Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu



Goodbye, Overtime!

This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother

3


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characters

Ekaterina Yulnova

The villainess of the game that
Rina is reincarnated into.
Her nemesis is overwork.



Alexei Yulnova

The young head of the ducal
House of Yulnova and
Ekaterina's older brother.



Mikhail Yulgran

The main love interest in the game and heir to the imperial throne.



Flora Cherny

The heroine of the game and a young lady with commoner origins who is now part of a baron's house.



Mina Frey

Ekaterina's maid.



Ivan Nil

Alexei's attendant and bodyguard.



Vladimir Yulmagna

The heir of the House of Yulmagna.

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Chapter 1: Before the Departure

After the classes of the day ended, I—Ekaterina, the lady of the ducal house of Yulnova—hurried to the office that Alexei, my dear brother and the young Duke of Yulnova, used at the academy.

Today was his birthday. We'd already celebrated earlier during our lunch break after I'd given him a heartfelt gift.

Having retained the memories from my previous life, I knew that I now lived inside the world of an otome game. Worse, I'd been reincarnated as the villainess! The good news was that I'd become close friends with the game's heroine, Flora, befriended the main love interest, Prince Mikhail, and was on track to avoid the tragic end of the game's Ekaterina.

I'd even used my memories to come up with the perfect birthday gift for my brother: a glass pen. The thing was, I'd also found myself purchasing a glass workshop while I was at it. I still wasn't sure how things had worked out that way, but I knew I'd be busier than ever managing it.



"Welcome, my lady." Alexei had yet to arrive at his office but his closest aide, Novak, stood up to welcome me. "It may be presumptuous of me to say, but we'd like to thank you for what you did at lunch. It was a pleasure to see His Grace celebrate his birthday surrounded by such warmth."

"Lord Novak! Thank you for always watching over my brother with care," I replied before asking, "Could it be that my brother dislikes celebrating his birthday?"

Before I brought it up, Alexei had acted as though today was just a regular day. But he hadn't been the only one to do so; his advisors had too. That made me wonder if he'd been the one to ask them not to celebrate.

At my words, Novak's expression shifted.

"The previous duke, your father, enjoyed exceedingly lavish and lively celebrations. He sometimes...overdid it. When His Grace took over, he decided to distance himself from such

things. Naturally, gifts always arrive on His Grace's birthday, but he deals with them in an almost administrative manner."

Novak had spoken in as roundabout a fashion as he could, but I could picture our father, the Hikaru Genji of the Yulgran Empire, hosting extravagant parties and acting indecently the entire time. No wonder Alexei hated it all. I assumed our father had only started behaving that way so blatantly after our grandfather died. That meant this had been happening when Alexei was ten to seventeen—a sensitive age. Damn him!

I was inwardly cursing our father when Alexei walked in.

"Oh, you're here already, Ekaterina."

"Yes, brother."

"I'm sorry for making you go out of your way to return. I wanted to discuss the glass pens with you," Alexei said, taking out the blue velvet box I'd gifted him.

He opened it, revealing the three beautiful glass pens I'd commissioned from a glass artisan. I'd used my knowledge of my previous life to describe them, and here they were. They were a bit of a revolution in this world, where people universally used quills to write.

"Halil, join us."

"Of course," Halil Talal, the duchy's trade advisor, said. He bowed to Alexei with a beautiful grin that brimmed with anticipation.

"I also wished to consult you," I said. "I'd like these glass pens to become a new product of the workshop you bought for me, brother. Now that the Murano Workshop is mine, I do not want it to weigh on the duchy's finances. I wish for it to prosper and benefit our house. Will you help me achieve that goal?"

Alexei smiled.

"I expected nothing less of you, Ekaterina. These pens hold wonderful promise. They're innovative as writing tools, yet beautiful. Only you would think of gifting such a groundbreaking creation to your family *before* selling it. I'll admit I worried that you were too selfless to set up a business, but you've proven me wrong. You already have plans to develop these pens as products. Brilliant!"

Sorry, brother. I'm not selfless. It's just that I didn't invent anything at all! To the great wind chime craftsman who invented glass pens during the Meiji Period, I'm so, so, so *sorry!*

Now that I think of it, does that guy have a patent?

That probably didn't matter. Patents only protected an invention for twenty years, and after that they became public domain. Besides, I doubted patents from my past world applied here in the Yulgran Empire.

Last I heard, they haven't signed the Paris Convention!

I wasn't sure why I worried about that for even a second: This really was a whole other world! That got me wondering, though. Were patents a thing in this world too?

"My lady, would you please allow me to take a good look at these pens?" Halil asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. I hurriedly took out the wooden box I kept in my pocket.

"Why, of course," I replied, handing him my glass pen. "Try writing as well, so you see how it feels."

He dipped it in ink and started writing. Sure enough, the first thing he wrote was his name. I didn't recognize the next word and wondered what he was writing, but I eventually realized that it was his name in several languages. As expected of the son of a prominent international merchant! Despite the era we were in, he already had a global mindset!

Oh! Here's a language written from right to left!

Just as I was surprised by that, Halil suddenly started writing vertically, just like we did in Japan! And in ideograms, at that! They didn't look like the kanji I knew from my past life, but I could tell from their shape that each of these characters had meaning beyond their phonetic use! I was pumped up by the time Halil finally stopped writing.

"I can't believe I wrote so much without having to add more ink," he said with admiration. "Just as His Grace pointed out, one can write regardless of the orientation of the nib. And since the nib is made of glass, it doesn't need to be sharpened like quills. It seems durable and the thickness of the handle is just right once you get used to it. Beyond the Summit of the Gods, even farther east than my birth country, is a place where they use pens with tips made of animal hair. The shape of these glass nibs reminds me of those."

Halil was really well learned. Hearing his thoughts, I was impressed *and* realized that this world was even more similar to my past world than I'd thought.

Now that he mentioned it, the nib of a glass pen *did* resemble a brush. After all, the true father of glass pens was Japanese. In his day, everyone had used writing brushes in Japan.

Uh-oh, doesn't that mean that it makes no sense for glass pens to emerge in the Yulgran Empire? Bah, whatever! There's nothing I can do about it anymore, so I'm not overthinking it!

Alexei also took out the velvet box that held the three pens I'd gifted him and handed it to Halil. Lev's work truly lived up to the name of the Murano Workshop, the best glass workshop in the empire. Halil inspected each pen's intricate design and colors one by one.

"The pens you gifted His Grace are practical, but they're so polished they ought to be called works of art," he said. "They're worthy of being used by a duke. The artisan you hired is exceedingly skilled, my lady."

"You have a good eye," I told Halil. "That artisan is only twenty-two years old. I expect him to create works of art even more beautiful than these in the future."

Halil hummed.

"So, Halil, what do you say?" Alexei asked.

"They'll sell," Halil replied immediately. "If I failed to sell such treasures, I'd be an absolute dimwit. If anything, I'm dying to sell them."

As he laughed, I saw the gleam in his eyes. It wasn't some sort of dreamy, sparkly gleam—no, it was a blazing inferno.

Is that his merchant's senses awakening? Amazing! Um, but are you sure you should use words like "dimwit" in front of your lord?

"My only worry," Halil continued, "is that production won't be able to keep up with demand. There's only one artisan who can make these, right, my lady?"

I *knew* Halil would point that out.

"Indeed," I confirmed. "I've asked him to invite the former employees of Master Murano back to the workshop, but I don't know if they'll accept."

"I see you've already made your move," Halil said with a smile.

"Now that you've assured me the pens would sell, I'll try to offer them better working conditions than their current employers. Even if they do come back, however, I have no way of knowing whether their work on glass pens will match the quality of my current artisan."

These people had never worked on glass pens. Since we'd be selling them to wealthy, important people, the quality of each product needed to be top-notch.

"If that ends up being the case, I shall have them focus on

glasses in the style of the Murano Workshop. I believe that such works will also bring in a profit," I continued. "At first, we can capitalize on the scarcity of the glass pens and only sell them to a handful of influential buyers. During that time, my main artisan can teach the others, and we can increase our scope as we go. If we make use of that initial time period to cement the idea that glass pens are items used by high-class aristocrats in the minds of the people, we'll be able to get away with quite the profit margin."

After I finished speaking, Halil remained silent for a few moments. Then, he let out a soft sigh and said, "I thought I knew not to let you surprise me anymore, but here I am once again. I've never met such an insightful young lady."

"Not at all! Those are just my shallow thoughts as a complete amateur," I rushed to say. "I'm not even sure any of what I said is truly possible."

My apologies if it seems weird. I'm not just a young noble lady!

Besides, I really was only giving armchair theory based on business and finance TV shows I used to watch, like *The Dawn of Something-Something*. I had serious doubts things would go as well as I'd predicted.

"An amateur thinking so far ahead is already quite something, Ekaterina the Sage," Alexei said with a laugh. "I thought of letting Halil and his subordinates take over the glass pen business, but considering how much thought you've put into it already, would you like to lead this venture yourself?"

"I'm aware it's awfully arrogant of me, but since you bought this workshop because of me, yes. I'd like to take responsibility and see things through myself."

"That is quite like you. Your sense of responsibility is far too strong," Alexei said with a sigh. "I'll have someone put in charge of the day-to-day work, so don't let this take up so much of your time that your health suffers. That is my only condition."

"Thank you very much. I shall heed your warning. I know very little about business matters, so please allow me to seek advice from you and Mr. Halil when I feel lost."

"Of course, never hesitate to do so," Alexei replied.

"Indeed, I'm happy to advise you at any time, my lady. However, you mustn't doubt yourself. The plan you told us about is quite sound. You can go ahead and implement it without worries."

“Thank you for your kind words. While I said all that earlier, I’m not sure how to actually convey the idea that glass pens are a high-class noble’s product. I spoke as though I knew what I was doing. Please forgive me for admitting it, but I am at a loss.”

I’d thought about having Alexei act as a living billboard, but he was still a student. Considering his personality, I doubted he’d enjoy showing his pens to everyone he came across. I absolutely refused to make him uncomfortable, so that was a no-go. I had no other ideas.

Alexei and Halil exchanged a look and smiled.

“Ekaterina,” Alexei started. “Can you have your artisan craft a pen as lavish, or if possible, more lavish still, than the ones you gifted me?”

I was perplexed.

“More lavish? I’m not sure. I asked him to pour everything into his work so that it would be worthy of you, a Grand Duke. However, I can certainly tell him to craft something of the same quality. But to what end?”

“To present it to His Imperial Majesty the Emperor. I’m sure he’ll be most pleased.”

Oh yeah, great idea! That was sure to give everyone the image that glass pens were for the noblest of people! And my brother just so happened to be one of the few people who could easily request an audience with the emperor. Having a duke aggressively promote a product was a little much, but it would have to do.

Speaking of which, I asked about patents as well. Apparently, it was possible to have a monopoly over an invention for a limited period of time here too! Patents lasted for ten years. It’d once been three years, but that period had gradually grown longer with the years. According to what I’d heard, the fifth Duke of Yulnova, Vasili, had been the one to convince the emperor to implement them in the first place.

Back then, he’d invited a famous foreign inventor to the Yulnova Duchy to help improve the mining and iron-manufacturing tools. That inventor had produced such great results that Vasili had done everything in his power to push him to stay, including petitioning the emperor so that his rights over his inventions would be protected. At the time there’d been no patents whatsoever, not in the empire and not in the birth country of that inventor. Vasili must have thought that if the

inventor's rights were protected in the empire, he'd choose it over his homeland.

Smart! I also got the feeling he must have been quite desperate, though.

"However, registering an item under that system isn't always a good thing. To do so, you must submit a detailed manufacturing method. This means you must reveal every last manufacturing secret. Naturally, as soon as the time limit is up, countless imitations could flood the market," Alexei warned me.

That was the same in my previous world. Knowing about IP rights was also useful in my line of work, so I'd been taught about it. Patents had two purposes: The first was to protect the rights of inventors and promote research, but the second was to make sure their inventions could be widely used by everyone after a set period.

"You should discuss this with your artisan and Daniil to ascertain whether a ten-year monopoly is worth this."

Daniil Legall was someone I'd heard a lot about, but I had yet to meet him in person. He was the duchy's legal advisor.

"Thank you, brother! I've heard he's brilliant, so I would love to seek his counsel."

"Was there anything you wanted to ask him?"

"To follow in our great ancestor Vasili's footsteps and gather talented artisans, I'd like to implement some rules for the workshop. I don't simply mean rules that the employees will need to follow. I want them to bind me, the employer, as well. I wish to set clear working hours and wages. For instance, I'm thinking of having rules prohibiting forcing employees to work long hours, guaranteeing a minimum salary, or defining bonuses employees will get in case the workshop hits specific profit thresholds. I want to put them down on paper so that myself and my employees can sign and abide by them. However, I must know whether setting such rules would be in violation of the empire's law in any way before I proceed."

The mention of the fifth duke had further pushed me in that direction, but as a former corporate drone, I *always* wanted to establish work regulations and clear contracts. In my past world, the question of whom a company truly belonged to had been widely debated. Did it belong to the shareholders who invested, the employees who did the work, or the customers?

While I wasn't sure the debate had been settled, in practice,

the answer was pretty clear to me: Companies belonged to shareholders. Money was power, and that tendency was only becoming clearer and clearer with each passing year, especially in the West. The very structure of society also shifted, slowly but surely, to favor the rich as much as possible.

However, when I'd first heard about this discussion, I'd personally thought that the answer should have been so obvious that I didn't see why it needed to be debated. Companies obviously belonged to *all three* of these parties. Shareholders, workers, and customers each had different rights and duties. Weren't companies meant to balance these things for themselves?

Well, even though I'd held such thoughts in the back of my mind, I'd still been milked for all I was worth and died an early death because of it. However, that was exactly why I was so intent on trying to find the correct balance here! The best time to get revenge was when people least expected it! Although in my case, that wasn't the kind of revenge that I wanted.

For all its flaws, people had fought for years to get better working conditions in my previous world. In this one, employers had the upper hand over employees even more so than back there. Still, that didn't mean that employees had *no* rights at all. There were laws and customs that protected them to some extent—or so I'd heard while hanging out in Alexei's office. Really, I wanted to discuss all this with an expert.

"Do as you wish to do, Ekaterina," Alexei said with a smile. "I'm sure Duke Vasili would applaud your cause. As for me, I'm curious to see what will come out of your efforts. Every one of your ideas is wonderful, truly."

Brother, it's not my idea this time either! I'm just rehashing something from my previous world, again.

"You've only set foot into society four months ago, yet you've already become irreplaceable, not only to me, but to the duchy. You've contributed to my work and, above all, to my happiness through your affection and thoughtfulness. I could never thank you enough."

Oh no! He'd taken me by surprise, and now I was so moved that I could feel myself trembling.

Aaaaah! I'm so happy!

"Brother, your words have pleased me more than ever!"

"Likewise, that you think so pleases me."

After he said that, a serious look replaced the fond expression on his face.

"You know, it hasn't been a year since I inherited my title. There is still much I must do, but there is also something I'd like to tackle once the situation calms down. Grandfather started it, but he passed before it could take shape. I suppose you could say it is his legacy, and I wish to inherit his will. In the future, I may have to pour all of the House of Yulnova's resources into this great enterprise. When that time comes, I hope you'll lend me your strength as well."

"Of course! Helping you achieve your goals would be my greatest happiness. All the more if that goal was once grandfather's. I shall do anything you require of me."

I'd give my unconditional support to Alexei, no matter what he wanted to do. Especially if what he wanted to achieve was some great enterprise to honor our grandfather's legacy. That got my soul burning! As a true fan of *Project Something*, I loved these things!

"Aaron," Alexei called.

His mine advisor, Aaron Kyle, stood up at once and approached while Halil retreated, making space for him by my brother's side. He held a fine leather folder.

"First of all, please have a look at this, my lady. This is a thesis written by your granduncle, Isaac," Aaron said, handing the paper to me very, *very* respectfully.

Aaron had the air of a scholar. On top of that, he was an absolute mineral freak. Because of that, he pretty much worshipped our granduncle, a prominent mineralogist. To Aaron, his thesis was probably a sacred text.

He said "first of all," but this thesis is long! This is going to take a while. Whew, the contents are so dense and full of terminology...

Still, I had to do my best. I'd focus on the parts I could understand and try to make sense of it. The title of the paper read *Sustaining Activation Magic: On the Practical Use of Rainbow Stone Magic and Magic Circles*.

I'd once been told that one of the theories regarding the origin of rainbow stones argued that they formed when mana condensed.

The second keyword was "magic circle." The memories of my past life made me think of the glowing prisms as super cool, but in this world, they weren't quite so epic. Still, they were a popular

research topic and always came up in books about mana control. However, for all the time and effort they required to use, they barely amplified the user's mana, so few of them were utilized these days.

Isaac's thesis didn't concern the amplification of people's mana, though. It was about rainbow stone magic. Could magic circles truly be of use in that context?

The House of Yulnova's treasured sword, the blade of Sergei the founder, was set with rainbow stones and became lighter whenever someone with mana held it. Four hundred years ago, people had already known how to utilize rainbow stones. In the case of this particular sword, the activation condition was a person's mana. It only became lighter *while* someone held it. Could that effect be sustained using rainbow stones and magic circles? That sounded incredible, didn't it?!

The title of the first chapter was "Case Studies of Rainbow Stone Magic Use."

Isaac's very first example was Sergei's prized sword, but he also brought up a *bunch* of different cases in which rainbow stones were used as a vector for mana.

Wow! The number of examples is incredible! Our granduncle sure knows how to do fieldwork.

"Chapter 2: The Effects of Magic Circles."

Urgh... This was turning into a complicated read. I didn't get most of it, but the conclusion seemed to be that, while magic circles had been studied so far as a means to amplify mana, they could in fact be used for something else: to sustain a spell previously activated as long as a steady supply of mana was available.

"Chapter 3: Connecting Rainbow Stones and Magic Circles."

This part seemed the most important. To make use of a magic circle, one just had to pour their mana into it. But how were you supposed to achieve that effect with rainbow stones?

Apparently, the answer was to incorporate rainbow stones into the magic circle. According to Isaac, when people poured their mana into magic circles, they did so through an entry point. If you could pinpoint it and set a rainbow stone there, it could continuously provide mana to the magic circle.

"Chapter 4: Practical Use of Rainbow-Stone-Powered Magic Circles, or Prism Circles."

That chapter focused on the conditions one had to meet to

make it all work, huh?

Wow, you need a lot of rainbow stones!

It couldn't even be just any rainbow stone. The quality and type of mana condensed had to match the spell for it to work as well as possible. Finding enough stones of the right quality, purity, and mana type seemed like a challenge. The magic circle presented in the book was also huge. Who could even draw something like that without deviating by a couple of millimeters?

I was starting to get the idea, though. By pulling mana from the stones, you could sustain magic.

This. The ability to do just this is what revolutionized everything *in my previous world.*

My hands were shivering. What a discovery. This world was about to change. I tried to put the leather folder on the desk, but my hands trembled so much that I couldn't let it go and only managed to hit the edge on the wood.

The industrial revolution was coming.

Instead of the steam engines of my past life, magic engines—could I even call them that?—would open the door to a new age. I was holding the very key in my hands.

"You look pale, Ekaterina! Are you all right?" Alexei inquired, worried.

"No! I mean, yes! It's just that…this paper is quite…quite…major. The world as we know it won't be the same…"

Aaron sucked in a breath. "You understand, my lady. Many at the Mineralogy Research Faculty failed to see the weight of this thesis, but you did so at first glance."

"No, I… I couldn't understand everything either. However, assuming that the conclusion is indeed correct, and that rainbow stones can *permanently* sustain a spell, so much could change. We could have spells perpetually calling forth water on dry land, wind continuously blowing where windmills are, and fire burning without the need to use firewood. We could even till the soil with earth magic. Oh, people's lives would be so different!"

For now, Isaac had only theorized about a huge magic circle that required large quantities of rainbow stones, but it wouldn't be long before he or other researchers improved, miniaturized, and diversified this technology. We'd surely reach a point one day where a human wouldn't even be needed to activate the spell anymore.

I suddenly remembered the view of the capital from the bell tower I'd seen with my brother, then thought back to the vast ocean of gray that the city of Tokyo was. This thesis might very well turn the capital into another Tokyo.

"Granduncle Isaac is undoubtedly a genius… A genius who shall leave his mark on history," I concluded.

"Indeed. Professor Isaac Yulnova is one of the greatest minds the Yulgran Empire has ever known. This thesis is proof of that. However, I must say that you are plenty intelligent, my lady! You only read his paper once but grasped so much. Many at the Mineralogy Research Faculty had nothing of value to say. All they did was complain that this sort of paper 'did not belong in the field of mineralogy.' These old researchers are stuck in their old ways. They don't hold a candle to you, my lady."

Aaron loved our granduncle so much that he had no qualms about belittling those researchers to praise me instead.

"Aaron is right," Alexei said. "I learned about this thesis while grandfather was still alive. Our granduncle came to visit grandfather and excitedly showed it to him. Back then, I completely failed to understand how groundbreaking it was."

When grandfather was still alive you weren't even ten! Of course a child *wouldn't get it!*

"Grandfather, on the other hand, immediately comprehended the possibilities his research opened. He was overjoyed and kept repeating, 'What a genius you are, Isaac!' As I thought, you are much like grandfather, Ekaterina. Only we, the Yulnovas, can make prism circles a reality. After all, large quantities of rainbow stones are needed. The cost will be tremendous, but if we achieve it, so will the benefits. Just as you said, this may change the world. So, please—Ekaterina, help me."

With wide eyes, I watched Alexei earnestly plead for my help. This was well beyond the realm of *Project Something*. We were talking about making history. This wouldn't affect one country—it would revolutionize the world.

But this wasn't the time to get cold feet: Alexei needed me. And who was I?

Alexei's number one fangirl! I exclaimed inwardly, clenching my fists. While pushing my head in the sand and ignoring such a monumental task did tempt me, I strengthened my resolve for him.

Thankfully, we wouldn't be using fossil fuels, so this world

wouldn't run into the same issues my previous world had with greenhouse gases and global warming. Obviously, I knew that these weren't the only problems that came with industrialization. There were other drawbacks. Still, there were also overwhelming benefits. Besides, my dear brother wished for this.

Let's do it, then! Let's change the world!

"If we succeed, the name of the Yulnova will echo far beyond the borders of the empire and forever be engraved in the history of the world. It would be an honor for our great house, of course, but above all things, I want your and our late grandfather's wish to come true. For that sake, I shall do anything," I said.

"Thank you. The thought of us siblings coming together as one in spirit to achieve this goal brings me joy." Alexei smiled. "I must warn you, however. Please do not mention this to anyone else for the time being."

"Are you worried other families will beat us to it?"

"No. What I'm worried about is that some…no, *most* noble families will strongly oppose us, to avoid losing their monopoly on magic."

I gasped. I hadn't thought about that! Magic was the mark of the nobility, and nobles took great pride in their mana.

While prism circles did need to be activated by someone who could use magic, the spell could be sustained as long as you added new rainbow stones when the first ones ran out of mana. Anyone could take on that role, even a commoner with no mana.

The value of having mana would drastically go down. And then…what? Would the commoner rise? Would the empire…no, the entire world walk the path toward democracy?

"Some are sure to take action—drastic action," Alexei continued. "But I swear I won't let any danger befall you. If anyone tries to harm you, I'll return the favor a thousandfold, no matter what."

His neon blue eyes shone.

Such graceful ruthlessness…like The Elegant Tyrant.

That was part of the title of a book I'd read in my previous life and, somehow, that phrase felt extremely fitting. As far as I was concerned, Alexei looked cooler than ever!

"If anything happens to me, you will become the Duchess of Yulnova, Ekaterina. If there is no eligible male heir, a woman can inherit the title as per the laws of the empire. I hope you'll see

this enterprise through if I can no longer do it myself."

If something happened to him, I was to inherit the title? In other words, if my brother... If he...

Huh?

"Ekaterina!" Alexei suddenly exclaimed, taking my hands into his. "What's wrong? Don't cry! Do you hate the idea of becoming a duchess that much?"

"No... That's not it... If something were to happen to you, I..." I sobbed, tears running down my face. I just couldn't stop them.

Stop it! Get a hold of yourself! You're an adult, so why're you crying and worrying your brother?!

The one who was crying wasn't the adult me, though. It was the fifteen-year-old Ekaterina inside me, the one whose psyche was far younger than her actual age and who'd grown scared of everything after losing her mother—the girl whose only pillar of support was her brother.

Even the grown-up me could hardly stomach the idea of Alexei following our grandfather. The thought made me want to cry.

I'm already crying, though.

In my previous life, I'd adored him at first sight through the screen of my phone. He'd been my only solace in my days of overwork. After I'd been reborn as his sister, he'd unconditionally loved me. He was a praiseworthy boy who'd gone through so much to grow into a wonderful, capable young man. The more I learned about him, the more I felt like I could do anything for his sake. So, thinking of him being gone... The thought was... No, I couldn't do it! I wouldn't be able to live on. I just couldn't.

BOO-HOO!!!

I could easily picture the cataclysm that'd change our society if prism circles came to be, but I couldn't imagine a future without my brother. Just the act of putting words to that idea was dreadful.

"I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said that. I know how sensitive you are. Please forget I said anything," Alexei said, hugging me close. "Whenever I see you cry, I feel as though my heart is being torn apart. Please, hush. I won't even allow the gods to sadden you, Ekaterina. If the thought makes you so sad, I won't die. Even if I cross the River of Oblivion, I will not forget you and shall always return to your side. So dry your tears. Please..."

His beautiful voice murmuring into my ear made me shiver.

In many myths, the River of Oblivion, called the River Lethe in Greek mythology, flowed in between the world of the living and that of the dead. This story or an equivalent of it existed in every corner of the world in my past life, and here too, the story had been passed down since the days of the Astra Empire.

I, who'd been reborn with my memories intact, had quite literally crossed the River of Oblivion without forgetting Alexei.

I'd died once. I remembered the days of overwork that had preceded my death: as time went by, I'd become almost apathetic, numb to most things, but the feeling of my life slowly being eaten away had remained painful.

Dying *hurt*. It was a lonely thing.

I didn't want my brother to go through that.

"My lady," Ivan said softly as I continued to cry in my brother's arms. "Please don't cry any longer. I'll protect His Grace. Nothing will happen to him. Even if my body is torn to pieces, I'll make sure to bring him back to you. You don't have to worry."

I sniffed and finally raised my head to look at Ivan. Just as Mina was mine, Ivan was also Alexei's bodyguard.

"Are you strong...?" I asked.



“I’ve never met anyone stronger than I am,” he answered confidently.

Amazing. Shouldn’t you *be the protagonist?*

“Then, you must return safely without injuries too…!”

“Understood, my lady. I, too, shall come back without a single injury,” he said, his tone cheerful.

I hadn’t known that Ivan was the type to lie without batting an eye. He was so quick to promise not to get injured that I *knew* he didn’t mean it. Rather, to protect Alexei, I believed he would let his own body be destroyed. Still, considering his confidence, I suspected he was in possession of a monstrous amount of strength.

“Thank you, Ivan.”

“It’s nothing, my lady.”

I finally stopped crying and smiled at Alexei.

He smiled back and seemed relieved as he wiped away the tears on my cheeks.

“I should have been more considerate. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, brother. I shouldn’t have lost my composure, especially not on your birthday. How embarrassing… Please forgive me.”

I looked up at him, feeling ashamed, and Alexei stared at me with confusion.

“What is there to forgive? You were simply worried about me. If anything, I should be the one to seek your forgiveness for being so insensitive. I swear to not leave you alone. Thank you for shedding tears for an unrefined boor like myself who did not even understand the meaning of birthday celebrations. The glass pens were a wonderful present, but there is no gift as precious as your pure, precious tears, my beloved Ekaterina.”

He’s so kind. As expected of him. I’m sorry for being such a bratty little sister. I’d once again let my obsession for Alexei get the better of me and upset him. *I’m locking in now! I’ll do my best not to repeat this mistake!*

Before my brother started working on prism circles for real, I had to get my glass pen business running. Then, I could leverage that experience to help him!

“As long as you’re by my side, nothing scares me, brother. I can hardly wait for the day when the two of us carry out grandfather’s legacy together. In the meantime, please take care of yourself.”

“Your wish is my command.”

My brother was the noblest and proudest man I knew. Yet, what he was trying to accomplish could very well sound the death knell of the nobility. How ironic.

Perhaps if a ducal house like ours was to lead the transition, we could avoid the bloodbath that the French Revolution had been. It was presumptuous to think we could achieve that, but I certainly would do everything in my power to that end.

After all, with my brother by my side, an endless supply of energy surged within me! I could achieve anything I put my mind to!



Roughly half a month had passed since Alexei’s birthday when he received a summon for a ducal meeting—the first in several months. The three Grand Dukes, the heads of Yulnova, Yulsein, and Yulmagna, were to gather in front of the emperor.

Alexei seized his chance and informed the emperor that he wished to present him with a gift, requesting a short audience before the ducal meeting. Konstantin readily agreed, making time in his tight schedule for him.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Alexei said, rising from his seat in the sumptuous room where the ducal meeting would later be held when Konstantin walked in. He bowed respectfully. “I am deeply grateful for the honor of your valuable time.”

“Come now, be at ease. The fussy ones have yet to arrive. I’m sure you’re very busy balancing your schoolwork and your ducal duties. For you to go out of your way to request an audience, the gift you’ve brought me must be extraordinary.”

Konstantin’s tone was warm and friendly. He’d taught Alexei and Vladimir many things, including swordplay, alongside his own son. He had not changed the way he spoke with them in private since that time.

Alexei smiled. “Indeed. I believe it will suit your fancy.”

“Oh?” Konstantin returned Alexei’s smile, wondering when the last time he’d seen such a soft expression on the young duke’s face was.

Every time he saw Alexei, Konstantin couldn’t help but compare him to his father, Aleksandr. With each passing year, Alexei’s appearance resembled Aleksandr’s *more* and his

personality *less*. The father and son were polar opposites on the inside.

Just like Mikhail and Alexei, Konstantin and Aleksandr had been playmates when they were young. The same went for the head of the House of Yulmagna, Georgi. However, Konstantin had never gotten along well with Georgi. He was far closer to Aleksandr—the radiant youth loved by everyone. Konstantin had considered him a close friend as a child.

After entering the Magic Academy, however, the two had grown apart. Konstantin hadn't been able to tolerate Aleksandr's behavior with the ladies, but that hadn't been the only reason. He'd slowly realized that Aleksandr's flawless facade as an accomplished swordsman and intellectual masked nothing but emptiness.

The emperor shook away his thoughts of the past and accepted the purple velvet box from Alexei's hands. He opened it before tilting his head to the side in confusion.

The three long, thin glass objects Alexei had given him were beautiful. The tip of each of them was made of clear glass and crafted into a spiral, but the main body was different on all three cylinders. The main part of the first was made of purple glass decorated with gold leaf and enamel paint depicting the emblems of the God of Thunder, a snake and wings. Purple was the color of the emperor, while the emblems of the God of Thunder were considered auspicious. The imperial family was especially fond of the God of Thunder because Pyotr the Great had wielded lightning mana.

The second cylinder was also purple. On the tail end, the glass was sculpted into a lion's head: the very embodiment of a monarch. The lion's head was rather small and only made up the tip of the glass cylinder, but the work was neat and precise. Even the emperor, accustomed as he was to pieces of fine art, was impressed by the delicate touch of the artist.

The third and final cylinder was far simpler than the other two; it was just two filaments twisted around one another. The first was blue like the summer sky, and the second was teal like the waters of the southern sea. They clearly represented the hair colors of himself and the empress, and Konstantin couldn't help but let his mind wander. He pictured her beautiful hair, almost always styled in an updo, loosened and flowing while he carded her teal locks with his fingers.

A strained smile took over his features. That was a sight only *he* got to see in the privacy of their bedroom. He had no business thinking of it in a meeting room, especially not in front of a child barely older than his own son.

"They're beautiful," he said. "But what are they?"

"They are glass pens, Your Imperial Majesty. And their refined appearance is not their greatest asset. With these, one can write far more fluidly, and for far longer with one dip of ink, than with a quill. I'm honored to present such a revolutionary writing implement to you."

Konstantin could hear the pride in Alexei's tone. Mulling over Alexei's explanation, he picked up one of the glass pens. He dipped it in a nearby inkwell and tried it, letting out a hum of admiration as soon as he started writing. Just as Alexei had said, the feel of the nib on the page was smooth, and he managed to write several lines before running out of ink.

"This suits my fancy indeed, Alexei. What a great invention," Konstantin declared with a smile. This innovative writing tool combined beauty and practicality to perfection. *She* was sure to like it too. "Where did you find such a thing? Was it made in the empire or bought from abroad? I haven't heard of the Yulnova Duchy starting to dabble in the glass business."

Alexei hesitated for a second before replying, "My sister, Ekaterina, had them made at the workshop she owns."

"Oh, did she, now?"

"My sister has never shown an ounce of greed, so I was surprised when she asked for a glass workshop. I bought it for her, then received such glass pens as a birthday present," he explained. Alexei took out the blue velvet box he kept in his pocket and showed his light-blue and indigo pen to the emperor. "The artisan in her employ made her dream a reality, but Ekaterina was the one who thought of the initial idea. She's now enthusiastic about marketing her glass pens so as to pay wages to her workshop's employees herself."

Konstantin smiled as he listened to Alexei do his best to sound as unconcerned as possible. It was hard to believe that a young lady who'd lived in seclusion until recently could've devised such a groundbreaking idea, but at the same time, it made no sense for Alexei to lie to him about something that he could easily verify. If anything, Alexei looked as though he would've rather concealed the fact that his dear sister was

behind this invention.

Alexei did not wish for the emperor's opinion of Ekaterina to become *too* good. As far as Konstantin could surmise, Alexei really didn't want her to become the next empress, so he'd been reluctant to answer. However, he was wise and knew not to lie to his emperor.

Ekaterina? Truly? the emperor wondered.

Konstantin remembered her appearance during the imperial visit. The thin girl had worn a twilight blue dress that made the paleness of her skin stand out. Her mature beauty was so striking that she outshone the radiance of the extravagant gems she donned. She hardly looked like a fifteen-year-old child. Furthermore, she'd engaged in conversation with the empress without a hint of timidity and had shown great interest in topics such as tariffs and insurance, which were usually far removed from young ladies' concerns. The girl was Alexei's sister and Sergei's granddaughter. If she truly was behind the glass pens, she took more after Sergei than the emperor had imagined.

"So, she'd like to commercialize glass pens," the emperor said. "Does the young lady of Yulnova intend to manage the workshop on her own?"

"She says that since she requested I buy the workshop, it is her duty to take care of it," Alexei answered.

Konstantin laughed. "She wishes to pay her employees wages and take responsibility for their livelihoods? What an exemplary sister you have."

While he did not want the emperor to value Ekaterina too much, Alexei couldn't help but smile with pride at Konstantin's words.

"Very well," the emperor concluded. "Then, you shall pass on a message to her: I'll purchase some glass pens from her. They will be a gift for the empress, so they must be as beautiful as these."

Anyone close to the imperial family knew that Konstantin would purchase anything he received that caught his eye so he could give it to the empress. He'd done everything in his power to impress her since their student days, and he didn't intend to stop! People only gifted the emperor the finest items they could find, but Konstantin carried it a step further, selecting only the cream of the crop for his empress.

Alexei's eyes gleamed at Konstantin's words.

"You honor us, Your Imperial Majesty. My sister will be

overjoyed."

"Speaking of which, I'm glad to hear Ekaterina seems to be in good health. Her body is frail, is it not? How is she faring?" The emperor remembered how fragile Ekaterina had seemed.

"Thank you for your concern, Your Imperial Majesty. She has accustomed herself to life at the academy without much trouble so far. However, the temperature will soon rise in the capital. I worry about how she will handle the heat."

"Will the two of you go back to your duchy for the summer holiday?"

"That is my intention. A year has yet to pass since I inherited my title, and I still have much to do to secure my control over my duchy."

"I see." Konstantin pretended to think for a moment before adding, "The royal astronomers predicted that this summer would be particularly hot. Would you mind if I sent Mikhail over to your duchy for the second half of the summer holiday?"

Welcoming the prince into his territory and showing the people of his duchy that the new duke and the crown were on good terms was a great opportunity for Alexei. Nevertheless, his expression shifted ever so slightly. Mikhail was doing his best to woo Ekaterina, Konstantin assumed. Had she finally stopped treating Mikhail like a pest, displeasing Alexei?

Eventually, Alexei said, "Of course not. It'd be a great honor for us to welcome His Highness. However, I have only succeeded to my title recently and Ekaterina is not used to being the lady of the house. I fear we may not be able to host him as he deserves."

Konstantin nodded at Alexei's reluctant answer. "I don't mind. He's yet to officially be made crown prince. You can treat him as casually as you please."

The heir to the throne was only appointed crown prince in an official capacity after graduating from the Magic Academy to make such processes less strenuous. At the same time, it helped princes preserve their honor even if they suffered romantic setbacks at the academy, as had occurred several times in the past.

The emperor's reply left no room to argue, so Alexei bowed and accepted it. "Thank you for your understanding, Your Imperial Majesty."

The corners of Konstantin's mouth lifted. "I know you have

Ekaterina to fill in for now, but you should not leave the position of duchess empty for too long. How about looking for a fiancée at the very least?"

Alexei was caught off guard, and a dumbfounded expression washed over his features.

"Well..." he mumbled.

This child doesn't seem too fond of women, the emperor thought.

