Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu



Goodbye, Overtime!

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.



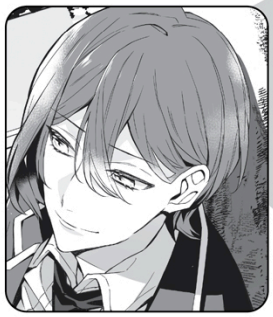
Flora Cherny

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



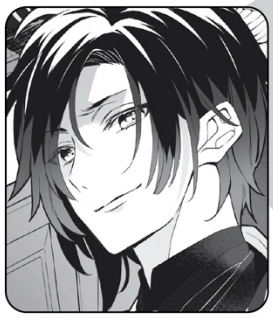
Mina Frey

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 Prince Visits

During my university days, I often visited my friends' homes during summer vacation. The same went for them. Whenever I returned to my parents' place, friends would ask to come over so we could go to the famous nearby theme park together.

While I was born in Tokyo, my parents were transferred to Osaka when I was in middle school. Henceforth, my family's home remained in Osaka. I finished middle school and high school in Osaka but moved to Tokyo alone to attend university. During the summer, I usually spent some time back in Osaka and some time visiting my friends in other areas.

All that to say, the theme park I usually went to with my university friends wasn't the mouse's kingdom but rather the Hollywood movie—themed one. It wasn't that I'd never visited the mouse's kingdom. In fact, I'd visited it many times with my friends from middle and high school who came to see me in Tokyo, although that had usually been during shorter breaks and not summer vacation.

I found work in Tokyo after graduation, so I kept living alone in the big city. The main difference was that since it turned out the company I worked for was as exploitative as they came, I never had time to see my friends anymore...

Why was I reflecting on those memories? Well, that was because I'd often watched parades *with* my friends in my past life, but I'd never watched my friends *perform* a parade!

After hearing that the crown prince, Mikhail, and my best friend, Flora, were about to arrive, my brother and I went to the main gate of the Yulnova Fortress to welcome them. We'd been standing there for a while, giving my thoughts ample time to wander.

This reminded me of the imperial family's visit to our residence in the capital, although the scale wasn't as grand. This time, there

weren't rows of knights in ceremonial clothes on either side of the road. However, our servants were neatly lined up, and most of them were tense.

Loud cheers suddenly echoed outside the estate.

The imperial family rarely came to the northern capital, so it was no wonder the arrival of the future emperor—a dashing young prince at that—would have everyone, especially the women, in a frenzy. After that occurred to me, I noticed the screams were particularly high-pitched. They were almost squeals.

Mikhail's visit had more or less been ordered by the emperor. After my brother presented him with the glass pens I'd had crafted for him, he'd used the pretense of wanting Mikhail to escape the summer heat to suggest he spend time in our duchy. There was a clear political goal behind this show. The emperor was displaying his trust in Alexei and supporting his current efforts to grasp full control over the duchy. To make the most out of this princely visit, we'd organized a parade through the streets of the northern capital to show off the close relationship between the duke of Yulnova and the crown prince.

Alexei thought the emperor had other hidden motives, but that didn't mean we shouldn't milk this visit for all it was worth.

I'd heard this visit was all people could talk about in the northern capital:

"They say His Highness is coming! He's so close to His Grace that he's seeing him over the summer!"

"That means His Grace will likely become an important minister after His Highness takes the throne. The future of Yulnova is bright."

"To think we'll get to see the future emperor with our own two eyes. How lucky we are!"

Mikhail had spent a good chunk of the trip traveling slowly so he could parade. As the crown prince, he was no doubt aware of the implications of his visit, and I trusted he'd smiled at the crowd the entire way.

Alexei had already won the support of the people, but there were still stubborn supporters of Alexandra among the elites. Most of them glorified the imperial family as she had, so Mikhail's show of

support would make opposing Alexei far more difficult for them.

At last, Mikhail's carriage passed through the gates of the Yulnova Fortress. The hornists of our order readied their instruments and sounded the melody of welcome.

The carriage Mikhail was currently riding in did not belong to the imperial family; it was actually one we'd sent to him. Just like we had, Mikhail had boarded the *Rapidus* and gone up the Serno River, so he couldn't have brought his own carriage. However, the six knights who surrounded the carriage marked with the crest of the Yulnova were imperial knights. Mikhail was protected by more guards than when he'd been in the imperial capital for two reasons: the dangers of the road, and another attempt at displaying the close collaboration between the House of Yulnova and the imperial family, even when it came to defense.

One of the imperial knights also carried a flag with the crest of the crown prince. In the imperial family, every member had their own crest in accordance with their role. There was the crest of the emperor, the crest of the empress, and the crest of the firstborn son—or in other words, the crest of the crown prince. Other princes, if there were any, were given slightly modified versions of the crown prince's crest, while imperial princesses were given adjusted versions of the empress's crest.

The crown prince's crest bore a snake and wings—the emblems of the God of Thunder. It also included a blue butterfly. Considering that the crests of the grand ducal houses depicted flowers, I felt like the implied connection was very clear.

Incidentally, the crest of the emperor also had a snake and wings, but alongside them was a lion, not a butterfly.

So, while the carriage belonged to the House of Yulnova, the high-flying flag bearing the crest of the crown prince declared that its occupant was the future sovereign of this land.

The carriage stopped in front of the main entrance, and a young man in uniform who appeared to be Mikhail's servant opened the door in a hurry. He had eyes so small they looked like pieces of thread. Though he was slender, he seemed quick-witted and agile. I wondered if, like Ivan, he doubled as a bodyguard for the prince.

Finally, the crown prince of our empire, Mikhail, stepped out of the carriage.

Wait, he's...

"Hey, Alexei. It's been a while."

"Welcome to the Yulnova Fortress. I'm glad to see you in good health."

As etiquette dictated, the prince and the head of our house exchanged greetings first. Mikhail was his usual casual self, but those who didn't know him would probably assume he and Alexei were especially close because of the way he spoke.

Then, Mikhail turned to me. "It's been a while since I last saw you, Ekaterina. You've grown even more beautiful."

Oh! Looks like his lip service skill has leveled up! But there's something else...

"Far too long, Prince Mikhail," I replied. I paused for a moment. "You've grown taller, haven't you?"

Now that he stood in front of Alexei, I could see there wasn't as much of a gap between their heights anymore.

Did he change his hairstyle too?

His hair had gotten longer, and he'd combed it back. Overall, he looked more mature.

Mikhail smiled. "You can tell? The servant in charge of my wardrobe can't stop sighing. I've grown more than he expected, and now he fears the outfits he had made will go to waste."

He has a servant in charge of his clothing? That's the imperial family for you.

I supposed this was a common issue boys faced because of their growth spurts.

Mikhail hadn't just grown taller. His frame had also gotten thicker—from that of a boy to that of a young man.

In Japan, there was a proverb that said, "If you haven't seen a boy in three days, pay close attention." How right that was. You truly couldn't underestimate growth spurts! Still, trying to change one's image over summer vacation was such a high schooler thing to do. It was adorable!

Big sis supports you. Do your best, Prince!

After greeting both of us, Mikhail extended his hand toward the carriage. A dainty hand took his, and the pink-haired young lady who'd accompanied him disembarked the carriage too.

"Lady Ekaterina!"

Her voice was so cheerful that I forgot all about etiquette and opened my arms. "Lady Flora!"

Flora jumped into my arms and responded with just as much enthusiasm. "I couldn't wait to see you! I counted the days until our reunion!"

Oh, she's so cute. How can she be so pretty and *say such cute things?!*

"I looked forward to your arrival every day as well!" I hugged her tightly.

Tears welled up in Flora's eyes, but she had a big smile on her face.

We lost ourselves for a time in our emotional reunion, but then I noticed all the eyes focused on us.

Oops, I forgot about etiquette—and what of my dignity as the lady of the house?! The servants' warm smiles are injuring me!

"I'm sorry! I shouldn't have..." Flora said, her face flushing red.

Argh, you're too cute! It's all right. Beautiful girls are never guilty of anything!

"Neither should I," I answered. "I forgot myself in my excitement. Please forgive me, Lady Flora."

"I'm just so overjoyed to see you!"

Her keen answer tugged at my heartstrings even more.

Yup, definitely innocent. A cutie like her can do no wrong.

"Watching you girls warms my heart," Mikhail said. His voice held a little laughter, but his remark helped us move away from this blatant breach of etiquette.

Thanks, Prince. You really are a good guy.

"Do excuse me for the outburst," I said, stepping back into my role as lady of the house. "Please, come inside. You must be tired from the long trip. Let us have a cup of tea to relax."

I led our little group into the fortress.



While I'd messed up a *little* bit, this friendly atmosphere felt nice. With our showdown against the remnants of the old regime followed by my adventurous pilgrimage, I'd almost forgotten this was summer break. I had a lot in store to entertain our guests, and I hoped I'd be able to create some nice summer memories with them.

I'm gonna have fun this time!

The content of the activities screamed royalty and nobility, but hey, I was still looking forward to them.

First, we all sat together in a lounge for tea and had a lively catch-up session.

Flora was very excited to share what she'd done so far during the break. She'd gone back to the baron and baroness who had taken her in after her mother passed and had spent most of her time helping the baron in the garden and cooking with the baroness.

"She taught me so many new recipes we can make for lunch! I'm so excited about trying them out with you once the next semester starts," she exclaimed, her cheeks flushing.

Mikhail let out a strained laugh while I replied, "How wonderful! I'm looking forward to it, Lady Flora. I love to learn new recipes with you."

At the academy, Flora and I borrowed a small space in the kitchen to cook lunch every day. Somehow, I felt as though I hadn't cooked in ages. Ever since summer vacation had started, I'd spent every day being served like a true noble lady and hadn't stepped into a kitchen.

"I've been away from the kitchen for so long, I'm afraid I've forgotten everything," I said. "I'm not sure I know how to control the heat of the stove anymore."

There were no gas or induction ranges in this world, and we used an old-school wood-burning stove. Managing the heat was surprisingly difficult. Charcoal, peat, and coal existed in this world, but they were far too expensive to use for cooking.

Alexei's expression clouded over.

"Controlling the heat... When I hear you speak of such things, I

worry you might burn yourself." He took my hand in his. "Ekaterina, would you agree to stop cooking? I will negotiate with the academy myself to have your meals brought from the outside or have a chef come cook for you. Please."

As always, my brother loved me *way* too much.

I squeezed his hand back and looked into his neon blue eyes. "If you command it, I shall do as you say, brother. However, cooking for you and watching you eat what I've made fills me with joy. I will be sad to lose this delight."

Alexei paused for a few seconds before clearing his throat. "I'd never rob you of your happiness," he said. "Everything shall be as you wish."

"Thank you, brother! I will ask Lady Flora for guidance and make you more delicious dishes!"

Yes! I got him to agree, so I can keep making him lunch!

In a corner of my heart, I raised my fist in victory.

Flora was grinning while Mikhail looked at us like he was lost in thought, his gaze distant.

"Why is it that I feel so at peace hearing you two go back and forth?" he asked.

Sorry about that, Prince.

I agreed that the four of us being together felt more natural than before. Flora in particular used to be a little shy around Mikhail, but she now spoke without reserve. Had the two of them gotten closer on the way?

How did you like this special event, handcrafted by yours truly, the villainess? Did your intimacy scores go up? Heh heh, I really outdid myself!

"You must have been busy since school let out, Prince Mikhail," I said.

"There were plenty of functions for me to attend, and I went to inspect my territory."

I wouldn't have expected any less of a prince. Having to spend your vacation attending functions seemed tiring, though. That said, it was my first time hearing about a territory.

"You have a territory of your own, Prince Mikhail?" I asked.

"I do. I've had it since I was born."

"The firstborn prince is given the Domain of the Blue Butterfly at birth, Ekaterina," Alexei said.

My eyes widened in surprise. *Whoa, that's so cool!*

Apparently, the Domain of the Blue Butterfly was one of the territories that belonged to the imperial family. While it belonged to the imperial "family," the true owner of the land was the emperor, of course. After he married and fathered children, however, he'd bestow some of that land upon them. What territory went to whom was more or less decided by conventions, and the Domain of the Blue Butterfly was always given to the crown prince. This was *actually* the reason there was a blue butterfly on the crest of the crown prince.

Civil officials took care of it while the crown prince was young, but he was expected to start learning how to manage it himself, little by little, after turning twelve. The tax revenue from his domain was meant to cover his expenses. He had the right to allocate the funds himself and had to devise annual plans detailing how much to spend on what and whether to set aside money for the following year.

The tax yields from the territories they owned weren't the only sources of revenue for the imperial family. They also received a portion of the taxes that all the other lords levied. However, relying on his territory's income was a good way for the crown prince to learn how other lords lived and worked—crucial knowledge for a future ruler.

After learning that, what surprised me most was the age at which the crown prince was expected to start administering his domain. Twelve! I'd give a child that age a little notebook to keep track of their pocket money, not an estate to run! Even with help, it was a daunting task. The imperial family was merciless.

"Its size isn't equivalent to the Yulnova Duchy in any way, though. What I've been doing is nothing compared to Alexei."

Mikhail grinned as he said those words, but he must have gone through his own challenges, albeit different than Alexei's. You couldn't tell from the way he talked about it, though. As the future ruler, he gave a lot of thought to the image he showed us, his future

subjects.

