’s tray. He had a plate each of meat and fish. He’d ordered a meal for two.

“Darn it, I didn’t know you could do that...”

“I can’t believe you’re so happy over splitting a meal... You have it harder than I thought.” Nick patted my head. Suddenly, there was a commotion around us again! *What’s going on?*

“Tch, what a pain. I can’t eat in peace with you around, Serephi. Go away!” He shooed me.

I was dismayed. “Wh-Why? Did I do something?”

“You tell this oblivious girl what’s up, Alma!”

Alma sighed. “You know, Serephi... To put it simply, you stand out a lot.”

“Because I’m strong?” I was self-aware of my strength, so I felt no need to

play it down.

“Well, that too, but mostly because you’re girly.”

“I’m not just ‘girly,’ I’m a bona fide girl!”

“No, no, I mean...your appearance, and your mannerisms.”

“Huh? But you and the other girls taught me yesterday, so I’m in my uniform instead of my pajamas. All I did was put on a cardigan because I got cold after taking my jacket off! This cardigan isn’t much either. My brother manually extracted the poison from hundreds of red scorpions that he caught, so I thought I’d use the leftover shells to dye my white cardigan, but what do you know, it turned out this soft pink...”

“Gahhh! That’s enough, stop talking! Just eat already!”

“Nick, it’s not good manners to yell, you know? Hm? Did you lose your appetite?”

Nick didn’t respond.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it, Nick.”

“Thanks, Alma.”

Oh, are they getting along well? How nice.

As I was enjoying Nick’s leftover meat, a shadow suddenly loomed over the table. I instantly got goosebumps. I thought I’d kicked the guts to stand before me out of him. My mood sank drastically.

“What do you want, Cecil?” Alma’s voice lacked any trace of warmth.

He appeared to be the picture of health, as if a skilled healer had worked on him.

“Not you. I want to talk to Granzeus.”

I flushed. *My family name? Even though people deliberately don’t use it at school? His sense of privilege is on full display.*

I raised my eyebrows and noticed Alma looking into the distance, her shoulders shaking. *Is she angry? No, wait, why is she laughing in this situation?*

“As you can see, I’m currently eating. Is it urgent?” I continued eating, naturally.

“I, Cecil MacGregor, am unsatisfied with the results of today’s fight, and I would like a rematch!”

Om nom nom. It wasn’t urgent at all.

I met eyes with Nick; he looked completely fed up. Alma’s entire body was shaking now. *Is she more giggly than I realized?*



“Hey!” Cecil yelled.

“Phew! That was good.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, yes, I’m listening. So, basically, you’re unsatisfied with the results of our fight and you want a rematch?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m terribly sorry, but that won’t be happening.”

“What?!” Cecil slammed the table, shaking the plates. Nick glared at him. Cecil flinched at his unusual fieriness. No wonder—he didn’t understand how fixated commoners were on food.

“Serephi, this guy is getting on my nerves. Give him an explanation and then make him leave.”

“Hah... Sorry, Nick. Cecil MacGregor, I understand that you personally feel unsatisfied with the results of our match, but I can assure you there was no cheating involved. Three teachers were refereeing. I don’t imagine you would criticize the referee skills of our teachers?”

“Th-That’s not what I mean. I just wanted to request a rematch. I...was caught off guard.”

“Well, if you were caught off guard, you should count yourself lucky it wasn’t a real fight. I take it that you’d like to challenge me, regardless of today’s match?”

“Exactly! Challenge me fair and square!”

“That won’t be possible.”

“Are you disrespecting me?”

“No. It’s just a rule. Look at this.” I took my plate from my chest—the second most important thing for my future life as an adventurer, following my life itself.

“No way...” muttered Nick.

“Ah... It’s real. How gorgeous...” Alma sighed.

“I’m a silver ranker with Trundle Guild. Outside of classes, if you want to challenge a bronze ranker or above, you must be at least one rank below them and no lower. That means only bronze rankers and up can challenge me. You must also have a neutral guild present as an official witness, and finally, an application fee—in my case, it would be a million gold. That’s the rule. It’s a serious matter and could risk your life, although I’m sure to you, it’s a small price to pay, Cecil MacGregor.”

I was parched from talking so much at once. I picked up my cup of hot tea and took a sip. *Mm, tasty.*

“Talk to me once you’ve fulfilled these conditions.”

Cecil was at a loss for words.

After that encounter, nobody made a fuss about my clothes anymore, so I gradually lost my anxiety about it. At times I would come to get breakfast without changing out of my pajamas, earning me a chastising from my pair of big sisters, Elise and Sasara.

And then...

“C-Can I sit with you? Alma, and, uh, Miss Serephione.”

“C-Cecil?”

Alma, Lou, and I all went wide-eyed with surprise, dropping our spoons with a clatter.

Why am I eating breakfast with a yellow-green head on either side of me?

“Nice weather we’re having,” he offered. Nobody replied.

I thought I drove him away! I did *utterly annihilate him, right? In both body and mind!*

“That’s a...lovely way of eating...”

He’s attached to me now?!

“Could you, uh...train me? You can shove my head into the ground with your little feet... Oh, Alma, you’re welcome to join too...”

Is he a masochist?

◇ ◇ ◇

It was the time of year when red leaves danced in the air. I was about to head to the cafeteria for lunch when a light flashed outside my window.

It was messenger magic in the shape of a paper airplane. Enrique's was butterfly-shaped, so this wasn't from the Granzeus household. Incidentally, messenger magic wouldn't open unless the receiver had magic.

As I'd assumed, it was addressed to me. I casually took it from outside the window, let some of my magic into it, and opened it on my lap.

"Come to the martial arts area after school," it read.

An invitation! Finally!

I'd always dreamed of being in this position. Would a delinquent try to bully me behind the gym like "You've been pretty full of yourself lately?" Or...would somebody ask me out, like "S-Serephione! I've always liked you! Please go out with me!"

Finally! I got to have this situation in my second life...

"That's a creepy smile you're making, Serephi. I guess I'll head to the cafeteria by myself..."

"W-Wait, Alma!"

"Serephione! You're finally here!"

My shoulders sank. *Just an old man?*

It was General Avenger who'd sent the invitation!

"Sorry, Sere," Lou giggled.

Lou, could you not shake on top of my head? It's too obvious that you're laughing.

The general was wearing a white button-down and khaki-colored pants instead of his uniform today. He looked younger without all the badges stiffening his shoulders.

"It's already been half a year since you started school...no, eight months? Are you used to the school yet? Have you made friends? What's your major? You

didn’t bring anyone else today, did you?”

“I’m used to it, thanks to your help. I made friends with a sweetheart and a sun-carrying kid. My major is archery. I got my certifications for the short lance and one-handed sword when I went to observe the classes. My grandmother isn’t here today.” *The last question is the only one he’s really concerned about...*

“I see. Glad to hear it...”

Yep. Look at how he immediately relaxed.

“So, Serephione, how much magic can you use?”

“My father has taught me the four basic elements and what I need for daily life.”

The premise was that my magic had awakened after birth, but I was still a daughter of the Granzeus family. It would sound like a lie if I said I hadn’t practiced at all. Also, I couldn’t forget to make my father’s presence known. I set up a magic net around the building so I would notice right away if anyone approached.

“I see... So I can proceed under the assumption that you can use a certain degree of magic.”

“Yes!”

“Wonderful! Then let me explain to you the ultimate fusion of magic and the sword that I have conceived of!”

Ooh, exciting!

“I call it the magical knight! A magical knight can enchant a sword such as this to increase their power. When they swing it, it activates magic to attack the opponent.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t blame you for struggling to picture it. Let me demonstrate. Here goes! Hah!”

The general used magic on the sword in his hand. It was water; the sword turned slightly bluish and took on a sheen of moisture.

“And when you swing it... Hah!” The general gave it a swing. A metallic sound rang from the sword, and a stream of water sprayed out of it.

“So? Isn’t it beautiful? If a more powerful magician used this, when they swung the sword, it would activate a wave that washed their enemies away. Just one soldier would be able to do the work of a hundred.”

Lou and I were speechless.

“Apparently, water magic can produce lightning if highly developed. A lightning sword would be a dream. You could instantly electrify and stun enemies from kilometers away. You could win battles without any bloodshed or death! Ah, how I wish I could live to see that day.” General Avenger’s eyes sparkled like those of a young boy.