He could see where the tendency came from. The woman who'd been closest to him for the longest time was his grandmother. He'd also grown up witnessing his father change lovers at the drop of a hat. Aleksandr had been the kind of man who'd watch women he'd been with fight until one shed blood, then tilt his head in confusion as though it was someone else's problem, saying, "Why would they do something so stupid?" Aleksandr's reputation as a philanderer was well-known, and women sometimes approached Alexei—who so much resembled his father—with similar intentions. He must've been fed up with them.

On the other hand, that was *exactly* why Konstantin wanted this serious child, so unlike his father, to find himself a nice woman with whom he could build a loving family. As the emperor, part of him hoped for it so that the House of Yulnova, a tremendously powerful dukedom, would stabilize. But, for the greater part, he was just worried about Alexei.

"I've decided to consider such matters after I graduate from the academy," Alexei said. "I ask for your patience."

"Oh, that's right. I remember now."

That was a lie; Konstantin knew Alexei's intentions, but he'd asked anyway because he could see that, while their personalities were opposites, Alexei had the same magnetic charm his father had wielded so freely.

Suddenly, Konstantin recalled something that'd happened when Alexei was very young. At the time, he and the heir of Yulmagna, Vladimir, had still been the best of friends.

Alexei and Mikhail had both been outstanding youths, but as far as studies went, neither could hold a candle to Vladimir the prodigy. As a child, Alexei had been strict on himself and others alike, but he'd been unconditionally soft on Vladimir. Though Alexei was picky about whom he gave his respect, even back then he'd earnestly praised those that he recognized, like

Vladimir.

One day, Konstantin had peeked at the children studying, as he often did. Mikhail hadn't been in the room at the time and Alexei had been showing a poem to Vladimir. He'd then asked the boy if he could recite it from memory.

"I've read it once, so I can."

"I see. That's amazing."

"No… I'm just good at remembering things. There are birds that can repeat what they hear, you know. Parrots. I'm just like them, nothing more."

"Well, I can't seem to see the beauty of poetry when I read it. Apparently, I lack the heart to feel it. But, when you recite poems, they sound beautiful to me," Alexei said, his eyes gleaming as he grinned. "If parrots can make every word sound as lovely as you do, I would like to keep one. How happy I would be if I always had a bird that spoke in your voice by my side."

The emperor could still picture how red poor Vladimir had turned.

Konstantin hadn't walked into the room. He'd only watched, wondering whether Alexei would grow up to become a more wicked lady-killer than even his father. The sight of the young boy so innocently delivering such a perfect pickup line to one of his friends was foreboding.

For better or worse, Alexei only opened up to a handful of people. When he finally fell for a lady, Konstantin believed he'd capture her heart in a flash and devote himself to her forevermore.

Sadly for him, ever since his friendship with Vladimir had died off, Alexei hadn't found anyone else who was special to him. Instead, he'd dedicated all of his love to his sister. Under those conditions, would Mikhail's love for Ekaterina ever come to fruition?

"Welcome home, brother."

I greeted Alexei in the entrance hall after he returned from the ducal meeting that had taken place in the imperial palace.

"Thank you, Ekaterina."

The ducal meeting, which was an assembly made up of the three Grand Dukes of the Yulgran Empire and the emperor himself, was akin to an imperial council. Needless to say, formal attire was required and Alexei looked even more dashing than usual upon his return. He was the picture of nobility. No matter what I had on my mind, the dreamy sight of Alexei always took my breath away.

I was in the middle of staring when Alexei said, beaming, “Just as I thought, the emperor was most pleased by your glass pens. He immediately ordered more as gifts for the empress.”

“Oh, I’m glad! I’m so glad!”

I’d initially wanted to present Her Imperial Majesty the Empress with a set of glass pens as well, but Alexei had stopped me, saying that we would gamble on the chance that the emperor would want to give them to the empress himself if he liked them. Apparently, our grandfather had often proceeded this way. His presents to the emperor had been more or less veiled suggestions of things he’d thought the emperor ought to give his wife. I knew one of his hobbies had been matchmaking, and I imagined encouraging good marital relationships between the couples he’d helped form had been the natural continuation of it.

Although, come to think of it, the current emperor was our grandfather’s wife’s nephew. Perhaps his involvement in the emperor and empress’s relationship had less to do with his hobby and more to do with concern for his nephew-in-law who’d fallen head over heels for Magdalena. Thinking of the future father of the nation in this way was quite something.

“I have another piece of good news,” Alexei said. “When Duke Sein saw the emperor’s glass pens, he told me that he, too, wished to acquire some and insisted that his order be prioritized right after the emperor’s. A prominent merchant from beyond the Summit of the Gods will visit him soon, and he wishes to use one when signing the contract, to show him the beautiful, outstanding writing tools our empire has invented.”

“My! What an honor!”

The emperor, the empress, and two out of the three grand dukes would be using my glass pens! I couldn’t dream of a better lineup to establish my brand image. Plus, if Duke Sein used my glass pens in the presence of a foreign merchant, they might place an order to gift some to *their* monarch! I knew I was

daydreaming at this point, but it wasn't impossible, was it?

Yes!!! I win this round!

"When I told him that you were behind the idea, Duke Sein requested to meet you. He's knowledgeable about domestic and foreign trade, so I believe there is much for you to learn from talking to him." Alexei paused before saying, "To tell the truth, you were the main topic of our meeting today. Magna was dejected."

Alexei let out a little laugh at the memory. He seemed to be in a great mood. The thought of the grand dukes and the emperor discussing me made me want to hide away for the rest of my days, though. I wasn't so special as to be discussed at such a prestigious meeting. But, if Alexei was happy, I was happy.

I had much to do. First, I had to focus on improving the glass pen production process. I also needed to bring the Murano Workshop back to life even more so that other artisans could craft glasses and other such staple items that we'd sell to turn a profit. For their sake, I would meet with Master Murano's former disciples tomorrow and try to convince them to return to the workshop.

Yet another big assignment was figuring out how to price our most luxurious, expensive product: glass pens. The thing was...I had *no idea* what price was appropriate!

Boo-hoo! Halil, save me!



I went to find Halil a little later and asked him to help me decide on a price for the glass pens. In response, he smiled and boldly announced an amount. As soon as the words left his lips, I froze.

"You mustn't look so surprised, my lady. If you don't make it that expensive, you'll embarrass His Imperial Majesty. Besides, you will find it difficult to cover all expenses without asking for that much."

"I-I see," I stuttered. "My pens will soon be gifted to the empress, after all."

If his gift was too affordable, the emperor would lose face. Halil was also right to bring up the workshop's expenses.

Remember the accounting systems you developed in your past life, girl! Picture the balance sheets—the profit and loss statements!

Was the purchase of the workshop considered “debt”? Or was it capital investment? I wasn’t sure, but either way, I had to generate enough profit to offset that. Then there were the labor costs, material costs, fuel costs, and a ton of miscellaneous expenses to cover. I had to earn enough to exceed all of these to have a positive balance.

If the buyers didn’t mind glass pens costing as much as jewels, that meant it was the appropriate price. After all, this was the price of the one and only luxury writing tool in the world!

Don’t freak out! You got this!



The next day, I headed for the Murano Workshop with Mina. Lev was waiting for me there, along with four former employees of the workshop.

As soon as I entered the workshop, I felt a change: the *heat*. Lev had just turned on the kiln to make more glass pens, but somehow, the heat of the flames felt like the heat of a living organism—as if the workshop had roared back to life. The white pieces of fabric covering various parts of the workshop had disappeared without a trace, and countless tools were neatly lined up on shelves. The quiet vigor of the place was almost palpable.

“My lady, thank you very much for joining us here.”

“Lev! I have a wonderful announcement. Oh, before I move on to that, I’d like to thank all of you for meeting me today. I’m Ekaterina Yulnova.”

I smiled at the artisans…and they all froze.

We settled in the corner, next to the sofas. I sat down, but the artisans seemed stressed and did not, while Lev also remained upright. He was the only one already employed here, but he was also the youngest, which explained his hesitation to sit before his seniors. Although, from what I knew, the Murano Workshop gave employees privileges based not on their order of seniority but rather on their skills, so that was probably Lev’s subdued personality shining through.

Since he seemed uncomfortable leading the conversation, I would.

“First off, I have some news for you, Lev. Brother… Rather, the Duke of Yulnova presented the emperor with the glass pens that

you made yesterday. He liked them so much that he decided to give the empress a set and placed an order immediately."

A wave of shock reverberated through my audience. For artisans, having their works presented to the emperor was the greatest honor there was. On top of that, the emperor himself wanted to purchase Lev's work to gift to the empress!

"Furthermore, the Duke of Yulsein saw the emperor's glass pens and expressed great interest in them. He's eager to purchase some as well. So, I will need you to craft two more sets of glass pens as soon as possible. One for Her Imperial Majesty the Empress, and another for the Duke of Yulsein."

"Wh-What a great honor. It's all thanks to you, my lady. Thank you so much," Lev said, bowing deeply.

"None of this would've been possible if not for your technique, Lev. As things stand, you're the only artisan in the world who can craft glass pens. Let me assure you that I intend to foster an environment where talented artisans such as yourself can focus on their craft as comfortably as possible." I smiled at Lev before looking at the four other glass artisans in the room. "If I'm not mistaken, you each used to work at the Murano Workshop. Is that right?"

"Yes," they replied in unison, bowing to me.

"I know you now work for different workshops, but would you consider returning to the Murano Workshop? I can promise you better working conditions and wages than you currently receive."

The artisans had yet to reply, but I could see they looked excited by the prospect. My conversation with Lev had clearly affected them to an extent.

"The glass pens we've recently developed will become the workshop's new flagship product," I said. "However, plenty of customers still wish to purchase the elegant glasses and plates that used to be the trademark of the Murano Workshop. That is why I need artisans who've learned from Master Murano to come back. If you do, you'll focus on producing such works while learning how to make glass pens when possible."

"May I ask you a question?" The man who'd just spoken, the oldest here, was tall and very thin.

"Yes, of course," I replied.

"Thank you." He was polite. Master Murano had taught his workers well. "Why are you, the young lady of the House of

Yulnova, taking charge of a glass workshop? You will certainly be married in a few years. What will become of this place once you are?" he asked.

Polite, but what a sharp question!

"You're being rude!" Lev screamed, throwing away his usual calm demeanor before turning to me. "I'm so sorry, my lady!"

I did not take offense, however, and simply smiled. "It's fine, Lev. That is a legitimate question. In fact, I'm glad this topic was brought up." I'd almost replied, "That's a good question!" with the same tone as that famous journalist I used to see on TV in my past life.

The most senior artisan in the room was a smart guy. Even in Japan, women tended to go through big life changes based on their marital situations. In this world, these changes were far more drastic, since women couldn't usually make decisions regarding their own lives. When considering things logically, it made sense to assume my situation would soon change and force me to let go of the workshop.

I didn't want to leave my brother's side, and my brother seemed perfectly content to grant me that wish, but the workers had no way to know that. They didn't want to go through the trouble of changing jobs only to find themselves unemployed in a couple of years.

"I am indeed the person in charge of this workshop," I said. "However, as you pointed out, my situation may change in the following years. But worry not—the workshop belongs to the House of Yulnova. If I cannot care for it anymore, someone else will take my place. Your employer will be the House of Yulnova, not me as an individual, and your contracts will reflect that fact."

I took out a piece of paper and handed it to the oldest artisan.

"Here is the contract you will be signing," I continued. "I've drafted it with our house's legal advisor. If we breach the conditions written here, you'll be able to claim justice for breach of contract as per the laws of the empire. I believe that, as things stand in the capital, artisans are paid for each day of work regardless of how much work they do. I wish to do things differently. You will receive a base salary and additional bonuses for each completed piece. We've calculated the amounts to ensure you'll make more than in the other workshops in the capital even if you work at a leisurely pace. If you choose to put in more effort, you'll be rewarded for that."

No unpaid overtime will be had in this house!

"However," I added after a pause, "you *absolutely* mustn't overwork. I urge you to please respect that rule. You'll find a few other conditions in the contract, such as a no-dismissal guarantee unless for a justifiable and legitimate reason and details on the compensation you'll receive in the event of a work-related incident that would leave you unable to work. Feel free to bring home these unsigned versions to review and discuss with your families."

I handed the three other men contracts and let them think. I had a good feeling about this.

Lev signed on the spot, with a glass pen prototype he'd made previously. I could feel the others' souls burn with interest at the sight of the pen and smiled. I hoped they'd come back.

Fingers crossed!



Come to think of it, these past few months have been crazy, I thought as I sat in the classroom, listening to the teacher conduct homeroom.

Today was the end-of-term ceremony. The first semester was finally over, and the summer holiday would start tomorrow.

Somehow, the entrance ceremony felt so close yet so far. A lot had happened recently, including the imperial visit and the whole *Project Something* situation. Reflecting on it, at the very start of the school term, I'd been a hundred percent focused on lowering the doom flags that threatened both the empire and my life, but I'd taken care of the former by pushing back the monsters that had attacked the academy. Well, *Flora* had done that.

As for the second flag—admittedly, I'd started out swearing I'd never approach the heroine or the prince but…

Stuff just happens, you know? By now, we were friends and talked practically every single day.

The heroine Flora and I were pretty much best friends. To be honest, she was a great friend! She always worked hard, and she was kind, smart, and a little reserved, but strong-willed underneath that. Even as an adult on the inside, I respected her from the bottom of my heart.

I also often chatted with the prince. Not that I could help it; *he*

always approached us! Besides, I did my best to guarantee that he and Flora could interact. I, the villainess, fully supported the love of the heroine and the prince!

Speaking of the prince, he often snatched some of the lunch that Flora and I had cooked as we toted it to my brother's office. He requested it, so we couldn't resist feeding him. He truly ate a lot for such a beanpole. Afterward, he praised us and the food without fail, so it wasn't such a bad feeling. Even after I learned that my brother wasn't too fond of sweet treats, I still made some because I knew the prince would rejoice. It wasn't only for him, though. Plenty of people loved sweets. *I* loved sweets!

At this point, I'd realized the prince was a genuinely good guy. While he was intelligent and had an impressive depth to his thinking, he didn't usually show it. I wasn't sure why he acted that way, but I assumed it had something to do with the fact that he was destined for the throne. It was as if he liked to step back and give others room to shine and share their ideas so that he wouldn't end up turning into a tyrant—or so I imagined. That level of restraint at his age was quite something, and I thought he was impressive in a different way from my brother.

Not to mention, Flora, the prince, and I were also friendly rivals when it came to grades.

I'd been certain that Mikhail would give the end-of-term exams his all, so I'd also studied as seriously as possible. The results had ended up as follows:

First place: Mikhail Yulgran.

Second place: Flora Cherny.

Third place: Ekaterina Yulnova.

I'd fallen all the way to third place! Eh, but I'd done my best, so that was that. After my loss, I'd sincerely congratulated the prince and Flora.

The two of them were amazing. Actually, I thought it was possible the prince had gotten *every* question for *every* topic right. Flora and I had compared our answers, and I was sure we'd scored quite high, yet Mikhail had scored even higher!

I still remembered his conflicted expression when he'd seen the results.



"Whew, I'm so relieved. It's the first time I've ever felt this

way," the prince had said.

This must've been his first time fighting for each point so fiercely. I was a bit frustrated by my own results, but I was happy for him—his efforts had been rewarded. Besides, having played an important role in an event that would remain in the memory of the future emperor was an honor.

Anyway, my brother was so desperate to comfort me that my frustration disappeared in the blink of an eye. He insisted that it couldn't be helped because I'd been too busy with the workshop and that what I'd been doing had far more value than mere school exams—all that while hugging me and patting my head right in front of the result board!

I'm kinda glad I got third, actually! This is the best reward!

Despite what Alexei told me, though, he'd managed to maintain his rank throughout the years, even after inheriting the duchy and being busier than ever. I couldn't compare to him.

"Brother, you spoil me too much. I'll become a good-for-nothing at this rate," I said without thinking.

Alexei stopped his hand and looked at me with a dejected face. "Have you come to dislike the way I treat you?" he asked nervously.

BOOM! My heart fired a rocket of love so powerful it left the stratosphere and flew into outer space in less than a second. *Oh, how blue is the earth from above!*

Okay, what am I even saying?!

I hugged Alexei as tight as I could and assured him I'd never dislike him or the way he treated me. From the corner of my eye, I could see the prince press his hand to his forehead as though he had a headache.

"How am I ever supposed to catch up?" he whispered.

Catch up with whom? You're first already!

I suddenly noticed that there were a bunch of girls around us including Marina and others from my class as well as some third-years (Alexei's classmates, I thought).

Everyone turned up, huh? They must've all tried their hardest for these exams!



I was glad Flora, the prince, and I got along so well, but *one* issue remained—I still had no idea how my fate as the villainess

would turn out! I had a feeling things would be fine but...who knew? Even the monster attack, which I'd seriously doubted would occur, had taken place just like in the game! How could I be sure that I wouldn't suddenly be judged for my (nonexistent) crimes? The thought scared me!

It was a bit late to say this, but I wouldn't get any closer to Mikhail!

Please don't talk to me, Prince! Go invite Flora on a date or something!

Sadly, screaming in the privacy of my own mind was not going to achieve much. I needed a plan to bring them closer. The issue was that I sucked at anything romance related, or so I'd been told by my friends many times in my past life. I didn't see what was so wrong with me, but they'd claimed *I* was the root of the problem.

I couldn't deny that I wasn't very popular. I also sometimes gave weird guys a shot. My friends had always asked why I ignored the good guys and met up with the weirdos, but I didn't remember ever ignoring anyone! I really didn't see what I possibly could've done wrong.

In this life, I'd gone beyond the "sheltered girl" category into the "secluded-from-the-world girl" category! Whenever I thought about my mother and everything she'd gone through because she'd fallen in love with the wrong man, I felt like swearing off men entirely. The only man I could trust was my brother.

Hang on, I'm just realizing that even without my memories from my past life, I would've been a hardcore Alexei stan in this life too.

On an unrelated note, I'd really done a lot yesterday! After the exam results had come out, Lev had given me two clear glass pens—prototypes he'd made while trying new things—so I'd called Flora and the prince to a pavilion located on the school grounds and had given one to each of them. I'd told them it was to encourage them to study hard, so we could keep a healthy rivalry going.

Flora and I often studied together, so I felt bad using a convenient writing tool while she had to use a quill. I thought that by bringing the prince into it and saying it was my way of celebrating the three of us coming in first, second, and third place, Flora would accept it without hesitation. The prince had also worked hard, so I figured he deserved a little celebration.

To be fair, I'd hesitated because I wasn't sure gifting a

prototype to a prince was appropriate, but I figured it was fine. Despite his status, he was still a child, so giving him a valuable gift to celebrate his efforts for an exam was overkill.

At any rate, both Flora and Mikhail found the pens delightful.

The glass pen I'd gifted to Mikhail was the same size as the ones I'd given my brother. I was surprised to see that his hands were roughly the same size as well! He was pretty tall, so I shouldn't have been so shocked. Would he get taller still? When I considered that, I sensed that he might have grown a bit since the beginning of the school year.

After that, the three of us had started discussing our plans for the summer holiday. I'd heard from my brother that Mikhail would visit the Yulnova Duchy during the second half of the holiday and, as expected, that topic came up.

That was when I'd suggested something...



"Lady Flora, would you like to visit me in the Yulnova Duchy alongside Prince Mikhail? The thought of being unable to see you until the start of the next semester saddens me deeply."

"I will miss you greatly, Lady Ekaterina, but I..." she'd trailed off.

Ah. Right. As a commoner, Flora couldn't possibly ask Mikhail if she could accompany him. That would be preposterous.

I glanced at Mikhail, again, and again, and again.

He *eventually* took the hint.

"Oh. Hmm... Flora, if you're not opposed to the idea, I'd like for you to accompany me to the Yulnova Duchy. The trip would be far more pleasant with some company!"

YES!

"Do you mean it? If you truly are fine with me imposing on you..."

"Of course! More than fine! I mean it. In fact, I was thinking I'd like a chance to chat with you at length."

YES! YES! YES!

I'd panicked when I heard from Alexei that Mikhail would be visiting us, but this was great! The most desperate times often brought along the greatest hopes! This visit would be my chance to bridge the distance between the heroine and her love. And the *trip*—a trip together would definitely boost their mutual

affection level, wouldn't it?!

This was a brand-new game event brought to you by yours truly, the villainess herself!

Break a leg, Flora! I'd really outdone myself. *That's some great work, me!*

We continued chatting. After I told Mikhail and Flora that I'd initially wanted to create glass pens because I wanted to give one to Alexei for his birthday, I asked: "Speaking of which, when is your birthday, Prince Mikhail?"

"On the tenth of April. It's long past."

Huh? That was right after the entrance ceremony, during the time I hadn't attended classes because I'd fainted! *Huh?! Seriously?! In other words…*

"You're already sixteen?!"

"I am. You didn't know?"

No, I didn't! I was convinced you were still fifteen!

I couldn't recall the number of times I'd thought Mikhail was doing great for a fifteen-year-old! Well, to be fair, as a woman close to thirty, fifteen and sixteen were roughly the same age…but still! Urgh. Why was he born so early?!

Seeing me all flustered, Mikhail laughed and said, "I think that's the first time someone's ever asked me when my birthday was. What a new feeling."

Ah… Sorry, Prince!

Come to think of it, he was the one and only son of the emperor and empress. The entire empire must've celebrated his birth, so his birthday was most likely common knowledge, wasn't it? Somehow, I, one of his *relatives*, didn't know!

"I wish Alexei would have told you a little more about me," Mikhail added.

Wait! This isn't my brother's fault!

"Prince Mikhail! I will not *stand* for it if you bad-mouth my brother! If you say that again, I shall face you in a duel!"

I'd never practiced any martial art, but I was one of the best at magic in our school year!

Come at me, if you dare*!*

In response, the prince was silent. Then, even worse—

Hey, Prince Mikhail! Don't laugh at me!!!

"Please don't move, my lady! This is the last one, I promise."

"How many times have you said that already?" I sighed, out of strength.

Still, I did my best to pose without moving a muscle. I stood with my back turned toward the tall, broad-shouldered, middle-aged man sketching me with my head turned toward him. This man was the wood sculptor who'd been hired to create a replica of the statue of the Goddess of the Night, also known as the Spirit of Twilight, that we'd seen at the Sun Sanctuary.

Apparently, he had been seeking a model to make the replica more realistic than the original statue when the priests of the Sun Sanctuary told him that I was pretty much the goddess's manifestation in the flesh. Hearing that, he'd respectfully—but ardently—requested that I become his model. Since Alexei and I had asked for the statue to be replicated because it looked like mother (rather than out of religious devotion), making me the model made perfect sense. The thought of refusing had really never crossed our minds. In fact, we had even halted our travel preparations to make time for this modeling session.

"My lady!" Lev exclaimed.

Lev and another glass artisan had just been led to this room by one of our maids. They looked around restlessly. Though they seemed relieved to have reached me, the second they laid eyes on me, they almost gasped.

"Sorry, Lev," I said without moving. "Could you give me a moment?"

"Yes, of course. Hmm..." Lev paused. He took out the sketchbook and glass pen he carried on him at all times before asking, "May I also sketch you, my lady?"

After the wood sculptor—finally satisfied with his sketches—took his leave, I led Lev and the other artisan to a small drawing room.

Mina brought us tea and I took a long sip before we started talking. I'd just been standing but I was dead tired! A wooden statue was a three-dimensional object. That meant the sculptor needed to sketch the model from every angle.

"Please have some," I said, urging Lev and the other man to enjoy the tea and snacks. "Thank you for coming all the way here."

"It's an honor to have been invited to such a wonderful place," Lev answered.

The two men bowed. The other artisan was a man in his late twenties with dark green hair and amber eyes. He had the air of an intellectual, yet his square jawline gave him a bit of a stubborn vibe. He was here to apply for a job at the Murano Workshop.

The four ex-employees of Master Murano I'd seen last time had all agreed to come back to the workshop. They'd even brought me their copies of the contract signed the very next day. Apparently, when they'd discussed the conditions with their respective spouses, they'd urged them to switch jobs immediately.

What I hadn't expected, however, was that our employment contracts would encourage other glass artisans to come knocking on our door asking if we'd consider hiring them. The Murano name remained well-known in the empire. First, the workshop had been saved from the brink of destruction by an influential, wealthy family like the Yulnovas; now, it was producing new, groundbreaking objects *and* offering favorable working conditions. With all of that, the applicants had come flocking!

The working conditions of glass artisans employed in the workshops of the capital were usually fairly bad. Most artisans tended to leave to open their own workshops once they became skilled enough, which meant that most employed artisans were apprentices—and treated as such.

Thus, the conditions I offered were everything the artisans dreamed of. They could increase their wages through effort but would not be forced to push themselves if they did not wish to. They'd receive compensation if they were hurt, and the best part: A written contract signed by both parties guarded these rights.

Even though the Murano Workshop had yet to start operating at full power, it was worth betting on. At least, that was what a lot of the incoming artisans believed.

Interestingly enough, we also received some unusual applications.

"You're Yegor Toma, a lens artisan, correct?"

"Yes. The workshop I was employed at recently closed down. I heard about your business at around the same time. I'm aware I'm grasping at straws as I'm no glassblowing specialist, but I'm good at detail work. Is there any way you could hire me?"

This man crafted glass lenses for a living. In a way, it was

related to glass, but as he himself admitted, it wasn't the same thing. Still, when I'd received Lev's letters mentioning him, I'd immediately replied that I wanted to meet him.

Why? Because of a worry I'd kept from the others from the moment we'd decided to put glass pens on the market. In my previous world, the golden age of glass pens had been very, *very* short. New, more practical writing implements, such as ballpoint pens or fountain pens, would be developed sooner or later. Since there were no alternatives to quills at the moment, an affordable line of glass pens could certainly take over the world for a while—but the bigger the market share we occupied, the harder the fall would be once it was inevitably supplanted. When that time came, the impact would threaten the workshop's survival.

If we could secure the glass pens' position as a noble writing tool, however, it had a better shot of enduring. Continuing to produce glass tableware could also help dilute the risks. However, there were plenty of other glass workshops who could usurp us.

Despite dealing with similar problems, the Japanese glass artisans of the twenty-first century had found a way to continue to thrive. How? They had become lens makers! Lenses were vital for optical equipment, medical equipment, and other fields that had grown during the twenty-first century. If we started raising precise, talented lens makers, the Murano Workshop might still stand in a hundred years, long after glass pens fell out of fashion. That could help protect the jobs of the other employees as well.

"I've invited you here because there is something I'd like you to craft. It involves lenses," I said. "Are you familiar with microscopes?"

"Microscopes..." Toma thought for a moment. "I have heard the name before, but I've never seen one with my own two eyes."

Microscopes were already a thing in this world, but they were still primitive and only allowed people to see things a tad larger than they would with a regular magnifying glass. It wasn't a popular implement—only scientists and those who loved curiosities owned one—so most people didn't even know they existed. The House of Yulnova owned several, though. Our grandfather had purchased them for Isaac to use for his research. As a result, almost all of them were with Isaac in the duchy, but one microscope had been left in our residence at the

capital.

I showed Toma the microscope and asked him to teach me how to use it, since he was the lens expert. After that firsthand experience, I said, “I’d like you to build me a microscope with a different form than this one.”

As I explained, I made a rough sketch. “The object to magnify goes here, on this stage. And I want you to add a mirror under it. Make sure the angle can be adjusted. It’ll provide light so that the object can be viewed properly.”

The microscopes of this world did not have the same design as those from my past world. There was no stage on which to deposit a specimen. You had to put your specimen directly on the table, which made the observation process difficult. Just matching the shape of the microscopes I knew would be a big improvement.

“There’s something else I’d like you to study,” I continued.

It wouldn’t happen right away, but I wanted to bring achromatic lenses to this world eventually. An achromatic lens, or simply an achromat, could correct colors and limit distortion. To make one, you had to combine a convex lens and a concave lens, which had different refractive indexes and dispersion.

Uh, I think! I’d attended a lecture on the history of microscopes during my university days, but I only had vague recollections of it. Actually, I was surprised I still remembered *this* random piece of information. *The human brain works in mysterious ways.*

“Two kinds of lenses?” Toma replied. “You have the strangest ideas…” Then, he seemed to realize that his phrasing was pretty rude and bowed in apology.

I mean… You’re not wrong. Though they’re not my ideas at all! I’m just parroting what I learned in my past world. I’m the one who’s sorry!

“Well, what do you say?” I asked.

“I’m not sure I can achieve it, but it does sound incredibly interesting. I tend to get absorbed in my work, so I can hardly wait to get started. I have so many ideas I want to try out already… Being paid to indulge in such pursuits is more than welcome,” Toma said with a smirk.

That smirk and his earlier comment told me he had quite a brazen personality.

“As long as you document your progress, you will be paid.”

I probably wouldn’t be able to make any money off his

research for a long time, but that was fine. In my past world, erasable pens had been a hit. However, developing the special ink that went in them had taken over thirty years. Apparently, the researchers had initially thought that ink that could change color with frictional heat was an intriguing idea, but it hadn't occurred to them to make it transparent from the get-go. Sometimes, you just had to pour money into research projects that seemed novel, even if you couldn't tell exactly what would come out of it.

Well. I could only say that because of the abundant funds of the House of Yulnova.

I'm so sorry for relying on my noble house for everything!

"I'll have an employment contract readied. Please make sure to read it thoroughly before signing," I said.

"Thank you. I'll do just that," Toma said.

Excluding Toma, whom I'd heard out directly, I'd let Lev check the skill level of the applicants and hire those who met the standards of the Murano Workshop. With that, I had a system in place to expand the business.

"I'm sorry for leaving the capital so soon after the workshop restarted work, Lev."

"Please don't apologize, my lady. You made sure to arrange everything before your departure. Thanks to you, I'll be able to leave the sales to the specialists and devote myself to crafting glass pens for Her Imperial Majesty the Empress and the Duke of Yulsein. I feel like I'm living in a dream."

"You've made that dream a reality through your talent and effort, Lev. Make sure not to get too engrossed in your work while I'm away. No matter what, do not neglect your health."

"Yes, my lady."

Lev bowed as deeply as he possibly could before offering me a long and narrow box.

"This is something I made to relax while I was crafting His Imperial Majesty the Emperor's pens. It's nothing much but...if it's all right with you, I'd like you to have it."

"My!" I said as I opened the box.

Inside the box was a glass hair ornament shaped into a single rose blossom: a *blue* rose.

"How beautiful! You created such a masterpiece on your break? You truly are a genius, Lev! I'm impressed! How much would you sell it for?"

“No!” he exclaimed before clarifying, “I was not asking for payment. I just wanted to give it to you to express my thanks.”

“I’m delighted. You’re very kind, Lev,” I said with a smile.

Lev looked away, his face flushing red, and Toma patted his shoulder, a knowing grin on his face. I wasn’t too sure what there was for him to know, but I was impressed by their camaraderie! They’d only met each other a few days ago, yet they already seemed to be such good friends. That was great. Friendly employees made for a better working environment!

I smiled brightly at them, pleased with that fact.



As always, Ekaterina had missed the mark beautifully.



“Brother,” I called out as I walked inside his office.

Immediately, Alexei stood up. “I’m sorry for asking you to come by when you’re busy preparing for our departure, Ekaterina. I’m sure you must be tired after posing for the sculptor.”

“Not at all. It was a curious experience, but I had fun.”

In truth, I *was* tired, but I *had* enjoyed myself. Seeing sketches of my body from every angle was quite unique. There were no photographs in this world, so I’d never seen what I looked like from the back before.

Oh no!

I just realized I’d missed my chance to get the artist to sketch my brother too! If I had, I could have carried a little picture of him with me every day! Well, the real deal was by my side, so I supposed I didn’t *really* need it.

Alexei always looked the part of a dignified, noble gentleman, but now that summer had come, he’d started donning the slightly more casual summer uniform: a shirt with no jacket. The shirt almost resembled outerwear because of its design and the silver thread embroidery that decorated it, but it made Alexei’s slender yet muscular body stand out more than usual—a sight for sore eyes! I was very thankful for the change of season.

“Allow me to start with pleasant news,” Alexei said. “Halil.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Halil smiled at me. I often saw his agreeable

smile these days. “We received a large order of Celestial Blue from the Sun Sanctuary, all thanks to the donation you suggested we make. After the House of Yulnova shouldered the cost of redecorating the shrine of the Queen of the Night with Celestial Blue, the number of worshippers exploded. People now praise the beauty of her shrine. This prompted the priests of the Sun Sanctuary to purchase more pigment to renovate the rest of the sanctuary.”

“How wonderful!” My advertisement had borne fruit, just as I’d hoped!

“First of all, they’ll use Celestial Blue pigment to paint a large mural in the main shrine. They also plan to hang Celestial Blue-dyed decorative curtains around the sanctuary during the summer solstice celebration of next year. They want to make the worshippers feel as though they’re walking through the sky. An interesting idea, wouldn’t you say?”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from the popular Sun Sanctuary! The priests there know how to win over the hearts of the people,” I said.

When I’d visited it with Alexei, I’d noted the extravagant decor—*so* extravagant, it had reminded me of the Vatican. Now, they planned to make it even more dazzling. Religious facilities in my old world had to be extraordinary to convince worshippers that the gods and the afterlife were far above their ordinary lives. Even in this world where magic and monsters existed, this had not changed.

“Rather, I believe the fact your idea won over the hearts of the people proves that *you* are a goddess, Ekaterina. Though, I find myself wishing you wouldn’t gather believers so I can remain your one and only worshipper. Forgive me,” Alexei said, taking my hands in his and kissing my fingertips.

Aaah! I’m so happy! Alexei’s rose-tinted filter is working wonders today!

“Celestial Blue is a cheap but gorgeous dye. This only happened because of its great value, not thanks to me! Besides, everything I do, I do for *you*, brother. My everything already belongs to you.”

“Thank you, my sweet Ekaterina.”

Ah! As usual, the blue of his eyes looks so *gentle!*

I did my best to give back to him, but my brother was so good to me that I felt like I’d never be able to repay him.

Back to the topic of conversation! “Mr. Halil, I recently consulted my designer on the matter, and I’ve decided to have each of my new dresses include Celestial Blue for the foreseeable future. I wish to popularize Celestial Blue in our duchy.”

Camilla, my designer, had been delighted when I’d let her know my intention.

“No one suits Celestial Blue as well as you do, my lady. Besides, working with such constraints is just the motivation a designer needs!”

Celestial Blue dresses were growing more and more popular in the capital thanks to the empress. Camilla, who’d adopted the trend earlier than other designers, was being praised by the fashionistas of the capital for her foresight, and Halil and his subordinate made sure to provide dyed fabric to her preferentially and at a bargain.

That’s what every business deal should be: a win-win transaction!

“Thank you,” Halil said. “Just as you said, Celestial Blue provides great value. However, we were only able to make people realize that so quickly thanks to your wit, my lady. I cannot accompany you to the duchy, but I’ll be expecting great results.”

“It’s a pity but I suppose it cannot be helped. The heart of the empire’s trade is the capital, after all…”

Advisors took turns at Alexei’s side depending on his needs, but Halil was pretty much always there. I relied heavily on him as well, especially when it came to my workshop and the glass pens, so the thought of being away from him was somewhat disheartening.

I also understood there was another reason. While it was true that his work was better accomplished in the capital, I suspected Halil wasn’t keen on leaving the city because his foreign origins were obvious at a glance. Not every region was as welcoming as the capital. The Yulnova Duchy wasn’t *historically* a place where discrimination was strong, but nowadays, a certain someone’s bad influence still lingered.

And by a certain someone, I mean the damn old hag!

I’d never asked about any of it directly, but I’d pieced some things together after visiting my brother’s office so frequently.

For seven years after our grandfather passed away, our grandmother and our father had lived in the capital. However, before that, they'd lived at the main residence in the duchy. With his political duties, our grandfather couldn't leave the capital and the old hag had been more than happy to avoid him.

The two of them hadn't lived as shut-ins, though. They'd visited the capital whenever they'd felt like it so that the old hag could try to bully the empress (still crown princess at the time) or do whatever other stupid things that witch had enjoyed doing.

Anyhow, my point was, the main residence in the Yulnova Duchy had been the hag's stronghold for a long time. There were still plenty of servants there who—like Nonna whom Alexei had dismissed—had been tainted with our grandmother's ideas.

Speaking of that awful environment, my dear brother had been raised in the main residence where she'd been nothing but strict and cold to him. At around six or seven, our grandfather had brought him to the capital and taken over his education. When he'd turned ten, however, our grandfather had passed away and Alexei had returned to the duchy. Our grandmother and our father had dumped most of the work on him, but he'd also used that to distance himself from them and spend most of his time with Novak and his other subordinates. He'd still visited the capital from time to time to see the prince, though, as he was his playmate.

I'd seen my brother several times from the windows of the secondary residence where I'd been trapped. In hindsight, I assumed these occurrences had all taken place after he'd turned ten and returned to the duchy.

"Kimberley," Alexei called.

Halil bowed and retreated while the duchy's financial advisor stepped forward. He carried a large briefcase with two keyholes. It looked sturdy, like a portable safe.

"Ekaterina," Alexei said. His tone was as gentle as ever, but I reflexively straightened my posture. "I wasn't sure whether to tell you about this or not—an ordinary lady should not concern herself with such things. However, I believe you have what it takes to lead the duchy with me. You've proven it to me many times over. Do you wish to hear what I have to say?"

"If you've judged me worthy, I will listen, brother—no matter what."

"You're too good," Alexei said before adding, "Kimberley."