How should I put this? Now that I think about it, it must be very overwhelming for him.

Even if the Domain of Blue Butterfly wasn't nearly as large as the Yulnova Duchy, learning how to manage it had only been the first step of Mikhail's education. There were people, lords ruling over them, and above them all—high on his throne—the emperor. One day, the sixteen-year-old boy in front of me would have to sit on that very throne. He had accepted this fact long ago and had worked tirelessly his entire life to prepare himself for the daunting task ahead.

That was praiseworthy, but Mikhail was still just a child. As a subject of this empire, I was reassured by his hardworking nature, but as someone who'd lived in twenty-first century Japan, I couldn't help but pity him. He'd never gotten to be a child.

At the academy, I'd never really thought about this. Even though we knew he was the crown prince, Mikhail blended in with the other students. Now that I gave it more thought, the years he got to spend as a student alongside everyone else must have felt very special to him.

It was now time for Alexei and me to share our news.

"I've carried out my duties as duke." As always, he was concise.

Mikhail smiled. "Is everything going smoothly?"

"Yes."

"I see. Good."

Their exchange was incredibly brief, but I could feel there was depth to it.

Prince... How much do you know?

This reminded me of the Edo Period. Back then, the shogunate had spies in every fief to keep track of new developments. I wondered if the emperor also had eyes everywhere in the empire. Wait. Even if that *was* the case, the emperor himself was likely the only one who heard the reports, so the prince probably didn't know about Novadain and the others.

I'm overthinking this, aren't I?

It was obvious that a young duke, having recently inherited his

duchy, would face difficulties. Mikhail must have just meant his question in a general way. Still, his way of making it seem like he knew more than he let on was impressive. *He's really good at this imperial prince thing!*

I thought of the sixteen-year-old boys of my past life. Most of them had only ever thought about playing soccer, reading manga, or what ingredients tasted best in okonomiyaki. Those were the only kinds of conversations I remembered having with them, and it made sense: They were still kids! Adolescence was a beautiful, precious time when having your mind filled with random thoughts was perfectly all right.

To be honest, most of my classmates at the academy resembled the kids of my past life. Even here, people like my brother or the prince were the exception, not the rule. I had conflicted thoughts about them. On the one hand, the way they'd been forced to grow up ahead of time pained me, but on the other, I couldn't help but admire them.

I recounted my pilgrimage. First, I talked about my encounter with the one-eyed bear, then the divine message warning us about an upcoming eruption. Flora and Mikhail were shocked enough by those events. I didn't mention the Maiden of Death, the God of Death, or Vladforen. I stole glances at Alexei the entire time, trying to judge what information I should give.

Eventually, he spoke up. "Her journey was so full of surprises that I found myself writing to His Imperial Majesty about it."

I'd told Alexei the Black Dragon could take on an entire nation's military. Our relationship with him did not impact only the Yulnova Duchy—it impacted the empire as a whole. I understood why he'd informed the emperor, and it further convinced me it wasn't the sort of topic I could bring up during a casual chat with friends.

Alexei was already a duke, while Mikhail was not yet on the throne. He had no real authority yet. For the time being, there was a big difference between the two of them.

I beamed at Mikhail and Flora and did not elaborate further.

"Ekaterina seems to have a way of finding herself in the strangest situations," Mikhail said with a nod. "Reminds me of when she fought

a monster at the academy."

This was an elegant way of signaling he wouldn't pry any more. *Once again: As expected of a prince!*

Flora simply smiled back without saying anything. She'd been raised as a commoner and did not necessarily know the ways of the nobility, but she was smart and thoughtful. She had potential!

Flora was the heroine of this game, so I wanted her to successfully bag the prince. I also prayed for her success because her failing had a fairly good chance of blowing up in my face, but...if she *did* end up with the prince, she'd have to become crown princess. One day, she'd have to shoulder the burden of becoming the empress. That was bound to be tough on her.

However, I knew she had the potential to overcome that challenge, so I, the villainess, would keep rooting for their love!

"This journey reminded me how lovely the Yulnova Duchy is. You may only be visiting us for a short time, but I'll do my utmost to show that to you," I said, changing the topic.

I started telling them about what I had planned for them. There were two main events. The first was a welcome banquet at the Yulnova Fortress. It'd be a *much* more private affair than the previous one we'd held to celebrate Alexei inheriting the duchy (and to introduce me to the local nobles), with a *much* shorter guest list, but I'd planned to make it *much* more luxurious instead.

Being present at a banquet with the future emperor as the main guest was an immense honor that people could brag about for generations. Obviously, everyone wanted to be invited. The ones we'd selected would need to be grateful, which would help Alexei strengthen his power.

The second event was a hunting tournament. This, too, would be a lavish affair with a select guest list. In this world, just like in my past one, hunting was the favorite activity of the nobility. It wasn't only a recreational pastime: It doubled as a way to secure food before the harsh winter arrived, unlike trophy hunting, which had been popular in some parts of the world in my past world.

I'd planned for us to enjoy some of the wild game together. The meat would be prepared there, on the hunting grounds, and we'd

hold a barbecue party of sorts.

"Women will also participate," I explained. "Some of the ladies like to hunt, but most will stay next to the refreshing stream. We'll eat sweets and listen to the twittering of the birds. I've never been there before, but I hear the hunting grounds are beautiful. I'm sure you'll appreciate the rich natural scenery since you're from the imperial capital, Lady Flora. I'd love to take a walk under the shade of the trees with you."

"That sounds lovely! I can hardly wait," Flora replied with a bashful laugh.

"The most common game there is deer, but there are boars as well as demonic beasts that are particularly well suited for consumption, like big-horned oxen. People of the nearby village will act as beaters, and I trust they'll push plenty of beasts toward us," Alexei told Mikhail.

Mikhail's eyes shone. "In the Yulnova Duchy, you share the spoils with nearby villagers, don't you? I'm sure they'll be motivated to help. I'm looking forward to hunting uncommon demonic beasts."

I was slightly taken aback. I didn't know he liked hunting. Come to think of it, he was the type who liked to chase after his love interest, so it made sense. I hadn't expected him to have such a wild side, though!

What he said next surprised me even more.

"While we're on the topic of the upcoming festivities, I have a request about the banquet. Would you agree to be my partner for the first dance, Ekaterina?"

SORRY, WHAT?!

"You and Lady Flora will be our guests of honor for this banquet, so we were thinking of having the two of you share the first dance," Alexei said, a stern expression on his face.

I nodded several times. I hadn't even considered any other option. The villainess sharing a dance with the prince? I'd be headed straight for doom!

I definitely shouldn't be your partner, Prince!

While Flora was only the adopted daughter of a baron, her status as the "prince's travel companion" and "a good friend of the lady of

the house" gave her a boost. That was why I, the noblest lady in the area, wasn't Mikhail's default partner. If anything, inserting myself into the equation when the prince had actually brought a partner with him would be rude.

In reality, the prince was free to choose whomever he wanted, and these things were more of a case-by-case matter influenced by interpersonal relationships, but picking Flora presented no particular issue.

Mikhail didn't look convinced.

"Yes, when a woman and a man arrive somewhere together, they're generally expected to be partners, but I'd say this is a special case," he said with a hum. "Traveling together usually means you're married or at least engaged. That isn't true in our case."

That was true. Unmarried men and women didn't often travel together in this world.

I'm sorry, I brought up the idea because I was trying to give you two a chance to bond!

"It is uncommon but not unheard of," Alexei said. "Besides, if you refuse to make her your partner after bringing her with you, it might reflect poorly on the way others see her. I'm afraid her position in the duchy might suffer."

Once again, I nodded enthusiastically. Regardless of what Mikhail chose to do, I'd protect Flora's position as a special guest with my own two hands. I had to keep nodding my head up and down like a bobbleheaded akabeko.

"I understand your point, but my choice of partner for the first dance risks following us back to the capital. I'm sure you're aware of this," Mikhail said.

He was hinting at Flora's rank. After they returned to the capital and her current "special" status disappeared, only the fact that she was from a baron's family would remain. Sharing the first dance with the prince risked putting her in an awkward position.

Her dancing with Mikhail was supposed to be my greatest accomplishment with this not-so-villainous event, but I hadn't thought things through. I'd told myself it'd be nice to strengthen Flora's position in advance for when the prince's route progressed,

but in the game, she danced with him much later on. I might have tried to move things too fast.

"I think Flora being my partner would be detrimental to her in the long run," Mikhail added. "Not to mention, she's never participated in such a party before. Having to perform the first dance from the get-go would be a challenge."

Urgh, that was...a very good point! I also had to work on my mental fortitude before I danced with Alexei.

I stole a glance at Flora. Alexei also seemed to be waiting for her to express her opinion. She seemed to hesitate and, after mustering all of her courage, she said, "I-I'm sorry to ask, but what is the first dance?"

All of us stared at her, astonished.

We should have started from there!

I explained to her that, at a formal party, the person with the highest rank in attendance always danced first, and Flora paled. I should have known she wouldn't be aware of that. She'd been a commoner practically her whole life. She wouldn't have been anywhere near a party like that!

I'm so stupid! I should have explained it to her first.

"I'm so sorry for never knowing anything. Ah, how embarrassing," she murmured.

"It's not your fault, Lady Flora!" I rushed to say. "You couldn't have known. It was my duty to explain."

I'm so, so sorry, my little Flora! You must not be used to dancing either, yet here I am, dumping this topic on you!

My brother and the prince were the kind of people who often had to perform the first dance. Conversely, they practically never interacted with people who didn't know what a first dance was. *I* should have been the one to notice! This was on me!

I could see that even Alexei was apprehensive. He must have regretted pushing for Mikhail to choose Flora as his partner. He seemed to be reviewing the guest list in his mind, but there was no way he'd find an appropriate partner there.

In other words, the only thing to do...was to take responsibility, and...

I looked at Alexei. I couldn't! If I went to my doom, I'd drag my brother down with me! Trying to become Mikhail's dance partner was exactly what the Ekaterina of the game would have done. If I did that, I'd be running straight toward the original plot and breathing life into the flags myself!

I don't want to. I'm scared! Besides...

I glanced at Mikhail.

"Um, you don't need to overthink it," he said. "You're the woman of the highest rank in this duchy. Everyone will realize we danced together because our statuses matched. No one will look for a deeper meaning."

What Mikhail had just said made sense, but...

"I..." I started mumbling. "While it embarrasses me to admit it, I've never danced with a gentleman other than my brother..."

"Huh? Really? But we have dance classes," Mikhail said.

We *did* have dance classes where we practiced dancing with our classmates, but that didn't help.

"I always dance with Lady Flora," I said.

During dance classes, girls normally partnered with boys. However, there weren't enough boys compared to the girls in the class, so Flora and I—the loners—hadn't had partners at the start. That was why we'd started dancing together. We switched who did the boy and girl part every time and always had a lot of fun. We weren't loners anymore, but no one would dare intrude on two beautiful girls giggling and twirling around.

"Th-That's true. Lady Ekaterina always dances with me!" Flora clenched her fists resolutely. "Wouldn't it be for the best if the two of us did the first dance together?!"

My little Flora! What a genius idea!

"You're right! There'd be no issue, then!" I exclaimed.

"Wait. Let's all calm down for a minute," Mikhail said.

What a magnificent tsukkomi you are, Your Highness. Straight-faced and well-timed! You've got a sense of comedic genius.

"Well, the idea has merit," Alexei said.

"Not *you* too!" Mikhail let out, exasperated.

And here comes another beautiful tsukkomi! You should give up

dance and start looking for a manzai partner, Prince.

All right, all right, enough cracking jokes to run away from reality.

The prince was a good friend of mine, but we'd need to hold one another close to dance. The thought of doing that made embarrassment well up in my stomach. I think I felt this awkward about dancing because of my memories from my past life. In this world, it was a very normal thing to do.

Who's the idiot who popularized social dancing in this world, huh? It was you, wasn't it, Pyotr the Great? I hate you!

Wait, is that lèse-majesté?

Actually, I was pretty sure the one who'd brought social dancing to the Duchy of Yulnova wasn't Pyotr himself, but one of his brothers—the founder of our house, Sergei.

Ah.

"Hmm, may I suggest something?" I said.



After being summoned at the last minute, Adelina Novak, the wife of Alexei's most trusted advisor, rushed in. A tinge of worry crossed her charming face as she knelt in front of Mikhail.

"It's an honor to be in your presence, Your Highness," Adelina said.

"Please, be at ease, Countess. Thank you for answering this call on such short notice," Mikhail replied with a perfect princely smile.

Addressing her by her future title was a way of paying her respect. Though her husband, Boris Novak, was still a viscount, he'd soon be made a count. When Novak had introduced Adelina to Mikhail, Alexei had mentioned the upcoming change, and Mikhail had immediately adapted. I still couldn't believe a sixteen-year-old could be so competent.

"I hear your husband is Alexei's most trusted vassal. You have my thanks for contributing to the stability of this duchy."

"What kind words... I have no doubt my husband will be as moved by your praise as I am, Your Highness."

Those didn't seem to be empty words, as Adelina's frame

quivered with emotion.

Alexei hadn't gone into the details and had only said that Novak was one of his vassals, but Mikhail had a clear grasp on the situation here. He must have done his research in preparation for the trip.

The prince really can't be underestimated.

