
Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu
Goodbye, Overtime!
4
This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother


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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.



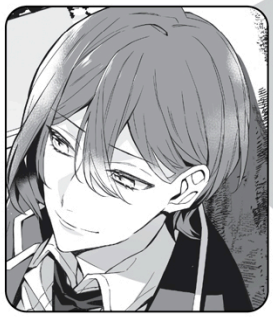
Flora Cherny

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



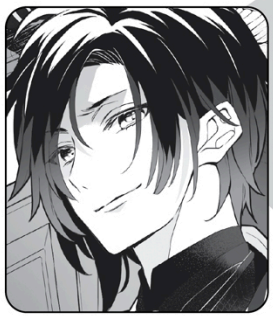
Mina Frey

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: The Villainess Runs Her First Errand

"Ekaterina, must you truly go?" Alexei asked sadly as he took my hand in his.

"Brother, I..."

My dear brother looked so pitiful that my lower lip trembled, leaving me unable to finish my sentence. I squeezed his hand in mine.

I'm so sorry! I won't ever leave! I'll always be right here by your —

I was about to say these words aloud when Aaron Kyle, the duchy's mine advisor, spoke up.

"Your Grace, my lady. It'll only be a few days. Besides, didn't you approve of her ladyship visiting the Mountain Sanctuary on your behalf already, Your Grace?"

Aaron was the youngest of Alexei's close aides and usually avoided being pushy with his opinions, but he wasn't holding back today.

"Not to mention the professor—erm, I mean, your granduncle will also be overjoyed to finally meet her," Aaron added. "He's still waiting at the old mine."

Aaron, you really love our granduncle way too much. Although, I guess that when it comes to loving someone too *much, I'm not really in a position to cast the first stone—and neither is Alexei.*

This was actually the fifth time this pathetic scene had repeated itself.

I, the young lady of the ducal house of Yulnova, Ekaterina Yulnova, had retained the memories of my past life as a Japanese corporate drone named Rina. Moreover, it just so happened that my current identity as Ekaterina was the villainess of the otome game

I'd once been hooked on. For summer vacation, I was away from the main stage of the game, the Magic Academy, and instead staying in the Yulnova Duchy. On top of all that, my absolute favorite character in my past life had been none other than Alexei Yulnova—who was now my beloved older brother.

That was why I found myself repeating this sad excuse for a parting scene with him over and over again.

What had led us to this? Well, the explanation could be traced back to the morning that had followed Alexei's celebratory banquet. It'd been an eventful night that had led to the purge of those who opposed him.



The morning after the banquet, I woke up fatigued from the events of the previous night but in a *great* mood. I readied myself for the day and headed to the dining room to have breakfast with my brother, but to my surprise, he wasn't there. Raisa, the housekeeper in charge of the female servants, appeared in his stead.

We chatted for a bit, and she told me that Count Novadain, the leader of the opposition whose crimes had been uncovered, had gone missing. Then she mentioned that Anna, the head maid, had been fired as well.

She didn't tell me any of the details, but considering the timing and the fact that Anna had always done Novadain's bidding, the connection was clear.

"I see... Thank you for letting me know, Raisa. To be honest, I worry that your load will grow too heavy without a head maid."

"Thank you for your concern, my lady. Anna was an experienced worker, and there is no doubt the hole she leaves behind will be difficult to fill. Still, we'll all work hard to do so," she replied with a composed smile.

At that moment, two maids walked in, pushing teacarts. Recognizing them as the two girls who'd helped out with my preparations for the banquet, I smiled at them.

"Thank you for your help yesterday," I told them. "Your hard work earned me a lot of praise."

One of the two was very polite and respectfully bowed to me, but the other beamed.

"My lady, you were incredibly beautiful!" she blurted out enthusiastically. "And His Grace's words to you were so delightful! I couldn't help but listen with rapt attention. To think that such a scary man could be so kind and thoughtful!"

"Careful," Raisa said, glaring at her.

The maid's joy practically melted off her face, soon replaced by an expression of horror. She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

I smiled awkwardly.

"Thank you for your kind words," I told her. "But the way you just behaved was not befitting of a maid of the House of Yulnova. My brother is a wonderful head of the family and a competent duke. He may be strict at times, but everything he does, he does for the good of the duchy."

"Yes, ma'am..." Her head drooped, but it didn't seem like I'd really gotten through to her. To be fair, being thought of as "scary" was probably to Alexei's advantage for now.

Oh well. Some things just can't be helped.

In the words of a famous author from my past world, Machiavelli, in his key treatise *The Prince*: "It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both."

At the age of eighteen, Alexei was too young to be much loved *or* feared by the big shots of the duchy. After the purge he'd undertaken yesterday, however, he was certainly closer to being feared. Earning that reputation at his age, less than a year after taking over the duchy, was impressive.

If I remembered correctly, Machiavelli had also written something along these lines: "People are more likely to mercilessly hurt those who show them love than those they fear, for the link of obligation born of kindness is easily broken in the face of self-interest."

Alexei was loved by the common people of the duchy because he'd spent years protecting their livelihoods. The great thing was

that they didn't just love him out of gratitude or obligation, but because Alexei was the guarantor of their interests.

The difference between the common people and the elites lay in the fact that many among the latter had actually profited from the irresponsibility of our father. To protect *their* interests, they would've stood up to Alexei. However, my brother had been so merciless in crushing Novadain and his goons that I expected they might have changed their minds already.

Anyway, that was why I hadn't told that maid that Alexei was in fact very gentle at heart. He wanted to present himself in a certain way, and I intended to respect that.

Not that it matters! You're the coolest no matter what you do, brother!

"You're incredible, my lady. You're younger than me but you always seem so wise. It's like you're far older than you look!"

At the words of the maid—who appeared never to learn her lesson—I shifted awkwardly. *Sorry about that. I'm around thirty deep down!*

Suddenly, my personal attendant, Mina, was standing next to the maid. She looked down on her with her usual blank stare.

Raisa let out a little laugh and walked up to the chatty maid, grabbing her by the collar.

"I'm terribly sorry about this ill-mannered girl, my lady," she told me. "As the person in charge of the female servants, allow me to apologize on her behalf."

"I don't mind," I replied with a laugh that bordered on villainous.

I really wasn't upset, but I had a feeling this cheerful girl's carefree working life would soon turn into a hellish training camp.

Good luck to you!

"By the way, has my brother had anything to eat this morning? I'm worried about his health," I said.

"He did eat," Raisa said. "Initially, he refused breakfast, saying it was unnecessary, but when we insisted that you'd worry if you heard that, he relented."

As always, I could tell Alexei loved me very much. *I'm glad that's making him take care of his health!*

"Is that so? What a relief. I shall go greet him later."

"I will let him know of your intentions, my lady," Raisa said before dragging the chatty maid away.

After I watched them leave, Mina served me my breakfast. Looking at the garden through the window, I ate while waiting for Raisa to return.

Somehow the atmosphere felt a bit colder or perhaps *tenser* than usual. It was as though the cool air that surrounded Alexei had taken over the entire building. The Yulnova Fortress—or rather, the Yulnova Duchy—was finally within the grasp of its ice king.

When Raisa came back, she was accompanied by a servant carrying a huge package. Apparently, it was for me. As soon as I heard who it was from, I asked for it to be opened.

The contents inside delighted me!

The atmosphere was hectic in Alexei's office. Novak; Aaron; Kimberley, the duchy's financial advisor; Rosen, the knight commander of the Order of Yulnova; and a plethora of guards in uniform kept coming and going. All were there to report on the documents they'd seized from the estates of Novadain's followers or on the results of these men's interrogations.

"Good morning, brother," I said, walking in. "I'm sorry for bothering you at such a busy time."

"Good morning, Ekaterina," he replied with a smile. "I'm glad to see you."

"I heard you still made time for breakfast despite your packed schedule. Seeing you take such good care of your health fills my heart with joy."

"Anything to follow your wishes."

Alexei was just as gentle with me as he always was, but the sight startled the guards. I suspected that before I'd shown up, Alexei had been so cold in his treatment of the men he'd arrested that the guards had started wondering whether he had a heart at all.

Hmm. I did say being feared is ideal for him right now, so my presence might undo everything. Maybe I shouldn't see him for a while.

Still, the thought of not visiting him even though we lived in the same house—sure, the "house" was a gigantic fortress, but that was beyond the point—made me pretty sad. Besides, I might've been worrying about this a *little* late. Alexei had already shown everyone at the banquet how affectionate he was with me.

Novak's voice roused me out of my thoughts. "Your Grace, how about having her ladyship replace you on the visit to the Mountain Sanctuary?"

As the name suggested, the Mountain Sanctuary was a place of worship for the divinities of the mountain. In this world, the gods definitely existed, and they sometimes reached out to mortals if they felt like it—though they were willful beings that blessed people with their favor or unleashed calamities depending on their mood. There were several mines in the Yulnova Duchy, so falling out of grace with the gods of the mountain had to be avoided at all costs. If one of them directed their ire onto the mines, the result would be horrific!

Ever since the days of the founder, Sergei, the members of the House of Yulnova had been diligent in their worship at the Mountain Sanctuary. Offerings were never neglected, and the head of the family usually visited the sanctuary himself. This was one of the duties of the Duke of Yulnova. By contrast, our layabout father had only gone to the sanctuary a single time, soon after inheriting his title. He had been too content living a life of excess in the capital to worry about such things. That was why his heir, Alexei, had always visited the sanctuary himself and revered the mountain divinities in his stead.

Unfortunately, now that Alexei had inherited his title as duke, he was busier than ever balancing his work for the duchy and his studies. Going on a pilgrimage that took several days from the Yulnova Fortress had become incredibly difficult for him. To solve this, he'd planned his next visit during our summer vacation. However, with the emperor asking him to welcome Mikhail during the second half of the holiday, Alexei's schedule was hopelessly packed. Dealing with the aftermath of the Novadain incident also required a lot of fine-tuning and a lot of time spent, even more so than they had initially planned.

For all these reasons, Alexei now found himself in a tricky situation and couldn't fit the pilgrimage into his schedule.

I had an idea what was delaying Alexei and his advisors—who were always so well prepared. After confiscating Novadain and his clique's titles and assets, they now had to decide how to divide them and who to give them to. That was sure to be an ordeal.

Novak would surely rise from viscount to count. What was that called again? "Elevating someone within the peerage," I think?

Having to prepare all that sounded like a pain. It was agreed upon that the main family was at liberty to modify the titles of branch families, but Novak couldn't use magic. Promoting him carelessly would lead to resentment from others.

Handling one's allies—or prospective allies—was even trickier than handling one's enemies. You needed a careful touch. If Alexei and the others failed to keep the resentment and envy in check, these negative feelings risked dragging on for years. It was better to resolve them now than to let them fester into worse issues. I completely understood. In my past life, I'd tortured myself over how to deal with some of my superiors too. If I hadn't laid the groundwork or had presented matters in the wrong order, they'd gotten cranky.

"I'd love to be of assistance, brother," I declared, all pumped up. "Please, leave that duty to me!"

Alexei didn't exactly look pleased. "But there are so many monsters in the duchy, and outlaws could ambush you on the way... There are often brigands near the mountains... No, the journey is far too dangerous for a delicate young lady like you to make alone."

I'm not that delicate, you know! I mean, sure, I may not be physically strong, but the personality I've dragged over from my past life is way too brazen for me to be called that!

Not that I could admit it!

"Your Grace, the roads that lead to the Mountain Sanctuary are safe and well maintained. You know full well that dangerous monsters are almost *never* sighted in that area," Novak said.

"Besides, we of the Order of Yulnova would not let our lady undertake a pilgrimage alone. Proud knights shall remain by her side

every step of the way," Rosen added.

Now this *is a rare sight.* It wasn't often that my brother's close aides talked back to him so openly. In fact, it was my first time seeing them contradict him with this much energy.

Alexei turned his head away, pretending not to hear them. It was also my first time seeing him act like a big baby. If anything, I usually found it hard to believe he was only eighteen.



Walking up to Alexei, I gently took his hand in mine.

"Brother, I would like to go," I said. "As the lady of the House of Yulnova, I wish to see more of the land we rule and truly come to understand it, so that I may one day be of use to you."

"Your Grace, considering the state of your schedule, I urge you to allow her ladyship to visit the Mountain Sanctuary," Novak said. "If you are to be replaced, and you know you must be, someone of similar rank to you must be sent, lest we insult the gods."

"I *know* that..." Alexei groaned.

The flurry of attacks from Novak and me seemed to have landed. Alexei let out a deep sigh and squeezed my hand back.

"I'm sorry, I'm acting spoiled. It's just...the thought of not being able to greet you every day if you leave... Even if we do not exchange any words, even if I don't get to see your face, just thinking that you are *here*, somewhere in the fortress, brings me comfort and makes my chest grow warm when I open my eyes in the morning. The thought of not having this chance anymore is difficult for me to bear. I cannot help but wish you would always be by my side."

"Brother..."

All right, all right, I got it. I'm not going anywhe—

"It's exactly *because* your sister is so dear to you that there is meaning in sending her to greet the gods," Novak said sternly, not letting himself be swayed by Alexei's pitiful expression. "Her presence on this important pilgrimage also means cementing her status as the second most important person in the duchy, even in the face of the gods. You may have declared it in front of the nobility last night, but many people of the Yulnova Duchy do not even know that you have a sister. This is the perfect opportunity to spread the word."

"This would also be the *perfect opportunity* for her to meet Professor Isaac. The professor is at the old mine at the moment," Aaron said. "Oh, in case you weren't aware, your ladyship," he added, turning to me, "the old mine is very close to the Mountain Sanctuary."

"In that case, there is something I would like to bring to

Granduncle Isaac," I said, remembering the big package that had arrived for me this morning. "The package that came for me today was made at my glass workshop. I hope it will aid him in his research."

The package had been from Yegor Toma, one of the recent hires of the workshop I'd bought when I wanted to make glass pens. He'd originally been a lens artisan. Now that he'd completed the revamped microscope I'd asked him for, he'd sent it over. I explained to Alexei and the others that I intended to give it to our granduncle and was eager to hear his thoughts on it.

"It appears my dear little sister has once again created something interesting," Alexei said, caressing my hair. "Fine. If you wish to go, I shall entrust the pilgrimage to you. Meet with our granduncle and give him the microscope."

"Thank you very much for giving me permission, brother. I'm most grateful. But please, never forget that even when I'm away, my heart and thoughts remain with you."

"I shall hold on to these words and wait for you," he said. "So please, return to me quickly."

Even though he said that, we still found ourselves repeating this heart-wrenching parting scene *four more times*.



Even though turning away from a lonely Alexei broke my heart, I finally departed.

He saw me off all the way to the carriage. After the door closed, I heard the sound of the reins being picked up and the carriage started moving forward. Alexei didn't budge from his spot, his eyes fixed on me, and I kept waving until he disappeared from view entirely—in fact, I did wave for a bit longer, just in case.

When we at last passed the gates of the fortress, I withdrew my hand and placed it in my lap with my other one. Then, I let out a deep sigh and sank into my seat.

I just felt something seeping away... My vital energy, most likely.

BOO-HOOOOO!!!

Why did I go and accept so easily? I'm such an idiot! My brother was saying he'd be lonely without me, but it should've been obvious I'd be just as lonely without him!

I realized why I'd been so easily swayed and on the verge of calling everything off whenever he asked me not to go.

BOO-HOOOOO!!!

How many days until I can go home? How many days do I have to stand not living under the same roof as him?!

"My lady, are you feeling sick?"

Ah! Oops! Forgot about him!

The serious tone brought me right out of my agony. I quickly straightened my back and smiled.

"I'm sorry for showing you such an unseemly spectacle," I said. "Please forgive me, Lord Forli. Do not concern yourself with my health. I'm perfectly fine."

Inside the carriage with me was Alexei's forestry and agriculture advisor, and one of the closest friends of our late grandfather, Forli.

At first, I thought I'd be traveling with Aaron, but after Alexei privately discussed something with him, Aaron told me that he had urgent business at the old mine and had left ahead of me. He'd looked dejected, so I assumed some issue must have arisen there.

I'd also learned that Forli always accompanied Alexei on his pilgrimages to the Mountain Sanctuary. The gods of the mountain held him in high regard, and as the forestry and agriculture advisor, his position required him to show respect to them often.

Get a hold of yourself, girl! You've gotta pull through!

If I allowed myself to drown in loneliness because of a few days apart, how was I supposed to be of any use to Alexei? When he inevitably was called to shoulder an important position in the capital, I needed to be strong enough to remain in the duchy and take care of it in his stead! Otherwise, I'd never lower the overwork flag that loomed over his head!

I swore to do it, and I will!

I'd been given a chance to carry part of his load by going on this pilgrimage in his place! I had to keep my spirits up—no, I should've been rejoicing! In my past life, I'd gone on trips alone like it was

nothing. I was almost thirty, not some helpless toddler!

Actually, taking my age as Ekaterina into account, I'm way *over thirty. Urgh...* Adding the numbers was depressing, so I decided to forget about that point.

At any rate, now wasn't the time to mope. I wasn't even alone. Forli was there along with *six* knights. That was more than the four knights that usually escorted the crown prince! On top of that, Regina, the leader of the hounds of Yulnova, and three other hounds were following the procession.

Oh, and I'd forgotten to mention my competent bodyguard: Mina the battle maid.

Don't I have way too many guards? Aaron took only one person with him.

My brother always worried too much when it came to me. Considering how much he adored me, I supposed it was only natural. Still, I should have insisted that Aaron could travel with me. Wouldn't Forli get bored to death with a girl young enough to be his grandkid as his sole company? Then again, if Aaron and I'd traveled alone in the same carriage together, it wouldn't have been a good look. He was a bachelor, after all.

"I'm much obliged to you for your company, Lord Forli," I said.

The tanned man smiled. "I'm glad you're interested in the duchy."

From what I knew, Forli usually disliked riding inside a carriage and only traveled by foot or on horseback. This time, he'd made an exception at my request, so he could teach me about the duchy on the way. Forli knew *a lot* about our land's forests and agriculture. It would've been a shame not to learn anything from the living encyclopedia next to me.

"That said, agriculture is a most unrefined subject and far from befitting a young noble lady such as yourself—" he began.

"No!" I blurted out, interrupting him. "In fact, I would say agriculture is *the most* important subject since the lives of the people depend on it. Please, help me learn."

With these words, I took out a notebook and glass pen. I listened intently and received a detailed class on the main agricultural and forest products of the duchy.

Number one above all else was the iconic black dragon cedar. In the capital, most of the buildings were made of stone, but the interiors required a lot of wood. It didn't need to be black dragon cedar from the Yulnova Duchy, but that was the most reliable in the minds of the majority.

This actually reminded me of something: At around the same time as the great fire that had ravaged Edo, there'd been a similarly devastating fire in London. I'd initially wondered how that could've been, since I'd pictured London as a city filled with stone buildings, unlike the wooden structures of Edo. However, the interior frameworks of London had been mostly made of wood, and a similar method of construction was used in the Yulgran Empire.

The main roads in the capital were spacious, so large that four carriages could pass side by side. (In other words, they were four lane roads.) There were also large sidewalks on either side. Now that I thought about it, that design might have been a fire prevention measure meant to mitigate the spread of flames.

When it came to agricultural products, another item of note was livestock and related products. The duchy produced and exported not only meat but also dairy products such as cheese and butter to the capital.

Forli told me that unique breeds of sheep and cattle were often born in the duchy because the abundance of monsters meant hybrids were more likely to appear. Some of them had rough temperaments because of their monster blood, but they also had evolutionary advantages. For instance, some were resistant to illnesses, had glowing wool or hair, produced milk with medicinal properties, and so on. Even their bad tempers could sometimes be of use, as these hybrids might be aggressive enough to fight off monsters if they attacked their group. As a general rule, people deemed that one such hybrid animal per group of nonhybrids was a good balance.

Sometimes, however, it yielded unexpected results. According to Forli, a cattleman had once ended up at his wit's end after adding one such cow to the herd. On top of protecting its fellow cows from monsters, it had also decided to protect them—and thoroughly at

that!—from the farmer's bulls.

An amusing story, indeed.

Next were the fruits. The duchy mostly produced, in order of most to least, apples, peaches, and berries. Forli also listed fruits that I'd never heard of and couldn't liken to an equivalent from Earth.

Despite not being number one in terms of quantity produced, the fruit that brought in the most money to the duchy was undoubtedly the grape. Wine was a prosperous industry, and Forli spent a long time telling me which winery produced which type of wine, describing each particular aroma in detail. There was no doubt the man was a wine connoisseur.

Sorry, but I think most of that went right over my head. I never drank much in my past life.

In recent years, the farmers had been concentrating their efforts on a special type of sugar beet. I hadn't known before, but the biggest producer of sugar in the empire was in fact the Yulnova Duchy! Though, at the moment, the majority of the sugar used in the empire was still imported from the countries to our south. The use of sugar was already quite widespread here, but it was way pricier than it'd been in my past world.

Up until now, I'd been using sugar without a second thought when I cooked at the academy, but I could only have done that because I attended an elite school for nobles. In fact, now that I thought about it, Flora had been careful with sugar and had used it sparingly. I also had a feeling that every time she'd mentioned who'd taught her a sweet dessert recipe, it'd been the baroness, not her mother.

In the Yulsein Duchy to the south, farmers made sugar out of sugarcane, but they produced it only in small quantities. Realizing the potential of sugar beets, Forli and my grandfather had jump-started the production here. After all, sugar was a promising market and the beets grew well in the cold weather of the Yulnova Duchy.

It was the same in Japan. The largest share of domestically produced sugar was actually from Hokkaido, up in the north, and it was also made from sugar beets. It was way easier to picture

Okinawa, with its sugarcane fields, being the main producer of sugar, but that wasn't the case.

I'm guessing that's due to the sheer immensity of the farmland in Hokkaido.

With so many mountains, the Yulnova Duchy hadn't had that much farmland in the beginning, but it'd been four hundred years since Sergei had initiated the reclamation and clearing process. By now, there was a lot more available land, and it was carefully divided to grow crops that could support the duchy's people and their livelihoods.

Speaking of which, I'd translated the term Forli had used to "sugar beet" to make things easier, but he'd mentioned that it...*wiggled*?

What do you mean it "resists when you try to pull it out of the ground?!" Are we still talking about a plant? Is it a mandrake?!

Apparently, there were plant monsters that could move around in the forests of the duchy. And this specific rootlike vegetable that you could transform into sugar was a subspecies of plant monster? A kind of...larva?

Okay, no, that wasn't quite right. They weren't exactly larvae but what resulted when the larvae failed to grow into adult monsters. The resulting sweet grass was originally a natural phenomenon that occurred in a certain proportion of plant monsters. According to Forli, the people of the forest had known about these things for ages and had long enjoyed eating the delicious, sugary wild grasses—though, could I really call monsters "grasses"?!

Either way, Forli had gotten to try this delicacy through his connection to the people of the forest and had eventually told Sergei about it. The latter had put a research team on it, and after much effort, they'd figured out how to intentionally grow this species and use it to get sugar.

As for cultivation, there was no need to harvest seeds. All you had to do was chop off the head of the tuber—which more or less looked like a turnip—then cut the area from which the leaves sprouted in small bits and replant them. Apparently, they grew back easily enough even when chopped into teeny-tiny bits.

That's some impressive vitality!

That reminded me of a manga in which someone haphazardly threw the skin of a potato in their garden, only for a potato to actually sprout. I assumed the method of reproduction was similar...maybe.

To be honest, this entire sugar beet story was right up my alley as a big-project lover. This could have made for an episode of *Project Something*, fantasy world edition!

Forli's stories were all incredibly interesting, and I learned a ton. The first leg of the trip went by in a heartbeat. Before I knew it, the carriage had entered a small town. When we stopped in front of the inn, where we were supposed to have lunch, I was still so engrossed in the conversation that I was reluctant to get up.

"You truly are eager to learn," Forli said with a smile. "What a peculiar young lady you are."

Despite the way he put it, I had a feeling Forli had sensed how lonely I was after parting with Alexei and had gone out of his way to entertain me as best as he could through our conversation.

Thank you for taking such good care of your best friend's grandchildren.



After lunch, we departed from the small town and got back on the road. I watched the scenery outside the window flow by while Forli continued to explain everything about the fields we passed.

We were still rather close to the northern capital, so the land in the area had been reclaimed a very long time ago. Through the window, I could see gently rolling hills stretching on and on to the horizon. Beyond the seemingly endless rows of green ridges that appeared to be potatoes were tall, dense bushes—corn plants perhaps?

In my past world, both potatoes and corn had originally been from South America, transported during the Age of Discovery. It seemed that things were somewhat similar here, as these crops had been brought from beyond the Summit of the Gods some two

hundred years ago.

And then...far away—so far, I could only barely make them out—were some strange wriggling leaves.

"These are sugar beets, my lady," Forli explained. He paused before adding, "Although, they appear to be uncharacteristically restless..."

They're restless? The vegetables *are restless.*

I felt somewhat sorry for the poor, normal sugar beets of my past world for associating them with these, but I truly had no better point of comparison.

Still, I can't help but wonder, how do they move? Do they have nerves, tendons, and muscles in their leaves? Probably not. Monsters are just strange like that.

Apparently, once they were grown, most plant monsters pulled themselves out of the ground and started lumbering around! The sugar beets couldn't do that. They remained safely planted in the ground and just wiggled about. So, comparatively, they were *less strange* than the alternative.

Yep, I'll just tell myself that.

Aaaah! No, I can't! I'm still incredibly put off!

"Erm... Lord Forli? I cannot help but feel like these crops are quite...unusual. Was it hard for people to consider cultivating them?"

In my past world, European societies had initially been wary of potatoes and tomatoes. People had wondered what in the world these strange crops could have been, so cautious that it'd taken a long time for them to become widespread.

I supposed this wasn't exactly the same thing. Potatoes and tomatoes, which had foreign origins, were already fully accepted by the people of the empire. Sugar beets weren't foreign at all since they originated from the Yulnova Duchy. And...

Huh? Now I'm confusing myself!

Forli smiled awkwardly at my question.

"We introduced these crops in a somewhat forceful fashion in the land directly managed by the duchy," he said. "It has been around thirty years now, and the tenant farmers have thankfully grown used to them. However, despite all this time passing, we've had trouble

promoting the culture of sugar beets among other lords and independent farmers. Transforming them into sugar yields important revenue, and we've always assured them we'd be happy to purchase their production at a good price...but very few have accepted. Only those who were desperate for money started cultivating sugar beets."

I'd guessed as much. But, in a way, that meant the House of Yulnova pretty much had a monopoly on beet sugar.

"I must say their reluctance is not unreasonable," Forli continued. "Many omnivorous monsters deliberately consume sugar beets. That is also why they cannot be cultivated anywhere near the areas where monsters reside."

Oh! That made sense! Pests had always been an issue in my past world too, but they were nothing in comparison to the ones of this world!

Suddenly, the carriage stopped.

"My lady, Lord Forli, I apologize for the abrupt stop," the knight spearheading my guard said from outside.

His name was Oleg Gardia, and he was one of Raisa's twins—the older one, actually. Raisa's twins had inherited her purple hair, so dark it almost looked black, and graceful features. On the other hand, their imposing, muscular frames came from their father, the vice-commander of the Order of Yulnova. The handsome twins had masterfully snatched each of their parents' best features.

"What happened, Oleg?" I asked.

"Please allow me to report! Someone is requesting the help of the knights of Yulnova. It appears a one-eyed bear has entered the nearby sugar beet field and will not leave."

"In the middle of the day? And so close to human settlements?" Forli asked, puzzled.

And here I had been thinking of pests. *Speak of the devil...*

It was now clear why the sugar beets were so restless. There was a bear in their midst!

While I knew the knights of the Order of Yulnova were practically rockstars in the duchy, stopping a carriage that bore the crest of the Yulnova to ask for the knights' help was quite brazen. The people of

this area must have been at their wit's end to dare to do something like that.

I peered outside the carriage and saw a villager prostrating himself on the ground—an elderly man in rags who seemed quite worn out.

As I thought, he must be desperate for help.

"My lady, if you could please wait a few moments," Forli said, stepping out of the carriage.

He spoke to the man for a short while before returning to the carriage with a grim expression.

"This man originally comes from another area. He's decided to settle here in the hopes of making a living to support his grandchildren and has started cultivating sugar beets outside the village. However, his field is quite far from the village, which has led to a one-eyed bear invading to feed on his crop."

Forli paused his explanation to look at the man before continuing. "According to what he told me, he comes from the hinterland. His dialect matches, so I do not believe he is lying. Six years ago, a landslide destroyed his home village, and he lost most of his family in the tragedy. With no means to support himself and no home, he became a wanderer. He eventually contracted a loan to start cultivating sugar beets. If that too fails, he and his grandchildren will have no way to support themselves anymore."

I held a breath. The first thing that ran through my mind was the ledger Kimberley had showed me. The money that should have gone to the victims of several landslides had been embezzled. Had that old man suffered because of their schemes too?

"If we stop to take care of the one-eyed bear, we will not be able to cover the distance we'd initially planned," Forli told me.

"I do not mind," I said resolutely. "Please, I wish to help this man."

A slight smile formed on Forli's face.

One-eyed bears weren't particularly powerful monsters, but the

knights traveling with us weren't prepared or equipped for an extermination mission. In other words, we needed to talk strategy!

We first advanced until we could see the bear. I was currently riding with Oleg as we'd left the carriage behind. We'd also left the hounds, even Regina, so that the bear wouldn't notice their presence.

As far as appearances went, the one-eyed bear very much resembled the brown bears from my past world. However, its head was longer and narrower, and it had a single, humongous eye.

Since no one had fought back yet, the monster seemed to have lowered its guard. It sat as though it owned the field, casually munching on sugar beets. Speaking of the sugar beets, they were shuddering and trying their hardest to slap the monster's paws away with their leaves. Their little act of resistance was strangely endearing.

Whenever the bears pulled one out of the ground, the sugar beets let out a high-pitched "Eeeee!" which was also, somehow, quite endearing.

"There's a wound on its muzzle. It must have lost to one of its peers in a turf war and fled here despite the nearby human settlements. That is most likely why it appears so famished," Forli said.

That's how you know he's a wildlife expert. Listen to those observation skills!

"The view is clear, so it'll notice us as soon as we approach," one of the knights said, crossing his arms.

Oleg nodded. "It will destroy part of the field, but how about we charge swiftly on horseback?"

"That seems the most sensible strategy," another knight replied. "We could retrieve the hounds and have them surround it, then advance from all sides at once."

A quick meeting was enough for them to put together a plan and visualize the battle to come.

These guys are true pros! So cool!

"Excuse me," I said shyly, after much hesitation. "I can use earth magic. If it would help, I could lower the ground around the monster

right before you attack. If it's stuck in a pit, you'll be able to approach without having to damage the field too badly, will you not?"

"That's true, but..." Oleg thought about it for a moment only to soon shake his head. "We cannot involve a young lady like you. It's far too dangerous."

"My brother once told me that the nobility's magic exists to protect the masses from monsters. Besides, I am the one who decided to have you fight that monster. I ought to take responsibility for my actions and do what I can too."

I knew that these men were professionals, but they didn't have firearms or anything like that. They were only armed with short spears, which meant they couldn't do much until they moved into range. Even from afar, I could tell that the one-eyed bear was a dangerous creature. If the knights got hurt here, that would be entirely on me since I was the one who'd asked them to fight. In a sense, *I* would have been the one to hurt them.

It was a bit belated, but I once again felt how heavy the responsibilities of those who held power were.

Anyway, my point was simply this: Since I could use ranged magic, I should put that to good use.

"I promise not to place myself in harm's way. I can cast my spell from afar. From here, in fact. Is that still not acceptable?"

I tilted my head and unleashed the puppy-dog eyes. Oleg seemed taken aback while Forli simply laughed.

"What noble words. How befitting of the lady of the order," Forli said. "You must all be grateful."

"We are, truly," Oleg said.

Starting with Oleg, the six knights brought their fists to their hearts and bowed to me.

"I doubt proud knights of Yulnova could ever lose to a mere one-eyed bear, but if something were to happen to Oleg, Erik would feel it. We mustn't make His Grace worry, so that cannot happen," Forli said.

Erik was Oleg's twin. He was tall and muscular like his brother, but at the behest of his mother, he hadn't joined the order, electing

to become a civil official instead. Apparently, the twins shared such a deep and powerful connection that they could feel it immediately if something bad happened to the other. They couldn't converse with one another, however, so Erik wouldn't be able to know exactly what was going on.

That was one of the reasons why Alexei had chosen Oleg to guard me. If something happened to him, it meant that I was in danger. As far as Alexei was concerned, this was the most effective way to keep track of my safety. Additionally, while Erik was still single, Oleg was already married.

I remembered hearing plenty of rumors about the bond that linked twins in my past world too. They were basically urban legends, and science had never proven such a bond was actually a "thing." In this world of fantasy, however, no one doubted it because it *actually* worked. The generally accepted explanation was that a weak mana bond existed between twins.

I didn't know any of this before today and was surprised to find out the lengths Alexei had gone to confirm my safety. In this world where cell phones didn't exist, he'd made use of every means he could have thought of. It was truly impressive—although I expected nothing less of him!

"I will stay by her ladyship's side to protect her if anything unexpected happens, so you should accept her help," Forli said.

"*I* will protect her ladyship," Mina immediately retorted in her usual deadpan tone. As always, she was right there, only half a step behind me.

"Indeed, you always have," Forli said with a nod, not taking offense.

He seemed to know that Mina was in fact a battle maid who doubled as my bodyguard, but the guards simply smiled at her loyalty. They thought she was just a regular—albeit lovely—maid.

"In that case, we, knights of Yulnova, shall have the honor of fighting by our lady's side," Oleg declared.

Just like that, we changed strategies!



As planned, we all took our positions.

I began by funneling my mana into the ground. There was some distance between me and the one-eyed bear, so I shaped the mana into a fine thread and slowly extended it until it reached the monster. Then, I started amassing my power in the ground underneath it.

Watching me work, Forli let out an appreciative hum. Once I was ready, I nodded at him. He lifted his hand before swiftly bringing it down. That was the cue to activate my magic.

YAAAAAAAH! I screamed—deep down where no one could hear.

My (secret) unladylike battle cry must have been quite effective, because the ground under the bear rumbled and dropped suddenly into a sinkhole. As though someone were trying to send smoke signals, a cloud of dust rose in the air. Once it had settled down, I saw that the earth I'd displaced had formed a little mound all around the hole, like an oversized mole had been digging there.

Diameter? Three meters. Depth? Around ten meters. One-eyed bear? Nowhere to be seen!

Forli's hand motion had also been the signal for Regina and the rest of the pack of hounds to dash forward. They advanced as swiftly as arrowheads, and in a flash they'd surrounded the hole, howling.

"The one-eyed bear has already started climbing back up," Forli said. "I can see the top of its head. Thankfully, with the hounds making such noise, it shouldn't dare to come out entirely."

I was impressed he could tell at such a distance. *That's our wildlife expert for you! Amazing as always!*

I was also impressed by the bear's physical abilities. The hole I'd dug was ten meters deep! How could it have climbed up again so quickly?

Well, even the regular, not-monstrous bears from my past life had been pretty incredible. I'd once seen a video of a bear running next to a car driving forty or fifty kilometers per hour. I wondered if a one-eyed bear could climb a steep cliff faster than a human could run up a flight of stairs.

Whoa! I can see it too!

It was using the piled-up earth as a shield and peeking at the hounds, looking for an opening to escape the hole.

Out of patience, the bear roared and swiped one paw at Regina, its sharp claws at the ready. Right at that moment, though, a gust of wind pushed the bear back into the hole, and it fell along with the earth it'd been using as a shield.

I glanced at Forli, and he smiled at me. His attribute was wind, and that little gust had been his doing. So quick and precise! His experience had truly shone through!

But the bear was not deterred. It climbed back up and managed to dodge the hounds on the second try—only to find, once it was out, that the knights had arrived. They encircled the monster, spears at the ready. Noticing its retreat had been cut off, the bear fled toward the hole for cover.

Not on your life!

I unleashed my mana and tried to cover the hole with a wall of earth. As the scene unfolded from there, I found myself speechless.

I hadn't meant for this to happen, but when the bear landed atop the earth wall, I wasn't finished forming it. As a result, one end of the bear's body sank into it—the front end! Now, its head and front paws were stuck inside the hole, trapped by my wall, while its butt and hind legs flapped in the air.

Is this a comedy sketch? Are we trying for laughs here, Mister Bear?!

Setting aside the comic effect, magic sure was handy. I'd been able to stop a *bear* without a firearm. I could see why those who had mana had ended up rising as the ruling class—and why the current nobility were so hellbent on maintaining strong mana within their bloodlines.

Some of the knights almost laughed, but they quickly collected themselves and advanced, spears in hand.

Oh... I couldn't help but look away.

I shouldn't, I thought. I had a duty to see this through...but I still couldn't bring myself to watch.

Even without looking, I could *hear* it.

This was my very first time, in either my past or current life,

witnessing the taking of a life. No, I wasn't just witnessing it; I'd been the one to order it. Even if I hadn't dealt the finishing blow, I'd ended that life.

I *killed this bear. Me, Ekaterina. I must face this fact.*

"My lady, are you ill?" Mina asked, noticing my queasiness.

"No, I'm fine. My health is perfectly adequate," I replied, shaking my head. Even without seeing myself, I could tell my face was white as a sheet.

What's wrong with me? Did I actually turn into some delicate little lady?

Mina wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug.

"I made a grave mistake," she said. "Most women would loathe having to see a carcass, let alone a kindhearted young lady like you. It's no wonder this would prove too much for you. I should have taken you away."

"Mina..."

She was speaking and acting like Alexei. I was seriously starting to wonder whether his behavior was contagious.

Is it transmitted through the air? Oh, come on, there's no way!

"I'm truly all right," I told her. "Feeling queasy at the sight of a dead animal even though I eat meat every day is ridiculous."

I should never forget that the meat I eat comes from animals that once lived.

Since I'd never shied away from eating meat, I had no right to lament the cruelty of taking a life.

And I shouldn't avert my eyes either.

Although I understood that, I still couldn't look.

Why? I'm not making any sense, and I'm shaking. I really must be weak and delicate.