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Kimberley took out a key and unlocked one of the locks. Alexei then handed a second key to him, and then he inserted it into the remaining keyhole, turning it to the side and opening the briefcase.

Security is tight, huh? Inside the briefcase were several sheets of paper.

“My lady, this is a list of the embezzlement cases we uncovered after a thorough investigation of the accounting ledgers,” Kimberley stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

Embezzlement cases?! I can’t believe it! My eyes shot wide open in shock.

“Kimberley was grandfather’s financial advisor before he was mine. No one knows the financial affairs of the Yulnova Duchy better than him,” Alexei said. “Yet when grandfather passed, he was immediately dismissed.”

I don’t need to ask who fired him, do I?

“Others, like Halil, were unjustly dismissed,” Alexei continued. “But Kimberley was the first, and his dismissal was always the most mysterious to me. Still, he and Halil, as well as many others, valued their oaths to serve the House of Yulnova faithfully and remained by my side. Novak helped me keep them together and create an effective organization through which we could manage the duchy.”

Oh! Like the shadow cabinet!

The shadow cabinet was a group of the opposition in the United Kingdom whose purpose was to be ready to act as the real cabinet the moment their party rose to power, or so I remembered. Alexei’s organization was more of a *literal* shadow cabinet, though—one that acted in the shadows, secretly making the duchy go round.

“As soon as I inherited my title, I restored them to their rightful positions. There were plenty of problems to fix in all areas, but the financial issues were the direst, so I ordered Kimberley to devote himself to a wide-scale investigation. What you see here is the result.”

The situation was so bad that the financial advisor had to devote himself to the task in person. Wow. My eyes fell on the documents Kimberley had handed me. The formatting was simple and easy to follow: a date, an item, and a sum.

I see. This all started after grandfather died. Wait! It started right

after! Look at these amounts! What in the world?! If I convert the first line into yen it's roughly…a hundred million yen?!

Only the very first amount recorded was that ridiculously huge, but the next ones were still pretty large! Most were in the tens of millions…

Hang on! Here's another hundred million! And another?! Did they lose all sense of restraint?! They're embezzling a hundred million yen almost every month!

The sum of the damage in the first year alone was mind-boggling.

"Hmm. May I ask where the man who replaced Lord Kimberley as financial advisor is?"

"Missing," Alexei said carefully.

Surprise washed over me once more. Then, I looked at the bald man with an aquiline nose. His expression was stern, but I couldn't read anything in his silver eyes.

I wasn't sure why, but I had a feeling both he and Alexei knew where the missing man was. I *also* suspected I was better off not knowing, so I decided not to push the matter. Instead, I continued to read the list, the second year next, then the third. The amounts written at the end of each line grew smaller and smaller, but there were more pretexts and more lines each month. In the end, the total sum each year was roughly the same.

I assumed they'd made up random, fabricated reasons for the large amounts of the first year. After noticing that it was difficult to falsify on the ledgers, they'd moved on to snatching less daring sums off existing transactions.

Ah. My eyes stopped on a specific item and I gasped. *Secondary residence budget*, it read.

The funds allocated to the residence where mother and I had lived had been embezzled and disappeared to who-knew-where. I read the number at the end of the line. It was a small amount for the living expenses of a duchess. If that small amount had made its way to us, we wouldn't have had to ration our food, and we could've purchased clothes…

"Ekaterina!" Alexei exclaimed, noticing what I was looking at. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry…"

"It's all right, brother."

My thoughts wandered. Alexei had known where mother and I were, but he'd never tried to get us out of that place. After

grandfather had passed, he must have felt so alone and sad. He'd wanted to see mother so badly, yet he'd endured and only allowed himself to go past the secondary residence from time to time. He'd done that because he'd believed that mother and I would be safer there than within grandmother's grasp. He'd still been a child but had put his needs second to protect us. Back then, he couldn't have imagined that our living expenses were being embezzled.

How had he felt when he'd learned the truth and understood how we'd been forced to live? He must've realized it when he saw mother in her last moments.



Even on the verge of death, she'd called for father—the one responsible for everything that had happened to us. Alexei had pretended to be him, answering her in the softest voice he could muster, even though his heart must have been torn to shreds.

"You did nothing wrong," I told Alexei. "I know you only ever tried to protect mother and me."

"Ekaterina..."

Don't look so sad. You're still young—a child who was never allowed to be one.

Heartbreaking as that was, the list was far from over.

Individuals had embezzled the emergency relief funds and reconstruction funds meant for the people of the duchy left and right. The Yulnova Duchy was vast, but the yearly landslides and flash floods couldn't be explained by its size alone. They certainly had to do with the reckless deforestation that had been practiced until recently. There were also cave-ins from improper care of the land.

Overall, the paper was a dull read, but its implications were terrifying. How many had lost their livelihoods because the relief funds had never reached them? How many could have rebuilt their lives with the help of the duchy but had instead been crushed under the sole of the embezzlers' schemes?

"You've seen enough, Ekaterina. You don't need to look further. I'm sorry. You're a gentle girl. I shouldn't have shown you this, knowing it would hurt you. Forgive me."

"I'm fine, brother. I will not let you carry this burden alone." I could feel the tears pooling in my eyes, but I held the paper firmly.

Alexei looked at me, a worried expression on his face, before nodding.

"All right... Allow me to add something regarding the relief funds. I've been sending whatever relief I could manage separately from what is written here. Three years after grandfather passed, I noticed that the funds often failed to reach the people when I rode out to survey the damage. Forli and Granduncle Isaac also realized what was happening, and we coordinated our efforts to alleviate the people's suffering. Still, while I suspected it, it was only after I became duke that I was able to see the scale of the embezzlement."

"I see. You're truly amazing, brother."

He'd surveyed the damage himself? Three years after

grandfather's passing, Alexei would only have been thirteen. A boy so young had gone to such dangerous places? Alexei had always exuded the air of a respectable nobleman. Had he walked through disaster-stricken areas until he'd been covered in mud?

I wished I could make our deadbeat father eat the dirt and mud under that poor boy's fingers. Alexei said he'd done what he could to send relief, but I could only imagine how hard it must've been without any access to the duchy's treasury, how stressed he and his supporters would've been!

"You exerted every effort for the good of the duchy even before you inherited it," I said. "You deserve all the praise in the world."

If my dear brother had not been so incredibly outstanding, how would the duchy have fared?

I supposed the economic power of our household had also helped, if such sums could disappear without anyone batting an eye or noticing anything. The gross domestic product of the Yulnova Duchy was most likely well beyond the equivalent of hundreds of millions of yen. However, without Alexei, the dissatisfaction of the people would've kept rising until public order eventually deteriorated beyond repair.

At last, I finished reading through seven years of embezzlement. The total of all the financial damage recorded at the very end gave me goose bumps.

Thirty billion yen. Seriously? Is that amount for real?

Who'd taken all that money? And to what end?!

Wait, that first question was stupid. Who else but the greedy old hag?

But *why*? Had she embezzled money to spend on luxuries? That made no sense! She'd already bought whatever she wanted. Even with all the dresses she'd purchased, her spending had never reached such ridiculous levels.

This all reminded me of a story from my past life. It was about a company president who'd embezzled ten billion yen from his own company to fund his gambling addiction. Our father had also spent his days womanizing and gambling, but the Yulnovas were far too rich for him to have needed to embezzle money to cover his gambling debts. From what I'd heard, he'd been content to let his gambling opponents claim the money from the duke's residence's butler. He'd never worried about making payments himself.

Where else could that money have gone, then? Such large sums over the course of seven years… What could burn through so much money?

I suddenly thought of the French Revolution. People often claimed that the luxurious spending of Queen Marie Antoinette had dried up the French treasury, but the truth was that the financial difficulties of the French kingdom had their roots in war expenditures. Maintaining troops was costly, incredibly so. When I considered that, I just so happened to know a family who kept a large knight order and was struggling financially.

Yulmagna.

Alexei had once told me that Georgi had visited frequently back then.

I lifted my head and asked, “Brother, Lord Kimberley, the financial advisor who went missing…which family introduced him to us?”

“He came to us bearing no letters of introduction so no proof remains,” Alexei answered. “But we now know he was from Magna.”

I closed my eyes. *Bingo.*

Yulmagna had sent us a financial advisor and had him funnel money to him—and our grandmother had let it all happen.

I knew she had no sense of decency and couldn’t tell right and wrong, but how could she allow another house to steal so brazenly from us? Was she so nuts that she hadn’t seen how messed up this all was?!

Well, hang on. Maybe I’d been too hasty in accusing her and she hadn’t been involved at all. Embezzlement didn’t fit her style. She’d lived her entire life convinced that she was the most righteous, noble lady in existence. Would she have abased herself to steal so sneakily when she could have just taken what she wanted? She’d even thought that concerning herself with money was below her. It simply didn’t add up. Had the Duke of Yulmagna deceived her?

I couldn’t help but let my thoughts catch like a fish on a hook at Alexei’s words. There was no proof that the financial advisor was from Magna, yet he *knew* it? How? And the man was missing…

Stop. I shouldn’t think of such things.

“Brother… This residence you’ve occupied since you assumed your role of duke, I know that you’ve bent it to your will.

However, the place we're about to return to, our main residence, is still corrupted by the influence of those who dared do such things, is it not?"

"Sharp as always, Ekaterina. Indeed. I cannot say whether they knew of Magna's involvement, but there are those who aided these crimes. I have purged the main culprits but many remain. Even within our relatives and the smaller houses of the duchy, there is no shortage of people who'd jump at the first opportunity to fill their own pockets. I showed you this so that you would be aware of that fact—but let me promise you one thing. I will not let them or anyone harm you. They know what fate awaits them if they so much as attempt it."

Alexei…

His smile was a sight to behold, of course, but so was his fierce face. The very temperature of the room went down. For once, it wasn't because of his magic. His beautiful, cold determination, befitting an evil ice prince, chilled the atmosphere.

I was putting the pieces together. The hateful messenger who'd forcefully dragged my mother out despite her illness had certainly been one of the old hag's servants. *He'd* gotten what he deserved. As for what exactly Alexei had done to him, I supposed I was better off not knowing, just like with the previous financial advisor.

"Thank you for telling me all this, brother. As the lady of the House of Yulnova, I shall oversee the main residence with caution."

The many dresses that had been made without consulting me during the short time I'd spent at the main residence crossed my mind. They'd been beautiful, but hadn't suited me in the slightest.

It all made sense now. The servants had treated me carefully out of fear of Alexei, but they'd made sure to show their animosity toward me in other ways. This passive-aggressive concealing of one's intentions under a fake smile was just what I expected from grandmother's pawns.

When the emperor had praised Alexei for managing his estate and territory so well, my brother had replied that he didn't deserve this praise and still had much to learn. Now, I understood that he wasn't being modest. He'd meant it.

The main residence had been the old hag's headquarters for a

long time, so I'd already made up my mind to confront her remaining goons when we visited. However, I never would have imagined their malice ran so deep. I was thankful Alexei had confided in me.

There was the matter of the Yulmagna too.

Some time ago, Alexei had told me that there'd be constant strife, even within our own class. I would never have guessed he meant it in such a direct way. Embezzling another house's money? They'd really gone and done something outrageous!

I'd noticed that my brother seemed to hate Yulmagnas, but I hadn't understood why. Now, I saw everything. He was perfectly justified.

There were no rules and no morals in a fight between houses.

The financial situation of the House of Yulmagna had to be dire for them to resort to such crimes. I couldn't help but wonder...had that witch known or not that Georgi was stealing from us?

"If you do not want to go to the main residence, you may remain in the capital, Ekaterina," Alexei said. "We have a vacation home in the suburbs. You'll be able to escape the heat there."

"No, brother. I will go with you. I feel safest by your side." I lacked the skills to manage a household properly, so I wasn't sure I would be of use, but I *refused* to leave Alexei on his own.

"Thank you... Your words mean so much to me. I will protect you without fail, as your brother, as your duke, and as your sworn blade."

Wow, how gallant!

All right! It's time to storm the main residence! Or, to put that less dramatically, it's time to go home!



"I saddened Ekaterina again. I shouldn't have shown her such a thing," Alexei muttered after his sister had left his office. He hit his desk with his fist, unable to bear the shame. "Damn that Magna dog!"

"It is not often I hear you speak so senselessly," Novak said with a stern face. "You judged it was safer for her to know of this before returning to the duchy, did you not?"

"I *did*. Ekaterina is clever. Now that I have shared this truth with her, she'll remain on her guard and avoid unnecessary

perils, and I expect she'll report anything off to me as well—but I can hardly bear to see her tears."

"That aside, for Yulmagna," Novak continued, "how about you start putting some pressure on them? Lord Kimberley has compiled a list of every payment they owe us that the previous financial advisor postponed. Asking for reimbursement of all of them at once is a fine way to get your point across."

"That will do for a start," Alexei said. "I would only be exercising a legitimate right, but it should still deal a considerable blow to them. Very well. When collecting the money, do not show any animosity but do it without fail. If Magna cries to His Imperial Majesty, we'll play dumb. Oh, and start spreading the word that Magna's finances have run dry to other houses and merchants."

Alexei looked at Novak then, his neon blue eyes shining with a cold light. "And what about that dirty rat? Will it be a long time yet before we can make him go public?"

"Quite some time, regrettably."

Alexei sighed. "He should confess before he's turned into something no one will want to look at. Make sure to train him well so that he testifies obediently when the time comes. Kimberley, are you still figuring out all of Magna's money sources?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Grace," Kimberley said. "There were financiers I suspected acted as relays, but they've all been murdered and their offices burned to the ground. Given the situation, I see no way to gather further intelligence."

At the sight of Kimberley bowing to him apologetically, Alexei's expression softened.

"I understand," he said after a pause. "Leave the rest to others. It's high time you returned to your main duties. I'm sorry you had to go through all that. You've done well, Kimberley."

"As you command," Kimberley replied, bowing once more. He seemed a little shaken, as though he hadn't expected Alexi to express his appreciation. He then returned the list he'd compiled to the briefcase and patted it.

After a pause, Kimberley added, "I must say, Lady Ekaterina is a kind and bright young woman. This list is nothing but a succession of numbers, but she seemed to see the struggle of the common people through it. Many of those who take part in financial affairs cannot do the same. I'm not sure how to best put

it, but she's not only intelligent, she exudes compassion. A most surprising disposition for a noble lady who has lived in seclusion for so long."

Little did Kimberley know that the secluded noble lady retained the memories of her life as a working woman, a commoner with experience developing accounting systems.

Alexei nodded.

"Indeed. She is wise and compassionate. Brave, yet able to sympathize with the weak. She's a strong girl." Alexei took a breath before adding, "I must pay great care to my safety. If something were to happen to me, she would become the Duchess of Yulnova. She'd do a fine job of it, but there are too many things I do not wish for a soul as gentle as hers to learn of."

"I will protect you, Your Grace, so that no harm ever befalls you. I've made a promise to her ladyship, after all," Ivan said as he tidied up Alexei's desk. His tone was light as ever.

Alexei smiled. "That's right."

"If something were to happen to you, I..."

Alexei remembered the way Ekaterina had said these words, tears rolling down her cheeks. One moment she was impressing Aaron with her keen insight, and the next she looked like a young child as she wept for fear of her brother's safety. This shift made her all the more lovely in Alexei's eyes.

Had Ekaterina been tasked to describe this feeling she would have exclaimed, "Gap moe!"

"Her ladyship is nice to everyone, but the way she always puts His Grace first is adorable, isn't it?" Ivan commented as he went to sort some items on Novak's desk.

"Ivan, don't move those," Novak said, glaring at him.

"Oh, my mistake. I thought you were done with them," Ivan replied.

Ivan's usual smile remained plastered on his face, but Novak could almost see him click his tongue inwardly. Much like Novak sensed from Alexei the second he said, "By the way, Your Grace, you mustn't put off the matter of her ladyship's engagement for too long."

"There's still time," Alexei grumbled.

"It's already far too late. Your decision to take a bride after you

graduate is fine because you can choose among the younger ladies. However, the same cannot be said for a woman. It is most appropriate for them to marry someone of the same age or older. To find her a good match, you must do so while she's still in school. For her sake if nothing else, I urge you to settle the matter as quickly as possible."

"If I may, her ladyship is so beautiful that any gentleman would jump at the chance to have her," Aaron interjected. "Even if they must break a previous engagement to do so."

Novak glared at him. "We could never let her ladyship anywhere near a man so fickle."

"You're right. I'm sorry for even suggesting it," Aaron said, withdrawing from the conversation, dejected.

Alexei still did not seem enthusiastic at the idea of finding Ekaterina a match, but Novak persevered.

"As you previously mentioned, Your Grace, her ladyship is the current heir of Yulnova since you have no children of your own," Novak said. "Even if she marries, she will remain so until the circumstances change. If she weds the wrong person and inherits, the House of Yulnova may very well experience a crisis more dire than that which we suffered under your father's leadership. As such, her betrothal is a grave issue. You do realize that, do you not, Your Grace? Besides, we must consider her wit and intelligence. Allowing her to marry into another house means giving those talents to them—a regrettable loss, as I'm sure you'll agree. As I see it, there are only two choices: the imperial household or one of our branch families."

Novak let out a deep sigh and continued, "As a subject of this empire, I wish for her ladyship to join the imperial family and become the mother of the nation. I do not believe any other lady is as suitable for the position. As empress, she would also become the greatest ally to the House of Yulnova as it threads the difficult path of making the use of prism circles a reality."

There was heat in Novak's tone and everyone in the room could tell he spoke from the heart. However, he shook his head. "Yet, her ladyship herself says she does not wish to be empress. You've promised her you would not force her to, and you mustn't break your word. This leaves you with only one option. Pick one of the Yulnova branch families—or find a promising young man—and create another branch anew around them. If you do so, the two of you can keep supporting each other as you are now.

She'll remain by your side."

"You're right," Alexei admitted, nodding. Novak was offering him a way to keep his dear sister close. "However, there's no one among the branch families to whom I could entrust her. If Andrei was still single I would have considered him but, well," he added, his tone teasing—a rare occurrence.

Andrei was Novak's son. He very much resembled Novak in his youth. Just like his father, he made a strong impression because of his fierce looks, but he was handsome and accomplished in both literary and military arts. He'd inherited strong mana from his mother as well. Regardless, Andrei was already married, so he couldn't be an option.

"I certainly never meant to include my son in the alternatives," Novak replied. "If you deem none of the current branches worthy of her, you can simply make a new one. Pick any young man from another family."

Novak so readily gave up on the idea of marrying Ekaterina into one of the current branches of the Yulnova family because he, too, could not think of an appropriate match.

"From another family, huh...?"

Alexei's eyes wandered to Aaron, his mine advisor, and Halil, his trade advisor. Daniil, his legal advisor, was also a possible choice. The three of them were young enough and single. Daniil was the eldest son of his family, though, so he couldn't easily discard his family name.

Aaron flushed red under his gaze. Out of the three, he was probably the best choice. His father, Count Kyle, was a wealthy and powerful man. He also happened to have five sons, so he would not mind marrying one into another family. Aaron also had strong earth magic and his scholarly air was suitable enough.

While he'd yet to marry at his age, there was nothing wrong with his character. He'd entered university after graduating from the academy to study mineralogy. That was how he'd met Isaac Yulnova. He greatly admired the man and had completely missed the window to marry because he'd spent his time conducting fieldwork with him. Because of that, he was thirty-one: twice as old as Ekaterina.

Halil was thirty-three, and anyone could tell he was a foreigner at first glance. However, he was the son of a great merchant whose wealth surpassed that of most small countries.

His exotic looks certainly caught the eyes of the ladies, and Alexei had no qualms with his character or capabilities. He wouldn't be a bad prospect to start a new branch family.

Yet after looking at both men intently, Alexei turned away, his face sullen. Aaron and Halil both forced strained smiles at his reaction despite the sweet, fleeting dream they'd entertained for a moment.

Novak pressed his hands to his temples in desperation.

"If you won't give her to a branch family, we must consider other families," he said. "The obvious option, when considering a house whose status rivals the Yulnova and whose son is of similar age to her ladyship's, is Lord Vladimir Yulmagna."

"Never!" Alexei exclaimed, slamming his hands on his desk. "It's absolutely out of the question! There is an unspoken rule discouraging marriages between the sons and daughters of the three grand ducal houses anyway, and the Magna treat women in the worst of ways! I will never give Ekaterina to them!"

Marriages between members of the imperial family and the descendants of the three grand ducal houses were common, which meant the blood relationships between these families were complex. For that reason, the grand ducal houses only married into the imperial family and avoided marrying their children to one another. At least, that was the usual pretext. The truth was that the imperial household heavily discouraged such marriages to keep the Grand Dukes in check—alliances through marriages could give rise to a counterpower.

"I'm aware, Your Grace," Novak replied. "Of both the unspoken rule and their ways with women. What was it—sixteen, seventeen years ago? When women's inheritance rights were made explicit and ratified into what they are today, the *only* house that opposed the idea to the very end was Yulmagna, thanks to Duke Georgi."

At the time, Georgi—who'd only just succeeded to his title—and his faction had fiercely opposed the crown prince and crown princess who, along with Prime Minister Sergei, had pushed for this law. Under the ancient Astra Empire, women had no right to inherit. Georgi's argument had been that the wisdom of old ought to be respected, not disregarded.

"When his son, Vladimir, was born in the middle of this debate, Duke Georgi boasted that any man could sire a son so long as he put in the effort. I remember it well," Novak said.

Had Ekaterina been there to hear of this, she surely would have channeled the spirit of a famous martial artist.

"Ridiculous," Alexei scoffed.

"I very much agree, Your Grace," Novak said.

"Vladimir once told me that his mother wasn't allowed to so much as read books in Astran. 'I'm so glad I wasn't born a woman,' he said." Memories welled up inside Alexei, but he shook his head to chase them away before returning his gaze to Novak. "Magna is a relic from the past. That blasted house will collapse on its own even if we ignore it. Would you have me give them Ekaterina just so I can deliver the coup de grâce?"

"You seemed eager to settle things," Novak replied. "If she won't be empress, she should at least be a duchess. Let her rule over the Yulmagna Duchy as its queen in all but name. With you and your sister controlling two of the three grand ducal houses, the House of Yulnova would achieve a historical victory. If she marries into a branch family, she'll be a countess at most—a title most unworthy of her greatness."

Alexei hummed. Novak had aroused his interest. Ekaterina reigning over the house that had hurt her and their mother would be the perfect revenge. Nevertheless, he soon shook his head.

"Don't say things you do not mean," he said. "Even if we pretended this is all to save Yulmagna from collapse, the imperial family would not allow us to gain such influence. Besides, a worthy title does not necessarily lead to happiness. She'd be alone, surrounded by enemies in a foreign place. I will not put her in such danger. Not to mention..."

"Yes?"

"...the Yulmagna Duchy is too far away."

Novak sighed.

Chapter 2: Journey

The Yulnova Duchy was far from the capital.

The trip took two weeks by carriage—an entire month in total to make the round trip. In other words, we'd spend half of the summer break on the road! Under these circumstances, not going home for the summer sounded like a much better option.

Thankfully, there was a quicker alternative: boats!

If we went up the Serno River, the large river that flowed through the capital, and continued to sail through one of its branches, we'd get to the duchy. Apparently, the wood we sold in the capital traveled along the same route.

During the Edo period in Japan or the medieval times in Europe, people had proceeded the same way. In fact, rivers had always played an important role in human history across the globe. Civilization flourished on the banks of the large rivers which were used to distribute goods and transport people.

Still, it was less convenient to sail upstream. The ships of this world weren't equipped with engines, so they couldn't do so very fast. As such, the trips still took several days…*usually*. The good news was, the empire did have a few special vessels that could sail much faster—high-speed ships. They were manned exclusively by sailors who could control either water or wind magic. There were several such ships in the empire, but they each traveled designated routes, so the Yulnova always used one named the *Rapidus* to travel to the duchy.

Such a peaceful and effective use of mana!

While that was my first thought, I later heard that using mana to speed up ships was a practice born in the empire's navy. It was kind of similar to the robotic vacuum cleaners of my previous world, which had also been created from military technology. It seemed like people were the same in every world, creating peaceful, cutting-edge technology based on things that had initially been developed for military purposes.

I looked at the slender hull of the ship anchored in the harbor. It was round and fairly flat, and I couldn't help but be reminded of robotic vacuum cleaners once more—specifically of the many adorable videos of cats riding on top of them.

Alexei, who was escorting me as usual, noticed me staring. “Ekaterina, are you scared of ships?”

He misunderstood!

“Not at all, brother,” I answered in a rush. “I was just remembering the first time I boarded one, when I came to the capital. I didn’t feel nauseous at all, and it was rather pleasant. Besides, I could never be scared with you by my side!”

“I see. We’ll sail for three days. If you start feeling sick at any point, let me know at once. I’ll arrange a different means of transportation.”

“Yes, brother. I shall do as you say.”

Alexei’s neon blue eyes were as gentle as they always were when he looked at me.

I can tell he’s as obsessed with me as ever! Thank you!

While he’d offered to change means of transportation if I wanted to, nothing else was as fast and practical as a high-speed ship. When a duke like my brother returned to his domain, his advisors, such as Novak or Aaron, and his servants, like Ivan or Mina, naturally accompanied him. Novak, too, had servants of his own. High-speed ships were great because everyone could sail together and you could even work—to some extent—during the trip.

Though, to be perfectly honest, I’d much rather he rested for once!

Such ships were also outstanding for safety reasons. There were some areas in the empire, rural areas in particular, where public order wasn’t the best. No one dared attack these vessels, where most of the crewmates were former soldiers from the empire’s navy and it was known that each sailor could use magic.

The *Rapidus* would take us up the Serno River and along its branch all the way to the Yulnova Duchy, and it would keep sailing at full speed, day and night.

As expected of a crew trained in the military!

Assuming the weather was clement, the entire trip including the last leg after disembarking to reach our residence would take us five days or six days—less than half of the two weeks it would have taken us if we’d ridden in a carriage for the whole trip!

The best part was that the ship was equipped with facilities fit for a duke. The interior was rather simple to keep the ship light, but it was elegant and comfortable, with good food on top of that. All in all, the vessel was as nice as hotels intended for

nobles. They were so nice, the emperor also used high-speed ships to get around. Actually, that was their main purpose! They'd only been made available to rent by other families thanks to our grandfather Sergei's efforts, or so I'd heard.

Needless to say, renting the *Rapidus* came at a steep cost, but the advantages were so great it was well worth it.

Heck, it may not even be that *expensive compared to the cost of transportation and accommodation for everyone for two weeks!*

My point in summing all that up was that thinking of canceling such a convenient means of transportation if I felt a bit sick was *crazy*. I couldn't allow it! In the name of my love for Alexei, I'd be more careful than ever not to fall ill so as not to bother him!



With my resolve in tow, I boarded the *Rapidus*.

As we left the dock, the weather was clear, and the ship advanced smoothly under the blue summer sky. True to its name, the *Rapidus* was faster than any of the other ships we encountered on the large river. I stood on the deck, my hair fluttering in the wind, and looked up toward the heavens. The sky's color was exactly that of the prince's hair and eyes—bright and deep, and somehow so far away that it made me sad for reasons I couldn't name.

This was the color of summer.

"It's hot, Ekaterina. You should go to your cabin," Alexei said.

"The wind is so refreshing that I find it quite pleasant here," I replied.

Compared to the humid Japanese summers of my past life, summer here was a lot easier to handle. Though, when I remembered my previous summer spent in the duchy, the capital was certainly a lot hotter. That said, Mina was by my side, a parasol in hand to shield me from the sun, so I didn't have anything to complain about.

"But if my being on the deck concerns you, I'll head inside to ease your worries, brother."

"Good girl." Alexei smiled and took my hand.

In the end, the two of us spent time together in his cabin, waiting until the hour for dinner drew near.

Ivan brewed us some fruit tea, and the refreshing smell of

citrus soon filled the room. Before we drank it, Alexei covered the pot with his hand and chilled it with his mana.

After sampling it, I said, “Thank you, brother. It’s delicious.”

“I suppose my attribute isn’t so bad if it makes you happy.”

The old hag and our deadbeat father were both ice-attribute mana users, so Alexei must’ve had conflicted feelings about matching them. My adult instincts urged me to pat his head, but I held them in.

“The capital is so large,” I commented. “We’re sailing so fast, yet we haven’t left the city.”

“Well, the city is continuously growing alongside the Serno River. However, we’ve actually departed the bounds of the capital. This is simply an area where refugees have settled.”

At Alexei’s words, I took another look at the houses I could see from the porthole. They were indeed much smaller and shabbier than the ones I’d seen earlier.

“I wonder if there are people from the Yulnova Duchy who lost their livelihoods among them…” That was to say, people who’d been struck by disaster and hadn’t received the help they deserved because the money had been embezzled.

“There may be. If their hometowns are restored and revitalized, they’ll most likely return.”

“Yes, they surely will. I shall endeavor to do what little I can to make it happen.”

If these people had built new lives for themselves elsewhere, it would be a different story. For those who were trapped in harsh conditions, they’d return if they thought life would be kinder in the duchy.

“You’re so kind and yet…” Alexei sighed. “So many others are consumed by greed. Wealthy as they are, they feel no shame stealing from those who cannot even support themselves.”

“You’ve spent all this time fighting against such people. You’re incredible, brother.”

He’d barely just turned eighteen, but he exuded might and dignity because of everything he’d experienced. After the monster attack on the school, I remembered thinking he’d looked like the headmaster’s boss and had done amazing picking his words, but I now realized the distance between the two of them came from their experiences. Despite their difference in age, Alexei had gone through so much the headmaster couldn’t even fathom.

Alexei smiled. “In the duchy, you are queen, Ekaterina,” he said. “I won’t allow anyone to defy you, so you may act as you see fit.”

“*You* are the head of our house, brother. As your younger sister, I shall support and serve you.”

“I am the head, indeed. Yet I am also your most devoted servant, my dearest queen.” Alexei took my hand and kissed the tips of my fingers.

Deep down, I was *screaming*. Servant?! The word felt almost forbidden, almost… *Argh, stop it, girl!*

“I’m still only a student,” Alexei continued. “And this will be my first time spending time in the duchy since I’ve officially inherited my title. I’m sure many will look down on me and call me a clueless youngster, but I will not allow anyone to be rude to you. I swear it.”

Ah, I get it.

I smiled fondly at Alexei. “I understand. We can measure your vassals’ loyalty by looking at the way they treat me. I’m glad I can be of use to you. Brother, please teach me about the duchy while we travel. I wish to know about the branch families and those who serve us. I, too, refuse to let anyone disrespect you.”

My fangirl heart won’t allow it! I was brimming with motivation just thinking about it, but I schooled my face and continued to smile peacefully at my brother.

“Thank you, Ekaterina. Your solicitude makes me happy. However, I would much rather you did not engage with such people. Your kind heart and your bright mind are better suited to other pursuits.”

Oh, you!

Wait a second—what am I doing feeling flattered? He’s excluding me from the team, isn’t he?!

As I reflected on that, I wondered seriously: Could I be of any use in the power struggle of the nobility? Yes, I had no intention of excusing those who dared oppose my brother, but could I handle them? In my past life, I’d mostly ignored the cliques that formed within my company. All I’d done was work, work, and work, since I didn’t really care about getting ahead.

Am I going to suck at this even worse than at household management?! B-But…I have to do my best for my brother’s sake!

“Brother, I wish to be of use to you. Give me a role to play to aid you, please,” I begged.

“Ekaterina…” Alexei took both of my hands in his. “You give me strength, so having you by my side is plenty, O gentle Queen of the Night, she who holds the moon and stars. Your presence alone brings me serenity and joy. I know how wise you are, and I have no doubt you would be a most dependable ally. Yet…you may laugh at a man’s foolishness, but I want to protect you. As a knight who swore his blade to you, my lady, I wish for you to live without ever knowing anguish. The thought of your contented smile brings me happiness. Please, my dear Ekaterina, grant my wish and allow me this.”

“Brother…”

BA-DUMP!

I’m dead. My heart is squeezing in my chest so hard that I’m starting to see the Sanzu River. Is that a flower field beyond? Is this what dying of cuteness is like?

“If that is what you want, brother, I shall do as you say. Always.”

“Thank you, Ekaterina. I’m glad for it.”

Our three-day boat trip ended without incident, and after thanking the ship’s captain and the crew, Alexei and I disembarked.

We were now in Yulnova territory. We’d gone pretty far up north and the wind was much cooler than it’d been in the capital. The buildings on each bank of the river were also different from those back in the capital. They were made of wood and bricks and looked similar to the architectural style you could see in Switzerland or northern Europe. The memories of my past life made me think of this style as exotic, but it also gave me a profound sense of nostalgia.

While I hadn’t always been happy at the secondary residence, I still found myself remembering the wind, the color of the sky, and the green of the mountains. It was my first time returning home since the memories from my past life had swelled to the surface. It felt strange, but at the same time, I had a strong sense of homecoming—this place was my home in *this* life.

Ah! My emotions are starting to get out of sync! That’s a danger signal!

I had to be careful not to pass out again, like after the

entrance ceremony.

"Are you all right, Ekaterina?" Alexei inquired, taking my hand gently.

The question brought me back to myself. "I'm fine, brother. The smell of the breeze made me a little nostalgic, and I got lost in my thoughts for a moment."

"I see." Alexei caressed my hair. "We have a full day of carriage riding left until we reach the duchy's capital. We'll take it easy and stop for the night, but if you feel sick, let me know."

"I will," I replied before adding, "Um, brother? Could you hold my hand?"

The one thing that connected my previous and current lives was my love for my brother! If I stuck close to him and focused on our battle to defeat the overwork flag that threatened him, I wouldn't get out of sync with myself.

The corners of Alexei's mouth lifted as he wrapped my hand in both of his. "I won't let you experience bitter memories anymore. Your *everything* is under my protection."

"Brother..."

You don't get it! It's not the trauma of confinement welling up. I'm sorry for worrying you with my annoying split-personality issues.

"With you holding my hand, nothing scares me. I'm frail and powerless, I know, but I intend to protect you so that neither of us ever experience any more bitterness."

"Thank you. You're so kind." Alexei smiled at me before lifting his head and addressing the people behind me. "Knights! It looks like you'll have less work to do in the future."

"Her ladyship hasn't changed. Despite her gentle demeanor, she says the boldest things," a clear voice replied.

I turned around and my eyes widened in surprise. "Lord Rosen!"

The fine-looking gray-haired man with a mustache—the knight commander of the Order of Yulnova—stood there, a group of knights neatly lined up behind him. He walked up to us and straightened his posture before placing his fist in front of his heart and bowing deeply.

While he and the other knights had worn ceremonial clothes for the imperial visit, they were currently garbed in their regular armor. Unlike the ceremonial clothes I'd seen last time, they appeared well used. The fading colors and scratches told the tale of their lengthy commitment to the duchy.

“Your Grace, your ladyship, allow me to congratulate you on your return.”

“I thank you for your efforts and courtesy,” Alexei replied.

As expected of Alexei! He could say the most old-fashioned line ever and look cool doing it!

“We, the knights of Yulnova, shall protect our master and lady until you reach the safety of the Yulnova Fortress.”

At Rosen’s words, the rest of the knights brought their fists to their chests and bowed. The controlled, synchronized motion was a beautiful sight to behold.

Behind the knights was a splendid carriage bearing the crest of the House of Yulnova, followed by several other carriages. They’d been sent by the main residence to welcome us.

I was surprised to see yet another group of knights neatly arranged around the procession. They were wearing standard armor, but some held flags bearing the crests of the order and of our house. There were four flag bearers, two next to the horses pulling the first carriage of the procession and two at the back. Each pair held one flag with our crest and one with the crest of the order.

I was shocked to see so many knights here. To be fair, I had absolutely no idea what an appropriate number of knights for an escort mission was, but this seemed like too many—*way* too many, even taking into account the fact that powerful monsters often lurked around the duchy.

Did they fear violent revolts? Alexei was young and had only just inherited, after all.

In light of that fact, I started feeling like this was actually a show, like a demonstration of the knights’ might—a way to declare to everyone that the Order of Yulnova firmly stood behind the new lord. That explained the banners flying side by side. The full support of the strongest military power within the duchy, the Order of Yulnova, was undoubtedly one of Alexei’s greatest assets.

The “Yulnova Fortress” that Rosen had mentioned was simply the main residence. I usually referred to it as the main residence in opposition to the residence we used in the capital, but most people in the duchy called it the Yulnova Fortress. It’d initially been a military stronghold when it was built four hundred years ago. After the empire stabilized, a city had started forming around it. That was the current capital of the duchy. The building

had then slowly been transformed from a military stronghold into a stylish residence. It was practically a palace nowadays. Despite that change, the people, and the knights in particular, still called it a fortress.

Alexei deserves the fortress and their loyalty!

While our shitty father had been busy playing around, Alexei had ridden alongside the knights to fight monsters and provide relief in areas struck by disaster. The support of the knights wasn't something our grandfather had passed on to him; he'd earned that himself. It was a bond that would never falter. At the young age of eighteen, Alexei held a firm grasp over the key power of the duchy. He never ceased to amaze me.

Come to think of it, this was only possible because the knights of our territory had stayed true to their values and fulfilled their duties to the people. In many other places, knights had become a decoration in fancy armor whose only occupation was to protect their lords. There were even places where they brought more harm than good to the common people.

Thank you for being the way you are, I thought, smiling brightly at Rosen and at the rest of the knights.

"How reassuring to have you with us," I said. "With the noble, powerful knights of Yulnova by our side, I would not even fear walking straight into a den of monsters. I shall enjoy the road home with peace of mind."