"I was told you have an interest in the traditional dances of Yulnova," Adelina continued. "I'm overjoyed. These dances have been loved by many, regardless of rank, for countless years—even before the empire was founded. When the people of Yulnova hear that such noble individuals performed one of our dances at the banquet in your honor, they'll be filled with pride."

Ever since I'd returned to the duchy, Adelina had been my dance teacher. In between our practice sessions, she'd shared her vast knowledge of dance with me, and that'd included talks about traditional dances that were performed as a group. She'd once told me that one of them was especially popular among young people in the past. After our grandfather passed, Alexandra had tried her hardest to erase these "barbaric dances" (as she called them), so she'd strictly forbidden performing them in public. According to Adelina, many citizens had been greatly saddened.

Back then, I'd replied it was a pity and they seemed like lovely dances, but the truth was I'd been *seething*.

Can't you do anything right, old hag?! You're the barbarian for trying to wipe away a regional culture! I'd thought.

This conversation had surfaced in my mind when I'd been looking for a way to avoid doing the first dance with Mikhail. Since Mikhail and Flora had taken the trouble to visit us in Yulnova, I'd asked if they'd like to try performing a traditional dance of our duchy that was in peril of being forgotten. It was one we could do with the four of us instead of pairing off.

"Ekaterina told us what the two of you discussed," Alexei said. "I wasn't aware the regional culture of Yulnova was fading after being trampled upon after our grandfather's passing. I believe it to be a grave issue and would like to undo the damage that has been done during my rule. We decided that performing this dance at the banquet was a good way of letting everyone know the times have

changed. His Highness and His Imperial Majesty are very dedicated to protecting the regional cultures of the empire. As soon as Ekaterina suggested this, His Highness gladly accepted."

Mikhail nodded. "Well, it sounds like a lot of fun. Besides, Pyotr the Great never wished for the local cultures to disappear, and the founder of the House of Yulnova, Sergei, attached great importance to harmony and peaceful cohabitation with the people of this land. My father has told me many times that his will was the foundation of the peace and stability of Yulnova. I'd be glad to help if I can."

After taking over this land, Sergei had married Kristina, the daughter of a powerful indigenous family who also happened to be a shaman of the Mountain Sanctuary. During his rule, he'd always respected the local culture and had promoted harmony. Not everyone had handled things like Sergei had. After receiving land from the emperor, some nobles had given preferential treatment to their vassals while discriminating against the native populations. The territories that had walked this path had often struggled to maintain peace.

Or so Mikhail explained. This immediately reminded me of Tosa, the fief where Sakamoto Ryouma had been born. The family that'd ruled over that fief, the Yamauchi clan, had done just that—given important positions to its original vassals. At the same time, they'd discriminated against the vassals of the former lords, the Chousokabe clan, and referred to them as "countryside samurai." Their feud had been the subject of many historical novels. Many historians believed that those years of oppression were the driving force behind the formation of the anti-shogunate Shishi movement during the Bakumatsu period. Even if the discrimination hadn't been the reason, it couldn't have felt good.

I'm so glad I was reborn as a Yulnova.

My brother was impressing me once again. I'd only come up with this idea because I was trying to avoid triggering the doom flags, but he'd immediately turned it into a plan to change public sentiment and made the prince agree.

You're amazing!

The prince wasn't too bad either! He'd said this seemed like a

good learning opportunity. I didn't think he was talking about the dancing but about the way to overturn public sentiment.

And he's only sixteen! I can't wait to see what he'll be like in the future!



Unbeknownst to Ekaterina, Alexei was almost entirely motivated by the thought of making sure Mikhail wouldn't steal Ekaterina from him.

Meanwhile, Mikhail figured that proactively helping Alexei was more likely to earn him points with Ekaterina than insisting on being her dance partner.

Ekaterina was dense as a brick wall and wonderfully missed both of their intentions, as usual.



Adelina watched over the group. The duke's decision to bring back the traditional dances she so loved moved her to the point of tears, but she couldn't help observing the noble, beautiful youngsters with a gleam in her eyes. She wondered how their relationships would develop. Her own children were already married and had moved on to the child-rearing phase. There wasn't much excitement there anymore.

"Your Highness and Your Grace are both wonderful young men, and I'm sure your guests won't be able to take their eyes off our beautiful young ladies. I can hardly wait to witness your dance. Come, I shall teach you the steps. They represent young men competing, courting, and finally being accepted by their partners."

Adelina assured us that the steps weren't hard because the dance was so old, and she was right.

At first, the men and women split into two groups and faced one another. Then, the men bowed to the women and extended one hand toward them. The women ignored them, took one another's hands instead, and started dancing with smiles on their faces. Next,

they stepped back and spun.

Adelina demonstrated the spinning motion for us, and her skirt billowed as beautifully as a blooming flower in the wind.

After that, the women paired up, linked arms, and twirled in a circular motion before striking a pose. This dance was supposed to be performed in larger groups so the women normally changed partners and repeated this sequence of steps, but we wouldn't be doing that.

During that time, the gentlemen also danced among themselves. Since they were supposed to be "fighting" over the ladies, however, their steps looked more like martial arts sequences. Once the women started dancing together, the men faced one another and each lifted a fist. They lightly bumped the fists before immediately retreating. They next stepped forward while they crossed their upper arms—first their right arms, then their left. Finally, they spun around and dropped into a fighting stance. Like the women, the men would normally repeat this sequence with other partners several times.

Once this was over, the men again bowed to the women and extended their hands. This time, the women accepted the invitation and each approached one of the men. They performed several dance moves together, but there was no touching—not even any hand holding. Eventually, the men extended their hands, but the women turned around and pretended to run away so the men chased after them. Just like before, this part continued several times with different partners for large groups.

During the very last sequence, each couple held hands and danced together. The choreography was almost the same as the one the women performed together at the start. Then, after striking the final pose, the man and woman of each pair bowed to one another. That was it!

"This is just the basic form," Adelina said. "There are variations in almost every village and the moves have changed over the years, so please feel free to alter some of them to make it easier if you'd like."

We'd moved to the hall that would be used for the party for Adelina's lesson. Her husband, Novak, was next to her. His face was almost entirely blank.

Poor Novak had been dragged here without prior notice in the middle of his work, forced to greet the prince even though he probably hadn't prepared himself to talk to His Highness today, and immediately been asked by his wife, "You remember that local dance I taught you, right?" before performing a demonstration for us. I couldn't imagine what was going through his mind right now.

Adelina hadn't been cruel enough to make her husband do the women's part with her. She'd done this part alone, then Novak had done the men's part on his own, and the two of them had demonstrated the couple part together. Even though they were both in their fifties, their movements were sharp, and I could sense their affection for one another in their steps.

After watching their masterful performance, all of us applauded.

Adelina turned to Novak and said, "Thank you, dear. You can return to your work."

Novak turned on his heels and left without a word. I *really* couldn't tell what he was thinking then.

I'm so sorry, Novak! If I hadn't suggested we perform this dance, you'd still be having a perfectly normal day!

While I felt bad for him, I was also very relieved. There were only four of us, so the dance wouldn't last long. I'd been the one to come up with this idea, but that didn't mean I was thrilled to be the center of everyone's attention with my subpar dancing skills. This trial would require a lot of emotional strength.

And I went and dragged the others into this horrible trial. I'm sorry. I didn't think before I spoke!

While my sorries were sincere, I soon felt like revoking that second round of (silent) apologies. Why? Because the other three mastered the dance—and to perfection at that—in the blink of an eye!

The prince and my brother were the worst offenders. They had great recall *and* great motor skills. On top of that, they'd practiced swordplay together since they were children, so their synchronization was impressive. Everything was flawless from the first time they rehearsed the men's part together.

When they faced off and raised their fists, Mikhail looked very

boyish—which was a rare occurrence these days—and I couldn't stop myself from grinning. It also seemed to get to Alexei because I noticed the corners of his lips lifting slightly. Then, they stepped closer to one another and bumped their fists before moving on to the battle choreography. Somehow, they made it seem like they were really fighting. I tensed up watching them. Not only did they get every movement right, they even looked good doing them. There was a sharp beauty to the movements of people who'd studied martial arts for years.

The entire time I was watching, I had to fight against my urge to fall to my knees.

Brother! You're so cooooool!!!

You're doing great as well, Prince! You look more like a little kid than an imperial prince, but that's adorable! Keep at it.

Be strong, self. If I fall to my knees now, Alexei is sure to worry and forbid me from attending the banquet altogether. I can't stay in my room while they perform the dance I *asked for.*

"My! What a splendid performance," Adelina said. "You were both impeccable. I'm sure you'll captivate all of the ladies in the audience. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Most definitely!" I kept my answer short because I wouldn't stop if I started detailing all the ways in which my brother was the coolest. Instead, I turned to Flora and asked, "What do *you* think, Lady Flora?"

Was the prince cool? Wanna share your feelings with the class?

"I agree. They both performed beautifully," she said. Her voice was polite and very calm.

Huh? That's *your reaction?*

Well, that was okay for now. I'd ask her about her feelings for the prince in detail later. Besides, I still had more summer vacation events planned to help her fall deeper in love.

Next, Flora and I tried the women's part, and Adelina gave us a passing mark too.

When Flora danced, her face flowered into a smile, and she moved with the grace of a fairy. I couldn't help but smile with her, but I didn't think my movements were as fluid.

"Lady Flora's movements were light and graceful, while yours were elegant and refined, Lady Ekaterina. How lovely!"

Despite Adelina's praise, I was aware I hadn't done a great job.

My athletic abilities in this life are abysmal...

Flora had picked up dancing after entering the academy, just like me, so she wasn't as proficient as Alexei or the prince, but she demonstrated potential.

As we tried to dance the mixed-gender parts, I was the only one who fell behind. I struggled the most when partnered up with Mikhail, as I didn't know how much distance to put between the two of us. I managed the "running away" bit, but linking arms didn't come as easily.

"I'm sorry. I moved a little too fast," Mikhail said, pushing his sky blue hair back.

I shook my head. "Not at all. I was slow."

Perhaps I'm just stupid...

The thought saddened me, but I tried to tell myself it wasn't the case. I wouldn't have remembered the choreography at all if I were. The other three were just *too* good. Maybe I had just lost track of the average person's skill level.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Ekaterina," Alexei said, caressing my hair softly. "You are as elegant as a goddess."

"Exactly. You dance wonderfully, Lady Ekaterina!" Flora insisted.

I disagreed. My brother was praising me because he saw life through a heavily rose-tinted Ekaterina filter, and Flora was too nice. I'd dragged everyone else into this; I couldn't hold them back!

"If you're worried, we can train some more," Adelina said. "A few more times, and I'm sure you'll be in perfect sync."

I nodded with a serious expression on my face.

All right, I'm gonna do better next time!

"Your Highness, would you mind being her practice partner?" Adelina asked.

"Of course not. I need the practice myself."

Mikhail and I danced together again and again until I was satisfied with my performance.

It was only after it all that I remembered that I'd suggested this

to try to *avoid* dancing with Mikhail, and that I thought dancing with a man other than Alexei was embarrassing.

Well, at least I'd avoided the whole hugging-each-other-close kind of dancing. Performing a folk dance would turn into a nice summer memory, so I supposed it was a win in the end.

Now, on to the girls-only part of the day!



"Hurry, Lady Flora. I want you to see it before the sun sets!"

"Y-Yes, but what are we going to see?"

"It's a surprise!"

Flora and I hustled through the corridors of the Yulnova Fortress as quickly as possible. After the rehearsal, the original plan had been to allow everyone to rest until dinner, but I'd urged Flora to come with me instead.

We reached the northeast wing of the fortress. This place wasn't in use at the moment. It was a special part of the fortress used to house the duchess if, and only if, she was of imperial descent. In other words, the northeastern wing had been Alexandra's place of residence.

I pushed open the door to a small hall.

"Oh my!" Flora exclaimed.

The hall was filled to the brim with countless lavish dresses.

"These were my grandmother's," I said.

"Here too?! And so many of them..."

When I'd seen my late grandmother's dress collection at our residence in the capital, Nonna, her waiting maid, had boasted that Alexandra's collection in the fortress was even grander. For all her faults, Nonna had been right.

I'd given away a ton of the dresses to my classmates when they'd come to visit our residence in the capital, but I had no idea what to do with the rest. If I kept doing things like that, I would look like I was flaunting my wealth. At the same time, I knew the garments could be useful to others. Right before the summer vacation started, one of my classmates who was the daughter of a baron, Olga, had

thanked me. Her younger brother had recently attended his very first party, and her family had only been able to dress him properly because she'd sold the dress she'd gotten from me. I had no doubts there were others like Olga.

Now wasn't the time to consider such things, though.

"Look, Lady Flora," I said, taking her by the hand and pulling her toward a specific dress. "I was so surprised when I first saw it, because it looks very similar to one of my dresses—only in a different color!"

There were only so many shapes for dresses, and considering my grandmother had owned a mountain of them, it wasn't all that surprising that there was at least one that closely resembled one of mine, but forget that!

"We're going to dance together on the night of the banquet," I continued. "So, I thought it'd be nice if our dresses matched. I also think this dress would suit you. If you're not opposed to the idea, I'd love to match with you when we dance together."