“Sere...just tell him. I can’t take this any longer.” Lou looked up at the ceiling with pain in his eyes. I sighed and raised my head.

“General?”

“Hm? Do you get the idea?”

“I hate to tell you this, but...”

“What is it?”

“That kind of magic has been in use for years.”

“Huh?”

When I explained using my brother’s magic tournament as an example, General Avenger sank to his knees.

“That match wasn’t a secret; it was held in front of a huge audience. I thought the idea of using lightning magic on a sword was already well-known. I guess it’s possible you would have to know it to spot it.”

“B-But a magical knight doesn’t just use magic! They also have to have exceptional swordsmanship!”

“That’s true, but there’s at least one person at the academy who’s skilled with a sword.”

“There is?!”

“Do you know whose grandchild my brother is?”

“I do... Colonel Erza’s...” The general was close to tears.

“I think the top four at that magic academy must have been using enchanted swords. Are you cooperating with the academy to develop new tech?”

“Ha ha ha, no. If anything, they keep things confidential. Even though we’re all working to defend the kingdom... I’m embarrassed for the younger generation.”

I felt kind of bad for the general.

“Well, in any case, I’ll make your dream come true, so cheer up!” I took my short lance out of the holder at my thigh, swung it up and to the right, and used lightning magic on it.

Brrring! Yellow sparks covered the short blade.

“It’s lightning...”

“Here goes!” I swung the blade down.

Zap-zap-zap-zappp!

Lightning strikes poured like rain into the arena, avoiding me, Lou, and the general.

“B-Beautiful...” A tear fell from the general’s eye.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Nice to meet you! I’m Elise, a fourth year at knight school!”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Sasara, likewise a fourth year.”

“N-Nice to meet you! I’m Alma! A first year!”

“He he, nice to meet you. Welcome to Trundle Guild. My name is Erza Trundle. I’ve heard good things about you from Serephione.”

I received a summons from my grandmother on a holiday in late autumn. She said to bring the girls I hang out with at school for a tea party. However, unlike me with Lou, the others were further from Trundle territory than I imagined. Also, Sasara went to her orphanage every weekend and was busy taking care of

her little sister. Once I told my grandmother that, she came to see us at the Trundle mansion in the capital.

My grandmother smiled sweetly as she unashamedly scrutinized my friends.

“Grandmother? Now that we’re done with introductions, should we go into the guest area?”

“Now, girls, I take it from Serephione that you usually just wear your uniforms?” Judging by her manner of speech, she didn’t like that fact.

The three shot me a glare. *No, I only told her stories involving myself! I don’t even know which part of that story upset my grandmother! You don’t understand, so stop looking at me like I did something wrong!*

“How shameful for my juniors...”

My grandmother clapped her hands, summoning the women who served her. *The way you move... I can tell you’re not just maids.*

“We don’t have much time. Commence the plan! Get to work!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Eek!”

“S-Serephi!”

The three were whisked away at my grandmother’s orders.

Whoa!

When the three came back into the guest area, they were dressed to the nines, almost as if they were going to a royal ball.

First was Elise. She wore a navy blue dress with a mermaid skirt and silver high heels. Her neck and ears were decorated with sapphire jewelry, and her straight, jet black hair was in a half-up hairstyle, partially gathered at the top of her head with the rest hanging down to her chest.

Next, we had Sasara. She wore a gorgeous, voluminous crimson dress with matching high heels. Her curly blonde hair was skillfully tied up, and rubies adorned her exposed ears and neck.

Last but not least, there was Alma. She wore an A-line dress with a white top

and a black skirt. A simple design, but it was covered with lace! She had on black heels, and her emerald accessories matched her hair.

They all had their makeup done as well, and their beauty was on another level! They looked not just sweet, but dignified as well.

“Wow! Beautiful! You all look amazing!” I gushed.

The three inspected their outfits, not caring to hide their bewilderment.

“What in the world...”

“I can’t pay for this if I get it dirty!”

“I’ve never worn something so gorgeous...”

My grandmother got our attention with a quick tap of her fan on her hand. “Listen here. I don’t care if you like these outfits or not. These are the outfits I have determined flatter you most. Now, have you mastered how to do your hair, makeup, and accessorizing?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” the three exclaimed.

“This is what we call a woman’s battle armor. Elise, if you were the queen’s bodyguard, would you go to a glamorous party still in your armor?”

“No.”

“Sasara, if you were to go to a ball in a neighboring country to gather information in disguise, could you do it in your military uniform?”

“No.”

“Alma, if you infiltrated enemy territory posing as a married couple, could you get around in a gown?”

“I couldn’t...”

“Precisely. Female knights must not only be able to do everything a man can, but also master that which only a woman can do. If you were the same as a man, a man could take your place. A woman’s value comes from being able to do the work of both a man and a woman.”

So, that was how it was... Thinking back, in addition to training in my ninja uniform, she’d made me do hunting and target practice in a dress. I’d enjoyed

taking my short lance and shurikens out from inside my dress like I was in a spy movie. Oh, but when I fell in the lake, the dress made me sink, so I ended up reincarnating into yet another world—or at least, I had steeled my resolve to do so before Lou pulled me out of the water.

"Let's go into the garden. Select a weapon that you can hide under your dress. You'll fight one-on-one at full strength for fifteen minutes. Two sets. Serephi, you too. Oh, and if you mess up your dress or makeup even a little, I'll reset the timer to zero. Now, go!"

"Huh?"

"Waaah!"

"Lady Erza...so commanding..."

"Oh, I suppose. Now, make me a cup of tea while you're on break, and do it elegantly. Hey! Don't walk so stiffly just because the dress is knee-length! Stand up straight! It's overflowing onto the saucer! Are you even considering the temperature?"

"Is this enough tea leaves?"

"Waaah!"

"Lady Erza...so wonderful..."

"I'll have you drink two cups of tea now. One is poisoned. Tell me which it is. Oh, and don't worry. If you drink it, you just won't be able to move tomorrow. This will increase your resistance and help you carry out secret missions."

"Oh, no... I'm feeling dizzy..."

"Eeeek!"

"Tea that Lady Erza made...!" *Gulp, gulp*.

Wait, I remember feeling sick after drinking my grandmother's tea a long time ago too.

"Yeah, she's put nine kinds of poison in yours," Lou replied to my thoughts. "I didn't stop you because it wasn't enough to kill you."

You definitely should have stopped me!

“I see you’re all thoroughly exhausted. Now, give me a genuine-looking smile. You can’t leave unless you do.”

“Ch-Cheese?”

“Hee hee hee?”

“Wahhhh!”

“You think you can deceive enemies and allies with stiff faces like that?! No good! Ten laps around the perimeter!”

“Waaah!” they all cried.

“Sere...do all female knights have it this rough?” asked Lou.

“I dunno, I’m an adventurer...”

“Good job, you three.” I passed out tea and cookies that my grandmother made to the thoroughly beaten-down girls.

“Don’t worry, I tested them for poison!” I reassured them.

“O-Oh, you did?” Elise fearfully put a cookie to her mouth.

“Listen, girls,” my grandmother began. “I order you to come here once a month and review what you learned today until you reach an acceptable level in my eyes. This is not up for debate. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three replied.

“Elise and Sasara, come even after you’ve graduated, and stop by the Marcus Trade Company in the center of the capital when you come. They can help you find the dresses and accessories you need. Marcus’s wife was one of the ladies who helped you today. She already knows your faces, so you can just pop in without worrying.”

“B-But...I don’t have that kind of money...or the social standing to go to the Marcus Trade Company...” Sasara stammered, looking down.

The Marcus Trade Company was at the forefront of the fashion world of Judore, and it was priced to match. Its reservation list was always full, and nobody got in without one. It certainly was difficult to get into.

“Hmph! I won’t accept a junior of mine being fearful! Do you understand how

much money we've made Marcus? The monotone, the pajamas, and splitting the dress into top and bottom were all our ideas. Leave it to me. Dresses are a woman's battle armor. You can't win without them!"

"But I couldn't possibly take charity from you!"

"Use the money for the dresses on the orphanage, then, and do a better job than anyone expects. Become your little brothers' and sisters' hope!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Elise! If you are to live in the enclosed space of a temple in the future, you must be sensitive and knowledgeable of the world to understand the concerns of the laity. Use my name and go down the mountain once a month."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I hadn't told my grandmother anything about Sasara, Elise, and Alma that they hadn't told me themselves. She must have done her own research into them. Well, it was no wonder, given her position, and it led to them being well-received by my grandmother.