Rosen couldn't stop himself from smiling. I was glad he'd felt my sincerity.

"The people of this duchy were eagerly awaiting your return," Rosen replied. "Seeing the two of you here will bring them great joy."

Alexei had the support of the people too. I knew everything he did for the duchy, so I thought it was only natural, but I also assumed Novak and the others never wasted an occasion to let as many people as they could know that *Alexei* was the one doing the work. Bearing the burden was something, but if no one ever knew of it, it couldn't generate support for him.

Alexei smiled and led me toward the carriage. "Let us go home to your fortress."

"*You're* the head of our family and the lord of that fortress," I replied teasingly.

"Didn't I tell you that I was your devoted servant?"

As Alexei led me by the hand to the carriage, I couldn't help

but feel like he shouldn't be using the word servant like that...especially not in front of other people! But I supposed there was no stopping his obsession with me now.

The line of carriages headed by the two flag bearers stood out beautifully. The procession looked almost like a parade with the flags floating in the wind. It followed the stone path toward the Yulnova Fortress, our main residence.

This road, like many others, had been built in the days of the Astra Empire. It'd been improved and repaired many times but was still in use a thousand years later. In that way, too, the Astra Empire resembled the Roman Empire of my past life.

Whenever we passed a village, people came out of their houses and waved at the procession, cheering. Being able to feel their support for Alexei firsthand filled me with joy.

The children—the little boys, in particular—were excited to see the knights on horseback. Their eyes were full of stars as they gazed up at them, some even running along the side of the road to see them for as long as possible. These men were heroes to them.

Every time my eyes met with those of a villager, I smiled and waved my hand. As a totally normal person in my past life, I couldn't help but laugh at myself for acting like some sort of celebrity, but I was eager to raise my brother's approval rating as much as I could, so I buried that feeling and did my part.

As for Alexei, he gave me a strained smile and explained that he wasn't so good at these sorts of things. He didn't look outside the carriage at all.

Don't worry! I'll do my best for the both of us! I thought, smiling at everybody. I wasn't sure there was demand for a villainess's smiles, but oh well.

"The children are adorable," I said fondly. "Ah, look, brother, a little knight! He's all equipped too."

At my comment, Alexei looked out the window. He smiled at the sight of the small boy wearing a pot over his head and swinging a wooden stick. His mother, a rather young woman, was next to the boy. She turned bright red, assuming Alexei had smiled at her.

"You're being a great help, thank you," he said earnestly.

He said I was helpful!!! I was ecstatic!

"I'm so glad I can be of help to you, brother," I said aloud. "These people are welcoming us like this because of everything

you have done for the duchy so far. I wish I could show those who look down on you how much support you have."

"Smart girl," Alexei said.

One of the purposes of this slow-paced, parade-like procession was to draw out a reaction from the average citizen. This turnout would show the small lords and ladies of the duchy that the commoners and the knights alike backed Alexei.

Now, I didn't think Alexei himself had devised this plan. This sounded more like something experienced men like Novak or Rosen would do. I suspected they knew I'd figure out their intent (even if they didn't explain it to me) and cover for Alexei's weaknesses.

"Don't overexert yourself if you're tired," Alexei told me. "I don't intend to burden you with any duties; just enjoy the journey."

"I'm having fun! It's my first time seeing how the people of our duchy live."

I couldn't see any villages from the windows of the secondary residence I'd grown up in. All I could see were trees and their changing colors. Now, I could finally have a look at what lay beyond all these trees.

Actually, that wasn't exactly true. I'd seen villages on my way to the capital, but I hadn't been watching back then. My heart hadn't been in it. I'd just kept my eyes focused on the window to avoid meeting my brother's eyes.

With the memories of my past life back, I could now enjoy this in a brand-new way. The houses and clothes still really reminded me of certain parts of Europe. Most houses were made of white plaster and wood, and the commoners wore clothes with brightly colored embroidery. The scene seemed right out of that popular anime about a young girl living in the Alps.

From the abundance of cows and goats, livestock farming seemed prosperous in the area. There were also pigs and chickens here and there. I even saw a kid playing at being a knight try to ride a goat in place of a horse—but he was bucked off in a few seconds.

Leave the poor goat alone! It *was* adorable, but it was also dangerous! Still, I had a feeling it was a popular game among boys around here.

"They seem comfortable and at peace, but the livelihood of commoners is fragile," I mused aloud. "A drought, a cold

summer, a long spell of rain, a monster attack… There are so many things that could turn their lives around in a heartbeat. When I look at them, the true meaning of the numbers you showed me appears to me anew."

"Novak often says that examining the situation on the ground is crucial." Alexei paused. "You understood that without needing to be told."

Right, because I have a lifetime of knowledge with me. Sorry! That logic applied to my old line of work. You should always *study the way people work in the field before trying to devise a system for them.*

As always, knowing I was cheating made me feel a little bad about receiving his praise.

To distract myself, I asked Alexei to tell me more about this village. He immediately replied with its name, its population, its main production, and a brief summary of its history. Then, he told me that I was certainly the only lady in the world who'd enjoy a conversation on this topic and laughed.

We soon arrived at the place where we'd be spending the night: not an inn or a hotel but the residence of the lord in charge of this area.

The old, round-faced nobleman there welcomed us with a warm smile. From what I'd heard, he'd once been our grandfather's personal attendant. Alexei stopped by his residence whenever he was in need of a place to stay in the area, and he assured me I could rest easy here.

I was shown to a cozy—albeit smaller than I was used to—room and started relaxing. I spent some time admiring the gorgeous embroidery on the bedcover before enjoying a cup of the unusual herb tea the lord's wife had brewed for me.

As I looked outside the window, I noticed that people had gathered in the streets surrounding the residence. I opened the window and waved at the people with a smile but was surprised when they cheered for me.

I'm gonna blush! I almost felt like a princess. My mind then wandered to the prince, who must've dealt with similar things his entire life. *Bet it's tough sometimes. I should tell him "good job" the next time I see him… No, wait! Flora should be the one to praise him, not the villainess! I can't risk raising a flag!*

Lingering in the open window, I waved at the crowd for a while. It was getting late, with the sun starting to set, but there

seemed to be more and more people outside. I'd just bent forward to take a better look when a voice surprised me from behind.

"Ekaterina."

"Brother!" I exclaimed, turning around.

Alexei stepped into my room and joined me in front of the window.

"You must be tired," he said. "Don't overwork yourself. I shouldn't depend on you for these things when you're so frail."

"Don't worry, brother. I'm genuinely having fun. It's lovely that these people are cheering to welcome me."

"I can see why they would. Your beauty deserves every cheer."

"Oh, brother!"

I see the usual Ekaterina filter is in overdrive!

"If anything, *you* shouldn't push yourself too much," I continued. "I know waving at the masses isn't your cup of tea."

"Well, I'm not generally well-liked by others," Alexei replied. "And I was never good at putting on forced smiles. It might be because I've spent too much time thinking about how meaningless the goodwill and affection one can earn with superficial friendliness is. I suppose even my body rebelled against that prospect."

I could easily imagine that the true target of his rebelliousness was our father, a worldly man whose only talent was just that—showering others with fake smiles and charm.

"Yet, today, I've finally realized something. With you by my side, smiling comes easy."

"Brother..."

Alexei smiled softly and put an arm over my shoulder. At the motion, the crowd cheered louder than ever.

How shrill! I could hardly believe their enthusiasm.

We both waved in front of the open window for a while before Alexei spoke loudly.

"Thank you, everyone." His voice was clear and carried well. "Your welcome delights us. But the hour is late, so I urge you to return home and dine. We shall do the same."

At these words, Alexei closed the window, but right before he finished doing so, I heard someone scream at the top of their lungs: "I hope you live happily ever after!"

The following day, our party ended up departing from the lord of the territory's residence earlier than planned.

The capital of the duchy was close to this place, so we *could* have left a lot later, but people started gathering around the residence in the early hours of the morning. At first, we wondered what was going on, but it seemed like these people were hoping to get a glimpse of us siblings. The crowd grew quickly, far exceeding our expectations, and we started worrying we might not be able to get the carriages through if we waited any longer, so we left ahead of schedule.

I might *have overdone it*, I thought, sweating inwardly. Though, I couldn't have known things would turn out like that from waving at them a little!

Yesterday, the crowd seemed to have gotten the wrong idea and mistaken us for newlyweds. At the time I hadn't thought much of it and kept waving because it was expected of us. Now, it looked like—much as saying the truth wasn't always the best thing to do in every situation—sticking to the socially appropriate action wasn't always the best choice.

I also wasn't sure Alexei had understood what had happened. He probably thought that the people were trying to congratulate *him* for becoming the new duke and *me* for regaining my proper place as the lady of the House of Yulnova. I'd often been told I was clueless, but it seemed like my brother shared that trait with me.

As we prepared to move, Rosen came up to me and bowed, a composed smile on his face.

"Please do not worry, my lady. We, the knights of Yulnova, will protect the two of you without fail. Besides, the people love you and His Grace. I'm sure they'd be deeply moved if you were so kind as to grace them with your smile as you did yesterday. Please return to the Yulnova Fortress with your head held high, surrounded by the cheers of your people."

I wasn't sure why Rosen was suddenly so assertive, nor why Novak was in a similar mood.

Still, I guess it's a good thing that they're so pumped up! Likewise, I'll put my best foot forward for my dear brother's sake once more!

Thus, for the second day in a row, I waved my hand and smiled as the carriage moved forward. Strangely enough, despite all the smiling, my face had yet to cramp up. In fact, I was genuinely having fun! It was probably because everyone I

laid eyes upon grinned at me. It was easy to return the expression when someone showed it to you first.

While Alexei's demeanor was a little cold (as it always was), he also seemed to be enjoying himself. Whenever I saw someone that caught my attention in the crowd, I pointed them out to Alexei and tried to include him. He seemed to appreciate my efforts.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, what he truly enjoyed was watching me have fun.

After leaving the city we'd spent the night at, we would pass through several villages. Then, we'd just need to follow the highway built during the days of the Astra Empire to the capital of the duchy.

As we journeyed onward, whenever we approached a village, I was surprised by the number of people awaiting our passage. There were no phones or emails in this world, but rumors somehow still spread like wildfire.

Even by word of mouth, information travels fast!



Eventually, I saw the capital in the distance, far down the end of the road.

The capital of the Yulnova Duchy was often referred to as the northern capital as it was the largest city in the north of the empire. Assuming the imperial capital was Tokyo, it was located roughly at the same distance as Sapporo.

While the northern capital wasn't as large as the imperial capital, it was still one of the few metropolises in this world. From what I could see, the general atmosphere of the city was similar to that of the capital, but its architecture was a little different, giving it a unique appeal.

This city had developed around the Yulnova Fortress as a castle town. The unrest of the early days of the empire had led to the creation of many of those sorts of towns, but the long peace that'd followed had changed the way they developed. Now, most empire cities weren't strictly defined by their outer walls, as they had gradually grown outside of them, just like the imperial capital. The northern capital was no different, its buildings stretching far beyond its walls.

Still, the walls stood as a clear line that showed where the city

proper began.

“We’re entering the capital,” Alexei said after we passed the remains of a gate that reminded me of the Arc de Triomphe of Paris. It was smaller and older, and I could feel its long history.

At almost the same time Alexei spoke, the heralds of the order started playing their blowing horns. The melody announced the return of the lord of this city.

Even before the music sounded, there were people lined up on each side of the road to welcome us. After the horns echoed, and people started running out of their houses, though, the crowd doubled in size—before doubling again mere seconds later!

Wow! That’s crazy! I mean, I expected it, but there are so *many more people here than in the villages!*

The crowd was growing larger and larger by the second and everyone looked at us with stars in their eyes. When I waved, they waved back at me while cheering something similar to the Japanese’s “banzai.” It was along the lines of—

Oh, whatever! Let’s just say they’re screaming “Banzai!”

Suffice it to say, I could hear many shouts of “Banzai” and “Welcome home!”

We did *come home…*

I looked around at the unfamiliar scenery. I’d regained the memories of my past life in the imperial capital. Before that, I’d spent most of my life in seclusion at the secondary residence and had refused to come out of the main residence even after being freed. As such, I barely knew the northern capital. Even so, this place was my brother’s home and mine.

I looked into Alexei’s eyes and smiled. “Welcome home, brother.”

Alexei’s neon blue eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Right. I’m back, aren’t I?” he replied with a smile. “Welcome home to you too, Ekaterina.”

He took one of my hands and softly wrapped it with his own.

“This is your city, now—my queen’s capital. Those who live here shall bow to you, or I’ll remove them myself. I swear this to you,” Alexei said.

“I may have little power, but I shall aid you as well,” I replied. “I’ll pass judgment over those who oppose you.”

“You are most reliable,” Alexei said with a smile, half in jest. “Let us go, then. To the abode of demons.”

Before long, the Yulnova Fortress came into view.

My first thought was that it looked like a building I'd seen in a travel ad in my past life. I wasn't entirely sure about it, but I believed the building I remembered was Stockholm Palace in Sweden. Unlike the imperial palace—a castle with grandiose spires, just like out of a fairy tale—the Yulnova Fortress merged simplicity with elegance.

I looked at my home, which I'd left only a few months ago, and thought, *Damn, it's huge!*

It wasn't all living space, though. It contained a prefectural office, governmental office, trading company head office, reception hall for visitors, and more, all in one! Each part of the building had its own function. Still, this was *ours*—a whole World Heritage site!

I wonder, will UNESCO also exist in this world one day?

The procession advanced surrounded by cheers, just as the knight commander had predicted. The screams of "Banzai!" echoed all the way to the heavens.

As we approached, the gate of the Yulnova Fortress opened wide and more knights poured out, forming two neat rows on each side of the gate. The blowing horns rang out once again and the knights raised their swords while giving a fierce battle cry.

Accompanied by the screaming of the common people and the whoops of the knights, our carriage passed through the gates.

Chapter 3: Villainess vs Villainess

Alexei held my hand and helped me get out of the carriage. As soon as I stepped foot on the ground, the line of servants bowed. The next second, though…

"Lord Alexei!"

The words came from a high-pitched voice I'd never heard before. I looked to where the sound had come from and saw that servants weren't the only ones who'd arrived to welcome us. My eyes fell on a man and a woman—nobles, considering their fancy clothes. They didn't resemble one another that much, but they still seemed to be father and daughter. Behind them were more people whose clothes weren't as luxurious, but I still assumed they were nobles.

"Welcome back! I missed you dearly, my lord!" the young lady—who I estimated was roughly the same age as me—exclaimed, walking up to Alexei. She had vivid green hair and turquoise eyes. Her features were somewhat harsh but she was still beautiful. What *really* stuck out to me, though, was her hairstyle.

Tight sausage curls… I see you, you villainess*!*

As *the* villainess of this story, I sure was one to talk! I had harsh, strong features too.

Alexei looked at her coldly. She didn't seem to notice his chilly gaze and kept advancing with a smile on her face, almost pushing me out of the way.

I wasn't about to let that slide and leaned closer to my brother. She finally stopped in her tracks and glared at me sullenly. Though, once she realized I was Alexei's sister, her expression shifted almost immediately into a forced smile. Several other young ladies quickly followed suit, surrounding us.

Goons? Yep, she's got goons! Ha ha, I knew it, Miss Sausage Curls! You are *a villainess! Are we finally in for a showdown—the one true villainess, yours truly, versus Miss Sausage Curls, our duchy's local villainess?!*

"Kira, you're being rude. Lord Alexei, I'm most grateful to see you back in good health. Allow me, Novadain, to welcome you here for your stay as the representative of the branch families of the Yulnovas," Kira's father said, bowing.

He had yellow hair. Not blond hair, *yellow* hair. And his eyes were…a shade of orange? He had an attractive face and was all smiles, but I sensed a tinge of fakeness. I was also a bit annoyed by the way he'd worded his greeting. He made it sound like *he* was the lord of this fortress and was welcoming Alexei as his guest.

Now, then, how to react?

I was trying to think of something to shoot back when Mina stepped forward. She (dramatically) bowed to me and presented me with a folding fan.

"My, how thoughtful you are," I said with a smile. Unfolding it, I covered the lower part of my face before leaning toward Alexei. "Who might this be, brother?"

I tried my best to speak quietly yet just loud enough for them to hear me. I also stuck close enough to Alexei that Miss Sausage Curls couldn't possibly approach.

The corners of Alexei's mouth lifted as though he was about to laugh.

"This is Count Novadain and his daughter, Lady Kira. They're from one of our branch families," he replied.

"I see… How sad," I said, letting out a deep, *deep* sigh behind my fan. I made sure to put so little effort into concealing it that it was obvious to everyone there. "How can members, let alone the *head*, of one of our branches not know how to properly address the head of the main family? My chest hurts at the thought of all the rudeness you've had to endure so far."

"Do not trouble your heart over me. I do not mind," Alexei said. "However, I must admit I find the lack of respect shown to you, the lady of the House of Yulnova, difficult to forgive. Not a single greeting?"

Alexei and I both paused and scanned the father and daughter pair from head to toe.

Are we looking down on them? Yes.

Miss Sausage Curls glared at me while her goons…faltered? *No, that's not quite it. They're all red. Is it because Alexei is so handsome?*



Oh, come on! Looking all sullen and sticking close to your daddy won't help you. Comparing my brother and your daddy is like comparing Mount Everest and Osaka's Tempozan (Elevation: Four and a Half Meters).

If anything, her father, Count Novadain, had more sense. He flinched under our combined gazes. He soon moved past that, though, and shrugged, laughing a little.

"My, my, do excuse me, Your Grace," he said. "Please understand that I only acted the way I did because I wish to be a father figure to you, as your late father, my dear friend, would have wanted."

Wow, can you sound any more suspicious?

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Ekaterina," he continued. "I missed the chance to greet you at your mother's funeral. I hope you can forgive me for that. You're just as beautiful as your late mother was. Although she, as a paragon of a lady, was a little more patient."

His words pissed me the hell off. He was looking down not only on me but on our *mother* too. Had he taken advantage of her meek disposition to bully her alongside the old hag?

"Duke Aleksandr took great care of his friends and treated them all with equal kindness. He often told me I was like a brother to him and insisted I treat his residence as my own. I treasure his friendship to this day," Novadain added, throwing our father's name around as though it were some sort of immunity totem.

"I will not tolerate the same behaviors my father did. Never," Alexei said firmly. "If you truly believe my father's home to be your home, you're welcome to move into the mausoleum."

"What?!" Novadain was at a loss for words. He clearly hadn't expected such a harsh comeback.

Our allies—Novak, Aaron, and Rosen among others—chose this time to step forward and stand behind us and at our sides to support us.

"Why, if it isn't Viscount Novak," Novadain almost spat out.

As the heads of two different branch families, they must have had some rivalry going on. Without missing a beat, several noblemen (lesser nobles, I assumed) approached to stand behind Novadain.

While I'd pretended I had no idea who he was, Alexei had told me about Isidor Novadain while we were on the ship. As a count,

he held the highest status out of any member of our branch families. Because of that, he'd dubbed himself the representative of the branch families, although he held no such position in truth. He'd also self-proclaimed himself one of our shitty father's closest friends and had acted as one of his aides—not that either of them had ever done *actual* work—since they were young. Back then, he'd travel often between the duchy and the capital, spending his time in the capital indulging in recreation with our father and his time in the duchy forcing people to do his bidding by throwing around our father's name.

This was now the first confrontation between the old and new powers within the duchy.

"Your Grace, my lady, you must be weary from the long trip. Would you like to head inside?" Novak asked, beautifully ignoring Novadain.

Making it clear that he doesn't care one bit about him is probably the most ruthless response he could've given!

While Novadain had been busy reminiscing on his prime, my brother, Novak, and the rest of his advisors had seized most of the power in the duchy. Novak was right not to bother giving Novadain a second look. He had better uses for his optic nerves, truly.

I wasn't sure I understood where Novadain found the gall to act like that. Did he think he could get Alexei to marry Kira and turn things around? That didn't make sense. He *should've* been currying favor with Alexei if that was his goal.

I'd sworn never to be mean to my brother's future wife, no matter what kind of person she was, and "Bullying young brides is not okay!" was practically my motto, but I wouldn't let anyone use Alexei for their personal gains.

You're no good, Sausage Curls!

Not that I *needed* to worry about her. Alexei seemed to despise her.

"I'm not tired, but I do worry about Ekaterina," Alexei said. "She spent the journey acknowledging her people despite her frail constitution. I want her to rest as soon as possible."

"I assure you I had fun every step of the way," I said. "But, if that would put your mind at ease, I'm happy to rest. I only ask that you too take some time to rest. And everyone else."

"What a kind girl you are," Alexei said, patting my head with a soft smile on his lips.

Miss Sausage Curls and her goons murmured among themselves.

What's wrong? Something bothering you?

"My lady," Rosen called, presenting me with a small bouquet. "One of the knights received this from a commoner man. His younger sister picked these for you, and she hopes you'll accept them."

"My! I'd be delighted!"

I took the flowers from him and a smile spread across my face. It was just a simple bouquet made up of flowers picked from the side of the road, but the thought of a little girl being so impressed with us that she'd give me such a thing brought me joy.

However, our local villainess, Kira, scoffed.

"My goodness! How dirty," she commented. "My poor Lady Ekaterina! The lady of a ducal house should not have to touch unsightly things given by dirty commoners."

Hey, you!

"Lady Kira is right!"

"What was that knight thinking? Did he mean to insult her?"

"To think she'd be happy with such shabby flowers! I suppose no gentleman has given her decent flowers before."

Kira's goons chuckled. They'd seized their chance to mock me among themselves, just loud enough for me to hear.

You're good at this whole volume-adjustment thing, aren't you? Very thickheaded too. Didn't you notice my brother's people getting annoyed by Kira's comment?

I was almost annoyed with myself for a moment, but then I remembered who these girls reminded me of. This was the Right Right Trio all over again! I covered one of my ears with my hand and turned to Rosen with a smile.

"My, I seem to have heard the buzzing of insects," I said.

Rosen looked surprised for a moment, but he soon laughed. "I do wish your ears weren't exposed to such vulgar sounds...but I suppose we cannot ask too much of mere bugs. They cannot help it, can they?"

I could tell Novak, Aaron, and the rest of my brother's aides were trying their best not to burst out laughing.

"Lord Rosen, please convey my gratitude to the knight who received the flowers on my behalf. His kindness toward that little girl is not lost on me. Protecting women and children is the

essence of chivalry."

"You're correct, my lady. We, the knights of Yulnova, are sworn to protect the people of this duchy." Rosen bowed. The other knights smiled and followed suit, bowing to me, the Lady of the Order.

"Yes, the lord and his knights' duty is to protect the people," Alexei said. "As for the Lady of the Order, her duty is to show compassion and love to the people." He smiled at me. "You show kindness to everyone equally. Your beauty, intelligence, and compassion make you the greatest lady I've ever known."

Oops. The old power of the duchy has now been exposed to his rose-tinted Ekaterina filter.

"I only try to be a sister you won't be ashamed of," I said. "And the commoners' welcome was all thanks to you, your advisors, and the knights of Yulnova. You've done an excellent job managing the duchy so far."

Oh no. I wanted to show off my own Alexei filter, but those were all stone-cold facts! I need to work harder to impress on everyone my devotion!

I hid my mouth with my fan and glanced at the father and daughter pair.

"How old might that young lady be? Once she grows up enough to learn how to properly greet people, I shall like to chat with her," I whispered before smiling.

I didn't realize at the time, but apparently it looked more like a bewitching sidelong glance than the mockery I'd intended. I'd already turned my back to them, so I didn't see, but Kira grew angry while her father, Isidor, almost smiled.

Alexei took my hand, saying, "Come, let us go in, Ekaterina."

"Yes, brother."

The two of us left those remnants of the old power behind as we walked toward the fortress with our followers in tow.

The next morning, the rays of the sun pouring in from the gaps between the curtains woke me up. I was in the room—or rather, the area—where I'd spent six months cooped up before leaving for the academy. I called it an "area" over a "room" because it was like an entire apartment, made up of a bedroom crowned with a gigantic bed, a personal study, a drawing room,

a hobby room where I could play music (among other things), a walk-in closet, and more!

I'd just gotten out of bed when Mina came in, pushing a tea wagon.

"Good morning, my lady."

"Good morning, Mina," I answered with a smile.

"Did you have a good night?"

"I did, thank you. The weather is cooler here. It's nice."

"That's good to hear," she said.

"And you, Mina? Aren't you tired?"

"I haven't done anything tiring," Mina answered, her tone as detached as always.

Despite what she'd just said, a lot had happened yesterday after we'd arrived.



After we'd entered the residence, Alexei and I had been greeted by the most important servants. I'd happily replied with a big smile while Alexei watched over me with his gentle gaze.

The behavior of both of us seemed to take them aback.

"My lady... It's a pleasure to see you so full of energy," Novalas—the old butler of the main residence—said, his eyes wet with emotion under his gray eyebrows.

He, too, was from one of our branches. He'd first served Sergei's father, our great-grandfather. In total, he'd worked under four heads of the House of Yulnova, and he was practically a living encyclopedia on the Yulnova Fortress.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," I said, my eyes downcast.

Alexei put his hand on my shoulder. "You went through so much. It's only natural that you needed time to recover. *I* should be sorry, not you."

"Please do not say such things, brother! You went through just as much," I replied, placing my hand over his.

"Seeing the two of you like that, it's as though Duke Aleksandr and his wife were back," the plump head maid, Anna, whispered subconsciously.

She had also worked for the Yulnovas for a long time. Her scarlet hair, which had surely been vivid in her youth, was now mostly gray.

There was another woman who stared at me in silence: Raisa,

the housekeeper. Her job was to manage the female servants. She was tall and slender, and her purple hair was so dark it almost looked black. Her eyes were a lighter shade of purple.

"Serve Ekaterina as you would a duchess," Alexei ordered. "Until she marries or I take a wife, she is the mistress of this house."

They bowed at his words.

Now, then, let's see how that'll go. Who among them will plot behind our backs? I thought calmly.

I might be inexperienced and lacking in knowledge when it came to managing a household, but I would do my best to keep the servants under control so as not to bother my brother! I clenched my fists—inwardly—to strengthen my resolve as per usual.

That was when Novalas said, "Lord Novadain resides in the Chamber of the Climbing Roses. He seemed to wish to dine with you, but considering what just happened, what should be done?"

As it turned out, Novadain and his daughter lived in the Yulnova Fortress of their own accord. They really believed that things would be just as when our father was alive.

Alexei looked at the butler and said flatly, "Throw them out."

The servants hesitated. The father and daughter often visited the Yulnova Fortress. Isidor, in particular, had been a longtime friend of our father. On top of that, many of the domestics, including the old butler, were from our branch families. They had complex relationships and shared interests. In fact, Novadain might have acted the way he had to show Alexei he could still do what he wanted.

Finding the servants' reactions too slow for his liking, Alexei nodded. He turned to look at Ivan, his attendant who never left his side.

"Ivan, *you* throw them out."

"At once, Your Grace," Ivan answered, cheerful as always.

"Go to the knights first. Ask a platoon to accompany you. Tell them I ordered it."

"As you command."

"Young master! N-No, I mean, Your Grace!" Novalas exclaimed, astonished. "The branch families are your relatives. Surely, bringing the knights into this is too excess—"

"Silence," Alexei ordered, his eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. When he noticed me looking up at him, the danger in his

eyes grew tinged with loneliness.

"You must think I'm terrifying," he said.

"I don't. I think you're very kind," I replied.

The servants seemed puzzled by my answer.

"Considering the way he behaved," I continued, "he has nothing but disdain for you, brother. If things continue this way, it won't be long before we're forced to send the knights to destroy the entire Novadain branch. You're trying to put a stop to this before it's too late by letting him know you're not to be trifled with. How much kinder could you be?"

In my past life, I'd had to deal with clients randomly adding or modifying features on my systems while I was working on them. With people like that, you had to tell them firmly from the start that you weren't okay with that, lest it turn into a monumental hassle. I remembered one case in particular when we'd ended up in a nasty legal battle with a certain client. In the end, they'd lost and suffered a major blow from having to pay the settlement and court fees.

So, my brother was perfectly right!

"You're always so wise," Alexei said. "I'm glad you understood my intentions. Thank you. However, we mustn't let the knights touch Lady Kira. It would be a terrible offense. Please ask Mina to escort her out instead."

"You're right," I agreed. "Besides, she may prove too much for the knights to handle. Mina."

"Yes, Your Grace," she replied with a blank face before bowing.

Ivan and Mina left together, walking quickly toward the guest rooms.



I'd heard the rest of the story from the platoon commander who'd been tasked with removing Isidor from the premises. Apparently, when Ivan and Mina had arrived, they'd barged into the respective rooms of the father and daughter without bothering to knock, their stride nonchalant as ever. They'd then picked up Isidor's and Kira's bags and had started filling them with their clothes and belongings. Needless to say, the father and daughter had been so shocked that they'd started screaming at the uninvited guests touching their things, but Ivan and Mina had ignored them completely.

The knights had then forcibly taken their bags away to carry them out of the residence. Novadain's attendant had tried to stop them, but he'd been caught by a guard who'd picked him up and carried him out as though he were a piece of furniture.

Soon after, Novadain himself had been grabbed by two knights and dragged out, screaming.

Apparently, Kira had been the most trouble. Knights carrying a noble lady over their shoulder as they had the attendant was completely out of the question. The men had had no idea how to handle her fury.

Mina had solved it her way. She'd walked right up to her and had stared at her in silence, her face expressionless. Then, she'd grabbed her like a discarded doll and hoisted her up.

Kira hadn't seen it coming. She'd remained speechless as Mina carried her out and pushed her into her father's carriage right alongside him. From what I'd heard in the aftermath, Mina had impressed the knights with her brilliant maneuver.

Yet, here she was, serving me tea as though nothing had happened.

"My lady, I ask that you only drink the tea I brew for the time being."

"Why is that?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

Mina humphed. "Someone sneakily exchanged your tea leaves for damp ones."

"Oh dear!" I laughed. "That someone must be so scared of my brother they resorted to that instead."

"I won't let them do it again, my lady."

"Thank you, Mina." It was a cheap trick, but the only reason I could laugh it off like this was that I trusted Mina to protect me. I smiled. "You're amazing, Mina. It's all thanks to you if I can sleep soundly and drink delicious tea."

For once, the corners of Mina's lips lifted ever so slightly.

I could've had my breakfast in my room, but I decided to head to the dining room instead. Why? Because I figured my dear brother would be there!

Since we lived in separate dormitories at the academy, I usually couldn't see him in the morning. To make up for that lost time, we had breakfast together *every* morning on weekends when we were both at our capital residence. That was why I was almost certain I'd find him in the dining room!

Well, I suppose we've been together the entire trip, not only for

meals… But that doesn't mean I've had enough!

Even when full, I always had room for dessert, and I felt the same toward Alexei. I could never see too much of him!

Mina followed me through the long corridors. I was walking at a casual pace when I heard a noise and looked through the window. What I saw through the frame made me widen my eyes in surprise.



During my last stay at the fortress, I'd kept to myself and had almost never entered the dining room. Now that I saw it, it was exactly what I imagined the dining room of an opulent noble family to look like. The ornate walls were decorated with dazzling paintings, and tons of chairs were lined up on each side of the long, imposing table.

"Good morning, Ekaterina."

"Good morning, brother."

Alexei arrived a little after I did and sat across from me at the head of the long table. Something caught my attention, a rare occurrence: His light blue hair was disheveled.

Wow, he looks so good like that. Wait, that's not what I should be thinking about!

"You came straight after training, did you not?" I asked.

"Indeed. I sparred with the knights, which took longer than I'd planned."

"I saw you from the windows of the corridor, and I noticed those who protected you from up close *weren't* knights," I said jokingly.

Alexei smiled. "Would you like to see them up close too?"

"Absolutely!"

"All right. I shall introduce you. They may not be as impressive as the demonic horses of Krymov, but the hounds of Yulnova are well-known among connoisseurs."



After breakfast, Alexei led me to the kennel. The dogs were currently out of their cages and in a large area for play. Some were relaxing while others dashed around. When they noticed us approaching, they all turned their heads toward us.

B-Big balls of fluff!

A dozen furballs stared at us, panting.

Though Alexei had called them hounds, they looked more like wolves with huge fangs that reminded me of saber-toothed tigers. Actually, wolves weren't *that* fluffy. They seemed more like some sort of mix between wolves and lions!

"The hounds of Yulnova are demonic dogs," Alexei said. "They're created by making certain monsters breed with a specific type of dog from this region. They'll hunt animals *and* monsters without ever faltering. They're truly the best hunting hounds in the empire."

"How big they are!" I said.

"Tall enough to tower over me if they stand on their hind legs."

Alexei was almost a meter and ninety centimeters tall. *Does that mean these dogs are over two meters tall?!*

Incredible! So cool! And so fluffy!!!

"Can I touch them, brother?"

"They're usually wary of people they don't know but... Igor!"

"Yes, young mast—um, Your Grace?"

A man whose age I couldn't really estimate appeared. He was short but had wide shoulders and a muscular build. What stood out the most, though, was his bald head and eye patch. The way I could only see one of his eyes gave him an intimidating air.

He resembled a famous character from my past life. The name wouldn't come back to me but I recalled he was from a boxing manga! An old man with a memorable catchphrase!

Sorry, Mr. Igor. We don't even know each other yet, but I've turned you into a boxer in my head.

"Meet Igor, Ekaterina. He's the dog breeder, and the only man who knows how to properly handle our hounds."

"Goodness! Handling such large dogs must be a lot of work. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Igor," I said with a bright smile.

"Th-Thank you. E-Excuse me..." Igor seemed surprised by my greeting, and he bowed several times.

Oh no. Did I look like I was laughing at him? I'm sorry for conflating you with that boxing manga character, sir.

"Igor, call the dogs. Make them approach slowly."

"Yes," he replied, nodding. Then, he whistled several times.

At the sound, the dogs stood up and five or six of them

started approaching.

Wow! They're so big!!!

Compared to them, a golden retriever would've looked tiny! I'd once mistaken a Great Pyrenees I'd seen from afar for a polar bear. Well, these were even bigger, *and* their eyes gleamed with intelligence!

They're strong and *smart!*

"Aren't ya scared, milady?" Igor asked, worried.

I shook my head. "No! They're so impressive that my heart is racing, but I trust my brother wouldn't allow me here if it wasn't safe, so I'm not scared."

"Clever, as always," Alexei said. "Ekaterina will be fine, Igor. She may not look the part, but she stood up alone to a monster. She's far braver than your average lady."

I could hear the pride in Alexei's voice.

Igor was astonished and his eye widened in surprise. "Th-This little lady? She seems so prim 'n' proper." He paused for a moment before adding, "Still, I can tell she's not scared of me or the dogs. She's not yer sister for nothing, Your Grace."

To be fair, I'd been absolutely *terrified* of that monster. Come to think of it, it was probably because of that experience that these dogs didn't scare me. It looked like I could communicate with them, which was very reassuring.

The hounds approached Alexei first. They clearly recognized their master. Some sat at his feet, waving their tails, while others tried to push their heads into his palms so he'd pet them. Despite their impressive size, they behaved just like regular doggies.

They also seemed very interested in me, a stranger they were meeting for the first time. They sniffed me all over. Even without standing on their rear legs, their heads almost reached my shoulders. One pushed its snout against my neck to smell me, tickling at my skin.

Their faces are huge and soooo fluffy! Argh, I wanna touch them!

"Do you think they'd let me pet them?" I asked.

"These dogs respect those with strong mana. Show them your mana."

Show them my mana?

I thought about it for a few moments before pouring my mana into the soil at my feet. I did my best to control the flow and move it little by little.

A small noise resounded, then a concentric pattern appeared on the ground. The diameter of the biggest circle was fairly large.

"Your control is precise," Alexei noted. "You've improved a lot."

Yay! My brother praised me!

Right away, the dogs' attitudes changed. The one that'd been sniffing at my neck immediately lay down on the ground. As for those who were hanging around Alexei, they turned to look at me and moved to either sit down or lie down. They seemed to be demonstrating submission.

One dog, which had remained farther away without getting up, finally stood up and walked up to me. It was larger than the others, with beautiful fur. Most of the other hounds had gray coats, but this one's fur was almost white with golden tips, and its eyes were gold as well.

"There you are, Regina," Alexei said, holding out his hand. Regina nuzzled against it before looking at me. "This is Regina, the leader of the pack. In other words, she's their queen."

"My!"

A female leads the pack! How interesting!

Come to think of it, I remembered reading an article online about how some packs of wolves were led by females. Apparently, they asserted their leadership through communication and smarts rather than pure strength.

"Hello, Regina. I'm Ekaterina. It's a pleasure to meet you," I said with a smile.

At these words, Regina showed me her teeth. Somehow, I felt as though she'd returned my smile. The next moment, she stood up on her rear legs and rested her upper body against mine.

AH! This is great!!! I thought, hugging her and burying my face in her fluffy fur. *She's so soft and comfy and warm! Kinda smelly but who cares? I'm loving it! Girl hug, yay!*

When I finally pulled my face out of her fur to breathe, I noticed that Regina was peering down at me with her bright, clear eyes.

"Is that your way of welcoming me?" I asked.

Regina answered by rubbing her snout on my cheek.

YAAAY!

I looked up at Alexei, a delighted smile on my face. "Brother! I made my first female friend in the duchy!"

"You did. And Regina is certainly worthy of you. Before I met

you, she was the kindest, smartest girl I knew."

He said that as though it was nothing, but it was clear he had trouble with actual human women considering his words. The old hag had definitely played a big role in that.