"The two of us...matching?" Flora whispered, her cheeks flushing red. After mumbling unintelligibly for a few seconds, she seemed to snap out of her daze. "I-I couldn't! This dress must be incredibly expensive. And the size is—"

"My grandmother was tall, indeed," I interrupted. "However, there is plenty of time until tomorrow night. Our maids can fix it. Unless you dislike the idea of matching with me?"

"How could I?! Of course not, I'd be overjoyed!" Flora yelped, clenching her fists.

I took her hands in mine. "I'm so happy to hear that! I was already looking forward to the banquet, but I can hardly wait now."

That was when Raisa walked in with a few maids in tow.

"We've brought accessories to go with the dress, my lady," Raisa said.

"Thank you, Raisa. Please try on the dress, Lady Flora. I'll lend you accessories, and let's see which ones go with it best. You can pick them yourself."

"Huh? N-No, that's—"

"I'd love to have our accessories match as much as possible, so

please say yes. We'll have such fun dressing up together! You came all this way at my request, so I really want you to enjoy your time in the Yulnova Duchy."

At my signal, the maids went to work.

Flora was still bewildered, but I took that as my chance to strike. Raisa and I started holding up accessories against her and debating what looked best. Then, I suggested she try on a few more things, just for fun. Before long, it turned into a fashion show. Flora tried on dress after dress while the maids and I rained praise on her. While Flora seemed confused, I could tell she was enjoying herself.



"I'm counting on you," I told Raisa and the maids as they left.

"Please leave it to us, my lady," Raisa replied.

They took the dress for tomorrow night with them, as well as a few other outfits for Flora to wear at other times. One dress in particular would be altered immediately and sent to Flora's room.

What was the hurry? Well, she'd need it right away! Tonight, we were accounting for the fact that Flora and the prince were tired from their trip by having a casual dinner with just the four of us. But even though it was casual, any dinner at a duke's estate was a serious affair. It was expected that she would wear a different dress every night.

This had become my new normal, but Flora had been brought up as a commoner. Dealing with the trappings of the nobility must have been stressful for her, and I was pretty sure she didn't have enough dresses to appear proper. That was why, at the very least, I wanted to take some worries off her plate and give her some new outfits. The dress I'd chosen for her just needed to be shortened, so she could wear it tonight.

I've learned from my mistake with the first dance plan. I will do my utmost to avoid Flora losing face in any way, I swore to the stars that had started appearing in the darkening sky.



Thanks to my careful planning, we were all dressed well for dinner.

For the chef of the Yulnova, the first meal of the crown prince in our home was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to show his craft. I could see he'd poured his experience into each and every plate. They were as delicious as they were beautiful. Mikhail particularly liked the main dish, big-horned ox sauté, and seemed more motivated than ever to hunt down one of them during the hunting tournament.

The ingredients the chef had chosen were rare and expensive, but I assumed that, unlike Flora, Mikhail ate these sorts of dishes often. For any chef, having the crown prince eat their cuisine was one of the greatest honors there could be. I couldn't help but wonder how it felt to lead such a life.

Half lost in my thoughts, I watched him intently as he praised the cuisine of the Yulnova with tact. His eyes met mine, and he smiled. I panicked a little and averted my eyes.

"There are very nice bathrooms in this fortress!" I hurried to say to Flora. "You should take a long bath to rid your body of the carriage fatigue after dinner. In fact, would you like to bathe together?"

In my previous life, there hadn't been much of a bathing culture in medieval Europe—and no *public* bathing culture beyond that era. Europeans did not like the idea of being seen naked, and I'd heard about it causing issues many times in Japan, with tourists insisting on wearing swimsuits in onsen.

In this world, despite the many resemblances between the empire and medieval Europe, people loved bathing just like the Japanese—or, perhaps, just like ancient Romans. Friends of the same gender bathing together was completely normal.

Flora beamed at me. She was wearing a beautiful dress with intricate floral embroideries, and it didn't look like it had just been altered in a rush. She seemed to realize I was trying my hardest to make her feel at home.

"I'd love to, Lady Ekaterina."

"And we'll go to my room after that," I said. "Let's have a nice girls' talk, just the two of us. I've been looking forward to that!"

A girl friend coming over could only mean one thing: a pajama party. I remembered these memories from my past life fondly, but it'd be my first time having a friend over in this life. I was so excited!

Alexei smiled. "Ekaterina seems so happy. It's all thanks to you, Lady Flora. Thank you for coming."

Mikhail, on the other hand, was completely silent. When I glanced at him, I found he'd put down his cutlery and lowered his face into his hands.

I blinked. "Is something wrong, Prince Mikhail?"

"Surprise attacks are a bit... No, nothing, never mind."

Mikhail's attendant—the slender youth—set a glass of water in front of his master.

"Ah, thank you, Lucas. Alexei, could you chill it for me? I think I need to...cool my head."

After Alexei cooled his water until it was almost frozen, Mikhail downed the glass in one gulp.

Mikhail and Flora were staying in the west wing of the Yulnova Fortress, where the guest bedrooms were located. There was a large fancy bathroom in that area too—complete with a sauna and everything—but I invited Flora to my room. As the crown prince, Mikhail would have priority for the guest bathroom.

"You should come sleep in the west wing too, Ekaterina," Mikhail said. "I'll be practicing my swordsmanship for a while after dinner, so the two of you can use the bathroom first."

He'd just gone through several days of travel, had been dragged to a dance rehearsal almost immediately after arriving, and he still wanted to train more?! How much stamina did this boy have? Well, I supposed sitting in a carriage did tend to make your body stiff. I could see why he wanted to move.

I pondered the idea of sleeping with Flora in her room, and glanced at Alexei, but I could see in his eyes that I shouldn't. The lady of the house staying in a guest room wasn't appropriate, I assumed.

I politely refused Mikhail's offer. I felt a little bad for leaving him alone (he had his guards and his personal servants, of course, but that wasn't the point). We'd still be under the same roof, so I was

sure he wouldn't be *too* lonely.

Just one thing, prince: Working out straight after a meal isn't good for you, so you should stop doing that!

Alexei and I lived in the north wing—the area dedicated to the duke and his family.

The bathroom there was also spacious and picturesque. The hot water came pouring out of a large statue of the water spirit Undine holding a jar, and the room was indirectly lit by rainbow stones.

"How wonderful!" Flora exclaimed. "Water flows out of the statue?! That's incredible!"

"The butler once explained to me that the structure of the bathrooms has not changed since the construction of this fortress. There is a statue of Undine in each of them."

This was one of the systems built by Duke Vasili's partner, Giovanna di Santi, the genius inventor. However, the statues themselves had likely been changed several times over the years.

In this world, Undine was sometimes depicted as a mermaid or with the lower body of a snake. This statue represented her as a naked woman with a voluptuous body. Her long hair draped over her to preserve her modesty.

"She looks a little like you, Lady Ekaterina. She's gorgeous," Flora said.

I felt a bit bashful, but at the same time, I couldn't help but agree that the body of a villainess was quite something.

After soaking in the large stone bathtub together for a while, Flora and I enjoyed the sauna. We finished with a cold shower and went to my room together. Even though we were in the middle of summer, the nights were slightly chilly in the Yulnova Duchy, and we were both thankful for that after our long, long bath.

We each drank a glass of the bittersweet grape juice Mina brought us, then I jumped into my bed with no regard for noble etiquette and gestured for Flora to join me.

Yep, this is a proper pajama party!

"Let me thank you for coming all this way to see me once again, Lady Flora," I said. "The long journey must have tired you."

"I should be thanking *you*, Lady Ekaterina. It's the first time I've

ever traveled beyond the walls of the capital."

The commoners of this world didn't—and couldn't—travel much. It reminded me of something I'd read once. During the Edo period, one village tried to save money so everyone could go on a pilgrimage to Ise Shrine. Despite saving for several years, they could barely afford travel expenses for a couple of people. In the end, they had to pick representatives to send on behalf of the village.

"Besides, even if I traveled on my own, I would never have been able to go up the Serno River aboard such an amazing ship. Everything I did and saw on the way was so new and fun! Whenever I thought about how I'd get to see you at the end, my heart wouldn't stop pounding." Flora grinned. "When I told the baron and baroness about your invitation, they rejoiced on my behalf. They told me, 'Duke Sergei's granddaughter seems to be as kindhearted as he was.' They were both so fond of your grandfather."

"How wonderful to hear," I said.

The couple who'd taken Flora in after her mother passed away, Baron and Baroness Cherny, had been friends with my grandfather at the academy. Sergei had even helped them elope when their relationship was in peril.

"I'd love to meet them one day," I added. "I'd like to hear their stories about my grandfather."

"You're welcome to visit us. I'm sure they'd love to meet you. We live in a small house, so that might surprise you, but the garden is stunning! The baron has earth-attribute mana and is very skilled at controlling plants. Speaking of which, the baroness has fire-attribute mana. She uses it masterfully in her cooking!"

"That sounds amazing," I said with a little laugh. "They both found very practical uses for their mana."

I suspected some people would frown on the baroness using mana to cook. In the empire, mana was seen as the source of the nobility's prestige. Many would scream at her to use her mana for a grander purpose.

Most of those people, I assumed, had very weak mana. The people with powerful mana I knew—such as the prince or my brother—had no qualms about using ice magic to cool a glass of

water, and I'd personally utilized my mana to till fields. I didn't see any issue with relying on useful abilities in one's daily life, magic or not.

Mana aside, this conversation was so relaxing. However, there was another topic every good girl gathering had to cover: romance!

"Tell me, Lady Flora, have you grown closer to Prince Mikhail during your journey?"

"To Prince Mikhail?" Flora repeated, a serious expression on her face. She seemed to be pondering the matter in earnest, but her reaction threw me off.

That's not the face you make when you talk about love, is it?

"He's very friendly and we've talked a lot during the trip," she finally said. "But he's incredibly good at getting the information he wants out of others, so I can never let my guard down."

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry. I mean that I tend to relax and act improperly because he's so friendly, and I ought to be more careful about that."

"Ah! I see. I completely understand. He's such a good person that I sometimes forget to whom I'm speaking. I let go of my nervousness—and that's not wise."

Because of that, my anti-doom-flags plans always get sidetracked. Wait, my *interactions with Mikhail don't matter here.*

"Say, Lady Flora..."

"Yes?"

I couldn't bring myself to ask my question, though. This was my first time talking about romance in this life. Now that I thought about it, I'd always been kind of terrible at everything that had to do with love in my previous life.

Aaaah! I don't know how to broach the topic.

In the end, Flora spoke first. She was looking at me intently. "Lady Ekaterina, what do you think of Prince Mikhail?"

Huh? Me?! Wait... What do I even answer?

"I, um, think he's a good friend and schoolmate."

"I see. Then, is there perhaps...someone else who has caught your interest?"

Flora, thanks for doing the hard part for me. I can just return the

question now.

"No, not really. What about *you*, Lady Flora?"

"Same as you."

And the tension fell back just like that.

Seriously? Have we exhausted the topic already? You've got nothing to say?

What did this mean? Had Flora not fallen for the prince?!

Flora was the heroine of the game, and the story had progressed quite a bit already. At first, she was supposed to think nothing could ever happen between the two of them because of their difference in status, but wasn't it about time for their respective affection gauge to fill up? They should have been a lot closer. She was in the middle of the prince's route, yet she didn't think of him as a potential love interest. Was that even possible?

Hang on a minute...

While I was undoubtedly in the world of the game, I was starting to think that one of the gods of this world had somehow injected the plot into the creator of the game's mind in my past world. In that case, perhaps it would be more accurate to say I was in the world that had *inspired* the game. Regardless of what I called it, though, the appearance of the monster at the academy had made it clear that this world somewhat followed the game's original plot.

That said, Flora herself had no awareness of being the heroine of an otome game, which meant she also had no awareness of being in the middle of a route or anything like that. She lived her life, met and interacted with people, and got them to like her without actively pursuing them. If you thought of things that way, it made total sense for her not to keep track of who liked her or how much.

In the game, you *could* track that, though. All you had to do was launch the game, tap on any button for the gates of the academy to open, and listen to the entrance ceremony speech. In other words, go through the basic explanation of the game's setting, then you could click on the love interest list—

I was suddenly struck with a realization. It hit me with the force of the dozens of flags that shot up in the crowd whenever a player scored a goal during a J.League match. *Bam bam bam!* Just like

that.

The prince isn't the only love interest!!!

I'd spent so much time looping the prince's route in my past life that I hadn't even stopped to consider the other options! At first, I hadn't given it much thought and had picked the most basic route. Then, I'd gotten obsessed with Alexei and googled if I could date him. I'd quickly discovered that no, I couldn't, and that the only route in which you saw him for more than a few seconds was the prince's. From there on, my sole raison d'être had been to glimpse him by the villainess's side. By the end, doing the prince's route had become such an automatism for me that I'd more or less forgotten there were even other choices.

But, while Flora *could* pick another love interest, I didn't think she was in contact with any of them...or was she? To be perfectly honest, I didn't remember them that clearly. There could have been one in our class for all I knew.

I tried digging through my memories. The only one I kind of remembered was Nikolai Krymov, Marina's older brother. I had a feeling they all had different hair colors. Yes, actually, I was certain they did! It made them look right out of a sentai show. The prince was blue, Nikolai was red, and...um...I really couldn't remember the rest. The only one I did remember wasn't even on the official list. It was the Dragon King, who I assumed was represented by the color black.