"Um... Everyone?" someone hesitantly said from behind us.

I started at the unexpected voice, only to see it was the elderly man who'd asked for our help.

"Thank you so much," he said, bowing repeatedly. "Thanks to you, it looks like I can cultivate the rest of the sugar beets without any issues. I don't know how to repay you..."

Mina let go of me, and I smiled at the man. "You need not worry about repaying us. Protecting this land and those who live on it is our duty. I'm glad we could be your strength."

"Thank you!" the man repeated again and again as tears flowed down his face.

Forli chuckled. "You know, every part of a one-eyed bear can be used, so they make for fine catches. Their fur is warm and durable, perfect for winter coats, and their meat is nutritious. Above all else, they possess a unique organ with fluids that can be transformed into potent medicine. One will fetch a high price on the market."

Not too long ago, we were worried about the bear eating someone, and now here we were, discussing eating it instead.

That is the law of nature, eat or be eaten—kill or be killed. Thank you for reminding me, Forli!

"You mentioned having debt, did you not?" I said to the man. "I hope the money you can get from selling the bear helps with that."

I once heard a proverb that said the ways of the heavens were unpredictable. Sometimes, misfortune turned into fortune when you least expected it. I hoped the old man felt that way. Besides, as one of the administrators of this duchy, that he could settle his debts, continue cultivating sugar beets, and turn his life around enough to pay his taxes was exactly what I wanted.

Thank you, one-eyed bear. There are people who can survive because you gave your life.

I'd once heard that the Ainu used to worship their prey as gods. Now, I felt like I better understood what that meant.

The elderly man shook his head. "No, I couldn't. You hunted this bear. It's yours."

"I insist," I said. "It is *yours*. You have grandchildren, right? I'm told the bear's meat is quite healthy. Have them eat it."

That man should have received aid back when tragedy hit his village. It was long overdue, but I hoped this would compensate for it, at least a little.

"I can finally feed them something good..." the man said. He was sobbing now. "Thank you, thank you!"

By now, several villagers had come to see what was happening.

All the dust that had risen when I'd dropped the bear into the hole must have alerted them. They were observing from a distance, but Forli recognized the mayor among them and called out to him, beckoning him closer. The two of them discussed what to do with the carcass, while Forli specified which part would go to whom.

The fur and medicine ingredients would go to the old man and his grandchildren. There was a lot of meat—Forli estimated the bear weighed around two hundred kilograms—so, while the old man would get the biggest share, it would still be split among the villagers so nothing would be wasted. They'd dry a portion of the meat as well, but there were no fridges and no freezers in this world; sharing it was just easier. The bones would also be distributed among the villagers, with the old man keeping the skull. Apparently, they could be used to repel other beasts.

Since the mayor was there, I took the chance to commend him for welcoming the old man and his grandchildren when they had found themselves outside the village with nowhere to go and lending them a vacant house and land—although it was just an abandoned field. Still, I told him his actions were very humane and that I hoped that he'd remain so good-hearted.

Neither the house nor the field had been given to the old man for free, and he was struggling with his debts, but it was better than nothing. There was no way around it: The mayor of a small village did not have the leeway to do things for charity alone.

Instead of drawing attention to that, I figured it was better to focus on the good. If the old man and his family were to stay here long term, then building amiable relationships with the people of the village was for the best—especially with the mayor. Getting on his bad side could have dramatic consequences for them.

Hearing such praise from a noblewoman seemed to delight the mayor, so I imagined he'd do what he could to make the old man's and his grandchildren's lives easier from now on.

The villagers and the old man could dress the bear themselves, but there was a trick to extracting the precious special organ properly, so the knights would take care of that themselves.

"We couldn't really show you our skills, my lady. The least we can

do is make ourselves useful any way we can," Oleg said.

He seemed to believe the conclusion of the battle had been anticlimactic. At that, I shook my head.

"Your coordination was perfect. I couldn't have assisted you at the end if you hadn't intimidated the bear. I admire your professionalism and talent, which is why we could achieve such a safe victory."

The very end had been a tad ridiculous, but if the knights had been any less efficient, the bear would not have jumped back into the hole and would have attacked instead. As a friend of mine who had been into soccer used to say, "A boring, efficient assist often goes a longer way than a showy attempt."

The knights once again brought their fists to their chests and bowed before getting to work.

While I waited for them to finish, I used my mana to till another abandoned field on the outskirts of the village. It was a good chance to practice my control and would help the villagers. Killing two birds with one stone!

I let my mana run through the field, which was covered in weeds, and dug deep. All over, the soil bubbled and squirmed, and the dark earth beneath began to surge up. In this world where tractors had yet to be invented, plowing the earth was heavy labor. With mana, however, I could get through the entire field very quickly, leaving behind soft and dark soil that was ready for sowing.

Proud of my work, I let out a satisfied sigh and smiled.

I'm dead tired, but getting some exercise sure feels nice!

Suddenly, applause echoed in my ears. The villagers, who'd been watching me the entire time, were cheering.

"Amazing! Nobles really are amazing!"

"Thank you, Duchess!"

Uh, come again?

"Everyone," Forli said. "She is not the duke's wife but his younger sister—the young lady of the House of Yulnova."

Surprised gasps and exclamations of "Huh?!" resounded all around.

"I-I apologize for our rudeness," the mayor said, bowing. "It's

just...the rumors said that the duke had brought home a beautiful wife, so we all assumed...”

Where in the world did that rumor even come from? Am I *supposed to be the beautiful wife? Alexei’s beautiful wife?*

Hang on, I’m pretty happy about this. And as a huge Alexei fangirl, this kinda hits.



When the knights were done extracting and processing the bear’s medicinal organ, we returned to the road.

Before that, because the old man and the mayor had insisted so much, we’d agreed to take some of the meat with us. The old man’s grandchildren—a boy and a girl—had also come to thank us personally. I’d been moved when I’d realized that the older brother, who’d reminded me a little of Alexei, had been taking good care of his younger sister. After that, the children of the village had played with the hounds. All of them, including Regina, had been gentle with the children and had even allowed them to ride on their backs for a while.

All in all, we spent quite a bit of time in the village.

“Come back again, our dear lady!” everyone exclaimed in unison as my carriage started rolling away.

The mayor and the old man both bowed deeply as everyone watched the procession depart. When I looked at the sugar beets field, the leaves were wiggling again. It almost looked as though they were waving us goodbye. Were they saying thank you for saving them from the one-eyed bear?

But, in the end, you guys will be harvested and turned into sugar. Oh my... I’m so sorry about that.

Aaaaaah! Sugar beets are technically root vegetables, yet here I am, feeling as though I’m about to send a cow or a piggy to the slaughterhouse! I’m getting a glimpse of the feelings of a livestock farmer, aren’t I?

“You must be tired, my lady,” Forli said, his voice dragging me out of my despair.

"Not at all. I did not do much," I replied. "But we stopped for longer than I expected. I doubt we'll reach the accommodation we planned, so I imagine we will need to think of something else in a hurry."

"That is correct," Forli said with a nod. "Would you care to sleep under the tent of the forest people for one night?"

"Well..."

That sounded lovely, but I didn't want to impose on them so suddenly. Besides, from what I knew, the people of the forest never settled anywhere for long and often moved about the forest. How would we know where they were?

I turned away from the window on my side to look at Forli and froze. I didn't want to say this. I really didn't, because that joke was so overdone, but...

Forli... Behind you! Behind you!

Outside the window of the carriage on Forli's side, right behind him...was a huge bee! It was way, way bigger than even the Asian giant hornet of my past life. Those had been roughly the size of an adult man's finger, while the bee I could see now was bigger than a person's palm! It was bigger than a sparrow!

Forli laughed. "Don't worry, my lady. This is an emperor bee messenger. They're sworn friends of the people of the forest."

Once Forli explained, I learned that emperor bees were a kind of insect monster that lived in symbiosis with the people of the forest.

Does that mean they have the same type of relationship as clown fish and sea anemones or ants and aphids?

Many strong monsters inhabited the duchy's forest, but emperor bees were among the most powerful. The poison from their stingers was so potent that they could kill a bear with one thrust! Their queen, which controlled their nests, was very intelligent, and the emperor bees were loyal to her. If anyone threatened the nests, all of them would band against the enemy.

Forli recounted the entire story to me: A very long time ago, the people of the forest nursed a wounded emperor bee back to health, even sharing their food and drinks with it. To thank them, the emperor bees became their protectors. In exchange for help caring

for their nest and eggs, the emperor bees shared their honey with the people of the forest and protected them from other monsters. That was partly why the people of the forest could live freely in these woods.

I get it now.

I hadn't really given it much thought before, but I should have realized it was strange for the people of the forest to survive in the face of the many dangers of the duchy's forest. The one-eyed bear we'd met earlier had been plenty scary, but it was one of the weakest monsters around. I now realized there was a reason behind it all.

"Emperor bees build several nests across their territory," Forli explained. "The queen travels through them and lays eggs in each. That is the solution they came up with to avoid the destruction of their species if something were to happen to one of the nests. The people of the forest usually dwell in the vicinity of the nests, traveling at the request of the queen."

"I knew that the people of the forest are often on the move, but I had no idea there was such a reason behind it!"

"We are close to one of the nests, and if a messenger came to find us, it means there are people of the forest staying there at the moment. This is their way of inviting us."

They were like the nomads of my past world. However, nomadic tribes usually migrated to find food depending on the season—or so I'd read somewhere.

"I understand! I'm most thankful for their goodwill, and since they were so kind as to invite us, I would love to visit them. I hoped to have a chance to chat at length with your wife. The party was so hectic that we barely got to talk at all. I'm so glad the opportunity has presented itself so fast!"

If I missed this chance, I'd never get to visit the dwelling of the people of the forest again! I just had to go!

Heh heh! I'm so lucky!

I felt like the guys on TV who were always on the lookout for marvelous places to see and big discoveries! I loved nonfiction programs, and this type of show was right up my alley.

Forli's smile broadened. "Inviting you is an honor, my lady. I'm sure my wife will be delighted to host you." He waved at the messenger bee outside, and it flew away.

Leaving behind the farming region and entering the forest, we advanced steadily along the road. It was the middle of summer so the sky was still rather bright, but the sun had started to sink and deep shadows were forming under the trees. Soon, we wouldn't be able to keep going.

If the people of the forest hadn't welcomed us, we would have had to sleep out in the open. In this world and time period, big changes in plans were risky, especially while traveling in the middle of the forest! I had to reflect and take that into account—although, I didn't regret helping that old man and protecting his field.

"Please do not worry, my lady. The forest people's dwellings aren't far from here."

"My, is that so? It's much closer to regular villages than I would have imagined."

"The farming area we just passed through was part of the forest not so long ago," Forli explained. "The territory of the emperor bees, on the other hand, has not changed for centuries. In fact, the only reason this part of the forest was never reclaimed is because the instructions left by Duke Vladimir have never been disregarded. The duke exchanged much with the people of the forest. He must have known about the emperor bees and left orders to avoid conflict. That is also why Lord Sergei appointed me forestry and agriculture advisor, so that the parts of the forest that must be protected remain untouched."

"I see..."

In recent years, more and more trees had been cut for fuel and construction wood. Protecting this part of the forest when it was so close to villages must have been incredibly tough for Forli. In my past world, economic concerns had often taken precedence over environmental protection. Thanks to the knowledge from my past life, I knew Forli's actions were for the best. If the forest was preserved, it'd come with many benefits: preserving biodiversity, retaining water, protecting people and animals from the wind, and

even preventing natural disasters such as landslides.

"The people of the forest have placed much hope in the afforestation initiatives we have launched," Forli told me. "They always feared the day the territory of the emperor bees would be infringed upon. But with the afforestation plans progressing, many of them are relieved. I can never thank you enough for that wonderful idea of yours, my lady."

I mean, that wasn't really a novel idea but common knowledge from my past life. I'm sorry for being a fraud!

"You were the one who made it a reality, Lord Forli, and in such a splendid way as well. Your decision to replant not only black dragon cedar but also trees that produce food and wood for furniture will help the duchy greatly in the future. I pray we will never experience poor harvests and famines, but there is no way to ensure the weather always remains on our side."

"You're quite right, my lady. I'm always impressed by your insight at such a young age."

Ack! Still a fraud, sorry!

When we reached a certain spot, Forli called out to the coachman and had the procession stop. I had no idea what sign or mark he'd used to know the right place, but he said that we were close to a small path that led to where the people of the forest dwelt.

He climbed out of the carriage alone and led the horses by the reins away from the road. Soon enough, though we'd only moved a very short distance, I couldn't see the road anymore through the trees. Forli had the carriage stop there. Presumably, no one would be able to see it from the road either.

He'd just unhitched two horses from the carriage when I heard the buzzing of a large insect. Half hidden in between the trees was the same messenger bee as before.

Actually, I have no clue if it's the same or not. I can't tell bees apart.

"The emperor bees will protect our belongings," Forli said as the bee landed atop the carriage. "Let us go."

He hopped onto one of the horses he'd unhitched while the coachman and Mina rode on the other. As for me, I once again rode

with Oleg. Following a faint trail on the ground that I could barely see, we trotted along behind Forli.

The deeper we pushed into the forest, the darker it grew. I'd never entered a forest at dusk before in either of my lifetimes, and I couldn't help the chills that ran down my spine. Dark forests just had to be a universal fear deeply rooted in human nature.

Suddenly, something ahead of us lit up: a brilliant white dot. As we progressed, more and more little spheres lit up.

"These are white orb bugs," Forli said. "They're tiny insects, barely the size of a grain of wheat, but as you can see, they glow. During summer nights, they illuminate the forest."

"They're beautiful," I said.

It was enchanting—a midsummer night's dream.

Led by the light of the white orb bugs, we continued down the little path until we reached a large open clearing. Here and there the space was dotted with large, colorful tents. At the head of the tents stood a woman.

"Welcome, my lady." Aurora, Forli's wife and the leader of the people of the forest, greeted me with a bow.

Chapter 2: The People of the Forest and the Maiden of Death

The one-eyed bear meat ended up being a great present.

The people of the forest were kind enough to offer us a few tents for the night and made us feel right at home. I was pretty sure families usually occupied these tents, but they insisted we use them, saying that their owners would just room with others for the night. The meat we'd brought seemed like a meager gift compared to the amount of trouble we were causing them, but Aurora looked overjoyed when she accepted it. Apparently, the people of the forest were quite fond of one-eyed bear meat.

"Eating it warms the body and makes people more resistant to illnesses," Aurora explained. "We shall add it to the soup, so make sure you have some too, my lady."

"Thank you very much," I said with a smile. "I'm also very grateful for your kind invitation."

The knights bowed to Aurora to show their appreciation.

I offered to help with the dinner preparations, but Aurora just laughed. She must have thought it was a joke, and I couldn't blame her: No one ever expected the young lady of a ducal house to know how to cook.

The people of the forest seldom welcomed guests, but on the few occasions that they did, they took hospitality *extremely* seriously. Apparently, that was just how they did things, so I decided not to argue and to enjoy my time here to the fullest.

Since my muscles had gotten stiff from sitting in the carriage, I decided to take a stroll through their dwelling place to loosen my muscles. Mina accompanied me, naturally, but so did Forli, Oleg, Regina, and her pack.

The people of the forest mostly kept to themselves, so they didn't

come up to me to strike up conversations, but many of them smiled at me—perhaps because I was with Forli. I returned their smiles every time. Most of the people of the forest were tall and thin, with toned bodies. The men had long hair that suited their slightly androgynous features well. Their appearances and way of life definitely reminded me of the fictional elves of my past world.

I'd expected the women to be hard at work preparing dinner considering the time, but some families had men cooking instead. The people of the forest didn't seem to follow traditional gender roles. Instead, everyone picked up tasks depending on their abilities and inclinations. I wondered if that had something to do with their long history of cohabitating with the emperor bees, which were led by a queen.

They're surprisingly progressive! Who needs the Equal Employment Opportunity Law when people already share tasks equally? Although, I guess a community like this one wouldn't really need a law anyway...

"The colors of everyone's clothes are so vivid," I said.

The design of the people of the forest's clothes felt ancient to me. In fact, they resembled the Celtic clothing I'd once seen in a manga. They were decorated with colorful, impressive embroideries. Ever since coming to the Yulnova Duchy, I'd become more appreciative of embroidery in general, but these were quite unique. I really liked that about them.

At one point, I spotted a cute embroidered flower on someone's clothing and chuckled. It reminded me of Flora.

These sorts of clothes would really suit her. Speaking of Flora, I wonder how she is. I hope she's doing well. And the prince too. And...is my brother feeling lonely without me?

It hadn't even been a full day since I'd left the fortress, and he wasn't the type to get disheartened easily, but he was so attached to me that I couldn't help but worry.

Besides, I'm lonely too! I'm also way too attached to him!

"That was an unusually ladylike comment," Forli joked before adding, "The people of the forest have extensive knowledge of vegetable-based dyes. See their tents, for instance. They're exposed

to the rain and wind, yet the colors never fade. To be honest, I've long been curious about their clothing. I think there is potential to turn them into products we could sell in the capital, but I know far too little about textiles."

"In that case, please allow me to help," I said, thinking back on my work to spread celestial blue.

There was a small field in a corner of their dwelling place in which crops were growing. While the people of the forest were nomadic, they moved along with the change of seasons, which meant they could cultivate quick-growing crops such as summer vegetables. I spotted some foreign crops such as tomatoes and assumed Forli had been the one to introduce them here.

There were lots of different crops and some...seemed alive. I saw familiar wiggling leaves—only they were moving more intensely.

"The sugar beets that grow here are wilder than the ones we saw earlier today," Forli said.

"Their movements sure are intense." The one in the corner wiggled so much it looked like it'd just pop out of the ground!

Hang on... Seriously? One of them had just managed to unearth itself by wiggling its little forked roots! *What in the world?!*

"Oh, an immature root just came out of the ground," Forli commented.

The sugar beet got up, standing on its little legs, but it looked very unsteady.

Ah! It tripped!

"Those, like that one, that come out of the ground without having completed their growth, are called 'immature roots.' They can wander about, but they'll never grow into adults. You need not worry, my lady."

I'm not sure I really get what I should have been worried about...but, okay?

I was still pondering Forli's last statement when I noticed another little sugar beet walking around. It wasn't fast by any means, but this one was a lot steadier on its forked roots and had a confident gait.

Can I call it a gait? It's still a vegetable at the end of the day.

It walked over to the sugar beet that had tripped and extended its leaves at it. In response, the other sugar beet entwined their leaves and used the leverage to get up.

Oh, such beautiful...brotherly love?

The assured sugar beet was acting like a picture-perfect, handsome guy. Did that make it a handsome sugar beet? It had no face, though...

Suddenly, a shadow emerged from beyond the trees. It was a small beast—a badger, perhaps? It lunged at the handsome sugar beet and bit it, holding it with its fangs.

"Eeeek!" the sugar beet cried.

Without wasting a moment, the badger dashed back toward the forest. However, right at that moment, I heard something cut through the air.

"My lady!" Mina exclaimed, pulling me behind her back protectively.

Oleg swiftly pulled out his sword and stepped forward while the hounds let out menacing howls. I, however, had no idea what was going on! All I knew was that the badger had somehow vanished and the sugar beet it'd been holding in its mouth was now rolling on the ground.

"Mina, Oleg, there is no cause for alarm," Forli said. "Hounds, quiet down. As long as we do not intervene, it will not harm humans. My lady, *that* is an adult."

"That? What is that...?"

Oh.

I looked in the direction Forli was pointing and my eyes widened in surprise. Among the dense vegetation outside the people of the forest's dwelling, under the crimson twilight light—come to think of it, in Japan, this time of the evening used to be referred to as the hour for meeting evil spirits—was a being that bore little resemblance to the harmless sugar beets I'd seen in the field.

First of all, it was *huge*! At least two meters tall. The rounder part of its body, which I assumed had once looked like a turnip, was now covered in a rough bark, and its torso was wider than several adult men. Its forked roots had grown long and steady like real legs, and

its neck—or rather, its leaves—looked as sharp as blades. Several long stems (were they truly stems?) ran down in between the sharp leaves, swaying in the wind like whips. At the end of one of them was the badger, unmoving.

"The adults feed off the monsters and animals that hunt immature roots. They have a digestive fluid pocket inside their body that they use to digest prey," Forli explained.

Okay, I see. They're the pitcher plants of this world.

"The adults have cordial relationships with the emperor bees, so they never attack the people of the forest," he continued. "Furthermore, the individuals one can encounter near this dwelling likely reverted to their ancestral form and grew to adulthood after first being planted in a field. It's rare, but it can happen. As a result, some may remember the people of the forest caring for them. When they're fully grown, a large flower blooms on the body of adult sugar beets. Emperor bees usually never gather nectar and instead have honeybees do the labor for them, but when such flowers bloom, the emperor bees extract it themselves. They produce special jelly with that nectar and use it to raise their next queen. The adult sugar beets also profit from the pollination and bear fruits. That is why adult sugar beets remain close to the emperor bees' territory."

A special jelly used to feed and raise the queen? That's royal jelly, isn't it?

This was all starting to make sense. The sweetness of the sugar beets was actually there to attract emperor bees during their flowering. After all, considering their size, they needed insects as large as emperor bees to pollinate them.

The adult sugar beet walked away, its large body swaying with every step. Before long, it had vanished into the darkness of the forest.

The sugar beet the badger had tried to take away seemed fine, and it staggered back up with the help of its little friend. I understood why Forli had tried to reassure me that these little guys wouldn't grow into adults.

Suddenly, something in the forest shone. I strained my eyes to see what it was.

“That horse...” I whispered.

“Which one?” Oleg, who’d just sheathed his sword, followed my gaze.

The knights’ beloved horses, as well as the two horses Forli had unhitched from the carriage—eight in total—had been tied in the middle of the dwelling. They were happily eating the grass the people of the forest and the knights had mowed and brought for them.

“I just saw a large black horse with shining silver mane... Mina, didn’t you see it?”

“I did not, my lady.” Mina’s face was as unexpressive as ever, but I could hear a hint of confusion in her voice.

“My lady,” Forli started, his tone rigid. “You might have seen the Maiden of Death.”

He explained that the Maiden of Death was a legendary being in stories from the people of the forest. She was a beautiful young woman clad in a bloodstained burial shroud who wielded a gigantic scythe that clashed with her petite, delicate frame. She always appeared atop a large jet-black horse with a silver mane and tail. According to the legends, the girl was no longer alive. She had died in such gruesome circumstances that she’d never found peace and continued to roam the land. Those who received her touch were supposed to die without fail, for the cursed maiden was trapped by death, unable to let go of her thirst for revenge.

Forli paused, then told us her story.



Two thousand years ago, before this land passed into the dominion of the Astra Empire, the maiden was born to a rich and powerful family near what was now the northern capital. She was blessed with an honest father and a gentle mother, and she grew up happily surrounded by her loving brother and sister.

The kindhearted girl was pretty, but her older sister was lovelier still. Her beauty was renowned throughout the entire region, and an incessant flow of marriage proposals arrived every day.

The man who finally won the older sister's hand was the heir of another powerful family in the area whose influence had grown steadily. He was handsome and ambitious, and captured her heart with eloquent words, making her fall deeply in love. The girl's father knew of the would-be groom's family's greed, and he opposed the match at first. However, in the face of his daughter's pleas, he gave in and accepted their union.

Eventually, the night of the wedding ceremony arrived.

The family of the groom had bided their time but had only ever had one plan from the beginning: to murder the bride's entire family and take over their land.

The members of the bride's family had all gathered in their best clothes to celebrate her. They happily drank and chatted with the groom's family, and after a pleasant evening, went to bed. In the dead of night, the members of the groom's family went to find their concealed weapons and murdered them all in their sleep—even the beautiful bride whom the groom had vowed to love and cherish just hours prior. The poor girl was no use to him anymore.

They also murdered her youngest sister that night, right alongside the rest of her family, but the indignation and resentment in her heart prevented her from passing over. When the God of Death went to find her, she refused to go with him. Instead, she swore to take revenge.

"If you refuse to go to the realm of the dead," the God of Death told her, "you shall become mine and remain among the living. If you accept, I will grant your wish."

The young woman nodded without hesitation, thus becoming the Maiden of Death, whose touch could extinguish any life.

"With her scythe, the Maiden of Death took the lives of every last member of the groom's family, carrying out her revenge. However, she remains entrapped by death, damned to roam through the realm of the living for all eternity, unable to ever pass on," Forli concluded.

I sighed. "What a sad story."

This reminded me that the image of a maiden had been used as the personification of the plague in my past world. I'd once read about it in a book. In eastern Europe, the "Maiden of Death" had been said to be a young woman in a white dress holding a bloodred handkerchief. If she stopped at the entrance of a village and waved her handkerchief, the plague befell it, killing people by the dozen.

In this world, however, the Maiden of Death wasn't simply the personification of death! She was supposed to have actually lived.

"So, you believe I actually saw *her*?" I asked Forli.

"I'm aware it may sound absurd, but my wife once told me that in her youth, she met the Maiden of Death."

Right at that moment, Aurora walked up to us.

"Dinner is ready," she said. "It's nothing much, but please join us."



Before I knew it, the sun had almost completely set. White orb bugs floated here and there like glowing soap bubbles, lighting up the people of the forest's dwellings.

Aurora led us to a conspicuously large tent where we sat at a long yet fairly low wooden table. The spicy smell of the dishes that were lined up on the table wafted in the air and whetted my appetite.

The soft gleam of the white orb bugs followed us even inside the tent. There were several small baskets with bugs inside that served as lamps. It was quite stylish, reminding me of the indirect lighting trend in my past world.

There were no chairs, but we were invited to sit on cushions on the floor. People didn't sit on the floor often in the empire, so Forli asked me if I minded, worry on his face. Having lived a lifetime in Japan before ending up here, I assured him I had absolutely no qualms about it!

Most of the tableware was made of wood, but it was far from unsophisticated. The bowls and plates had elegant, intriguing shapes and were adorned with intricate carvings that made them look more

like artwork than dishware. The spoons and forks were also made of wood and just as masterfully crafted. Here and there, tasteful floral arrangements decorated the table.

"This is *beautiful*," I said. "The people of the forest truly have an impressive aesthetic sense! I'm sure our guests would rejoice at this tableware's beauty if we were to use them for a garden party."

"Your words are too kind. Most young ladies of the empire would find these peculiar, but I see you are broad-minded, my lady."

I wasn't being polite! I genuinely think they look great!

Wooden tableware had the advantage of being much lighter than earthenware, so I thought they'd be a great fit for buffet-style parties where you had to carry your plate. Actually, I kind of wanted to try using them in that context. I was already in the midst of opening up a market for my glass workshop's glasses and plates, but perhaps wooden tableware would also interest the same customer base...

Stop right here, me! I'm a guest. I'm not here to do business!

Still, would it hurt to ask them if they'd be interested in making some money?

The core of the people of the forest's cuisine was edible wild plants. It would be my first time tasting a lot of the ingredients, so I was excited!

First, I tried the soup that contained the one-eyed bear's meat. I was a little cautious because I feared that it would smell and taste too strong, but that wasn't the case at all. The herbs did a wonderful job to make the soup both fragrant and delicious, and they even brought a little acidity to the dish. My tongue tingled in satisfaction. I could still taste a tinge of the strong flavor of wild game, but they'd prepared it so well that it was almost addictive.

There were also turnips in the soup. Sweet, tasty turnips.

Yeah, no, these aren't turnips at all...

I had to get a grip! I'd been eating living beings my whole life! This was nothing new!

Thank you, sugar beets. Thank you, one-eyed bear. Thank you, all former animals I've eaten. I shall humbly receive the sustenance you bring me!

Next, I tried a brownish bread full of nuts. Apparently, they used ground nut powder instead of wheat flour to make the dough, and they added entire nuts before it baked. After that, I ate grilled leaf buds, mushrooms that were a tad bitter, some sort of bulb thing with a soft, fluffy texture, as well as small peaches, raspberries, blueberries, and even akebi fruit.

With my appetite aroused by this sense of novelty, I ate a lot. It was all so different from the refined cuisine I'd been eating at the fortress. Being in a new environment was a nice change of pace.

"My lady, are you all right?" Mina asked me.

"Why, of course. Everything is delicious! Does it suit your taste too, Mina?"

"I can eat anything," she replied.

Since the people of the forest were so kind as to handle the service, Mina was sitting beside me and eating with me. She'd tried to insist on serving me at first, but I'd pulled on her arm and forced her to sit. I imagined she might have a harder time acting as a bodyguard sitting down like that, but there were *six* knights at the table, and even Forli was there. There was nothing to worry about. Mina was always in work mode; I wanted her to relax a bit from time to time.

Our coachman was also being treated as a guest by the people of the forest, and while he'd felt awkward and hesitant at first, he'd eventually agreed to sit at the same table as us. As far as the people of the forest were concerned, people's social standing outside the forest didn't matter. I wasn't even sure they cared enough about rank to have a clear grasp of our group's social hierarchy. Considering my past as a commoner, I was very happy not having to stay on top of social standing for once.

Regina and the rest of the hounds were just outside the tent. They'd been given huge bones and were happily chewing them.

Although I wasn't sure it was an appropriate topic for dinner, I eventually brought up the Maiden of Death.

"It's true," Aurora said with a nod. "I met her when I was a child. To this day, I am still entirely convinced that it was her."

Aurora recounted the tale for us—back then, she'd met the

Maiden of Death after losing her way.



Aurora had left the settlement to look for mushrooms and had gotten so absorbed in her search that she'd found herself completely lost.

The sun was almost completely down, yet she had no idea where she was. It was beyond dangerous for a child to spend the night alone in the forest. Aurora, who knew that very well, began to cry.

Suddenly, she heard a gentle voice.

"What's wrong?"

Surprised, she turned around to look at the person who'd just spoken and saw an unfamiliar young woman. Aurora's first thought was that she was beautiful. Her long blonde locks sparkled under the setting sun. She had a thin, delicate frame, dazzling fair skin, and a slender face painted with an eerie, lonely expression. The girl seemed to be about fifteen or sixteen. To Aurora's eyes, she seemed the very essence of purity and grace.

Aurora felt a lot calmer now that she wasn't alone anymore, so she stared at the beautiful older girl in fascination before answering that she'd gotten lost.

The girl smiled at her.

"You're one of the people of the forest, are you not? I'll bring you to them. Just remember one thing: you mustn't touch me, no matter what."

At that moment, Aurora finally noticed that the girl was holding a large scythe. She flinched. The adults often told the story of the Maiden of Death, and they always said that she was cursed.

The treacherous family who'd deceived her own was no more, but some people with distant links to it had survived. Fearing revenge from the Maiden of Death, they'd taken refuge deep within these woods. These were the forefathers of the people of the forest.

Still, if Aurora didn't find her way back to the others before night fell, she risked falling prey to monsters. Therefore, even though she was afraid, she followed the girl.

Aurora's gaze stayed fixed on her, but no matter how much she looked, she couldn't find anything amiss. She simply looked like a human girl—a gorgeous one, but a regular one nonetheless.

Despite that, this situation was very strange. It made no sense for Aurora to run into someone she didn't know in this area. The young woman's simple white dress was a little dirty and, according to the story, the Maiden of Death's clothes were stained with blood. On top of that, she carried a scythe large enough to cut off a person's head! Her arms were so thin that she shouldn't have been able to so much as lift it, but she walked as though she couldn't feel its weight.

She looked gentle, but maybe she intended on killing everyone the second they reached the dwelling.

It wasn't long before they found the people of the forest's camp. The girl looked over her shoulder at Aurora and pointed at the dwelling.

"Go on," she said.

"A-And you?" Aurora asked.

The girl simply smiled. The forest was full of monsters. Would she stay there all alone?

At that moment, an enormous horse appeared and stopped by the girl's side. It was jet-black, but its mane and tail were silver. Its eyes were the same shade of silver and gleamed with such a cold light that Aurora could hardly believe she was looking into a horse's eyes. This creature looked exactly like the Maiden of Death's horse from the legend.

Was she *truly* the Maiden of Death?

But she'd saved her.

Aurora suddenly remembered something, and she lifted her basket that was filled to the brim with mushrooms, extending it toward the girl.

"Thank you," she said. "Here, take this."

"No need," the girl replied, shaking her head.

Without warning, Aurora reached into her basket and threw a mushroom at the girl. She tried to dodge it but wasn't fast enough. As soon as it made contact with her, the fresh mushroom started

drying out. In a matter of seconds, it had turned into a black, shriveled-up thing—there wasn't an ounce of life left in it. This *was* death.

She really was the Maiden of Death!

Screaming, Aurora ran toward the home as fast as her legs could carry her.



"It happened over fifty years ago, but I remember it as though it was yesterday," Aurora concluded with a sigh.

"The person you described did not strike me as terrifying," I said.

Aurora's eyes widened in surprise before her features settled into a smile.

"Is that so? As a child, I used to think of my encounter with the Maiden of Death as frightening, yet I also boasted about it. Had I told you the story at that time, I'm sure I would have painted her in a far more fearsome light. Now, after all this time, the only thing I take out of our exchange is the kindness she showed me. I'm convinced she only appeared to do me a favor."

Aurora sighed before continuing. "But I was impolite to her. She was so kind as to lead a lost child home, only for that child to act rudely. I've always hoped to see her again so I could apologize, but I never have."



"You may retire for the night," Forli said as soon as everyone was done eating.

The knights and the coachman swiftly stood up to leave the tent, along with the women who'd served us the food. Before they left, I thanked them with a smile for the delicious meal. I could tell they believed me as they gave their own warm smiles.

Mina didn't budge, her face flat. She was making it clear she had no intention to leave my side. Forli nodded and didn't insist on it.

"Please have this, my lady," Aurora said, presenting me with a

plate that had a thin biscuit on it. "It is coated in regal jelly. So little of it is produced that the emperor bees usually reserve it for their queen and very seldom share it with humans. Not even His Imperial Majesty the Emperor could procure it. This is the one and only luxurious form of hospitality we, the people of the forest, can offer."

"If I may, while this is wonderful, I truly did find every dish served earlier to be luxurious," I replied. While that *was* true, I was a little excited at the thought of tasting something so rare.

I picked up the biscuit and took a bite. It was nice and crispy. The sweetness, which was faint at first, gradually grew stronger and enveloped my taste buds.

After a few moments, a new sensation took over, and my eyes widened in shock.

Huh?!

It was hard to describe. It was...mana. I felt as though I was a car being filled to the brim with fuel. Despite all the mana I'd used fighting the one-eyed bear, I'd just been recharged to the max!

"The effects are particularly potent on individuals with strong mana such as yourself, my lady," Forli said. "The emperor bees' regal jelly enhances people's constitution and helps them get over illnesses or injuries at an impressive speed. But if someone with mana eats it, it'll also boost their mana pool."

"My! How incredible."

"They say Duke Vasili used to refer to regal jelly as the hidden treasure of the forest," Forli added.

Amazing! This was a lot like the mana recovery potions that always came up in games in my past life. If this were an adventure game and not an otome game, adventurers would have been flooding this dwelling nonstop trying to acquire some.

Thank god adventurers aren't a thing in this world!

Come to think of it, the fact that I was in the world of an otome game had almost entirely slipped my mind. After all, ever since the holiday had started and I'd come to the duchy, my life had been completely disconnected from my worries regarding the game scenario. That scared me a bit. I feared I'd end up forgetting the details of the main events.

"The queen of the emperor bees is very intelligent," Forli said. "I believe she understands that the House of Yulnova rules over this territory. When members of the House of Yulnova visit a dwelling, the emperor bees often share regal jelly with the people of the forest. I've always wondered if that was their way of showing their worth to the sovereigns of this land."

If Forli was right, the queen was even more intelligent than I'd first imagined. She had enough awareness of humans' necessities to provide them exactly what they needed. She'd be a good marketer.

Clearly, she'd made the right call in this case. I assumed part of the reason Vasili had insisted the territory of the emperor bees be preserved was the regal jelly. In this world, where having strong mana was a tremendous advantage, an item that could enhance it was priceless. Medicine wasn't all that advanced either, so if it worked on illnesses and wounds on top of that, it truly deserved to be called a hidden treasure.

"I wish my brother could have some," I whispered without even meaning to.

I wondered how Alexei was doing. I hoped he wasn't working late just because I wasn't there to see him. Had he eaten properly?

If I could give him regal jelly, perhaps I could lower that damned death-from-overwork flag for good. I shouldn't have eaten it—I should have brought it home!

Ah, but if he had recovery potions, I feared he'd use them as an excuse to work even more. That wasn't good! It reminded me of that old energy drink commercial from the Showa era that went something like "Can you fight for twenty-four hours?" A relic from the past...or a relic from the future, considering that this world definitely hadn't reached the twentieth century.

Not that it mattered.

BOO-HOO! I'm so lonely without my brother!

Aurora distracted me by saying, "My lady, would you like to see an item that has been passed down within our tribe from the days of Duke Vasili?"

"Why, of course!"

I had to get over my loneliness. Now wasn't the time to let my

excessive attachment to my brother show.

Aurora stood up and retrieved a large wooden box from a corner of the tent. It was clearly old and had been in use for a long time, but there were beautiful carvings on the outside. On the front side was a pattern that resembled a go board, and on each of the nine star points were carvings of plants.

Aurora lifted the top part and moved some sort of mechanism. There was a click, and one of the nine panels fell down. Aurora started moving the other eight panels around as though she was solving a puzzle.

Wow, a puzzle box!

In Japan, the yosegi-zaiku puzzle boxes from Hakone were especially famous, but it appeared such boxes also existed here! It turned out the people of the forest could even craft such intricate items.

Once Aurora was done, a small drawer opened. She took the timeworn letter inside it and handed it to me.

"Could this be the certificate my brother mentioned at the banquet?" I asked.

"Indeed."

The paper didn't feel much different from regular paper, but considering that the color of the ink had barely faded despite this certificate having been written roughly three hundred years ago, this must have been a sheepskin parchment.

According to what I knew from my days visiting Alexei's office, paper had been around ever since the foundation of the empire. However, parchment like this was often used for important documents as it was far more durable.

The fact that Vasili had chosen to use parchment showed his determination to protect the people of the forest and the emperor bees' territory. He had been telling his successors that this was important.