"I...really get to wear something this gorgeous..." Alma muttered.

"Wear beautiful clothing, stand tall, and fight! That's an order. You can use my having said that as your excuse. Internal conflict comes with being young..." My grandmother chuckled and hid her mouth with her fan gracefully. "Do not tell a soul about our tea party today. Women can make better expressions with a secret or two."

I remembered that the invitation was for a tea party. It had turned out to be no different from my hellish training.

When we were about to go back to my dorm, my grandmother said, "Take these, you three. Anyone who sees them will know who your guardian is."

She handed out hair accessories made of white gold and inlaid with jewels. They took them reverently and gazed at them, their eyes sparkling.

"Lou, are those..."

"Yep. There's a bit of liquid inside," he answered.

I had to lecture Team Erza on how to handle the hair accessories as soon as we got back to the dorm, before somebody died...

In the end, the only tea that had been poisoned was mine. That made ten different poisons in total. It might have been a placebo effect from realizing I drank poison, but I didn't have the energy to put up an appearance of being well. I went back to the dorm, but I wasn't able to get up, so I missed classes for the day.

As I lay in bed, a cold drizzle fell outside my window. Winter was coming.

"I can't believe that Lady Erza... Here, this is the antidote." Kodak had come to check on me.

"Thank you, but I'll pass on the antidote. After all the hardship I went through last night, and now that my body is used to it, it would be a waste to use the antidote."

Kodak sighed and ruffled my hair. "You're diligent, young lady. I'll bring you something good to heal the poison in the afternoon, so get some sleep today."

According to him, Elise, Sasara, and Alma were all well and attended class. *I'm a family member, so it's okay for me, but if you poison someone else's kid and there are lasting effects, you'll go to prison... Got it, grandmother?*

I lay alone and looked at the ceiling. In *Wild Rose*, I had been an essential character in this world, but in reality, I was just like any average middle schooler. I wasn't scared of being poisoned in the slightest. If I was going to be killed in a novel-like way, it wouldn't be so quiet. It would be a grand public execution.

Suddenly, the room was filled with a powerful aura. I took my right hand from under my blanket and cast illusion, perception-disruption, and soundproofing magic.

"This is unusual, Sere. Are you feeling ill?"

Moving just my face, I greeted the featherball I hadn't seen for some time.

"Long time no see, Asu. Aren't your wings wet from the rain?"

A crease appeared between Asu's...eyebrows? "Hmm... What is *he* doing

while you're in this state?"

"He he. I threw up a lot last night, so Lou is going to get water for me from the Spring of...Daruma?"

"The Spring of Dorma... Well, drinking that will certainly calm you down. I'll give you first aid for now."

Asu landed on my chest. He didn't feel heavy. He then shed a single tear from one eye and dampened my lips with it. My body instantly felt lighter.

"Thank you, Asu. I should expect as much from a phoenix."

"Phoenix? I'm impressed you know that. Did you know if you cut off my head and drink the blood, you can become immortal? Care to try it?"

I managed to lift myself up, and I sat with my back against my headboard. "I'll pass. It would be lonely to live forever on my own."

"Wise. I should expect as much from a Reborn."

"You heard?"

"I eavesdropped."

"My, how shameless."

I took a cookie out from my Magic Room, put it in my right hand, and held it out. I wouldn't give him cake; that would cause a battle between the two heavenly beasts!

Asu, sensing that I wasn't going to move any more, shrunk down on my bed, took the cookie in his beak, and munched on it on my chest.

I looked out my window again, feeling blissful as I stroked Asu's beautiful, unworldly rainbow wings. The rain was picking up. *Is Lou doing all right?* I pictured Lou soaking wet and let out a sigh.

"Sere."

I resumed petting Asu, trying to fix his feathers. We met eyes.

"Gillain is now the emperor. Both the first prince and the emperor are now confined to their homes."

“That was fast!”

“Faster than in the prophecy?”

In the book, he had taken the throne when he was twenty-five and I was fifteen. He then invaded Judore at twenty-seven. I was convicted during that war, and at seventeen, I defected to Galé. At eighteen, I was taken prisoner by my home country, and my magic was taken away—I would then die there.

This was almost two years faster than in the book. Did that mean things had diverged from the plot? Or would it progress as written, since he ended up as the emperor all the same?

“So...did he wish on the stars to become emperor soon?”

“Reigning over Galé was a foregone conclusion for Gillain, whether it came early or late, given his power. He had no need to rely on the stars.”

“That’s true.”

But what could he have wished for back then? Maybe someone average like me has no chance of understanding what goes through a genius’s mind.

“Has anything about him changed?”

“He’s as strong as ever, and he doesn’t let anyone get close to him.”

He didn’t let anyone get close... He was already being treated like a god. I wondered if he now had the same icy eyes as in my past life. *He himself wanted the position of emperor no matter what, so he most likely accepted the loneliness that came with it, but... That’s right, at least...*

I took a necklace with a blue jewel out from the bag I kept by my bed. The jewel was a souvenir from when my brother went mining that he gave to me last time he came home—lapis lazuli. It didn’t have any particular value in this world, but in my past life, it had been popular as a healing crystal. I’d charmed it for good luck, financial luck, and presence of mind, and given one each to my father and brother to protect them from being swayed by any spell, charm, or plot correction. I gently held my own in my hands and made a wish on it. The jewel shone faintly.

“This is a charm I made. Give it to the emperor as congratulations for

ascending to the throne.”

Asu tilted his head. “What is it?”

“It’s lapis lazuli, a jewel that was said to bring good luck in my past life. I’ve also woven a bit of a shed dragon skin into the string above the jewel. It should bring financial luck. Oh, but I guess the emperor wouldn’t need money. There isn’t anything he can’t get for himself, anyway. If he doesn’t want it, you can have it!”

“Your magic is soaked into it. Have you been wearing this?”

“Yeah. Isn’t it pretty? Oh, look! It’s deep ultramarine, just like the sky on that night. The gold streaks look like shooting stars. Don’t you agree?”

“Certainly.”

“So, did you come today just to tell me that Gillain took the throne?”

“I came to gently remind you that you only have two years until your ten years are up. You’ll turn fourteen soon, won’t you?”

It had been eight years since the magic tournament when I was six. It was about two years until the time Gillain had declared he would come for me.

“Is that promise really still in effect? He’s the emperor now, right? Couldn’t he have his pick of high-ranking ladies? Why would he want a little girl like me?”

Well, I came with a hopeless fluffball too.

“Of course the promise is in effect. You’re the only one who can relax next to Gillain.”

Is that a compliment? Or is he subtly dissing my psychological strength?

“Two years, huh...? He he, I wonder if I’ll even be alive then,” I muttered as it came to mind. Asu narrowed his eyes.

“Sere, never say anything like that to Lou. The loss of a contractor when it is not guaranteed by fate means the loss of our own soul. Just hinting at it would make him uneasy.”

“Of course I wouldn’t say that to Lou. I said it because it’s you.”

“Sere...you will not die at sixteen. Gillain will loom large before anyone that

dares to threaten you.”

“Asu, the emperor doesn’t have that kind of free time. You must not be very familiar with the human world.”

“It’s you who’s unfamiliar. The only person in this world who can give Gillain what he wants is you, Sere.”

It was magic, wasn’t it? I knew from my past life...

◇ ◇ ◇

I thought I would be able to breathe more easily when I got into knight school, but between being threatened by Maribelle, whose own story had begun, and Gillain becoming emperor, things that I couldn’t stay apathetic about were happening one after the other.

I had to save up money and strength at a fever pitch to prepare for what was to come. I planned to leave the country the next time I met Maribelle in the future. I would go far away overseas. That was the emergency plan Lou, my father, and I decided on. I would live on my own as an adventurer somewhere where nobody knew me. If I stayed alive, someday, I would be able to see my father, Lou...and my brother and grandmother again.

I saved cash by going to the guild between classes and taking commissions. With that money, I bought equipment I would need as an adventurer in the future, such as tents, rain gear, weapons, and tools to maintain those weapons. Then I stored it all in my Magic Room (Living Alone). Things that were easy to use cost quite a bit, so my savings quickly ran out.