Speaking of Vladforen, maybe Flora somehow cleared the requirements and hopped onto his route while I wasn't paying attention.

"Lady Ekaterina?" Flora's puzzled tone brought me back to reality.

"O-Oh! Sorry, I had my head in the clouds."

"You must be tired," she said. "I've been worried about you this entire time. You're so earnest and care for your brother so much that I feared you would push yourself to support him and forgo rest."

Her big purple eyes were entirely focused on me, and I felt a little sentimental. What a good girl she was!

"You're always so kind and thoughtful, Lady Flora. You don't need to worry. I haven't been pushing myself. My brother wouldn't allow

it.”

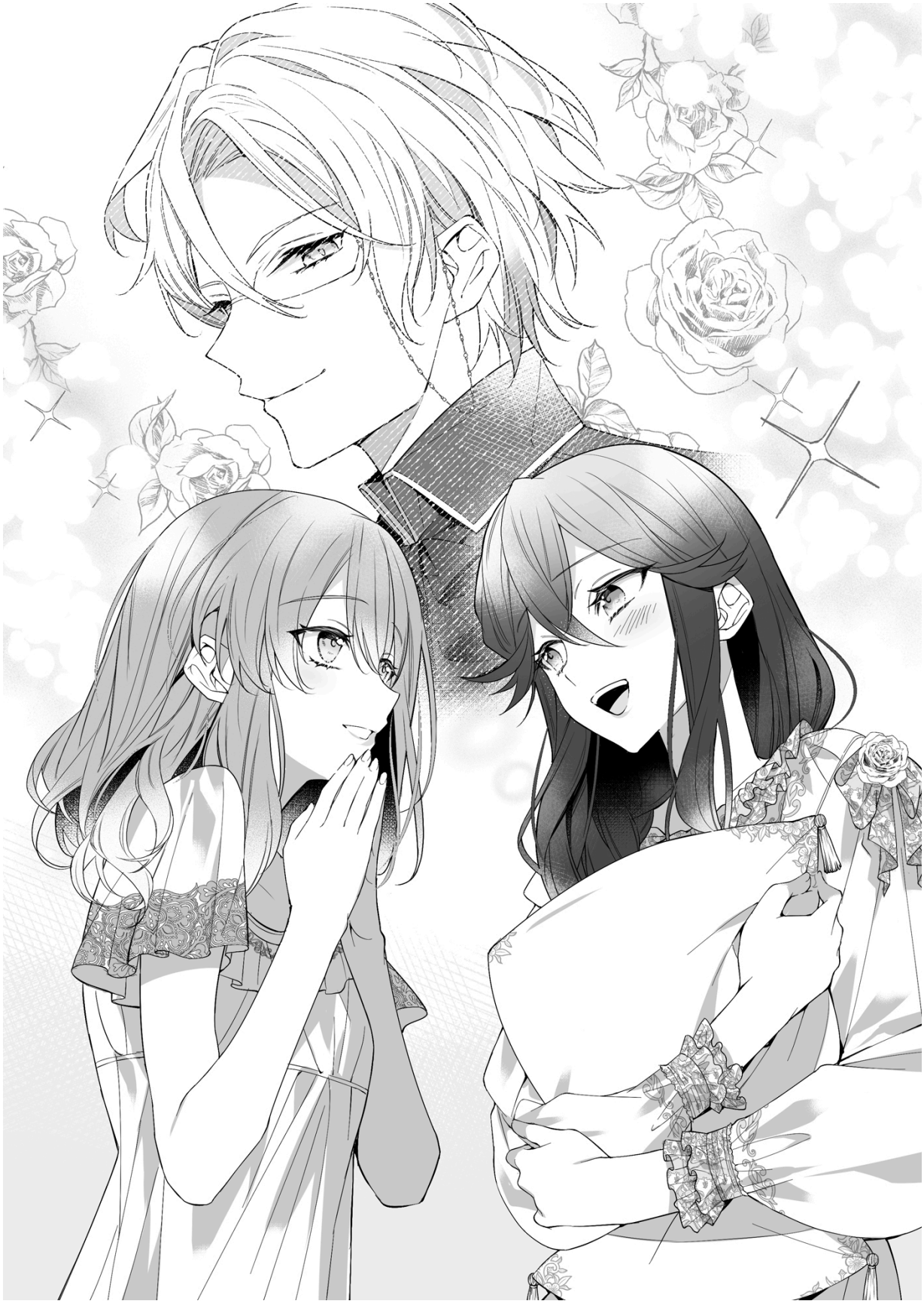
A lot had happened during the pilgrimage, but I hadn’t overdone it—not at all.

Flora giggled as though she could read right through me. “You truly love His Grace very much, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I adore him! I could do anything for him!” I exclaimed as though I was trying to prove a point. Obviously, there was nothing to prove.

“I can tell you are just as dear to him,” Flora said. “Very few siblings get along as well as you do.”

“Thank you for the praise!”



My brother's love for me was as big as the world's tallest mountain, and my love was bigger still. I wasn't sure I should be so proud of that, but I was anyway!

"Still, that is exactly why I worry so much. I heard that the noble ladies who attend the academy usually marry soon after they graduate. The higher their status, the earlier they do. Lady Ekaterina, have you thought of your future?"

"My future..." My eyes widened in surprise while Flora continued to gaze at me with concern. My first thought was that I was lucky to have made a friend who worried so much about my happiness. "By 'future,' I imagine you're asking about my marriage prospects. You're asking if I'll leave my brother's side and marry into another family."

"Yes."

I'd given this some thought, although I supposed my thinking about it didn't exactly matter. "The head of our house, my brother, will make that decision, and I will obey."

"Are you... Are you all right with that?"

"Of course. That is a duty that comes with my rank, as well as one of the few ways I can be useful to my house and my brother." I smiled, but it quickly fell off my face, and I looked down. "Besides, I...do not hold big dreams about love. Do you remember what I told you about my mother?"

Flora's reply was curt but decisive. "I do."

Back when the two of us had just met, and Flora had kept me at arm's length because of our difference in status, I'd told her about my childhood. I'd recounted how Alexandra had tormented my mother, how we'd been confined for almost my entire life, and how my mother had died.

"My mother was in love with my father," I said. "Very deeply in love. And she kept loving him until the end..." I let out a deep sigh. "I know most young girls dream of experiencing a wonderful love story with a dashing gentleman, but I've never idealized it. I can't bring myself to believe that happiness lies down that path. If I could have any future I wanted, I'd choose to stay by my brother's side and assist him however I could."

These were the true feelings of Ekaterina, the one who had

always been a young noble lady. Even the memories from my past life told me that nothing good ever came of love. Those who'd professed their love to me had all tried to hurt me. I didn't want another blade pointed at me—not again. It was terrifying. *Love* was terrifying.

"I've made one request to my brother," I continued. "No matter what, I don't want to join the imperial family—the very house where the monster who hurt my mother was raised. I'm already being so difficult and selfish that I can't possibly ask for more. Whomever he chooses, I'll marry obediently without a word."

The part about my grandmother was an excuse. I didn't want to marry into the imperial family to avoid my doom. I'd already messed up most of my other plans, but I wouldn't let this one go. As long as I didn't get involved romantically with the prince, things would work out, I hoped.

Unlike in my previous world, I couldn't just stay single. Under these conditions, marrying whoever a third party told me to felt more reassuring than having to worry about it myself. I didn't mind having a marriage of convenience. I'd like it if I got along decently well with my future husband, but my main goal was to help my brother. For his sake, I could handle a few relational hardships. I supposed even if we didn't hit it off immediately, my future husband and I could work on our relationship and strive to have a good marriage. It probably wouldn't be so bad.

My views might sound mature, but hey, I was almost thirty in my previous life! I'd long grown past the age when my eyes sparkled at the mere mention of love. Even when the most beautiful man in the world—the great Dragon King—had proposed to me, I'd just panicked. My heart hadn't skipped a beat or anything of the sort. It was too late for me already.

"I believe I understand your views. You don't want to be part of the imperial family because of your grandmother, but you'll accept any other partner, and you'd like to keep supporting His Grace," Flora summed up with a serious expression. "Is that correct?"

"Exactly."

Flora's smile was warm. "I'm sure His Grace also wishes to keep

you by his side."

"Nothing would make me happier."

I knew Alexei loved me a lot and might have felt the same, but hearing someone else say it was nice.

"Enough about myself," I said. "How do *you* envision your future, Lady Flora?"

"Well, I..." Flora flushed red. "I discussed it with His Grace once, and...I was hoping I could work in the Yulnova Duchy."

"Huh?"

"I was thinking I might be of assistance with my holy-attribute mana. But more than anything else, I want to be by your side and serve you."

I was astonished. I hadn't been expecting this answer. "Does that mean...you want to be my waiting maid?"

"I couldn't dream of a better position."

At the moment, I had only one personal servant: Mina. However, that was only because I'd declined having more and used the excuse that only Mina was able to accompany me at the academy. This was normally unthinkable for a daughter of one of the three grand ducal houses. Most noble ladies had at least two or three waiting maids. They'd give orders to regular maids on her behalf and the lady herself would never converse with a mere maid—or so was the norm, I'd heard.

Waiting maids did not do manual labor. They were conversation partners, and their main job was to get a feel for their master's preferences so they could direct the lower-ranked servants to better suit their needs and tastes. They also gathered information on high society for their master. While they were technically servants, they remained noble ladies. Even though Flora had been born a commoner, she was now the daughter of a baron. She *could* become my waiting maid.

"But you are a saint, Lady Flora," I said. "I'm sure the imperial family will call upon your services. Besides, I want you to meet a wonderful gentleman and find love. I want you to be happy! You are the loveliest young lady I know, and you certainly deserve to be."

Setting aside my preconceptions about Flora based on her being

the heroine from the equation, she was still wonderful.

You can do anything. You can become anything. You can have anyone. Your love stories captivated thousands in my old world!

I couldn't see myself finding satisfaction through romance, but to most, loving and being loved was important. She just had to meet the right someone—actually, it was highly likely that she'd already met them, so she simply needed to realize they were the one for her and walk down the path of happiness!

"I was lucky enough to meet *you*," Flora said with a grin. "To me, that was a marvelous encounter. I want to stay by your side forever."

"Lady Flora..."

A beautiful girl's heartfelt smile is so precious!

She'd called our meeting a marvelous encounter... What a delight!

"Your words moved me. I'm also grateful to have met you," I said.

Now that I thought about it, if you messed up the romance routes, there were friendship endings in the game. I always reset my game whenever I reached Alexei's last appearance, so it had totally slipped my mind. If Flora became my waiting maid after we graduated... Ah, how nice would that be?

I pictured a future where I helped my brother avoid overwork by assisting him with the duchy while Flora and Mina were by my side. Flora was skilled at everything, and I had no doubt she'd be a dependable ally. If I were her employer, I could also guarantee her a good salary and working conditions. Besides, she could always find love after getting a job.

All right! I've made up my mind!

If Flora fell in love, I'd support her with all my might. I only remembered the prince's route, so I kind of wanted her to go to him, but I'd help her all the same if she chose another route. Even if the love interest she set her sights on was of a high status, I'd make sure the House of Yulnova backed her so that no one would be able to say a thing about their relationship.

I'll make you crown princess if you wish it, my little Flora!

And if romance didn't go well for her, I'd welcome her as my waiting maid.

"I truly hope you find happiness, Lady Flora. After we graduate, I'll stay in this duchy to help my brother as long as I can. I can't think of a more reliable person to aid me in this task than you. If you still feel the same way when we graduate, I'd be glad to have you as my waiting maid."

"Thank you, Lady Ekaterina. I'll do my best to live up to your expectations!"

Flora and I clasped each other's hands tightly.

Chapter 2: The Welcome Banquet

Flora and I lost ourselves in conversation for a long time after that. Eventually, we both fell asleep in my bed.

As far as I was concerned, this was how any sleepover was supposed to end, but I wasn't sure the nobles of this world would see things that way. I was relieved when Flora seemed in a good mood when we woke up.

Just like Mina did every morning, she somehow appeared right after I opened my eyes and pulled aside the curtains. Alongside Mina was the maid assigned to Flora. She should have been in the west wing, but here she was with clothes for Flora. She didn't seem thrown off in the slightest and started brushing Flora's hair as though her being here had been the plan all along.

After Anna, the former head maid, had been dismissed, there had been some disarray among the maids, but Raisa had clearly brought order back.

"Lady Flora, would you like to have breakfast in my room or the dining room?" I asked.

"I'm fine with either. Let's eat where you usually eat," she said, a knowing smile on her face.

I always ate breakfast in the dining room with Alexei, and I had a feeling she could see right through me. I agreed, and the two of us made our way to the dining room to find that Alexei and Mikhail were already there.

"Good morning, Prince Mikhail, brother. What a fine morning." While I greeted them with a smile, I shot a confused glance at Mikhail. What was he doing here?

"Good morning, Ekaterina and Flora," Mikhail replied, beaming.

"His Highness wished to train with me this morning, so we're having breakfast together too," Alexei explained.

It was very subtle, but I could hear a tinge of reluctance in his

voice.

"My... You said you'd train after dinner yesterday, and you also trained this morning?" I said.

"Someone stopped me yesterday—told me exercising after a meal wasn't wise. I trained in the morning to make up for it. Besides, I thought joining the knights of the renowned Order of Yulnova for training would do my imperial knights some good."