Alexei petted Regina's head.

"Regina, please protect my sister," he said. "Ekaterina isn't just my sister—she's my life. Make sure no one touches a single hair on her head. You understand, right?"

Regina's golden eyes met with Alexei's and she let out a soft growl as though to say she did.

Since we were in the garden, Alexei suggested that we take the opportunity to enjoy a stroll together. Needless to say, I wanted to jump at the chance, but I stopped myself at the last minute.

"I'd love to, but are *you* not busy, brother?" I asked.

"It's fine. Thanks to you, I find myself with more leeway than expected."

"Oh? Was I of help somehow?"

"You always are," Alexei said, taking my hand in his. "A single look at your beautiful face fills me with energy, while the sound of your gentle voice calms my heart. I've never been a pious man, but I finally understand the rapture of worship now that I've met you."

"Oh, brother!" His obsession with me was going strong!

As we walked side by side, Regina followed us. She seemed to have comprehended Alexei perfectly and stuck to my other side.

Igor also seemed to trust Regina to behave. When he'd noticed her intentions to follow us, he'd petted her head and said, "Make sure ya protect the lady well, all right?" After that, he'd let her go without hesitation.

I happily petted her fluffy coat throughout our walk.

"You seem to like animals," Alexei said, looking over at me. "Would you like to see the horses? Or if you'd rather see flowers, I'm happy to escort you through the flower garden."

"I adore horses. They're beautiful animals."

To be honest, I know I'll have fun anywhere if it's with you.

I truly did like horses, though, so I wanted to visit them. That reminded me—I wanted to learn horseback riding to build up

my stamina! I'd been so busy since I'd thought that, I still hadn't had time to try it even once.

Thankfully, I walked a lot every day, so I did feel like I'd gotten some strength back. Both in the empire and here, our residences were so ridiculously huge that I walked more than I used to in my past life. There were no elevators either, so I often went up and down flights of stairs.

The stable of the Yulnova Fortress was expansive and home to a large number of horses. There were the horses that belonged to the estate, but also those of the knights that were currently staying here. Needless to say, taking care of that many horses required a lot of stablemen.

Alexei could've filled in for a stableman himself; he knew the horses of the estate that well. Not only did he know all of their names, but he also had a firm grasp on their personalities, specificities, and even lineage!

"You like horses, don't you, brother?" I asked.

"I do. Horsemanship is one of my preferred disciplines."

I wondered if he'd ever thought of galloping away, never to come back. He probably had, considering the heavy burden he'd had to shoulder from a young age.

Each horse had large eyes and long eyelashes. Despite their size, I found them truly adorable. Plus, compared to most of the horses I'd encountered in this world so far, ours were well proportioned and elegant.

Here, horses were a means of transportation, and, in a way, stables were akin to huge parking garages. Using this analogy, the horses we had here were like luxurious Italian cars—the ones with a bucking horse as their logo, for instance. The knights' horses weren't *as* fancy, but they were still expensive sports carts. As for the short and stout farming horses I'd often seen on the side of the road, they were more like regular, sturdy minitrucks.

Alexei then told me about another breed of horse from the duchy—large, strapping horses whose job was to pull wagons of incredibly heavy ore. I'd yet to see one, but the description made me think of the draft horses used in ban'ei races in Hokkaido. These horses were humongous, weighing roughly twice as much as our Thoroughbreds.

Despite my comparison to cars, horses in this world were very pricey animals. Unlike in modern-day Japan, ordinary people

couldn't purchase one just because they wanted or needed one. Part of the admiration the masses had for the knights was probably based on watching them ride on the backs of such valuable animals.

The Order of Yulnova allowed commoners to join if they had the necessary aptitude. Once they swore their oath to the lord, they were awarded the same status as all other knights and a salary considerable enough to purchase and care for a horse. Knights could not pass on their titles to their descendants, but they still enjoyed a much better status and lifestyle than most people. That was a dream come true for many commoners.

As we strolled, a stable boy brought me carrots so I could try feeding the horses myself. I had fun doing so for some time, until I noticed a small building from one of the windows of the stable. The building was splendid, but it didn't seem like the sort of place where a *person* would live. It looked more like a single stable.

"Brother, what is that?" I asked, pointing at it.

"That's..." Alexei hesitated.

That wasn't like him. "It just caught my eye," I hurried to say. "I won't pry if you'd rather not talk about it."

"No, it's fine. This is a good occasion to show you. Follow me."

I took his arm and we exited the stable before walking up to the small building. Now that I saw it up close, I could tell it was indeed a (much smaller) stable. It had clearly been made for one horse. There were no storage boxes inside, the space was fairly large, and the walls seemed solidly made. While the building was luxurious and empty, it was also covered in dust. No one had used it for a long time.

While there was no horse inside, there was a painting of a man riding a horse. I recognized the rider as our grandfather Sergei. The dappled gray horse he was on top of was so large that our grandfather—a tall man—was dwarfed. There was a silver horn on its forehead and large fangs peeking from its open mouth.

A demonic horse of Krymov!

"This is grandfather and his favorite horse, Zephyros. He had this stable built for him. There used to be one much like it in the capital as well."

"My! Grandfather's favorite horse was a demonic horse?"

Actually, I wouldn't have expected anything less of him! If the

horses in the stable were luxury cars, a demonic horse was certainly like a private jet, wasn't it?! Assuming the private jet was an appropriate analogy, a horse like that would've cost tens of billions of yen!

"The House of Krymov is in charge of the imperial stable. Usually, every single demonic horse is presented to the imperial family. One cannot simply buy one regardless of how much money they offer. Yet the head of the House of Krymov has a prerogative. He can decide to give a demonic horse to an individual he deems worthy. That is how our grandfather got Zephyros, as a gift from the previous head of Krymov."

"So that's what happened..."

I'm so sorry I immediately started calculating the horse's value.

That said, if it couldn't be bought with money, a more fitting analogy was an F1 car. These didn't have a market value, but were such technological marvels that I could easily imagine their worth. The development cost alone was certainly in the hundreds of billions of yen, and...

Wait, I'm trying to calculate its value again!

Leaving the F1 thing aside, horses weren't only means of transportation. They were also weapons. In a way, the demonic horses of Krymov were akin to a military secret! It made total sense why the imperial family didn't want anyone to be able to just *buy* them. Giving them to influential individuals who benefited the empire, on the other hand, was sensible. It also helped protect these important VIPs. A single demonic horse was probably a better bodyguard than an entire special police squad—or so I assumed.

This was making me realize the House of Krymov was pretty damn cool! In a sense, the imperial family trusted them more than the three grand ducal houses. I had to admit I mostly remembered Nikolai and Marina for their comedic squabbles, but they were actually the heirs to an incredible family!

Regina started smelling the ground of the stable. In the past, it would've been covered by straw. Now, it was just a plain wooden floor layered with dust. Still, Regina seemed to have found the source of the scent that had attracted her, and she soon sprawled down on the ground.

"Zephyros had a bit of a difficult personality," Alexei said, "but he and Regina got along well. The monster blood flowing through their veins makes demonic hounds live far longer than

regular dogs. In fact, Regina is a little older than I am. She was always clever and kind, so much so that grandfather always knew she'd one day become the leader of the pack."

"I see. So Regina is our older sister, in a way."

If Regina was a little older than Alexei, she was most likely around twenty. It turned out we had a wise, beautiful, kind, mature sister! And a super fluffy one at that! Had Alexei depended on her when he was young? I imagined a tiny version of him nestled against the soft fur…

ARGH! THE VISION'S TOO CUTE!

"Demonic horses also have a longer lifespan," Alexei continued. "It depends on the individual, but most live roughly as long as humans. So when one receives a demonic horse, it'll be their companion for life. Grandfather and Zephyros were almost like friends. A single glance was enough for them to understand one another. Zephyros was very clever, just like Regina—strong too. Whenever grandfather was out hunting monsters and one tried to attack him, Zephyros would tear into it and kill it."

I see these fangs aren't for show!

Come to think of it, a legendary warhorse called Ikezuki came up in the old classic *The Tale of the Heike*. It was said to be fierce enough to bite into living beings with its teeth and eat their flesh, which was why the two characters for its name meant "eat" and "raw." I remembered thinking it was ridiculous because a horse couldn't do such things—but a demonic horse totally could.

Can't imagine a better warhorse.

"Zephyros hated children, so I couldn't get close to him most of the time. He'd only let me ride him—albeit reluctantly—when I was with grandfather. Still, he'd glare at me whenever I tried to pet him. Then grandfather would laugh. Those were fun times," he reminisced. "Zephyros was so majestic that all the living beings in the estate revered him. Or, at least, that's how it appeared to me."

I felt like I could hear a tinge of yearning in his voice. Just like he'd bought me the glass workshop without a second thought, Alexei could obtain any physical object he desired. Because of that, there was seldom anything he truly wanted. Zephyros must have been just that—a special something he couldn't get no matter how much he wished for it.

“I’m sure the Krymovs will give you a demonic horse one day, brother. You’re certainly worthy of it,” I said.

Alexei was friends with Nikolai and the prince, and even His Imperial Majesty the Emperor seemed to be partial to him. One day, he would surely hold an important position in government like our grandfather had and receive his own demonic horse.

Alexei shook his head.

“I will not ever receive one,” he replied. “For the House of Yulnova has committed a terrible sin toward the Krymovs.”

“A…sin?”

“Indeed,” Alexei confirmed, his tone heavy. “After grandfather passed, Zephyros let himself wither away. He would not eat and refused to come out of his stable in the capital. He would not even let anyone touch him.”

“Did he mean to…?”

“That’s what I assumed too,” Alexei said, guessing what I was about to say. “That he meant to follow grandfather in death. Those in the know all say that demonic horses of Krymov form strong bonds with their masters, and I know Zephyros loved grandfather. He was stubborn too. So, we decided to respect his will and watch over him quietly. But demonic horses are vigorous, and Zephyros lived on despite his refusal to eat. After a month, he’d grown weak and spent his days leaning against the walls of the stable, awaiting the end. That’s when *someone* dragged him out of the stable by force.”

“What?! Who in the world dared do such a thing?!” I exclaimed in spite of myself.

I didn’t want to glorify the act of following one’s master to the grave, but I could see the beauty in the horse’s devotion to our grandfather. Perhaps it was due to my Japanese sense of aesthetics from my past life.

No, I think I would always have respected his sincerity. So, what ruffian dared to drag that poor horse out against his will?!

“That *louse*…or rather, his followers did it. They didn’t understand the first thing about demonic horses. All they could see was that he was a prized possession of the House of Yulnova. As such, he should be passed down to the next duke. In broad daylight, they hauled him out to bring him to father—drunk as they were.”

Bastards! Damn them! I’d also just discovered that Alexei referred to our father as “that louse” in the privacy of his own

mind. He'd let it slip this one time. *Though, I'm actually a hundred times more vulgar in here.*

"Even weakened, Zephyros was still a seasoned veteran. He kicked the fools and broke a few bones. That's when they pulled out their swords."

I closed my eyes in horror, so Alexei caressed my hair gently and spared me the end of the story.

"These fools you spoke of, were they at least punished?"

"Barely. Father shielded them. 'Who cares about a mere beast?' he said. 'They had to protect themselves.'"

I got the feeling that Novadain must've been among them. If he'd lived like that for years, free of the consequences of his actions, I understood better why he'd acted the way he had. He probably knew there'd be no mending his relationship with my brother. That was why he hadn't even tried to kiss up to him and had taken the offensive instead.

"Demonic horses normally belong to the emperor. Houses blessed with such a priceless gift must handle it with care and respect. What they did dirtied the name and honor of Yulnova. After that, grandmother, who also believed a mere beast undeserving of her interest and saw herself above everyone because she was an imperial princess, asked the emperor to order the Count of Krymov to present our father with another horse."

Whoa... I so *wanna punch her in the face.*

Instead of apologizing as she should have, she'd had the gall to try to get the emperor to order the Count of Krymov to hand over another horse?! Sure, the emperor at the time was her younger brother, but that didn't mean she could just do whatever she wanted, did it?! I'd never hit anyone in my life, but I was more than ready to make an exception for her!

"So, in the end, *I* went to visit the House of Krymov and apologize in our father's name," Alexei concluded.

"What?!" I almost screamed.

At the time Alexei would have been what, ten? He hadn't done anything wrong and he must have been the most frustrated, sad, and angry because he loved that horse!

"Father would never have apologized himself, but doing so through a proxy would have been extremely rude. I figured that I, at the very least, could do it for the honor of the Yulnova name. When I visited them, after I apologized, I made them a promise. I

swore that in the future, the House of Yulnova would not request a demonic horse again. Father would not, and I wouldn't either."

Brother... You threw away your only chance for yourself. My goodness! I seriously want to punch that witch and our useless genitor in the face! I wish they'd both fall to the lowest level of Dante's hell to be gnawed on by Satan—just like Judas!

"Grandmother..." I paused. "Didn't she scold you for doing that?"

"She had little time to worry about me. That was when His Imperial Majesty the Emperor announced his intention to abdicate."

Oh, figures.

She would panic, wouldn't she? Even as the crown prince, Konstantin had made it clear he wouldn't let her dictate his every move. Making sure her little brother, Valentin, who'd struggled to tell her no, remained on the throne had been in her interest.

"The previous emperor relied heavily upon grandfather," Alexei continued. "The two of them also often hunted together, and he knew Zephyros quite well."

"I see..."

After grandfather's passing, he must have thought the time for him to step down was near. I suspected his sister's shameful behavior regarding Zephyros and his own inability to keep her in check had been the straw that broke the camel's back.

"The man I met when I went to apologize is the current Count of Krymov, Nikolai and Lady Marina's father. He does not involve himself in politics or high society much, but I hear he and the emperor share a deep trust. In the end, the matter of what happened to Zephyros was kept under wraps, for the most part. In fact, I do not believe Lady Marina knows of it. Nikolai most likely does, but he hasn't brought it up in the two years we've been classmates. He's a good, trustworthy man."

"I'm glad Lord Nikolai is a good friend to you, brother."

Alexei closed his eyes, embarrassed, but he muttered a quiet "He is" before smiling.

"When you see the Krymov siblings again, please interact with them as usual. As you said, they're good friends to us. I only told you about this because I believe we shouldn't bear such things as burdens."

"I understand, brother. Thank you for sharing the story with me."

Alexei had told me to act as usual, but I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to. The first time I saw them, I'd probably be at a loss for words. Still, I knew Nikolai would smile at me like he always did and not let any odd reaction I might've had bother him.

I wondered what the Count of Krymov—a man who'd raised the ever-bubbly siblings I knew and was a close confidant of the emperor—had thought when little Alexei had shown up at his place to apologize. Knowing Alexei, he'd acted in a way that befitted his station even when he was ten and mourning the horse. He'd have apologized and taken the blame with a rational, thought-out speech. How had he appeared in the count's eyes?

Alexei was serious to a fault and not one to go back on his word. If he'd sworn never to seek a demonic horse, he wouldn't. But what did Count Krymov think of that?

While he was sharp and accomplished beyond his years, Alexei struck me as someone who didn't always understand himself. I had an inkling that, on a deep, subconscious level, he'd made that oath not on behalf of our father, but to punish himself—because *he* felt guilty for having failed to do anything for our grandfather and Zephyros.

Alexei never strove to make himself happy. He only ever thought in terms of duties or responsibilities. Thinking this, I took his hands and squeezed them.

"Did I make you sad?" Alexei asked, worried.

"No," I replied. "I was just thinking *you* must have felt very sad. I wish I had been there to share that sorrow with you."

"You truly are kind," Alexei said, squeezing my hands back.

Regina rested her big head atop our hands. Alexei laughed and started petting her.



“And you’re just as kind, Regina. You used to always share my sorrow with me, didn’t you?”

His words made me picture the lonely child he’d been even more clearly. I looked up at him and smiled. “Regina was, and still is, a fantastic big sister.”

“How fortunate I am,” Alexei said. “I have two wise, gentle sisters who care about me.”

“Just as you should, as the most wonderful gentleman ever! Right, Regina?”

Regina looked up at us and wagged her fluffy tail.

“Brother. Will the fools you spoke of earlier come to the banquet this weekend?”

“Most likely. I’ve invited almost every noble man and woman in the duchy, as this banquet will be held to celebrate my succession, but also to make sure *you’re* widely recognized as the lady of the House of Yulnova.”

“In that case, I beg you not to leave my side for a single moment. If those louses try to approach you, I’ll chase them away myself!”

I knew Alexei was strong enough to deal with them on his own, but I didn’t want him to have even one more unpleasant memory!

I, the fangirl villainess, will not permit it!

“How dependable you are.” He tried to sound serious but couldn’t conceal his smile. “But there is no need for you to worry about insignificant fools like them. Let your beautiful eyes and gentle heart concern themselves with more worthwhile things. You are able to make the world a better, more beautiful place. Very few are those gifted with the sort of vision you have. You’re very wise, Ekaterina, but I feel like you do not always understand yourself.”

Huh? Isn’t that exactly what I thought about him two minutes ago?! And *his speech was nicer than mine! Am I losing the die-hard fan battle here?!*

I was a tad frustrated although I wasn’t entirely sure this competition made a lot of sense to begin with.

Whenever a new Duke of Yulnova ascended, two celebrations would be held: one in the capital and one in the duchy.

It was customary for the three Grand Dukes to pass on their titles while they were still alive, just like emperors. In such cases, these banquets were a formality that was swiftly dealt with. When the previous duke passed away before the succession, however, the funeral had to come first. Then, a period of mourning would be observed before a party to celebrate the new duke could be held.

In Alexei's case, the first celebration, which had taken place in the capital, had already been held. The second one in the duchy, however, had been delayed—a rare occurrence. The official reason was that, as a student, he couldn't easily return to the duchy. Now, the *truth* was that Alexei had thus far had no interest in holding it. He'd thought the celebration in the capital was plenty.

He'd since changed his mind and intended to make this a large-scale, sumptuous feast. While it was meant to celebrate his becoming the duke, his true goal was to make sure I, who'd never been presented to the nobility of the duchy, was recognized by all as the lady of the House of Yulnova.

In other words, it was no exaggeration to say that he was holding this banquet for me!

"My lady," the head maid, Anna, said after entering my room.

She was about to speak but paused, flustered, when she saw Regina lying at my feet under my desk. The gigantic hunting hound with fangs as big as swords looked at her, then sat up with her eyes gleaming.

Anna, a veteran maid with graying scarlet hair, trembled in fear despite her experience.

"Don't be scared of Regina, Anna," I said with a smile, petting Regina's head. Satisfied, she closed her eyes and lay back down.

"M-My lady. The hounds are not supposed to be inside the house," Anna stuttered.

"My brother gave me permission. He says grandfather always kept the leader of the pack by his side whenever he was in the duchy."

"Well..." Anna had been a maid here for a long time. She remembered that era and couldn't argue. Despite that, she turned her face down and muttered, "But that beast is half monster..."

I ignored that and asked, "Did you have business with me?"

"Y-Yes." She raised her head and quickly calmed her

breathing. She was experienced, indeed. “My lady, have you decided on your outfit for the banquet?”

“I brought a dress from the capital. Is there an issue?”

Anna hesitated before saying, “Well, we’re in charge of dressing you, so we must see the dress prior to the banquet. Besides, the trends are different in the northern capital. We’ll be able to advise you on whether it is appropriate for you to wear or not.”

“Is that what you were worried about? You can rest easy then. The best designer of the imperial capital made my dress. I suppose it’s unlikely to fit the trends of the northern capital, but I do not mind,” I said with a smile before letting a serious expression take over my features. “Besides, I have no intention to change anything based on *your* advice. My dress was made to promote the newest product of the duchy, something devised by my brother and his advisors. Her Imperial Majesty the Empress herself praised another dress I wore made by the same designer from the same fabric. She even expressed her intention to purchase some of this fabric for herself. Surely, you realize your advice does not carry enough weight to change anything under these circumstances, right?”

My tone was soft but I enunciated every word clearly.

“O-Of course… I apologize for my brazen remark, my lady,” she said. She seemed ashamed and bowed her head to me. An appropriate reaction, considering I’d mentioned the empress.

“Mina knows how I like my preparations handled. On the day of the banquet, follow her orders and help her.”

Anna looked at Mina, who was standing behind me.

“I also wished to discuss this topic with you,” she said. “A young lady of the House of Yulnova should have more than one personal maid. I’d like to put the maids who were in charge of you back in your service. Is that all right?”

“Oh, I’m glad you brought this up, because I hoped to discuss this as well,” I replied, beaming. “As you know, I could only take one maid with me to the academy. During that time, I got used to having only Mina by my side. I’m afraid that I’m not used to having maids taking care of me, and that will trouble my inner peace. Until I graduate from the academy, I shall only have *her* as my personal maid. If she ever needs help, she’ll let you and the others know, so make sure you follow any order she may give.”

“My lady…” Anna frowned, and I once again pretended not to notice.

“I’ll graduate in roughly two and a half years. It’s a short time. Besides, I’ll make sure to let my brother and the butler know, so neither of them will think it’s an oversight on your part.”

“Thank you very much,” she said, bowing reluctantly.

She couldn’t argue after I’d said so much.

“You’ve changed, my lady,” she whispered, seemingly without meaning to.

“Have I?” I responded, tilting my long, dainty neck to the side. “I’m afraid I hadn’t noticed.”



That was quite the lie! I thought, sipping the delicious tea Mina had prepared for me after Anna left. *Of course I changed! How could I have not?! A whole other personality got mixed in with mine! I even used to pass out because of the shock. I’m impressed I managed to keep a straight face with such a bold lie!*

During the time I spent here before I recovered my memories, I had pretty much been a doll. I’d worn whatever clothes were given to me without a word and sat in my room all day long. I could see why Anna was so taken aback by the new me.

To be fair, I wasn’t doing a lot more right now. My brother had asked me to be careful in case Novadain and the rest of the geezers that made up the old power of the duchy tried something. Because of that, I had yet to take a single step out of the Yulnova Fortress. I didn’t even leave my room much, just in case. That was probably why Anna had assumed I’d be the same as before.

“You were very cool, my lady,” Mina said, her tone as inexpressive as always.

I looked at her, surprised. “*Me…*? Cool?!”

“You didn’t let the head maid talk over you. You handled her remarkably.”

I let out a little laugh. “Why, thank you!”

I’m gonna blush! Mina the battle maid had just told me I was cool!

“Still, either Regina or I should stay in the room at all times,” she said.

“Do you think she’d try to destroy my dress?” That was a staple

of villainess stories.

Wait… I'm the villainess! Not them!

"That woman is smart. She won't do anything so conspicuous that would give us a reason to fire her. That said, she *could* talk someone else into doing it. We can never be too careful."

"You're right. Better safe than sorry," I replied before letting out a sigh. I couldn't fathom what was so fun about bullying people like that.

Well, I supposed I wasn't a saint either.

In my past life, I'd had a superior who'd forced me to face the ire of a client during negotiations while undermining me at *every* turn behind the scenes. I'd prayed for his wife to find out about the affair he so brazenly bragged about in the office, divorce him, and snatch a hefty alimony!

I wasn't sure such prayers and curses counted as bullying. My prayers had been answered, though, so maybe they should. I didn't know the details of what had happened with his wife, but the guy had aged ten years in a couple of months from stress. To be honest, seeing him in that state had alleviated my own stress, so I kind of understood the feeling of wanting someone you hated to suffer.

Nonetheless, I'd never considered speaking to his wife *myself*. Devoting time and effort to making people suffer was such a sad endeavor. If that man had ended up in distress as a direct result of my actions, I probably would've felt bad instead of finding it funny. All in all, I kind of got the desire to bully, but I mostly didn't.

Wait, which one is it? I'm bullying myself by overthinking this!

"I won't let anyone touch what is yours, my lady," Mina said.

Do I hear a tinge of resolve under that detached tone of hers?!

When I'd been told about the banquet back in the capital and asked if I wanted a new outfit made for it, I'd refused, saying I'd wear the dress from the imperial visit. That had reminded me of all the dresses that had been made for me without my input in the duchy, and I'd casually brought up how they hadn't really suited me. The response had been stronger than I'd expected. Not only Mina, but also Graham and the head maid of our residence in the capital had all looked strangely annoyed. They'd immediately called on Camilla to make me a new dress I could bring with me. I'd insisted I didn't really need a new one, but everyone had ignored me.

I now realized they'd all seen that the dress thing was a red flag.

"My lady, does Anna bother you?"

Ah. Are we back for another season of That Time My Beautiful Maid Almost Became a Murderer*?*

I couldn't blame her for being like that. Mina *was* a bona fide battle maid, after all. In fact, it was exactly because I knew how Mina could be that I'd warned Anna myself the second she'd shown me disrespect.

I hadn't really been given the details—and I didn't want them—but Anna seemed to have had something going on with our deadbeat of a father. That was why she had conflicted feelings for Alexei, who looked just like him but couldn't have been more different on the inside. At least, that was what Ivan had told Mina. That was also why she hated me, a woman who was the spitting image of mother yet beloved by Alexei. *That* bit was Mina's theory.

Good grief! Why do I have to be hated for something so stupid? And ripping dresses apart? Like, why? That's so trivial.

It was thanks to Mina, who I trusted one hundred percent, that I could be so nonchalant about it all.

"She does her job well. As long as she doesn't cause my brother any harm, we can leave her be," I replied. "Let us take our time to look for a worthy replacement by the time I graduate from the academy. With you by my side, Mina, she doesn't bother me. Thank you for always being there."

At my words, I sensed Mina's bloodlust disappear, and a faint smile crept onto her face.

Raisa, the housekeeper in charge of the female servants, stepped into my room. "My lady, may I speak with you regarding the banquet?" she asked.

"Of course. You may approach."

At my answer, Raisa rested the large ledger she'd brought with her on the table across from me. She did not spare a look for Regina, who was lying at my feet, and swiftly put on her glasses. The silver-rimmed spectacles shone under the light.

Wow, someone's ready to work.

Sure enough, Raisa meant business. She started going over the guest list, bringing up the most notable expected attendees, the amount and types of food and drinks, the grade of the tableware as well as the order in which each set was to be

brought out—she was especially particular about the silverware and the amount of time and number of employees required to polish it in advance—the style of hospitality, and the program for the evening. Then, we discussed which rooms to use for the party and what security to put in place to make sure guests wouldn't cross these boundaries, the estimated number of carriages and where to have them park, where the guests' servants would wait, and what job to give to each of our own servants, as well as the number of temporary workers to hire. Finally, Raisa broke down the expenses and concluded it was an appropriate amount.

Now, that *was a marathon. I'm getting runner's high! All right, I'm all ready for another lap. Come at me!*

Considering her personality, I expected Raisa would have suffered an untimely death from overwork just like me had she lived in twenty-first-century Japan.

"Wait. Will the guests' servants be waiting for that long without food or drinks? This is due to a rule from eight years ago, it says here?" I asked, reading through the documents.

"Indeed, my lady. When Duke Aleksandr took over, it was decided that no money should be wasted on servants."

I'm guessing this is one of the many budgets that was embezzled, huh? I hadn't checked, but I could easily imagine it would claim money had been spent on that if I checked the ledgers.

"I'd like to rescind that decision," I said. "If it can still be done with such short notice, I want food and drink to be given to servants from the upcoming banquet onward, just like in grandfather's days."

"I'll make arrangements, my lady." I saw the corners of Raisa's lips lift as she readily agreed.

"You wanted me to point this out, did you not? That's why you wrote about the change happening eight years ago," I said, smiling.

Mina handed me a cup of tea. "My lady, please take a break. You've been at it for so long you'll tire yourself out."

"Thank you, Mina." It was only after taking a sip that I realized how dry my throat felt. I gratefully drank the tea that'd been allowed to cool to room temperature.

"Please enjoy," Mina said, offering one to Raisa as well.

"Thank you." Raisa accepted it, but I could tell Mina's blank face had thrown her off somewhat.

During our conversation, Regina had left my side to nap a little farther away. She continued to sleep soundly while we sipped our tea.

"It seems like the housekeeper has much to do here," I said. "At our residence in the capital, the butler handles such things."

"Mr. Novalas is getting on with the years," Raisa replied. "I've started doing what I can to take some of the load off his shoulders. I'm surprised to hear the butler of that residence discussed such details regarding the work behind the scenes with you, my lady."

"Well, I must be involved as the lady of the house. Besides, I don't mind such work. In fact, I find it fascinating to learn about what must be done behind the scenes to achieve splendid parties."

Actually, as a history buff, it was an absolute pleasure. I felt as though I was finally starting to unravel the secret behind the exquisite parties of the European nobility that I used to read about in my past life. There was so little left from those sorts of affairs that much was still unknown.

I remembered reading a book—about Japanese history, not European history, though—where the researcher had mentioned in the preface how excited he'd been to find the household account book of a samurai family. He'd insisted on the rarity of such accounts and praised himself for the incredible discovery he'd made. When a movie had eventually been made about the samurai mentioned in the book, the lead actor had ruthlessly called the writer a braggart, but *I* understood why he'd been so excited in his preface. This sort of knowledge was fun!

Raisa smiled. "I see everything Mr. Graham wrote to me was true. You are very much like your grandfather, my lady."

I was surprised to hear that—not because she'd compared me to grandfather, but because I couldn't fathom Graham exchanging letters with Raisa, the housekeeper of the main residence, to talk about *me*. I could understand work letters, sure, but this was a peculiar topic in that context. Didn't that mean these two exchanged personal letters that had nothing to do with work?

"Have you known Graham for a long time, Raisa?" I asked.

"We've been acquaintances since the days when he was Duke Sergei's attendant. My personal history happens to resemble that of Mr. Graham in some ways. He wrote to me that he'd

mentioned his past to you—his days as an itinerant entertainer, I mean."

"He has, indeed."

"I used to be a laundry girl, one of the lowest servants," she began. I could tell I was in for a story.



Raisa had started working at the Yulnova Fortress at the young age of eight after the death of her parents during a monster attack on their village. While winter was always cold in the Yulnova Duchy, that year was particularly harsh, with blizzards continuing for weeks on end.

Usually, children who lost their parents so young would either be adopted by relatives or sent to an orphanage. In Raisa's case, however, her relatives who lived in the same village did not have the means to feed another mouth, and the orphanages were all full.

The harsh conditions and growing number of orphans became such an issue that the wealthy families of the duchy were asked to take in a number of children to work for them. Needless to say, the House of Yulnova had to lead by example, and several children were brought in on that occasion. Raisa was one of them.

While she had to start working and fending for herself at an early age, Raisa was aware even in those days that she'd been fortunate in her misfortune. Had she not been chosen to go to the Yulnova Fortress, she would have starved or frozen to death. Thus, Raisa gave her work her all.

Washing clothes was heavy labor, but to Raisa, working at the Yulnova Fortress was no hardship. Thanks to the floor heating system, made up of large pipes beneath the floor through which hot air circulated, the vast fortress was always warm. The source of that hot air was several furnaces located in the basement.

Because the laundry room was located in the basement near the furnaces and hot air was pumped into the drying room, even during the harsh winter, Raisa did not have to suffer from the cold. All these burning furnaces also meant that the servants could heat up large quantities of water. While the servants weren't allowed in the magnificent bath used by the duke and his family, they could wash in a bathroom dedicated to servants. At

the end of each day of work, Raisa got to soak in a large tub. She even got to use the leftover water to wash the clothes and did not have to tremble with her hands in cold water all day.

At the time, Raisa had no way of knowing, but floor heating systems had existed since the days of the Astra Empire. The fifth Duke of Yulnova, Vasili, had gotten the foreign inventor he'd invited to the empire to innovate upon it. Thanks to him, the Yulnova Fortress had the best, most ingenious heating system in the entire empire. However, all the young Raisa knew was that the fortress was an incredible place.

After that point, she never forgot the strong impression her first visit to the laundry room of the fortress had made on her. It was the middle of winter, yet she felt warm enough to sweat. In the small village she'd come from, people woke up to find the water they'd brought from the well to their homes the day before frozen solid. *This* was another world altogether.

During her work in the laundry room, Raisa washed countless clothes. By the time winter melted into spring, the clever girl was allowed to wash some of the clothes of the ducal family. Children with their weak arm strength were in fact better suited to handling delicate silk shirts and the like.

Eventually, Raisa started getting confused. For some reason, one member of the family always sent his clothes far dirtier than the others.

That man was Isaac Yulnova, eighteen at the time. The young lord had just returned to the duchy after graduating from the Magic Academy and, strangely enough, his clothes were as dirty as those of the children that played in the mud.

Isaac was not highly esteemed in the fortress. He'd long been deemed "weird" for picking up unremarkable stones and piling them up in his room—or so Raisa had heard. Apparently, he'd learned how to read and write much later than others. Even the lowly servants of the laundry room often mocked him for being so different from his praiseworthy brother.

Raisa deeply resented them for their behavior. The duke had saved her life. She couldn't forgive them for mocking one of his sons. Besides, most of the servants were illiterate or could barely read easy words. What right did they have to mock him for learning later than other noble children?

The eight-year-old laundry girl had an idea. She'd ask Isaac not to dirty his clothes so much anymore. Surely, the other

servants would stop mocking him, then.

Whenever she thought back on that as an adult, she couldn't help but sigh at her stupidity. A laundry girl's place was in the basement. While he was an illegitimate child, Isaac was still a part of the ducal family. He belonged in the heavens. She should never have shown herself in front of him, let alone spoken to him.

But the foolish girl from the countryside did not know that and, by chance, she happened to catch sight of him. Two men in impeccable dress were strolling in the garden. Raisa had never seen either of their faces before, but she could tell from the clothes: One of them was Isaac.

She did not hesitate one bit before running up to them. She bowed as low as she could and made her request.

"Please do not dirty your clothes so much anymore," she begged before explaining that delicate fiber shouldn't be washed with too much strength and that, as such, she couldn't wash off the stains properly. She did her best to make her explanation as clear as possible, giving plenty of details on the way she and the other laundry girls had been taught to wash clothes.

A mere laundry girl speaking that way to the son of a duke was inappropriate. She could have been beaten black and blue for her impudence and thrown out of the fortress, but little Raisa had no way of knowing that.

Isaac listened to her plea in silence, his shoulders hunched.

When she was done, he let out a sigh and said, "I'm sorry. It's my fault. I can never resist the call of an uncommon stone and always end up digging up each and every one I stumble across. But I never knew I was causing trouble to such a small girl. I'll make sure not to excavate stones anymore unless I'm wearing appropriate clothes."

In this way, too, Raisa was incredibly fortunate. Isaac was a peculiar man. He wasn't very good at respecting etiquette and seldom acted like a proper nobleman, but he was kind and had retained a childlike innocence.

The gentleman who accompanied him was a tall man with a significant presence. He tapped Isaac's shoulder and smiled at Raisa.

"My brother has caused you much trouble, I see," he said. "I must say, you're impressive. You're the first to manage to convince him not to dirty his fine clothes. You're so young, yet so

good at explaining things already. How old are you, smart girl? What's your name?"

These were the first words Sergei ever addressed to Raisa.



"My grandfather and granduncle were both wonderful young men," I said with a smile.

The manager of the restaurant I'd visited with my brother in the capital, Moore, had already told me so, but grandfather really had *loved* looking for talents to nurture. It seemed Raisa, too, had been one of his targets.

What a meaningful hobby!

"Duke Sergei had yet to inherit, but he already managed the territory in most ways. He had come up with the idea to ask wealthy houses to take in orphans. He was my savior."

"I wouldn't have expected any less from him," I said.

If Isaac had been eighteen back then, Sergei, who was five years his senior, would've been twenty-three. In my past world, he'd have been in the workforce for a year or two after graduating from university—a naive young adult. Nevertheless, he seemed to have been a competent administrator from such a young age! I was impressed, as always.

Speaking of, if Raisa was eight when grandfather was twenty-three...

She's over fifty years old?!

She didn't look it! She must have been the kind who seemed mature for her age in her youth and never aged another day afterward.

"You're incredible as well, Raisa," I said. "You were so young, yet you didn't let the adults around you influence you negatively. You could have mocked my granduncle with the rest of the staff, but you went to look for him to explain things instead."

"I thank you for your praise, my lady, but I was just a child. I did it without truly understanding anything."



"You're good at explaining things. I don't know much about laundry. Will you tell me more about it the next time we meet?" Sergei had said.

Eight-year-old Raisa was over the moon. She couldn't wait to tell him everything she knew. From that day onward, she started working with even more fervor. She asked her seniors about the method to wash the clothes of the ladies she wasn't allowed to touch yet; women's clothes were particularly difficult because of the many ornaments on them.

Whenever she had a free moment, Raisa would roam in the garden hoping to run into Sergei. For a lonely child in an unfamiliar environment, without family or close friends, that hope was everything.

When her wish finally came true and Raisa saw Sergei in the garden, she wavered. She'd yet to learn how lip service or small talk worked, but she knew adults sometimes said things they didn't mean to make the people they were talking to happy. Could an important nobleman like him truly care about the laundry stories of a servant child? It seemed unlikely.

Raisa's doubts made perfect sense. But as soon as Sergei saw her, he smiled and waved at her.

"Raisa! I'm glad I ran into you. Do you have a moment?" he asked.

Sergei truly listened to her rambling about laundry. He listened when she talked about how impressed she'd been with the laundry room at first, how other servants liked to gossip, and how she sometimes found dealing with them difficult. In fact, Sergei did not only listen—he asked questions and requested clarification or details whenever something caught his attention.

Raisa became more enthusiastic still, asking the other workers as many questions as she could and paying attention to her surroundings so she could answer Sergei. The two met several times in the garden, and their conversations slowly started touching upon more topics, including the way servants in other positions worked.