If I’d asked my papa, he would have helped me as much as I wanted, but I didn’t know if I would be able to rely on my father’s money in the future. If the plot corrected itself back to how it went in the book and he kicked out his convicted daughter, our family wouldn’t survive unscathed. So...I took more commissions.

At times, I would ride on Lou like a horse. We went around collecting rare materials to save for the future. We’d been just about everywhere in the kingdom.

However, to gather materials outside the kingdom, we would have to cross

borders. Unlike my brother, I was a chicken, so I could never have snuck illegally into another country. Naturally, crossing a border required a lot of bureaucracy, and a noble lady venturing outside of the kingdom would attract suspicion. I couldn't stand out right now and signal where exactly I was, so I was stuck.

If I were to become an A-rank adventurer, however, I could cross the border into any country for exploration purposes just by showing my gold plate. I would also be able to earn more money from the guild as an A-ranker, I'd get a special A-rank discount on purchases, and I'd be able to buy more risky medicinal items.

That long preface takes us to...yes, my old friend, Trundle Guild! There was now another sign there that read "Superior Strength."

I, Serephione G., had come to take the A-rank qualification test!

"Salutations!"

"Good to see you here, Serephione," Ziek greeted me with a smile. "Everything is ready for you. Go on and prove your strength."

When I went into the arena, my grandmother was sitting elegantly in a silver-gray gown. She would be the examiner. Ziek went over to her side. Lou hopped off my shoulder onto my grandmother's lap.

Relatives usually weren't allowed to be the observer or opponent, but Trundle Guild only had as many S-and A-rankers as you could count on your fingers. Nobody thought my grandmother, of all people, would go easy on me, so the guild's board of directors approved it. She was the kind of person to poison her granddaughter to make her stronger, after all.

My opponent was Gilbert, an S-ranker. He had become one of the top adventurers at Trundle Guild.

Gilbert looked at me with the same gentle eyes he always did. "Come at me with all you've got, Serephi!"

I nodded and gripped my short lance with both hands.

"You can do it, miss!"

"Good luck, Serephi!"

“Finish him in one shot, miss!”

“Go! Serephi!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my audience of Matt, Lara, Kodak, and Nick, who had recently made his guild debut. Rank tests above B-rank were a celebrated event at the guild, so any member who wanted to could watch. No high-ranker would be distracted by an audience.

“Begin!”

Gilbert unsheathed his long one-handed sword. The blade shook slightly and shone a clear blue when he gripped it. His magic was flowing through it. *See, General Avenger! We have a magical knight right here!*

He took two steps toward me and swung for my right hand. I jumped back to dodge, but I misjudged the sword’s length and his reach—a stream of blood dripped down my cheek and then froze solid. Snow blew from Gil’s sword.

Awesome! It’s so cool that it’s snow instead of ice! I have to learn how to do that.

It’s cliche, but if I’m up against snow... I sent my magic through my short sword’s blade and cast a spell on it.

I dashed forward in a zigzag, went around Gil’s left side, and aimed a kick at his throat. When he raised his arms to block, I wasted no time in slamming the short sword in my right hand into his sword.

Clang! *Sizzle*!

My blade was extremely hot with fire magic. Gil’s snow sword immediately steamed up on contact. Fog filled the arena. I pulled my right hand back, put the blades in each of my hands on either side of his sword, and thrust it to the left, the opposite direction of before. The snow sword shattered, unable to withstand the sudden temperature change and the force from the two hot blades.

“Gh!” Gil couldn’t see me through the fog. Yeah, I was using a new convenient type of magic similar to night-vision goggles that let me see through any darkness or fog, so what?

I jumped soundlessly onto Gil's shoulders into a piggyback position.

"S-Serephi! Where'd you come from?!"

I wrapped my legs around his neck and squeezed. In my past life's terms, this would be called a triangle choke, except my opponent was still standing in this version. How did I know about this technique, you ask? That adorable little brother who chased after me crying when he was little grew into a judo practitioner with an unstylish buzz cut, and I, his older sister, spent all my time taking him to and from practice and cheering him on.

I changed the angle of my right thigh and squeezed even harder. "Do you surrender yet, Gil?"

"That's not—That move is...dangerous! Stop!"

He's still able to talk? His face is completely red, though. I turned my thigh to hold him more firmly. "How about now?"

"Don't give me that! Your chest is touching me now! Shit, this is going to get me killed!"

How rude! I'd never kill you, Gil! It seemed I hadn't delivered the finishing blow yet. I put my left arm over Gil's face, blocking his vision, and tried to bring him down by twisting his neck to the left. His face pressed against my chest.

"Serephi! Stop clinging to me, or else...!"

Why is he screaming? The audience started to yell.

"Hey, Gilbert! What's going on in there?!"

"Damn it, I can't see through this fog!"

"Serephione! Serephione!!!"

"S-Serephi! Pull yourself together!"

I'm actually pretty level-headed right now, Nick?

"Th-The demon lord...is going to...kill me..." Gil abruptly collapsed backwards, along with me. *Ow, my butt!*

"Serephione! Clear this fog immediately!" resounded my grandmother's exasperated voice. *How unusual. What's going on?*

I used lightning magic to run something like static electricity through the air, clearing the fog. Then I looked up at my grandmother and Ziek, my arms and legs still squeezed around Gil. I wanted to raise my rank, after all, so I had to keep the hold in place.

My grandmother and Ziek were white as sheets.

“Is something wrong?”

The two observers looked back and forth at me and Gil—and suddenly, their faces twisted with demonic rage.

“Serephione, get off of Gilbert this instant!”

“Eh? But grandmother, I haven’t—”

“Just do it!”

I let go of Gilbert since my grandmother’s tone was so severe. *Tch. If this were judo, that would have secured me the win...*

As soon as I let go, Kodak jumped out of the audience at inhuman speed and landed a flying kick on the unconscious Gil! *Wow! A real hero kick!*

Bam! Gilbert slammed into the wall.

“Gilbert! What do you think you’re doing to Serephione?!”

“Huh?”

He’s unconscious, so I doubt he’s thinking anything...

Before I knew it, Matt, Nick, and Lara had rushed to his side too. Their features were already intimidating, so it was really scary to see them so angry!

“Gilbert, I thought better of you! I can’t believe you had her thighs squeezing your neck!”

“Gilbert! I looked up to you, but you had your face in Serephi’s...!”

“Nooo! There’s a cut on the fairy’s face!”

“Move.”

Eeek! Ziek the devil has come to earth! There’s a tornado behind him again!

Ziek grabbed the unconscious Gil by the neck and dragged him outside.

“Um... Grandmother, Lou, what’s going on?”

My grandmother sighed. “Serephi...you’re not allowed to use that choking technique in the future.”

“It’s for your own good... No, it’s to keep the peace,” said Lou.

I had no idea what they meant, but I’d become the owner of the A-rank gold plate of my heart’s desire. So why couldn’t I feel genuinely happy about it?

◇ ◇ ◇

When the new year came around, the fourth-years began working hard in preparation to graduate. They had to decide what they would do after graduation, take make-up exams for missing credits, and those who didn’t have a full license in a martial art had to train hard to get one.

After they completed all of those trials, there would be a graduation dance party. The big lecture building would be transformed into a dance hall, and everyone would bring a partner to celebrate graduation with some light alcoholic drinks, snacks, and dancing.

“Serephi, Alma, help out with the dance party! Please!” said Elise, eating vanilla ice cream at one of the last few pajama parties we would be able to have. Eating ice cream in a warm room in midwinter was pure bliss.

“Huh? You don’t have enough staff members? I can be a receptionist, at least...”

Sasara smiled wryly through a mouthful of refreshing lemon sherbet. “All the guys in our year are too sorry to ask out girls from outside the school, so we need some girls to dance with them.”

We’d learned how to dance at the Trundle mansion, so there shouldn’t have been a problem on that front.

“Sasara, why would people want to dance with us rough knight school students on their last big party, anyway? There’s gotta be tons of cute girls outside the school they could invite.” Alma tipped her head as she ate her strawberry ice cream.

“Yeah, don’t guys look twenty percent more handsome once they put on the

knight school uniform? Plus they have bright futures. They shouldn't have any trouble reeling in the ladies," I said between bites of chocolate ice cream.

"Apparently, they're saying this is their last chance to dance with the Twilight Fairy and the Stoic Lily!"

Tea sprayed out of Alma's mouth.

"That's another lovely nickname you've earned there, Alma..."

"Who...? Why...?"