Is that so? That meant the people in this world also knew that you should avoid strenuous exercise after a meal.

The prince was such a serious boy. The health of the future emperor was of the greatest importance, a fact he was well aware of. He took care of himself while not skipping his training, and he even thought about improving the knights he'd brought with him. He truly was a born leader. He had the state of mind of those who stood above others—in a good way!

I was also impressed to see him so energetic after a long trip. I wanted to say, "That's youth for you!" but I had a feeling the young boys of my past life hadn't been like that. Mikhail was remarkable.

My eyes went to Alexei, who was sitting next to Mikhail, and I smiled again. He was on another level altogether. There was no need to compare *him* to the high school boys of my past.

"Please don't overdo it," I said, my tone like that of a worried older sister. "Tonight is the welcome banquet in your and Flora's honor, after all."

Mikhail awkwardly but pleasantly told me he'd be fine.

It really was the night of the banquet. How exciting! This would be a smaller affair than the previous banquet we'd held, but I'd planned for it to be more lavish and sophisticated. As one of the three grand ducal houses, we had to welcome the crown prince appropriately, and the entire fortress was bubbling with the desire to make it happen. The servants ebbed and flowed through the corridors. The chefs had started prepping the evening's food at dawn. Prized bottles of wine and brandy were being taken out of the storehouse as we spoke, while the silverware and party glasses were being wiped spotless.

In the midst of all this agitation, a troop of maids had gathered in

my room. They had the most important mission of the day: getting our guest, Flora, ready. There were last-minute adjustments to make to her dress, and I wanted her skin and hair pampered. Flora was plenty beautiful without any of this, but she deserved to have fun getting ready.

Obviously, I ended up being dragged in and went through the entire beauty regimen alongside her.



In the evening, Alexei, exuding all the dignity of a duke in formal dress, and Mikhail, dressed like the glorious prince he was, came to my room.

"They're ready. Please come in," Mina said as she let them into the room.

Flora and I were standing side by side, and we curtsied for them.

"Thank you both for coming to escort us," I said.

A breath escaped Mikhail's lips.

Flora and I wore empire dresses and short-sleeved boleros over our shoulders. The fitted bodices ended right under our chests, which were framed by our little open jackets. In a way, we might have looked like ancient goddesses.

While our outfits were very similar, the colors contrasted. My skirt and bolero were black, and my bodice was in my trademark color: Celestial Blue. There were opulent roses embroidered in gold thread on my bolero, and my skirt had a second layer of thin lace over it. It resembled the tulle or lace skirts that had been popular in my previous world, and I thought the see-through fabric was a perfect fit for the summer. It gave my outfit a breath of freshness while the dark tones kept it cohesive (and a little sexy). There were also golden-thread roses stitched on the waistband. Small bells and golden leaves attached to thin golden chains hung down from the roses. They moved rhythmically and clanged whenever I took a step. They were fresh yet lavish, just like the rest of my outfit.

The most notable part of my outfit, however, wasn't the waistband but the long ribbons attached to the short sleeves of my

bolero. The thin ribbons, flowing down from the small bows at my sides, were made of light and glossy satin. At the end of each, which reached all the way down to my knees, were more golden rose embroideries. The ribbons kind of reminded me of the ones rhythmic gymnasts used. They swirled as I moved, drawing people's eyes toward me.

My indigo hair was styled in an up-do with handmade gold roses decorating it. They didn't look as real as Lev's blue roses, but they were still dazzling. The fact that they were gold also fit the daughter of a house as noble as Yulnova. My cleavage was more exposed than usual, and a beautiful sapphire necklace was throned above it. To keep with the general theme of my outfit, the sapphire had been embedded in the center of a large gold rose, while plenty of smaller gold roses formed the chain. The beautiful chain looked almost like lace and was a testament to the skills of the artisans who'd made it.

While I was entirely draped in black and gold, Flora's outfit was mostly white with the exception of her bodice and bolero. They shimmered with the prismatic hues of nacre collected from iridescent pearl oysters, a type of shellfish that produced pearls with an opalescent glow. Even in the dark, Flora's outfit would glow faintly. Lace was layered over her narrow white skirt to match mine, and her waistband was decorated with rose quartz that matched her hair. Ribbons the same shade as cherry blossoms adorned the lace of her skirt here and there, giving her an adorable look. The ribbons on her bolero, however, were white. Just like mine, they flowed down all the way to her knees.

Flora's cherry-blossom hair had been braided and decorated with double-flowering gardenia, while a gardenia carved out of a large moonstone hung from her neck. The craftsmanship was so lifelike it was hard to believe it had been carved from a gemstone. It was pure with a hint of mystery, just like Flora. I couldn't help but think about how well her name—the goddess of spring—suited her. She was beautiful.

"Ekaterina," Alexei said, walking up to me. "You are magnificent tonight." He took my hand and kissed the tip of my fingers. "I see my blue rose has transformed into a golden one. I've long disliked

gold, for in my eyes, it is the symbol of humans' greed, but I have changed my mind. It has its uses if it can enhance your glory so wonderfully."

"Oh, brother!" How could he even see the gold through his rose-tinted filter? "Your words are a delight, but doesn't etiquette dictate that you should address our guest first? Don't you think Lady Flora looks wonderful?"

"You're right. I forgot my manners. I fear I could forget anything when faced with your radiant beauty."

His smooth-talking skills are activated *too!*

Alexei turned to Flora and smiled. "Do excuse me, Lady Flora. You are beautiful indeed, much like the goddess of spring. In the cold land of Yulnova, spring is ever valued. I'm sure you'll entrance the people of our duchy, just as the season itself does."

"Thank you," Flora said with a polite bow. She seemed a little embarrassed. "I owe everything to Lady Ekaterina's fine treatment. I'm most thankful for the beautiful clothes and accessories she lent me."

"They suit you so well, Lady Flora. I'm sure the dress and necklace are glad to be worn by you," I said with a little laugh.

Then, I looked at Mikhail. He'd been silent for a long time, hadn't he? He usually always had something to say.

"You're both beautiful," he said after a pause.

"Thank you very much," I replied.

Yep, a fitting compliment from a high school boy.

While I nodded inside my head, Mikhail's attendant poked his arm. Mikhail's shoulders slumped and I heard him whisper to his attendant, "I can't. I'll only humiliate myself if I try to imitate him..."

Did Mikhail really want to talk like Alexei?

Don't worry, Prince! I'm sure you'll master rhetorical flourishes like your father one day. In the meantime, you're fine the way you are!

The welcome banquet was held in the same great hall as the

previous party. Last time, several other rooms and halls had been open to the guests as well, but tonight, the great hall was the only venue. A majority of the guests had also attended the previous banquet, and they were surprised to see how different the room looked tonight.

To reference the blue butterfly on the prince's crest, handcrafted, delicate blue butterflies rested their wings on the rose blossoms that decorated the room and the candlestands. The chefs had incorporated rose and butterfly motifs into the food as well, and there were small gelatin butterflies inside the drinks, which would appear at the bottom of people's glasses when they were finished. A few people had just finished their first glass and were discovering this, judging by the surprised looks on their faces. Those who noticed the reactions approached servants to grab drinks of their own.

The most prominent decorations were the large crests of both the prince and the Yulnovas rendered in glowing blue rainbow stones near the grand staircase. The light had been intentionally dimmed in this area so that the blue crests seemed to be floating mysteriously.

The guests enjoyed the decorations while awaiting the entrance of the crown prince.

At the signal, the musicians that had been on standby in a corner of the hall picked up their instruments. The music announced the arrival of the guest of honor. Everyone held their breath. All eyes focused on the grand staircase.

Most of the guests in attendance had never seen the crown prince. Of course, they'd seen pictures of the imperial family. In these paintings, the prince very much resembled the emperor. He was pictured as a handsome young man with hair and eyes as blue as the sky on a bright summer day.

Finally, the silhouette they'd been anticipating appeared at the top of the staircase. Cheers echoed as thunderous applause filled the great hall.

Whoa, that's the imperial prince for you! There are fewer people than last time, but the cheering's loud.

I walked behind Mikhail, escorted by my brother, and couldn't help but wonder at the raucous welcome. What stood out to me the most, however, wasn't the loud noise. It was the fact that Mikhail was completely unbothered.

In my opinion, people could lie from the front but not from the back. Even if you could school your expression to one of neutrality, you couldn't control your back nearly as well—especially because you couldn't see it. When someone lacked confidence or was startled, you could tell from the way their back shifted.

I'd drawn this conclusion during one of the high school choir recitals I'd been part of in my previous life. One of the boys had performed a solo that day. He always exuded confidence, but when he stepped forward to sing, I saw the stiffness in his back clear as day.

Mikhail, on the other hand, looked perfectly natural. If anything, I had the feeling his back looked stronger than usual. Sometimes, when I observed him at the academy, I wondered if he hid his light under a bushel because he was destined to shine brighter than anyone in the future.

While we'd kept the guest list as short as possible, and there were fewer people than last time, the number of guests was still in the triple digits. There were that many pairs of eyes focused solely on him, yet he held himself firm and steady. I really thought my hunch was correct.

Mikhail was escorting Flora. His outfit was primarily white with blue details on both his collar and his sleeves. With the lavish gold braids that adorned his attire, he appeared both imperial and youthful. With Flora, the goddess of spring, by his side, he looked every bit like a god ruling over summer. Behind them were Alexei and I, both draped in black—the king of winter and the queen of the night, I supposed.

Our guests were honored to behold the future emperor with their own two eyes, but they seemed just as proud to see their duke not being outdone by the dazzling prince.

Mikhail stopped on the staircase landing, and Alexei walked a few more steps to stand next to him. The latter lifted his right hand slowly, and the great hall fell silent.

"Honored guests, thank you for gathering within the walls of this fortress tonight to welcome His Highness, Prince Mikhail, and our good friend, Lady Flora. Pay close attention, for His Highness will now address you."

After this succinct speech, Alexei nodded toward Mikhail.

Every single guest had their gaze fixed on Mikhail, and he looked over the crowd with a serene smile.



"People of Yulnova, I thank you for your warm welcome."

While Alexei had a deep baritone voice, Mikhail's was a sweet tenor, and the sound carried well. With his princely appearance and tone, he had the women of the audience spellbound.

"After arriving in this land, I was deeply moved by the beauty of its forests and mountains, the diligence and sincerity of its people, and the fierce loyalty shown toward my family by my dear friend, Duke Alexei, as well as all of you. I will forever cherish the memories of my time here, and I'm certain tonight will become a delightful highlight. I'm glad I have the opportunity to spend time with you, and I hope each of you enjoys this banquet."

At these words, Mikhail smiled, and cheers erupted once again: "Long live the prince!"

I smiled where I stood a few steps behind them.

Yep, he's definitely got this prince thing down. Short, safe, and to the point—the perfect diplomatic speech. He really knows what he's doing. You can tell he's been doing this his whole life. Big sister approves, Mikhail!

I wasn't sure he'd like the way I was praising him in my head, because even I realized it was a tad patronizing, but oh well.

The four of us descended the rest of the stairs and walked to the middle of the great hall.

Confused murmurs erupted in the assembly. Only a few, well-connected people knew in advance what kind of first dance we had planned. The rest had no idea where this was going.

Music started playing. Alexei and Mikhail smiled at us and bowed.

The shrill voices of a few ladies erupted, but then a greater agitation overtook the hall. Most of our guests had realized we were about to perform a traditional dance. For years, the northern capital had been colored by the ways of the imperial capital, and its traditions had been frowned upon. Now, for the first time in a *very* long time, our area's culture was back in the limelight.

Flora and I averted our eyes from the dashing gentlemen extending their hands to us. Instead, I, the queen of the night, adorned in sumptuous black and gold, held out my hand elegantly to the goddess of spring, whose white dress gleamed with the seven

hues of the rainbow. Flora smiled at me, then she took my hand, and our dance began.

As we linked arms and spun in rhythm, the black-and-white ribbons attached to our boleros swayed, trailing after us in a beautiful stream of motion.

We let go of each other and performed a turn in tandem. This was one of the adjustments we'd made to the choreography. We'd decided to incorporate a common element of the popular social dances performed in the empire—turns. The ribbons drew an arc around us as the lace layer of our skirts flared open like blooming flowers.

Black and white, indigo and pink. Our contrasting colors blooming caught the eyes of the audience, and sighs of admiration escaped their lips.

In the meantime, Alexei and Mikhail faced one another and shifted into position. With his black outfit, Alexei had all the majesty of the king of winter. Mikhail, in his striking white, blue, and gold costume, channeled the invigorating energy of the god of summer.

Just like during practice, the two grinned at one another. That was enough to get the ladies of the assembly to scream. They bumped their fists lightly and moved on to the fighting dance. Alexei and Mikhail had known each other for nearly ten years. They'd studied together, trained together, and learned mana control together. They were in perfect sync.

They truly looked like they were fighting—one trying to guard a prized possession, the other trying to snatch it away. Although this was only a dance, their attacks were so sharp that many of the men, who I expected were familiar with martial arts, let out hums of admiration.

When both paired parts ended, Alexei and Mikhail once again bowed to us and extended their hands. This time, Flora and I did not ignore them, but we didn't take their hands either. We walked past them. I stood back-to-back with Alexei while Flora stood with her back almost touching Mikhail's.