I opened the certificate and started reading.

The writing was old-fashioned yet bold and powerful. Through it, I could feel the strong will of the famous duke who was so often referred to as a wise ruler. The language used was also archaic, but

official documents often defaulted to this style even in this day and age, so I could read it thanks to everything I'd seen in Alexei's office.

The content was concise, with only four main points. The first three were as follows: The people of the forest were authorized to reside in the Yulnova Duchy, they had the right to go anywhere they liked within the duchy, and cutting trees too close to their residences was strictly prohibited.

In exchange for these privileges, the people of the forest were to accommodate Giovanni di Santi to the best of their abilities, ensure his safety, and provide him with anything he might require for his research, as well as swear loyalty to the Duke of Yulnova.

The fourth sentence had been added later and was in a different handwriting. It simply stipulated that this certificate was still valid along with a date and signature. As I'd seen it many times in Alexei's office, I recognized this signature as our grandfather's.

Considering the contents of this certificate...the people of the forest could quite literally barge into the fortress if they so wished! Actually, I wondered if it had been written that way on purpose so that, in the event the duke desperately needed regal jelly, it could be delivered straight to his door by the people of the forest themselves.

Still, Vasili had given them such good conditions and had only asked for his inventor to be looked after in return. He seemed to have been really devoted to him.

No, I guess the most important clause is actually the one about swearing loyalty to the duke. Did he use the inventor as a cover to secure regal jelly?

The thought crossed my mind, but I quickly started to doubt that. Vasili had gone as far as to push for a law protecting patents to be implemented just to dissuade Giovanni di Santi from returning to his homeland. Those didn't feel like the kinds of lengths one went to for a mere cover.

"My lady, please take a look at this as well," Aurora said. "This is a portrait of Duke Vasili and his inventor."

"Oh my! I did not know a portrait of the inventor remained!"

I'd heard di Santi's name a lot, but I still had absolutely no idea what he looked like or what his personality was like, so I was

curious.

Aurora handed me a miniature portrait that was roughly the size of a hand mirror. The moment I laid eyes on it, I almost laughed.

"He looks...surprisingly young," I commented.

Aurora had set down a basket of white orb bugs on the table for me, so I could see every detail very clearly. Next to Vasili was a man with a bit of a baby face. He actually looked positively adorable. He had salmon pink hair and big yellow eyes as vivid as little lemons. His large, bright eyes were definitely his most charming feature. Now, the funny part was that, despite his cute baby face, the guy had a mustache. It was amazing how badly it suited him!

In my past world, they sometimes made girl idol groups perform the song "The Mustache Dance" as a joke on TV. Di Santi looked as though someone had stuck the fake mustache they used for these shows on his face.

Oh boy.

Since he was an inventor, I'd pictured him looking like Leonardo da Vinci this entire time—an old man with a big beard just like in his famous self-portrait! No, Giovanni di Santi had actually been a cute idol with a mustache. I sure hadn't been expecting this.

The difference between the two men in the picture was quite something. Vasili, in classic Yulnova fashion, was a tall man with a muscular body that he'd forged through rigorous training. His blue-gray hair and eyes gave him a bit of a severe look, but he was very handsome. I just knew that if one of my friends—a seasoned BL fangirl—had seen this handsome thirty-something man and a twenty-something baby-faced cutie next to one another, her brain would have gone into overdrive with the wildest fantasies.

Erm, sorry about that thought, dear ancestor.

"My lady, please look at this one next," Aurora said, handing me another miniature.

This time, I lowered my eyes fully expecting a cutie with a mustache. Only, there was no mustache, and the person in the picture was in a dress.



It was a comfortable-looking dress that resembled the clothes the people of the forest wore. The person had short hair with flower ornaments that suited their adorable features. Vasili was holding them close, their hands in one another's.

Errr...?

I turned the miniature around to see if anything was written on it. There, in the handwriting of Duke Vasili, were the words: "Giovanna di Santi, my dear partner."

Giovanna?! S-So that's a woman?! And Vasili's partner?!

Panicking, I started tracing back the Yulnova family tree in my head.

Just like our grandfather, the fifth Duke of Yulnova, Vasili, had married an imperial princess. I expected he'd done so at the average age for nobles—eighteen or nineteen. I remembered seeing portraits of young Vasili and his wife at the Yulnova residence in the capital and at the fortress.

However, the duchess had passed away a few years after that. Luckily, she'd already given birth to an heir to the duchy, so Vasili had never remarried and remained single until the end of his life.

At least, that was how the official story went. It was now clear that some years after losing his wife, Vasili had been lucky enough to meet a woman he loved enough to call his partner. For a duke, marrying was an ordeal that involved a lot of formalities, so he and Giovanna—who I imagined had posed as a man because of her work—had never wed. Still, considering how much Vasili seemed to have cared for her, it looked like he'd been devoted to her and her only.

Phew, I'm glad you didn't cheat, Mr. Ancestor. I'm so sorry that's where my mind first went.

Though if that imperial princess had been as much of a witch as the old hag, I could have made an exception and wholeheartedly supported cheating. In the paintings, the sickly beauty definitely didn't appear to be anything like the old hag, but who knew?

Now that I'd settled that part, I could be shocked about the second discovery I'd just made. The acclaimed genius inventor Giovanni di Santi had been a woman!

This is crazy! As a history buff, I was overjoyed with that

revelation. *The secrets hiding in the shadow of official history are always so wild!*

In my past life, I'd always loved hearing about such theories—like the one that surmised Uesugi Kenshin was, in fact, a woman.

"Are you surprised?" Aurora asked with a little laugh, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Beyond surprised!" I replied.

This revelation cleared up some questions I'd had. For instance, why let the people of the forest protect di Santi instead of appointing knights—or a forestry advisor, even? Now that I knew the inventor had been carrying this huge secret, it made a lot more sense! The people of the forest had practically no contact with the rest of society *and* had just been given great privileges by their duke. They would have been the perfect people to protect the big secret.

Thinking back on it, his—no, *her* first accomplishment in her homeland had been figuring out how to restore the sewage system of the Astra Empire, whose construction methods had been lost to the ages after centuries of war. Having heard of that young inventor's incredible feat, Vasili had enthusiastically invited her to the duchy, and she'd agreed to go.

But when had she started posing as a man? And when had Vasili learned the truth? *The key to one mystery unlocks* more *mysteries!*

I was torturing my brain thinking about it all when Aurora gave me an old notebook.

"These are the memoirs of our leader at the time," she said. "Back then, the head was a woman called Luciola. She and the inventor were close friends. While the records are fragmentary, reading them should allow you to grasp the situation."

"Thank you very much."

Oho! A secret firsthand source! I'm getting hyped up!

I started reading through it and quickly found something interesting.

"I asked her why she pretended to be a man, and why she'd put her life on the line to flee from her homeland, to which she replied, 'I started cross-dressing to save my father's life. If the people of my homeland ever learned the truth, I'd surely be burned at the stake.'"

Burned at the stake?! Hang on, she risked her life to get out of her homeland, and she started cross-dressing to save her father?! Too much info, too little context!

Come to think of it, there'd been a woman like that in my past life—who'd been burned at the stake for dressing as a man—the Maid of Orléans, Joan of Arc. Giovanna's homeland must have oppressed women just as much as the Catholic nations of medieval Europe.

With the scraps of information written in Luciola's memoirs and little additions by Aurora and Forli, I slowly started seeing the big picture.

Giovanna di Santi had been born to a mason in a city close to the city-state of Astra.

She hadn't been raised as a boy from birth. In fact, she'd been treated like a regular little girl, even if she'd always been a bit of a tomboy. She'd played noisily in the streets with other young boys, and had even become their leader, treating them like her minions.

She'd always been smart and had learned to read and write by observing her brother Giovanni's lessons with her father. Even though she'd never been personally taught, she'd still learned much faster than her brother, who was one year her elder, which had earned his ire.

The city-state of Astra was located at the very heart of the former Astra Empire. It was to the Astra Empire what Rome had been to the Roman Empire. While Rome had eventually gone on to become the capital of Italy, Rome had also been a city-state for many years after the fall of the empire.

In those days (although I supposed even now, three hundred years later, it was still the case to some extent), the once flourishing civilization had regressed immensely because of the violent wars that had followed the fall of the Astra Empire. The larger city-states fought war after war against one another, with no end in sight.

Actually, the "flourishing civilization regressed due to war" thing was just the leading theory and explanation they had here. However, if I thought about this world as on par with my old one in its complexity, I didn't think that was likely. I felt as though the wars hadn't been the cause of a cultural regression, but rather one of the

consequences.

In my past world, the main cause for regression had been theorized to be a shift in the climate. According to researchers, the climate had cooled during the decline of the Roman Empire and had remained this way through the first half of the European Middle Ages at the very least. The cold weather had hurt harvests, which in turn caused famines. Those who'd lived up north (the Germanic people) abandoned their land to move south, pillaging land and food on their way and bringing with them an era of war. In such times, maintaining civilization at its current level, let alone cultural progress, was practically impossible. That had led to the fall of the Roman Empire, the end of antiquity, and the beginning of the historical period that was commonly referred to as an age of darkness—the medieval era.

I suspected roughly the same thing had happened in this world. Obviously, climate change probably wasn't to blame for *everything*, but it had surely been a key factor.

One of the old theories I'd heard regarding the lack of cultural progress during the Middle Ages had blamed Christianity for being too stifling. The truth, however, was that the Catholic Church hadn't always been as oppressive as people thought.

For instance, I'd once read a series of mystery novels set in seventh-century Ireland about a nun who was both a lawyer and detective. She could even get married! The author of these novels had been a Celtic history scholar and had made sure what he wrote could have realistically happened in the period in which the story was set.

The interesting thing about these novels was that the rigidification of the church's morals was portrayed over the course of the story. Gradually, it showed how the Catholic Church became harsher and started forbidding the clergy from having relationships, chasing after witches with inquisitors, and rejecting everything that wasn't in complete accordance with the Bible.

With the cooling of the world's temperature, life became harder, and more people turned to religion, giving the church more and more power. That, too, had been a consequence rather than a

cause. While this world hadn't ended up becoming mostly monotheistic, it wasn't so different from my previous one. They'd also had an equivalent to the Inquisition and witch hunts, and the area directly surrounding the city-state Astra had been the most affected by it. Monsters with a human appearance such as vampires or werewolves had been declared evil, and anyone who'd associated with them in any fashion had been considered a depraved criminal.

Worst of all had been the sin of having a romantic relationship with a monster. A mere rumor had been enough to cause someone to be interrogated under torture, and a confession had led straight to the stake.

After learning that, I now understood a little better why Nonna, the old hag's waiting maid, had said such horrible things to Mina. My grandmother had kept a very close relationship with the Yulmagnas, who'd eagerly studied the ancient Astra Empire and had ties to the city-state of Astra. I'd even learned from Forli that the House of Yulmagna was so closely linked to Astra that—when they couldn't snatch a bride from the imperial family—they sometimes married women from distinguished Astran families.

The Astrans did not burn people for the slightest association with monsters anymore, but they still discriminated against them. The Yulmagnas shared their ideals and never hired anyone with monster blood in their veins. The old hag had influenced Nonna in this way, which had led her to treat Mina poorly.

I was often told I was ignorant of the ways of the world. I assumed it was because I didn't know about all of these things that were considered common sense but that no one ever said out loud in normal circumstances. It wasn't my fault, though! I'd been confined almost my entire life, so how was I supposed to know?

That said, even after hearing the explanation, I had no intention of being influenced by such disgusting ideas.

Never, I thought, mentally clenching my fists.

Anyway, that was also why the technique to summon monsters had been lost to the ages. It had been labeled evil and the books that so much as mentioned it had all been burned.

I couldn't help but wonder when and why monsters and demonic

beasts had started being considered evil. In the ancient Astra Empire, demonic beasts had worked alongside humans and humanoid monsters such as vampires or werewolves could have obtained citizenship just like anyone else if they'd so wished—if they'd had enough money to pay the necessary taxes.

Picturing vampires doing taxes feels a little surreal, doesn't it?

Had climate change made the monsters more powerful, leading to more serious damage?

Apparently, there was a theory that this hatred for monsters stemmed from the resentment of a single governor of the city-state of Astra, because during the troubled era of incessant wars, powerful monsters had routed the Astran army to rescue immigrants arriving from the north.

Even if the first spark had come from Astra, that loathing for monsters had quickly spread to the surrounding city-states and even to more distant countries.

This felt a lot like the Holocaust. Using a minority group as a scapegoat during difficult times was beyond horrible but sadly common in human history.

Anyhow, let us get back to Giovanna.



Although the general time she grew up in was grim, little Giovanna was treasured by her father. He was an uncultured mason, but he was good at his craft and loved his children. Whenever his daughter—a little ball of curiosity—assaulted him with endless "hows" and "whys," he answered her to the best of his knowledge. Even though, at the time, most agreed that education was nothing but a poison to girls, Giovanna's father supported her and often helped her test out her ideas.

The crazy thing was that this list of "ideas" included ways to repair the sewage system. Giovanna, who liked to play around in the Astran ruins, would tell her father about what she pictured the ruins looked like before they were broken, how water would be pumped up if they simply repaired this or that. Her father listened and

employed his skills as a mason to help her through trial and error.

Giovanna herself thought of it as a game.

Like the handicraft projects grade-schoolers do over summer vacation, I guess. Although they don't usually solve the enigmas left by ancient civilizations. Her genius is terrifying.

At first, every attempt failed, but after several years, the engineering and the logic behind it became clearer to Giovanna and she and her father finally succeeded. At the time, Giovanna was only sixteen.

Sixteen. Her genius is beyond *terrifying!*

Giovanna's relationship with Giovanni, however, remained strained. His features were so feminine that he was often mistaken for a woman. Both he and Giovanna looked very much like their mother. He was too thin and frail to become a strong mason like his father, yet far from being clever enough to engage in scholarly pursuits like his sister. Thus, the boy grew up with an inferiority complex.

While Giovanna was doted on by their father, Giovanni was the apple of their mother's eye. Eventually, two clans that constantly clashed formed within the household.

This sort of thing happens to many families.

When the family started discussing Giovanna's marriage prospects, another war broke out—a real one. The small city in which they lived was embroiled in conflict, and the mother lost her life after being hit by a stray arrow. The family had no time to mourn her before another tragedy struck: The nobleman who led the Astran army noticed that the sewage system in the city had been repaired and demanded to know who had done it.

The name of Giovanna's father was brought up, and he was taken to Astra.

Immediately, the nobleman ordered him to fix the waterworks systems of Astra. The spoils of war had done little to quell that man's ambitions. As a result, he hoped to take credit for the reparation of the waterworks to boost his prestige.

Giovanna's father managed to fix a few things here and there, but there wasn't much he could do alone. The shape and size of the

elements weren't the same as the ones he'd repaired with Giovanna, and some parts seemed to require different techniques altogether. Giovanna's father was a good mason, but he couldn't make sense of such a complex project.

Still, he didn't breathe a word about his daughter. He doubted people would believe him even if he did. Who would think that a sixteen-year-old girl had managed a feat no one else ever had? More importantly, he feared for her safety. He didn't want to involve her.

Waterworks only made sense if the water could travel from one end to the other without blockage. Fixing only parts of it was utterly useless. The nobleman was furious, but there was nothing more Giovanna's father could do.

It was at that time that another nobleman, one who had an antagonistic relationship with the first, made his entrance. He declared that a boorish mason could never have figured out how to fix the sewer of his city or fix part of this one on his own. There could only be one explanation: He'd made a deal with monsters.

If I'd been around, that famous kickboxer and MMA champion whose spirit I loved to channel would have been very busy! "What are you saying?!"

Apparently, even in my past world, a lot of the public condemnations during the Inquisition had been motivated by profit. People had thrown others under the bus to steal their wealth. Those in power certainly made use of cries of "Heresy!" in this world too.

The two noblemen involved considered this to be an unimportant skirmish, but Giovanna's father, on the other hand, risked being burned at the stake. Throughout all of human history, the powerful sacrificed the lives of those they deemed lesser just to bicker with one another. That was nothing new, but it was disgusting nonetheless.

I hope you're all cursed!

The accusations against Giovanna's father were ridiculous, but plenty of people before him had lost their lives because of claims just as ridiculous. The poor mason was dragged to a courtroom, where he was asked to explain how he'd thought of the way to fix the sewage system. He'd never been all that eloquent and could not

find a way to defend himself without involving his daughter, which he refused to do.

Word of what was happening quickly reached Giovanna and her brother. Shocked and overcome with sorrow, Giovanna immediately started thinking of ways to save their father.

She sought her brother's advice, but all he said was "No way in hell I'll let myself be dragged into this because of him! I'm out!" He took whatever money and valuables were left in their house and vanished.

Oh my god! The brother's the worst! He should learn from my *brother! No, actually, he's not even worthy of looking his way!*

Giovanna was astonished at the time, but she later told the head of the people of the forest that she thought her brother's betrayal actually helped her clear her mind.

The first thing she did after her brother's departure was look for the scissors her mother had kept with her sewing supplies. Then, she chopped off her long hair.

She'd always looked strikingly similar to her brother, so she put on his clothes and a hooded cloak, promptly gathered a few things, and left for Astra.

She made the entire trip on foot, during which she sang songs and practiced the statements she planned to make. By the time she arrived, her voice was so rough and broken that it didn't sound like a woman's anymore.

When she at last reached the courthouse, her father's trial was underway. Unable to find good answers, he'd spent most of the trial completely mute and it was becoming clear he couldn't escape a guilty verdict. Inside the courtroom, the atmosphere was tense.

Then, Giovanna barged in and screamed, "Wait! The one who devised the plans to repair the sewage system was none other than I, his son, Giovanni di Santi! My father was worried because of my young age. That is why he did not confess to the truth! I have no wicked contract with monsters! All I've done, I've done through observation and study. I can explain it all!"

To prove it, Giovanna had brought the countless memos and sketches she'd accumulated over the years. She threw them all

across the room so everyone could see, and started explaining how she'd first gotten the idea while playing in the ruins with her friends and the subsequent trial and error process she and her father had gone through. She went through every detail in that hoarse voice of hers. Unlike her taciturn father, words came easily to Giovanna. Even more so in that moment, when she was determined to save her father.

When she finished speaking, cheers and applause erupted. The one who was the most taken aback by this reaction was Giovanna herself.

The commoners who'd filled the seats to watch the proceedings had been moved by this son showing up at the last minute to save his father, and they wanted to show their support for him. The fact that the young boy (girl, in truth, but none of them could tell) was so cute and bright got them all the more excited.

"Give the kid money! Let him fix the waterworks! Let us have water!" the commoners all began to shout. Giovanna hadn't expected it, but on that day, the legend of Giovanni di Santi, genius inventor, was born.

Just like that, Giovanna was ordered to repair the city's waterworks. It was the young governor of Astra, who'd happened to be present at the courthouse, who made that decision.

Needless to say, at first Giovanna intended to take the first chance to flee with her father. If anyone found out that she was a woman, the inquisitors would interrogate her and declare her guilty. In the days of the ancient Astra Empire, the status of women was low and they barely had any rights. After the empire collapsed, their situation only grew more dire, and they weren't even allowed to become literate.

Just like in my past world.

By the time Giovanna was born, the social standing of women had *somewhat* improved, but there was still no way anyone would believe a young girl was smart enough to figure out how to repair ancient constructions. Giovanna knew for a fact that she would be accused of having made a pact with monsters and sentenced to death if her secret came out.

However... Giovanna also loved this new life as Giovanni, and she quickly became addicted to it.

Figures! A genius like her could thrive after finally being allowed to express her talent.

"When Giovanna brought up an idea, everyone laughed. But when Giovanni di Santi did, everyone listened with rapt attention. Finally, I could turn my ideas into reality. If I pointed to the left, people looked to the left. Everyone was eager to aid me, and people thanked me. People were in awe of me. And I found that I couldn't... I couldn't return to being Giovanna."

She'd once said those words to the head of the people of the forest, and I felt that I really understood her.

In just three years, Giovanna comprehended every last mechanism of the waterworks, figured out ways to repair them, and taught artisans how to do it, but she didn't stop there. After bringing the techniques of old back, Giovanna devised *new* techniques. Thanks to her, water flowed through the city-state of Astra once more. The fountain of the main square pumped water and became a place of relaxation, and the sewage system was operational.

Over time, she came up with many more ideas, and started being referred to as "the inventor." Her name crossed the walls of the city and its surroundings and soon spread to other nations.

Giovanna found that, so long as she behaved confidently, no one ever suspected her. She'd become such a respected personality that no one fathomed that she could possibly be a woman.

Still, she could never relax. Her birthplace was close to Astra. There was no telling when someone who'd known her before would appear and recognize her as Giovanna.

At around that time, Giovanna received an invitation from a duke of the Yulgran Empire, Vasili Yulnova.

"I'd always admired Yulgran," Giovanna had told the head of the people of the forest. "I'd heard rumors of a school where both girls and boys could study side by side."

Giovanna... I'm sorry, but that school is one big romance trap...

Be that as it may, the Magic Academy had indeed been established in the early days of the empire—although it wasn't

exactly the same as it was today. It was a bit of a forceful comparison, but I estimated we were currently in the late modern period. The academy had been founded some four hundred years ago...so, roughly around the empire's Renaissance period? To speak in Japanese historical terms, that corresponded to the Muromachi period.

Wait, the empire was actually ultraprogressive! A coed school in the Muromachi period?!

I had a newfound respect for Pyotr the Great.

Anyhow, as soon as the genius inventor started showing signs of accepting the Duke of Yulnova's invitation, the governor of Astra flew into a rage. He'd been Giovanna's patron this entire time, and he most likely thought of "him" as his property.

The governor *needed* the inventor, and he knew of her popularity with the masses. He had no desire to let her go. Not to mention, these were troubled times. Information on the waterworks was a protected military secret. Giovanni di Santi, who had studied them extensively, knew far too much.

"I hear you wish to leave Astra," the governor told her. "Be advised that I'd much rather turn you into a corpse than let someone else have you."

But Giovanna was desperate to find a way out, and Vasili's envoys, having witnessed for themselves the prowess of the inventor, were just as desperate to bring her back to their master.

"I could stand still and await death, or I could roll the dice," Giovanna had later recounted. "An easy decision to make."

She did not hesitate: She started planning her escape to the Yulgran Empire.

So, this is just me fantasizing, but if the governor knew Giovanna was a woman—or had an inkling she might be, at the very least—that "I won't let someone else have you" thing takes on a whole other meaning!

The name of the governor wasn't in the memoirs, but the head of the people of the forest did mention he had been young, capable, and sharp. Back then, Vasili would have been in his late twenties, and I assumed the Astran governor had been roughly the same age.

A love triangle between a beautiful, brilliant inventor, and two powerful, competent men? Someone, anyone, please! Make a movie out of this!

Ah, but before I can beg for a movie adaptation, someone has to invent movies... Anyway, I knew Giovanna eventually reached the Yulgran Empire, but she went through a lot to get here!

After the governor made that declaration, he assigned armed guards to her under the guise of providing protection to his prized inventor. The truth, however, was that these guards were there to watch Giovanna. While the governor forbade her from going out as she pleased, Giovanna had to oversee several construction sites. He needed her to complete the work, so he couldn't keep her completely trapped, and the guards were the way he'd found to prevent her from fleeing during these times. Vasili's messengers were also strictly prohibited from meeting with the inventor. The duke could get letters to Giovanna, but their content was controlled and subject to censorship.

The only reason she ever succeeded in making her escape was the appearance of a wild card no one, including Giovanna herself, had expected.

Her brother, Giovanni, suddenly visited their father and agreed to act as a bridge between his sister and the people of the Yulnova Duchy. At first, he swore he was only helping for the money—he was flat broke, he claimed—but at the very end, when Giovanna ran from her guards, Giovanni appeared and bravely ran in the opposite direction to mislead them.

"I'm thankful to my brother," Giovanna had said when reflecting later. "Although, knowing him, he must have *really* needed the money."

While Giovanna's feelings toward her brother were complex, that didn't change the fact that it was all thanks to his diversion that she escaped from Astra. Vasili's messenger and a man who'd come to escort her were waiting for her outside the city walls. As soon as they met up, the escort pulled her onto his horse and dashed away, leaving the messenger and her father behind as he urged his horse to gallop as fast as possible.

"There was no telling when the guards would notice my brother was a decoy and come after me, so that was the right call, but it was still such an unimaginable day!"

Aurora told me that Giovanna had much to say every time her trip to the duchy had been mentioned—plenty of complaints! I got why, though. Apparently, they'd made a journey that should have lasted seven days in *one day*.

Seven days' worth of riding in a single day?!

I thought that had to be a mistake, so I asked Forli about it, but he confirmed it was doable. I could hardly believe it.

The seven-day itinerary came with lots of breaks and a nice, slow pace. If you hurried, it was a distance that could be covered in two days—if you changed horses several times on the way and didn't put two people on the same horse, that is! There surely were shortcuts that could cut that time, but still, two people and only one horse for the entire journey? No way.

Actually, I *could* think of one type of horse that might manage such a feat: a demonic horse of Krymov.

If Forli said it could be done, then it must have been. As a close friend of my grandfather, he must have been familiar with demonic horses like Zephyros and what they could do.

Which meant that, just like Sergei, Vasili had received a demonic horse from the head of the House of Krymov.

In other words...the one who stole away the inventor was Vasili himself!

Giovanna, you were right, that's unimaginable! Vasili, you were one of the three Grand Dukes of the Yulgran Empire. What were you doing?!

From what I'd gathered, Vasili had been pretty much the embodiment of efficiency. If he'd decided this was the cleanest way to bring the famous inventor to his duchy, he wouldn't have hesitated to act on it, even if it went against all manners of etiquette. That was certainly why he'd accomplished so many feats and had earned himself a place of honor in the history of the duchy. However, for the people around him, he must have created constant headaches.

I bet Giovanna was holding on for dear life. Being on horseback for the first time is scary enough already, but the way it sways when it goes fast is even scarier. And she was forced to gallop for a full day!

Not to mention, unlike regular horses, demonic horses of Krymov could maintain their top speed for much longer.

That's around fifty kilometers per hour, isn't it? As opposed to someone like me, who's used to cars and trains, traveling at that speed with the scenery blending into an unrecognizable blur would have been a first for Giovanna.

According to the memoirs, Vasili held on to her securely the whole trip, but she was terrified regardless. She screamed whenever the horse leaped over a wall as tall as a man or a large stream of water, until, ultimately...

"I passed out! So what?!" she'd once shouted while reminiscing about that journey.

Oh, you definitely *get to be annoyed, Giovanna! What was my ancestor thinking? Well, I suppose he had to make sure they wouldn't be caught.*

At the time, riding a demonic horse near Astra was labeled heresy. Vasili disguised his horse to pass it off as a normal horse, but the truth would be discovered if anyone saw it run. The safest option was to get out of Astra's sphere of influence as quickly as possible.

Now, the worst part was that Giovanna's trouble during the journey wasn't over just like that. She soon regained consciousness. When she did, she was still on the demonic horse, the man sitting behind her holding her up.

When he noticed she was awake, he stopped the horse.

"You're a woman," he said. "Where is the real inventor?"

At these words, Giovanna lost control and slapped him. "I'm *not* a fake! I'm Giovanni di Santi, the inventor! The one who repaired the waterworks! The one who invented winches, cranes, and a myriad of other tools! It was all me! What does it matter if I'm a man or a woman?! What's inside my brain is the same!"

Fatigue and stress made her pent-up frustration run wild and, after screaming at Vasili, tears started streaming down her face

uncontrollably.

At that time, Giovanna had no idea the man she'd just slapped was a duke.

Well, there was no way she could have known that!

Vasili didn't comfort her. He simply waited for her to calm down and said, "I see. In that case, you can prove it to me through your work."

Giovanna was shocked. She'd expected him to call her a liar, to insist a woman couldn't possibly have accomplished what she had, but Vasili had done none of that. When she looked up at Vasili, her eyes wide with surprise, he was the one to ask why she seemed so perplexed.

"If a cat is good at catching mice, why should anyone worry whether it's male or female?"

When the pair finally reached the Yulgran Empire and joined the people who were waiting to welcome back Vasili, Giovanna finally learned that the man she'd been riding with was the Duke of Yulnova...and she passed out again.

Oh, how deeply I sympathize...

Apparently, much later, Vasili had referred to Giovanna on that day as "a ruffled kitten." He seemed to have thought that slap of hers had been as adorable as a little kitten's punch.

Someone clearly had a good time.

I wondered if my brother would think the same thing if I ever slapped him.

No... I can't! I can't even imagine doing such a thing!

All right, let's overturn this terrible image by imagining myself patting his head. Yep, perfect, and now a hug for good measure. Heh heh heh.

I'm such a simpleton.

While her arrival in the duchy had been eventful, Giovanna quickly got to work.

First of all, she repaired what remained of the Astra Empire's waterworks in the duchy. Then, she invented or improved tools and mechanisms to facilitate and optimize mining and enhanced the furnaces. She also planned the transformation of the military fortress

of the Yulnovas into its current form: a modern place of politics and refinement. She came up with novel ideas such as underfloor heating and new ways of lighting spaces in the process and even oversaw the construction herself.

She truly was a jack-of-all-trades!

There were up to four people in charge of hanging around Giovanna and writing down every new idea she came up with. They spent all their time taking notes and running to artisans so they could try out her ideas.

Geniuses are scary.

The Astra city-state often tried to negotiate the return of its prized inventor, and even the emperor threw his hat into the ring, ordering the inventor to come to the capital to help develop it, but Vasili shut them both down.

At the same time, he devised patent laws to protect Giovanna's rights as an inventor and implemented them in the duchy. It was as though he was saying, *I'm doing all this for my precious genius. You're going to have to do better if you want him to come to you.*

I couldn't help but think, *Implementing progressive initiatives and skillfully turning them into bargaining chips... Vasili, you were a genius too!*

As for Giovanna, she was the type to constantly complain that there weren't enough hours in a day to do everything she wanted to do.

Yup, that's a bad case of workaholism right here. You get a yellow card!

When she overdid it too much and forwent eating and sleeping in favor of working, Vasili would grab her by the scruff of her neck and toss her in bed so she'd rest. He sometimes had to physically pin her down so she'd actually sleep!

The people of the forest's leader poked fun at them in her memoirs because, despite doing all that, the pair took ages to actually get involved romantically. My mind went back to the words written on the back of the miniature.

"My dear partner."

Now that I thought about it again, this one word—*partner*—

carried a lot of weight coming from a duke. On top of the fact that Giovanna had to lie about her gender, their birth ranks were nowhere near compatible. Vasili must have loved her very deeply if he chose to call her that regardless.

I was getting near the end of the memoirs. Toward the end of their lives, after Vasili passed down his title to his heir, he proposed to Giovanna many times. The reason behind these belated proposals was that if they remained unwed, Giovanna wouldn't be able to be buried in the Yulnova mausoleum.

The members of the imperial family and of the three grand ducal houses rested in a gigantic mausoleum—or to be more precise, in an underground maze much like catacombs. Inside the catacombs were countless chambers, and it was customary for each head of the house to be assigned one where he'd sleep for all eternity alongside his family.

Vasili must have wanted to remain with Giovanna forever, even in death.

Doing so would have meant giving up her identity as Giovanni di Santi and living as a noblewoman instead. According to the head of the people of the forest, she would also have felt guilty toward Vasili's late wife. Giovanna never accepted his offer.

In response, Vasili designed his future coffin and had a cat carved onto it. Next to the cat, he had an epitaph in ancient Astran added. The words translated to: *Together in life, together in death.*



"Their story was certainly full of twists," I said after I finished reading. "Your leader at the time, Lady Luciola, and Miss Giovanna must have very close friends. I'm sure it was heartening for Miss Giovanna to have someone she could trust with her life story so far from her homeland."

"I imagine Miss Giovanna must have been taken aback by our way of living in communion with the emperor bees at first. After all, such a thing would have been unthinkable where she was born. Nonetheless, I believe that may be why she came to feel so free

among the people of the forest," Aurora said with a smile.

I could feel her pride as the current leader of her people in her voice.

"I'm once again realizing that the people of the forest are true friends of ours," I replied. "You helped protect the secrets of the House of Yulnova then, as you do today. As a daughter of the House of Yulnova, I shall strive to protect and cherish our friendship and your forest alongside my brother."

Evoking this feeling within me was surely one of the reasons Aurora had shown me these memoirs.

As far as the House of Yulnova was concerned, the people of the forest were like ninjas—a hidden force we could rely upon. I now saw, beyond the benefits we could derive from this relationship, the trust that united us was real.

Here's to hoping this win-win relationship endures forever.

"If you don't mind, there is something I'd like to inquire about," I said. I cleared my throat. As a former Japanese girl, I'd seen something in the memoirs I just couldn't ignore. "Do the people of the forest...still bathe in hot springs?"

"We do," Aurora replied. "In fact, there is one at the edge of this area. However, I'm afraid that, as it is an outdoor hot spring, you may not feel at ease bathing there, my lady."

H-Hang on... Does that mean what I think it means?

They have an open-air bath, for real?



Aaaaah!!! It is *an open-air bath!!!*

I slowly submerged my body in the hot water, doing a dance inside my head. Before I could hold it back, a deep, pleased sigh left my lips.

This place felt just like the small secret hot springs off the beaten path in Japan. It had been built right next to a freshwater stream, which the people of the forest used to regulate the temperature of the bath. I had an inkling that Giovanna had been the one who'd come up with the idea. Either way, the people of the forest had done

a wonderful job preserving it for three hundred years.

There was a decorative curtain to block the view of the bath from the dwelling, but the rest was completely open. I could watch the stars and listen to the murmurs of the stream as I bathed.

To put it plainly, this is the best!

Compared to my past life, I felt as though there were far more stars above my head. The night sky was positively brimming with stars, and I could even see the Milky Way clearly!

Speaking of the Milky Way, when people had usually talked about looking at it in my past life, they'd meant looking toward the Galactic Center, more specifically at the dense cluster of stars visible from Earth. That got me thinking. The solar system this planet was part of seemed to be located on the edge of the Milky Way too. Was I on Earth—the Earth of a parallel universe? Or was I on another planet altogether?

I should stop thinking about that. If I start, I won't get a wink of sleep tonight.

"My lady, are you not afraid of bathing outside like this?" Mina asked, entering the water too.

I smiled and shook my head. "No, this is very pleasant. The air is refreshing and makes for an even better experience. Besides, I'm glad I get to bathe with you, Mina."

Mina paused for a few seconds. "You're so strange. You must be the only noble lady who enjoys sharing a bath with a mere maid."

"Oh my, it's been a while since you last called me strange."

When we first met, Mina told me I was strange all the time, but she'd almost entirely stopped recently. I wasn't sure if it was because I'd grown more accustomed to acting like a proper lady or because Mina had gotten used to my eccentricities.

On another note, Mina's abs were crazy. She was as ripped as the female athletes who competed in the World Athletics Championships in my past world.

As for me, I felt like I'd maybe built a tiny bit more muscle compared to when I was stuck at home away from society, but the changes weren't that noticeable. Actually, I supposed there was one visible change to my body: My womanly curves had gotten even

more scandalous. Before I left the capital, my favorite designer, Camilla, had told me I was getting "more alluring by the day," but I wasn't too fond of the idea.

Thank you, body, but this is more than enough. You can stop.

Using the thick leaves the people of the forest typically washed themselves with, Mina washed my back for me. Rubbing the leaves together left them slimy. They were meant to be used like soap bars and were supposed to make your skin soft and beautiful.

In this world, or at least in the empire, bathing—including washing one's face and hands regularly—was regarded as very important. The nobles did so, naturally, but so did the commoners. Flora had told me several times about the public baths commoners used.

In my past world, medieval Europe was well-known for not having the best hygiene practices, but the empire was different in this regard. I assumed Giovanna's work in restoring the waterworks and sewer infrastructures had been to thank for this. Good quality water was also abundant in the empire. The Yulnova Duchy, in particular, was blessed with many springs that were so clean that you could drink directly from them.

The gods also had a big role to play in this. People washed their hands so often thanks to them. The God of Medicine, for instance, valued cleanliness and granted protection against illnesses to those who washed their hands regularly—or so people believed.

No one knew about bacteria in this world; rather, they washed their hands to please the God of Medicine, but it was a scientifically sound way to keep illnesses at bay!

Thanks for passing down an omen about that, God of Medicine! Good job!

"I'll wash your back too, Mina."

"No need. A lady shouldn't do such things."

What a curt reply! Even though we've bared our naked selves to one another!

I tried throwing a tantrum and whining so that Mina would let me, but there was no overcoming her defenses. It felt as though I was faced with an impregnable fortress. Before I could argue more,

Mina washed her own back.

Tsk!

I'd feel guilty if I stayed for a long time, so now that we were both done, we got out of the water and dressed ourselves while hidden behind the curtain.

I didn't want to prolong the bath too much because the knights were guarding the area around the open-air bath while Mina and I sat in it. I'd also felt bad for them during the meal. They all enjoyed drinking but hadn't touched a single drop of alcohol because they wanted to stay clearheaded while they were on duty.

"Thank you, everyone," I said loud enough for them to hear. "We're done and will retire for the night. Feel free to enjoy the hot spring too."

The knights all responded "Yes!" in unison. They seemed stiff as they stood with their backs still turned.

Yeah, no, I'm feeling really *sorry.*

We entered the tent that the people of the forest had lent us for the night. Inside, Mina combed my hair for me. We'd left the carriage in a hurry on the way to the dwelling, but Mina had somehow remembered to bring the tools she used to care for my hair and nails. I presumed there were some precious items in my hair care set (my blue rose ornament, for instance), so keeping it close was for the best.

Since we'd sat on cushions for dinner, I figured we'd likely sleep on futons, but I was surprised to discover beds—small and low ones, but beds nonetheless.

A pleasant smell came from the pillows. It was refreshing and reminded me of lemongrass. Was it some kind of bug repellent? Did it not bother the emperor bees? Well, they probably didn't go inside people's tents.

The people of the forest had a vast knowledge of aromas. I hoped that one day we could leverage that experience in some way. For the people of the forest to be able to live the way they wished for generations to come, building some level of economic power would be a good thing. In my past world, the indigenous people of many nations had struggled horribly. If this world progressed like my

last had, I hoped the people of the forest wouldn't have to go through such hardships.