"To be totally honest...the two of us don't feel like we can manage this on our own. So, please! Help us make some good memories to finish off knight school!" Elise and Sasara both put their hands to ours. Alma and I couldn't refuse this request from our beloved friends.

This brought us to the Marcus Trade Company, where we were to look for dresses for the graduation party. My grandmother contacted them beforehand, so we were expecting the store to be reserved for us.

"Alma, are you really going into the Marcus Trade Company?" Cecil was waiting in front of the shop, for *some* reason.

"Cecil...? What, are you watching over me? Don't worry, I'm not going to use the family money."

Alma had gotten D-rank at Trundle Guild, and she was making good money by completing collection-type commissions that didn't interfere with her classwork. I had no intention of letting her spend her own money at the Marcus Trade Company, though.

"N-No! It's just that Marcus is pretty expensive! I just wanted to make sure you didn't get embarrassed..."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who's never bought anything except on credit."

"Ack..."

"Hey, don't argue out here," Sasara chided. "We'll make a scene."

We were on the main street in the capital; she was right. We had no choice

but to bring Cecil with us into the store.

“Serephione! Girls! I’ve been waiting for you!”

A middle-aged woman with clear, deep brown eyes and a measuring tape hanging from her neck was the first person to greet us. Her chestnut-brown hair was gathered on top of her head, and her plump figure was wrapped in a simple brown dress. Several other women flanked her as though they’d been waiting for us, bowing at perfect ninety-degree angles.

“Hello, Mrs. Marcus and staff members. Thank you for having us today.”

“No, thank you! I hear that you’ll be having a dance party to celebrate your graduation. I would recommend something fancy and easy to move in. I have samples this way, so please, come into the back.”

Elise, Sasara, Alma, and Cecil were all overwhelmed by the gorgeous space lined with dresses and other clothing items in an array of colors. The pajamas I designed had their own large display space, of course.

“How are the new winter pajamas selling?”

“They’re selling well. Here’s the sales report for you. Our older customers are saying they would like pajamas that button down the front.”

“I see. That would definitely make them easier to take off, now that you mention it.”

Sasara quietly spoke to us as I was consulting Mrs. Marcus and sketching some designs.

“Um...”

“Oh, Sasara, have you decided on your base dress?” asked Mrs. Marcus.

“Serephi, I...I’m okay with the cheapest one.”

Sasara is so modest...a wonderful virtue. I love her!

I gave Mrs. Marcus a look. She nodded in understanding.

“That won’t do, Miss Sasara. You must receive our finest piece!”

“But...”

“It’s an order from Lady Trundle, isn’t it? And we need you to be an advertisement for us as well.”

“An advertisement?”

“Indeed. With all due respect, Sasara, you don’t understand your own value. You will be the first woman to graduate from knight school in twelve years, along with Elise. I can only wonder how much attention you will attract in your dignified military uniform! Not only are the two of you excellent knights, you’re gorgeous. You have the Lady of Swords, Erza Trundle, supporting you as well. You are truly two diamonds in the rough.”

“She’s completely right...” Cecil inexplicably chimed in.

“How much of an economic impact do you think it will have for that very Miss Sasara to wear our dress? I intend to embroider our M logo on each piece you wear. Won’t you do business with me?”

“Business?”

“Yes. I’ll be sure to make it a good deal for you, since you have someone very frightening backing you. Oh, and I’m thinking of making fragrance sachets out of the trimmings from our pajamas—do you know anyone who we could hire to do that?”

Sasara smiled with a troubled look on her face. “I understand... And thank you for the job offer.”

Sasara seemed to have finally come around, so she joined Elise and Alma in browsing.

“That’s Mrs. Marcus for you. Thank you for putting it in a way Sasara could accept.”

“I did no such thing,” Mrs. Marcus replied.

I raised my right eyebrow.

“Sasara really is a flower of hope for us...us commoners, that is,” she explained. “She became a knight without any backing or money through her own determined efforts, and instead of resting on her laurels, she continues to care for the children in the orphanage. She’s positively radiant in the eyes of us

merchants, who don't have the power to do anything but save money..." Mrs. Marcus smiled and looked over at Sasara, who was grinning as she picked up some raw fabric.

"If what you say is true, then would you come to Sasara's aid if she's ever under undue pressure and I can't come to her?"

"Is that an order?"

"Would that make it easier to carry out? In that case, yes, it's an order."

"If Lady Serephione, the next master of Trundle, orders it."

Is now the time to use that title...?

These were my first three female friends ever. Thanks to them, I had been able to forget about my destiny for a while and enjoy my time in knight school. Eventually, I would leave the country, and then I might never see Sasara again. If I'd managed to help Sasara, even just a little...then I would be happy.

"How about your dress, miss?" Mrs. Marcus asked me.

"Hmm, I'll think about it after I see what colors the other three get. I'm kind of an afterthought here."

"You most certainly are not!"

Cecil? You're still here?

After the four of us had picked out our party dresses and had our measurements taken, Mrs. Marcus treated us to coffee and sweets. They were top-notch, as one would expect from a woman of her means. Lou napped at my feet, his ears occasionally twitching to listen in on our conversation.

As we were having some lively girl talk, there was suddenly a commotion in the storefront.

"Excuse me for a moment." Mrs. Marcus got out of her seat to respond. She was taking a while to get back.

Curious about the customer who'd forced themself into a high-end clothing store with a closed sign up, we peeked into the shop area. We saw a girl with blonde hair in sausage curls with a determined look on her face, and she was

accompanied by three other girls. She was arguing vehemently with Mrs. Marcus.

“Whoa... Her hair is in perfect drills!”

“Drills? Like the tool? I’m impressed you know what those are, Serephi,” commented Sasara with surprise.

“Those ringlets don’t have a single hair out of place,” said Elise. “Do drills mean she’s nobility? Who is she, Alma?”

“Sorry, I don’t know... I’m not acquainted with her.”

“Is it even possible for there to be a noble lady who a lady of a marquisate family doesn’t know?”

“I haven’t had the chance to do anything noble-like...”

We shot cold glares at the noble boy enjoying some snacks.

“Aaah, I’m sorry!” Cecil rushed to us and glanced at where we were looking. “She’s...”

“You know her?”

“She’s Lady Isabella Berth, Prince Gardner’s fiancée.”

The woman who got engaged to that piece of junk in my place...

“Give us a showcase of your royal family obsession, Cecil,” pressed Alma in a low voice.

Cecil looked overjoyed to be spoken to by Alma for the first time in a while. “Isabella is fourteen, which makes her one year younger than Prince Gardner and the same age as me and Alma. She’s currently a first-year at the magic academy. Her magic level is classified as Normal, and I hear her specialty is wind magic.”

“What’s her relationship with the prince like? Is it good?”

“Um...”

“Cecil!” we exclaimed.

“W-Well, there’s this commoner who enrolled in the magic academy on

scholarship and is really good at magic. The prince is really interested in her, so apparently, he doesn't spend much time with Isabella lately..."

Maribelle came up! I can't believe the day has come where Cecil can be of use!

"Have you ever met that student, Cecil?"

"S-Serephione is talking to me...? I have! At the prince's tea party!"

"He invited another girl even though he has a fiancée? That's no position for a drill-haired noble to be in!" Elise, ever the straitlaced girl, was shocked.

"I'm just impressed that a commoner was invited to the castle... Going to Erza's house is enough for me in itself." Sasara was suddenly shaking.

Cecil was on my list. According to my and Lou's hypothesis, he should have gone weak in the knees for Maribelle.

"What did you think of her?" I asked.

"Just that she was a commoner, nothing more."

"And there's Cecil's classism coming out..."

"That's not what I meant, Alma! I just meant to say I don't remember anything in particular! She was telling me stuff about how cool it is that I'm a knight and that I'll be a commander in the future, but I know from school that I'm not that strong, and our older brother will probably end up as the commander, so it didn't really resonate with me..."

"Your point is?"

"I just didn't get the 'Please step on me!' feeling about her that everyone else got at all. I didn't mean to make fun of commoners, Sasara! If you're mad at me, please, don't hesitate to punish me! Hit me! Kick me!"

The four of us had no words to respond to that...

He...doesn't remember her much? Is that even possible after direct contact with Maribelle?

Could it be...?

"The kick in the head?" said Lou knowingly. We met eyes, and he desperately covered his head with both paws.