Raisa paused her story and smiled.

"My lady, do you understand what he was doing?"

I forced a smile and replied awkwardly, "Well... Grandfather relied on your eyes."

If I'd been inclined to put it more harshly, I would've said he'd turned poor, naive Raisa into a spy. I assumed he'd been looking

into something. What better source of information than a bright little girl with no hidden agenda or hope of promotion?

I wasn't sure I approved of using a child like that. As a future duke, I could say he was born to use others, but would a twenty-three-year-old really be that slick?

Raisa looked slightly surprised before laughing.

"Were you trying to spare my feelings? How kind of you. I'm starting to understand why His Grace holds you in such high esteem. You're just as wise as I've heard. What Lord Sergei did was only natural for a duke-to-be. I hold no resentment. In fact, I'm glad I could be of use to him. I must say, I also find myself seeing the resemblance between the two of you more and more. He also used to be far too kind to me."



"Raisa, do you want to learn how to read and write?"

"I do! Because if I knew how to write letters, I'd be more helpful to you! Oh, but, I know I shouldn't wish for such things," Raisa said, casting her eyes down.

She stared at her rough hands. She had enough to eat and a place to sleep, so she was already plenty fortunate.

A few months had passed since she'd come to the Yulnova Fortress. She was starting to get used to the work and to her environment. Her secret talks with Sergei filled her with pride, and she'd not stopped thinking for a single moment that she was lucky. Despite that, a new desire had slowly started growing within her—she didn't want to be a laundry girl forever.

"You're smart, earnest, and hardworking. I enjoy our talks," Sergei told her before leaving.

The next time she saw him, he said something much more unbelievable: "Raisa, would you like to leave this fortress and become the child of one of my acquaintances?"

The family Sergei was talking about had produced knights of the Order of Yulnova for generations. However, their two sons had lost their lives in the line of duty before they could get married. Depressed, the parents had resolved themselves to the end of their line. However, they'd started feeling lonely and were now considering adopting a girl. If they adopted a boy, they thought, they'd ultimately raise him to be a knight. They didn't want to live that way anymore. A girl, on the other hand, could

stay by their side until the end if they welcomed her future husband into their family.

“Me? I couldn’t. They’ll be disappointed.” A family that produced knights from generation to generation wouldn’t want a destitute country girl like her. They’d pick a child of the same background as themselves.

Sergei smiled. “Yet, they seem to want you. I, too, hope you’ll accept. Study, learn new skills, and come back to the fortress under different circumstances. I’d feel most reassured with you working by my side in the future.”



“That’s how I was adopted into another family.”

“You must have respected grandfather a great deal,” I said.

According to her story, the adoption process had been smooth. That said, I thought the doubts of the small Raisa were logical. In the duchy, knights could only keep their status while they were alive, not pass it down to their children. That was why knights trained their boys from a young age so that they, too, might become knights in turn and preserve their privileges—that was the only way for a knight family to remain so. The sons of knights weren’t treated favorably by the order or accepted without passing the test, but it was much easier to succeed if one had been trained from childhood.

Families that successfully kept this up for generations eventually came to be known as reputable families and treated as second only to nobles. A family like that wanting to adopt a lowly servant sounded like some sort of trick. Raisa must have seen that, but she’d accepted because grandfather had urged her to.

“There was actually a true reason that family wanted to adopt me. Duke Sergei was behind it, of course. Can you guess, my lady?”

“You say grandfather was behind it…” I mused.

A reason and not a direct order?

Had they picked her because they thought grandfather liked her? While their meetings were “secret,” the garden wasn’t the most discreet of places. People were bound to have noticed them. It was strange for the son of a duke to see a laundry girl so often. If Raisa had been a little older at the time, people

would have thought they were lovers, but she had only been *eight*, so that made little sense, even as a rumor.

Ah!

"Is it because grandfather treated you as though you were his sister?"

"Indeed. He treated me so to make people believe I might be his father's illegitimate daughter and, as such, his half sister. Naturally, it was not the case at all, but that provided him with a good excuse to see a girl of lowly status like me so often."

A master manipulator! Poor great-grandfather!

Well, our granduncle Isaac *was* an illegitimate child so I imagined it was plausible.

"Like others, my adoptive parents assumed that, since Lord Sergei mentioned me in spite of my status when they discussed their intention to adopt, there had to be a secret behind my birth. That's why they decided on me. When I learned of this misunderstanding, I was astonished and denied it, but they decided to adopt me anyway. Apparently, my personality reminded them of their late sons."

Grandfather must have known these knights well. Since they'd died before marrying, I assumed they'd been rather young—close in age with Sergei. He must have remembered their personalities and decided Raisa, who had much in common with them, would be a good fit for that family. He'd truly planned it all!

What an astute schemer!

"From then on, I received an education. I learned how to read and write and studied etiquette. When I turned fourteen, I returned to the Yulnova Fortress, as a maid this time. By then, Lord Sergei had become duke…and my being the secret daughter of the previous duke had become an open secret. I made sure not to confirm or deny that rumor, because I realized that Lord Sergei had let it spread to protect me."

Ah, yes, anti-old-hag armor. I get it.

I remembered the gardeners of the rose garden being terrified to appear in front of me because they were still traumatized from grandmother firing people for dirtying her eyes. Who knew what she would've done to a former laundry girl turned maid if she'd caught sight of her? Grandfather had tried to make sure Raisa wouldn't be treated that way.

Sergei had met Raisa when he was twenty-three. He'd already been married to the old hag by then. He'd really run out of luck

with that match. What had he done in his past life to deserve such a horrible wife? I couldn't imagine a more mismatched couple.

"On top of his work for the duchy, Duke Sergei involved himself in politics and was tremendously busy. He divided his time between the capital and the duchy. Lord Isaac also traveled often for his research. While I was a maid, I spent more time writing letters and making arrangements for them than carrying trays and the like."

She was more a secretary than a maid, really. I wonder if she used to wear glasses even back then. A smart, pretty secretary with glasses... Gotta love that!

"Duke Sergei often made the most peculiar of requests. Those were hectic days, but I had so much fun. When I turned eighteen, however, I married and left the fortress to raise my children."

Grandfather was a bit of a matchmaker, so I expected he'd casually pushed her into the arms of an eligible bachelor.

Grandfather was fifteen years older than Raisa, and our granduncle Isaac was ten years older. Had she ever been infatuated with either of them? Well, since she'd ended up pretending to be their sister, there was nothing she could have done even if she had.

"I sometimes returned to help them out whenever they needed me. I took care of my adoptive parents until they passed and, after that, I was asked if I'd like to come back to the fortress. That was ten years ago. The lady of the house and Lord Aleksandr had taken up residence here, so I did what I could to not stand out. I mostly helped the housekeeper with her work and let Duke Sergei know about what was going on in the fortress. Eventually, Duke Sergei passed..."

Raisa stopped to take a deep breath. "Then, Lord Aleksandr became duke and he appointed a new housekeeper. One who'd come from another house. I was swiftly ousted."

From another house, huh? Go figure that Raisa had also been purged during our shitty dad's rule.

"Five months ago," Raisa continued, "that housekeeper disappeared, and Mr. Novalas contacted me to ask if I'd like to take over the position."

Disappeared?! There are more people like the financial advisor?!

Considering everything I'd heard, I could piece together that

the housekeeper had been sent by Magna to spearhead the embezzlement and other wrongdoings. My brother had said he'd already removed the most problematic individuals. I imagined she was one of them.

Housekeepers were responsible for a lot of things, including the food and goods that came into the household. To successfully conceal embezzlement, it was one of the key positions to secure. I remembered reading that in Victorian England, housekeepers had been trusted with the keys to the rooms where food and valuables were kept. Eventually, those keys had become a symbol of their prestige and authority.

"Therefore, I must say I am rather new as a housekeeper. The banquet will be the first large event I'm handling," she said.

"But you seem so used to it already!"

"The housekeeper in charge during Duke Sergei's rule was elderly, so I often helped her."

This probably meant that grandfather had intended for Raisa to be the next housekeeper. I could see why the old hag had removed her as soon as she could.

"That is most heartening," I said. "For I myself am rather new as the lady of the house."

The two of us exchanged a glance and smiled at one another. Then, to my surprise, Raisa quickly looked down in shame.

"I couldn't be of help to you and your mother, my lady. I'm terribly sorry for that."

I shook my head. "None of what happened to us was your fault, Raisa."

Raisa had come back to the fortress ten years ago, after raising her children and taking care of her aging adoptive parents. My mother and I had already been at the secondary residence at the time. There was nothing she could have done for us.

"Grandfather left my brother many capable and kind subordinates. I'm finding today that he did the same for me. I never got the chance to meet him, but I feel like I was able to connect with him through you, Raisa. That makes me happy. Thank you."

Raisa seemed surprised, and she paused before saying, "I cannot stop thinking how you resemble him, my lady. You gift me by saying something so wonderful, just like he did. You know, of the best things said to me in my life, the third best was

spoken by Duke Sergei."

Somehow, I could guess even without being told: *Raisa! I'm glad I ran into you. Do you have a moment?*

"What about first and second place?" I asked.

Raisa smiled. "In first place, I'd have to put my son's first word: 'momwy.'"

"My! Grandfather could never compete with that, indeed! And second place?"

"Second place…"—Raisa cleared her throat—"…is a secret." Her cheeks were slightly red.

Looks like she has a happy marriage.

Chapter 4: The Banquet

After waking up in the morning, I gave Regina a big hug. “Thank you, Regina. You’ve been of great help to me.”

She wagged her fluffy tail and pushed her big head onto me. I couldn’t get enough of her soft mane against my skin.

Animal therapy works! I feel my stress melting away! Sadly, today, I couldn’t be with her for long.

“Go back to your pack and have a nice rest,” I said, petting her muzzle.

Regina showed me her teeth as though she were smiling.

“Raisa, could you take Regina back to the kennel?”

She nodded. “Of course, my lady.”

Raisa had worked in the Yulnova Fortress for a long time. The huge hounds didn’t intimidate her anymore. I’d heard that grandfather had brought the leader of the pack everywhere with him when he stayed here. She must have gotten used to it then.

She was here to bring me something from the safe and would take Regina afterward. In the meantime, she deposited a box on the table and opened it. The inside shone with dazzling brilliance, revealing a pair of earrings and a necklace made of sapphires and diamonds.

The centerpiece of the necklace was a huge rectangular sapphire. It looked at least five centimeters long and three centimeters large. There were smaller sapphires—roughly two centimeters wide, I estimated—along the dazzling gold chain. Small diamonds surrounded each stone.

This parure was one of the Yulnova heirlooms. It was passed down from one lady of the house to the next, just like the sapphire earrings and hair ornament in the residence of the capital.

A four-hundred-year-old house is quite something!

In my past world, I imagined only the Queen of England owned such treasures. I couldn’t even guess how pricey this jewelry was—hundreds of millions of yen at the very least. And I was about to wear them…

Eek, I’m scared!

“You must be very busy today,” I told Raisa. “I’m sorry for

taking up some of your time."

"Please don't be, my lady. This is my job. Ensuring the mistress of the Yulnova receives the jewelry she needs is what a housekeeper must do," Raisa said before looking at the back of my room.

Hanging there on a mannequin was the dress I'd wear tonight. The time had finally come to get it out of my closet. That was why I couldn't keep Regina in my room today. Her fur would get on the dress!

"It's a beautiful dress, my lady. I'm sure it'll suit you very well," Raisa said.

"Thank you. This will be my very first time attending a formal party. I must do my best not to embarrass my brother."

At last, the banquet to celebrate Alexei becoming the new Duke of Yulnova was tonight. Although, he'd turned it into more of a large celebration to introduce *me* to the nobles of the duchy. A regular noble young lady would have already made her debut in high society before entering the Magic Academy. In my case, since I'd remained confined—first by force and then by choice—I'd yet to do so.

I'd never been to this sort of fancy party in my previous life either. It was too late to turn back now, but I was a little freaked out. It would be different from hosting the imperial family, wouldn't it?

I have to pull myself together!

Raisa smiled. "Firsts are always accompanied by mistakes. Be kind to yourself and confront the situation calmly. Besides, it shall help you get the upper hand in the long run if they look down on you at first."

"Thank you for cheering me on. You're right. All I need to do is stay by my brother's side and greet everyone."

Yep, by my brother's side. That was the most important part.

The only thing I needed to focus on before that was making myself as pretty as possible.

My brother would be the main character of this fancy party and I, his partner. I had to look the part! Putting on such treasures was scary, but I couldn't hesitate. I'd use the family heirlooms to the utmost!

Let's forget about the other attendees entirely. I'm sorry, guys, but I've only got eyes for Alexei. That means I've only got one mission: make sure Alexei thinks I'm pretty. I'm on it!

Though I was getting all pumped up, the one who'd do most of the work was Mina, not me. After all, my battle maid was in charge of dressing me and doing my hair.

I take my hat off to her and her long list of skills.



The banquet was to start in the evening. During the summer, the sun shone until the late hours of the day, and it had only just started setting.

Inside the Yulnova Fortress, the servants were busy attending to the final details of the banquet. The stoves burned as the cooks busied themselves with the preparation of the food, while the gardeners turned on the lamps outside. Servants lined up polished silverware and plates on the large table as others rushed to the cellar to bring out bottles of wine.

Time was ticking.

In the midst of this agitation, Alexei, the Duke of Yulnova, made his way to his younger sister's room to escort her to the banquet hall.



I heard a knock on the door.

"My lady, are you ready?" That was Ivan's voice.

Mina walked up to the door and opened it. "She is ready. Please come in."

Ivan moved aside to allow Alexei to enter first. He'd only taken one step into the room when he stopped in his tracks, astonished. His neon blue eyes widened in surprise as he stared at me in silence, mouth agape.

I smiled at him. "Thank you for coming to get me, brother."

Alexei did not respond. He was probably busy comparing me to a flower in bloom or something equally poetic in his head.

I was wearing a mermaid dress. The design was delicate, with strategically placed frills that added a touch of elegance. Most of the dress was dark blue, like the early twilight sky, but the center part was lighter, creating a beautiful gradation. The snuggly fitted skirt flared at the knees. From there, the blue color darkened, and the shape transformed to resemble flower petals.

The bodice was even more intricate. Camilla had emphasized

my small waist by keeping it simple there, while the upper part was covered in layers of dark blue frills that reminded me of a rose in bloom. The narrow V-neck was deep, but the gorgeous, glimmering sapphire necklace I was wearing concealed my cleavage. Still, the white of my neck and collarbone peeked through the beautiful fabric and stones, making for an alluring yet graceful spectacle. My sleeves were also dark blue, but they were just see-through enough to let the enticing paleness of my skin show. My dazzling earrings completed the look.

I wore my indigo hair in an intricate updo that, once again, resembled the shape of a rose. I also had an actual blue rose accessory in my hair. While it appeared to be a real rose at first glance, it was in fact made of glass. I had a feeling the masterful glasswork might attract even more attention than the invaluable jewels I wore. That blue rose brought together the outfit's inspiration and transformed me into a flower in bloom.

Whew! I managed to get ready on time! Or rather, Mina did!

It had taken all day but we'd made it!

I didn't remember it being so complicated for the imperial visit, perhaps because my dress was simpler then. My hair style was also quite something this time. Camilla had come up with it and explained it to Mina in detail. It had taken hours to bring her vision to life. Not even Mina could manage it alone. She'd had to enlist the help of two other maids!

Turns out women do *take hours to get ready.*

I was starting to think I'd failed as a girl in my previous life. I used to take ten minutes to get ready—fifteen if I was going all out. I was glad I'd put in the time and effort today, though! Alexei was even more dashing than usual, so I had to keep up!

On a daily basis, my brother often wore white. Today, however, he was in formal dress and wore a stylish black ensemble.

Black suits him as well as white…

Alexei was handsome and had a good figure, so I assumed anything would suit him, but today's outfit was fantastic.

"Ekaterina," Alexei said, holding out both hands.

I walked up to him and put both of my hands in his.

"My blue rose," he whispered, reverently kissing the tip of my fingers. "You're breathtaking. I finally understand why so many people spend their lives trying to nurture blue roses. If they're as beautiful as you, they must bring those who lay eyes on their

blossoming forms to the garden of the heavens. I can hardly believe a mythical blue rose came to me and blessed me with her touch. Oh, how my chest trembles at your sight, Ekaterina, my goddess."

Alexei let his fingers rest on my cheek. His touch was so light it almost felt reverent, but his gaze held a tinge of sadness.

"Promise me one thing," he continued. "Please do not go out looking like that while the sun is still up. I fear His Imperial Majesty was right. The sun, consumed with love, might descend from the heavens to steal you away. Not even the gods can resist longing for a blue rose."

"Oh, *brother*!"

I see you're just as crazy about me as ever—and as inspired! You deserve a gold medal for that speech, or a National Honor Award! I'll grant you the award of the Alexei's Fave Kingdom! Never heard of that country? That's natural, because only I live in it!

"I absolutely refuse to rise to the heavens," I stated firmly. "I'd much rather stay here where I can hold your hand. I've told you many times, have I not? I'm happiest by your side."

"Thank you, Ekaterina. I am also happy—very much so," Alexei said with a smile. "Banquets and the like usually depress me, but I'm looking forward to tonight. I'm sure everyone will be in awe of your beauty. I cannot wait to see their faces."



The fireworks marking the start of the banquet soared over the Yulnova Fortress. The people of the ducal capital that surrounded the fortress stopped what they were doing to stare up at the sky. It was still bright outside and most could only hear the noise of the fireworks and see the smoke. Regardless, cheers erupted.

"The celebrations have started."

"Indeed, and with great pomp," a merchant who'd supplied foodstuffs for the banquet replied to his friend, a pleased look on his face.

"The new duke is young, but he sure knows how to do these things properly. He showed favor to serious, *local* businesses to support the duchy's economy. It's as though Duke Sergei were back."

"I'm glad he's got his head on straight. After Duke Sergei

passed, people who came from who-knows-where took *all* of the jobs in the fortress. I was worried about the duchy's future."

Many merchants shared these two's sentiments. None of them knew about the embezzlement, but they'd felt its effects.

"I wonder if our new lord's gonna remain in the fortress from now on. They say he brought his very pretty young wife with him."

That rumor had already gained traction all over the duchy.

"That's his *sister*. The young princess of the House of Yulnova. Apparently, she was locked in some tower for the longest time. Poor girl. She must've suffered so much. It's no wonder the duke gives her so much attention now."

Several people tilted their heads in confusion at the man's words.

"Are you sure? I heard she was his wife."

"I'm telling you it's his sister! A servant of the fortress told me so in person!"

"But the people who saw them together said they looked like a young couple!"

"And they're all wrong!"

As this new rumor started spreading, many were found arguing in the streets of the northern capital.

Two large chandeliers swayed inside the great reception hall of the Yulnova Fortress, casting their light on the dazzling decorations and enormous paintings that adorned the walls.

There was a third chandelier in the center of the room. At its core was a rainbow stone—a shining one—that had been selected for its extraordinarily strong glow. This particular artifact, a chandelier that could radiate its light at all times without candles needing to be lit, was one of the prized possessions of the House of Yulnova. It had been built long ago by the inventor Vasili had invited to the duchy and had remained in the family since then. Not even the imperial family owned such an impressive, bright stone.

Many of the guests had already arrived and the hall was filled with distinguished ladies and gentlemen in lavish dress exchanging smiles and pleasantries. Servants walked through the hall, offering drinks to the guests, while extravagant dishes were arranged beautifully.

However, the banquet had yet to begin, for the guest of honor, the young Duke Alexei, and his partner, Ekaterina, hadn't

appeared.

Musicians awaited their entrance in a corner of the room. They'd start playing right before the duke stepped into the hall, as per the traditions of the House of Yulnova.

Suddenly, the butler gave them the signal. They readied their instruments and began playing. As the first notes echoed, the guests held their breath. Every pair of eyes was on the large staircase that connected the great hall to the second floor.

Finally, they appeared: the Duke of Yulnova, the picture of dignity in his black formal suit, and the lady of the house, wrapped in the night sky itself. At the beautiful spectacle, the guests cheered, almost despite themselves.



I reflexively tightened my hold on Alexei's arm at the loud cheers.

Whoa! They surprised me! So many people cheering in unison felt like some sort of shock wave. I hadn't been ready for that.

Walking down the staircase, I couldn't help but be reminded of old Hollywood movies. I felt like I was in *Gone with the Wind* or something.

Am I the heroine of some soap opera? I felt the guests' eyes on me with every step. *My mental strength is being tested.*

"Are you all right, Ekaterina?" Alexei asked, putting his left hand on mine and squeezing.

"Yes, brother. I was just surprised."

"Don't push yourself. If you feel sick, tell me immediately."

Right! I'm supposed to be sickly... Forgot about that.

"No matter the size of the crowd, I shall be fine as long as you are by my side, brother. So please don't worry about me."

"If you say so." Alexei's neon blue eyes softened at my words. "These people are all residents of the duchy. In other words, they're your subjects. You do not need to worry about anything. Just behave as the queen you are."

"Oh, brother. They're *your* subjects, not mine. In fact, I, too, am one of your subjects, Duke."

"In front of you, I am but a servant, my queen."

Oops, I made him say that again.

With my brother by my side, I had not one reason to freak out, even if I *was* walking down the steps of a fancy staircase in

front of a gawking crowd! After all, he was much cooler than even the greatest stars in Hollywood!



The guests let out sighs of admiration as they watched the pair of siblings walk down the stairs. They seemed very close to the onlookers.

Most of the people in the hall had known Alexei Yulnova since he'd been a child. However, this was the first time a banquet like this one had been held in the Yulnova Fortress since the celebration for Aleksandr's succession, and Alexei had been so busy dealing with the higher-ranking nobles of the duchy that most had barely caught a glimpse of him during the successive funerals held for his father, grandmother, and mother. Since Alexei disliked involving himself in high society, the memory most of these people had retained of him was that of a boy—a young boy wiser than most adults, sure, but a child nonetheless.

At eighteen, however, Alexei had become a poised, handsome man. He was tall and slender, and his elegant attire, worthy of a duke, served as a reminder he was here to rule over them all. The cold expression he directed at the crowd waiting below him warned them not to underestimate him because of his age.

Whenever he looked at his sister, though, the cold in his eyes melted away, replaced by tenderness. Those who knew Alexei the best were the most surprised by this change. Young men watched him with awe, while a soft blush reddened the cheeks of the young ladies in attendance.

Ekaterina, on the other hand, was unknown to the majority of them. For the most part, it was their very first time seeing her. All they knew about her was that, having been kept away from the world for so long, she knew nothing of society and had yet to make her debut despite her age. She hadn't even received a decent education. Needless to say, the crowd had been expecting a confused debutante unaware of the habits and customs of high society.

In spite of that, the young lady who appeared atop the staircase—in a more sophisticated dress than any of the other ladies in the room—exuded refinement. The detailed, graceful gown did not expose much skin, but her feminine curves shone through in alluring ways. It was plain to see that the theme of

the dress was the emblem of the House of Yulnova, a blue rose, as though she were announcing to everyone the legitimacy of her birthright.

Ekaterina looked much older than fifteen. Her mature beauty, which hinted at her strong character, did not pale even in comparison to Alexei's. Their respective charms seemed to somehow amplify one another's, lending them an unapproachable air.

This was the first time this beautiful girl had appeared in the social scene. She'd yet to be claimed by anyone and boasted a tremendous fortune and an impressive family line. As such, it was not surprising that the hearts of young men of similar age started racing.

Someone clapped. Immediately, others imitated them and, in the blink of an eye, a storm of applause echoed, welcoming the siblings into the hall.



The game's afoot.

I smiled at our guests, keeping my attention on a group of people I could see from the corner of my eye. They were standing a little away from the staircase and, unlike the others, had not clapped for one second. I could feel the animosity in their gazes. Unsurprisingly enough, Count Novadain and his daughter, Kira, were among them.

Today, once again,
Most impressive sausage curls
Lady Kira wears.
Oh! I just composed a senryu!

I smiled to myself.

Meanwhile, I'd already started looking elsewhere, so I hardly noticed that Kira (taking my neutral smile as some sort of provocation) had glared at me with a frown. I was busy focusing on a far more interesting group: Alexei's closest retainers, Novak, Aaron, Forli, and a few others I often crossed paths with at the academy. They were waiting for us with smiles on their faces. So many people I liked were here, and Alexei was right by my side. I wasn't the least bit scared of Miss Sausage Curls, her dad, or their followers.

During such succession celebrations, it was customary for the

new duke to stop in the center of the room and give a little speech to thank the attendees for their presence. Thus, after we'd walked down the stairs, Alexei headed to the middle of the room and stopped there. He looked at the crowd gathered around him, standing rigidly, which made him appear even taller. Everyone quieted down at the sight of his domineering eyes that seemed to almost glow.

Even the music stopped. A deep silence fell over the hall.

"First of all, allow me to thank you for joining me here today," Alexei said in his clear voice. It carried well, and I had no doubts even the people standing in the back could hear him. "I, Alexei Yulnova, have inherited the title of Duke of Yulnova. While I am still young and inexperienced, I vow to fight for the peace and prosperity of the duchy and give my life for it if necessary."

He looked at one group of people in particular and the dangerous gleam in his eye shone brighter. Quickly, though, he regained his calm.

"I expect all of you to devote yourselves to the good of the Yulnova Duchy alongside me," he continued. "Now, allow me to introduce someone to you." He turned to look at me, his expression growing as soft as warmed butter. He took my hand and smiled. "Ekaterina Yulnova, my dear sister who shall rule over the duchy with me. She underwent a long period of convalescence alongside our mother, so I expect this is the first time many of you have met her."

Alexei lifted my hand and I smiled. At the gesture, cheers erupted from the crowd once again.

"I'm certain my wise sister will become my greatest strength and help me rule as an accomplished duke," he said. "I ask that you show her the respect she deserves."

The crowd shouted, "At your command!" in unison before clapping.

That's Alexei for you! He was concise and effective—as well as a tad obsessed with me.

Seeing him give a speech reminded me of the entrance ceremony at the Magic Academy. Back then the crowd had also quieted down with a single look from him.

At the time, I'd been sitting in the audience, listening. Now that I was next to him, faced with the reactions of his listeners, my impression of his amazingness was even stronger. There were enough people here to fill this humongous hall, yet he

wasn’t the slightest bit hesitant. If anything, the others were the ones feeling overpowered!

I also noticed something else. When facing a crowd like this, you could grasp a sense of their sentiment. Despite the smiles these people were showing, I could tell Alexei’s words had landed. Some were nervous and others hopeful.

Alexei had been born to stand here. He’d carried this fate all these years, knowing full well that one day he’d have to bear this burden.

Before today, I hadn’t quite realized how lonely that was.

With me here, though, he didn’t have to be alone anymore. I could hold his hand and stand by his side. I finally understood how important my presence must have been to him. Thinking that, I swore an oath anew, deep down in my heart.

I won’t ever let go of your hand.

Honestly, my memories from my past life were still firmly rooted inside me, and I couldn’t help but feel out of place at a fancy party like this one. Nevertheless, Alexei was also here, doing his best at the young age of eighteen. I could manage. I didn’t know how useful I’d be to him, but I intended to do everything in my power to be of help.

I’m the biggest Alexei fangirl there is, after all!

I squeezed my brother’s hand and he looked at me, smiling.

“It’s time to show them the result of your hard work, Ekaterina,” he whispered in my ear, squeezing back.

Uh-oh. I know I just made an oath, but I already wanna run away! We now had to dance the first dance in front of all these people! *Who’s the idiot who decided the most noble person in the room had to do the first dance, huh?!*

Making sure none of my internal turmoil showed on my face, I smiled at Alexei.

“I’m glad I get to dance with you, brother,” I said.

The waltz played by the best musicians in the northern capital had a way of enlivening hearts. It flowed, easy and light. Elegant as swans, the pair of siblings danced in the center of the great hall. They were so in harmony with the notes that it almost felt as though the music was flowing out of their beautiful silhouettes.

As they swirled together, they looked into one another's eyes. The crowd was entranced by the lovely spectacle.

Alexei's height made him stand out on the dance floor, while the black of his clothes highlighted his beautiful, fair complexion. The coolheaded young man, who'd been nicknamed the Ice Rose, had traded his usual inexpressive face for a gentle smile.

As for Ekaterina, she let her body move in rhythm, following Alexei's lead. The cheerful smile that curled her full lips did not disappear, not even for a moment. Her dress did not seem to hinder her movements at all, and whenever she spun, the blue petals that adorned her dress swayed gracefully. The modesty of her dress inflamed passions rather than curbed them. The eyes of every young man were fixed on her, eager to catch a glimpse of an ankle as she moved. Her voluptuous figure and natural allure had their hearts hammering in their chests.

Those with a good eye would have easily discerned the lack of experience in Ekaterina's footwork. However, had they known it was her first time dancing, everyone would have agreed that she'd done a magnificent job.

The Ice Rose and the Blue Rose—the dance of these two beautiful roses of Yulnova captivated the hearts of the banquet's guests.



Waltzes were the very quintessence of high society in my mind.

However, during the Middle Ages and the early modern period, dances with men and women having close physical contact had actually been forbidden because they had been considered immodest. Apparently, at the time, noble men and women had only performed dances that did not require them to embrace one another.

What's the title again? Oh, "Pavane pour une Infante Défunte," that's it!

The term "pavane" from that famous piece's title referred to a very common dance at the time. While performing this dance—and others like it—men and women had only held hands at most.

At the start of the nineteenth century, however, the waltz had become widely popular, and people had started performing it at

gatherings more and more often. That was when the close-contact dances of high society most people thought of when picturing balls had *really* turned commonplace.

It was my first time giving this any thought, but I could see why these dances used to be considered immodest. After all, you had to throw your arms around your partner's body and get *very* close to them.

In this world, or at the very least, in the empire, such dances had become mainstream much earlier than in my previous world.

Why? Well, because of the Magic Academy!

That wasn't the entire explanation, since these dances also had their origins in those done by Pyotr and his family during celebrations, but the *main* reason was to get young men and women up close and personal by teaching them in class.

No, for real, the Magic Academy was like a huge mixer party, and dancing was their prime gambit. I meant it when I said our school was a trap laid out by the imperial family! They really did intend to create strong mages for the empire's stability by bringing together young men and women with plenty of mana.

I loved that trap, though! Thanks to it, I got to wear a pretty dress and dance with my dear brother, the most handsome man I knew, in a dazzling reception hall.

I was living the dream of every maiden! I hadn't exactly been the kind of girl to dream of such things in my past life, but now that it was actually happening, I was over the moon!

I'm so happy! I'm so glad I was reborn!

Alexei also looked like he was having a good time and, to be honest, that was what made me happiest.

Thank you, God! Erm, I mean, gods? People are polytheists here. I'm not sure which one of you blessed me, but thank you so much!

Despite the fact that her mind was occupied by such thoughts, Ekaterina was dancing with ease, following the rhythm of the music.

"You're doing wonderfully, Ekaterina," Alexei whispered with a gentle smile.

"That's all thanks to you helping me train so many times," she replied, returning his gesture.

She was not being modest or overstating. Even though Alexei had been very busy, he'd still made time to help Ekaterina practice almost every day after they'd arrived in the duchy.

While practicing, the siblings also talked a lot. Their training sessions had become the perfect place to exchange information. For instance, Ekaterina had been able to tell him all about her conversation with Raisa the day after.

To practice dancing, music was a must. Obviously, people *could* dance without music, but it wasn't the same. Besides, as a ducal family, the House of Yulnova had personal musicians—who just so happened to be more than happy to play for the siblings whenever Alexei requested it. This allowed them to discuss sensitive information without worrying about being overheard, the music doing a fine job of concealing their whispers.

It truly isn't easy being an important noble, Ekaterina thought.

Needless to say, Alexei was an accomplished dancer. Since men led women during such dances, his adept lead helped Ekaterina dance beautifully despite her superficial skill. Of course, without her tireless efforts, her perceptiveness, and her natural grace, it would not have been enough to capture the favor of the crowd as she had.

What had also helped Ekaterina was the basic dance training her mother, Anastasia, had instilled into her under the pretense of games. Her body still remembered the moves she'd learned then. Every step her mother took had made her look as beautiful and graceful as a butterfly, and little Ekaterina had spent hours trying to replicate them. Every time she had shown her mother the results, Anastasia would compliment her, telling her she was adorable.

When Ekaterina had told Alexei of these memories, he'd hugged her without a word.

Eventually, the waltz ended and the siblings bowed to one another. In this room—or rather, in the entire Yulnova Duchy—the only people they should bow to were one another.

Once more, a storm of applause took over the hall.



After Alexei and I left the dance floor in the center of the hall, several couples replaced us and the musicians started playing another piece.

There weren't that many people dancing, though. Most guests surrounded *us*, scrambling to be first in line. I expected some were trying to greet us to maintain good relationships between their houses and ours, while others wanted to ask Alexei or me for a dance.

Yet none of them actually spoke to us directly. They just sent enthusiastic glances our way, making it as obvious as could be that they were dying for a conversation. As a general rule, it was considered rude for someone to start a conversation with a person of higher status. You had to wait for the nobler one to greet you.

The first time I'd heard of this, I couldn't help but think, *Are we in Versailles or what?!* Now that I was at a banquet for the first time, though, I finally understood. If anyone were free to talk to us as they pleased, chaos would ensue! We'd end up swallowed by the crowd!

Still, this wasn't a hard rule—just a matter of good manners. If you actually knew the person or had a good reason, it was fine to talk to them first. Considering the situation, though, if anyone approached us first, their social standing could take a serious blow.

I guess every etiquette rule comes from somewhere.

In my past life, there had been rules like that too. Like not waiting in front of the artist's exit for theater performers to enter or leave for instance. I was now learning that in high society, these rules had meaning beyond showing off one's status.

"Novak," Alexei called.

The crowd surrounding us immediately reacted and people moved to open up a path for Novak to approach. He walked up to Alexei with his wife at his arm and bowed to his master.

"Please allow me to congratulate you once again, Your Grace," he said.

"It feels strange hearing that from you after all this time," Alexei replied with a laugh.

Novak had been by Alexei's side almost every day since he'd inherited. He was his closest aide. His congratulating Alexei again did feel a bit out of place. However, Alexei saying so publicly sent a message to the others. Novak was closer to the Duke of Yulnova than anyone else.

Because of Alexei's studies, Novak was forced to spend most of his time in the capital to work with Alexei. As a result, many

had yet to take notice of him in the duchy. Alexei's remark was sure to change that. From now on, people would flock to him in the hope of having him act as an intermediary between them and Alexei. This would increase his personal influence and help him govern alongside Alexei in a more effective way.

Tonight, the power structure of the duchy was changing in front of everyone's eyes.

I imagined that, back when our father was still in power, this position had fallen into Novadain's lap. He'd made sure to savor every last bit of privilege he could. I wondered how he felt, watching another man take that power away. Or how he felt watching lesser nobles of the duchy looking at Novak instead of him. Sadly, I couldn't see him with the crowd around us.

Still, I had a feeling he wouldn't throw in the towel so easily.

Ignoring the envious gazes directed at Novak, Alexei and I enjoyed a pleasant talk with him and his family.

His son, Andrei, was about thirty years old. He was a handsome man with a strong gaze and black hair. Apparently, he looked very much like his father in his youth. Andrei handled most of the work of the viscounty, and I expected that one day, he would also become one of Alexei's aides. He had enough mana to have studied at the Magic Academy and fondly recounted anecdotes from his days there.

Novak's wife was called Adelina. It wasn't actually my first time meeting her. In fact, I'd seen her almost every day since coming to the duchy!

"Your dancing was most remarkable, Lady Ekaterina," she told me, a warm smile on her face.

"I have your guidance to thank for it, madam," I replied. Adelina had been kind enough to become my dance teacher.

She was nothing like Novak, who often wore an austere, almost scary expression. What had struck me most about her was her gentle smile. She had light purple hair and eyes, and while she wasn't necessarily a great beauty, her amiable nature made her quite charming. She was the only daughter of the previous Viscount of Novak and had been a great dancer when she was young. The way she told it, she'd apparently fallen for Novak—or Boris Kruz, as he had been called then—after dancing with him at a ball. She'd only accepted the dance because Sergei had insisted, but the way Novak had led their steps had left an impression on her.

From what she'd said during our lessons, people had mocked her a great deal at the time for being lured in by his handsome face. Why? Because Boris Novak had almost no mana at all. On top of that, he was the son of a nobleman's illegitimate child. In other words, he was pretty much a commoner with no family wealth to speak of.

As an individual, however, Novak was outstanding. He had a sharp mind and had taught himself about many topics while also mastering martial arts to an impressive degree. In fact, it was probably because he'd been born without mana or an impressive pedigree that he'd spent so much time and effort bettering himself. To Novak, the nobles' obsession with mana control—an ability that served practically no use in times of peace—was foolish. He'd had no intention to get too close to them back then. That was why, even after Adelina started showing interest in him, he'd made no effort to get closer to her. Instead, he'd rejected her at every turn.

Adelina was fiercer than she let on, though. She'd set her sights on him and chased him like a hound on the trail of a fox. Still, without Sergei's help—and the fact that he'd recognized Novak's talents and openly praised him—she would have been forced to give up. She was still thankful to grandfather to this day.

Despite this rocky start, Novak had ended up becoming the Duke of Yulnova's right-hand man and, by doing so, had brought glory to the Novak Viscounty.

"We've both caused you much trouble, madam," Alexei said.

His tone was extra polite because he knew that, with him monopolizing Novak in the capital, Adelina had no choice but to handle the viscounty's affairs and their home's affairs on her own—or with the help of their son.