After I climbed into bed, Mina carried the baskets of white orb bugs outside, just like Aurora had instructed. With the inside of the tent now dark, I closed my eyes and drifted into slumber.



When I woke up, I wondered how much time had passed. The inside of the tent was bright, but somehow, I got the feeling it was still the middle of the night.

Someone is calling me... That's right, I have to go.

As these thoughts surfaced in my mind, I rose from the bed. Once I put a shawl over my nightgown, I noticed that something was off: Mina wasn't waking up.

Mina normally snapped awake at the slightest noise or presence, but there she was, sleeping soundly on the bed next to mine.

Strangely enough, I didn't feel scared. I knew exactly who was calling for me.

When I left the tent, there was no one around. Even Regina and the rest of the hounds were asleep, huddled together.

At some point, the moon had decided to show its round and brilliant face. It was as though the stars that had been filling up the night sky had run away, overwhelmed by the beautiful, blinding light of the full moon.

I looked down and saw a distinct shadow. When I raised my head again, I saw a lone rider illuminated by the moonlight. The blade of the rider's large scythe twinkled in the light.

I performed an elegant curtsy. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Ekaterina Yulnova. O Maiden of Death, is there anything I can do for you?"

The young woman smiled. Her slender frame descended from her large black horse, her long, straight blonde hair swaying with the motion. Though her delicate features were marked with an air of desolation, she was still beautiful.

"My name is Selene."

In this world, Selene was the name of a beautiful woman that often came up in old myths. She lived on the moon and occupied her time with playing the harp. That name had once been popular and appeared often in classical literature.

"I'm glad you're not afraid of me," she said.

"I heard about you from Lady Aurora," I replied. "She said you're a kind person who helped her find her way back to her family."

Besides, I still felt as though I was inside a dream. Mina, the knights, the people of the forest, even Regina and the other hounds—not one soul had stirred from their slumber, and the forest was eerily silent. Selene had something to do with that, I believed. Even I felt somewhat numb.

"I'm relieved to hear that. Those who've seen me usually describe me as terrifying instead," Selene said quietly, pressing her cheek against the silver mane of her horse.

Had this girl truly murdered an entire clan? It was hard to believe.

When I took a better look at her plain white dress, however, I noticed darkened stains. Just as the story recounted, the Maiden of Death was stained with blood.

"You're very bright, not approaching me." Selene laughed softly. She tilted her head to the side, and her eyes gleamed as she inspected me. "I'm sorry for summoning you in such a way, but something was so peculiar I just had to. Your soul... I've remained in this realm for two thousand years, but I've never seen anything like it. Tell me, what are you?"

I sucked in a breath.

What am I? Can I just answer "a villainess"?

No, that probably wouldn't cut it. There were no otome games two thousand years ago, so she wouldn't know the trope!

Actually, there aren't any otome games now either! Even though this is literally *the world of an otome game!*

I still needed to answer.

Ugh, say something, me! Anything!

"I'm..." I paused and thought for a few more seconds before resolutely saying, "I remember my previous life."

Who would have thought I'd ever tell anyone that?

It wasn't a very believable statement, but the existence of the Maiden of Death wasn't all that believable either! To be honest, I didn't feel like I could lie when she looked at me with such an intense gaze.

"Memories of your past life?" Selene whispered. She shook her head. "No, there were others like that before. You're different. Something about your soul stands out. A tune I've never heard echoes from its depths, and a peculiar color shines through. There's something...distinctly unique about you. You're unlike any other, unlike this world itself. It almost feels as though you don't belong here. It made me so curious that I couldn't help but want to meet you."

Wow... She pretty much has me figured out, doesn't she?

Accepting my fate, I admitted, "The thing is... The memories I have come from a life in another world, not this one. That may be why I seem so strange."

Selene's eyes widened in surprise. "Another *world*?"

"The world I used to live in was more advanced than this one. Although, I imagine that this one will become more like it in a few hundred years. The biggest difference, I believe, is that mana did not exist in my previous world, and neither did monsters, demonic beasts, or gods."

Selene was speechless. She looked up at her horse, threaded her fingers through its silver mane, and shook her head.

"I cannot imagine it," she eventually said.

"That doesn't surprise me."

In a world with no gods, Selene couldn't have begged the God of Death to grant her wish, nor could she have remained on the outskirts of the living for so long. Considering that her existence would have been an impossibility, her reaction made sense.

"Have you lived in any other world besides the one you spoke of?" Selene asked.

"I haven't. Well, no, I can't be sure. All I can say is that I only have memories from one previous life in that one other world."

"I see... How strange. I believed that souls remained in a single

world for eternity. Since yours is so peculiar, I thought that perhaps it could go from world to world, but if even you have only done it once, moving worlds must be a rare occurrence. Do you have an inkling of why this might have happened?"

Erm...

I did have an idea, but the truth was that I was still utterly perplexed by the relationship between the game I used to play and this world.

"So, in my previous world, this world was..." I paused. "How should I put this? I have...seen something that...depicted this world. That might be why I was transported here."

"Depicted this world? Did the people of your previous world have ways to observe other worlds?"

"That's not it. It was like...a tale. Back then, I thought that it was just a story someone came up with, and I enjoyed it as you might a book. I never could have imagined that this world *actually* existed. The story depicted the Magic Academy I attend, as well as some of the people I study with such as His Highness and my good friend who possesses holy mana. There wasn't much about the Yulnova Duchy. Ah, but the Black Dragon did make an appearance."

For a moment, I stopped speaking and focused. While I was thinking about this all in Japanese, my mouth automatically translated what I said into the language of the empire. More interestingly, the content was also filtered and expressed in words the original Ekaterina might have used. That was something that always happened (and honestly, I was thankful since that prevented me from throwing around terms such as "the old hag" in front of everyone). Intentionally using words from my past life required a conscious effort.

"He was referred to as Vladforen," I finally managed to say. "Vladforen, the Dragon King."

As soon as I said that, Selene's black horse moved away from her.

Darkness erupted from its body, its silhouette decaying in an instant. The shadow in front of me was darker than the night itself and, after twisting and shifting, it morphed into a tall human shape.

I remained silent, but it wasn't because I was shocked to see him

change forms. That somehow seemed natural.

His skin was dark and his sparkling silver hair was as long as he was tall. Even the moonlight appeared to worship his hair as it fell upon it, lending it an exquisite shine, and his eyes gleamed with the same silvery light. His ancient-looking clothes were all jet black, except for his wrap belt, which was decorated with silvery patterns.

As those argent eyes fixed themselves on me, I felt as though he'd reached out and grasped my heart. I'd thought the Dragon King was beautiful when I saw him on my phone's screen, but seeing such beauty in real life was a different experience altogether. His looks truly were unmatched. His beauty was dark, almost ominous, yet unparalleled. Goose bumps prickled on my skin.

"Daughter of the Yulnova, did you just speak the name of Vladforen?" His voice was low and magnetic. Anyone would have been enticed on the spot. "That is the name of the king of the north, is it not? The one who rules over the monsters of this land—the Dragon King. But a human should not know this name. Did you learn of it in your past life?"

I couldn't reply. I was too busy trying not to collapse.

What is this pressure? Not even the emperor exuded such majesty!

Wait. Of course. I finally understood. This was the one who'd bound the Maiden of Death to this realm.

"If you refuse to go to the realm of the dead, you shall become mine and remain among the living."

The God of Death.

So, this *is the might of a god.*

Selene walked up to the God of Death. He gently put his arm over her shoulders. The pressure I felt drew back like the tide from the shore, and I was finally able to take a deep breath.

"Y-Yes," I blurted out. "I came to know of this venerable name in my past life."

"You did well, answering me," he replied. "A most courageous girl you are."

A faint grin appeared on his face. I felt like I might pass out for another reason now. A smile on that gorgeous face of his had

destructive power!

"It appears you formed a bond with this world through that story and thus your soul passed to this one. How odd. I wonder, how did an accurate story about this world find its way to your old one?"

"I do not know how or why either," I said.

Actually, I wish someone would tell me!

"In that case, I have another question. You say you remember your previous life. Your soul shines with a tint that does not exist in this world because your memories color it so. But when a person dies, they cross the River of Oblivion before they can be reborn. You should have forgotten at that moment. When did your memories return?"

Did that mean that until my memories returned, my soul had been indistinguishable from any other soul in this world even though it'd come from another world?

"My memories suddenly came back a few months ago," I said. "When I first saw the Magic Academy I mentioned earlier. Something burst forth out of the blue, and I remembered my past self."

The God of Death nodded. "You said you had a friend there who possesses holy mana. Perhaps the Creator God is involved."

"The...Creator God?"

The Creator God was usually represented wearing a long, hooded cloak that covered his face and holding a staff. The myths often described him as having two faces (or none at all) and two bells, Fate and Chance, hanging from his staff.

"The Creator God swung his staff, and one of the two bells, Fate or Chance, rang. Thereupon, light arose from nothingness."

That was how the myth of creation I'd once read started.

The world had begun to take shape as the Creator God shook his staff. But the myth never specified if it was Fate or Chance that rang.

According to the myth, the Creator God did not speak, and he never involved himself with humans either. All he did was spread Fate or Chance around the world. He did not have relationships with the other gods either. There were several tales of people being stopped from or reprimanded for making requests to the Creator God, so there were no sanctuaries dedicated to his worship.

"Yes," the God of Death replied. "What you call holy mana is connected to his powers."

I wasn't sure I really understood, but it sounded incredible. *My little Flora, you're a true heroine!*

"Perhaps, with a shake of his staff, the Creator God interfered with your previous world. The one who wrote the story you read unknowingly caught a glimpse of the destiny of your friend and wrote about it. In turn, that story linked your soul to this world and you found your way here. That may very well be how these events came to pass."

People often said they'd been struck by inspiration and produced novels or music in this way, but perhaps this was what such muses really were: sudden knowledge granted by the god of another world through happenstance.

"I spoke of things humans should not know about," the God of Death added. "You mustn't tell anyone else. I hope the Creator God never appears for you, lest Fate or Chance bind you."

I'd be careful not to breathe a word. There was no fighting against such things, after all.

"I shall heed your warning," I said. "It may be preposterous for me to worry, but I also hope neither of you has to suffer consequences for telling me these secrets..."

Fate and Chance... Not even the gods can go against those, can they?

The God of Death laughed.

"You worry about a god! I suppose I should have expected as much of a soul from another world. No one knows what the Creator God will do. However, he has already swung his staff for us."

I couldn't help but stare first at the God of Death, then at Selene.

"Not even I know when he did so," the God of Death continued. "Long, very long ago, Selene's ancestors brought ruin to those who worshipped me and sealed me. Was it then that the Creator God shook his staff? Or was it centuries later, when a daughter of that clan was born with obscure mana?"

The God of Death had been sealed?!

Come to think of it, there was practically no difference between

gods and demons in this world. The gods of a vanquished people could easily be deemed monsters and dragged down.

I was also curious what he meant by "obscure" mana.

"Obscure mana is rarer still than holy mana, so it is not known among humans," the God of Death said. "It influences life and souls and belongs to those destined to become my shamans. Before that time came, however, Selene's clan was murdered and she lost her life. Surely, *he* shook his staff for her back then."

The God of Death was practically thinking aloud at this point, not really talking to me, but I kept my mouth shut. This was a god, after all.

According to the story Forli had told me, the God of Death had tried to bring her to the realm of the dead, but Selene had refused. Had he gone to her because there was already a connection between the two of them?

But in that case, the reason for Selene becoming the "Maiden of Death," whose touch could kill anything was...

"I became the way I am on my own," Selene said, as though she could read my thoughts. "During my lifetime, I did not know I had obscure mana. However, when I died, my anger and resentment altered my very being. What should have been a gentle power that brought relief to souls was warped beyond recognition. Every last member of my family was murdered the night of the wedding by the man who'd sworn to love and protect my sister. The one who'd said just hours prior that he held her dearer than his own life. She had looked so happy. I couldn't forgive him after that."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, the image of my mother surfaced. Her husband had never deigned to protect her, yet she'd continued loving him until the very end. If the chance had been given to me, I would have loved to punch him in the face for that.

Obviously, that couldn't be compared to what Selene had experienced, but I couldn't condemn her for her reaction.

"Left to her own devices, her body would eventually have decayed, and she would have turned into a spirit," the God of Death said. "I stopped that process. At first, it was because I hoped she'd release me from my seal...but that didn't work out as expected."

As he spoke, he caressed Selene's hair, and a wry smile appeared on his lips.

"You're free. You've long been free," Selene said, looking up at him.

"I'm your captive," he replied.

Selene let out a soft laugh. "I'm happy, you know?" she told me. "Despite being like this. It's strange, isn't it? Not being able to so much as brush a flower with my fingers does sadden me, but I'm still happy."

If she touched a flower, it'd wither immediately, wouldn't it?

Ah! An idea bloomed in my mind.

"Please excuse me, I'll be right back," I said.

I hurried to the tent and started going through the hair-care set Mina had brought. I found what I was looking for almost immediately: the blue rose hair ornament.

I'm sorry for doing whatever I want with your gift, Lev!

Once I was back, I showed it to her. "Miss Selene, please take this. This flower will not wither."

"My!"

Selene seemed astonished by the beauty of the glass rose. She asked me to put it down on the ground. I immediately complied, then took a step back. Hesitantly, Selene approached and picked it up.

Cupped in her hands, the beauty of the blue rose did not wane one bit. Her face lit up.

"It's not withering... This flower is truly eternal! How beautiful..."

She looked up at the God of Death and presented the blue rose to him.

"Do you remember? When I still lived, I picked flowers every day and brought them to the mausoleum where you were sealed. I always worried you might have been lonely."

"I've never forgotten," he said, taking the blue rose from Selene's hands.

He adorned her long blonde hair with it, and the two of them exchanged a smile.



"Thank you, Ekaterina," she told me.

"You have my thanks too, daughter of the Yulnova. I shall pay back this debt one day."

Smiling, I shook my head. "Oh no, please don't say that. I'm glad it pleased you. That's more than enough for me."

The God of Death smiled back at me—good heavens, was he ever beautiful!

"You do not understand. Being granted the favor of a god is no small feat," he said. "If one day the Creator God should wave his staff your way, remember my words."



That night, Alexei retired to bed later than usual.

The reason for this was that his work had taken far longer than usual. To be precise, the work itself hadn't delayed him—it had been dealing with the bothersome visitors who had barged into his office right as he'd finished.

News of the arrest of Novadain and the other nobles who'd committed wrongdoings during Aleksandr's rule had quickly spread throughout the duchy. Every noble who'd heard this had reached the same conclusion: If Novadain's and the others' peerages and assets had been confiscated, they'd eventually need to be redistributed. The question was to *whom*.

A crowd had gathered. The petitioners who'd barged into Alexei's office one after another had all argued that they should be promoted or receive the traitors' wealth. Their reasons had varied. Some had insisted their forefathers had done much for the good of the duchy, some had cited dire financial difficulties, while others had lamented the way the previous duke had treated them and asked for reparations. Regardless of the excuse they'd chosen to serve Alexei, the truth was that they'd all had the same motive: greed.

None of them had contributed to or helped Alexei in any way as he'd dealt with the aftermath of his father's reign, yet they'd demanded that he help them now. Their shamelessness had made his skin crawl, but Novak had advised him not to turn them away at

the gate.

"Duke Sergei would have met with each of them in person and listened to their pleas. This is the perfect occasion to grasp their situations and gain control over them."

Sergei had been a virtuous man, of course, but he'd been more than that—he'd also been a tactician who'd known that lofty ideals and kindness weren't enough to govern.

Alexei had nodded. "If their reasons were valid, grandfather would have helped them. And even if their reasoning is ridiculous, I should still ensure I do not miss any talent I could put to good use."

"Exactly," Novak had said with a satisfied grin. "You are starting to become more like him, Your Grace."

"I'm not. I was simply wondering what Ekaterina might have said in this situation. Although, I'm sure she'd have put it a kinder way... She's the only one who resembles him."

A self-deprecating smile had crossed Alexei's face, but Novak's satisfied expression hadn't budged.

In the past, even if Alexei had listened to their pleas, he would have dismissed them coldly. When he'd received the petitioners in his office after his conversation with Novak, however, he'd proven to be much more reasonable and softer than before. In response to those who'd claimed to have suffered monetary losses because of Novadain, Alexei had promised compensation—after thorough verifications.

The petitioners had been left with the impression that Alexei had become surprisingly understanding. There was no doubt his popularity would rise as a result. Still, the evening had thoroughly exhausted him. Most of his visitors had no good reason to request a higher title. Alexei was a very rational man, so having to listen to illogical claims for hours had been agony.

When he finally sat down for dinner, Ekaterina's absence pierced his heart like a knife. Had she been there, she surely would have fussed over him, worrying about his worn-out face. Tonight, that gentle voice of hers was nowhere to be heard.

Alexei had sent her away from the fortress knowing that it would soon be overrun by greedy petitioners. He had become accustomed

to living without the warmth of family love ever since he'd lost his grandfather. Yet, here he was.

I've truly grown weak.

Perhaps because he went to bed with that mindset, Alexei had a vivid dream that night.



Alexei was wandering inside a gigantic building.

He'd had this very dream many times in the past, and he was aware it wasn't real. Inside the dream, he was still a child, and for some reason, he was in full formal dress. Around him, everything was gray and blurry. There were stairs and corridors, but they swayed in a peculiar way, never settling in place.

Alexei had no idea where he was or what time it was, but despite the confusion, he searched for something. He always did.

There was a sharp pain in his chest. If he found what he was looking for, that pain would finally disappear. But while he knew he *had* to find it, he didn't know what he was looking for. As he realized that, Alexei came to a stop.

There was no one, nothing, not even a single sound.

How desolate and hollow this place was.

Usually, he'd keep looking for the entirety of the dream. He'd search, search, search, and find nothing.

"Brother!" Suddenly, despite the hollowness of the world, a sound arose. "It's me, Ekaterina! I'm here!"

Alexei turned around.

In this gray world, she alone was painted in color—a young woman with indigo-blue hair, wearing a dress that resembled the night sky. She elegantly lifted the narrow skirt of the glamorous dress that she'd worn during the banquet and ran up to Alexei with a smile as bright as the Milky Way itself.

The Queen of the Night had descended upon this world alongside a myriad of stars.

"Ekaterina!" Alexei opened his arms, and she jumped into them without any hesitation.

“I’ve missed you, brother!”

“Ekaterina,” he repeated, hugging her tightly. He’d been a child moments prior, but he realized he was back inside his eighteen-year-old body now. “Oh, Ekaterina... Ekaterina...”

“Yes, brother?” she replied, looking up at him with a beautiful smile.

“We are inside my dream. This place was always empty, so how are you here?”

“I do not know. I did an ancient god a small favor, and he seemed to appreciate it so much that he might have granted my wish to see you.”

“One of the gods of the mountain?”

Ekaterina shook her head. “No, another esteemed being.” A mischievous expression appeared on her face as she asked, “Brother, were you lonely without me?”

Alexei brought his hand to his chest. “That was it,” he whispered. “That’s what this ache was.” He’d been feeling lonely.

Ekaterina tilted her head in confusion, before she took Alexei’s hands in hers. “I see... You were lonely for so long that you couldn’t tell what the emotion was anymore.”

“That may be it...” His voice was a murmur. “I feel like this ache was always with me, from the day grandfather died to the day I found you.”

He took a good look around. Under the starlight, the hazy gray world looked brand new.

“So this was the imperial palace,” he said.

“It is?” She’d never been there and seemed puzzled.

This particular spot didn’t look like much, so he wasn’t surprised by her reaction. They were standing in the shadow of a staircase.

“Long ago, I had a friend,” Alexei whispered softly. “This is where I met him.”

Ekaterina squeezed his hands. “You treasured him, didn’t you, brother? I know you’re not one to let people in easily. But once you do, you cannot erase them from your heart, no matter what happens or how your relationship may change.”

“You may be right.”

"I *am* right," Ekaterina insisted. "Furthermore, if I may add, you are very picky when it comes to people. You grew up surrounded by grandfather and his exceptional aides, and you made them your standard. Regular children were not suitable companions for you. The fact that you considered him a friend despite the circumstances proves he was outstanding."

Maybe because this was a dream, Ekaterina was more outspoken and direct than she usually was. Although Alexei had just been told he was picky, he found he couldn't argue.

"You could say that," he replied. "He was referred to as a prodigy, yet he was shy and had no self-confidence whatsoever. I felt like I had to protect him."

"Once you let someone in, you love and protect them with everything you have. Prince Mikhail is also outstanding, but you've never forgotten that he is your sovereign. You've always kept in mind that you couldn't let yourself get too close. That's why *he* was the very first person you let in."

"But now I have you. The one I ought to love and protect is you and you alone, yet I was searching for him. How foolish."

"Your heart has learned to come to this place whenever you feel lonely. It has been so for a long time, hasn't it?"

Alexei smiled. "You always seem to understand everything."

Ekaterina pouted. "This is *your* dream," she said. "If I am this way now, it must be because you see me so. In truth, I'm afraid I'm not this perceptive."

"I wonder," Alexei said. He gently rested his finger against her lips. "You do seem like the real Ekaterina to me. Although, I must say, this lovely expression is novel. I've seen you puff up your cheeks, which was charming too, but this is the most adorable expression you've shown me so far, my dear Ekaterina."



“Oh, you!” Ekaterina’s pout turned into a smile.

“How is the journey?” Alexei asked. “Has anything dangerous or inconvenient happened?”

“Not at all, brother. There were some unexpected events, but they gave me the opportunity to witness uncommon sights. And Lord Forli has already taught me so much! I’m having a most pleasant trip. And you, how have you been? You felt so lonely you had this dream. Did anything bad happen?”

Worry clouded Ekaterina’s face, so Alexei caressed her cheek, smiling. “How have I been? I wonder. Seeing your face filled me with such joy I forgot all about my day.”

“Oh, brother!” she exclaimed, her smile brightening again.

Alexei pulled her in for a hug.

“Thank you for worrying about me, Ekaterina,” he said. “No one loves as sincerely as you do. How lucky I am to have a sister as wonderful as you. Not having you by my side is hard, but I shall bear it by remembering how you came to comfort me, even in my dreams. Have a pleasant and safe trip, and come back to me soon.”

“If I love you so much, it’s because no one is as wonderful as *you* are. Since you wish for me to return soon, I shall make it so. Please take care of your health and wait for me.” Ekaterina returned the embrace, hugging Alexei close.

Alexei had wished for her to have a safe, short trip, and Ekaterina had agreed. At that time, neither of them knew that she’d break her promise.

Chapter 3: Isaac and the Gods of the Mountain

The next morning, I woke up refreshed.

While Mina helped me get dressed, I told her that I'd given away the blue rose hair ornament yesterday. I also told her to whom.

It was a bit of a crazy story, but I figured I had to explain to Mina why the ornament was gone. I also doubted a half-baked lie would convince her, so I decided honesty was the best policy and just told her the whole story—well, almost the whole story. I didn't mention the Creator God or the fact that we'd discussed my reincarnation at length.

"I know I was supposed to wear it to worship the divinities of the mountain. I'm sorry," I concluded.

Even Mina was taken aback by such a revelation.

"My lady... To think you met with such dangerous beings when I wasn't by your side..."

She seemed enraged at herself for sleeping through the events of last night. I could almost see pale-blue flames erupting behind her.

"They were wonderful people," I said. "And it's not your fault you didn't wake up. I was summoned by a god, after all. Please don't worry about it, Mina."

"You seem to be in a good mood this morning, my lady," Mina said.

I smiled. "I am! I had a beautiful dream after I met them! I saw my brother!"

Before breakfast, I went to find Aurora and told her about my talk with the Maiden of Death, Selene. I explained how happy it'd made Selene that she'd described her as kind.

Aurora was speechless at first, but she believed me. I told her about how being unable to touch flowers saddened Selene and

suggested the people of the forest carve wooden flowers for her since they were so good at it. Aurora nodded.

"If we can make her an offering that pleases her, perhaps some of my regrets will fade," she said. "I'll talk it over with the others."

Then, we had breakfast together and Aurora gave me plenty of local products. Elegant wooden tableware, fabrics dyed with vegetable-based dyes, and even scent sachets that smelled like lemongrass.

"We must purchase some of the things we need, such as cutting instruments and salt, from the outside," she told me. "If the products we make can truly be sold, it'd be a great help."

"As I mentioned, I'd love to help you on that front!" I said. "If I can successfully turn this into a business, I promise to consult with you and Lord Forli every step of the way to make sure it does not trouble your way of life."

Aurora smiled. "Thank you, my lady. You're so young yet already so considerate. I'm impressed."

Oops. As always, please forgive me for being a scam!

While most hadn't interacted with me directly, the people of the forest had been plenty friendly during our short one-night stay, and they all waved us goodbye.

As we left, I once again rode with Oleg on his horse and waved back.

I felt as though I'd spent a night at a nice European pension in the woods—one with a natural hot spring at that! Even the food had been great and kind of like what I imagined would have been served in a rustic French auberge.

It was a wonderful stay. Thank you!



It was now time for our little procession to go on our merry way.

Before we could do that, though, we had to get rid of the two little sugar beets that had somehow found their way into the carriage. It took but a couple of seconds for Forli to grab them by the leaves and toss them away.

These two were probably the handsome sugar beet and the other one from yesterday. But what were they doing here? If we hadn't noticed them, we could have brought them kilometers away! Had they managed to open the carriage's door with their leaves?!

These guys are surprisingly dexterous, just like the cats that figure out how to open fridges!

I was also surprised to see how friendly they'd gotten! They'd kept holding hands—erm, I mean *leaves*—even as Forli had thrown them out!

Speaking of Forli, the way he'd handled them reminded me of an experienced farmer. He'd been born to a marquess family, but it seemed his years as forestry and agriculture advisor had had a big influence on him.

Sugar beets were delicious, so I worried the animals of the forest would eat them, but when I watched the emperor bee messenger that had been resting on the roof of the carriage to protect the sugar beet fly away, I remembered that this forest was full of bizarre creatures. The adult sugar beets would surely keep the little guys safe.

"Perhaps we should have brought them along. They'd have made good emergency rations," Forli said pensively.

I shook my head so hard my hair flew from side to side. There was no way I could have eaten them now that I'd started registering them as individuals. If we'd brought them along, I would have only gotten more and more attached along the way!

If that handsome sugar beet becomes soup, I'll cry!

After that, our trip was smooth.

The coachman and the horses were working hard to make up for the delays of the first day, so we sped through the forest. Per this world's standard, we were going very fast, but to someone who was used to modern cars and trains, it felt like a leisurely journey. After all, we had to stop regularly to let the horses rest, drink, and munch on grass.

During the breaks, I always got out of the carriage and either walked a bit or played with Regina and the hounds.

This time, I decided to help the coachman brush the horses because I felt bad for making him work so hard. At first, he was tense and apologetic, but he eventually taught me where each horse liked to be brushed and stroked, so I had a lot of fun. The horses were adorable!

I picked up some wildflowers and tried to give them to the horses, but Mina stopped me, saying some were toxic. I panicked and asked her to thoroughly check what I'd picked up. A noble lady with her hands full of wildflowers and her beautiful maid intently looking at them—from afar I imagined we made a pretty picture, but the truth was this was all a poison check.

Once I knew which flowers were safe, I gave some to the horses of the knights as well. One of the knights, watching them munching on the plants, grumbled that they should know what an honor it was to be hand-fed by the young lady of the Yulnova and be more thankful. I couldn't help but laugh. I'd be more shocked if the horses understood any of that. Forli and the rest of the knights found the man's statement just as funny and laughed too.

Sometimes, we stopped in a village on the side of the highway to purchase fodder to feed them. Whenever we did so, the villagers gathered round, burning with curiosity. I'd figured this was my chance to increase my popularity, so I waved at people or struck up random conversations. Most people really seemed to believe I was the duke's wife, and I couldn't help but laugh every time I heard it. That rumor sure had traveled far and wide!

Since Alexei had been effectively taking care of the duchy before he actually inherited it, most people probably thought he was way older than eighteen. I couldn't blame them; he certainly looked more like a man in his twenties than a teenager.

"Lady Ekaterina is His Grace's younger sister," Forli always corrected. "She, too, hails from the uninterrupted lineage of the House of Yulnova, and is a legitimate descendant of the founder, Duke Sergei."

"What an honor to be mistaken for my brother's wife," I usually

replied with a smile. The Alexei fangirl in me was over the moon!

Me? His wife? Aaaaaah! The sound of it is wonderful!

Our pleasant, carefree trip—or rather, our superhard trip in this world—continued until night fell, and we arrived at a larger city as planned. This time we were able to sleep at an inn.

The next day, the journey resumed. Eventually, the scenery turned to bare rocks.

"My lady, there is the old mine," Forli told me. "The Mountain Sanctuary is at the foot of this peak."

"So, this is it..."

The luxuriant forest had come to an end before I knew it, and we'd traveled alongside fields for a while. The trees in the area had long been cut down to serve as fuel. After all, processing iron required insane quantities of energy.

Now, even the fields had disappeared. All I could see was the gray of the rocky mountain which loomed over us with a peculiar intensity.

What is this feeling? I remember it from somewhere...

The old mine had once been filled with iron. Apparently, it was already being exploited before the empire was even founded. At the time, it'd been under the control of a powerful indigenous clan with extensive knowledge of mining and iron manufacturing techniques, but the four brothers had conquered it. Sergei, Yulnova's founder, had married the daughter of the head of the clan, Kristina, simultaneously bringing back peace *and* getting his hands on their advanced techniques.

The iron veins of this mountain had long ago run out, which was why it was now referred to as the "old" mine. However, that didn't mean there wasn't anything left to mine here. Despite its name, the mine was still in use as a place to collect rainbow stones. In fact, even if the main mining sites had been moved to other areas long ago, this place had remained the very core of the Yulnova mining industry.

At the foot of the mountain was the Mountain Sanctuary, and also the Mining Operations Headquarters that oversaw all mining-related activities in the entire duchy. And the one in charge of this agency

was Alexei's mine advisor, Aaron Kyle!

"My lady!" Aaron exclaimed as soon as the carriage stopped, as though he couldn't wait anymore.

"Thank you for coming to welcome us when you're so busy," I told him.

"I'm glad you made it to us safe and sound. You must be tired. Please take some time to rest. Although, if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if you could greet the professor later. He'll be overjoyed."

I smiled. Aaron was beaming with love for Isaac as always.

"It'd be my pleasure. I've been looking forward to meeting my granduncle too."



The famous professor sat inside an untidy room of the Mining Operations Headquarters, scribbling something on a piece of paper. He was seated at a simple table—a plain plank with four legs—not a fancy desk. While the table was simple, it was huge and absolutely covered in stones. Some had been crushed to powder or were soaked in chemicals, while others were being brought to a boil in beakers or sitting on magic circles that flickered. Cabinets covered the back wall. Beyond the glass doors, I could see dozens of labeled minerals, kept locked away as if they were precious.

Oh, this totally reminds me of the labs at uni. It's giving me the irrepressible itch to wash test tubes.

"Is that you, Aaron?" a gentle voice asked. "I'm writing a letter, so could you please send it for me later? It's for the observatory at the foot of the Summit of the Gods."

While Aaron currently stood at the top of the Mining Operations Headquarters, Isaac still seemed to treat him as his assistant.

"Of course," Aaron replied as though that were the most natural thing in the world. "But before I do that, Professor, you have a guest."

"A guest?" Isaac sounded puzzled as he turned around. When he saw me, his eyes widened in surprise.

On the outside, I smiled brightly, but deep down, I could hardly contain my surprise!

He looks so much like our grandfather!!!

I only knew our grandfather through the portraits I'd seen, and while I'd heard plenty of stories about his gentle disposition, my image of him was that he had been the personification of dignity. When I looked at him, I couldn't imagine anyone better suited to hold the role of the first minister or Minister for Foreign Affairs. Add to that the charm of a dandy, and you got Sergei.

Though Sergei and Isaac had different mothers, their features looked incredibly similar. However, Isaac had a gentler air about him and was smaller. His hair was mostly gray but tinged with blue. I assumed it had once all been blue but had grayed with age. If I remembered correctly, Sergei's eyes in the paintings had been a vivid blue, while Isaac's were paler. The color very much resembled that of forget-me-nots. I could have simply described his eyes as light blue and called it a day, but the shade was actually quite different from the neon blue of Alexei's eyes or the ice blue of our mother's. It was a gentle, subdued color.

"Anastasia?" Isaac murmured hesitantly.

I shook my head and then did a proper curtsy. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Granduncle Isaac. I could hardly wait. I'm Ekaterina."

"Ekaterina!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. He walked up to me with a big smile on his face and took my hands gently. His hands were big and warm. "My goodness, I'm so happy to finally see you! I don't know why, but I was expecting a small girl. You've grown into such a fine beauty! Ah, right, Aaron told me much about you. He praised your bright mind!"

Isaac suddenly paused. I felt as though I could see his excitement turning to panic in real time before he added, "I'm so sorry. I should have been there to welcome you and Alexei at the fortress but it entirely slipped my mind. When I remembered, you two had already arrived and... Oh, right, I was supposed to visit for the banquet, wasn't I? I'm terribly sorry... I'm the worst..."

Isaac looked down, so I smiled at him. Just like Aaron and Raisa

had told me, Isaac seemed to be terrible at keeping track of the more pragmatic aspects of life. As a genius scholar, he had a personality that would only make future biographies more interesting, so it was all good.

"Please do not mind it," I said. "I've come to worship the divinities of the mountain on my brother's behalf. Your being here gave me the perfect opportunity to meet you, so it all worked out in the end, did it not?"

"Is that so...? Still, you traveled all alone at such a young age? What a dependable girl you are!"

But I'm actually an adult deep down... Please don't praise me so innocently, I'm starting to feel guilty!

"I wasn't alone," I replied. "Lord Forli was by my side the entire time. He's gone to the Mountain Sanctuary to discuss tomorrow's ceremony with the priests."

"I see, so you were with Baltazar. His presence must have been most reassuring. I have also traveled with him many times in the past."

Forli was Sergei's best friend, but it looked like he also had a great relationship with the younger brother.

"Professor, her ladyship has brought a present for you. She was eager to give it to you as quickly as possible. Forli went to meet with the priests without her so she could see you instead," Aaron said.

When Aaron brought up this topic, Isaac reacted with surprise. "A present? For me?"

"It's something that I hope will help you with your research," I said. "Mina, if you please."

Mina, who'd been holding the huge box as though it weighed absolutely nothing, stepped forward. Placing the box down on the table, she started unpacking it.

Inside was a microscope. It was a little crude, but—to me at least—obviously a microscope. Isaac, however, seemed puzzled. He tilted his head.

"What is this?" he asked. "It's my first time seeing something like this. Although, it does seem like a research instrument."

While microscopes existed in this world, they had a very different

shape—which also made them a pain to use. The part on which you could put the specimen didn't exist, so you had to put it directly on the table to observe it. Getting a proper look at anything was hard.

When I'd asked the artisan I'd recently hired, Yegor Toma, to make this microscope for me, I'd also asked him to make me some glass slides to go with it. There was a proper spot for them on the microscope, right over a mirror that would reflect light and make it easier to see the specimen one wanted to study.

Toma had also put his own twist on it, and the final product ended up having a magnification power greater than the microscope we currently had in our residence in the capital. He'd once told me he had a tendency to get engrossed in things. The microscope he'd crafted for me proved this was definitely true.

"This is a microscope," I told Isaac. "I had the artisans of the glass workshop I recently purchased in the capital make it. It's an improved version of the microscopes you must be accustomed to. You use it this way."

I asked Isaac for some of the stone powder that was on the desk and put it on one of the slides. In my past world, this would have been the moment to add a drop of water before placing a slim coverslip over it, but glass that thin still couldn't be crafted in this world. Glass slides thin enough for them to be perfectly clear already required technical prowess, considering the existing equipment.

After setting everything up, I took a look through the lens. I moved the mirror so that the reflection of the light would be oriented in the right direction, and I adjusted the focus. Through the lens, the mineral powder looked completely different. Amid the dark, rugged objects I could see beautifully colored crystals, bright and transparent. They were as pretty as snowflakes. I studied the shape for a moment, but it didn't appear to be quartz or anything like it.

"Please have a look, granduncle."

"Thank you." Isaac, who'd been staring at me maneuvering the microscope with an amazed expression, looked into the lens. "Oh!" he screamed almost immediately. "That is amazing! How clear! This is the first time I've been able to magnify something this much. I can see so well. Ah, it feels as though the stone is speaking to me..."

The loud, excited cries slowly turned to absent-minded whispers as he focused on the specimen, then to complete silence. Isaac held his breath, his full attention on the stone. When he finally lifted his head, it was only to look around, as though he was searching for something.

Aaron immediately handed him his notebook, a quill pen, and a pot of ink. I had no idea when he'd even grabbed them.

"Ah, thank you, Aaron," Isaac said happily.

He immediately started sketching and taking notes. It was as though he'd entirely forgotten about everything else. Aaron watched over him, a satisfied look on his face. He certainly was the perfect assistant.

Speaking of Aaron, his being awarded the position of mine advisor at such a young age was neither due to connections nor for show.

He had a clear understanding of all the mines of the duchy. From the production volume of each mine to the estimated reserves, the terrain and transport routes around each location, the approximate costs, profits, the number of employees, key stakeholders, and their relationships—Aaron had vast quantities of information stored in his brain. All of it helped him make the best calls and give precise instructions to each of the mines. He was also the sort of flexible (and somewhat scary) man who could bypass the established processes to get things done and fix issues when it mattered. He was especially good at dealing with the cunning veteran miners in charge who had a tendency to submit inflated expense claims.

In my brother's office, he was humble and self-effacing because he was the youngest of Alexei's advisors, but our grandfather hadn't chosen him for no reason. He was incredibly competent, and, in truth, a little self-serving.

He worked so hard as the duchy's mine advisor to fulfill his own goal of giving Isaac the best possible research environment. In a way, his daily work was just him being the best assistant he could possibly be. I'd never seen him happier than in this moment, watching Isaac work.