While the men moved to see us face-to-face, Flora and I walked in the other direction to remain back-to-back, and we completed an

entire rotation just like that.

The thought of refusing to see Alexei made me giggle. The distraction made me slow down a little bit, and my back bumped against Alexei's. It was only for a moment, but feeling his warmth made me giddy.

Finally, the men turned around to face us, and Alexei smiled for me. Shrill shrieks echoed, and I almost smiled back. I really wanted to, but this was the part when we were supposed to run away from the men, so I couldn't. Flora and I swirled away to escape them, and the long ribbons spiraled around us while our outer skirts billowed into blooming flowers.

Next, we switched partners. I went through the same movements with Mikhail, while Flora did so with Alexei. While we danced, the ribbons of my bolero touched Mikhail's arm. They were so light and flowy, I didn't think he'd even felt it.

Little did I know that he had in fact noticed, and his breath caught in his throat. With my back turned to him, I couldn't see him reaching out for my ribbon or letting it slip out of his fingers with a pained expression on his face as I moved away.

As we moved on to the final part, we exchanged partners once more. Beaming, I took Alexei's hand, and we linked arms. We seldom did that, as Alexei usually escorted me following the rules of etiquette. It dictated that the man offer his right arm, and the woman would then rest her left hand lightly on it.

This choreography was almost the same as the women's part, but the general impression it gave was very different, as this was the moment the women finally accepted the men after rejecting them for so long. The crowd watched with rapt attention as Mikhail's and Alexei's efforts were rewarded. When Flora and I danced together, our movements mainly just seemed cute, but the height gap between us ladies and the men emphasized our grace.

Alexei's gaze was soft, and I looked up at him just as fondly. He led our steps like he would have if we'd danced a waltz or something of the kind, holding my hand gently while we turned. As we swayed, I watched the ribbons of my bolero wrap around his arm before coming undone.



Mikhail and Flora looked just like a prince and his princess. They were the picture of youth, innocence, and sweetness, and I couldn't help but smile as I looked at them. Though they appeared close and had smiles on their faces, it looked to me as though there was a hint of tension underneath. Strangely enough, *both* of their expressions had that in common.

Just as we had previously, we changed partners, and I started dancing with Mikhail. It was almost over. I just had to get through this last part, then I could *finally* stop being at the center of everyone's attention. The thought brought me such relief that when I looked up at Mihail, I was grinning. The prince's expression was just as bright.

He led me like Alexei. Every movement was so easy with him. *He's just as good a dancer as my brother*, I thought with admiration.

At the end, the four of us bowed to one another. It was over. The next second, applause filled the great hall.

Phew, we made it! Relief washed over me. *I'm sorry I dragged you guys through this, but you all did amazing. No, you were perfect. Thank you!*

Our audience was even more taken with our performance than I'd expected. Some were even wiping away tears! When local traditions and culture were respected, the people who lived there also felt respected. I'd only dragged everyone into this to avoid dooming myself with a prince-villainess dance, but the outcome was a lot more positive than I could have predicted. I was really glad things turned out this way.

The applause lasted for so long I was starting to think it would never end before it eventually faded away. The musicians started playing a waltz but hardly anyone stepped onto the dance floor. The guests' attention was still on us as we walked away—or rather, on Mikhail. Their gazes were so ardent, they were practically burning holes through him. They must have been dying for a chance to speak to him.

I imagined that some aimed to expand their influence through a connection with the crown prince, but most weren't hoping to further such ambitions—they simply wanted bragging rights. When

Mikhail ascended to the throne, they'd be able to tell everyone they crossed paths with, "I spoke to the emperor at a party once!" There were probably others that had been so moved by the first dance choice that they wanted to share their emotion with him in person.

"Ekaterina," Alexei said, drawing my attention back to him. He leaned in and whispered in my ear, "I'll show His Highness around. It might take a long time, so you don't need to follow us."

"But I have to do my duty as the lady of the house."

"I'd like for you to entertain Lady Flora instead. Think of her having to wait next to us while we accept everyone's greetings..."

He didn't say anything more, but I got the message. I knew from last time that accepting greetings was *long* and *tedious*. Alexei, Mikhail, and I were duty bound to do these things, but Flora wasn't. There was no need to make her go through that.

"It's Flora's first party," Mikhail added. "The two of you should enjoy it."

He was about to listen to a gazillion greetings, but he looked just as composed as ever.

A true imperial prince.

"We shall take you up on that," I replied. "Thank you, and make sure not to overexert yourselves."

I knew there was no point in saying that because they wouldn't listen, but I couldn't stop myself. Alexei and Mikhail nodded, and Flora and I went on our way.

We only made it a few steps before we were forced to come to a stop because of the sheer number of men approaching us. Actually, they weren't exactly approaching us—they were *surrounding* us.

Come to think of it, the same thing had happened at the last banquet the second I left Alexei's side. Last time, Alexei had come to rescue me almost immediately, so I had no clue what to do! All I knew was that I had to protect Flora.

I was the highest-ranked person here. As per the rules of etiquette, no one was allowed to talk to me first...so as long as I didn't meet anyone's eyes, everything would be okay. Well, I hoped!

Though what am I doing, acting like a criminal? I'm the lady of this house! Ugh, but that doesn't help me to know what to do.

I was frozen in place, and Flora looked at me with concern. Just when everything seemed lost, the strongest armada swept in.

Okay, ships have nothing to do with this, but our saviors really look as powerful as a fleet of warships!

It was actually a group of young women who were a little older than us who'd come to our rescue and routed the army of young men. The ladies' commandant smiled at me, and my face lit up.

"Lady Margarita! It's a pleasure to see you," I said.

"Likewise," she replied. "My family is still grateful for the kindness you showed us at the celebratory banquet."

Margarita was Novak and Adelina's daughter—a beautiful woman with purple hair and black eyes. While she mostly resembled her mother, her eyes were exactly the same as her father's. She had already married into another family, and I'd met her and her husband at the previous banquet. A single glance had been enough for me to figure out who called the shots in their relationship. She was a lot like her mother in that way.

A young man suddenly approached.

"Um, sister..." he mumbled. He was speaking to one of the women beside Margarita. He was clearly trying to approach Flora and me through his sister.

The young woman seemed to be about twenty, and she lifted her folding fan to her mouth. Her voice was low and decisive. "Back off."

She was so cool, she could have followed with: *Once again, I have cut a worthless object.*

The young man left as quickly as he'd come. He reminded me of some of the younger brothers my friends had in my past life. They'd usually had them run all their errands for them. It appeared that familial hierarchies transcended worlds.

That's just how sisters and brothers are, isn't it?

That failed attempt seemed to have a big effect on the other young men, and they grew disheartened. Thanks to that, Flora and I were able to converse with the other ladies in peace.

"The first dance was wonderful," Margarita said. "To be honest, I couldn't have been more surprised. This dance was forbidden during the rule of Duke Aleksandr, so to see it chosen to welcome His

Highness filled me with emotion."

The other ladies seemed just as touched. Some smiled brightly while others wiped their tears.

"My mother told me you came up with the idea, my lady," Margarita continued. "My father often says you inherited Duke Sergei's creativity. I now see how right he is."

"I can hardly be credited for the idea," I said. "The four of us made that decision together."

Really, it had been a last resort to avoid raising any doom flags, but I couldn't just confess that, so I came up with another answer. Flora hid her laughter behind her arm, so I had an inkling the other ladies knew I wasn't *exactly* telling the truth. They probably assumed I was just being modest, though.

"Lady Adelina once told me that these historic dances were about to disappear, and I simply shared her concerns with my brother," I insisted. "He thought it a very pressing matter. Prince Mikhail was just as touched. He spoke of the importance of heeding our founder's beliefs regarding harmony."

The ladies suddenly got excited.

"My! His Highness has given you permission to call him by name!" one exclaimed.

"Why of course, he has! Haven't you heard?" another chimed in. "My younger siblings at the academy have told me all about how His Highness, her ladyship, and Lady Cherny compete over first place. They're good friends and rivals."

What?

"They even fought a monster that appeared at the academy with His Grace to protect the other students! The four of them are wonderful, don't you think?" she added.

"They are!" another said. "In the end, Lady Cherny saved her ladyship's life by awakening her holy mana! His Grace was so thankful that he declared Lady Cherny a true friend of House Yulnova. Everyone's heard that, I'm sure."

"Beautiful, brave, and kind. To think we were lucky enough to watch such an amazing young woman perform a traditional dance of Yulnova, and so gracefully at that! I shall never forget this party."

Flora and I shared a look. I was hit by a wave of realization and glanced at Margarita. She had a satisfied smile on her lips.

What masterful propaganda!

Considering how much the people revered my brother, I knew there had to have been someone making sure they got every bit of information on how much he was doing for them. I'd even had a hunch that person was probably Novak. But I now realized the propaganda machine wasn't kept afloat by Novak alone. His entire family was a part of it!

I also had a feeling our grandfather had been the one to teach Novak these tricks. The man was a tactician. I'd never seen him in action, but I just *knew* he was good at these things.

"My lady, serving the main house is the duty of the branch families," Margarita said. "Feel free to call upon me should you need anything—anything at all."

"What a reliable ally you make," I said. She was formidable indeed. Her support was so heartening that I felt the tension leave my body.

Before I knew it, our surroundings had turned into a women-only party. A number of young unmarried girls joined the young madams Margarita had initially brought along. I was starting to worry about how the banquet would go, with all the young single ladies gathered in one spot, until I noticed a few young men asking the ladies standing at the edge of our formation for a dance. Some of the ladies had no interest in speaking to Flora or me. They were using us as bait, ready to hunt the prey that gathered near us, like anglerfish using their light to lure prey, if that analogy made sense.

I supposed most of the men behaved like hunters too, so it was probably a fair battle.

Eat or be eaten, right? Give it your best shot, ladies. It's not really for me, but I wish you the best.

I scanned the great hall and saw that there were several clusters. While the largest one had formed around Alexei and Mikhail, there were a few others too.

First of all, there was the cluster of older ladies led by Lady Adelina. As a key person in making tonight's first dance possible,

she'd gotten a boost in popularity. Her position as the wife of Alexei's most trusted advisor already awarded her quite a bit of influence. She probably had heaps of people trying to curry favor with her.

It reminded me of a famous show from my past life—a hit drama set in a bank. Some scenes really showed the hierarchy of the wives. I had a feeling things weren't all that different here. The weight these interactions carried was simply heavier here.

I spotted another smaller cluster a little farther away. These people were glaring at Adelina, and I suspected they were remnants of the old regime. They hadn't been purged by Alexei, so I expected they hadn't done anything too dire. Regardless of that, some people always struggled to adapt to the times.

Honestly, I'd always been terrible at dealing with cliques myself. However, thanks to Margarita, the propaganda master, orchestrating everything for me, I could get away with hanging out in this safe haven of girls for most of the evening. Actually, I had a feeling my role *was* to be here. If I walked around mindlessly with Flora, we could stumble into the hunting grounds and disrupt the hunters.

Now that I was more at ease, I called over a butler and asked for nonalcoholic cocktails for me and Flora. While I was at it, I asked Margarita and the others what they wanted to drink and ordered those too. After I finished my drink, I tried eating the small gelatin butterflies inside. Not only were they pretty, but they also tasted good, having soaked in the delicious cocktail for so long.

"This is your first party, so I want you to enjoy yourself, Lady Flora. Would you like to dance?"

Flora shook her head. "I'm not too comfortable with the idea of dancing with someone I don't know...but I'd love to dance with you, Lady Ekaterina," she replied with a teasing tone.

I laughed. "I feel the same way. I'd much rather dance with you than with some gentleman I've never met."

"The two of you are so close," Margarita said warmly.

"You certainly seem to be!" another woman chimed in. "Close enough to wear matching dresses. Speaking of which, they suit you very well."

"Oh yes, I *love* your dresses!" another added. "The way the

ribbons twirled as you danced was beautiful. In fact, I'm thinking of asking for similar ribbons on my next dress."

"Me too. My sister was already begging our mother for a similar dress the second the dancing began. We all feel like copying the dresses of beautiful women, don't we? It must make us feel like we'll look just as beautiful on the dance floor."

"The dancing itself was also lovely. I've performed that dance at a local festival before, a long time ago, but I remember it being simpler. You added some turns, didn't you? They made the choreography more refined."

The ladies bubbled with laughter as they chatted.

"Oh my, now that you mention *dresses*..."

At the words of one of them, everyone's attention shifted to the center of the great hall. This was where Alexei and Mikhail were, and where the largest cluster had assembled. I followed their stares, only for my eyes to widen when I spotted the person they were talking about.

We can see her whole back!

The group that had gathered around Mikhail in the hope of greeting him was mostly men, but among them stood a woman in a very bold dress. From my spot, behind and to the side, only her back was visible. Her hair was a plain and discreet shade of brown, but even from my viewpoint, I could tell the curves of her body were anything but discreet. She hadn't tried to hide that either, and her dress exposed quite a bit of skin.

Dresses like hers had been popular for a time, and they were supposedly an acceptable option for an unmarried woman during the summer months—or so my designer, Camilla, had told me. On a figure that was even more curvaceous than mine, the dress's impact was remarkable.

Is the prince gonna be okay? He's only sixteen, so that's gotta be a lot for him.

I remembered him flushing red after seeing *me* in a dress. That woman was in a league of her own, so it'd likely be even worse. I was worried for him.