Did my kick to his head damage Cecil's brain and keep the plot correction from working on him? I had to see if I could reproduce the conditions...

"Wait, wait, Sere! Stop! Let's talk this over with Isaac! What are you going to do about it if kicking me in the head turns me into a 'masochist?'"

"I'd still love you if you were a masochist, Lou!"

"No, but, still..."

Mrs. Marcus came back over.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"Ah, well, she's a noble lady, but I had to turn down her request for an haute couture piece because my schedule is full. However, she kept shouting for me to do something and that she has a rival she can't lose to..."

"How heartless of the prince." Elise shook her head.

"I'm so glad I'm Magicless." Alma sighed with relief. "This is the first time I've been grateful to my grandfather for not introducing me to noble society."

Right, Alma is from a marquisate family. There could have been a chance for her to be engaged to the prince.

Isabella was indirectly helping a lot of us out... I figured I should return the favor sooner rather than later.

"May I take care of the job, Mrs. Marcus?"

"Nice to meet you. I'm Fio, the head designer," I told Isabella. "I sincerely apologize for being unable to meet your expectations today."

"Please, just do something for me!" Isabella begged. "I'll pay twice, even thrice the money! I need to wear something nicer than that other girl and win back the prince's heart!"

"Money isn't the problem. We simply don't have enough seamstresses. I'm terribly sorry. As an apology, how about I, the head designer, style one of these ready-made dresses especially for you? It would make it a one-of-a-kind dress. Would you like that?"

"Head designer...?"

“Yes, I’m the designer of the monotone series. Just imagine, the head designer, styling a dress just for you!”

“Goodness...”

“You can’t just compete to be the pinkest and frilliest! We have to tone down the dress so your gorgeous face stands out in comparison. And no puff sleeves either! Let’s go for a sleek silhouette in navy blue!”

“Wouldn’t it look cheap, though?”

“Minimal, not cheap. Everyone will know it’s high-quality from the fact that you wore it alone! Also, let’s add a daring slit on the skirt...” *Rip*!

“Eeek!”

“Mrs. Marcus, cover this slit with lace. I call this style ‘exhibitionism’!”

“Exhibitionism? How wonderful! This will be the start of a new trend! You’re on the front lines of fashion, Lady Isabella! Fantastic job, Fio...”

“Y-You think so?”

“Pearls would be best to accessorize with. You must have some wonderful pearl jewelry, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes...”

“Take more care with your foundation, and use a soft beige for the eyes...”

“Oh my...”

“...”

“Thank you, Serephione!” said Mrs. Marcus. “She left satisfied.”

“Serephi, that was awesome! You were like your magician grandmother.”

“Ah... Serephione is not just strong, but a woman of many talents... And the depth of sympathy she showed to Isabella... I have to announce this to the newly-formed Serephi/Alma Fan Club!”

“Well, it’s pretty lonely being the prince’s fiancée...at least, I would guess it is. So I wanted to at least let her wear a nice dress and carry herself proudly, even if the prince doesn’t accompany her,” I explained.

Once I put some decent makeup on her and undid her drills, Isabella was a normal lady with good traits of her own. She didn't have all that much magic, so she most likely wouldn't have to shoulder the burden of war. She wouldn't be called a murderer like I had...or so I wanted to believe.

The pressure of being engaged to the prince, the powerlessness and loneliness from his lack of cooperation... I never intended to make someone else feel those things. I was sacrificing somebody else for my own happiness.

Forgive me, Isabella...

◇ ◇ ◇

Alma and I took care of a lot of things for our two upperclassman friends as they entered a flurry of activity in preparation to graduate. We wanted them to be able to spend their time as comfortably and enjoyably as possible. We were friends forged in battle, after all: together, we'd laughed, cried, been poisoned, gotten angry, been poisoned, and—most of all—we'd been poisoned.

There was some good news as well. Elise was set to join the military unit stationed in the capital, and Sasara was going into the military intelligence agency. After being exposed to a variety of ideas throughout the year, Elise decided not to go straight into temple life out of school, instead choosing to learn more about the world, gain some practical experience, and make some connections beforehand. That said, my grandmother alone could probably take care of finding her connections...

In any case, since they would both be working in the capital, we would be able to keep having girls' nights. Hooray!

And so, the graduation ceremony was finally today. After the ceremony, the new graduates would immediately go into their new positions without a moment to spare. Their freedom would last only until the end of the party today.

Our dresses were pieces that Mrs. Marcus and I were proud of! Each of us had a different color! Our dresses were all based on our eye colors. Elise's was a calm blue, like the ocean; Sasara's was an orange-leaning scarlet to match her bright personality; and Alma's was a modest ivory and chocolate two-tone dress. Mine was monochrome black and white.

As students of the knight school, we unfortunately had cuts and scars, so the necklines only went down far enough to show off our collarbones elegantly, and the sleeves went most of the way down our arms. We weren't showing much skin at all. The skirts were made with plenty of fabric so they would be easy to dance in, and on each side, there was a lace panel in the same color that started at the thigh and went down, another use of the "exhibitionism" idea I got while working with Isabella.

Elise and Sasara were dancing with some boys who they'd been friendly with for a bit. They looked shy at first, but they were both very athletic, after all! They were spinning around now and enjoying the dance to their heart's content. Their partners looked enraptured.

This is your last chance to dance with such pretty girls! Do your best to win the rock-paper-scissors match for your place in line!

Alma was dancing in the middle of the hall too. She had her own line of boys waiting to dance with her. *Ahh, being tall makes you look so nice while dancing...*

"Hey, Serephione! Restock the programs!"

"Okayyy."

I was looking on at my friends from afar...as a receptionist, for some reason! Kodak was watching over me from my side with narrowed eyes.

"You don't have to give me that scary look. I'm not going to run away."

"Oh, I'm not standing watch over you, miss."

"You aren't? In that case, since it seems like people are about done showing up, can I go join the party?"

"Absolutely not! To dance would mean to hold hands with boys, have their hands around your waist, let them support your weight, talk to them at close range..."

"Yeah, of course it would."

"The demon lord would kill me!" he shouted.

I don't get it...

“Okay, then I’ll just eat.”

“I’ll get you some good food later, so just stay put!”

“Fine, I get the idea! If I’m just going to work reception, I don’t want to wear this uncomfortable dress. I’m going to go change into my uniform!”

“No!”

“Huh?”

“The only privilege the school was able to wrestle away from the demon lord is to enjoy the view! Give them a little credit for their bravery!”

This is only getting more baffling...

The party was in full swing, and the reception area was empty, with nobody else coming in. I had all the time in the world.

“Can I go take a walk to clear my head?”

“It’s still snowing, you know.”

“It’s fine.”

“Well, it *would* be boring for you here.” Kodak took off his own mantle and put it on me. “Come back before the event is over. And don’t hide your presence! I need to be able to come to you if something happens.”

I nodded, pulled the hood all the way up, and walked outside. Lou hopped down to my feet.

“Where are you going, Sere?”

“I don’t know... How about the roof?”

Lou and I jumped up onto the roof of the building.

There were about thirty centimeters of snow on the roof. I used a warm wind to melt the snow in my path so I wouldn’t slip in my heels. I went to the edge, which was a step higher than the rest of the roof, swept the snow off, and sat down.

Fancy music was playing directly below us. I looked up at the sky. Beyond the snow fluttering down, the winter constellations were twinkling. This world

didn’t have Orion like my old one did.

“Sorry about the party, Sere.”

“Well, I did what I could. I’m not pretty like Alma, anyway, and the boys keep me at arm’s length since I beat them up in sparring too much. Not to mention...I don’t have any good memories related to dancing in the first place. So I don’t mind.”

I had always been a wallflower in the book. Prince Gardner danced adoringly with Maribelle, and as the prince’s fiancée, no men had the guts to ask me to dance.

I’d thought maybe I could rewrite those bitter memories of the past if I had a good time dancing today, though. Maybe this was my karma coming back to bite me for messing around with getting my dress ready while Isabella was suffering.

“You’re beautiful, Sere.”

I smiled slightly, still looking up at the night sky. Lou’s bias toward family members was my lifeline.

Suddenly, a gust of energy-bearing wind blew across the roof.

Lou jumped to my front and grew to full size. I stood up as well, readying my magic.

The wind blew away the clouds in the area, revealing the silver light of the moon. The gale began to spiral into itself, creating a whirlwind of white powder snow that reflected the moonlight to become a glowing cocoon—and from that cocoon, a man dressed in a black military uniform with shining silver hair stepped out, like an envoy of the moon.