Suddenly, a ridiculous burst of competitiveness overwhelmed me.

That's not good. My love for Alexei may be losing to Aaron's love for Isaac! I need to do something about this!

Once he was done sketching, Isaac finally lifted his head. He once again took a good look at the microscope and brushed it gently with admiring fingers.



He finally seemed to come back to himself and he turned to me.

"Oh my, I'm sorry," he said, flustered. "I ended up forgetting myself again."

"Your research is very important," I said happily. "Focus is a good thing. Either way, I'm glad to see this microscope seems to be of use."

"It's wonderful! Adding this stage for glass slides and putting a mirror under it is an incredible improvement. This feels like an entirely new instrument." Isaac happily patted the microscope. "Are you sure I can keep such an amazing object?"

"Why, of course! Please let me know if you feel like any part could be improved further as you use it."

"Professor, her ladyship is the one who imagined this new version of the microscope," Aaron said.

Isaac stared at me dazedly.

Yeah, that's a fair reaction. If you're thinking my coming up with these ideas is unbelievable... Well, that's because it is!

Normally, several people should have improved the microscope over the course of a hundred or two hundred years. Only then would it have found its final shape. Not that I could tell them that!

"I could only come up with these ideas because I am an amateur when it comes to science," I said. "Women always check their hair and makeup in the mirror before banquets. When we do so, we must make sure light hits the mirror properly so we can take a good look and see every detail. I simply thought this principle could be applied here. Gentlemen do not pay such close attention to mirrors, I imagine."

The speed at which I could now come up with random excuses was starting to impress me. Since vanity mirrors with lights all around them had yet to be invented, people indeed had to be careful with lighting when applying makeup.

"I see! Still, it's remarkable! Aaron was right. You are incredibly bright, Ekaterina," Isaac said, a childish and bubbly smile on his face.

The innocence in his smile tugged at my conscience.

"G-Granduncle, anyway, what mineral were you observing?" I asked, desperately trying to change the topic.

Isaac beamed at my question. “Oh, these? These are rainbow stone shards.”

“My!” I exclaimed. “I hadn’t noticed at all. I thought rainbow stones shone.”

“They do shine,” Isaac replied. “When they’re crushed so finely, it can be difficult to notice. Especially in broad daylight. I was able to see the mana vortex, so there is no doubt. These are the shards that fell while extracting a large rainbow stone. I’ve been looking for an efficient way to separate these tiny rainbow stones from the rest of the debris.”

Oh!

The only time I’d observed a rainbow stone up close was right before the imperial visit, when I’d put on that brooch. I remembered it looking like a clear crystal with a twirling blue light inside. Was that twirling blue light what Isaac called a mana vortex? For a moment, I wondered why Isaac was so concerned about tiny shards when we could extract huge bright stones instead.

“Is it because you need them for prism circles?” I asked. “Instead of struggling to find high-quality rainbow stones, you’re trying to think of a way to artificially create high-quality stones by using shards...is that it?”

“You know about prism circles, Ekaterina?” Isaac asked. “Well, you have it mostly right. Large natural stones sometimes have mana of poor quality, or contain several mana types merged together. If they’re used to activate a prism circle, it’s likely the system will not stabilize. If we could crush them to powder and classify each by quality and attribute, we’d be able to both fix that problem *and* use the shards we used to throw away because they had no practical use. Quality is not proportional to size, so shards can be of very high quality. They sometimes have rare mana attributes as well. I couldn’t help but feel like throwing them away was a terrible waste.”

So, the aim was to homogenize quality and sort attributes. Prism circles weren’t even a reality yet, but Isaac had already started improving them. *That’s impressive.*

As a former systems engineer, I knew just how crucial it was to identify issues during the planning phase and come up with fixes. In

Isaac's head, prism circles existed already, so he could find issues in the simulations he ran in his mind. That was how powerful his brain was. A discovery that would revolutionize the world had emerged from this mind. Even as we spoke, the gears that would move the history of this world forever were turning inside him.

A shiver ran down my spine. I was so moved, I thought I might get goose bumps.

"They refine iron, gold, or silver by melting it. But that process cannot be used for rainbow stones, can it?" I asked.

"Unlike metals, rainbow stones do not melt when heat is applied to them. You can think of them as a type of gemstone. However, since rainbow stones are condensed mana, their nature remains different from that of other gemstones... They have not been studied much in the past, so much is still unknown."

"That is all so interesting!" I exclaimed, my eyes sparkling.

Isaac was treading on uncharted territory—a "New World" of knowledge. How epic!

Isaac smiled and said, "I'm happy to have you listen to my rambling with such rapt attention. Most ladies have no interest in these matters."

"To be perfectly honest, that very fact puzzles me. What else could make a heart flutter with such anticipation? It's an honor to hear about your research in person, granduncle. Prism circles have the potential to change the way people live entirely. It's so exciting I can hardly contain myself!"

"Your words make me very happy. Thank you," he said, extending his hand and patting my head. "I wouldn't have expected anything less of Alexei's sister. He's always been a bright boy. Even as a child, he impressed me. You seem to be just as smart, albeit in a different way."

The genius called me smart! I'm gonna blush!

Wait, hang on, why would I blush?! I'm a fraud! I'm not actually smart, I just know things because I lived in a world that was far more advanced. I mustn't get conceited and start believing I'm some sort of prodigy too.

"Allow me to thank you once more for this microscope, Ekaterina.

A present hasn't made me so happy since the time my big brother gifted me a cabinet when I was still a child."

"A...cabinet?" I repeated, tilting my head in confusion.

And Isaac called Sergei "big brother"? He must have kept referring to him this way through the years even as they'd grown up. A gray-haired gentleman referring to his brother in such a childish way was adorable.

Still, I was a bit lost. If Isaac had been a child back then, so had Sergei. A kid gifting another kid a cabinet was hard to picture, but the second kid loving the present was even stranger.

"Minerals have fascinated me for as long as I can remember," Isaac said. "As a child, I spent my days picking up all kinds of stones and bringing them back to my room. Every time, without fail, someone would get mad and throw them right back out. Looking back on it, I see it was only natural, but at the time, it made me very sad. One day, as I was crying in the gardens, my big brother came to find me and told me he'd thought of a way I could keep my stones. All I had to do, he said, was to line them up neatly and label them. That way, others would understand that these were special stones I wanted to keep. Then, he gave me a cabinet and an illustrated mineral encyclopedia."

Makes sense!

People made assumptions based on what they saw. Rocks on the ground seemed like rubbish, but if you displayed them carefully in cases, they'd appear to have value. Our grandfather has been smart, even as a child!

Being able to give your little brother a wooden cabinet on a whim really was a noble thing, though. Those things were huge and expensive!

"I was about seven back then," Isaac said. "But I still couldn't read. My tutor had tried to teach me many times, but the letters wouldn't register. Rather than trying to decipher these characters on a page, I was much more interested in going out and listening to what the sky, the trees, and—above all—the stones had to tell me. Everyone always told me I was hopeless, but my big brother didn't think so. 'An illustrated encyclopedia has pictures, so all you need to

do is compare them with the stones you find and copy the letters you see next to them. That way, you'll practice writing letters too,' he told me."

A soft, nostalgic smile appeared on Isaac's face as he continued, "The encyclopedia was even more interesting than I'd anticipated. All the stones I'd picked up were in it, and they all had names. That surprised me so much that I got obsessed with the idea of knowing them all. I stared at the letters for an entire night and, when the morning came, I could read."

Excuse me?

"And I could write most of the technical terms that had to do with minerals. It was an encyclopedia aimed at adults, so I learned a lot," he added with a sunny smile.

There was so much I wanted to comment on that I didn't have the energy to start. *I raise the white flag on this one. No, but seriously?! Who learns to read and write in a single night? Geniuses are so scary!!!*

I glanced at Aaron, and he nodded, pleased. *Yes, yes, your dear professor Isaac is incredible. Write his biography already. I know you want to. Hang on, maybe he's already writing it...*

"The cabinet made me so happy," Isaac said. "Just as big brother had told me, a few labels was all it took for the maids' anger to turn to admiration. They'd look at my collection and comment on it, telling me they had no idea the stones all had names. My world changed that day. When I was done filling the cabinet with stones and labeling them properly, I showed it to my big brother. He was surprised I'd done it so fast and complimented me. Then, he bought me a new cabinet. From that point onward, he always supported my research. He helped me find a place where I could store all these cabinets, even helped me get permission to travel to places I shouldn't have been able to go so I could look for more specimens... Until the very end, he always helped me."

Isaac's tone was so earnest. To him, these cabinets were the materialization of his bond with his brother.

"After my big brother...left us, Alexei started doing the same for me. He was still so young, but he was bright and reliable. Truly, that

boy has always impressed me. Now, you too are supporting me. You see, big brother used to listen to my rambling with the same expression you had just now." Isaac beamed. "When he gifted me my first encyclopedia, my dream became to create one like it myself —one that would cover minerals that weren't in that book. Eventually, that dream came true, but I now want to write another one. I'll add new sketches of what can only be observed using this microscope, and revise my writings to make it even better. Once my research on the rainbow stones settles, I shall pursue this project— my new dream. I'm glad that the one to have given me that new dream is a descendant of my dear big brother. Thank you, Ekaterina."

Oh, that was adorable. Isaac is impressive in many ways, so how is he so cute*?*

I was starting to understand Aaron. And I was sure our grandfather must have thought the same. Though I'd always love my brother the best, I now adored my granduncle too!

"And I'm glad *you* are a member of my family, granduncle," I replied, beaming.

Then I told him I'd brought him another present. I gave him the glass pen I'd had made for him, much to his delight. Unlike the intricate, colorful pens I'd gifted Alexei, the design I'd chosen for Isaac was colorless. I figured that, since he often wrote outside and on the go, having something he wouldn't be too sad to break was better—or rather, that was the conclusion I'd come up with after listening to Aaron's advice.

"This is so interesting," Isaac said. "Much more practical than a quill pen. What a prodigious invention! You're truly incredible, Ekaterina."

You're the prodigy, granduncle, not me. I haven't invented anything! I apologize for stealing your credit, O wind-chime craftsman of the Meiji era!

"Still, crafting such a thin and long object raises the concern of durability."

"I thought you might think of this issue!" I exclaimed. "I asked my artisan to devise ways to increase the durability."

"What ways have they found?" Isaac asked, looking at the pen with deep interest. "Perhaps the trick is in the temperature. Crafting strong, durable glass requires high temperatures. Although I imagine there may be more to this."

"Ah, this reminds me of something he told me. The kiln he uses was modified by his master and is very special. He said that, unless he used this kiln, he couldn't produce glass this sturdy."

"How intriguing. I wish I could see that kiln," Isaac said.

"You're most welcome to! Please come visit the workshop the next time you're in the capital. I'm sure the artisans could produce even more beauty if you gave them advice. You're so knowledgeable about minerals, after all! I'd also love you to meet the man who made the microscope."

With Isaac's counsel, the workshop would surely become even better. I hoped one day Lev would surpass the work of his master. I could tell he was also a genius, so I was sure it was possible.

Although to be fully honest, the truth was that I just really wanted to see two geniuses interact!

I'd been so enthusiastic in my invitation that Isaac replied, "You seem so passionate about minerals, Ekaterina. That's wonderful."

Oops! He misunderstood me!

It wasn't like I hated minerals or glass, but I wasn't particularly dedicated to them either. I'd only acquired that glass workshop by going with the flow. However, Isaac looked so happy that I couldn't possibly tell him that. Thus, I smiled and agreed that yes, I really liked them.

"I want to show you my gratitude," Isaac said. "Would you please come to the old mine with me?"

As a result of our conversation, I found myself agreeing to accompany my granduncle there.

I'd been about to decline and tell him there was no need for him to be so considerate when Aaron had started gesturing wildly at me —which I'd assumed was his way of urging me to accept. I hadn't had the heart to refuse.

"How is Alexei doing, by the way?" Isaac asked me.

"Good," I said. "Still, I'm a little worried about his health. He's

been so busy these days...”

If luck was on my side, perhaps I could drag our granduncle to my cause and make him another member of the protect-Alexei-from-overwork squad!

“Granduncle, could you please warn him not to overwork himself and remind him that taking care of his body is the most important thing there is?” I added.

“Is he *that* busy?” Isaac asked. He sounded shocked. “I wonder if big brother used to be as busy. I never was any help to him. In fact, all I ever did was add more work to his plate...”

Oh no! I hit a sensitive topic!

It’s okay, granduncle! Even if you did give him more work to do, it was for the good of the duchy—Wait, am I indirectly approving of overwork?! It was a good thing I hadn’t said it, just thought it. *Phew. That was close!*

While we were chatting, we exited the Mining Operations Headquarters and started climbing the slope that led to the old mine.

As the young lady of a prominent house, I barely ever had to walk any distance on my own two feet. Moreover, there were plenty of burly miners on the slope, going in and out of the mine and pushing wheelbarrows full of rainbow stones around. Had Alexei been there, he would have *vehemently* opposed me walking in the middle of all these men and insisted on a carriage or a palanquin. In his absence, however, my guardian was Isaac. The thought didn’t seem to have crossed his mind. Instead, he exchanged greetings with all the miners we crossed paths with.

“Oh! You look well today, professor” was the gist of what most of them said.

“Thank you, I’m doing wonderfully,” Isaac would reply, waving his hand.

However, some made comments that were slightly less appropriate.

“That girl you’re with is quite a little treat,” one said with a smirk.

I didn’t want to make a scene so I replied in a cool voice, “Why, thank you *very* much. Now, good day to you.”

He stared at me with a stunned look on his face before it turned to horror under the murderous glares of Aaron and Mina.

Good! Maybe you'll learn to think twice before speaking!

Eventually, the gaping mouth of the rocky mountain came into view. The bluish-gray peak loomed over our heads with an uncanny intensity, almost as if exerting a palpable pressure. As I stared at it, my legs felt like they had turned to stone themselves.

Mina noticed immediately.

"My lady, is the slope too much for you? Should I carry you?"

I shook my head. I knew my battle maid *could* totally carry me princess-style and keep walking without breaking a sweat, but it would be way too embarrassing.

"No, I'm not tired," I said. "It's just, there's this..."

I paused mid-sentence and frowned. I'd felt a similar pressure before, but I couldn't recall when.

Isaac took a good look at my face and asked, "Ekaterina, have you ever met a god?"

"Huh?!" I blurted out, completely taken aback by his question.

"Three Gods of the Mountain seem to have descended upon this peak. The priests must have told them a member of the House of Yulnova would come to worship them shortly."

Isaac had just told me something crazy as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

"You can tell, granduncle?"

Just like that, he said something even crazier: "Yes. After all, I often encounter those gods."

I'm sorry but, what*? Who in the world are you? On top of being a genius who'll leave his mark on history, you even know gods?!*

At least I now comprehended what that tremendous pressure I'd been feeling was—the might of a god. It was the same sensation I'd experienced when I'd met the God of Death.

The Mountain Sanctuary did not worship just one god. Its role was to revere all the mountain divinities of the Yulnova Duchy. Although, if I understood correctly, there was a focus on the gods for places with mines. The sanctuary's most important mission was to beg for these gods' forgiveness for hurting the mountain and quell

their anger.

That said, just because a sanctuary worshipped certain gods didn't mean that these gods would necessarily descend upon our realm. In fact, outright asking them to visit was considered incredibly rude and was strictly forbidden. All one could do was pray and hope.

I wasn't sure why, but ever since our grandfather had started being in charge of this pilgrimage, at least one of the Gods of the Mountain had descended whenever he came to visit. That trend seemed to have continued even after Alexei took over.

"I had no idea the Gods of the Mountain dwelled on *this* mountain when they descended to visit the sanctuary," I said.

"The god of this mountain has a particularly high status among the mountain divinities. That is why the other gods stop here to greet him first before visiting the sanctuary. That esteemed god is very warmhearted and used to be quite fond of Lady Kristina, the founder's wife, when she was still a shaman. Even today, he continues to treat the House of Yulnova and the Mountain Sanctuary kindly."

So that's why... Thank you, Kristina!

Speaking of Kristina, her gentle personality was the reason the knights of our order were fine with a light tap on the shoulder during the ceremony instead of a brutal slam to channel their fighting spirit, wasn't it?

A kindhearted god and a gentle shaman. I'm sure they must have gotten along well.

We kept walking as we talked and, before I knew it, we reached the entrance of the old mine.

Miners were coming and going from the main gallery, and next to it stood a tunnel closed up by an iron grille with a sign that said "No Entry" plastered on it. Aaron told me it led to the area where iron used to be mined. There was a door secured by a heavy chain and a padlock. Aaron pulled out a key, opened the padlock, and undid the

chain. Then, he stepped forward, using the rainbow stone lantern he'd brought to light up his path.

"Is there anything in here?" I asked.

"Not really," Isaac said. "The main gallery would have done just fine too, but this place won't be as crowded, so it'll be easier..."

He suddenly paused, struck by a realization. "Ah! Are you scared? I shouldn't have brought a young lady to such a place... I've made a mistake again..."

"Please don't worry about me, granduncle. I'm not alone, so I'm not scared."

I wasn't all that young inside, and I'd lived a life during which no one would have put up with me whining that I was afraid of the dark. Working at night was common among systems engineers. For the corporate drone that I used to be, getting off work long after night had fallen was practically a daily occurrence.

Wow, I sure dealt with a lot in my past life, huh? Still, what does he mean by "easier"? What *will be?*

"You're so sweet and dependable, Ekaterina. I'll do my best to pick out a good one for you."

I watched Isaac get down on one knee. I still had no idea what he was talking about.

Ah! That's mana!

I felt Isaac's mana flow into the bedrock. As swift as lightning, it descended toward the deepest layers of the ground. Despite that, it didn't seem to be earth mana. Mine certainly didn't flow through bedrock like that. Was Isaac's attribute unique? Close to earth mana, but somewhat different. Perhaps his attribute was rock?

Eventually, I couldn't keep track of where his mana was going. It was too deep.

"I got it," Isaac whispered, suddenly reversing the flow of his mana. It was as though he was pulling something up from the depth of the mine.

"It's big!" Aaron said excitedly. Just like I did, Aaron had earth mana. Could he still feel what Isaac was doing?

He'd only just spoken when a bright light, far brighter than the light of the lantern he was carrying, filled the tunnel.

“I got a good one,” Isaac said calmly, although I could hear a tinge of fatigue in his voice.

In his arms, he now held a large rainbow stone that glowed brightly. It had a peculiar shape: like a branch of coral with manifold arms that extended upward, as though reaching for the heavens. Inside of it, light crimson mana twirled, lending it the color of a red rose. It was so beautiful it stole my breath away.

“This is for you,” Isaac said. With a smile, he extended the rainbow stone to me.

“My! But it seems so valuable...”

I couldn’t help but hesitate. Not only was it huge, but the beauty and intensity of its glow made it clear it was very precious. It must have been considerably pricier than the rainbow stone I’d worn as a brooch in the past.

“Is this not a specimen of great scientific interest?” I asked. “I think you should keep it, granduncle. The thought of it existing delights me enough.”

“You truly are a good girl, Ekaterina. It does appear to have a rare mana attribute and the quality seems high. I’d be glad if you allowed me to conduct some analysis someday, but I found it for *you*. Would you please accept it, for my sake? Ah, but it is quite heavy for a young girl to carry. I’ll carry it for you, for the time being.”

Aaron immediately stepped in. “Please, professor, I’ll carry it.”

“No, Lord Aaron. If this belongs to her ladyship, *I* should carry it,” Mina said, snatching the stone from Isaac’s hands before anyone could react.

“But it’s so heavy—” Isaac started to protest. He didn’t want to let a girl carry it, even if she was a maid. However, when he saw her lift it as though it weighed nothing, he cut himself off before adding, “Ah, you are... I see.”

He nodded and did not insist further. He seemed to have parsed Mina’s background.

“Now then, Professor, my lady, let us head back,” Aaron said, coming back to his senses.

“We should. You must be tired, Ekaterina. Go rest once we return

to the headquarters," Isaac said gently.

Aaron's tone had sounded strangely urgent. Did the two have something else planned? I was puzzled when I remembered we'd entered a zone that was clearly marked as "No Entry." There might have been security reasons why we shouldn't stay here for too long.

Convinced by the conclusion I'd just reached, I nodded to myself and followed Aaron and Isaac out of the mine.



"Granduncle," I began as we were going down the slope that led to the Mining Operations Headquarters, "earlier, I felt your mana sink deep into the ground. You pulled this rainbow stone from the depths with your mana, right?"

Isaac's mana seemed truly special! What he'd done was like that paranormal power the spiritualists had touted in my past life!

It was called "apport," wasn't it?

Surprisingly enough, there were even fewer claims of calling objects to your hand in this world than in my previous one. According to the books I'd read, a few occurrences had been studied in the past, but they were rare and far between.

Summoning something that didn't exist to begin with into your hand was a thing—flames, ice, darkness, or lightning for instance. Technically, you could liquefy the water in the air and get it to gather in your hand, but that was quite different from attracting a stone buried deep underground.

Now that I thought about it, perhaps the persecution of monsters and anything monster-related during this world's Middle Ages had something to do with this. Wasn't it possible that those with unique mana had been hunted down like witches?

"Ever since I was a child, I have always found myself attracted to unusual stones, as though they are calling to me," Isaac explained. "When they call out, I feel an irresistible urge to go find them. In the past, I used a shovel to look for them, but after I learned that dirtying my clothes was a big inconvenience for everyone else, I started wondering if there was a way to get them to come to me

with my mana. Eventually, I figured out how to."

Raisa's speech had quite the effect!

It was interesting to see that the thought of not looking for the stones had never even crossed Isaac's mind. Instead, he'd looked for a way to keep doing so without dirtying his clothes. His train of thought really was that of a genius. People said that genius was one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. With Isaac, that seemed to be true.

"Granduncle, is your attribute earth?"

"It was classified as such, but there are many types of earth mana that seem to poorly fit the category. See, I've always thought it strange that my mana is considered the same as that of someone with control over plants, for instance. Insisting on maintaining the categories theorized during the days of the Astra Empire is quite unreasonable, in my opinion."

What he'd just said made a lot of sense. The mana attributes, such as earth, water, fire, wind, ice, light, darkness, thunder, and holy, had all been classified during the days of the Astra Empire. Even nowadays, the influence of the dazzling Astra Empire was so strong that no one dared challenge this. Thus, even when someone's mana didn't seem to fit in any of the existing categories, people forcibly attributed it to one of them.

The Maiden of Death, Selene, was supposed to have "obscure" mana. According to the classification of the ancient Astra Empire, that attribute didn't exist at all. In other words, even if others had the same mana she did, another label would have been forced onto them.

A similar event had occurred in my previous world. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle had developed a theory that everything on the planet was made of earth, air, fire, and water. For a long time, people trusted him blindly and refused to accept anything else —or so I'd read in a manga. Back then, his words had carried the same weight as a god's.

"I agree, granduncle," I said. "In fact, I believe that someday, we might just stop classifying attributes altogether."

Just like the four classical chemical elements theory disappeared

for good along with the discovery of the atom, I thought but didn't say.

Isaac's eyes widened at my statement but the surprise on his face was quickly replaced by a smile.

"That's a bold statement," he said, before adding, "I love when you say such things. I shall definitely come to visit you in the capital. I'd like to see your workshop and chat with you some more."



The following day, I went to the Mountain Sanctuary.

Out of respect for the gods, I'd kept my clothing humble but befitting of the lady of an important noble family. The priests led me to the innermost part of the sanctuary along with Forli and Aaron, who'd accompanied me.

I'd assumed Isaac would also be coming, but when I'd brought up the idea yesterday, he'd hummed, thought about it, then said: "I think I will pass. The gods' jokes confuse me."

His answer had probably confused me more than the jokes had confused him. I imagined he would spend the entire day immersing himself in his research without a care in the world, but *I* couldn't stop thinking of the strange thing he'd said. Was he on such good terms with the gods that they cracked jokes with him?

The sanctuary was built with stones so old that I could feel the long history of this place with every step. The room we were in was decorated with magnificent sculptures that represented each of the Gods of the Mountain worshipped in the duchy. Some looked just like humans, some like animals such as wolves or wild boars, while others had distinctive, unnatural appearances.

At the center of all these gods was one who looked like an elder sage with gray hair and a gray beard. I'd just been told he was the god of the mountain of the old mine when his likeness shone.

He was descending.

Light beamed out of the statue, and an old man that looked exactly like it revealed himself. Every human present reverently bowed as his might filled the room.

I was still looking down when a voice sounded. “Daughter of the Yulnova, you may raise your head. The rest of you may be at ease as well.”

I’d never heard a voice that sounded quite so old, but it was also very gentle. Just as I’d been told, I lifted my head.

“I’m honored you granted me the chance to meet you,” I said. “I’m Ekaterina Yulnova.”

“A lovely girl you are. You did well to come here,” he said with a smile.

He reminded me so much of the famous “grey” wizard from that hit blockbuster movie series—only even kinder! Even though the pressure he brought forth was so powerful I didn’t think anyone could stand up to him, I still felt at ease in his presence. He had the energy of a kindly grandpa.

Before long, two more statues started glowing, followed by their gods descending.

The first one also had a human appearance, but her looks were almost the complete opposite of the god of the old mine. She was a very young girl who seemed no older than an elementary school student. She was cuter than any child I’d ever seen, even in my past life where we’d had mass media! Seeing her, it felt as though an angel was in front of me. She was a goddess, not an angel, but I couldn’t rid myself of that impression. Her long, flowing hair was bright green, and a beautiful flower crown crafted from a variety of blossoms sat on her head. The lovely angel looked every bit as fragrant as a spring mountain in full bloom.

The other god was a large wolf—much larger than even Regina and the other hounds. On top of that, he was draped in flames. His mane and the tip of his tail burned orange and his piercing eyes looked like melted gold. There was even fire escaping from his large mouth.

Despite all this, I didn’t feel hot at all, so I assumed the god of the old mine must have been protecting us.

Considering his looks, the wolf god was most likely the god of a volcano. He was even scarier than a monster, as far as appearances went.

This is amazing! I'm really feeling the fantasy vibe! Ah, how fantastic*!*

The priests were sneaking glances at me, worried that I'd be afraid, but their expressions turned unreadable when they noticed I was excited instead.

First of all, I decided to apologize to the three gods for Alexei's absence and informed them that he was now Duke of Yulnova.

"What? I thought that child had been a duke for a long time. The previous duke had been bringing him to visit since he was a child, and after that, he came alone from time to time."

Oops.

The god of the old mine seemed to have no idea our father so much as existed. By the previous duke, I was pretty sure he meant Sergei...

Awkward. I probably shouldn't correct him.

Instead, I read out the list of the offerings I'd brought. As per the customs, the offerings included alcohol, food, ornaments, and more. Needless to say, every item was of the highest quality there was. They accepted my offerings with pleasure.

After that, I moved on to the next thing I had to do: consulting with them regarding the afforestation plans. This would directly impact the mountains and forests of the duchy, so it was better to let the gods know in advance.

"Afforestation, you say?" the god of the old mine said with a gentle smile. He made an appreciative sound. "Humans live far shorter lives than trees, yet you now think of replanting trees. How patient your kind has become."

"If the forests persist, demonic beasts will find refuge inside them," the fiery wolf god said. "Was it not your kind's goal to eradicate them?"

His voice was low and intense and his smoldering gold eyes were fixed on me. I bowed to him.

"To put it plainly," I said, "demonic beasts are indeed terrifying to us humans. Individually, humans are weak. If anyone were to run into a monster alone, they'd surely lose their life. That is why many wish for their disappearance."

One-eyed bears and emperor bees. As far as a regular person with no mana was concerned, they were the same—creatures one couldn't hope to resist. Just like the old man who'd had to sit back and watch the bear wreak havoc on his field, most were powerless against them. It was obvious people like them simply wished to be rid of the monsters.

Even in my previous world, many people who'd lived in regions where bears resided had often wished for them to drop dead. After all, one bad encounter could cost lives. It was natural to feel this way. For those in this world who lived with the constant threat of monsters hanging above their heads, the decision to protect monsters' ecosystems and allow them to thrive sounded like the selfish whim of nobles who never had to worry about finding a monster on their own doorstep.

"However, the king of the north, the Black Dragon, will not stand by if we continue to destroy the forest. If we anger him, it is humans that will be decimated. Therefore, we have sworn to put every effort into this new initiative so that humans and monsters may find a path toward peaceful cohabitation."

We have no choice! If we don't start replanting trees, the Black Dragon will once again lock off an entire area in protest. The Black Dragon had given us the perfect excuse to start putting efforts into afforestation. *Thanks, Mr. Hidden-Love-Interest!*

"Besides, the resources of the forest are important to us," I continued. "If we destroy the forests to expand agricultural land and annihilate all demonic beasts, life may become easier for people. However, we'll have lost something we can never recover."

In my past life, delicious bread had been made with yeast discovered in Shirakami-Sanchi forest, new medicines had been invented using plants found in tropical rainforests, and much more. If the forests of the duchy disappeared, who knew what future discoveries would be forever lost?

"I shall not sink myself into platitudes and pretend we are doing this because demonic beasts are alive and all lives must be preserved. We humans are working for the future of *humanity*. We believe we should strive to protect what can help *us* in the future.

That is all. Yet..."

The last moments of the one-eyed bear flashed through my mind.

"There is also no denying that we humans feel pain when we witness the end of a life. Even if we are the ones taking this life away. Laughable, is it not? The truth is, I would like for every living being, regardless of their nature, to have the fullest, longest life they can possibly have."

I was aware this was naive and somewhat irresponsible for me to think, but I couldn't help it.

Oh, shoot! I ended up telling the gods my true feelings!

The fiery wolf god looked at me with an unreadable expression. After a few moments of silence, he said, "You have a peculiar soul."

AAAH!

The Maiden of Death had told me the same thing! Did my soul really appear that strange to the gods? Forli and Aaron looked at me.

Don't look! Don't smile!

"Oh? Have you changed your mind? Do you want a human bride now?"

The goddess with the flower crown had just said the most outrageous thing in the cutest voice I'd ever heard. Deep down, I screamed.

"Don't lump me in with the likes of you," the wolf god retorted.

The goddess looked at me and added, "Speaking of which, you were with my bride yesterday, were you not, youngster?"

Huh?

*Her...*bride*?*

...

Sorry, I don't think I'm following.

Even if I tried my hardest to ignore the fact that this perfect angel was talking to me in a tone weirdly reminiscent of an old man's and calling *me* the youngster (which was already incredibly strange, but whatever), I wasn't sure I could get past that.

Why is a tiny girl talking about her bride?! And also who in the world is her bride?!

A chill ran through my body. The only unusual person I'd been

with yesterday was...

I glanced at Aaron. Sure enough, all light had left his eyes. He looked like a fish that'd been dead and lying under the sun for three days.

"My bride, Isaac," the goddess clarified.

It really *was* him!

This elementary school girl really was calling the genius professor, Isaac Yulnova (a man around sixty), her bride.

No, but seriously, this is weird*.*

Had that been what Isaac meant when he said the gods' jokes confused him?! I nearly fell on my butt from shock, but I desperately held myself up.

You can do it, Ekaterina! You're here on Alexei's behalf, so you can't embarrass him! You've got this! On your honor as a fangirl, stay strong!

Smiling as hard as I could, I straightened my back.

"Indeed, I was with Granduncle Isaac," I said. "He accompanied me inside the old mine."

"I'm aware, child. I felt my bride's mana and wanted to greet him, but he left so quickly..."

Come to think of it, Aaron had been strangely eager to get out of the mine yesterday. Was it because of her? Had he known she'd come?

Aaron, is that goddess your rival? Are you two fighting over the professor?

To go so far as to compete with a goddess... Aaron's love ran even deeper than I'd imagined—I couldn't see the bottom.

I need to do better and up my game too! Or maybe not? I'm not sure deepening my addiction is something I should actively work on.

"Isn't my bride pretty? I've rarely seen such a beautiful soul," the goddess said.

I kinda agreed, actually. Isaac's heart *did* seem pure and unblemished.

"And you certainly possess an unusual soul," she continued. "As I'd expect from a member of *his* family. It is quite a sight."

Her focus was back to me.

"H-Hearing those words from a beautiful goddess such as yourself is an undeserved honor," I replied.

"I'm beautiful?" she asked innocently as a colorful lily bloomed on her flower crown. It looked like the flowers of her crown hadn't been picked up and woven together like I thought—they were alive! "But worry not, child. I shall not take you as my bride. Humans are monogamous creatures, are they not? I intend to respect your customs."

I seriously don't know how to answer her anymore.

"I must say, I'm surprised you did not know Isaac was my rightful bride," she continued. "I made my intentions clear to the previous head of your family and received his hand."

GRANDFATHER?!

What in the world had happened?!

I was struck by a sudden realization. One of Sergei's favorite pastimes had been playing matchmaker. It was hard to believe he hadn't put all of his energy into finding the perfect wife for his adorable brother. Somehow, he hadn't. Was it because he'd actually agreed to make him this goddess's bride?

Yet Isaac seems to think this is all an elaborate joke... Also, if I may, why "bride"?! Couldn't she at least call him her groom?!

I really wanted to correct her, but could I? Leaving the correct terms aside, what did this mean for Isaac? Even though he wasn't aware of it, he was the partner of a goddess! I was about to open my mouth when the god of the old mine let out a warm laugh.

"It's no problem that she didn't know. She does now, so everything is all right, is it not?"

"If you say so, Elder God. I shall not push the matter any further."

For better or for worse, the chance to correct the goddess slipped me by.

Bye-bye, chance. Au revoir!

I pulled myself together and went back to the original program of the ceremony. It was almost over!

Just as I opened my mouth—for real this time—the fiery wolf god interrupted. "You need to know this. My mountain will erupt before long. Prepare yourselves accordingly."

Excuse me. WHAAAAAT?!

Why are you dropping a bomb like that right before the end of our meeting?!

I'd experienced a similar sense of dread too many times at work in my past life. It was the same feeling I'd gotten when I was ready to pack up and go home, only to receive an urgent email or call. And I hated it *so* much!

However, I kept the screams of my soul locked in a cage and replied, as politely as I could, "Thank you very much for conveying such an important piece of information to us. Thanks to your kindness, many lives will surely be saved."

"I don't care about the lives of humans," he snapped back, turning his face away with a *humph*.

That Time a God Turned Out to Be a Tsundere!



In my past world, an announcement like that would have meant overtime for the messenger as well, but it turned out that gods didn't do overtime, and they left just like that.

Their statues had barely finished shining when the youngest priest in the room dashed out. He returned with a map and the book in which priests wrote down revelations.

Good job!

It clearly wasn't the first time the Mountain Sanctuary had received a divine message saying there would be a volcanic eruption. The priests were aware of what they had to do. I imagined handling such announcements was one of their main duties.

"Please do not worry, my lady," one of them told me. "He said 'before long.' According to the previous records, this isn't likely to mean today or tomorrow. Sometimes a hundred years goes by before such a prediction comes true."

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

"For the gods, a hundred years must be but an instant," he continued. "Still, there are precedents of such events taking place mere months after the gods' warning, so our preparations should be

swift and thorough."

Hmm...

My first instinct had been to be pissed at the gods for being so vague about their warning, but the priest had a point. They probably couldn't estimate time by human standards that well, even if they wanted to. Was it like the feeling when you were going to sneeze? You knew it was coming, but you'd be hard-pressed to say in how many seconds exactly.

That was a terrible comparison, wasn't it?

In my past world, the timing of volcanic eruptions was usually estimated by studying the eruption cycle, installing seismographs in the risky zones, and tracking volcanic tremors and geomagnetism data. In this world, people didn't have to lift a finger and they still got an estimate (as well as the exact location of the upcoming eruption).

Talk about cost and labor effectiveness! I should be thankful to the gods, shouldn't I?

"As the forestry and agriculture advisor, I shall head to that god's mountain to have a proper look at it, even from afar," Forli said. "I must ascertain the state of the forest, fields, and villages surrounding it so that we can estimate the damage, as well as prepare appropriate shelters for the villagers."

That made total sense. A map wasn't enough to get a perfect grasp of the mountain's topography. In this world, maps were far from being as accurate as in my previous world. They didn't include contour lines or anything of the kind. While it could be dangerous, going to that mountain in person was absolutely necessary.

Everyone, applaud our resident nature expert!

"Well said," I told Forli. "Besides, wouldn't it be possible to predict the timing of the eruption to some extent based on the smoke from the crater and the frequency of the tremors at the actual location?"

The more volcanic tremors and smoke, the closer the eruption. Asking the people of the surrounding villages about recent changes could go a long way.

"Dear priests," I continued. "If any of you know about the signs of an upcoming eruption, would you be so kind as to accompany

Lord Forli to the mountain to ascertain whether the eruption is imminent or not?"

"Of course, my lady. Building up knowledge of volcanoes is one of our missions. We shall send our best expert."

"Thank you. I shall be counting on you. But I do have one last request," I said. "Would you be so kind as to consult the documents about the previous eruptions of that particular volcano to investigate the scale of the damage?"

"We shall start researching at once, my lady," one of the oldest priests exclaimed, bringing his hand to his chest.

Here, you couldn't just type keywords into a computer and find the data you were looking for. All you could do was rely on the good old human wave tactics: throw enough people at the problem that one eventually found what they were looking for!

Ah, I really wish I could just create a database...

"Speaking of evacuating the villagers," Aaron said, "there are vacant buildings around the old mine. They used to be full of miners, but ever since the iron ran out, most of the accommodations stand empty. They haven't been used in so long they're likely in a poor state, but I shall check."

"Good idea," I said. "If it looks like the eruption might occur in a few months, we will need to start preparing shelters as quickly as possible."

I felt a bit weird making such decisions without getting my brother's input, but considering the urgency of the situation, I was sure he'd understand.

"We must report this matter to my brother," I said. "Returning to the fortress and discussing it with him in person seems like the best solution. Or perhaps we should send a knight galloping back at full speed to inform him instead?"

"My thoughts on the matter are that while a knight carrying partial information would indeed be swifter, His Grace would have a difficult time taking command without the full story," Forli said. "You returning to discuss the situation with him in detail would be far more helpful, I believe."

"If that is what you think, Lord Forli, I shall heed your advice."