"Nonsense, Your Grace. Supporting the head house is the role of the branch families. If anything, I'm glad we can be of help."

Adelina seemed to truly believe that. She had never complained about her husband spending most of his time in the capital and had done a wonderful job raising their son and daughter while taking care of the viscounty. She was the best wife and mother anyone could ask for. While the fierce hunter tendencies of her youth had mellowed, Adelina remained a strong, capable woman.

She was the true heir of the House of Novak, Boris having

married into it, but she'd never made him feel inferior. She'd also taught her children that, even though their dad was away, it was to do important work. She'd always made sure they respected him.

As a result, Novak could not refuse his wife anything. He was much more considerate than the average husband out of appreciation, and perhaps guilt for having made her go through so much because of his work. Likewise, through his example, Alexei had ended up being particularly considerate of Lady Novak.

As far as *I* was concerned, Lady Novak was exemplary! Everything I'd heard about her had made me respect her more and more, and I felt like her family's current success was the fruit of her efforts. She'd done everything that was expected of her as a woman.

In my past life, I could never have done the same. But I supposed I had to learn from her in this life. After all, I was already at a suitable age for marriage. Once I graduated from the Magic Academy, I would probably have to leave to marry into another family. My brother would be the one to decide whom I would marry. I'd already thrown a tantrum about not wanting to marry into the imperial family, so whomever else he picked, I'd have no choice but to accept.

Although, if I was being honest, I didn't want to marry anyone or go anywhere. I just wanted to stay by my brother's side.



After the Novak family, my brother's other advisors came to greet us. Among them was Aaron Kyle, who wore a dejected expression.

"Your Grace, my lady, I'm sorry I failed you!" he said abruptly, lowering his head.

Alexei and I were both puzzled.

"What's wrong, Aaron?" Alexei asked.

Aaron couldn't meet his gaze and he averted his eyes, saying, "Professor Isaac... Your granduncle will not come."

Obsessed with our granduncle, as always.

Aaron *adored* stones of all kinds, and he'd come to know Isaac, an eminent researcher in mineralogy, during his studies. He'd forced his way into becoming Isaac's assistant by chasing

him around relentlessly. That was when Sergei had met him. Recognizing his knowledge, he'd hired him.

"He doesn't mean anything by it. He loves you dearly, Your Grace, and is looking forward to meeting her ladyship but…his research requires all of his attention, and he cannot think of anything else at the moment," Aaron said, desperately trying to defend his dear Isaac. "Of course, that doesn't mean—"

"Don't worry, Aaron," Alexei cut him off. "I know how he is," he added with a smile.

I tried my hardest to hold back my laughter. I did understand why Aaron was so panicked. The initial plan had been for our granduncle to welcome us to the fortress. When we'd arrived, however, we'd realized he wasn't there at all. No one had *any* idea where he was.

Aaron had panicked and started looking for him everywhere. Eventually, he'd discovered that he was cooped up in one of the mines of the duchy. He'd immediately sent word to him to come to the fortress at once, but Isaac had ignored him.

"Granduncle Isaac is a devoted researcher," I said. "For someone like him, busy unraveling the mysteries of the world, a banquet must seem quite dull. It's no wonder he'd rather focus on his work. In fact, I'm glad to hear he seems to be making progress. People like him make mankind advance, not banquets."

According to the stories Raisa had told me, Isaac was never the kind to pay much attention to such affairs. I was looking forward to meeting him, so I was a little disappointed about that, though.

Come to think of it, I'd almost been able to attend a conference by a professor who'd won the Nobel Prize for his research on iPS cells. I didn't know much about the topic and, to be honest, that wasn't where my interest lay. I just wanted to see the kind of person who could revolutionize the world and listen to what they had to say. Call me a sheep, if you will, but I'd been looking forward to it. Unfortunately, work had gotten in the way, and I hadn't been able to actually attend the conference.

Now that I'd been reborn, I had such a person in my family! When I thought of the fact that I'd have plenty of opportunities to meet him in the future, I felt beyond blessed!

"Thank you, my lady. As always, I'm impressed by your wisdom," Aaron said, relieved. "The professor always likes to

repeat that he doesn't know anything. He was given the greatest brain of this century, yet he's always so humble. He's quite innocent too, almost like a child."

"My..."

That reminded me of one of Newton's famous quotes: *"To myself, I am only a child playing on the beach, while vast oceans of truth lie undiscovered before me."*

He surely meant the same thing as Isaac. Come to think of it, he shared Newton's first name—though, from what I'd heard, Newton's personality wasn't the best.

"I'm sure you'll get along with the professor," Aaron said. "I hope the two of you can meet soon."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him too. If he doesn't intend on coming back to the fortress, perhaps I shall pay him a visit myself."

"Oh! If you truly mean it, I'm happy to accompany you to the mine," Aaron replied with a bright smile.

Somehow, I got a feeling his smile grew tenser when he met Alexei's eyes.

Alexei and I were the highest-ranking nobles in the duchy, but even the two of us had to follow etiquette. The order in which we greeted and accepted congratulations from the guests mattered very much and was decided by how close they were to us and how important they were.

While a crowd had formed around us in the hope of having us address them, everyone in the room had a rough idea of whom we might greet next and made space for them to go through. In fact, I suspected most of the people who were observing us closely were there to ascertain the new power structure of the duchy.

Out of nowhere, loud voices rose from a part of the crowd.

"Get back! Someone like you has no place here!" a shrill voice exclaimed.

My eyes automatically followed the sound and fell on a woman I had never seen before. What I *had* seen before, however, was vibrant green hair just like hers. She'd styled her hair in an updo, but some of her sausage curls were still draped over her back and shoulders.

"If His Grace the Duke Aleksandr were still here, you would have been whipped and thrown out!" she screamed. "As Lady Alexandra's waiting maid, I cannot tolerate the presence of a

dirty rat such as you in the Yulnova Fortress! You're tarnishing its great prestige!"

Urgh, another of the old hag's waiting maids? With that hair, she's definitely Kira's mom… I suppose I finally get to meet Lady Novadain. Speaking of which, were all of my grandmother's maids like this? Their workplace must have been so *toxic—not that it could have been anything but, considering who their boss was!*

I must have done a poor job of hiding my weary expression because Alexei put a protective arm around my shoulders and leveled his gaze on Lady Novadain. He quietly called for the next person he wanted to greet.

"Forli."

Baltazar Forli, one of Alexei's close advisors, walked up to us, completely ignoring Lady Novadain's complaints.

Forli, with his deep tan and rough hands, was nothing like the other nobles in the room, who had pale skin and pristine hands. His wrinkles were deep, a mark of his age and many years spent out under the sun, but he stood tall and solemn, looking every bit like a majestic warrior.

He was walking hand in hand with a tall woman. She seemed to be about the same age as Forli, but the years had barely worn down the beauty of her younger days. Her demeanor was just as dignified as her husband's and her skin as tanned by the sun. While she was slender, I could tell she was also muscular and strong. Her long gray hair flew freely with only a few simple ornaments pinned into the strands, and her brightly colored outfit was nothing like what the other ladies wore. It looked like an empire-waist dress—no, more like a Moroccan caftan—and lent her an exotic air.

So that's the head of the people of the forest!

The people of the forest were a collection of tribes that lived in the woodlands of the duchy. They were nomadic and moved without limits within the forests. From what I'd heard, they didn't communicate much with people outside of their lands and attached great importance to their traditions. Because of that, they were feared and often discriminated against. Forli, the third son of an ancient and honorable marquess family, had even been disowned for daring to marry a woman from one of these tribes.

I imagined that was why Madam Sausage Curls was making a racket. In her opinion, Forli's wife did not belong with the

imperial nobility.

“Young mas— Um, Your Grace, my lady, allow me to congratulate you both.”



Forli and his wife bowed to us and Alexei smiled.

"You can call me young master," Alexei said. "I will allow that, as you were my grandfather's close friend."

"For tonight, I shall call you Your Grace," Forli responded. "To be honest, you've become so dependable these days that I'm not sure young master is appropriate anymore, even if you'll allow it."

A look of surprise flashed across Alexei's face. He clearly hadn't expected Forli to say that. Once it passed, a warm smile replaced it.

"I used to be so reluctant to hear you call me that, but now that you say you won't anymore, I can't help but feel like I'm losing something. Isn't it strange how these things are?"

I could see the emotion on Forli's face.

"This is exactly what I mean," he said. "You used to overexert yourself to fill your grandfather's shoes, but you've grown into your role. You're now much stronger than you know."

"I cannot say I see what you see," Alexei said, "but if you're right, I'm certain it's all thanks to the goddess watching over me."

He glanced my way and smiled. I couldn't stop my eyes from widening in surprise but quickly returned the smile. It felt a little ignoble to make him expose his obsessive tendencies in front of everyone, but Forli had put his recent changes in such a good light that I didn't really mind.

I understood what Forli meant, though; Alexei *was* more relaxed. I still had much to learn to be of real help to him, but I was glad I'd at least managed to make him feel more mentally at ease.

"My lady, please meet my wife, Aurora."

Yay! I really wanted to talk to her! I beamed. Aloud, I said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquain—"

But before I could finish my sentence, another commotion started, stopping me in my tracks.

"Hey! Wait just one minute!" someone screamed.

A woman was violently pushing her way through the crowd to get to us: Madam Sausage Curls.

What do you mean, "Wait just one minute!"? Am I watching Neruton Benikujiradan*? Oh, you say my references are old-fashioned? Of course they are! I was nearly thirty when I died!*

Unaware of my internal turmoil, Madam Sausage Curls—

who'd finally made her way to us—curtsied beautifully.

"Your Grace! As a member of the House of Novadain, which leads your branch families, I must offer you this counsel, even if it comes at the peril of my own life! Please do not stain the spotless four-hundred-year history of the House of Yulnova. This woman is one of the barbarians who creep through the mountains and do not even know how to build a proper house! An outlaw who refuses to submit to the laws of our empire shouldn't be allowed to tarnish your home!"

In the crowd, I spotted several people nodding along.

"Today, your honorable vassals have assembled to celebrate your glory," she continued. "They mustn't be forced to breathe the same air as this savage! Even if you punish me for saying this, I have a duty to protect your honor, just as Lady Alexandra taught me! I beg you to please heed my words!"

Lady Novadain hung her head low, acting like a tragic hero in the face of injustice. I looked up at my brother's face and saw his eyes turn as cold and unforgiving as a glacier.

Hey, Madam Sausage Curls! Alexei, who hates social functions, was having so much fun chatting with Forli! How dare you rain on his parade?!

I could see that plenty of the noble men and women around agreed with her, and the things she was saying were fairly accepted in this world. To be fair, in my old world, many people in many countries had thought the same way at one point or another of history.

For all she spoke of etiquette and order, though, she'd had the nerve to interrupt a duke's conversation. That was incredibly rude, especially for someone who claimed to be teaching *us* manners. In the end, I was just confused. Why did every person in her family think that their actions had no consequences?

I pulled on my brother's sleeve and stage-whispered, "Brother... That woman said she was grandmother's waiting maid earlier, did she not? Do you think grandmother would have taken kindly to mere servants making such a public scene?"

I saw a small smile creep onto Alexei's lips. "She wouldn't have. Everyone here knows how particular she was about such things."

Many around us started nodding in agreement.

"That's also what I thought," I said. "To think this woman doesn't even understand that. What did she really learn from

grandmother? How could she act this way and claim to lead our branch families in the same breath? The embarrassment makes my chest ache."

I frowned and dramatically put my hand in front of my chest, covering the sapphire pendant. Alexei's expression shifted at once.

As for the young men in the assembly, if placing my hand on my chest drew their attention there, they averted their eyes before I could catch them staring.

"My poor Ekaterina," he said. "Hurting you is an offense punishable by death. I shall slay her with my own two hands right this moment."

You're joking, right? Your sense of humor is a tad scary! Wait—he's not joking at all!

The glow in his eyes was ice-cold. I felt as though I were staring at the demon king in person!

"Y-Your Grace..." Lady Novadain said. For someone who'd said she was ready to put her life on the line, she sure lost her nerve fast. She looked like she was about to pass out from fear.

I put a hand on my brother's shoulder and shook my head. "Please stop, brother. I do not wish for you to dirty your blade on my behalf."

And if it sounded like I was more worried about my brother's favorite sword than Madam Sausage Curls's life, that was probably true. She seemed just as full of energy as the girls of the Right Right Trio. If he split her in half with his blade, she'd most likely turn into two noisy madams instead of one!

"I simply felt for our poor guests who were forced to witness this spectacle," I added.

"Your sense of responsibility is too strong, sweet sister. None of this is your fault. Do not trouble yourself over it," Alexei said softly, putting his arm around my shoulders once again.

I glanced at Forli and his wife and noticed that they were both trying their hardest not to laugh.

I'm so sorry your dear friend's grandchildren turned out like this.

"Allow me to apologize to you for this insult, noble lady of the forest," Alexei told Aurora.

Hearing Alexei call her "noble" clearly horrified Lady Novadain.

"You and your tribe have hosted and helped our knights on more occasions than I can count. My grandfather was infinitely grateful to you and often referred to you by this title. He always

wore a fond smile when he told me about you and your tribe," Alexei continued.

Aurora laughed elegantly and smiled. "I can't help but wonder what stories he recounted to you."

Her voice was a little husky for a woman. Husky and *dignified*. She had the majesty of someone who led others.

Alexei returned her smile. "I recall him telling me the story of three hundred years ago, when the fifth Duke of Yulnova, Vasili, gave your tribe a certificate allowing you passage anywhere in the duchy. He told me that Giovanni di Santi, the inventor Duke Vasili so adored, loved to explore ruins of the Astra Empire regardless of their location, and your tribe had the difficult task of escorting him. I know that certificate remains in your hands, and for good reason. The facilities that di Santi found and restored are still in use today, all thanks to your tribe."

Seriously?!

Actually, it was Alexei saying it, so it was most definitely true! And he'd laid it all out in front of everyone to quash Lady Novadain's accusations toward Aurora!

In my past world, the modern city of Rome had still used sewers built during the Roman Empire. It made sense that such useful facilities were still in use in some places in this world too. From what I'd heard, most had become unusable because no one knew how to mend the damage time had done to them, but the brilliant di Santi had figured out the entire structure of the sewer system left by the Astra Empire in his homeland and repaired it so it could be used all across the country. That was how Vasili had heard of him, and what had prompted him to invite di Santi to the duchy. I could understand why he'd done the same work in the duchy!

"I've never heard of anything of the sort!" Lady Novadain shouted. "The wise Lord Vasili would never have involved himself with these savages!"

Alexei's cold eyes darted back to her. She shut up immediately. Noticing Alexei's mood, the people in the crowd had started subtly distancing themselves from her, one step at a time.

"That reminds me of something else. Your grandfather Duke Sergei wrote an additional ducal note to accompany this certificate and handed it to me years ago. What a pleasant memory," Aurora said, further discrediting the countess.

I could kind of see why the countess hadn't believed what

Alexei had said about Vasili. After all, why had he tasked the people of the forest with escorting di Santi? Shouldn't he have given the job to his knight order or to some of his men in charge of managing the forest? I supposed the people of the forest might have known the location of ruins so deep in the forest that no one else knew about them. Then again, letting his precious inventor go to such remote places when so many monsters lived in the duchy would have been risky.

I wasn't sure I understood Vasili's intentions, but one thing was for certain. Considering what Alexei had said, the people of the forest had worked directly under Vasili at the time.

That's so cool!

It reminded me of ninja villages or shadow warriors! If the people of the forest had been a thing in my past world, there would have been so many TV shows and games about them!

While I hadn't been paying attention, a silhouette had appeared next to the countess, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Dear guest," Raisa said in a businesslike tone. "Are you feeling under the weather? Please follow me. I've prepared a room for you to rest. I'm sure the other guests are all concerned about your health. Please put their minds at ease."

It was a sugarcoated, roundabout way of saying, *You're a pain in the butt to everyone around you. Can you get the hell out?* What professionalism!

"I-I..." she stuttered.

She struggled to answer because she knew who Raisa was: Sergei's supposed younger sister. In other words, she was the current duke's grandaunt. Everyone who was remotely close to the ducal family believed that was the case.

"This way, please," Raisa said.

While her tone was calm and as nonthreatening as could be, the three people behind her were not—two knights in ceremonial knight clothes and a man in civilian formal wear. While the latter wasn't armed, he was so tall and muscular that he was just as intimidating as the other two.

They were Raisa's husband and twin sons.

While she'd started out as a laundry girl, Raisa had been adopted by a family of knights. When her husband had married her, he had also joined the family. *He* was a knight as well, and he was currently the vice commander of the Order of Yulnova. That made him Ephrem Rosen's number two.

Meanwhile, her twins had chosen very different paths. Both were muscular and talented in martial arts, but while one had become a knight, like his father, the other was a civil official. Regardless, they were both outstanding men.

The aura these three exude… Wow. I wouldn't want them as enemies.

Lady Novadain was utterly unable to retort anything else. Meekly, she followed Raisa to another room.

While a beautiful piece of dance music was echoing in the great hall, I couldn't help but play "Dona, Dona" in my head as I watched her walk away.



"Aren't you tired, Ekaterina? You should rest."

"Don't worry, brother. I'm fine."

Truth be told, I was a *little* tired. I couldn't even remember how many people we'd greeted since the party had started. The guest list had over two thousand names on it! Just thinking about how many more people we had to go through made me feel like passing out. We probably wouldn't speak to every single one of them, but Alexei couldn't stop greeting people just yet.

However, while I was indeed losing steam, I'd learned that leaving Alexei's side was *far worse*.

Earlier, he'd been worried about my health, so as we'd finished greeting the most important guests, he'd suggested I sit and rest. The issue was…the second I'd stepped away from him, I'd been surrounded by an army of guys!

I couldn't go through them, so I'd had no choice but to speak to them first. That had been a big mistake. All at once, they'd started inviting me to dance.

I'd seen it coming—kinda. I was part of the family that hosted this banquet *and* the younger sister of the noblest man in the duchy. They had to be courteous. They couldn't exactly let me be a wallflower unless they wanted to appear rude. Not to mention, I wasn't used to such invitations, so I'd struggled to refuse them.

I *could* have danced, but I was afraid everyone would notice I'd only pretended to be good at dancing. I wasn't sure how to pick my dance partner either. In these cases, accepting the invite of the highest-ranking young man was probably the most logical choice, but how was I supposed to tell who was who?!

Anyhow, instead of dancing with anyone, I'd just laughed and evaded the invites until Alexei had rescued me.

Thank you and bless your obsession with me!

There'd been so many guys around me that I couldn't see beyond the sea of them, yet the crowd had split in an instant to let Alexei pass through. As soon as he'd come to stand behind me, the men had fled without looking back. For once, his eyes hadn't been cold—they'd exuded a hot fury.

As soon as he'd regarded me, though, his gaze had softened. He'd smiled and escorted me to another part of the hall. I'd stayed with him since then.

He really is the coolest in the world.

Another amazing thing about Alexei was that he seemed to remember so much about everyone! Whenever someone came to greet us, Alexei would ask them a personal question about their land, business, family, or ancestors, depending on the person.

I knew that, unlike me, Alexei had been socializing with these people since he was young and that he'd taken some time to review the guest list before the banquet, but there were still two thousand guests. I was astonished he could remember so much! I figured that was probably why my "suitors" had freaked out so badly. While I had no clue who was who, Alexei did.

Even the amazing Alexei had a blind spot, though...

"Aren't *you* tired, brother?" I returned the question. "I know your duties as the head of the household are of the utmost importance, but you could take a short break. How about dancing with a lady you like for a nice change of pace?" I asked, trying not to be too direct.

See, he was *terrible* at noticing the affection others showed him!

I already thought he was popular at the academy, but it was a whole other story in the duchy! All the girls were so obviously pining over him and throwing longing glances his way! Some looked like they were on the verge of crying because Alexei had yet to take the hint and invite them to dance.

While some might say I loved my brother a bit *too* much, I was absolutely against bullying young ladies. I'd long ago sworn I would never get in the way of his love life, so I didn't want him to hold back on my account.

Go talk to the girls. I'll be fine! They need comfort more than I do.

I glanced around and saw a bunch of them avert their eyes. *I knew it! They're all looking at Alexei!*

Whenever he smiled at me, I felt like I could hear them trying to suppress their squeals. Speaking of suppressed squeals, I somehow felt like I'd been in a similar situation at the academy...

Alexei let out a soft laugh. "I'm not tired at all. In fact, I've never enjoyed myself at a party more than I have today."

He took my hands—which were far smaller than his—and wrapped his hands around them.

"They're all in awe of your beauty," Alexei said. "Yet here you are, by my side, worrying about my well-being... I don't think I could be any happier than I am, my dear Ekaterina. No matter what we're doing or where we are, having you by my side is enough to make me the happiest man in the world."

"Oh, you!"

All right, I get it. We're both stans, so let's just stay together.

I felt sorry for the ladies squealing over Alexei's every smile but it didn't seem like he wanted to dance with any of them.

I'm sorry, girls, truly. To be fair, the time we can spend enjoying one another's company like this is running out...

In my defense, Alexei wasn't meant to look for a bride in the duchy. He was supposed to find one at the Magic Academy. So, even if he danced with one of them, her joy would be short-lived. I supposed Alexei knew that too.

"The fireworks will start soon," Alexei said. "They mark the midpoint of the party. Once it's over, some guests will start to leave. You, too, can retire to your room at any time after that."

"Thank you for letting me know, brother. I appreciate your consideration," I replied.

When an event was this big, people didn't all arrive and leave at the same exact time. That would result in a huge traffic jam. It was a tacit rule that some people should delay their arrivals or hasten their exits. The midpoint of the party was when the attendance rate was at its max. Everyone would enjoy the fireworks together and then it would be time for the early shift workers—uh, that is, those who'd arrived early and the elderly—to start leaving. It wasn't a precise arrangement or a hard rule, but things just had to be this way for the sake of practicality.

Even though the party was *well* underway, there were still plenty of people waiting to greet the new duke. Alexei and I paused to chat among ourselves here and there and accepted

greetings the rest of the time, but we'd already gone through the most important people.

"If you'll allow it, I'd rather stay with you," I continued. "As you know, I'm happiest by your side."

"I'm glad to hear that, Ekaterina. But don't overdo it," Alexei replied tenderly.

Then, his demeanor hardened when he saw who'd stepped forward to greet him.

"Your Grace, I'm terribly sorry for my late arrival."

"Novadain," Alexei said coldly, looking between the man and his daughter, Kira.

Just as the last time I'd seen them, the father-daughter duo was wearing incredibly extravagant outfits. Kira, in particular, was adorned with so many jewels I couldn't help but wince. Her eyes fell to the sumptuous necklace I was wearing and she glared at me before composing herself.

"Please allow me to apologize for my wife's discourteous behavior. It was a most regrettable incident," Novadain said. He bowed but quickly raised his head. "Although, I must say your answer very much reassured me. I was overjoyed to hear that you, too, attached much importance to the words of your predecessors, Your Grace."

I furrowed my brow without meaning to. *What are you on about?*

As though to answer me, Novadain reached into his inside pocket. "Please take a look, everyone!" he exclaimed loudly.

He held up a sealed letter. The paper of the envelope was of great quality and it definitely *seemed* like some sort of important document.

"I have a wonderful announcement to make tonight! Our revered duke, His Grace Alexei, and my dear daughter, Kira, are to be engaged!"

A wave of confusion took over the great hall and whispers echoed all around us.

Novadain continued even louder, "Our previous duke, Lord Aleksandr, cherished Kira very much. While he was still alive, he arranged for our children to be betrothed. This document is the proof of that engagement. It bears Lord Aleksandr's seal and his handwritten signature, as well as Lady Alexandra's seal and signature. Our glorious imperial princess blessed their union, as I am sure all of you will!"

As the agitation in the hall grew, Kira put on her best smile. She was practically glowing. She started walking toward Alexei, but *he* did not spare her a single glance and put his arm over my shoulders. Without meaning to, I grasped his sleeve tightly.

So, that's *why Novadain was so carefree!*

The fact that he might want to make Kira duchess had crossed my mind, but with that attitude of his, I hadn't seen how it could be possible. Now, I understood. He thought he had no need to curry favor with my brother because he'd already planned it with the old hag and our stupid father. He'd kept that ace up his sleeve this entire time. *That* was why he'd been so rude to us when we'd arrived.

What really bothered me, however, was that this sequence of events was oddly similar to the villainess's condemnation scene in the game. Was this happening because I'd changed the original scenario too much? Were the doom flags coming back to get me when I least expected them?!

"Ekaterina, are you all right?" Alexei asked, a worried look on his face.

"Y-Yes, brother," I replied, finally coming back to my senses.

I can't let myself panic. Be calm, me.

Despite my attempts to steady them, my hands kept shivering. The thought of the doom flags resurfacing frightened me far more than I'd expected.

"Lord Alexei!" Kira exclaimed, growing impatient.

Alexei finally turned to look at her. The soft, concerned expression he'd shown me had disappeared. Kira beamed when their eyes met. It was as though she couldn't see the coldness in his gaze.

"Lord Alexei," she said again, curtsying just like her mother had. Then, she extended her hand toward Alexei with a smile.

"I'm overjoyed I finally get to stand by your side!" she said. "I won't let you be lonely anymore! I'll always be right by your side from now on. My father and mother cannot wait to offer you their support. They will soon be your father and mother as well, after all! You won't need to put on such a rigid face as you worry about managing the duchy. My father will do it all for you. From now on, you can enjoy a relaxed life as your father once did. Oh, how I've dreamed of this day! I've always wanted to give you the freedom you so deserve."

I leaned into my brother's arms, my brow furrowing more and

more with every word she uttered.

Um, Little Miss Sausage Curls, are you for real? Do you actually believe marrying you and watching your dad steal his birthright will make Alexei happy? Wow…

I was baffled, but once I thought about it, I got it. Kira was still a kid. In her view, our father, who'd had no responsibilities whatsoever and had played around while surrounded by luxury, would have seemed like the luckiest man ever.

Naturally, I didn't think Alexei, who'd been hounded by heavy responsibilities from a young age, had lived an easy or happy life because of it. However, being responsible for the lives of your people *meant* something. The happiness or misfortune of countless people depended on the Duke of Yulnova. Alexei understood that. There was no way he could ever be content with his own life while abandoning them to their fate.

You wouldn't get it, Miss Sausage Curls. Even if I spent an hour explaining what duty means to you, you'd laugh in my face, and I wouldn't even be surprised by it. Most fifteen-year-old kids in my past world would have reacted the same.

Although, to be fair, Kira was even worse than your average twenty-first-century teenager. Because of her status as a noblewoman, she looked down on ordinary people.

You should remember something, Miss Sausage Curls. Pulling dramatic stunts like this when you're a villainess never bodes well.

While I'd panicked at first, Alexei was perfectly calm. He caressed my hair to calm me down before turning to me with a smile and asking, "Ekaterina, will you be all right waiting for me for a few moments?"

"Yes, brother," I replied, letting go of his sleeve.

Alexei lifted his face to look at Novadain. His eyes were so piercing I thought he might just shoot a hole through his skull. As for Kira, he ignored her entirely, including the hand she was still holding out for him to take.

"The letter," Alexei said.

Novadain recoiled before giving it to him with a weak "Here…"

Alexei took it and opened it without further ado. He nodded once, an indifferent expression on his face.

"Daniil. Is Daniil Legall here?" he asked, looking around the great hall.

There was a short moment of silence before a voice came from a corner of the hall.

“Yes, Your Grace. I am.”

People moved aside and the duchy’s legal advisor appeared at the end of the makeshift pathway. My eyes were on him as he approached. The young man had the air of an intellectual, only reinforced by his memorable silver-rimmed spectacles. The color of his hair—gray—was kind of dull, but his eyes were a striking and vivid jade green. At thirty, he appeared far too young for his position, but the gleam in his green eyes was sharp and assured. He smiled just a little, as though he were enjoying this bizarre situation.

“Check the contents and explain it to them,” Alexei said.

“At once, Your Grace,” Daniil replied, accepting the latter from Alexei. He quickly passed his eyes over it, then smiled brightly before announcing, “As per the laws of our empire, this letter does not bind His Grace in any legal capacity. As far as the law is concerned, this letter is meaningless.”

Another wave of shocked whispers took over the crowd.

“You insolent quack!” Novadain shouted, his face flushing red. “*Meaningless*?! How dare you?! It bears the handwritten signature of the previous duke, Lord Aleksandr! It even has his seal!”

“Yes, indeed,” Daniil said, readjusting his glasses with a pleased smile. “I can confirm that this appears to be the handwriting of the late Lord Aleksandr. But the seal you refer to is Lord Aleksandr’s *personal* seal, not the seal of the House of Yulnova. The same goes for Lady Alexandra’s seal.” As he spoke, Daniil held the letter up for Novadain to see and pointed at the signatures and seals to demonstrate his point. “As you must know, whenever influential nobles are concerned, engagements are contracts between *houses*. As such, they can only be established with the seals of both houses as well as the signatures of the head of each family, as determined by the Yulgran Empire’s marriage laws.”

The crowd eagerly listened to Daniil’s explanation, whispers of “Oh!” and “Ah!” echoing as he spoke.

“I’m afraid the signature of the previous duke and his venerable mother alone hold no legal weight,” he concluded.

Wow! As expected of a lawyer used to debating in a courtroom! His tone and the way he puts things are so convincing!

“S-Silence! Who cares about the law?! What matters is that Lord Aleksandr wanted this marriage to happen! Do you think you can ignore the dying wish of a duke?!” Novadain screamed.

A commotion stirred at his words.

Daniil nodded, a serious expression on his face. “I can and I will. Allowing this illegal letter to dictate a marriage would be insulting His Imperial Majesty the Emperor.”

Yet another round of whispers followed.

“His Imperial Majesty must sanction the marriages of the heads of the three grand ducal houses and of their heirs. This law has existed since the very founding of our nation. Lord Aleksandr arranging His Grace’s marriage without His Imperial Majesty’s approval is a grave crime. Living or dead, Lord Aleksandr didn’t hold this authority. In fact, there are records of grand dukes being punished by the crown for having dared to do so in the past. One was even stripped of his position. As I am referring to a case that’s more than two hundred years old, I understand you may not have heard of it, Lord Novadain, but—Oh?” Daniil looked around at the crowd, then continued, “It appears *many* here know what I mean. Without the House of Yulnova’s seal *and* the imperial seal, this paper cannot possibly bind His Grace. I would even say that his taking Lady Kira as his fiancée under these circumstances would be a grave offense.”

Novadain was clearly flustered, but he forged ahead. “L-Lady Alexandra was an imperial princess, and *her* seal is on there! This clearly means His Imperial Majesty the Emperor approved of this marriage!”

“As soon as she married into another family, Lady Alexandra lost her imperial status. When she signed that letter, she was a *duchess*, not a princess. As such, she had to follow the law, just as every other subject of the empire does.”

“Sh-Shut up! Regardless of the law, Duke Aleksandr and Lady Alexandra wished for Kira to become the next duchess. If you believe Duke Vasili’s certificate still holds importance, you should respect our late Lord Aleksandr’s dying wish even more!”

“I wonder if they truly wished for that to happen…” Daniil said, his voice quiet yet oddly threatening.

“Wh-What are you trying to say?!”

“Lord Aleksandr and Lady Alexandra certainly knew the correct procedure to follow for the heir of one of the three grand ducal houses to be lawfully engaged. They knew they needed His Imperial Majesty’s approval, yet they gave you this letter which bears no trace of it.”

Daniil practically shoved the letter in Novadain’s face and the

man stuttered, unable to come up with an answer.

"They were both aware this letter would not hold when they signed it," Daniil continued. "In other words, that means neither of them truly wanted your daughter and His Grace to be wed. Lord Aleksandr often did such things. Whenever he was asked for a difficult favor, he'd draft up a letter that could not be enforced and hand it over with a smile. He said he disliked disappointing his friends. If I recall, you were one of his close friends, were you not, Lord Novadain? In that case, I can only assume you, too, knew of his disposition."

"*Don't* lump me in with the rest of them! I was special! I was his closest friend!"

Sweat was starting to run down his forehead. Daniil had clearly struck a nerve. Novadain knew how "kind" our father had been. I was certain he'd even laughed at the idiots who'd fallen for his kindness time and time again, convinced that he alone was different. He must have basked in his sense of superiority for so long, only to have his beliefs destroyed in front of the entire duchy's nobility—along with that letter of his.

"Lord Aleksandr had a fascinating charm. He made everyone who approached him believe they were important to him," Daniil said, feigning admiration. While he hadn't said it directly, his meaning was crystal clear: Novadain wasn't any more special than the rest of our father's dear friends. In the eyes of Aleksandr Yulnova, *none* of them had been.

"I'm terribly sorry for bringing this to your attention," Daniil continued, "but regardless of how much Lord Aleksandr may have appreciated you, I can hardly believe he would have wanted your daughter to wed his son. If I may, you are a count."

Silence fell over the crowd at our lawyer's words.

"Insolent brat! What do you know, you charlatan?! I won't let you belittle the letter the duke granted *me*! He wrote it because he and his venerable mother both wanted Kira to be the next duchess!"

For all Novadain's barking, the crowd was now looking at him with cold eyes. Some even seemed exasperated at themselves for having believed his initial announcement. That was just how persuasive our lawyer had been. Besides, many here remembered how even our mother, the daughter of an honorable marquess, had been treated by our grandmother for lacking pedigree.

“Noble men and women of the duchy!” Novadain shouted even louder. “You must not lend an ear to these inanities!” He was trying to get the crowd on his side. “Duke Aleksandr was never one to mind details, and Lady Alexandra thought that abiding by formal procedures was below her stature. They were both of the mind that once they spoke their wishes, it was up to their entourage to make them come true. I’m sure you all remember that! As for you, the rude brat who claims to be a lawyer, how many years could even have passed since you obtained your qualification? You are but a greenhorn. How dare you speak of the noble Duke Aleksandr’s and Lady Alexandra’s characters when you know nothing about them? I’ll have my veteran lawyer *quash* you in the courtroom if I must take it there!”

Daniil let out a mildly surprised “Oh?” It hadn’t been very loud, but his voice carried well. He once again pushed his glasses up with a self-satisfied smile. Despite his intellectual air, he was radiating malevolence.

“Will you truly grant me the opportunity to fight you in a courtroom? I can hardly wait. Please pass a message to your veteran lawyer for me: ‘The brat who obtained his qualification at eighteen will come at you with everything he has.’”

Those who understood the legal world opened their eyes wide in shock. To become a lawyer, one had to first study law at university. Once they completed their program, they’d take an exam and obtain their qualification if their grade was good enough. However, there was another way to go about it: Even without going to university, you could sit for the exam if you were deemed to have sufficient knowledge. Needless to say, barely anyone was ever allowed to do that.

If Daniil had gotten his qualification at eighteen, it meant he’d become the youngest man in the empire to overcome this huge hurdle! On top of that, the examination itself was reputed to be incredibly difficult. Passing it at eighteen was anything but ordinary!

“Oh, and,” Daniil continued, “I do happen to know the noble individuals you so revere through my father, Maxim Legall. He served the imperial family as a legal advisor for many years. He has since retired from this position to preside over the Supreme Court.”

This time, the gasp that shook the crowd was especially loud.

The Supreme Court controlled all other courts of law. As its chief, Maxim Legall held the highest authority in the world of law.

"My father was quite close to His Grace's grandfather, the late Duke Sergei. He was a wonderful man who deeply understood the weight his words and actions carried, considering his position. With all due respect," Daniil continued, "I grew up listening to my father read me legal texts instead of picture books. Every conversation was a legal dispute. While I may have only practiced law for twelve years, I'd appreciate it if you avoided judging my worth based on that. This *greenhorn* is entirely devoted to his position, out of respect for the trust His Grace has shown him."

Daniil put a hand over his heart and bowed politely to Alexei.

I was starting to understand how he'd managed the incredible feat of getting his qualification at eighteen! He'd been taught personally by the cream of the crop of the legal world since he was an infant! Daniil was not to be underestimated because of his age—and to be fair, a twelve-year career was already fairly long!

Novadain's eyes darted around desperately. He was seeking support in the crowd, but no one would meet his eyes, not even his minions. I even spotted a few people sneakily rushing out of the hall.

Neither he nor his supporters had imagined Alexei would deal with the situation so calmly. Common sense dictated that, even if the legal requirements weren't met, one had to respect their late father's wishes. Novadain had thought that with that weapon *and* the signature of our grandmother, an imperial princess, Alexei would be unable to refuse lest he appear unfilial. Even if Alexei didn't want to marry Kira, Novadain had surely expected him to keep quiet during the party, if nothing else. Then, he could have told everyone Alexei had accepted.

Instead, he'd found himself faced with a superelite lawyer who'd gotten everyone in the room to believe that neither our father nor our grandmother had wanted this match to happen. Daniil had even flaunted the prestige of his father, the highest authority in the legal world, with theatrical poise, rallying the crowd to his side.

Novadain had maintained his influence thanks to his trump card and had even dared act arrogantly in front of Alexei. Now, this so-called trump card had been mercilessly torn apart. He

had no way to come back from that, and even his followers had seen that.

Realizing his loss, Novadain fell to his knees in shock.

“No! He’s lying!” A shrill voice echoed around the hall. It was Kira’s voice. She glared at Daniil, her gaze burning with rage, and shouted, “Lord Aleksandr, my dear uncle, loved me! He always praised me and told me how he thought of me as his daughter. He was always kinder to me than to anyone else! I know he wanted me to be the next duchess! I *know* it! He told me many times he wished *I’d* become his daughter!”