My eyes widened. He walked toward me slowly, emanating an overwhelming power. He came up to me and Lou... *It can’t be!* He knelt down...

Lou softly stepped aside; the man took my hand and kissed it. “May I have this dance, my lady?”

His deep, resonant voice...his unforgettable ice blue eyes... This man before me with a subtle smile on his face was the man to whom I’d once owed my life.

“Emperor Gillain...”

As I stood there at a loss for words, the emperor knit his eyebrows and rose to his feet. I gazed up at him; he looked many times stronger and more regal than when I last saw him.

Narrowing his eyes, he used his left hand to sweep back the hood covering my head. With his other hand, he unhooked the collar that held the mantle in place, ripped it off, and threw it behind him.

“Ah!”

“It’s not very considerate of you to wear another man’s clothes in front of your fiancé.”

I shivered, suddenly exposed to the outside air. He immediately spread his own cloak and let me lean against his chest. With our height difference, my entire field of vision was blocked off; all I saw was darkness.

I struggled upwards. When I finally poked my face out of the cloak, I met Gillain’s blue eyes. “You’re too tall!”

“Am I?”

The emperor, at twenty-four years old, now looked the same as when he wanted me as a weapon in the book and squeezed every last bit of use out of me. But wait—the long silky silver hair that had played such a big role in adding to his cold atmosphere was now chopped short. Not only that, there was a jagged scar starting at his forehead and running just barely outside his eye, extending all the way to his left ear. He hadn’t had that before. I reached out to it.

“How did you get this?”

“My brother attacked me in my sleep.”

Betrayed by a relative... My chest tightened.

“Did you keep the scar on purpose?”

“No. It’s just that nobody’s healed it.”

“They didn’t? And it’s still so red! It must still hurt!”

As I stood on my tiptoes, trying to wrap my hands around the scar, he bent down and lifted me up with his left arm.

I put my right hand over the scar and mentally chanted, *Pain, pain, go to the person who hurt him!* Now that I was a teenager, I was a bit embarrassed to chant magic words out loud...

My hand gently glowed, and when I removed it, the scar had faded considerably. I gently ran a finger along it.

“Sere...”

“Some time has passed, so there’s still a scar left. Jeez, if this had been an inch to the left, you would have lost your eyesight! Why didn’t you have a healer take a look at it?”

“You’re the only person who worries about me in spite of all my magical power, and you’re the only person who’s willing to pour your own magic into me to heal me without any reservations. All anyone else thinks is that it serves me right to get hurt.”

That’s awful...

Gillain chuckled. “Don’t make that face. Do you think I’d give in that easily?” He cupped my face with his hand that wasn’t holding me.

“From now on...come straight to me if you get hurt.”

He smiled softly. “As you wish.”

The music from below changed from an uptempo piece to a slow ballad.

“Ah, that’s right. Let’s dance.”

“Hm? That reminds me, why did you come all the way out here? Oh, right! You became emperor, didn’t you? Congrats?”

“Ha. Thank you for your completely insincere congratulations. As for your question, I came here to dance with you.”

“What?” I asked incredulously.

“Of course I wouldn’t let another man have your first dance.”

He gently lowered me down, took my hand, and put his other hand around

my waist. We stepped gently in time with the music. The snow melted instantly wherever his feet landed. My black and white skirt with delicate lace details billowed out.

We were alone in a world of silver and white, bathed in moonlight. Snow and flower petals swirled and danced in the air around us.

My body naturally followed his lead, but I didn't get what was going on and searched for Lou with my eyes. Lou was deep in conversation with Asu, who'd gotten here at some point, and paid me no attention.

"Who looks away during a dance with their fiancé?"

Huh...?

"That's the second time you've said 'fiancé'... What's up with that?"

Emperor Gillain put a hand to his chest and picked something up.

It was...my lapis lazuli necklace.

"I see you've been wearing it... Were you hurt before you put it on? Or after?"

"Before. It was before I became emperor. Since I put on this necklace... I haven't faced any significant danger."

"That's good..." I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you know what it means to give an item imbued with your magic as a gift to a member of the opposite sex?"

What it means? I have a bad feeling about this.

"It's a proposal."

"What?!"

"What a surprise it was to receive a proposal from Sere! My answer is yes, of course."

"N-No! I just didn't know!"

As I tried to explain myself, flustered and red in the face, Gillain looked up and laughed out loud like a child who'd pulled off a prank.

Good... His heart isn't as frozen yet as it was in the book. In my ten centimeter

heels, my head came up to his chest. I put my ear to his chest and heard the thump of his heartbeat.

As I did so, he stopped moving, embraced me, and rested his cheek on my head.

“Sere, your time isn’t up yet, but...should I take you away now?”

“Huh...?”

“I can free you from everything that afflicts you. Come to my side.”

Gillain knew exactly what I was going through right now thanks to Asu.

Here he was, trying to make a place for me again. Why was nobody helping such a kind person as him?

“Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty...but I’m still okay. And I don’t have the courage to throw away everything I have in Judore right now...” *Unlike in the novel. Have I become weaker?*

I clutched Gillain’s clothes. He sighed on top of my head. Then he took my arm and began to dance again.

“I thought about sending you something back, but the count and Trundle have already given you the best things you could receive, right?”

I nodded.

Emperor Gillain took something else from his chest—his plates. They were platinum.

He took one of the plates and held it up in front of him. A strong blue light burst forth and was then absorbed into the plate.

“Take this.”

I couldn’t! Plates were the most important thing after your life! And they came in pairs! They could only be exposed when you died.

“No! Your plates don’t just belong to you, they belong to your family too!”

“I have no family.”

Oh... I said something thoughtless. Gillain lived in an environment where he

was forced to kill his own relatives to survive. He was a lonely figure, in both the book and this life. I knew that loneliness myself.

I was the only one who'd managed to escape in this life.

"But I have you, Sere. My wonderful fiancée."

Is he asking me to pick up his bones? Saying that I'm the only family he has with that privilege?

Gillain took the two gold plates from my collar, unfastened the chain holding them in place, and placed his own plate between them.

The plates hung heavy from my neck. When I clutched all three together, his wind magic surrounded my body like a veil.



He...had entrusted me with his life.

I wasn't dumb enough to not realize that I was special to Emperor Gillain after all he'd done.

Yes...I promise... I may not be able to help you, but you will always have at least me on your side, loyal forever and ever. And if I outlive you, I promise to find your body.

He grabbed my shoulders as I looked down.

"Serephione...I will wait as I promised. However, if anything wounds your soul before these next two years are up, I will take you to Galé by brute force."

I was silent.

"I can't use healing magic. I can't heal you like you can do for me. Whenever something hurts you, I can't help but feel powerless."

He crouched down and looked into my eyes.

"Call me before you get hurt. Got it?"

My chest felt tight at his consideration. Tears came to my eyes. I bit my lip, willing myself to hold them back.

Gillain widened his eyes and wrapped his arms around me. He placed one of his large hands at the back of my head and lifted my face. My grandmother's hair clip clattered onto the ground behind me, and my black hair danced in the wind.

"The only one who cries for my sake..."

Gillain gently pecked away my tears.

"...is you."

Just then, as he leaned over me, he kissed me.

My first dance, and my first kiss. His mildly bitter magic flowed into my body once again.

As we huddled together, the gentle snow enveloped us silently, sheltering us in our own little world for a moment.

I awoke to the bright morning light. Memories of Gillain from the night before flashed through my mind, and my face grew warm. I gently put a finger to my lips and touched the plate with my other hand. A bit of Gillain's magic seeped into my finger. It hadn't been a dream.

When I got up from my bed and opened my curtain, the morning sun reflected off the snow, sparkling bright white.

Lou was happily running around in the unexpected playground of snow. It reminded me of that fateful day we first met. I remembered all the days we'd spent training together.

We've worked really hard together, haven't we, Lou? We practiced magic, martial arts, and building stamina. We laughed a lot and cried just a little. You found out, though.

I'd worked desperately to avoid a tragic death, terrified of being alone, but along the way, I found myself surrounded by loved ones: my father, my brother, my grandmother, the Granzeus household's servants, the guild members, my friends from school... And also...I'd met Emperor Gillain again.

Thanks to everyone who cared for me, I'd been able to enter knight school and become an A-rank adventurer.