At these words, the head priest of the sanctuary bowed to me. "For such a young lady to remain so calm in the face of such an abrupt revelation... Not to mention you seem so well-versed in the early signs of an eruption, such as smoke and tremors. I am truly in awe of your wisdom, my lady," he said.

Ack! I slipped into troubleshooting mode out of habit and said too much!

I hadn't realized, but what I considered common knowledge—such as volcanic tremors—was in fact specialized knowledge only those who'd studied the topic would know in this world. Speaking of the signs of an eruption as though knowing them was the most natural thing in the world hadn't been very smart. That said, I couldn't afford to care about that in the middle of an emergency.

"Likewise, I am very much impressed by your swift reaction and way of handling this. I thought of the sanctuary as a place of worship, but I now realize it is far more than that. I can see you are deeply committed to helping the people," I said.

"Your words honor us, my lady. We strive to live up to the expectations of the wise Lord Vasili. As he once decreed, the Mountain Sanctuary should not be content solely to receive divine messages."

As expected of the king of efficiency himself. He seemed like he'd been the kind to get even religious institutions to do their share of the work. He must have been a firm believer in the idea that sanctuaries weren't just for receiving revelations but for acting upon them.

In my past world, people had been concerned about keeping the church and state separate, but the Yulnova family incorporated religious institutions into governance. Although, unlike in my past world, the Gods of the Mountain *actually* showed up at the Mountain Sanctuary. That meant there was no need to worry about priests using religion as a pretext just to amass wealth.

That said, it didn't look like the god worshipped at the Sun Sanctuary in the capital ever descended to it, so the high priest there probably did whatever he wanted with the funds.

"As you said earlier, my lady, many villages will surely be saved

thanks to this divine revelation," the head priest reiterated. "Such messages are only passed down to those the gods recognize. The fact that three of them descended this time shows that they favor you. Please, do visit us again in the future."

"I'm not that grand," I replied. "I believe the gods showed me their favor because they approve of the way my brother runs the duchy."

Still, I wanted to come back and take a better look at the sanctuary during a leisurely period. Had time allowed, I would have loved to ask the priests for a detailed explanation of which statue represented which god and to hear a bit about each of them.

For now, I needed the driver and the horses to work hard once again so we could get home fast!

Just as I promised you in my dream, I'm returning as swiftly as I can! Unfortunately, I do bear some bad news.



"Lord Forli, please promise me you won't do anything dangerous," I said after we'd decided on our course of action. "You mustn't approach the crater under any circumstances. Please return as soon as you have a good grasp of the surroundings of the mountain. Even if there are no signs, volcanoes can still erupt suddenly. Remember that your safety is the most important thing there is."

"My lady, you needn't worry so much for an old man like me," he replied with a smile. "I'm fully aware that my role is solely to grasp the present situation. I shall not pursue the matter too far."

"You're right. It was quite presumptuous of me to express concerns about someone as competent as you. Do forgive me. I only ask that you do not forget that your existence is irreplaceable in my brother's eyes."

To Alexei, our grandfather was a compass—the goal he'd set for himself that kept him on course. As Sergei's close friend, Forli was special to him.

In my past world, even though science was far more advanced than in this world, I remembered hearing about a famous

volcanologist couple who'd lost their lives in Kyushu during an eruption. Volcanoes were unpredictable.

"I do not deserve your concern, my lady. The one His Grace holds dearest to his heart is you. So, please hurry back to the fortress to show him you're in good health."

True! Alexei *did* love me the most.

That reminded me, Forli had completely switched to referring to Alexei as "His Grace." Not so long ago, he'd called him "young master" most of the time. I'd found it adorable, to be honest. I supposed the change went to show Alexei had grown more mature in Forli's eyes, so I ought to have been happy about it, even if I missed it.

Hold on—Forli was indeed responsible for the forests and agriculture, but he was one of Alexei's *advisors*. Was someone in such a high position really supposed to roam around in the wilderness so much? I had a feeling that the number two of Forli's department must have handled most of the office work.

Actually, I remembered hearing that, while our grandfather had been the one to appoint Forli forestry and agriculture advisor, the one he'd actually wanted to name was the current vice-advisor. Apparently, that man's status hadn't been appropriately high, so many had opposed him. Sergei was so convinced he'd be great at the job, he'd named Forli instead—the son of the marquess whose status no one could find fault with—and appointed the other as vice-advisor. I assumed the plan was for the latter to do the job without others criticizing him.

That was why there were never any problems and the work was still being done, even though Forli spent his time wandering through the duchy like the iconic retired lords from popular historical dramas. Forli said he thought it was high time he retired and officially passed down his position to the vice-advisor, but the latter vehemently refused and begged him to maintain the status quo.

That was practically him saying, "The real power is in my hands, but all the liability falls on you. I won't ever let go of such a sweet deal!"

That was a little mean, but as a former corporate drone, I could

see the appeal.

The fact that Forli's position was "just for show" was probably why he'd accepted the proposition in the first place. Knowing grandfather and his boundless scheming, I suspected that, while he had genuinely wanted the vice-advisor to do the job, his actual goal had been to achieve exactly what had transpired: getting *both* of them to work for him. I could tell Forli had many qualities Sergei would have valued in this context, including his love for the duchy's nature and the fact that he'd never misuse his authority despite his rank, so I was almost certain of my theory.

Anyway, the priest who would accompany Forli on his inspection ended up being the young priest who'd dashed out of the room to grab the map and book as soon as the gods had left. He had the stamina for it, was a sensible person, and seemed well learned. He even knew about volcanic gas and its dangers. Sure, he didn't use that precise term, but he warned everyone about "an invisible poison the volcano can breathe out and which could accumulate in certain areas." That wasn't very precise, but considering the period we were in, it was plenty.

"Lord Forli can use wind mana. If you must approach a place with stagnant air, please remember to clear the air with your wind first. I hope the two of you will be careful," I told the priest with a smile.

"Th-Thank you, my lady. Do not worry, I shall ensure Lord Forli's safety," the priest told me, his face bright red.

"I'm most thankful for your concern too, my lady," Forli said, wearing an amused expression. "Please be careful on your way back."

Despite our farewells, even emergency trips required some level of preparation. Forli and the priest, in particular, needed to gather information on the villages that surrounded the mountain and maps first. These documents wouldn't be found at the sanctuary. They needed to get in touch with the local government official.

This would require some time, so while they waited for these

documents (and I for my carriage to be ready), Forli, Isaac, Aaron, and I had a meal together.

Despite the age gap between us, we had an enjoyable chat. Forli and Isaac kept surprising me with stories of Sergei I'd never heard, and I learned that Aaron and the forestry and agriculture vice-advisor were in fact good friends.

I also listened with much interest and admiration when Isaac spoke of his research and how he'd established his theory regarding prism circles. As for Isaac, he seemed deeply impressed with me after Forli told him about afforestation.

"It was merely a passing thought," I replied awkwardly. "Hearing such high praise from you is quite embarrassing."

"Well, I would never have thought of it myself. You're so bright, Ekaterina. Tell me, do you and Alexei get along?"

"We do!" I exclaimed. "My dear brother is always *very* kind to me!"

My overly enthusiastic answer made everyone laugh.

"My big brother was also very kind to me," Isaac replied. "It seems the two of you are much like us. I am glad to hear that, and I look forward to seeing you again in the capital."

Chapter 4: A Calamity Visits

I was finally on my way home.

My carriage rattled along the road, protected on all sides by six knights. While this was meant to be a forced march, it felt just as leisurely to me as the outbound trip.

As we proceeded farther away from the old mine, we once again entered the forest. Our procession kept moving forward, continuing its way toward the northern capital through the dense vegetation.

We were traveling fast for this world's standards, but that did not mean we were reckless. We reached our planned accommodation before dark and stopped there for the night, only returning to the road when the sun rose in the morning.

After reentering the forest, we reached the territory of the emperor bees. We paused for a break next to a spring near the people of the forest's woodland so the horses could rest. While the knights ensured the animals drank and grazed, I played with Regina and the hounds. I brushed them, laughing at the amount of fur that ended up on my comb, and had a lot of fun watching Mina throw sticks for them to fetch. I would have thrown the sticks myself, but my arms were so weak they didn't fly far enough.

Suddenly, Regina came up to me and rubbed her big body against mine. I reached out to scratch her head and noticed her fur was standing on end.

"What's wrong, Regina?"

Almost immediately, the other hounds gathered around me. Some started howling while others paced nervously. Their gazes were focused in the same direction, so I looked that way.

An enormous black bird was resting on a branch.

It was pitch-black, like a crow, but its shape reminded me more of a bird of prey. I was no expert, so I couldn't tell if it was closer to a hawk or an eagle, though.

A black bird of prey...

"My lady!" Mina exclaimed, rushing to me. She protectively placed herself in between the bird and me. "Please go back to the carriage. There's something off about this bird. Its aura is unnatural!"

I nodded. "All right."

Just as I was about to move, the bird stretched open its large wings and took off.

Mina remained alert, her eyes fixed on it as she continued to shield me with her back. When she spoke again, her tone was harsher than usual. "My lady, that was *not* a normal bird."

"I...can't help but wonder if that was the bird Lord Forli once told us about."

The Dragon Herald Bird—no one knew whether it was a subordinate of the Black Dragon or its alter ego, but it reported everything it saw and heard to its master.

These words had only just left my lips when the sky, which had been clear and blue since morning, darkened.

A loud noise echoed in the forest and the wind started whipping, swaying the branches and leaves. My long indigo hair fluttered just as much, but I barely even noticed it. All I could do was stare upward.

In the sky, above the canopy, was the humongous midnight-black head of a dragon. His eyes were red as a raging inferno and gazed down upon us as though we were ants.

The sight froze me in place. I couldn't even scream at the unreal spectacle in front of my eyes. The dragon was *so* enormous.

I feel like I'm inside a movie.

Not just *any* movie—it felt like I was now faced with the star of the most famous Japanese monster movies of all time. The one that had inspired Hollywood adaptations and even had its name given to an unofficial constellation by NASA.

Now, the issue was that people who stumbled into that monster at the start of a movie were all doomed to die, weren't they? Any second now, it would stomp on me with a big *thud*.

"My lady!"

Oleg and the others rushed over and took position around me as

well. They had their spears and swords at the ready and glared, unfaltering, at the dragon. The knights of the Order of Yulnova possessed boundless courage. Despite their resolve, anyone could tell that resistance was futile in the face of this gigantic beast.

"My lady! Get a hold of yourself," Mina said. "Come, you must hide inside the carriage."

She started pulling me by the hand, but we hadn't even taken a step when the ground shook and a deafening noise filled the air. The impact almost sent us flying.

The Black Dragon had landed in front of us—and his piercing crimson eyes were focused on me.

Mina hugged me to prevent my body from toppling over. She was perfectly still, awaiting the dragon's next move. That was when I finally came back to my senses.

Pull yourself together, Ekaterina! I was the person with the highest status here. I had to step up and lead. *Think. Make a decision. There's no time.*

If I messed up here, our lives would be in danger. There was no mistake: The being in front of us was Vladforen, the Dragon King in his dragon form. He was powerful enough to envelop the imperial capital in a sea of flames and grind the palace to dust. Hell, he could destroy the entire empire if he so wished!

The thought of running away crossed my mind, but I'd seen more than enough movie scenes in which someone's car was trampled by a monster and then exploded to discard the idea immediately. Fleeing wasn't an option, and neither was fighting.

But I knew there was another card to play. Vladforen was a hidden love interest in the game. He could turn into a human and would fall in love with Flora if you made the right choices. In other words, he wasn't a mindless brute; he had intelligence and feelings. There had to be a way we could reach a mutual understanding.

My mind's made up. I need to act.

"Mina, let go of me."

"My lady?!" Her eyes widened in surprise, but I managed to slip out of her arms.

"Lower your blades, everyone. You mustn't be rude," I said firmly.

"B-But, my lady!" Oleg exclaimed without turning back to look at me. I walked past him and the others and he screamed, "M-Ma'am?!"

I walked up to the Black Dragon without hesitation and performed an elegant curtsy—slow and low. This was the politest form of greeting for a noble lady, one that was normally reserved for emperors or empresses.

"It's an honor to make your acquaintance, O king of the north who rules over demonic beasts. I am the daughter of the House of Yulnova, which governs this territory as per the customs of human society. My name is Ekaterina. Have you come to talk to me, perhaps?"

There was a pause. I thought the silence might stretch for longer when the Black Dragon moved. He lowered his neck, approaching my face. The closer he got, the more overwhelmed I felt by his size.

He looked *exactly* like what I'd always pictured a dragon would look like in my past life. Black scales, sharp fangs, blazing red eyes. His eyes were particularly interesting in that many shades of red seemed to flicker inside them, as though a fire was really burning within. He also had two large horns at the top of his head that resembled those of a devil and a few smaller horns protruding on the sides. All in all, he looked terrifying.

"Ekaterina Yulnova," a low rumble came. It echoed through the mountains like a tremor of the earth.

I swallowed a breath. The Black Dragon had just said my name.

"Call my name," he continued.

Huh?

I was totally taken aback at first, but I was suddenly hit by a realization. I remembered the beautiful face of the God of Death, illuminated by the moonlight and his voice.

"That is the name of the king of the north, is it not? But a human should not know this name."

"If you do know my name—the name of the king of the north—call it."

I couldn’t tell what he wanted, but I wasn’t in a position to argue. He just had to bring a leg down to kill me, Mina, and the knights, in a heartbeat. As cannon fodder in the opening scene of a movie, all I could do was prepare myself for the worst and do as I was told.

“Your name is...Lord Vladforen, the Dragon King.”

His reaction was anything but what I’d imagined: He started laughing loudly.

The wind rose once more. It was so strong I had to close my eyes. When I managed to open them again, there was no dragon in front of me. Instead, there was a tall man with a cool and composed expression on his face floating a few meters above the ground. He wore black clothes that were nothing like modern fashion and had long black hair, a stark contrast with his strikingly pale skin. As for his eyes, they still appeared to be full of fire itself.

H-H-H-He... I stared at him, completely frozen. I felt as though my brain was about to shut down. *He’s...right there!!! The Dragon King in his human form!*

Since his route was hidden, I’d never even seen him in the game. I’d only stumbled across a single illustration while looking up if there was an Alexei route. His looks were so phenomenal that I’d even considered doing his route.

Back then, I’d been so naive. Oh, so naive.

His beauty in real life isn’t even comparable to that drawing!!!

The peerless beauty laughed until he landed and walked up to me. “Girl with an otherworldly soul, come with me,” he said, pulling me up into his arms.

“Let go of her ladyship!” Mina roared.

She rushed toward us at an inhuman speed and attacked Vladforen with a dagger she’d been hiding who knows where. However, her blade, which had moved too fast for my eyes to follow, only hit the air. By the time it reached him, Vladforen had already leaped away and was floating midair while he held me to his chest.

“You seem to have demonic blood in your veins. Who do you think you just tried to strike?” he asked Mina.

“Shut up!” she shouted.

She jumped, the crazed expression of an angered yaksha—a wild

spirit—on her face. Despite not running to build momentum, she rose several meters into the air. Her hand was about to reach me when Vladforen flew higher.

"My lady!"

The knights were also scrambling to reach me, but there wasn't much they could do from the ground. Throwing their spears at Vladforen when I was in his arms was completely out of the question. As for the hounds, they seemed to be struggling with their instinct to bow to the Dragon King. They were part monster, after all. Regina couldn't even howl, and several others lay belly-down on the ground in a show of submission.

Vladforen *humph*ed, looking at the group with an uninterested expression.

I felt a shiver go down my spine. Did their presence annoy him? If that was the case, would he try to kill them? I knew his dragon version could breathe fire, and I imagined even in his human form, he could use destructive attacks.

I bent over as much as I could from within his hold and screamed, "Mina! Everyone! I have accepted his invitation! We'll have a pleasant chat, so wait for me right where you are. Do *not* do anything! This is an order!"

It was my very first time uttering the word "order," and Mina and the others visibly stiffened.

As for Vladforen, he took my statement as his sign to fly farther up.

"My lady!" Mina cried out.

Her pained screams grew farther and farther away until I couldn't hear them anymore.



A strange noise buzzed in my ears and, suddenly, I noticed that we were above an entirely different area. I looked around, astonished.

Where are we?!

I was restlessly looking left and right when I realized we were

over the flank of a particularly high mountain. As far I could see, mountains upon mountains covered in lush green forests stretched endlessly. The color and shape of the vegetation told me we hadn't left the Yulnova Duchy.

But we were definitely *not* anywhere near where my carriage was.

Did we teleport? Had I really just teleported like the characters in manga and anime of my past life? *That's so cool!*

"You seem to be having fun."

Ah! I came back to my senses and glanced at the man who was carrying me princess-style...before immediately averting my eyes again. *Oh my, that's a lot to take in.*

The God of Death had been gorgeous too, but it'd been a sort of eerie, out-of-this-world type of beauty, especially at night under the moonlight. That had allowed me to keep my cool somewhat. Looking at Vladforen up close, in broad daylight, was another matter altogether!

Oh boy, my cognitive abilities are flying right into the stratosphere.

"Why won't you look at me?"

AAAAAH!!! Why's his voice hot too?!

I was finally calm(?) enough to pay attention to his voice, but that only resulted in more internal screaming.

My brother's voice was also deep and pleasant, but the Dragon King's voice was deeper still! As someone with experience singing in a choir, I'd say my brother was a baritone, while he was more of a bass or a bass-baritone.

Can you please stop speaking so close to my ears? It's resonating through my body and I feel like I'm gonna die!

Argh, come on girl! Now's not the time to be flustered. Be strong! Remember who's truly the one for you!

The Dragon King might have been gorgeous, but he wasn't my type! My type was Alexei!

I clenched my fists and looked up once more. This time, I was resolved not to avert my eyes.

All that tension must have shown on my face because the

beautiful Vladforen laughed softly—and I once again had to look away.

"Erm, you can let me down," I said.

"No need. You're light."

Oh my, he's polite too.

But still, this guy (talking about him like he was a regular human man, even though he was anything but) had to know what his face did to people! He was clearly finding my reaction funny, so I imagined he'd been in contact with other humans at one point or another.

Maybe he'd understand if I explained my point of view? Argh, but that just reminded me of the May 15 incident in Japan. The prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi, had tried just that, only to be told "Dialogue is futile" and be shot anyway.

No, no, no, there's no saying something like that will happen to me! He's a romanceable character. He's got to have feelings!

"I'm sorry to insist, but our customs stipulate that a young, unmarried woman should not have bodily contact with men outside her family. I will not be able to focus on any conversation unless you let me down first," I said.

"I see," Vladforen said with a little laugh. He moved us closer to the mountain, gliding through the air like it was nothing.

Whoa! I really wonder how that floating ability works. How peculiar.

Speaking of which, I remembered reading in my past life that dragons shouldn't technically be able to fly. Sure, they had wings, but their bodies were too big, making the wingspan-to-mass ratio way off. If Vladforen could fly in his dragon form despite the laws of physics, I shouldn't have been surprised he could float in his human form too. He was most likely doing something with his mana—not that I could feel his mana or tell what was going on.

Am I ignoring my current problem by thinking about other things? You bet.

After landing on the mountainside, Vladforen set me down on a large rock. The view was incredible. The green mountains stretched on and on all around us, and I had a feeling this place would one

day become a famous tourist attraction.

"I apologize for having broken your customs," Vladforen said.

Oh my! The one image of him I'd seen in my past life had led me to assume he was a self-centered, arrogant sort of character, but that didn't seem to be the case so far.

"You need not apologize," I replied. "In fact, I must thank you for heeding my words."

"You're calm. Humans usually scream at the top of their lungs if I so much as lift them off the ground. They're convinced they'll die. Could it be that humans can fly in the world you come from?"

Not *quite*, but he wasn't entirely wrong either. There'd been planes, paragliders, hang gliders, and more in my past world. People had also seen pictures and videos taken from the sky with drones and whatnot practically every day. Besides, I'd always been good at handling heights, both in this life and the previous one. Maybe that had to do with the fact that I used to love roller coasters...

Who cares about amusement parks?! Focus!

"Um, Dragon King, how do you know that my soul is from another world, and that I remember my previous life?"

"The God of Death and his wife told me about you," he replied right away.

I knew it!

No one else knew about that, so it just had to have been them! While that wolf god had told me I had a "peculiar soul," he hadn't guessed I came from another world! But why had they told the Dragon King about me?

I don't get it!

"They seem to have taken a liking to you. They're quite worried about you, you see. Tell me, do you usually reside in the imperial capital?"

"Yes, that would be correct."

"The God of Death can't enter the capital. There are far too many humans there calling forth far too many gods. That city is too saturated for him to step foot in it."

Ah! Come to think of it, I remembered hearing that the concentration of gods in the capital was already far too high for any

new god to settle there. I'd even heard about a worshipper building a sanctuary for the god he worshipped only to be told "This isn't gonna work. This place's too crowded. Give it up." (Still a liberal translation.)

Sounds like it was all true, huh?

"The God of Death is not weak by any means," Vladforen continued. "As a being with a finite lifespan, even I find it hard to oppose him. However, he has no believers and has knowingly acted against the very principles that govern him. There is no denying he's grown weaker by the gods' standards."

Ah, this is about Selene, isn't it? Allowing a dead human to remain in the realm of the living had to be against the core principle of death.

"He feared that he would not be able to protect you if something were to happen to you in the capital and wanted me to step in."

The God of Death was wary of the Creator God. But I never thought he'd be so worried about me. I didn't deserve such concern —and, to be honest, the current situation sounded even more dangerous to me!

Vladforen continued, "I've lived long enough to be on speaking terms with the gods, but I do not care for their circumstances. I dislike the imperial capital. So many humans crawling about... It makes me want to burn it to the ground."

Please don't. That isn't funny.

"However, I am interested in *you*, an otherworldly girl with memories of her past life. I've been alive for three thousand years. I have traveled this world and seen many things, so much that I grew weary of it all. Neither the fields of ice of the north nor the eastern horizon interest me anymore. Yet, I hear you know of an entirely different world. For the first time in a while, I am curious. Tell me of your world."

Oh, he is *self-centered all right! Why did you have to kidnap me just to have a chat?!*

I suddenly felt like Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*! If I remembered correctly, the sultan of that story was so overcome with rage after discovering his wife's infidelity that he

decided all women had to be the same and started mistrusting them all. As a result, each day, he had the woman he spent the night with executed in the morning.

Yeah, this situation is anything but funny. Just like Scheherazade, I'm stuck having to talk to someone who can kill me at any point.

Even if he didn't bother killing me himself, all Vladforen had to do was leave me here and I'd die on my own. In the middle of the mountains, I had no way to fend for myself.

I really wished he would have started this conversation more peacefully. I'd have been happy to tell him anything he wanted to know about my previous world, but dragging me here and demanding I talk was outrageous!

Despite my desire to scream at him, I kept my feelings in check. I could do this. I'd been a corporate drone for years! Outrageous clients and superiors? Been there, done that! I just had to remember the basics: sympathy and dialogue. That was how I'd always done things. First, you listened to the request attentively and made sure your interlocutor knew you thought their demands were perfectly justified. Then, you identified what they *really* wanted and came up with an adequate solution to their issue.

I'll push through!

He was a tad too handsome to fit the part, but as long as I imagined him as a client, I could deal with him calmly.

Who am I kidding? A "tad" doesn't cut it. He's way *too handsome. Anyway! Calm and composed. I've got this.*

"Just so you know, I won't do anything to you if you refuse to talk," he said before I could speak. "As I mentioned earlier, I am also mortal. My existence is governed by the principles of death. The God of Death fancies you—though I should say his wife does, in particular."

Huh? How did he know what I was thinking?!

"I can't peer into human minds, nor do I need to. It just seemed like the obvious train of thought for a human," he added.

Really?

"If you do not wish to talk to me, I'll simply return you to the place you were earlier. You can be at ease."

What was the point of kidnapping me like that, then?! I sighed in spite of myself, and Vladforen laughed again. *He's just messing with me because he finds it fun, isn't he? Damn him! Don't think you can get away with anything just because you're hot. It just makes you half forgiven—no more!*

"I cannot imagine how you must feel, having lived for three thousand years. If stories about my previous world can ease your boredom, I'm happy to share them with you," I said. "What kinds of things are you interested in?"

"I wonder. I don't know anything about your world, so I can't tell what questions would lead to interesting answers."

"In that case, allow me to first answer the question you asked earlier about whether humans could fly. In my past world, humans had indeed found several ways to fly in the sky."

There was a guilty pleasure in seeing his eyes widen in surprise.

There! Shocked, aren't you?

Explaining the details wouldn't be easy, though. There were no planes in this world. The concept hadn't even been invented yet! This meant there were no words to refer to anything of the sort.

In the end, I had no choice but to describe it in a roundabout way. "In this world, humans only use horses to travel faster. However, in my past world, people invented vehicles that resembled carriages but could run without relying on horses. Then, others added wings to these vehicles so we could fly in the sky. Some of these flying vehicles were large enough for several hundred humans to travel together at once."

Vladforen hummed, his interest piqued.

After attempting an explanation of how big a jumbo jet was using the measurement units of this world, I found that he was smiling.

"It's as big as me," he said.

No, you're definitely bigger, I thought but didn't dare say.

In the game, the Dragon King (dragon version) was large enough to trample the palace and was roughly as huge as the building itself —or perhaps that had been a bit of an exaggeration on the part of the artists? Earlier, I could only see his neck and head, so I couldn't properly estimate his overall size.

“So, where do humans go in these large vehicles?” Vladforen asked.

“Anywhere,” I replied. “Most countries were connected by air travel. These vehicles flew above the clouds, over seas and mountains. If we so wished, there was almost nowhere we could not go, from the fields of ice in the north to the fields of ice in the south, including the deserts.”

Vladforen’s gaze turned sharp.

“The fields of ice of the south? They do exist, far beyond the dense, humid jungles,” he said. “Some humans make this conjecture, but I don’t believe anyone holds it as a certainty.”

“In my past world, everyone knew this to be true. We called these areas the North Pole and the South Pole. I believe they were discovered approximately two hundred years before my time in that world.”

“With the flying vehicles?”

“No, with boats, at the time. Flying vehicles weren’t invented until about a hundred years before my time. People first sighted the South Pole a hundred years before flying vehicles were invented. They weaved their way through the ice in the water until they reached the solid fields of ice.”

I didn’t remember the name of the first person to visit Antarctica. All I remembered was that there’d been a crazy race to get to the South Pole first with people such as Amundsen, Scott, and Shirase duking it out.

Vladforen laughed. “You speak as though you’ve seen it all. You must have received a sophisticated education in your past world to know so much about events that occurred a hundred or two hundred years ago. I imagine you were a noble in your previous life too.”

“Not at all,” I said with a shake of my head. “I was a commoner. However, there was no more class system in my country by the time I was born. Everyone was born equal.”

“Equal...?” Vladforen whispered, clearly doubtful.

“Indeed. All children had a right to an education, which the state provided. From age six to age fifteen, it was compulsory for children to attend school. Everyone learned reading, writing, mathematics,

geography, history, and foreign languages."

"What a utopia."

Sensing the sarcasm in his tone, I smiled. "I shall be candid with you. People were only equal on the surface. Wealth inequality meant that some were born with a silver spoon, while others simply weren't. However, while I cannot speak for the rest of the world, at that specific point in time, in my country, people were more equal than ever before in history. The information I told you was considered general knowledge."

I'd come to realize it all the more after being reborn in this world: Not being trapped by class was an incredible thing. If you looked at things from a broader perspective, the disappearance of class-based societies was only a recent development. In Japan, there had been a nobility and a class system until *after* World War II. Not even a hundred years had gone by since then.

Obviously, the disappearance of classes didn't mean people were truly equal, and the wealth inequalities that had been temporarily reduced had gradually been growing again. Progress had a way of reversing itself at times.

Perhaps the main reason for democracy's spread throughout the world after the Second World War was that people had been sick and tired of the unprecedented scale of violence, death, and destruction during that time period. Or maybe it had just been a brief moment of enlightenment, born to people free of iniquities after having expressed them all during the war. It could have been that, as time passed, these flaws accumulated once again, forcing the world toward a darker age.

Still, even if humanity took two steps forward and one step back, things had been moving in the right direction.

Reflecting on my former world had left me so pensive that I barely noticed Vladforen's gaze on me until he took a deep breath.

"It looks like you weren't lying about having retained your memories of another world," he said. "No young lady would be able to invent such stories. I'm even *more* interested now."

"I'm glad you believe me," I replied with a smile.

"Was 'afforestation' something you learned about in your previous

life?”

“Indeed. People had been practicing it for centuries in my birth country.”

I remembered it clearly from the paper I’d worked on in high school. Japan had started afforestation during the Muromachi period.

“So, in your past world humans also searched for ways to cohabit with the demonic beasts.”

Oops. He doesn’t get it.

“Afforestation did not start for that reason in my previous world, if only because demonic beasts didn’t exist. While magical powers and gods were often brought up in legends, the general consensus was that those weren’t real either.”

“They...did not exist?” Vladforen whispered, stunned. “How ridiculous. How would those flying vehicles of yours fly without mana?”

Oh, he assumed planes were mana-powered! Actually, that was logical. We hadn’t discussed mana yet, so he couldn’t have imagined anything else. *How do I explain the science behind planes to him?*

“We transformed the heat that burning oil produces into power. That power was then used to fly.” That was a bit of a lousy explanation, but it was the best that came to mind at the moment. Besides, it wasn’t wrong. If you simplified it to the maximum, that was more or less what an engine did.

The Dragon King didn’t seem entirely convinced. “Oil?”

I looked in the distance, wondering what was going through his brain. Was he picturing gigantic oil lamps in the sky? I sure hoped not.

Leaving that aside, that air of confusion on his gorgeous features gave him a tinge of cuteness that was difficult to handle.

I’m scared for other reasons, now. His face’s too dangerous!

“No demonic beasts, no mana, and no gods,” Vladforen murmured, his blazing red eyes on me. “In other words, the humans of your world had nothing to fear.”

That’s what he was pondering. I’m sorry I thought you were imagining a huge flying oil lamp.

"I wouldn't say we had nothing to fear. In the face of natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or floods, humans are measly, weak creatures. However, there were no beings such as the gods or beasts that could intimidate humans."

"Humans could do as they pleased, then."

Touché.

"Well...yes. I believe it's no exaggeration to say that they did."

I couldn't even count the number of species humanity had decimated even if I tried to. I remembered reading an article titled "Twenty-Five Percent of Plants and Animal Species at Risk of Extinction Due to Human Activity," or something similar. That figure had been so mind-boggling, it'd stuck with me.

The human population, on the other hand, had been increasing exponentially over the last two hundred years. Any graph could show you how insane that growth was. At the end of the eighteenth century, the global population was around one billion. Two hundred years later, there were seven to eight billion people on Earth, and experts had agreed it wouldn't be long until it grew to ten billion. Humanity had been practically devouring the world to grow and grow, with no limits.

Speaking of the end of the eighteenth century, that time period had also been the start of the Industrial Revolution. The thought frightened me. What Isaac was about to invent was more or less the equivalent of the steam engine.

The Industrial Revolution had resulted in its fair share of benefits: Humanity had conquered many illnesses, most people were better nourished, water was clean, and we'd learned to make regions that weren't fit for humans habitable.

However, that progress had come at a cost. Countless living beings had lost their habitats, and many species had been driven to extinction. Extreme climate events had been becoming more intense while the global temperature rose. Humanity had been reaping what it had sowed.

Thankfully, prism circles had no effects on the weather, and there were beings as powerful as gods, such as the Black Dragon and the Green Dragon, that would not stand by idly if humans destroyed

nature. The gods would rain disasters upon us if we went overboard as well. Unlike in my past world, someone would keep humanity in check.

I couldn't help but wonder what direction my past world had taken after my death.

I hope things worked out somehow...

"What's wrong?" Vladforen's voice snapped me back to reality.

"I'm sorry for being distracted," I said. "I was just thinking that doing as one pleases for too long leads to doom."

"Did humanity perish in your past world?"

"Not at all. When I died, humanity was still at the height of its prosperity. However, our way of thriving was impacting our world. We'd driven many species to death, and it was becoming increasingly clear to many that the seeds of danger we were sowing would eventually bloom to threaten our survival too. There's no way for me to know if humanity overcame that crisis. I admit, it weighs on my mind."

"I wouldn't be surprised if your people went to their ruin. Those who attempt to rise above their station are doomed to fall. Especially if it involves ruining other species in the process."

A sad smile crawled onto my lips. If an invincible dragon who'd lived for three thousand years was saying it...

"It appears that no matter the world, humans are greedy creatures," Vladforen added. "To think they'd endanger their planet to such an extent."

"You're most correct, but I must say I'm not certain that trait is specific to humans. Don't all living beings strive to live the fullest lives they can? I don't believe humans are the only ones who wish to fill their stomachs, nor are they the only ones eager to find partners, bear children, and see them grow healthy and thrive. It just so happened that humanity had the means to make it all happen."

Vladforen's red eyes narrowed. He seemed intrigued by my argument. "Has any other creature ever reshaped their world and caused the destruction of countless other beings?"

"According to the research of my past world, that happened before, albeit a very long time ago."

Snowball Earth.

For a time, Earth had been covered with glaciers and turned into a planet of ice. There had even been traces of glaciers from that era in the equatorial region. That climate event had led to mass extinction, and one theory pointed to the responsibility of a certain living being.

"Oh? And what is that creature?"

"Alga," I replied.

Vladforen stared at me with a perplexed expression. "Alga?"

"Yes, alga. The tiny plant that grows underwater."

To be more accurate, the supposed culprit behind the Snowball Earth episode had actually been photosynthetic bacteria, but calling them plants was probably a fair approximation. Bacteria had yet to be discovered in this world, and I didn't want to delve into yet another impossible explanation.

"How could this alga change the world?" Vladforen asked.

"Simply by living and breathing. Plants, like algae, must breathe as we do. However, what they inhale and exhale is different from what animals do. What they breathe out lowers the temperature of the air. Animals breathe in that colder air and breathe out air that heats up the world instead."

The people of this world had no idea what oxygen, carbon dioxide, or methane—which used to make up most of the Earth's atmosphere—were. The concepts didn't even exist yet, so I'd gone with a vague explanation. Saying that plants breathed probably wasn't quite right, and I'd completely skipped over the concept of photosynthesis, but what mattered was that they expelled carbon dioxide at night.

Of course my explanations suck! It's not like I have a lot of options.

"A long time ago, algae too small to see with the naked eye propagated and consumed countless beings that could warm up the air. As a result, the surface of the world froze over, and living beings died en masse. You mentioned humid jungles earlier, did you not? Even parts of the world like that were frozen solid."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"By studying rocks. We had ways to do that with great accuracy in my previous world. Rocks aren't permanent objects. They start as mud, the remains of living beings, and the like. As more and more layers deposit themselves upon one another and harden, they become rocks. By analyzing these layers, one can tell what these rocks initially were, and as such, understand events of the past through them."

In this world, radiocarbon dating hadn't... *I don't have to say it every time, do I?*

"If even those regions were frozen, how did the world come back from it?"

"It took a very long time, but the world gradually heated up thanks to the rays of the sun and volcanic activity—natural heating processes. Eventually, the ice melted. But, as I mentioned, this all happened over a very, very long time. In my past world, researchers estimated the world froze several hundred million years ago, and it took tens of millions of years for the ice to melt."

Vladforen remained silent. He seemed equal parts impressed and reluctant to believe what I'd just said.

"When I first learned about this in my previous life, I was overcome with an indescribable feeling," I continued. "In the end, humans aren't so different from algae."

I'd read so many times in manga or simply on the net that humans were hideous creatures that didn't hesitate to destroy nature, unlike other living beings. The truth was, given the opportunity to thrive, algae destroyed nature just as much as we did. Humans weren't special in any way.

My logic might have been a little extreme, but that was how I felt.

Still, I supposed there was *some* difference. Unlike bacteria that did nothing but multiply, humans shaped their world with their own two hands. Besides, humans could do many things that bacteria couldn't. They *could* make predictions and understand the gravity of their situation. They *could* try to limit greenhouse gases. That was the entire point of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.

The issue was that the countries that produced the most

greenhouse gases were the ones that fought these plans the hardest, so our prospects had been bleak. Leaving aside such things, plenty of corporations and people had been more attached to the economy than to the idea of saving the planet.

However, I completely understood where they were coming from. Slapping the word "economy" on it didn't really change the intrinsic nature of that feeling. People wanted to live. People wanted to *thrive*. I couldn't truly criticize anyone on the matter. I used to work overtime practically every day, which meant using tons of electricity. My way of life had been anything but eco-friendly, and truth be told, I hadn't had much time to worry about it. I'd been busy doing my best to survive.

Back then, I could hardly fathom that tomorrow would be any different from the previous day. Even though I saw the figures and graphs and heard about global warming, every new day was the same as the previous one. I'd never been able to seriously envision our future doom.

In the end, I'd died of overwork long before humanity could collapse, and now I spent my time battling doom flags. Life was ironic like that.

If things continued along the same path, with everyone living in the present, and the damage we caused eventually became irreversible, humanity would fall. Along the way, we would drag countless other living beings into our mess. If that happened, we'd really be able to say that humans weren't any better than bacteria.

After that long thought, I continued, "When I heard about what the algae had done, I couldn't help but wonder, how could algae or humans *not* want to thrive? Trying to multiply and prosper is every living being's basest instinct. The humans from my past world weren't so extraordinary that they knew what the pinnacle of prosperity was and did not attempt to rise beyond it. Is that truly so evil?"

Humanity had a tendency to declare itself the most evolved beings on Earth, so controlling our instincts was the least we could do, but at the end of the day, knowing one's limits as a species wasn't easy. Accepting them and changing course was even less so.

The fact that humans had understood a change of course was necessary was already pretty incredible compared to every other species out there.

Though, I suppose only the result would matter in the end.

Regardless, I didn't believe humans were evil or shameful creatures. For better and for worse, humans were just like other animals.

"Most humans can only do their utmost to handle their day-to-day lives. Please do not resent them too much," I concluded with a smile.

Vladforen let out a breath. "You said you were a commoner. Were there truly that many people capable of such nuanced thought in your past world?"