“Silence.” Alexei’s voice came, sharp as a whip. Kira shivered at its sheer coldness.

“You don’t need to listen to another word of this, Ekaterina,” he said. He lifted both of his hands and covered my ears softly.

“Brother... You mustn’t trouble yourself over such things. I’m fine,” I replied, looking up at him with a smile.



Even with his actual daughter locked up far from him, my father had had no qualms telling another child such things. I found the idea revolting, but it didn't *get* to me. I'd never even met the man. I did feel a pang in my chest, but I could tell it was Ekaterina's heart breaking for her poor, oblivious mother, nothing more. She was fine—*I* was fine.

"Sweet girl," Alexei said. "Come with me. Let us head to the balcony. The fireworks will start soon." He turned to Daniil. "Daniil, you've done a splendid job as my legal advisor."

"It's an honor, Your Grace," he replied with a bow, a satisfied smile on his face.

"Lord Alexei!" Kira screamed, running up to Alexei. "Please, my lord, *please*, say you'll marry me! I've always adored you! You're the only one for me! I want nothing more than to spend my life at your side, so please! Accept my earnest feelings!"

Alexei turned to look at Kira, taking a step to the side to hide me behind his back protectively.

"You're not worthy of becoming my duchess," he said coldly. "A woman who could not even get into the Magic Academy could never be."

Kira froze. We were the same age, but I'd never run into her at the academy. That could only mean one thing: Kira did not attend the academy.

The Magic Academy accepted students from all over the empire regardless of rank as long as they met the mana threshold. In other words, Kira's mana wasn't plentiful enough to be admitted.

Gasps erupted all over the great hall. Had Novadain pretended that his daughter attended the Magic Academy?

Kira snapped out of her daze. "You're wrong, my lord!" she shouted desperately. "This is all a plot! People were so jealous of the favor Lord Aleksandr showed me that they falsified my results to keep me out of the academy! I have mana, more than enough! My dear uncle knew it! That's why he wanted me to become your fiancée!"

"Yet all he wrote was that worthless letter," Alexei said calmly.

Kira's face paled. It was clear that Aleksandr's willingness to believe—or to pretend he did, at least—that she had enough mana had been a meaningful gesture to her.

Kira had grown up dreaming of marrying Alexei and becoming his duchess. When her mana was tested and she was

declared inept, her world must have crumbled. However, neither Kira nor her father knew how to give up when faced with reality. Instead, they'd pleaded with Aleksandr and he'd given them that letter. How happy they must have been, while blissfully unaware that this was all an illusion.

Kira was so shaken it looked like she might faint at any moment. I understood. Everything that had been promised to her had just disappeared into wisps of smoke when she'd finally tried to reach for it.

"No..." Alexei suddenly whispered, shaking his head. "I shouldn't have said that. That isn't the reason."

While Alexei seemed to regret his words, I could tell it wasn't out of pity for Kira. He was trying to be considerate toward those who had little or no mana, including Novak. As a duke, it would be improper of him to close off doors for his subjects based on their amount of mana. In the past, he might not have been so kind, but Alexei had softened.

"The truth is, *I* don't want *you*," he said bluntly. "As the Duke of Yulnova, I don't believe your presence would bring anything positive to the duchy. I cannot imagine that a woman who could cause such a scene in the middle of a banquet—in front of so many guests—has what it takes to be a duchess."

Many nodded at Alexei's straightforward explanation. No one in their right mind would try to coerce someone into a marriage in front of a crowd, especially not their liege lord. Novadain was bound by oath to serve Alexei. Trying to force his daughter on him to control him was practically a coup d'état.

Surely, Novadain knew that Alexei did not want anything to do with Kira. That was why he'd gone about this so publicly. I assumed he had been afraid Alexei would just grab the letter and rip it into pieces if he approached him alone. Besides, if he didn't do something, he knew he'd never rise above his status of count with Alexei in power. He could even have been demoted...or worse.

Thus, he'd taken the chance and proclaimed Kira and Alexei's upcoming marriage in front of everyone. He'd hoped to make it look like Alexei was unjustly retaliating against him to avoid his responsibilities if he dared do anything to him afterward. That way, he could garner support.

He'd lost his bet, though.

"Please don't be mean to me, my lord," Kira said.

Her forced smile was still plastered on her lips, but she was trembling like a leaf. Kira was terrified, and for just cause: If Alexei rejected her, she'd struggle to find another match. She'd made a fool of herself in front of the duchy's elite. She'd be mocked wherever she went.

This banquet was supposed to be her big moment, but every last jewel adorning her body had been in vain.

"This is a celebratory banquet," she said. "Your guests long for a happy ending. If you accept me, they'll rejoice. Please, you must understand that my feelings have always been true. I… From the very first time I laid eyes upon you, I've always…"

She trailed off when she noticed Alexei had stopped listening long ago. He'd taken my hand and was pulling me gently toward the balcony.

There was no one else on this specific balcony. The other balconies were packed with people eagerly awaiting the fireworks, but this was the spot from which the ducal family traditionally watched them, so no one dared intrude.

"No!" Kira screamed, running after us. "Please don't go. Please, my lord! I love you!"

Alexei let out a sigh and finally turned around to look at Kira.

"Didn't you despise my eyes?" he asked.

"Never, I've always thought they were wonderful! The one who always said she hated them was Lady Alexandra, not me!"

"And you reported it to me every time." Alexei's tone was devoid of anger. He just sounded fed up.

"I-I just wanted to talk to you! Don't you remember? You were always alone and I was the only one who'd go to you… I'd be overjoyed every time your expression shifted because of me! It was all because I adored you. I knew I was Lady Alexandra's favorite and I wanted nothing more than to teach you how to act for her to like you too! It was the wise thing to do!"

This time, I covered Alexei's ears with my hands and smiled at him.

"Here, brother. You won't hear the unnerving buzzing of the flies at all this way."

You were overjoyed when his expression shifted? So, you enjoyed making him sad? And you still dare say he *should have been currying favor with the old hag despite everything she said and did to him?*

What shocked me the most wasn't that Kira had been like that

as a small child. It was that she was *still* utterly convinced she'd been right and didn't show any remorse.

I see you're the type to bully the one you love to get their attention.

As a general rule, boys most often did this sort of thing, but there were some girls who acted that way. Regardless of gender, the outcome was the same, though: Your crush would only grow to hate your guts. I seriously couldn't get people like her. I wanted to be kind to those I loved, to see them happy and thriving. Wasn't that the whole point of love? I couldn't fathom how anyone could think differently when it came to this.

I knew there were as many ways to love as people in the world, but *still*…

Alexei was the kind of person who loved with all his heart. I wanted him to encounter someone who'd love him just as intensely.

Alexei smiled.

"Don't worry, Ekaterina. I've never let the buzzing of mere insects bother me. Please, could you remove your hands? I can hardly hear your voice anymore and *that* pains me," he said as he pushed my hands toward his cheeks. His neon blue eyes softened as he continued, "Your voice is as enchanting as that of the heavenly bird who resides in the celestial garden, and as sweet as the gods' nectar. It has enraptured my very soul with the gentle words it murmurs. Truly, I can think of no melody as lovely."

"Oh, you!" Had his Ekaterina-colored glasses come with a set of headphones?

"You're so cruel!" Kira exclaimed. She glared at me, enraged. "Why is it not me?! That's my spot! *I* should receive these words from you, not her!"

In her dreams, Alexei was surely grateful to her and whispered sweet words in her ear while she stood by his side. In that life, she became the duchess and basked in glory, indulging in luxury every day.

"It's all your fault! You stole my place!" she screamed, pouncing at me.

I couldn't react. All I could think as she rushed at me while howling was that her face looked just like a hannya mask.

Before she could lay a finger on me, however, Kira fell forward into a sort of somersault before slamming headfirst into the

ground on the balcony.

Huh? Why did you suddenly turn into an acrobat? You're giving up life as a count's daughter?

I was utterly confused until I noticed Mina and Ivan standing on either side of Kira. They'd moved so fast that I hadn't seen a thing, but they were both holding one of Kira's arms. They'd probably swept her legs from under her to make her fall, or so I imagined.

"My lady, I'm terribly sorry for allowing her to frighten you," Mina apologized in her usual deadpan tone.

"You dealt with her so swiftly that I didn't have the time to be frightened. Good job," I praised, still dumbfounded.

The corners of Mina's mouth upturned, just a little.

"She tried to harm the lady of the House of Yulnova. Have her dealt with appropriately," Alexei ordered coldly.

He, on the other hand, didn't seem the slightest bit surprised. Unlike me, he fully viewed Mina and Ivan as bodyguards and was used to seeing them at work. He'd probably even been able to follow their movements.

Mina and Ivan bowed and pulled up Kira, who'd passed out from the shock, before carrying her away. She was a count's daughter but neither of them seemed to care. They pulled her haphazardly by the arms, letting her feet drag against the floor. I felt a little bad for her.

As a fellow villainess, I'd even freaked out when I'd conflated her starting a scene with the villainess judgment scene from the game. Her slamming headfirst into the ground had diffused all the tension, though. Ekaterina's judgment scene in the game didn't end on such a ridiculous note. I didn't feel scared anymore, especially not with my dear brother by my side.

Bye-bye, Miss Sausage Curls!

I didn't want her anywhere near Alexei in the future but I did hope her future wouldn't be too bleak. She was just a fifteen-year-old kid, after all.

Alexei saw that I was following Kira with my eyes and said, "Look at the sky, Ekaterina." He put a hand on my shoulder. "You do not need to concern yourself with people like her. Enjoy the show instead."

Right at that moment, the first firework rose up in the sky.

"It's beautiful!" I cried.

I remembered hearing that, during the Edo period, fireworks

hadn't been colored. Unlike the colorful shows of the twenty-first century, fireworks then had all looked like golden flowers. However, in this night sky, a blue flower bloomed.

I doubted they could make fireworks that changed color while exploding like in my past life, but pyrotechnics were clearly more developed than during the Edo period.

"The fireworks of the Yulnova are famous for their colors," Alexei explained. "That, too, is thanks to our granduncle Isaac."

Oh, that made sense. The color of fireworks changed depending on the metal added to them. An eminent mineralogist like Isaac would have contributed greatly!

You're amazing, Isaac! What a colorful achievement!

One after the other, fireworks shot up into the sky. Most of them were golden, but there were plenty of colorful ones as well—red, green, pink, and more! Some of the flowers that bloomed in the sky were even made up of two colors! I imagined the pyrotechnicians masterfully shot several fireworks in close succession to achieve that effect. Our guests hurried to the balconies or to the garden to observe the spectacle and loud cheers erupted with every colorful explosion.

"I wished for only such beauty to ever be reflected in your eyes," Alexei whispered in between two fireworks. "I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to make that happen."

That got me thinking. Until what point had Alexei predicted what had transpired tonight?

He had naturally known Novadain was planning something—even I had guessed it. Had he had an inkling regarding the content of his plan? He might have, I concluded, yet he had chosen not to say a word about it to me.

I imagined the main reason he'd remained silent was to shield me. Knowing Alexei, he would rather keep me away from the fighting.

However, Alexei was a coolheaded man. To deal a serious blow to the faction that opposed him, he had to put Novadain in his place publicly. Despite his feelings, he'd done so.

He's so cool and efficient! Argh! I really love him! Capable men are the best!

"I do not mind seeing ugly things if I must," I said. "I wish to see what *you* see so I can assist you. However, you are the head of this family. If you decide there are some things I should not lay eyes upon, I shall trust your judgment and abide by that."

Perhaps Alexei had decided not to tell me anything so my reactions wouldn't give away his preparedness and warn Novadain. I could understand that. I hadn't been raised as a noble lady and my social skills weren't up to par with the rest of them. For instance, I wasn't confident I could keep a poker face no matter the situation.

I wouldn't get mad or sulk just because Alexei didn't share everything with me. I'd worked at a company where information was controlled; I knew how these things worked. What I *could* see wasn't necessarily the big picture, and I simply had to accept that. However, I didn't want Alexei to protect me like I was some sort of fragile treasure. I wanted to fight by his side.

"My dear Ekaterina," he said. "You always understand and forgive me. How bright and kind you are, sweet sister. Sometimes, I even wonder if you have some special kind of magic. You were raised away from the world yet see through everything so clearly."

That's not magic, brother. It's called life experience. I just happened to be a corporate drone in my past life! Not that I'll ever say it, though! I'm so sorry I'm not the little princess you think I am!



“All I have is my overwhelming love for you. Don’t you know that love can bring about miracles?” I replied jokingly.

“I suppose I, too, shall make miracles come true, then. I love you, Ekaterina.”



On the following day, I received a report from Raisa.

The previous evening, during the party, guards and knights of the duchy had raided the homes of Novadain and his clique. Taking advantage of their absence, the knights and guards had been able to collect evidence of them accepting bribes to act in ways that harmed the duchy. As soon as they’d left the fortress, they’d been arrested for these crimes.

Novadain, however, had made his escape and was currently “missing.”

Wow! That’s some next-level trap!

I could now confirm that Alexei had done well not to tell me about this. I wouldn’t have been able to stop looking at these men with eyes full of pity if I’d known their fates were sealed.

You’re so cool, brother!

His ingenuity had just made me even *more* of a fangirl—if that was at all possible.

The only thing is…I wasn’t really of help, was I? All the working experience from my past life didn’t mean much in the face of the power struggles between nobles. *I’m gonna have to do better from now on!*



The Yulnova Fortress stood like a gigantic shadow in the dark of the night. The banquet had long finished and even the servants who’d busied themselves with the cleanup were already in bed. These were the deepest hours of the night.

In the gloom, the large hounds of Yulnova suddenly sprung to their feet.

“All right, lads, come here,” a bald man with an eye patch said quietly. “Rejoice, for His Grace has given you prey tonight.”

Igor, the dog breeder, held a gentleman’s coat. It was a luxurious garment, its expensive silk decorated with masterful embroideries. A commoner’s entire annual income wouldn’t

have been enough to purchase half a coat like that. Nevertheless, it was in a terrible state—torn and dirty.

From behind the hounds that were sniffing the coat, a larger, superbly white beast approached.

"Smell it, Regina. I'm sure you'll know whose coat that is as soon as you do."

The leader of the pack, Regina, pressed her snout against the fabric. After a few seconds, she growled.

"You got it? Of course you did. His Grace will let you have revenge for yer friend. That man's hidden somewhere in the fortress. Find him and drag him out. You can't kill him, but a few bites are fair game. I'm sure His Grace won't get mad at you for that. All right, then, go on!" Igor said, opening the door of the kennel.

The hounds raced out in a flood.



Why?! Why did it go like this?!

Hidden in a thicket of evergreen bushes in a corner of the large garden of the Yulnova Fortress, Novadain trembled with anger and despair. The outfit he'd paid a fortune for was ruined. He'd even lost his coat! He couldn't *believe* he'd fallen so low.

His wife and daughter had been seized, but he'd narrowly managed to slip away before being apprehended. However, he had no way to escape the fortress. Sooner or later, he'd be found.

Kira should have wed Alexei and he should have become the duke's father-in-law. He would then have been able to exercise his authority as a member of the ducal family. So, how had he ended up here, crawling in the mud?! This made no sense!

Things shouldn't have ended up this way!

Why had Aleksandr and Alexandra passed on so early? If the two of them had still been alive, Alexei would have married Kira!

"A count's daughter wanting to marry a future duke?! Ha ha ha! You say the funniest things! You know my mother would never allow this, don't you?"

Novadain had had no choice but to laugh alongside Aleksandr, concealing his bitterness. He hadn't given up, pushing until Aleksandr and Alexandra had agreed.

He hadn’t just pleaded with them. He’d done *everything* in his power to get there. He’d spent his time running errands like a mere servant for Alexandra’s guests and had gone above and beyond to make those who displeased her and her son *disappear*.

Eventually, he’d noticed something important. The almighty Lady Alexandra seemed to always comply with the whims of her outsider guests. Perhaps “comply” wasn’t the right word—she didn’t do anything herself, but she let them act as they pleased. Considering her personality, that was unthinkable unless there was a reason.

That was when Novadain had remembered something: The biggest thorn in his side for years, Sergei, had passed away very suddenly despite his apparent good health…

That had given Novadain an idea. Since Aleksandr and Alexandra had always laughed in his face whenever he brought up the idea of an engagement between Alexei and Kira, he’d decided to ask Alexandra’s guests for help. In exchange for making their wishes come true, he’d asked them to support his pleas.

Novadain had known that they were only there for the money. All he’d needed to do was tell them where the money was stashed. He had promised to let them know whenever the money was moved to another location for safeguarding and insisted that he’d be even more useful to them once his daughter became the duchess. Their leader had accepted with a pleased grin.

That man had been the duchy’s financial advisor.

Not long after, Aleksandr had come to find him with a letter. Novadain had asked for Alexandra’s signature as well and his request had immediately been granted. His many efforts had finally paid off—the letter he needed had been in his hands.

When Aleksandr and Alexandra died, Novadain had known he had no choice but to wager everything on that letter. He couldn’t give up after everything he’d done to obtain it.

He now wished he hadn’t given up on uncovering what exactly these outsiders held over Alexandra’s head. Back then, he’d tried to dig up the truth, but he’d stopped, fearing for his life. Perhaps he shouldn’t have. Those who’d been involved had swiftly been removed, disappearing without a trace after Alexei rose to power.

At the time, Novadain had rejoiced. Handing the duchy's money to outsiders hadn't exactly sat well with Novadain. While he had gotten a cut, as the leader of the Yulnova branch families, he hated the thought of receiving leftovers. When they'd disappeared, he'd thought his time had finally come. As soon as Kira married Alexei, all the money—and the right to dispose of it as he wished—would be his. The world had taken a rose-colored tint. He'd finally won.

He hadn't expected Alexei to be so ruthless.

Now, hidden in the bushes, Novadain couldn't help but wonder once again: Where in the world was the previous financial advisor? Novadain's best guess was the old cells of the fortress, but he hadn't been able to find him no matter how hard he'd looked before Alexei's return. He'd kept searching through his connections even after Alexei had kicked him out, but he hadn't succeeded in finding him. If he had, things would have turned out differently.

Suddenly, a monstrous rumble sounded from beyond the bushes, behind him. Branches cracked, and a beast with enormous fangs suddenly lunged at him.

Novadain screamed in terror. He jumped to his feet and tried to run, but there was another beast in front of him with fangs that were just as sharp. He screamed once again, falling to his knees. He tried to crawl away, but he soon found he couldn't advance. No... He was being dragged back!

The fangs of one of the beasts closed around his leg, but he couldn't even feel the pain as he was dragged out of the bushes and across the ground. All he could do was scream, even as mud and leaves caught in his gaping mouth.

I'm going to die! That thing is going to kill me—to eat *me! No! Save me! Someone, anyone! Please!*

Novadain was hurled back and slammed against the ground. The pain made him grow dizzy, and then he erupted in a fit of coughing, spitting out the dirt and leaves that had found their way into his mouth.

Struggling for air, Novadain lifted his head up and finally saw what had attacked him: a hound of Yulnova.

"Ah," he panted.

His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could now clearly see a pack of fierce hounds glaring at him, their eyes gleaming. These beasts did not hesitate to pounce on monsters,

and when they started growling, Novadain felt as though the ground was shaking.

I'll fight these things… I have to! he resolved.

He tried to call upon his mana, but years of idleness had dulled his senses. With his mind troubled by fear, he couldn't do anything.

The larger of the hounds seemed to notice his inability to channel his mana and it started approaching slowly.

Novadain screamed once more before forcing himself up and starting to run. He had no idea where he was going. He scrambled aimlessly through the garden as the hounds chased after him.

After running for a while, he stumbled upon a small building. He rushed in and closed the door before the hounds could follow him and sank to the floor against it, out of strength.

Suddenly, someone barged through the door, opening it solely with sheer strength. Novadain rolled on the ground.

"Do excuse me," a friendly voice said.

The casual tone was eerily out of place.

The young man who'd just spoken walked in, holding a lantern made of a rainbow stone. To Novadain's eyes, which had gotten used to the darkness, the light of the stone was blinding. Still, he recognized Alexei's servant—the one who'd dragged him out of the Yulnova Fortress.

Behind him was another man.

The tall figure stepped inside. "To think that you'd flee to Zephyros's stable."

Novadain shivered at the sound of Alexei's deep voice. "Y-Your Grace…"

"Did you actually think he'd be in the fortress?" Alexei asked.

"Who…?" Novadain asked.

"Yulnova's previous financial advisor. You've been trying to get to him, have you not? Oh, so you know—your pawn, Anna, has already been dismissed."

Novadain was trembling like a leaf.

"Did you think *he* wouldn't tell me anything?"

Novadain gasped. Had he known? Had Alexei known about the existence of that letter all along?

"The man you so eagerly looked for isn't in the fortress. But since you seem to like it so much, you can stay here." Alexei's eyes shifted toward the wall. The light of Ivan's lantern lit up a

painting of a man with his horse.

"Do you remember Zephyros?" Alexei asked. "You killed him." His voice was uncharacteristically thick with emotion. "I shouldn't have done anything on that day. Weak as he was then, Zephyros would have still bitten you to death. I was stupid enough to try to step in, and Zephyros died because he tried to protect me."

The memories of that day slowly welled up in Novadain's mind. They were fragments, disconnected and blurry, because of the alcohol. But he could remember Alexei rushing out of the residence and getting in between him and that disgusting horse. The ever-calm child had screamed in a rare moment of frenzy.

That had annoyed Novadain. Intending to mess with him a little, he'd pulled out his sword. He'd been drunk and it was just a joke, nothing more.

But that horse, that dreadful horse, had practically howled before throwing himself in between Alexei and the sword. The beast had been in a murderous frenzy, and Novadain had had no choice but to stab it with all his strength. He'd repeated the motion again, and again, and again. If he hadn't done that, the horse would have gotten him instead.

That was the truth of Zephyros's death, the truth Alexei had refused to recount to Ekaterina to avoid breaking her heart.

Novadain let out a rough laugh. "I *do* remember. For once in your life, you acted like an actual kid that day. It's the only time I've ever seen you cry."

Novadain rolled on the floor once more with a grunt. Ivan had just kicked him in the stomach.

"Sorry, Your Grace," he apologized, bowing. "My foot just moved on its own."

Alexei shook his head. "It's fine. I might have done that myself a few months ago."

His tone softened on that second sentence, but his eyes, still fixed on Novadain, were ice-cold.



“Now that you ran from the guards, you’re officially missing,” he said. “No matter what becomes of you, no one will know.”

Novadain stiffened. They’d let him get away… No, they’d pushed him to run away! And run he had, right into Alexei’s trap. No one would know what happened to him. He was at Alexei’s mercy.

“Did you know that there are several furnaces in the basement?” Alexei asked, a faint smile on his lips. “To heat up the fortress in the winter. From the beginning of spring to the end of autumn, they house no fires. From today on, one of them shall house you instead.”

Novadain’s face paled.

“Telling day and night apart might prove difficult, but do try to count the days as you await the first snow of the year. When that time comes, the fire shall return…while you remain right where you are.”



Novadain made several successive wails of despair as the knights dragged him away.

“Looks like he’ll spill everything he knows before the night is over,” Ivan said as he and Alexei left the stable. “You should burn him to a crisp for real, Your Grace.” His tone was bright as always.

Alexei shook his head. “He’s too well-connected to the important figures of the duchy. Killing him might lead to trouble. We’ll just keep him alive for the time being. I could get rid of him at any point, but using him will prove far more productive.”

After saying that, Alexei’s expression softened and he added, “Besides, Ekaterina wouldn’t like it. I don’t want her to hate me.”

“Her ladyship would never hate you, no matter what you do,” Ivan told him.

“That’s true. I’m sure she’d understand and forgive me…but just because she forgives me every time doesn’t mean I should take advantage of her kindness,” he said seriously.

People tended to always demand more from those who easily forgave them.

“There’s one thing she won’t let slide, Your Grace,” Ivan said. “*You* pulling an all-nighter because of your work.”

Alexei laughed. “You’re right. I must get to bed quickly.”

With that, the pair hurried toward the residence.

Ekaterina’s First Horseback Ride

“I wish to learn the proper way to ride a horse.”

When his beloved sister, Ekaterina, came to him to tell him that after he’d recounted to her the story of Zephyros, their grandfather’s favorite horse, Alexei had immediately nodded.

In the empire, horseback riding was not necessarily part of every young noble lady’s education, but ladies riding was not seen as an issue either. However, in the House of Yulnova, the activity had been heavily discouraged in recent years.

The reason for that was Alexandra’s strong dislike for it. Why had she found it so distasteful, one might wonder? Well, because the empress, Magdalena, was an energetic woman who loved to ride on horseback. Magdalena’s refusal to show her the respect she thought she deserved as the previous emperor’s older sister had greatly irritated Alexandra, who’d made every effort to remove everything that reminded her of the hateful empress from her view.

Suffice it to say that Alexei himself cared very little about that unspoken taboo.

“If it pleases you, you may, of course.”

He’d only just replied when Alexei was struck with a realization.

In the empire, it was common for women to ride sidesaddle. However, that required a special type of saddle that, because of their grandmother’s long ban on women riding, could be found nowhere in the large fortress. On top of that, it was far more comfortable to ride with a custom-made saddle created to fit the rider and horse perfectly.

The presence of the Order of Yulnova meant that the fortress did not lack horse-riding tools and equipment, but they were all made for men. Alexei hadn’t thought of that before answering Ekaterina and he couldn’t help but beat himself up mentally for his stupidity while explaining the issue to his sister.

“I’ll have a saddle made for you as soon as possible. Please wait until it’s finished,” he concluded apologetically.

Ekaterina smiled brightly at him. “All right, brother, I understand. But there is something I would like to try…if you’d

be so kind as to give me permission."

Alexei asked her what that thing was and his eyes shot wide open in surprise at the answer. However, he nodded.

"I shall grant every one of your wishes, my queen."



On the following day, Ekaterina walked up to Alexei, who was waiting for her near the stable.

"Brother!" she exclaimed.

She was pulling on the hems of her sleeves and messing with her collar as she walked, but she seemed overjoyed.

"I'm sorry for the wait," she said. "Do I not look too strange?"

A few knights who were training horses on the riding grounds turned to stare at her, astonishment on their faces. Alexei, on the other hand, watched her fondly.

"You could never look strange. You're as beautiful as always yet you carry a dignified, awe-inspiring presence. You seem even more like a goddess than before."

"Oh, brother," Ekaterina replied with a smile.

She always replied this way to Alexei's praises and, every time, he could see the fondness in her smile. Alexei always felt as though she was spoiling *him* when she accepted his compliments.

The shocked reaction of the knights, however, was understandable—for Ekaterina was currently wearing men's clothes.

What she'd told Alexei she wanted to try was riding on horseback like a man.

It's very much like her, Alexei thought. She did not know the ways of the world and thus did not let common sense stand in her way. In his eyes, her tendency to innocently make the most surprising of requests was one of Ekaterina's greatest charms.

The truth was that Ekaterina remembered that horseback riding had been done straddling the horse in her past life. She knew that women had ridden sidesaddle in the past, of course, but that wasn't enough to shake off her image of "regular" horseback riding. On top of that, she had far preferred pants to skirts and dresses in her past life. At work, too, she had always worn pantsuits. Deep down, she rejoiced at the chance to finally hop into a casual fit.

But Alexei had no way of knowing any of that.

Ekaterina was wearing Alexei's old clothes. The outfit was simple: a white shirt and a pair of black, fitted trousers. However, their difference in build meant that the clothes didn't exactly suit her. The sleeves were far too long and the pants too wide, so she'd rolled up the sleeves and forced her pants to stay on with a tight belt. Alexei thought she looked adorable, like a child in an adult's clothes.

He, however, was the only one to see things that way. The young knights quickly averted their eyes after seeing Ekaterina. While the sleeves were too long and the waistline too big, the chest and hip areas were in desperate need of additional fabric. The men's clothes, stretched beyond capacity to make space for the young lady's curves—the spectacle of it all was far from unseemly. No, the outfit suited Ekaterina. It was charming.

To put it more bluntly, it was an incredibly erotic sight. The young men of the empire were awakening to the charm of the legendary boyfriend shirt.



After thinking about it for hours, Alexei had selected an older mare for Ekaterina's first ride. She was smart with a very docile temperament. Alexei had practiced horseback riding since he was young and he himself preferred the thrill of taming unruly stallions, but he knew that was not advisable for a beginner. Ekaterina would just have to sit there while the gentle mare did all the work, taking her on a safe little tour.

Still, Alexei was worried so he personally held the horse's bridle and had her walk slowly next to him. This wouldn't teach Ekaterina much, but since she could not start training in earnest until her custom-made saddle arrived, Alexei decided this was good enough for a first try. As for Ekaterina, she was telling him about either how it was higher than she expected or how the swaying of the horse was a strange sensation with a smile on her face. She seemed to be having a good time.

Alexei often felt as though *he* was being pampered when he tried to spoil her and today was no different. *He* was having the most fun.

"Her Imperial Majesty the Empress loves to ride," Alexei said. "And she's far better at it than most men. I've never witnessed it,

but I heard that she, too, dresses like a man to ride this way in private."

"My! Then I must speak to her about horse riding during the next imperial visit!" Ekaterina replied.

"She may call upon you to visit the imperial palace before then. She told you she wanted you to visit her, did she not?"

"She did, right before leaving. I wonder if she'll truly invite me," Ekaterina said, a delighted expression on her face.

She was adamant she did not wish to marry into the "cold imperial family," as she'd once called it, but she seemed to adore the emperor and empress. Despite learning what their personalities were like, Ekaterina did not seem to have changed her mind, nor had she noticed the glaring contradiction either. Ekaterina was wiser than most, yet she sometimes failed to see the obvious in this way.

Alexei had no intentions of pointing it out, though. He couldn't send this sickly, sheltered child to the imperial family. If the Yulnova Fortress, with Novadain and the others plotting, was an abode of demons, the imperial palace was at the very heart of the demons' machinations: a demon-infested hell. Alexei could not bear to risk her suffering in a place he couldn't see or reach, like their mother had.

"I'm sure she will," he said. "And when the time comes, I shall make sure to protect you so that you can come home unharmed."

"Thank you, brother."

While she'd thanked him, Alexei could read on her face that she had no idea what could possibly warrant the need for a protector at the imperial palace.

"You're so beautiful I fear a scoundrel may steal you away," Alexei said. "I wish I could be by your side protecting you at every moment."

"Oh, brother!" Ekaterina laughed. "You're too sweet to me. You truly should learn a thing or two from the Krymov siblings."

"I couldn't call you a monkey when you're a blue rose. Although I certainly do wish for you to be as full of energy as Lady Marina."



At the same time, miles to the east, on the vast plains that made

up the Krymov territory.

"Hey."

At the curt greeting, Nikolai Krymov, Alexei's classmate, turned around.

"What's up, pops?"

The Count of Krymov, Fyodor, looked at his son in silence. He'd already grown to be as tall as him. He walked up to Nikolai, who was lazily slouching against a fence. Just like his children, Fyodor had red hair sprinkled with gold that he kept short. He was tall, broad, and muscular, and his skin was tan and wrinkled from years of working in the sun. These features gave him a sort of rough charm.

Beyond the fence was the riding ground, where two horses were currently galloping at full speed. They weren't demonic horses but regular horses the Krymovs bred for pedigree management. Regardless, the two were remarkably fast. The riders were both women. Their dignified beauty suited the masculine wear they both had on, and neither rode sidesaddle. Their fine handling of the reins was far beyond the abilities of most men.

These two women were the Countess of Krymov and the young lady of the house, Marina.

"They seem to be having fun," Fyodor said.

"They do," Nikolai agreed. "Marina should give up on the dainty act and be like that all the time. No, wait, I can't have her chasing me with a pitchfork at school." A wry smile appeared on his lips as the image passed through his mind. "Still, she's been doing it less often these days. I guess she finally understood that even if she puts on airs, she can't compare to the true princess of our school."

"The true princess... You mean the young lady of the Yulnova?" his father asked.

"Lady Ekaterina. She's a beauty, that one. Everything from her way of speaking to her mannerisms is *so* refined, it almost makes her seem old-fashioned, but in a good way. She sparkles just from standing there. She's the most elegant lady I've ever seen! The best part is that she seems entirely clueless about it. And don't get me started on the way the duke dotes on her!"

Nikolai laughed loudly before stopping abruptly. "No, seriously, I can't even joke about it."

"What do you mean?" Fyodor asked.

“I couldn’t put it in words…”

Fyodor looked at his son, whose face had paled, in utter confusion.

“Anyway, how is His Grace doing?” he asked.

“Hmm…” Nikolai looked down, pensive. Quickly, he lifted his head again and said, “He seems good. He spends his time doting on his sister, and she seems to be taking care of him as well. He’s been a lot more human these days.”

Fyodor bent over the fence, asking, “Still as stubborn?”

“Oh, yeah, that hasn’t changed one bit.”

“Good grief.” Fyodor clicked his tongue. “I made up my mind eight years ago, but I know that if I send him one, he’ll send it right back. Even at ten, I could feel he was destined to become a great man. And he was already stubborn as a mule and strict to a fault. Couldn’t he grow up to be at least half as easygoing as Sergei? Damn… Ventus’s tired of waiting, you know?”

Nikolai’s eyes went to a stall. Inside was a magnificent demonic horse: a young stallion with a strong build and shining mane.

“You’re just as stubborn, pops, not changing your mind for over eight years.” Nikolai laughed. “The duke’s like a whole other person when Lady Ekaterina is involved. You may just get your chance thanks to her.”

“Lady Ekaterina, huh? She’s pretty and graceful, I got that, but what is she *actually* like?”

“We haven’t talked much… But if I had to give you my impression…” Nikolai paused to think. A small smile appeared on his lips as he finished, “She’s like an unclouded jewel.”

“What do you mean?”

“High-ranking nobles are always on the defensive. They take care not to expose any flaws or weaknesses while keeping an eye out for those of others. The duke’s like that, and His Highness Mikhail too. The way I see it, this way of refusing to show one’s true colors dims people’s shine. But Lady Ekaterina hasn’t made me feel that at all. She doesn’t guard herself while trying to expand her sphere of influence at every turn. The nasty tricks of the nobility just seem so foreign to her. She’s smart, though, and a lot more mature than the rest of the first-year students. I just feel like it’s in her nature to be honest and kind. I imagine that’s why the duke loves her so much—and why His Highness Mikhail seems to have a little thing for her. Though,

that part's just my intuition."

Fyodor hummed. "If you say so, you must be—"

A shout prevented him from finishing his sentence. "Sylph! Sylph ran away! *Again*!"

Fyodor and Nikolai looked in the direction of the scream just in time to see a demonic horse dash right past them. The mare was rather small for a demonic horse, but she was one of the most beautiful horses the Krymov had ever bred. A stableman was running after her, a saddle in hand.

"She'll come back eventually. No need to chase after her," Fyodor said with a sigh. "She's so willful. She'll let me put a saddle on her sometimes, but that's it. What a fussy horse."

"Mom said she thought she could ride her, though," Nikolai said. "Doesn't she just hate being straddled? There are some horses like that. They only accept sidesaddles."

Fyodor hummed, deep in thought. "I'm not sure there are any precedents, but...that could prove interesting," he said.

"What's interesting, pops?" Nikolai asked, dubious.

Fyodor did not answer.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book. I'm Chidori Hama, and I truly want to thank everyone who purchased the first and second volumes! It's all thanks to you that I was able to publish this third volume! Thank you so much!

The stage of the third volume moved from the imperial capital to the Yulnova Duchy, the siblings' fief. The first volume was centered around the Magic Academy, the second around the imperial capital, and with the third, I got to expand the world of this story further. I hope you enjoyed traveling across the empire in Ekaterina and Alexei's company.

Aside from the stage widening, a lot happened in this volume. The connections between the House of Yulnova and Yulmagna are getting clearer, and it's becoming apparent that this world is standing on the edge of a major turning point. I also got to write about a certain local villainess and her shenanigans involving Alexei.

No matter where they are, Ekaterina and Alexei are always true to themselves—and to their sister complex and brother complex! Ekaterina is ready to change the world for her dear brother. As for Alexei, while the colder, more pragmatic side of his personality befitting the heir of a powerful noble family has started peeking through, he remains sugary sweet with his dear sister.

I often receive comments along the lines of "Alexei's so sweet I'm afraid I'm gonna get cavities." Well, I hope you guys get cavities this time around too! But don't mind me; I have no idea what I'm saying anymore.

Anyhow, for this volume as well, I worked hard to grab the ultimate reward: the chance of seeing Wan Hachipisu-sensei's stunning illustrations. While working on the web novel version, I often saw comments saying, "I wish I could see this scene illustrated!" and every time, I couldn't help but think, *Me too!* Even while writing, I'd imagine the illustrations in my head. This time, too, Wan Hachipisu-sensei did a fantastic job!

I was only able to complete this volume thanks to the support and hard work of many others. I would like to express my

gratitude to every one of them. I had an especially great time corresponding with my dear proofreader. They probed into many words and turns of phrase and often got me wondering, *Is this really the best word I could use?* They also helped me think of where to use hiragana instead of kanji and other such things. I used to do that work all alone for the web novel, but getting to do it with someone else, in a collaborative effort, brought me much joy.

Once again, allow me to thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading my story. I truly hope you enjoy yourself—at least a little bit—while doing so!

Chidori Hama


Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu
Goodbye, Overtime!
This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother
3



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Goodbye, Overtime! This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother Volume 3
by Chidori Hama

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