Right now, I felt so blessed... I was truly happy. Meeting Lou and being loved by him had changed my future.

I can't predict what's in store for me from now on, but I'll overcome whatever it is! I absolutely won't die! I won't let an unfair, mean fate win against me!

I'm a reincarnated lady with memories from both my past life in Japan and my life in the book, and I'm as one with Loudarylphena, one of the four heavenly beasts. I'm gonna have a super fluffy adventure with my fluffball! Let's go, platinum rank! Let's go, my sixtieth birthday!

Lou chuffed, noticing me from outside the window.

"Lou!" I leapt out of the window onto the snow-covered Lou and flopped into his fur. He already smelled like the sun.

"Good morning, Sere! What's got you in such high spirits? Jeez, you're such a

kid.”

So are you!

My best friend, my partner, my other half! My Lou! I love you, Loudarylphena!

Together, we rolled around and laughed—as one.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing *Forget Being the Villainess, I Want to Be an Adventurer!*

This is my first published novel, and it's been a deeply moving experience for me. In turn, this makes this my first ever afterword.

I looked up what exactly an afterword is, and apparently, it's a letter to the readers. In that case, I'd like to tell the readers how I feel about my beloved characters and how they came to be.

First of all, Lou! Lou is modeled after an Ezo red fox. When I lived in Hokkaido, I once opened my curtains in the morning to see a fox trotting along the parking lot without a care in the world, covered in fresh snow and holding food in its mouth. The scene stuck in my memory, down to the scenery and the little footprints. I made some details rounder, whiter, and more fluffy...and that became Lou's introduction scene. He may have undergone a gradual fluffballification, but he's a holy beast, don't forget! I'm going to hone my writing skills so I can write cool battle scenes with Lou.

Next is Serephione. I gave her black hair and black eyes so that everyone can project their own feelings onto her and root for her. Her facial features are just like Larouza's. I'm looking forward to seeing her grow from cute to beautiful, like the adult Larouza that Tobi drew!

Lastly, Serephione's grandmother. I'm active on the web novel platform Shosetsuka ni Naro; I received feedback on another work of mine from there that the story didn't work because the protagonist lacked the presence of a strong, reliable figure of the same gender in their life. My heart felt like a rock in my chest hearing that.

When I was planning this story, I thought to myself, "Let's give Serephione the best female ally, someone who's super strong, cool, and unshakeable, so she doesn't get lonely!" That led to her grandmother's sudden emergence.

This story could never have moved ahead without Erza! I think her presence really increased the charm of this book. She will continue to protect Serephione

with her life. Thank you, grandmother.

With that, thank you once again.

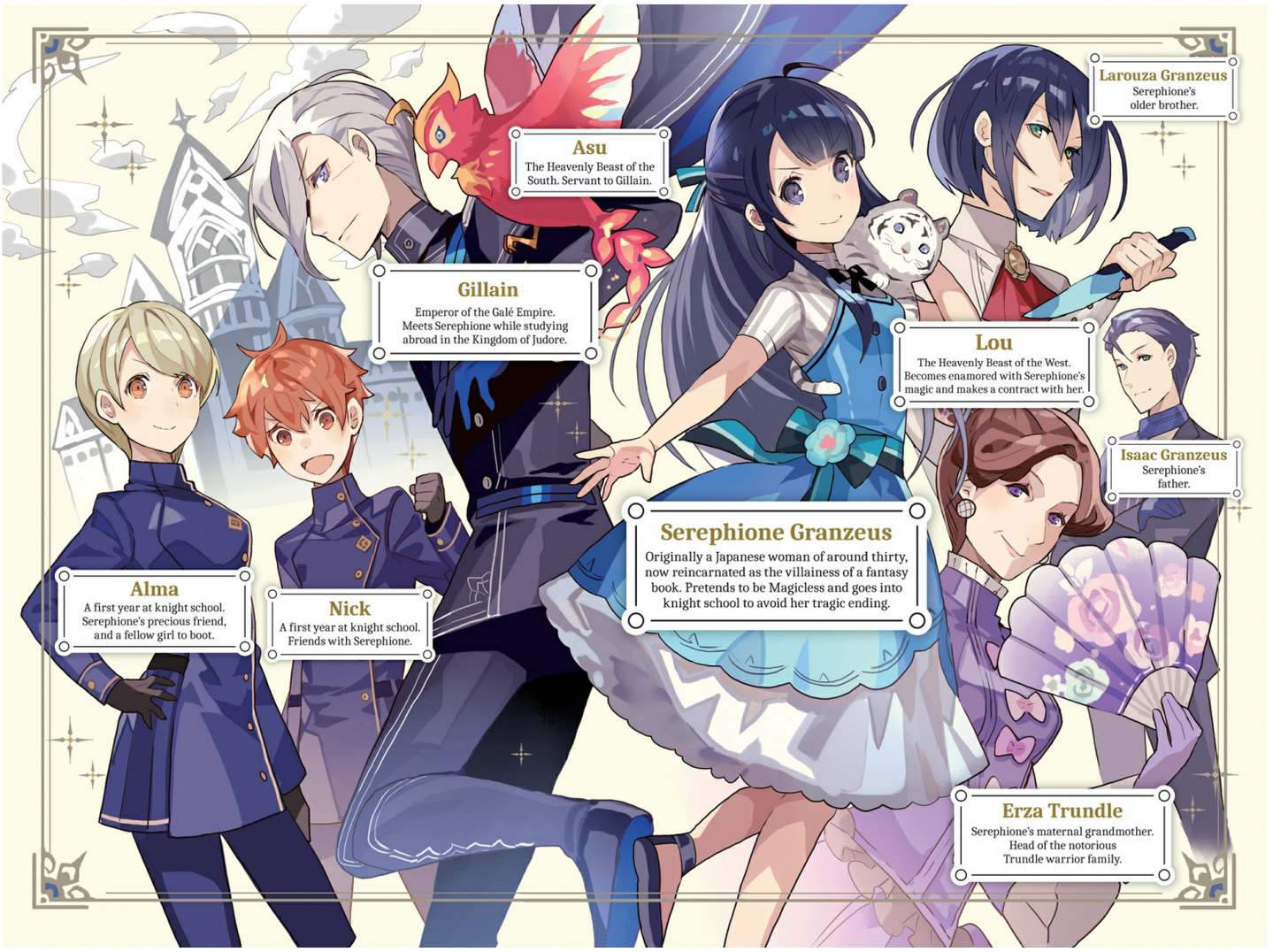
I extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who gave me advice online like I mentioned before, everyone who warmly looked after me as this book came together, and everyone who picked up this book. I wouldn't be who I am today without my readers. I would appreciate it if you continue to support me, inexperienced writer that I am.

Thank you to my editors, who found Lou and Sere out of the infinite number of books out there and taught me the ABCs of writing, and thank you to everyone who helped me form a relationship with a publisher. And thank you to Tobi for bringing Lou, Sere, and the others to life in cute, cool, lively art!

This year marks the beginning of Reiwa, a turning point in our era. I hope that wonderful things come to you all during this commemorable year.

Hiro Oda


"F-Father! I want to ask you for something."
"That's unusual. What is it, Serephi?"
"I want to go to knight school in the future, so I want to start studying the basics now."
Forget Being the VILLAINESS, I Want to Be an ADVENTURER!


Larouza Granzeus
Serephione's older brother.
Asu
The Heavenly Beast of the South. Servant to Gillain.
Gillain
Emperor of the Galé Empire. Meets Serephione while studying abroad in the Kingdom of Judore.
Lou
The Heavenly Beast of the West. Becomes enamored with Serephione's magic and makes a contract with her.
Isaac Granzeus
Serephione's father.
Serephione Granzeus
Originally a Japanese woman of around thirty, now reincarnated as the villainess of a fantasy book. Pretends to be Magicless and goes into knight school to avoid her tragic ending.
Alma
A first year at knight school. Serephione's precious friend, and a fellow girl to boot.
Nick
A first year at knight school. Friends with Serephione.
Erza Trundle
Serephione's maternal grandmother. Head of the notorious Trundle warrior family.


"Sere, that tickles! Come on, where are we going?"
"Ah, sorry! Um, let's just head in the direction of those ginkgo trees for now. Let's go!"
"All right!"



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Forget Being the Villainess, I Want to Be an Adventurer! Volume 1

by Hiro Oda

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