"Indeed. Anyone with a sliver of interest in the subjects I mentioned would know what I told you." The fact that most people were learned to some extent must have been hard to believe for someone in this world, where illiteracy was widespread.

Hooray for compulsory education and the internet! Hang on, I'd actually learned about the Snowball Earth theory by watching a government-sponsored TV program. *Well, hooray for TV too!*

The part about how humanity wasn't any better than algae was just a personal belief, though.

While I was reflecting on my past world, Vladforen looked into my eyes and smiled. I turned away immediately.

EEK! His smile is way too dangerous. We're in calamity territory!

Seeing me twisting so frantically, Vladforen laughed. He extended his hand and rested it on my cheek.

"I now see the wife of the God of Death had other designs when she asked me to head to the capital to protect you."

I was so surprised by what he'd just said that my gaze darted back to his face. Our eyes met.

There was a lot more variation in eye color in this world than in my previous one, but this was still my first time meeting someone with red eyes. I'd had friends who'd loved to cosplay and had seen them with red contact lenses on occasion, but it wasn't the same at all. Countless shades of red intermingled in Vladforen's irises, quivering like the depths of a burning inferno. Red, crimson, scarlet,

vermilion, cinnabar, and ruby danced, with even darker shades of burgundy, merlot, and blood red lining his irises.

The term for the clouds of fire that escaped from the sun's atmosphere came to mind: "prominence." In Japanese, we called these "red flames." The red flames of Vladforen's eyes had drawn me in so deeply that I couldn't look away anymore.

They seemed like the complete opposite of Alexei's neon blue eyes.

Thinking of my brother made me come back to my senses. I grabbed Vladforen's hand, which was still on my cheek, and pushed it away.

"P-Please heed our customs!" I stuttered.

"Right." Vladforen laughed. "You're very intriguing. The stories of your past world are, naturally, but that's not all. I've never met a human who spoke of their kind without glorifying *or* disparaging them. I wish to hear more of what you have to say."

"Th-Thank you." That was all fine and dandy but...

Why in the world are you sitting right next to me?! You're close! Too *close!* Way *too close!*

When I was busy pondering ways to explain things from my past world I could handle his proximity, but when I had nothing else to think about, having *that* face so close to mine was extremely dangerous. It wasn't just his face, actually—his hot-guy aura was more explosive than dynamite. Handling explosives required a certification, and I certainly didn't have it. All I had was my degree in information engineering!

Nooo, don't look at me so much!

"S-So, um... Y-You were about to say something about Selene and the God of Death, were you not?"

"Indeed. His wife has taken a deep liking to you. She was grateful that you not only showed no fear of her but also gave her a gift without expecting anything in return. She said you reminded her of an old friend of hers."

"Goodness..."

Come to think of it, people always asked for something when they made offerings to the gods, didn't they? As a former human,

that behavior must have saddened Selene. I'd given her that hair accessory on a whim, but I was glad that it'd made her so happy.

Selene had said she was content, but even though she was with the one she loved, not being able to befriend a single person must have weighed on her.

"Her words truly honor me," I said. "If it pleases her, I'd love to chat with her again in the future."

I wondered if the Maiden of Death could change clothes. If she wore a cute outfit instead of that bloodstained dress of hers, people wouldn't think she was so scary anymore. Even if we left aside other people's opinions, I wanted her to experience the fun of dressing up!

I'll try to give her a new fit next time!

"The God of Death wishes for that too. Well, he'd do anything to make his wife happy," Vladforen replied. "The issue, however, is that humans are short-lived. He's afraid that, should the two of you grow closer, the pain of losing you would outweigh the temporary joy she'd feel in your company."

"That is a valid concern." Their lives could be counted in millennia, after all. I assumed it was like when a human got a hamster. The fleeting span of their lives could hurt your heart.

I don't know how I feel comparing myself to a pet hamster, though.

"That is why he told me about you," Vladforen said.

I'm not sure I see the connection here.

As I tilted my head to the side, Vladforen laughed at the obvious confusion on my face.

"If you consort with me, you will not age, and most wounds won't be able to kill you anymore. We may be different species, but I can share my dragon essence with you."

"Consort"? Wait, could he mean... WHAT?!

"I'm not fond of humans. They're weak, yet they always fancy themselves special. But every once in a while..." Vladforen paused and the red flames in his eyes locked on my face. "Every once in a while, someone like you appears. A human whose voice I can't help but want to listen to, whose face I can't help but want to gaze at. Even if your soul weren't from a different world, even if you refused

to tell me any more stories, I'd still delight in your presence, your cleverness, your kindness..."

Vladforen paused once more as though he was looking for the right words. After a few moments, he smiled and continued. "You know the vastness of the world and the depth of its memories better than even I do, and your spirit is greater and deeper still."

I was bewildered. "Um, I just happen to have kept my memories of a different world, really. Anyone would know as much as I do over there."

"I don't know about that other world, but in this world, seldom does anyone think the way you do. And I like the way you think, Ekaterina Yulnova." Vladforen took one of my hands in his. "Will you become my partner?"

I felt as though a pop-up appeared in my brain, filling the entire space. In the background, the oppressive *beeeeep* of emergency checks echoed in loops.

System freeze. An unexpected error has occurred!

It seemed my years as a systems engineer had traumatized me more than I thought. At any rate, my thought process was entirely frozen. I couldn't process anything.

I have to reboot. The last resort is to press the power button so... Hang on, where even is the power button on a human?

"There's something else I need to say," Vladforen added, his hand still holding mine. "You're beautiful."

Ekaterina.exe has stopped working.

"All living creatures possess their own form of beauty. Even I can see that, as a human woman, you are strikingly beautiful. You know, deep within these mountains is a waterfall humans have yet to discover. There, when the white rapids cascade over the bare rocks, a deep blue is born. The contrasting hues of white and blue make that waterfall breathtaking, just as they do you."

Vladforen's other hand brushed the side of my face, almost caressing my indigo hair. His touch was so faint, I could hardly tell whether his fingers were on me or not.

"In a corner of the Summit of the Gods that rises at the heart of this continent is a gigantic glacier. If you follow along the large rift

within it, you'll reach a cavernous space akin to a sanctuary. There, you can bear witness to a sight no human has ever seen before: demonic fish swimming within the ice. Can you imagine the blue of glaciers? It is deeper than even the twilight sky—much like the hue of the deep sea. Schools of demonic fish light it up with gold and silver like shooting stars. This world is brimming with mysteries you've yet to uncover and wonders you've never seen. If you so wish, I will show them all to you. Every last wonder I hold will be yours too. You need only take my hand and come with me, Ekaterina."

Fish lighting up glaciers like shooting stars...

I wanted to see it. It sounded like one of the places an internet article titled "Ten Views to See Before You Die!" or something would introduce. I was super weak to those!

I was escaping reality by focusing on the most innocuous part of his speech, wasn't I?

My hand was still in his and my body was frozen solid. While my brain had unlocked, my thoughts were so stupid they weren't useful at all.

I can't help it, though. I'm so bad at this!

In my past life, my romantic life had been abysmal. I hadn't been popular at all, but I'd still dated twice—once in high school and once in college. Both times, the guys had confessed to me, I'd accepted, and then, for some reason, they'd almost immediately turned into egotistical jerks. Naturally, I'd broken up with them over it, but *both times* they'd started stalking me and eventually tried to attack me with a knife!

The same story had repeated itself *twice*, even though the guys I'd dated had seemed to be pretty different at the start. My high school boyfriend had been a bit of a frivolous playboy, while my university boyfriend had been more of a plain, quiet man. Why had they both ended up like that?!

Maybe *I* was the problem.

The silver lining in my misfortune was that, since I'd requested police assistance each time when the stalking began, police officers helped me out promptly when things got really bad.

At that time, I'd been so tired, so scared, and so sad. I remembered telling my friend, "I've learned my lesson. I won't ever date another man. I'm done. I'd much rather be alone."

To which she'd replied, "That might be for the best. You ignored the others and picked these two. You probably just don't have an eye for men."

That answer had stung, badly.

*What do you even mean by "*You *ignored the others?" Why are you trying to make it my fault?!*

Anyway, that was why I was happier to simply fangirl over my brother in this life. We both cared for each other very much, and that was more than enough to make me happy.

So, even if you tell me to take your hand or to become your partner, I...

Still, I couldn't help but feel like I was about to swoon being practically *p-p-proposed* to by the most handsome man I'd ever seen, be it in this life or my previous one. It was certainly the first time anyone had asked for my hand, and it did make me happy, but...

My hands grew cold. I felt as though my very core was frozen.

A louder *beeeeeep* echoed in my head as my brain shut down for real.

That's it. My synapses are closing up shop.

"I-I... My brother will be the one to decide my marriage. I cannot make this decision on my own. Please forgive me," I managed to blurt out after a while, my voice trembling.

"I see. I remember the man who spoke of afforestation mentioning it. He said you were the younger sister of the Duke of Yulnova. It was true then, that the current duke is your brother, not your father."

He must have been referring to Forli. On one of his visits on the field, he'd run into the Dragon Herald Bird and had explained our afforestation plans to it in detail.

"Are you sure you're all right with that?" Vladforen asked. "Heeding the orders of the duke."

"Of course I am!" I replied resolutely. "No one considers my well-

being and happiness as much as my dear brother does." Even with my brain in standby mode, my trust in Alexei was steadfast. "I love my brother and wish for nothing more than to assist him."

"Hmm," Vladforen murmured, his brows furrowing in displeasure. The expression did nothing to cloud his beauty. If anything, I felt like he looked even more ethereal with a frown. "So, to have you, I must earn the duke's approval, huh? He is...in the northern capital, I believe. I suppose I could pay him a visit and introduce myself to him."

I doubted Vladforen cared much for the peerage, etiquette, and customs of human society. While he seemed interested in me and knew I had the backing of the God of Death, as far as he was concerned, my brother was a mere human. He was talking about meeting him, but I didn't think he understood what a courtesy visit was like.

He, too, seemed to think about it for a while before discarding the idea. "What a hassle. You're already right here, by my side. All you need to do is stay."

No, don't come closer. You have to know what your face does to people, so stop that already! I really can't handle dynamite!

I'd gone past freeze mode straight into panic mode, while Vladforen looked at me as if he were pleased with himself. His smile was so soft I could hardly believe it belonged to the fearsome dragon who could destroy the country if he felt like it.

"Is there anything you desire, Ekaterina?" he whispered. His sultry voice echoed in my ears while his blazing eyes held mine. "I'll give you anything you wish for and let you experience anything you want if you just say the word. You'll live by my side, forever as beautiful as you are today. If you want to live in a palace, I will erect one for you, and my followers will take human form to serve you as you deserve. If you wish to hear about the wisdom of old, I'll have an ancient god visit you. We will travel the world together so I can show you every hidden wonder there is. If your House of Yulnova weighs on your mind, I'll give your family riches. I'll keep the demonic beasts under control so humans can make free use of the forest's blessings. The forest shall become a haven of peace for the

people of Yulnova. Your people have made concessions to protect the forest already, so I have no further objections. Desire me, Ekaterina. Stay by my side."

Vladforen looked at me, holding his breath, but all I could focus on were the tears flowing down my cheeks.

I was wiping at them like a lost child, but in between the sobs, I choked out, "Please... I want my brother..."

The one who'd just spoken wasn't really me, but the original Ekaterina. Most of the time, I—the persona who'd emerged when my personality from my past life linked with Ekaterina's memories—was the one in control, while the young noble lady hid in a corner of my mind.

However, my usual front had stopped functioning from the shock, so Ekaterina had mustered up the courage to take things into her own hands.

Needless to say, Vladforen had no way of knowing any of this, so he was taken aback. He stared at Ekaterina bawling with a bewildered look. After a few moments, an awkward but incredibly gentle smile appeared on his face.

"What's wrong? Mere moments ago, you were telling me facts about hundreds of millions of years ago, yet you now seem...so childish."

"I've always been locked up," Ekaterina said between sobs. "I led a life of poverty, all alone with my mother. When father and grandmother died, my brother finally came to free us...but not even a year has passed since then. It's only been six months since we started talking properly. Mother died as well, so we only have each other..."

She sounded less like a little kid than she had before, but I could feel that her expression was still childlike.

"I want to stay with my brother!" she blurted out, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

"Don't cry," Vladforen said, stroking my hair gently. His touch was much different from earlier. He was patting me like one would a child. Then, he pulled me into his arms.

Ekaterina didn't fight it. She let herself lean against his chest,

sniffled, and continued to sob.

Vladforen sighed. “Who in the world are you, radiant beauty? One minute you talk like a sage and the next here you are, crying like a little one.”



"I'm..." Ekaterina started.

The villainess. Not that she or I could say that.

"I'm me. I was just born this way."

"I see." Vladforen said, smiling crookedly at the simple yet oddly philosophical answer. "Despite your beauty and wisdom, I certainly can't marry a little girl. I'll bring you home. I said I'd grant your every wish, and a dragon never goes back on his word."

Truly?!

"I would have stolen you away if you had a lover, but if you just wish to stay with your brother, there is nothing I can do."

Ekaterina's face lit up. "Thank you!"

And...my brain's back on!

Vladforen seemed a little exasperated by my successive mood changes, but also somewhat enchanted. I averted my eyes from his face and tried to wiggle my way out of his arms.

Mischief flickered in Vladforen's eyes as he pinned my shoulder in place. "How old are you?"

"I'm...fifteen."

"Is that not the age you humans usually marry at?"

Urgh! If you ask me, this situation is way *different from a regular wedding!*

"I-In the country I came from, fifteen was too young to marry," I replied. "The law stipulated that girls had to be at least sixteen years of age to wed."

Actually, I was pretty sure the law had been changed recently to make the minimum legal age eighteen for both girls and boys. I didn't think it had taken effect before I died, though. Or had it? I couldn't remember!

"Oh? A human's lifespan is so short, yet you dally so? How carefree."

"In my past world, and particularly in the country I was born in, people lived far longer than in the empire. It wasn't rare for humans to reach a hundred years old."

"As I thought, your stories *are* interesting."

Huh? No! Take me home!

I turned pale, and Vladforen laughed before picking me up—only

to put me down a little farther away.

"I know there is no point in keeping a woman who does not want to be by my side. I'm not unreasonable, so don't worry."

Whew. But if you really want me to relax, could you please stop amusing yourself with my reactions?!

"You're very knowledgeable about human women, Dragon King," I said, my tone dripping with sarcasm despite myself.

"Well, human women adore my face," Vladforen replied calmly.

ARGH! I wanted to scream aloud, but couldn't.

"A woman once chased after me across three different countries," he continued. "I had to settle beyond the Summit of the Gods for some time because of her." If the annoyed expression on his face was anything to go by, he wasn't bragging. It was quite the story, though.

"Were none of those who adored you to your liking?" I asked.

Vladforen looked into the distance. "In the three thousand years I've been alive, there have been two. Two saints with holy mana."

Holy mana! Flora's face popped up in my mind.

In the ancient Astra Empire, those who could wield holy mana had been revered as saints. These individuals had been so influential that it was believed that the appearance of a saint was enough to quell monsters' attacks. I remembered hearing somewhere that some worked as shamans and could even appease the most powerful of monsters, such as the Black Dragon. Oh, and my brother had said that holy mana wielders were often invited to reside in the Yulnova Duchy to assist with monsters.

"The essence of holy mana is circulation, and saints seem to be born to complement the work of the Creator God, who abandoned this world after willing it into existence. They are always born when mana has stagnated for a long time, and the world has started to decay. At the end of the day, demonic beasts are simply beings that were altered by mana, so the saints who can circulate that mana surplus are a comforting presence."

W-Wait, did you just dump a huge revelation on me? I feel like I just heard the biggest secret of this world!

Actually, now that I thought about it, it was all in the game's title!

Infinity World: The Maiden of Salvation!

The word "Infinity" was written in English, but I knew it referred to eternity—or permanence, perhaps. The infinity symbol—"∞"—represented the Ouroboros, the snake that perpetually consumed its own tail in an endless cycle. I'd never realized it before, but that represented the role of the heroine in the world!

Whoa! I certainly didn't expect to finally understand the title while talking to Vladforen. On the other hand, why are you telling me?! You should be saying this to Flora at the end of the game, not the villainess!

Was the Dragon King's route the true ending? It had to be!

"Is something wrong?"

Vladforen's puzzled voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

"I apologize for being distracted," I said. "It's just that...one of my good friends is a saint with holy mana."

"How nice." Vladforen's tone was sardonic, which I hadn't expected. "I have to wonder if she's the real deal. You humans often misread mana types."

This is my little Flora we're talking about. There's no way I could possibly be mistaken!

My mind flared with irritation for a second before I realized that, while holy mana was incredibly rare and was estimated to only appear once a generation, considering the way Vladforen had worded things, that still seemed like an awful lot. After all, he'd said that saints were only born after a long period of stagnation.

Just like my granduncle's mana probably had no business being classified as earth mana, there were probably people who'd been told they had holy mana when that hadn't actually been the case.

"My friend *is* the real deal," I told him confidently, a bright smile on my face. "There's no mistake."

"I see you also know something about this topic. She must be the real deal, then," he said with a little laugh. He seemed interested in that revelation, but after a moment, he refocused on me. The inferno in his eyes flickered. "Saints are rare, but you're one of a kind. I will let you go for now, but I don't intend to stop pursuing you." His voice had grown deeper and more passionate.

GAH! Stop that, my brain's gonna freeze *again!*

I didn't know what to do with myself. Clenching my fists, I calmed my internal turmoil and looked at Vladforen. "Allow me to say one more thing."

"What is it?"

"If my brother hears of this, there is a good chance he'll challenge you to a duel. If that happens, I shall assist him with everything I have."

Vladforen burst into laughter.

"I'm not joking! I *will* take his side, no matter what!"

"I don't doubt it," Vladforen said between fits of laughter.

I didn't like that he was laughing so much, but I could see where he was coming from. A puny human challenging a jumbo-jet-sized dragon to a duel had to be a joke as far as the dragon was concerned. While I understood that in my head, I absolutely could not let it slide. Mocking my dear brother in front of me was a jail-worthy offense!

"Stop looking down your nose at my brother. He truly holds me dear!"

"As I imagine you do him."

"That's right. My brother is the one I hold dearest in this world," I declared.

Vladforen forced a smile. "I can't say I understand filial love. Dragons almost never live with their kind. We aren't even born from parents. If anything, other dragons are the only beings whose might matches our own. More often than not, that leads to conflict."

Were dragons territorial? What did he mean by "not born from parents?" Did dragons spontaneously come into existence, like when the mana in nature condensed like in a fantasy story? I tended to forget when faced with Vladforen in his human form, but I was talking to another type of being entirely.

Actually, for a being of a very different species, wasn't the Dragon King surprisingly close to humans?

That reminded me of a scientist who'd decided to live among the wolves and had eventually become the leader of a pack. He did everything with them, even howling. If I remembered correctly, he'd

been German. When I'd heard of him, I'd thought, *Whoa! A man leading a pack of wolves! That's so cool!*

Well, for a powerful dragon, taking on a human form to communicate with humans and even being considerate of concepts he didn't understand such as family was probably a similar endeavor. He was taking a step toward us. We'd gone beyond intercultural communication—this was *interspecies* communication. I'd been quite arrogant to assume it was normal for him to match my customs.

Vladforen seemed to have misinterpreted my long silence. "Are you having trouble understanding my lack of familial love?"

"No," I said with a shake of my head. "I was just realizing all over again that our species are very different. I must say, I am moved by your consideration for our ways. The fact that you took on a human form and are speaking to me in my language is very kind. I must thank you for your willingness to approach me like this."

Vladforen's eyes widened, and he lifted his hand. He was about to touch me again when he stopped himself. The corners of his lips curled awkwardly. "Humans are so scared of my dragon form that there would have been no room for discussion. Even you would be terrified to see my true appearance. In fact, should we test it out?"

At these words, he stood up and transformed. It only took an instant, then the sky darkened as a humongous shadow stretched over my head. I looked up to find a gigantic dragon. His wings were spread, but he floated without flapping them, as though gravity had no hold on him.

I couldn't speak. All I could do was stare at him in amazement.

If this were a fantasy movie, this would be the moment the lead actor boggled at a mysterious monument—or at a spaceship. This situation could totally apply to a sci-fi movie too. Only this wasn't a movie; it was real life! There was an actual dragon right there, over my head. A super-duper, humongous dragon!

I'd never looked up at a plane from so close, but I remembered seeing the work vehicles driving next to the planes at the airport and being surprised by how tiny they were in comparison. Right now, there was a dragon just as big as one of these planes above my head!

Earlier, I'd only been able to see his neck and head, but I could now witness Vladforen in his entirety. He was so big that I could hardly focus on all the details, but he made for an impressive sight with his dark, gleaming scales. His huge black wings resembled those of a bat, and rows of spiky protrusions ran down his neck and back like a mane. Enormous claws—so massive they could rival the wheels of a jumbo jet—adorned his powerful limbs. As for his long tail, it undulated slowly in the wind.

Seriously, every fiber of his being screamed "dragon." He looked straight out of a fantasy tale.

Aaaah!!!

I was so overwhelmed my legs shivered, but...

"Are you scared, Ekaterina?"

His voice snapped me back to reality.

Getting to my feet, I extended my hand toward him. He was so huge that it created the illusion that I could touch him from where I stood.

"You look incredible! I'm *so* honored to see this!" I screamed, feeling in high spirits. My eyes must've been sparkling.

He looks so cool! This is terrific. I can't believe it, but this form is even cooler than the other one—despite that stunning face of his. Not even the visual artists of Hollywood productions could get anywhere near this level of perfection. The dragons of blockbusters had been cool, sure, but the real deal was thousands of times better. *This is amazing!*

Wait, he asked me if I was scared, didn't he?

To be fair, I'd been downright terrified when he'd appeared out of the blue earlier. Now, I knew I could talk things out with him, so I was fine. If anything, my boss in my past life had been a lot more difficult to communicate with.

Vladforen remained silent for a moment before roaring with laughter so deep that the rumble of it echoed through the mountains.

"This is the first time I've met a human woman who likes my dragon form more than my human one." Vladforen chuckled for a while longer before looking at me. "I feel like I understand you

better. You are a sage *and* a child. You say you won't take my hand, yet there you are, extending yours toward me."

"I'm terribly sorry if you thought it was rude," I said, embarrassed.

"I did not. You, on the other hand, do not seem to understand me at all." Despite being powerful enough to trample over an entire nation, his voice was gentle. "If this appearance doesn't unsettle you, I'll take you home like this. If I hold you in my human form again, I'll have a hard time letting go."

For real?

"You'll take me home...like this?"

"You could be the first human to ride on the back of the Dragon King. Would you like that?"

I could ride on his back?! Would he really let me?!

Absolutely, please! I'd love to!

I told him I accepted in a heartbeat, but I was a tad puzzled. How was I supposed to get on his back?

"Ekaterina."

I didn't get to ponder that for long, as I suddenly heard Vladforen's voice come from behind me rather than from the sky. The flapping of wings came alongside it. Turning, I saw a black bird of prey with piercing red eyes.

"Dragon King, is that also you?" I asked.

"This is my alter ego. Hold out your arm."

So, it was *him, not his subordinate.*

I did as I'd been told, then the black bird landed gently on my arm. Somehow, he didn't feel heavy at all. Vladforen's alter ego seemed able to levitate just like his dragon form, even if he didn't move his wings.

This new situation was pretty amazing too. I had a large bird of prey on my arm, and not just *any* bird—one I could converse with that had shining black feathers and gleaming red eyes! Cooler still, that bird could not have existed naturally. It was a unique, magical bird! My chuuni blood boiled with excitement!

Sorry. Once again, my mind was filled with stupid thoughts.

Suddenly, I heard strange noises, and my field of view changed. I

felt ready to stagger from a bout of dizziness before realizing I'd experienced this once before already. I'd just teleported. This time, however, the experience felt a lot more vivid, making me more nauseous than when I'd been tucked in Vladforen's arms.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I was just...surprised," I said. I got a hold of myself and looked around.

I'd reappeared atop his back, in between his wings. I wasn't sure how a dragon's bone structure really worked, but he seemed to have shoulder bones—or something similar—and the spot there was slightly sunken. It seemed like the most stable place for me to stand.

The spines that had appeared like a mane from the ground actually continued all the way from Vladforen's neck to his tail. They'd probably break the wind for me, and I could grab onto them for support.

Leaving that aside, his back was astonishingly wide! How many square meters was it?! It was so big I could barely see the scenery below. Instead, jet-black scales spread under my feet. They seemed sturdy enough to repel a sword with ease, but they didn't look metallic. They appeared quite supple, in fact.

Vladforen just laughed at the sight of me looking around with such excitement.

"I won't let you fall, but you should still sit down and hold tight," he said.

"I will! Thank you very much."

After I sat down, the bird of prey flew off my arm and landed on a nearby spike. While Vladforen had a bit of a self-centered, arrogant side, he was surprisingly good at taking care of others.

Oh, right. He decided I was a kid in the end, didn't he? That was probably why he was being so nice. He must have had a soft spot for children. *But mentally, I'm almost thirty!*

Unbeknownst to me, I'd once again majestically missed the mark. Despite having lived for about thirty years, I still had a childish side to me—that much was certain.

"Let's go."

This time, Vladforen's voice came from the mighty dragon, not

from the bird of prey. It seemed he could split his consciousness between his two bodies and did not need to move his mind from one to the other to converse with me. For a fantasy world dragon, he was an expert at multitasking.

The next moment, Vladforen's wings beat like a sharp strike on a drum. The sound of flapping cut through the air, and our flight began.

WHOOOOO!!!

Vladforen clearly did not need his wings to float, but he seemed to be moving them to adjust his direction. From my spot on his back, I could feel every minute movement of his muscles. Thanks to his flying rather slowly, the wind pressure didn't bother me much. If anything, I felt great!

"Should I take you to the northern capital? Or would you like to go to the imperial capital?" Vladforen's black bird asked me. "We can go anywhere you like."

Bad idea! Flying over the imperial capital was absolutely out of the question. Actually, returning to the northern capital on a dragon's back was sure to give my brother a heart attack, so that was out of the question too. I'd been so eager to ride on a dragon that I hadn't given any thought to my arrival!

"N-No. Could you please go back to the place where you found me? I ordered my retinue to wait, so they must still be there."

Mina and the others were in for quite the shock.

Aaah! I'm so stupid!

If I had to pick again, I'd make the same choice, though. I felt bad, but not enough to regret jumping on this once-in-a-lifetime chance!

"Wait, can you move all the way to the imperial capital or northern capital like you did earlier, in an instant?" I asked.

"No," Vladforen replied. "As the king of the north, I can only do so within my territory—the Great Northern Forest, that is. When I wish to travel elsewhere, I have to fly. And the imperial capital is a bit of a special case—a true hassle. On top of being saturated with gods, the humans there are particular about defending the city with mana. Not that any of that would stop me if I really wanted to enter."

The burning capital I'd seen in the game popped into my mind. A shiver ran down my spine as I remembered Vladforen standing over the ruined palace and roaring.

In the game, what had become of the emperor and empress? The academy had burned to the ground, but what had happened to the people in it? I couldn't help but think of my classmates, my teachers, and the kind people in the kitchen...and what about the employees at our residence in the capital?

"Dragon King, please do not ever go to the capital." The words had left my mouth before I even realized I was speaking. "If you do, it'll end in a feud between you and humanity. I know you're capable of destroying this empire if you so choose, but I also know that we can communicate instead. If we can understand one another, I do not wish to fight. I'm thankful for the God of Death and Selene's concern, but I'm not in danger in the capital—certainly not enough to warrant such risks."

The biggest danger of all would be your presence in the capital, I thought but didn't add.

I wasn't sure whether my brother and I were free of the doom flags that loomed over us, but there was nothing Vladforen could do for us regarding these matters.

"Next year too, I shall return to the Yulnova Duchy in the summer," I said. "When that time comes, I'd be happy to see you again and share more stories of my past world with you. If anything we humans are doing displeases you, I hope you'll tell me about it at that time. I promise to inform my brother of your words. Together, we will strive to correct any problem that arises. Please, Dragon King, grant me this wish."

"Well, I've always disliked the imperial capital, so if this is what you wish for, I agree to see you here when next summer comes," Vladforen replied. "I wonder, will your mind be less childish next year? A part of me hopes for that, yet another doesn't. I'm feeling quite conflicted," he added with a little laugh. "Speaking of which, how long did you live in your past life?"

Ah.

"Twenty-eight years," I said.

Vladforen's voice turned gentle. "You passed early, considering the humans of your world could live to a hundred."

Since I'd regained my memories at fifteen and had almost immediately started going to school with other teenagers, I'd convinced myself that twenty-eight was pretty old, but in the grand scheme of things, Vladforen was right. I'd died young.

"Did you have a brother in your past world too? Was your family dear to you?" Vladforen suddenly asked, as though he'd had some sort of realization.

A silence stretched between us. It took me a long time to muster up a response.

"No. I was an only child and...a cruel daughter," I said, my voice low.

The black bird cocked his head at me with a perplexed air before the dragon gave a powerful flap of his wings and started descending.

"We're almost there," he said.

From the gap between Vladforen's neck and one of his wings, I caught a glimpse of the open space next to the spring. He began to fly in smaller and smaller circles as he descended to the ground. I suspected he was making the landing as smooth and gentle as he could out of consideration for me.

When Vladforen lowered his neck, I saw that the carriage was still in the same spot, and several people ran up to us—Mina and the knights.

"Mina! Everyone!" I exclaimed, standing up and waving.

Some of the knights were so surprised that they almost tripped.

"My lady!" Mina screamed.

My chest ached with guilt when I heard her. The roughness in her voice made it clear that she'd been very worried.

"I'll let you down there," Vladforen said.

"Yes, plea—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Mina, who'd not stopped running, leaped and landed on Vladforen's head. She jumped from spike to spike down his back until she reached me.

"My lady!"

"Mi—"

I didn't get to finish speaking this time either because Mina scooped me into her arms. After glaring at the black bird, she hopped along the path she'd used a moment ago to leave his back, all while carrying me in her arms like I weighed nothing.

Wh-What just happened?

I felt like I'd just boarded a roller coaster—only I was being held like a princess instead of sitting in a cart. Either way, I could hardly follow.

"M-My lady!" Mina said once more, holding me tightly. This was my first time hearing her voice tremble like that.

I really caused you a lot of worry, didn't I?

"Ma'am! You're all right!" Oleg exclaimed as he and the other knights ran up to us, quickly surrounding us.

The next moment, they pointed their weapons at Vladforen, and I started into action.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Mina," I said, hugging her back, then I continued firmly, "However, please put me down."

"But, my lady—"

"Everyone else, lower your weapons at once. This dragon has been nothing but kind to me. He is no enemy of the Yulnova."

"As you command..."

After the knights and Mina hesitantly complied, I took a few steps toward Vladforen and curtsied.

"I thank you for your congeniality. I enjoyed my time in your company."

"Ekaterina," Vladforen said warmly. "No matter how many centuries pass, I will not forget our conversation. As long as you are here, I will not harm Yulnova in any way. If you wish it, I'll refrain from showing hostility to the people of Yulgran as well—to all humans, in fact. If you loathe conflict, take good care of yourself, for everything I have just sworn, I have sworn to you alone."

Vladforen opened his large wings, casting a shadow over all of us.

"Let us meet again," he said.

The wind whipped wildly as he flew away.

Chapter 5: Reunion

I was ready to be bombarded with questions by Mina and the knights, but no one asked me anything. The first one to speak up—Oleg—did so to suggest we hurry back on the road because we'd fallen behind schedule. As for Mina, she only asked if I was hurt or tired. Even though I answered that I was fine, she tried to pick me up again to take me to the carriage, and I had to protest before she'd let me walk.

Still, neither she nor the knights asked a thing about what had happened between myself and the Black Dragon or what his parting words meant.

Well...

At the end of the day, the social hierarchy placed me above them. If I, their superior, wasn't bringing up the topic, they probably couldn't broach it themselves. However, I had a feeling there was a bit more than that to it. The knights, in particular, seemed withdrawn. They were even more polite than before, but there was a new distance between us.

I suppose it makes sense.

I'd been abducted by a dragon out of the blue, only to come back on said dragon's back. They must have been wondering, *Who the hell is she?!*

They definitely think I'm weird now, don't they? I'm not that odd, I promise. I just so happen to have the memories of my past life and knew I could reason with him. I'm just a regular villainess—and a former corporate drone from another world, but let's not sweat the small stuff!

Oh, who am I kidding? What even is a "regular villainess"?

Anyway, it was clear that they thought they couldn't ask me anything. No matter how crazy what had happened was, I was the little sister of their lord. Actually, the incredible nature of the event

probably made it *more* difficult for them to speak up.

I was thankful for the peace, though, because it'd give me time—time to think about what I'd tell my brother! There was no doubt in my mind that Mina and Oleg would report everything to him, and *he* would ask. I couldn't tell him about my past life, so I had to come up with something else!

Amid all my worrying, we returned to the carriage.

The driver cried when he saw I was back in one piece, while the hounds dropped their tails as though ashamed to have failed to protect me. There was nothing they could have done in that situation, so I gave them as many pats as I could to soothe them before we departed.

Since we'd been traveling with haste before Vladforen's interruption, we weren't too far behind schedule, but it still didn't look like we'd make it to our original destination before nightfall. Instead, we planned to stop in a midsized city on the edge of the road.

We could have pushed through and made it to the other city, albeit a little late, but Mina had insisted, "Her ladyship is tired. She must rest in decent lodgings as soon as possible."

I wasn't sure why Mina was the one to make that call—especially since I wasn't all that tired and would have rather kept going, but she looked so resolved that I couldn't bring myself to say a word.

I'm the noble! I should be the one making decisions!

It was probably better not to argue after I'd made her worry so much. Besides, even if it would be slightly later than expected, I'd finally be reunited with Alexei tomorrow.

Thus, when we entered the town and the carriage stopped, I waited patiently for one of the knights to book accommodation for us.

This city was located in a valley on the bank of a river. Thanks to its river port, great quantities of wood and ores passed through this place, and it was flourishing. The valley didn't extend far, so even if I tried to look in the direction of the northern city where Alexei awaited me, the road soon disappeared as the river basin ended and the mountains rose up again.

I was looking into the distance when Regina, who'd been lying down right outside the carriage, suddenly jumped to her feet. She seemed engrossed as she sniffed the air wildly. Once she was done, she looked up at me and started howling.

"Regina? What's wrong?" I asked.

Regina ran toward the highway, then came back before long and howled again, as if she were trying to tell me something.

The three other hounds started imitating her, snuffling and pacing around restlessly. Standing guard next to the carriage, Mina reacted soon after. She lifted her head and seemed to strain toward something before dashing toward the road. Dropping down with no regard for her clothing, she pressed her ear against the ground and listened with rapt attention.

When she stood up, she ran to me. "Riders from the northern capital, my lady. The sound of the horses' hooves is heavy and regular. Their riders must be trained men in armor."

Huh?

I glanced at Oleg and he nodded. He didn't seem surprised.

This could only mean one thing! I jumped off the carriage and stared down the highway. Before long, I saw a group of riders—men from the Order of Yulnova.

The company rode at a canter. Their horses were so disciplined that the thunderous pounding of their hooves remained perfectly steady. Somehow, it had the musicality of a band of percussionists.

At the head of the group was a man riding a particularly swift horse. Unlike the others, he wore the distinctive clothing of the Master of the Order and a long sword hung at his hip. His posture was dignified, his expression was stern, and his pale blue hair swayed in the wind as he hurried his horse.

"Brother!" I screamed in spite of myself.

I was so far away that there was no way he could have heard me, but his eyes somehow found me as though he had. He expertly changed the course of his steed and spurred him forward. From that point onward, Alexei's horse galloped toward me at full speed, while Alexei's neon blue eyes remained fixed on me.

"Brother!" I screamed again, breaking into a run.

Logically speaking, I could have just waited for him to arrive where I stood. But I couldn't. I couldn't *not* go to him when he was right there in front of me. Lifting my skirt to free my feet, I ran as fast as I could. I wasn't looking at all where I stepped, only at Alexei.

Alexei pulled on the reins to keep his horse in check, but he'd been going so fast that there was no stopping the animal. He was about to go right past me when he nimbly jumped off his horse's back. Leaping off a running horse was no easy feat, but with his outstanding athletic abilities, Alexei made it look easy. A moment later, he landed next to me.

"Ekaterina!" He opened his arms and pulled me into his embrace.

"Brother!"

It's you! It's really you! How I wanted to see you! I squeezed him back as tight as I could.

"Ekaterina." As Alexei said my name again, his voice was a whisper, and his arms just squeezed tighter. "Ah, Ekaterina... My dear Ekaterina..."

"Brother—" I was about to ask him why he was here, but I swallowed the words. Alexei was trembling. The proud Duke of Yulnova, who competently ruled over a vast domain at the young age of eighteen, was trembling. Alexei was always so strong, no matter what happened. I'd never seen him in this state.

"Brother! Why are you shaking? Are you hurt? Sick?! Please, you must lie down at once."

"My body is just fine," Alexei replied after a brief hesitation. He let out a shaky sigh and continued, his voice soft, "I was terrified. I thought that...what I dread most had come to pass." Alexei brought his hand to my head and started stroking my hair gently. "Erik sensed that something terrible had happened to you, yet I was so far away—unable to protect you. I felt as though my heart was being crushed."

Alexei pressed his cheek against my hair, holding me closer still.

"I'm glad you're safe. Ekaterina... My sweet sister, my life, my love. I couldn't go on without you. I've once again come to realize how dark and cold a place the world is without your light..."

"Brother..."

So, the twins' alert had ended up ringing! I'd been told that Oleg and Erik's strong bond would indicate when danger was upon one of them, and it appeared their special bond truly worked. In this world with no cell phones, that bond made Oleg the perfect choice to be my guard. In the end, Alexei's security system had worked exactly how it was meant to.

I imagined Erik had felt his brother's life was in danger when the Dragon King appeared. To think Alexei had readied a company and reached this city in such a short time. The Japan Air Self-Defense Force could learn from such a scramble!

But now wasn't the time to think about such things. My brother loved me so much that he must have been worried sick. What was *I* doing during that time? Having a fun talk with the Dragon King and getting excited about riding on his back!

I'm the worst...

"I'm sorry, brother."

Tears welled up in my eyes as I brought my hand to Alexei's cheek. After caressing it gently, I stroked his hair, putting the disorderly strands back into place. His eyes closed, his expression relaxing, and I pulled his head into the crook of my neck. I tried my best to wrap him in *my* embrace this time.

"I can't forgive myself for making you feel this way. I know you must have pushed your body far too hard to rush to my rescue so swiftly. Oh my dear, dear brother, how I regret making you suffer so."

I should be ashamed of calling myself an Alexei fangirl. I'd left on this pilgrimage to be of use to him, not to cause him pain.

"It's all right," he said. "You're fine. That's all that matters to me. Besides, you haven't done anything wrong, my dear Ekaterina."

"The sun rises in the east, and Ekaterina can do no wrong." That seemed to be Alexei's motto. As always, his rose-colored Ekaterina filter was too strong.

"Even if the world collapsed around us, I'd still be happy as long as I could see your smile, for it is the most beautiful thing the world has to offer."

"Oh, brother..."

I had a feeling Alexei's filter might have somehow grown even more opaque since the last time I'd seen him—or maybe not. The rose color had been almost impenetrable from the start.

"Please tell me, Ekaterina, what happened? Whatever it was, it must have been terrifying. You worried about my safety, but are *you* hurt in any way? You're so kind that you always put others before yourself. That is why I cannot help but worry."

Oops! He's asking for a report!

Before I dove into that, though, there was something else I absolutely had to say. "*You're* the one who always puts others before yourself. Did you eat balanced meals and rest enough while I was away?"

"Of course I did."

He hadn't hesitated one bit before answering, but I was still suspicious. I looked up at him intently, trying to figure out if that was true when I heard another voice.

"My lady, what a relief to find you safe and sound."

"Ivan!"

Alexei's attendant, Ivan, directed his typical smile at me. If he'd managed to keep up with Alexei galloping at full speed, he had to be as skilled a rider as a knight.

"You came as well? You truly never leave my brother's side, do you?" I asked.

"My duty is to protect His Grace," he replied. "I just wanted to inform you that your knight is back. He's made arrangements for you to lodge in this city tonight."

Oh, right. The knight who'd left had returned already.

I let my gaze wander around, looking for him, only to be completely taken aback. There were tons of people around us now!

I could understand why there were that many people in the streets—this city was a major hub, after all. But why were they all looking at us? With fond smiles on their faces at that?!

Hang on, some of them are even wiping away tears!

I supposed Alexei riding so dramatically to reach me had stood out a little. They must have been observing our reunion because of

that. Did they assume we hadn't seen each other in years?

Sorry, everyone. We've only been separated a few days. We aren't star-crossed lovers either, just a pair of siblings!

"I assume you'll do the same, Your Grace. That way the two of you can chat at length," Ivan added.

Alexei nodded. "Yes, I shall." He didn't seem to have noticed the gallery around us.

"I'm happy I get to spend time with you, brother," I said.

Incredibly happy, actually!

We'd only been apart a few days, but this still had been the very first time we'd been separated since Alexei had come to tell me that he would enroll me in the academy. Just having him in front of me filled me with joy. Besides, I was pretty sure Alexei hadn't had time to bring any work with him, so we could spend an actual restful evening together.

Ivan was so thoughtful. I was convinced he'd chosen this timing to speak up to make sure my brother would take a break—which sparked more doubts in my mind! Had Alexei truly taken care not to overwork himself while I was away? Regardless, I'd make sure he did nothing but rest for the remainder of today!



"Much has happened during my trip, but there are two things I must report to you," I declared, holding up two fingers.

We were currently at our lodging for the night. Quite some time had passed since Alexei first asked me what'd happened, but I'd told him I wanted to go to a place where we could talk at our own pace, and he'd accepted my request.

After arriving at the finest inn in the city, we'd decided to have a meal. In the middle of that, we'd been interrupted by the local governor, who'd come rushing to greet us. Only after dealing with him had we been able to retire to Alexei's room. Mina and Ivan had just served us each a cup of tea, and I was finally able to say what I needed to.

To be honest, these interruptions had been welcome since they'd

given me more time to mull over how best to present the recent events to Alexei. Adjusting how you introduced facts based on the current mood of a meeting was a crucial skill for a white-collar worker like me.

I'd also wanted Alexei to relax and have a good time eating and chatting with me before I dropped everything on him, so you could say I'd managed to kill two birds with one stone.

"You asked about the danger Erik felt, but I'm afraid another matter requires the attention of the Duke of Yulnova first," I said. "I shall start with that one, but be assured I'll answer your query afterward."

Step one: Clarify the number of points you will touch upon. Step two: Seek your interlocutor's understanding with a short preamble.

Okay, I was just pushing back the topic I wanted to avoid and diverting Alexei's attention with something else.

But that's also a very important skill to have as a working adult!

Still, regardless of my personal feelings, I'd actually been rushing home *because* I had an important matter to report to Alexei. Starting with that one made total sense! It wasn't because I was hoping to gloss over what happened with Vladforen—not at all!

I'm the picture of integrity and innocence, and I definitely do not *have a guilty conscience.*

What I'd failed to consider was that, even if I acted like a proper businesswoman, in everyone's eyes, I was still a naive young lady. Alexei, in particular, probably only thought I looked adorable acting all serious. Oh well!

"All right, I understand," he said. "What is that first matter?"

"One of the three gods who descended during my visit passed down a divine revelation upon us. He said his mountain would erupt soon."

Alexei's bright eyes widened in surprise. "That is an emergency, indeed."

"I agree," I replied. "Still, the priests of the Mountain Sanctuary told me that a god's 'soon' is to be interpreted quite loosely. According to the records, it is just as likely to happen in a few months as in a hundred years. Lord Forli headed to the mountain to

ascertain whether there were already signs of an incoming eruption or not. He shall report to you as soon as possible. As for Lord Aaron, he is in the process of checking if the people in surrounding villages could evacuate to the miner lodgings near the old mine when the need arises."

Alexei had tensed up, but my thorough report seemed to put his mind at ease.

"I see," he said. "You've handled the situation well. I shall await the reports from both Forli and Aaron before making any decisions."

"That is wise, brother." I nodded before clearing my throat. "So, um, moving on to the second topic..." I was about to say more, but I hesitated. I didn't want to shock him. "Brother, could you please hold my hands?"

"Of course." Alexei replied as though there could be no other answer to that question and took both of my hands in his.

All right. He should be able to listen to me calmly now. Time to follow proper communication theory and start with the key information.

"I encountered the Black Dragon," I said.

A sharp *crack* echoed through the room.

AH! Looks like my preparations weren't thorough enough!

Alexei's expression hadn't budged, but what was that chill I felt?!

No, seriously, the room suddenly feels so *cold. I'm not imagining it, am I? What happened? Is the air conditioner broken? What am I even talking about?! Those don't exist here! Ack, could it be Alexei's mana?!*

"My poor Ekaterina..." Alexei's face still hadn't shifted, but his eyes gleamed with a dangerous light as he squeezed my hands in his. "It scared you so badly that you can't bear to talk about it unless I hold your hands. This all happened because I let that dragon have his way last time... The Yulnova Duchy shall put every effort into hunting him down, I swear to you."

Oh no, holding hands backfired horribly. I'd underestimated his attachment to me. *I should have expected this of Alexei!*

But what he'd said was absolutely out of the question. Humans couldn't win a fight against a jumbo-jet-sized dragon. I wouldn't

allow any of this! Especially not after Vladforen had gone out of his way to tell me he'd do Yulnova no harm.

"No, you misunderstand, brother. It wasn't scary at all! Please, I beg of you, calm down."

I was starting to panic because I had no idea how to handle Alexei's fury—when Mina stepped in. Walking up to us, she calmly put a shawl over my shoulders. Then, she bowed once and walked away, just as evenly.

Ivan made his move right after her. "I'll pour you another cup of tea. You're sure to catch a cold if you drink this."

Ivan retrieved the cups that were on the table in a hurry, but I caught a glimpse of their contents—the tea looked frozen solid.

"I can't believe I made you feel so cold. I should never have let that happen. Forgive me, Ekaterina," Alexei blurted out, his expression finally softening.

He's back to his normal self! Mina and Ivan, thank you so much!

"There's nothing to forgive," I said. "And I'm the one in the wrong for making you worry so much. I should have told you the entire story in order so you could see I was never in any danger at all."

I picked up the new cup of tea Ivan had swiftly served me and drank a sip. It was time to recount my journey to Alexei.

I told Alexei about the villager who'd stopped us and the one-eyed bear; that we hadn't made it to our first destination and had spent a night with the people of the forest; meeting the Maiden of Death, Selene, and the God of Death; and how the topic of the Black Dragon had come up, and I'd learned the Dragon King's true name was Vladforen. Then, I mentioned the gift I'd given Selene and how happy it had made her.

Everything I told him was true. I omitted some of the details, sure, but I didn't lie.

I completely skipped over why Selene had visited me and our talk about the Creator God. I couldn't let Alexei know that a grown woman from another world had ended up mixing personalities with his little sister! I also didn't mention that I knew Vladforen's name before my conversation with Selene and the God of Death. They'd confirmed that the Black Dragon's true name was what I thought it

was, so that counted as them telling me about it.

I'm not lying by omission! I'm just...summarizing with intention!

My guilty conscience threatened to overflow every time I made up a new excuse in my mind.

"Afterward, we continued our journey and reached the Mountain Sanctuary," I said. "Speaking of which, I'm glad I finally got to meet our granduncle Isaac—but I digress. I shall focus on the important parts. As I told you earlier, one of the gods warned me of an upcoming eruption while I was there. Lord Forli and I judged that it was better for the two of us to move separately after receiving this piece of information, so I hurried back to inform you. On the road, just as we'd stopped to let the horses rest, the Black Dragon appeared. I must say, he was far bigger than I could ever have imagined."

Pausing, I dug for a way to describe his size to Alexei. I told him to picture one of the smaller auditoriums of the academy and add a head, a tail, and wings to it. That was roughly how big he was. As I went on and on about Vladforen's size, Alexei's expression darkened.

"My poor Ekaterina, to suddenly be faced with such a humongous dragon... As I thought, you must have been terrified."

"I'll admit I was surprised at first," I said. "But the God of Death *had* mentioned him in our talk, so I trusted he wouldn't do anything unreasonable."

All the God of Death had done was confirm that the Black Dragon was indeed Vladforen, the Dragon King. He hadn't said a word about his character, and I'd simply drawn that conclusion from what I remembered about the game...but it was still true that the God of Death had mentioned him. Once again, I hadn't lied! I'd just gotten to the point without unnecessary details!

Mina, Oleg, and the others had witnessed me starting the conversation, so there was no point in saying otherwise. I had to adjust my story so it made sense.

"After I talked to him, he changed his form and took the appearance of a young man," I said before quickly adding, "Really, I wasn't scared at all!"

"Oh? So the rumors about the Black Dragon being able to take on

human form were true."

"Indeed. He took the form of a dashing gentleman."

"Dashing" was a total understatement considering how incredibly gorgeous he was, and I felt bad for downplaying his good looks so much, but there was no way I could find words to express such beauty.

Unaware of my internal turmoil, Alexei looked at me, an expression I couldn't read on his face. "This is the first time I've ever heard you praise a man's appearance."

"That's because you're so handsome, brother!" I exclaimed, beaming. "How could I appreciate others' looks when I'm so used to seeing you? While I do have to admit that the Black Dragon was very good-looking, I still much prefer your looks."

Don't doubt that I'm an Alexei fangirl through and through!

Alexei's expression melted into an embarrassed smile. "You're still a child when it comes to these things."

"My! The Black Dragon said the same thing."

The truth is that you're both wrong about my inner age. Forgive me!

"At any rate," I said, continuing my story, "it appears the Black Dragon had a conversation with the God of Death. He and his wife told the Black Dragon about me, then he decided he wanted to meet me. He stated himself that he'd never hurt me as I have the favor of the God of Death's wife and he cannot oppose her. That is why I was never in any danger at all."

"Is that so?" Alexei's expression had softened by now. At that, I finally started to relax.

Thinking back on the conversation between the God of Death and Vladforen, I couldn't help but conclude the former was quite something. Our grandfather had been an expert matchmaker, but trying to find a match for the *Dragon King* of all people was crazy.

"After that, the two of us had a pleasant talk," I assured Alexei. "We discussed afforestation. He became interested in the topic when Lord Forli brought it up to the Dragon Herald Bird."

Afforestation had indeed come up. And Vladforen remembered Forli talking about it. *Yup, all true.*

"As we assumed, he truly was displeased by our excessive logging activities. However, he seems amenable to the idea of allowing us to keep logging as long as we make sure the forests are preserved through afforestation. He also stated he does not intend to harm Yulnova or any humans at all, for that matter. After seeing him up close, I've come to realize he is a powerful being, as strong as an entire nation's army. Not to mention he also has absolute control over all monsters. I believe it is in our best interest to seek and maintain a friendly relationship with him."

In preparation for what I was about to say, I highlighted the importance of staying on good terms with Vladforen.

We absolutely mustn't *turn him into an enemy!* However, the conversation was about to turn in a direction that might be difficult for Alexei to stomach, so I hesitated.

"What he said about not harming humans...came with a condition. He said he wouldn't do so...while I'm here," I admitted.

Sure enough, Alexei furrowed his brows. "He seems to have taken a strong liking to you..."

"Yes. Well, um, he asked me to be his partner."

CRACK!

A sound as sharp as a whip snapped through the air, and the tea Ivan had only just poured us turned solid in a heartbeat.

I knew it! It's so cold. Please calm down, brother!

Hmm? Why are his surroundings sparkling?

It couldn't be diamond dust, couldn't it? What in the world was this phenomenon surrounding him? A special effect to signal he was about to turn into an icy demon king?

My brother is evolving! What should I do?! Quick, I need to evolve too!

Wait, I'm the one who needs to calm down.

I'd actually read about this in a mana control book. This very, *very* rare sight occurred when large quantities of mana tried to escape from someone. If that clashed with the will of the wielder, some of the mana could turn visible to the naked eye.

Leave it to Alexei to trigger such a rare thing out of love for me!

This also meant he was currently holding his mana back with all

his might. If it was this cold even with that, I imagined this room would have turned into an ice cave if he'd let his mana take over.

Alexei's beautiful, ice-cold mana shimmered around him as the corners of his lips lifted into a brutal smile. "He may be a dragon, but a dragon is still a demonic beast. A mere *beast* dares claim *you* as his partner? You said he was as strong as a nation's army, didn't you? Everything will be all right, Ekaterina. Even if I must cover the ground in mountains of bodies and streams of blood, I'll dedicate every last bit of Yulnova's might to your protection."

No, no, no! We're not doing that! This was exactly what I had wanted to avoid by putting the emphasis on Vladforen's strength. For once, I hated Alexei's extensive vocabulary. *"Mountain of bodies and streams of blood"? Let's pause the demon king transformation, please!*

"B-Brother, please compose yourself. While he did suggest it at first, he realized I'm still a child and changed his mind. There is no need to turn this into a larger issue."

"Ekaterina, you may be too innocent to understand this, but if he gave up on the idea because you're too young, he'll surely come after you as soon as you become an adult," Alexei declared, his demon king smile still going strong.

Please, stop! My brain is going to freeze again if I think about this! I just want to stick my head in the sand and ignore it! Minaaa! Ivaaan! Anyone! Save me!

Looking around, I hoped to find a savior, and instead started when I found that Mina was standing right next to me. Her face held the flat expression I expected, but an eerie atmosphere had overtaken her.

"I'll follow you to whichever house you marry into, my lady, but I'm not sure I'd be able to keep that promise if you went with *him*. Please, anyone but him."

That's your issue?!

"Besides," Mina continued, "he abducted you in front of my eyes. I'll never forgive him—nor will I forgive myself. I won't ever allow anyone to steal you away. Never again..." She clenched her teeth.

"M-Mina, *I* ordered you to stay put!" I cried. "*You* didn't do

anything wrong. If anything, you impressed me by not faltering one bit in the face of a powerful dragon. You accomplished your duty as my bodyguard magnificently!”

Refusing to back down in front of the Dragon King was quite something. I’d been so focused on figuring out how to report this to Alexei that I’d forgotten to give my hardworking maid proper praise. I was a failure of an employer!

I’d just noticed, but Ivan, who was standing next to Mina, was nodding again and again.

“You should stay right by His Grace’s side, my lady,” Ivan said. “I’ll protect you both.” He usually had a gentle smile on, but his current expression scared me...



"My dear Ekaterina," Alexei said, bringing his hand to my cheek. His fingers were so cold I reflexively covered his hand with mine in an attempt to warm them. "Forgive me. I shouldn't have sent you on this pilgrimage on my stead. Your brilliance attracts gods and demons alike. I should have realized that—I know it better than anyone else."

Actually, it's just my otherworldly soul that caught their eyes...

As an old-school tsundere, Alexei was infinitely sweet to one and one person only—me—so he'd completely misread the situation. I couldn't tell him the truth, though.

Mina, Ivan, why are neither of you stopping him? O-Okay, well, if nothing else is working, I still have my last resort...

Crying. I will cry.

My mind was set on this ridiculous—and somewhat shameful—method. Pulling Alexei's hand away from my cheek, I squeezed it gently between both of mine.

"Brother, I genuinely feel blessed. How could I not when the person I hold dearest loves me so much?"

Although this time, I'm a little bewildered by the extent of his love.

Still, I could never allow myself to forget that I was lucky. Everyone was kind to me, starting with Mina and Ivan, and I knew my dear brother loved me unconditionally. True happiness filled me when I thought about this, and that feeling only fueled my desire to be helpful to Alexei. I wanted to give back to him and to love him as much as he loved me.

My brother's eyes softened once more, and I almost let out a sigh of relief. The demon king effects—uh, the manifestation of his mana—had also disappeared.

"I gave him a reply," I said, "and told him that I wanted to stay by your side for much, *much* longer. After all, it's only been half a year since we started being able to talk to one another. When I explained that you are the only family I have, he understood. He said it would be harder to accept if I were in love with someone, but that there was nothing he could do if I simply wanted to stay with my family."

"I see..." Alexei nodded.

"Furthermore, I informed him that, as the head of our family, *you* would be the one to decide my future engagement and that there was no doubt you'd challenge him to a duel if his conduct toward me was improper. Needless to say, I let him know that I'd assist you if anything of the sort were to happen."

I smiled at Alexei, and he slowly cracked a smile too. A moment later, he started laughing in earnest.

"You'll assist me, you said?"

"Why, of course! To the best of my ability, poor as it may be."

"Thank you. You're so kind." Alexei paused before adding, "I wonder how he felt, being told such a thing by the lady he attempted to court."

Alexei seemed to be in a much better mood, as he continued to smile at me, and I noticed his hands were warmer.

"To think it's only been half a year since the two of us started speaking... I can hardly believe it," Alexei continued. "How did I live all these years without you by my side, when even the few days you spent away were so hard to bear? I even dreamed of you."

"I dreamed of you too. You were looking for your friend inside the imperial palace, and when I came up to you, you hugged me."

Alexei's eyes widened. "Come to think of it, you told me in that dream that you'd met an ancient god that had granted your wish... I shouldn't have known about that."

It was my turn to be surprised. Incredible! We really *had* met in a dream!

According to the old Greek myths of my past world, Death and Sleep were brothers, while Dream was Sleep's son. The God of Death managed death and souls, and I'd heard plenty of stories about souls leaving the body during dreams. Zhuang Zhou's story in *Zhuangzi* came to mind. How did it go—did he dream of being a butterfly or did the butterfly dream of being Zhuang Zhou?

Had the God of Death allowed our souls to meet somehow?

Actually, I don't care how it happened! Thank you!

"Even though I was away, my soul was still with you," I said. "Please allow it to remain by your side from now on. There is no

other place I'd rather be."

Alexei looked at me fondly. "If that is what you wish for," he replied.



"Welcome home, my lady, Your Grace. I'm glad to see you both safe." Novak greeted us with an expression of deep relief on his face. It wasn't often he showed his feelings so openly.

Rosen, the knight commander of the Order of Yulnova, had led men to join Alexei when he'd ridden out to find me, but Novak and the others had remained in the fortress, awaiting our return.

Kimberley and Raisa had also come out to welcome us back home, but they were currently staring at us, at a loss for words. I couldn't exactly blame them.

"Thank you for your welcome. As you can see, Ekaterina is all right," Alexei said.

"B-Brother, you can let me down." The meekness of my tone contrasted with Alexei's jovial voice.

You see, he was currently carrying me in his arms...*princess-style*.

"I know you're tired, Ekaterina," he replied. "You slept for so long in the carriage."

My face turned bright red. "To think I fell asleep on you! How embarrassing," I half whispered, covering my face with my hands.

I want to disappear!

An embarrassed beauty might be a tantalizing sight, but almost everyone here looked at me with just a warm smile—in part because they knew me, and in part because I was young enough to be their granddaughter. Rosen and Novak also seemed completely unfazed, which was probably because they'd been influenced by a certain protective someone.

"There's no need for you to be flustered. I'm the one who told you to lean on me. Ah, how blessed I felt gazing at your adorable sleeping face while holding you in my arms. You seemed at peace," Alexei said. "Now, I shall carry you to your room. I want you to spend the rest of the day resting."

"I can walk on my own!" I exclaimed after Alexei's not-so-effective reassurance.

He wouldn't let me, though. "I'll see you in my office shortly," he told Novak and the others as he started walking toward my bedroom.

Mina, Ivan, as well as Raisa, and a few other servants followed behind us.

"You dote on me *too much*, brother," I cried out.

Alexei just burst out laughing.



"Her ladyship truly is the apple of His Grace's eye," Kimberley said as he walked toward Alexei's office. "I'm very relieved she returned to us safely."

With his bald head and large aquiline nose, Kimberley very much looked the part of the stern financial advisor, but ever since he'd met Ekaterina, he'd held the young girl in high esteem.

"A relief, indeed," Rosen said with a nod. "Her ladyship is worth every effort we deployed."

After Alexei had left with the light cavalry, prioritizing speed over all else, Rosen had assembled a larger troop with heavy equipment and departed from the fortress. As soon as Alexei had found Ekaterina safe and sound, he'd sent a rider to notify Rosen so he could stop his troop's advance. The following day, Ekaterina, Alexei, and their respective parties had joined Rosen. Together, they'd returned to the fortress.

Rosen remembered how shocked Ekaterina had been upon seeing the order's equipped troops.

The Order of Yulnova was always prepared to face powerful monsters such as dragons (excluding the Black Dragon, naturally) or chimeras and carried the necessary equipment at all times. While they hadn't been assembled at the time because they were only marching, Rosen's troop had brought catapults, giant crossbows that could shoot arrows as long as spears, and other such weapons. They'd been as heavily equipped as an army descending on a castle.

"Brother, Lord Rosen... All this, just to find me? This is beyond excessive," she'd blurted out in a panic.

Alexei's reply had seemed to make her understand how these things worked, though. "Moving such a force takes time, Ekaterina. Even if one is unsure, if there is the slightest chance it might be needed, it must always be moved preemptively, or else it might be too late."

"You're right... When you have to make a decision without knowing any of the details, you cannot afford to worry about excess. I'm sorry for saying something foolish," Ekaterina had said.

Rosen, and the vice commander of the order—Oleg and Erik's father, as well as Raisa's husband—who'd been standing near the siblings and had heard this conversation, had been very surprised by her answer.

"I believe her ladyship may know far more about the art of war than we assume," he'd told Kimberley. "She's no ordinary young lady."

Little did he know that Ekaterina's reply had little to do with warfare. She'd simply pictured herself having to deal with a system error and drawn parallels between the two situations. While this particular remark hadn't been rooted in any military knowledge, Ekaterina still had a fairly decent grasp of some matters. As a history buff, she'd read plenty of war chronicles. Needless to say, she'd also read Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. In the end, Rosen had hit the mark, but for the wrong reasons.

Rosen was unusually talkative, so he kept recounting what he remembered.

After recovering from her initial shock, Ekaterina had happily looked around, asking a million questions about the catapults and crossbows. She'd wanted to know their reach, power, durability, manufacturing costs, and maintenance costs—*everything*. The knights had been impressed. Asking about the strength of a weapon wasn't so outlandish, but they doubted another lady would ever concern herself with its durability or maintenance cost.

Novak jumped into the conversation at that point. "I heard that her ladyship ordered the execution of a one-eyed bear after a

villager pleaded to her for help. Once the knights had hunted it down, she gave most of it to needy villagers and even repaired the destroyed field with her mana. The story of our beautiful and benevolent lady has already begun to spread among the commoners. Her popularity is rising as we speak."

Kimberley's silver eyes widened in surprise. "A one-eyed bear? Our gentle lady is quite valiant," he said. "Although I can absolutely picture her doing so for the sake of a poor commoner. I was deeply touched by her wisdom and concern for the people's hardships the last time we spoke. Since her ladyship supports His Grace with all her might, I'm sure her rise in popularity will make it easier for him to rule."

That last sentence was very clearly directed at Novak. While he hadn't said so directly, Kimberley had already guessed that the story of Ekaterina's kindness and bravery hadn't spread so widely out of nowhere—Novak was making sure it did.

"Her ladyship is...fifteen, is she not?" Kimberley asked. "Her wit and dazzling beauty make it hard to believe, yet her devotion to her brother shows how childlike and innocent she still is. I understand why His Grace is so cautious and careful when it comes to her. Young girls are weak."

Novak looked like Kimberley's words had reminded him of something, but he didn't reply.



Alexei's advisors didn't wait long for him. After carrying Ekaterina to her room, he quickly joined them in his office. After he stood for a moment behind his desk, Ivan pushed the large leather-covered chair forward, and Alexei took a seat.

"There are two things I wish to share with you," Alexei began. "First, one of the mountain gods passed down a divine message. There will be a volcanic eruption soon in the duchy. Second, Ekaterina encountered the Black Dragon on her way back."

All of Alexei's advisors were astonished. Rosen had heard about the Black Dragon's appearance briefly from Oleg, but the matter of

the eruption was news to him.

The first to get over his shock and speak was Novak. "It's impressive that she came back to us safe and sound. But I must say, I fail to understand the Black Dragon's motivations. Why appear in front of her ladyship *now*? Why vanish when hearing of the afforestation plans?"

"He proposed to Ekaterina," Alexei replied, his mood souring immediately.

His advisors were stunned once again. They all stared at their lord in silence as he summarized everything Ekaterina had told him.

"On her way to the sanctuary, she met the God of Death and the Maiden of Death, received a revelation while there, and encountered the Black Dragon on her way back... Her ladyship had quite the eventful trip." Novak said after Alexei finished, a tired expression on his face.

"First things first, we must set aside money to deal with the aftermath of the eruption. We still know nothing of the scale or timing, so we cannot decide on an amount, but we should review the available reserve funds," Kimberley said.

"Do that. We'll wait for Forli's report and consider the details," Alexei replied before shifting his attention to Rosen. "As for the second matter... I'd like to reinforce the strength of the Order of Yulnova."

Rosen nodded. "He'd be a difficult opponent with the current weapons at our disposal. I believe we'll need to develop new heavy weapons. I suggest focusing on gunpowder and—"

"Please wait," Novak cut him. "*I* suggest that you give the Black Dragon proper consideration as a match for her ladyship."

"What?! I'd *never* give her to some beast no one knows anything about!"

Alexei's strong rejection didn't faze Novak. "Bringing a being as powerful as a nation's entire military to our side would benefit the Yulnova greatly, and if he's as handsome as her ladyship said, surely she wouldn't dislike the idea. Besides, doing so would allow you to keep her in the duchy forever, rather than sending her to another family far away. You could create a new branch of the Yulnova,

welcome the Black Dragon into the family, and build them a castle close to the fortress. She'll remain where we can watch over and protect her. Have you considered how many resources we'd waste waging war upon the Black Dragon? Expanding the order and building up its strength would require tremendous amounts of money. Your grandmother's love of fine clothing wouldn't come close."

Alexei remained silent, unable to find a rebuttal, while Kimberley nodded at Novak's last sentence.

Kimberley was Alexei's second-oldest advisor, after Forli. Despite being a viscount, he never overstepped his role of financial advisor to comment on politics. Those who controlled the finances often held the real political power, but Kimberley did not play those games. Regardless, Alexei valued his opinion greatly, both because he was incredibly competent and because Alexei's grandfather had always trusted him greatly.

"I received a letter from Halil," Novak continued. "His Highness's intentions to spend part of summer vacation in the duchy sparked rumors in the capital. Many see her ladyship as the most likely winner of the competition to win the prince's favors and become empress."

Alexei groaned in a rare display of open irritation. He'd known this would happen the moment the emperor had asked him to welcome Mikhail for the holiday, but hearing about it infuriated him all the same. The imperial family wanted Ekaterina, that much was clear as day. Yet they hadn't tried to force her hand. Instead, they'd taken an indirect approach—one Alexei couldn't fight. He had to admit it was a deft play.

"If you wish to respect her ladyship's will not to marry into the imperial family, you must present the emperor with a match even he will find difficult to meddle with. The Black Dragon certainly fits the bill. He is not the only possible choice, of course, but I believe he deserves to be considered thoroughly."

Alexei averted his gaze, sullen. He looked nothing like the competent leader he always was, his expression more like that of a stubborn child.

Suddenly, a soft laughter echoed in the room. The source was Kimberley.

"I apologize," he said after a moment. "It's just that her ladyship's charm is quite something. Who else could get to weigh the coveted throne of the empress, for which countless houses compete fiercely, against the courtship of a legendary dragon? I feel like I'm listening to an ancient myth. As for her betrothal, I believe her ladyship's feelings on the matter are of utmost importance. She's still young and innocent enough to insist she wants to stay by Your Grace's side. We should not push our views onto her, but allow her to follow her heart. Young women are meant to leave their families and marry, sooner or later, but life is often unexpected. It would be best to watch over her with care to ensure she has no regrets."

It was so unusual for Kimberley to give his opinion on anything other than financial matters that Alexei was surprised. Novak opened his mouth to add something, but he decided against it. Among the people in this room, Novak was the only one who was around Kimberley's age and knew that he'd had a daughter who'd passed away from illness at the young age of ten.

"You're right," Alexei said resolutely, like he'd finally made up his mind. "Everything should be as she wishes it. For now, she says she wants to stay by my side. If those feelings change, I shall grant her heart's desire, no matter what it is." He went quiet, and when he continued, his voice was a mere whisper. "She said she wanted to be with me much longer, as it hasn't even been a year since we met. The day our mother passed...because of *me*. Despite that... Ekaterina is too kind."

No one could reply.

After taking a moment to compose himself, Alexei added, "His Highness Mikhail will be here soon. I'm sure you'll all be very busy with his arrival and the matter of the eruption, but I'm counting on you."

"Yes, Your Grace," his advisors answered in unison, bowing.

Oleg’s Reports (or Snippets of a Journey)

“What did you just say?” Alexei asked, his neon blue eyes widening in surprise. He couldn’t believe his ears.

Oleg straightened his posture. He seemed to have been expecting this reaction. “Allow me to repeat myself, Your Grace. Her ladyship returned on the dragon’s back. When she drew close, she waved with a bright smile and called out to us. The gentlehearted lady of our order controlling a mighty dragon and soaring in the skies... She looked like a goddess, Your Grace. I cannot begin to tell you how honored we felt to have been blessed by such a sight.”



Not long after returning to the Yulnova Fortress, Alexei had summoned Oleg to hear his full report on Ekaterina’s journey. He’d freed up enough time to get Oleg to tell him about every last detail.

Alexei was astonished by what Oleg said. He was discovering that Ekaterina’s version of events had been very much abridged.

He’d heard that Ekaterina’s party had fought a one-eyed bear, but he’d been convinced Ekaterina had simply given orders to the knights. As it turned out, she’d involved herself in the assault and had been instrumental in carrying it out. When Oleg described how she’d trembled in horror when the time came to finish off the beast, Alexei’s heart ached. Ekaterina was so kind she even felt compassion for monsters. To such a sweet girl, facing the act of killing for the very first time must have been terrible. Alexei wished he could have been there to soothe her.

At least, according to Oleg, she’d interacted merrily with the villagers after they took down the monster and seemed to have

genuinely enjoyed herself. The thought brought Alexei relief.

"The villagers were in awe of our lady's beauty and gentle disposition."

Alexei nodded enthusiastically. That was only natural. When Oleg added that most of the villagers had mistaken Ekaterina for Alexei's wife, a strained smile found its way to his lips, but he didn't take offense.

However, Alexei lost some of his composure when Oleg mentioned that Ekaterina had taken an open-air bath while staying with the people of the forest. She had been far too unguarded. Oleg quickly insisted that not only had the knights stood guard, but that even Forli had unsheathed his favorite longsword and joined them, which reassured Alexei. On the other hand, Oleg's next words aggravated Alexei further.

"You bathed in the same hot spring...*after* she did?" he asked.

"W-Well, yes. Her ladyship instructed us to. She's always so attentive and kind to those around her. She told us that we should take some time to relax. Still..."

That bathwater had touched the skin of our beautiful young lady, Oleg thought privately.

"We tried to refuse out of respect for her, but Lord Forli intervened," he said aloud.

"You won't be able to protect her ladyship if you're not in your best condition. Heed her advice and rid yourself of the journey's fatigue. And hurry it along, there are people waiting to use the hot spring after you," Forli told the guards, almost pushing them into the water.

"If Forli insisted, then I suppose you had no choice," Alexei muttered with displeasure.

The temperature of the room hadn't dropped, but Oleg looked a little pale. He continued his report nonetheless: Whenever they'd stopped to let the horses rest, Ekaterina had amused herself like a child, picking up flowers and playing with the hounds.

Alexei's lips curled into a smile as he imagined it.

"She sometimes threw sticks for the hounds to fetch—or attempted it, at least."

After Ekaterina told Regina and the others to fetch the stick she was about to throw, she managed to launch it a mere few centimeters away. Regina looked at the stick, confused, before picking it up and bringing it back to Ekaterina's feet.

"Oh dear. I'm so weak," she whispered, hiding her blushing face with both her hands.

"Why, of course," Alexei said. "The young lady of a ducal house shouldn't have to throw things herself. I would have done it for her had I been there."

"We all offered to do it in her stead," Oleg replied. "In the end, she had Mina throw it for her."

Finally, Oleg got to their encounter with the Black Dragon. Before he started recounting it, he straightened his posture and said, "Your Grace, your sister is an incredible person. Her noble brilliance makes her a true lady among ladies."

"I know that better than anyone else," Alexei replied.

Had Ekaterina heard the unwavering confidence in his tone, she would have giggled at the opacity of his rose-tinted Ekaterina filter. Oleg, on the other hand, wore a solemn expression.

"At the moment the Black Dragon first appeared, her ladyship was dumbfounded. However, she calmed down remarkably fast and instructed us to lower our weapons with dignity. She then stepped forward and greeted him as a princess might a foreign king. It pains me to admit it, but the Black Dragon is not an opponent we could have defeated. Her ladyship realized it immediately and told us to stand down so she could face him instead. I could hardly believe our soft lady had such courage in her."

"She stepped forward on her own? It is very much like her, but she put herself in such danger..."

When Ekaterina had told him that story, she'd only said that she'd "talked to him." She must have wanted to avoid worrying him. Alexei clutched his chest, remembering how much his younger sister had

sobbed after standing up to that monster in the academy.

"After she greeted him, the Black Dragon turned into a human and took her away. Needless to say, we tried to intervene, but her ladyship instructed us not to move and to wait for her while they had a conversation. She said it was an order."

"She used that word?" Alexei was amazed that Ekaterina, who always made requests with a gentle tone, had issued an order of all things. "I see she can be stern when she wishes to protect people," he whispered, letting out a small sigh.

Oleg nodded.

Unable to do anything else, he and the others had waited. They'd *kept* waiting until, finally, they saw the humongous dragon flying back their way—with Ekaterina on his back.

"At first, the Black Dragon was rude and arrogant," Oleg said. "But when he returned, he acted courteous. After landing, he obediently lowered his head so that her ladyship could come down. He also said that as long as she was there, he would not harm Yulnova, nor would he show hostility to the empire. He insisted that she take good care of herself, for he had made that oath to her alone. My heart trembled as I watched this scene unfold. Our lady had made this near invincible being her captive. It goes without saying that knights should love and protect the Lady of their Order, but I came to realize that there could be no greater happiness than to give my life for our lady."

Alexei nodded. "Well said. You must not tell another soul, but the Black Dragon has asked for Ekaterina's hand. Some believe he'd make a powerful ally and encouraged me to consider it, but I will not force her to marry. I shall *not* give her to him unless she wills it. I order you to strengthen the Order of Yulnova, so that you may protect your lady."

"Yes, Your Grace!" Oleg replied seriously.

Alexei's orders, along with what Oleg had seen, soon spread among the knights. Ekaterina had always been popular, but now they began to revere her as a goddess. While the knights of Yulnova were known for their vigor, they started training harder than ever to turn their order into the greatest of them all.

Had Ekaterina gotten wind of this, she surely would have (inwardly) screamed, *How did my brother's Ekaterina filter infect them all?! Is it contagious now?!*

Naturally, she didn't quite understand what had really transpired.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book. I'm Chidori Hama, and I'm very thankful I got to publish the fourth volume of this series! It's thanks to everyone who bought the previous volumes. You have all of my gratitude!

In this fourth volume, Ekaterina is separated from her brother for the very first time and departs on a journey—in other words, her first errand! She travels through the duchy to reach the Mountain Sanctuary and pays her respects to the gods but runs into unexpected situations and unexpected (well, perhaps not to everyone) people. The fantastical elements are stronger in this volume than in previous ones. That said, please don't worry: Despite their separation, the siblings still only have eyes for one another! Well, perhaps you should worry a little.

I've received the support of many people to have come this far—including that of Wan Hachipisu-sensei, whose illustrations are always gorgeous. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Above all, I'm beyond thankful for my dear readers. I hope you enjoy reading the rest of this story!

Chidori Hama


Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu
Goodbye, Overtime!
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This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother



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Goodbye, Overtime! This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother Volume 4
by Chidori Hama

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