Good luck, Prince!

However, in a very anticlimactic turn of events, Mikhail talked to her like she was anyone else. He smiled at her calmly, the same way he smiled at everyone, and then it was over. The woman walked away.

Meanwhile, when Alexei's eyes fell on her, his gaze was about as interested as when he looked at vases or cabinets.

Huh? With a woman like her in front of you, shouldn't your eyes linger?! I won't say where, but hey, it'd be perfectly normal for them to look, right? They're boys in the middle of puberty. They can be forgiven that much.

But, neither of them seemed fazed by her.

I guess an imperial prince would be used to seeing women in dresses... But then, why did he blush last time?

Margarita had noticed me looking at Mikhail.

"His Highness is a true gentleman, don't you think?" she asked. "Are you acquainted with the woman who just greeted him?"

"I met her briefly at the celebratory banquet," I said. "She's a widow, is she not?"

"Indeed. There aren't many she can rely on, yet she cares for her young son and protects her family admirably."

If she'd been granted permission to say hello to Mikhail, she must have been from an important house. According to the other ladies, she'd been married to a man much older than her. She'd become a widow young and now had to act as the head of the family in her son's stead until he grew up. I'd read in some historical novels that the only noble ladies who truly enjoyed life were widows. The gloomy days under the yoke of their late husbands were gone, dispelled by the freedom of their new situations.

Margarita spoke of the widow in a positive light, but the other ladies didn't seem to be as fond of her. In fact, I got the feeling the majority of them disliked her. I wasn't all that surprised, though. Sexy women often earned the ire of other women.

"She sounds like a wonderful person, Lady Margarita. Striving to protect one's children and family is a laudable goal. I must also say her dress attracts the eye. She's piqued my interest."

I'd lived in a time period when wearing miniskirts and crop tops

was completely normal, so I had no issue with her outfit. Since we'd only exchanged short greetings at the previous banquet, I didn't know her character, but I decided to trust Margarita. Besides, it wasn't fair to speak ill of people I didn't know.

I was also curious to see what her dress looked like from the front.

"I'm glad to know you feel this way," Margarita said. "If you'd like, it'd be my pleasure to introduce the two of you to one another aga—"

Margarita cut herself off with a gasp. She seemed to have seen something behind me, and I spun around to check what this was about.

A group of people with Mikhail at their head was walking this way.

Hey, what? Are you done accepting greetings already?

Then I recalled that Alexei had done the same at the previous banquet. After greeting a select group of important people, he'd walked around and talked to those who couldn't flock to him because of their status. Mikhail seemed to have reached that phase.

The ladies around me—even the married ones!—let out dreamy sighs as he approached.

"Ekaterina, Flora," he called out to us. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I noticed some beautiful flowers and couldn't help but want a closer look."

He grinned and the girls around us let out strangled cries.

Your smooth-talking is really improving, Prince. That one-liner was slick.

"Prince Mikhail, I hope you're enjoying your evening," I replied with a polite smile.

"Of course. I've received much warmth and kind words from everyone here, and I couldn't be more pleased. I have you to thank for it, Ekaterina. Thank you for coming up with such a great idea."

"You honor me, Prince Mikhail."

"That dance was a lot of fun, wasn't it? Your dress looked even more striking while you were dancing. These ribbons in particular..." Mikhail's hand reached for the ribbons hanging at my shoulder. He stopped with his fingers so close I couldn't tell if he was touching

them or not. “I feel the urge to catch them.”

Mischief flickered on my face and I did one little spin myself. The ribbons fluttered, entangling themselves around Mikhail’s outstretched arm.

I didn’t see Mikhail’s reaction, but the ladies around us (who were all staring at him) held up their folding fans as they squealed.

“I’m glad you like them,” I said once I was done turning.

“I do... I find myself drawn to them,” Mikhail replied as the ribbons slipped down his arm. His cheeks seemed a little red as he pulled his eyes away from me to speak to Flora. “And are you enjoying yourself?”

“Very much so. Being here feels like a dream come true. Lady Ekaterina is taking such good care of me too.”

“Excellent. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

While the two of them talked, Alexei, who’d been following Mikhail dutifully this entire time, stroked my hair.

“You’re not feeling tired, are you, Ekaterina?” he asked.

“I’m fine, brother. I’m having a lovely time surrounded by very kind people.” I snuggled my head against Alexei’s hand and looked up at him with a smile.

“Good. You’re not used to socializing, so don’t overdo it.”

“I won’t, brother. I promise to heed your warning.”



The way Alexei gazed at Ekaterina was soft as down feathers. The ladies in attendance practically writhed as they admired the adorable scene. Then, Mikhail and Alexei left. The ladies who had gathered around Ekaterina exchanged excited glances. Their excited glances said it all:

I knew it. His Highness is yearning for our lady’s attention!

He is! When I saw how he looked at her while they were dancing, I just knew he was in love with her.

They suit each other so much. We must help their relationship. As vassals of the Yulnova, what greater joy than to see our lady crowned empress?

Did you see the longing on his face when he grazed her ribbons?! My heart skipped a beat. Ah, youth is beautiful.

What these ladies didn't know was what Ekaterina had thought when she'd seen Mikhail reach for the ribbons:

I used to think the prince was like a puppy, but seeing him fixating on fluttering ribbons shows me he has a kitty side to him too!

Regrettable thoughts, indeed.



The prince's welcome banquet drew to a close without incident. Most of the guests had managed to say a few words to Mikhail or at least share a look and a smile, and they headed home satisfied. This night would surely become an important memory for them.

In one of the carriages carrying the noble guests of the banquet home, however, a different mood had taken over.

"You'd better be reflecting on your actions. Oh, I hope you're *very* sorry," a woman said, her voice hard as steel.

She snapped her folding fan closed and pointed it at her younger brother, who was sitting opposite her. The woman was one of Margarita's friends—the beauty who'd dealt with her brother as swiftly and decisively as a samurai swung the blade of his katana when he'd tried to approach Ekaterina.

Right next to her was her husband, but he knew better than to poke his nose in his wife's business when she was in such a foul mood. In fact, he was trying his hardest to fade into the air so no one would perceive him.

"Why should I be sorry just for trying to say hello?" her younger brother said, sulking.

While his sister was sometimes a terror, she was also someone he could depend on. He didn't hesitate to pout around her. On the other hand, it might have been more accurate to say he never learned his lesson.

"Do you think I couldn't tell you were waiting for a chance to invite Lady Ekaterina to dance? You're such a fool. If you'd paid any

attention to the first dance, you should have known His Highness has special feelings toward her."

"I *do* know! I was hoping to get a dance with the future empress! What's wrong with making a memory or two?"

"Does 'making a memory or two' warrant earning the ire of the future *emperor*? You didn't give that any thought, now did you? That's why I'm calling you a fool! Besides..." The sister opened her folding fan and concealed her mouth. She glared at her brother. "I know you only wanted to use dancing as an excuse to touch her. I could see right through you, and I am *not* the only one! His Grace would have slain you on the spot for daring to look at his darling sister with such eyes!"

"I-I wasn't thinking about that... Okay, maybe a little. But what kind of guy doesn't appreciate beautiful women? It's completely normal!"

The brother glanced at his brother-in-law for support, but the latter had done such a good job of fading that he was practically transparent at this point.

"This is why you're so unpopular with girls!" the sister hissed, her words still katana-sharp. "Look at you, the heir of the Viscount of Novalas, yet you've spent so much time distracted at the academy that you couldn't even find a fiancée. Now you're back in the duchy, and you've been rejected left and right. With that track record of yours, do you think you would've been forgiven for causing a commotion on the night of our great-grandfather's last function as a butler?"

The siblings were the great-grandchildren of the old butler of the Yulnova Fortress, Novalas.

"Oh, come on, his last function? He says that for *every* banquet."

"Well, that's why they call him the Phoenix Weathervane..."

The old butler Novalas's allegiance changed with the wind, just like a weather vane. That was how he'd survived Alexandra's ironclad rule without being dismissed, and how he'd managed to remain the butler of Yulnova Fortress for so long. He was getting on in years, and people had started to gossip about how he would never die. That had earned him the first half of his nickname.

"But with His Grace in the midst of building a solid, loyal base for his power," the sister continued, "I expect he'll be asked to retire soon. If we don't want to lose our connection to the main branch, we must endeavor for His Grace to grant grandfather or father some sort of position. If you incur his displeasure *now* of all times, being disowned will be the least of your troubles."

"Urgh..."

"That said..." The sister sighed. "Such a wonderful first dance would have been unthinkable in the days of Lady Alexandra. I almost cried. It felt as though another era opened tonight. Back then, even with the protection our great-grandfather's position awarded us, she'd glare and nag at us if we wore dresses that were even a fraction too eye-catching for her taste..."

She clenched her folding fan in annoyance, but she soon snapped out of it and cleared her throat. "Did you know her ladyship was the one to suggest this first dance? She's a breath of fresh air in high society. She showed such solicitude, worrying over us having a good evening... She's kindhearted and the one the crown prince has fallen for. We must support our future empress with all our might for the glory of Yulnova!"

She once again tightly grasped her folding fan.

"After speaking with her tonight, though, I realized that no matter how bright she is, she's *completely* ignorant of the matters of the heart. She seems mature, but she's still a naive, sheltered girl. A vulgar man like you shouldn't be allowed to look at her lest you stain her. You'd better remember that."

"Don't you think you're being too harsh on me?!"

Despite her brother's whining, she did not reply. She simply glared at him in silence.



"So, you young ladies have decided to come together to support her ladyship?"

"Yes, mother," Margarita replied, struggling to hold back a smile.

The Novaks—her mother, her father, and her brother—and

Margarita's husband were heading home in their own carriage, discussing private matters. Margarita's husband was one of her brother Andrei's good friends, and her father recognized him for his many talents. When Alexei inherited, he'd made him commander of the northern capital's guard. The two forces that could put a purge into action were the Order of Yulnova and the northern capital's guard. Both were under Alexei's control.

"Everyone sensed that Lady Alexandra's era was no more tonight—and they all were in high spirits!" Margarita continued. "Besides, her ladyship's taste is impeccable. I thought the Celestial Blue she incorporates in her dresses would forever be out of reach for the likes of me, but she told us about a new dye that is significantly cheaper. She's encouraged us to try commissioning dresses using this affordable Celestial Blue dye for ourselves. You should consider the idea yourself, mother."

"My! That is a trend we could all follow, regardless of age. I'll recommend it to my friends too." Adelina pictured the faces of her "friends"—a group that had grown exponentially in the past few weeks—and smiled. "Still, what moved me the most was that first dance. What an honor to have seen the future emperor perform a traditional dance of Yulnova like one of our own. They all danced wonderfully, and how lovely they were. But the greatest surprise was witnessing true love concealed behind the choreography of a courting dance. From how fast my heart was racing, you'd have thought I was watching a play."

Adelina tilted her head to the side, surprised by what she'd learned tonight. "Yet her ladyship truly didn't notice a thing. His Highness touched her a few times, but she clearly didn't understand the meaning behind it. I suppose she was too busy clinging to His Grace."

When Ekaterina had let her ribbons curl around Mikhail's arm, Adelina had been impressed. *What a strategist!* she'd thought. Now that she realized that Ekaterina hadn't done it on purpose, she felt differently about her. *She's terrifying.*

Margarita sighed. "To be blunt, I got the feeling that her ladyship is a deeply unbalanced person. She's intelligent and has a mature

side to her, but she's also so juvenile. She isn't very familiar with the unspoken rules of high society. Well...it's only natural given the tragic circumstances of her upbringing, isn't it?"

Margarita realized she was about to delve into a topic that shouldn't be touched upon, and she immediately shut her mouth.

"I taught as much as I could during our dance lessons," Adelina said. "But there are so many unspoken rules about so many subjects, I could hardly cover them all. We must impart what knowledge we can upon her when possible. Men and women abide by different rules, so His Grace won't be of much help to her on that front. Besides, I have a feeling he'd approve of anything her ladyship does, regardless of the rules."

This time, Adelina was the one to realize she should hold her tongue, and she stopped talking with a little purse of her lips.

"Well, she is kind, intelligent, and sensible enough to earn people's approval, so I'm not *too* worried. She has such natural charm," Margarita said. "Oh, I meant to tell you. She spoke to Madam Zoya. I was glad to see it."

"You've always been close to her, haven't you? Though she's changed a lot compared to when the two of you were young."

Zoya was the widow who'd worn a flamboyant outfit to the banquet. Margarita and Zoya had been friends for a long time, and Margarita knew the hardships she'd been through.



Zoya was raised in a very strict family. Back then, she felt ashamed of her figure. The more she grew into a womanly shape, the more she hid under loose clothes. She even hunched forward to better conceal her curves. Zoya's father and brother were the kind of men who looked down on women. They ridiculed and insulted her every chance they got, and sometimes even hurt her. As soon as the right occasion came by, they more or less sold her to an old man.

But there was a silver lining to her misfortune, and that old man was kind to his young wife. He taught her the joy of dressing up and rejoiced when she birthed a son. Their married life ended up being

rather short, but her husband made sure his massive wealth passed on to his wife and child.

Zoya's father and brother marched into her home right after his passing, hoping to seize control over his inheritance. Zoya was the one to throw them out. Since then, she'd worn outfits that she knew would provoke them—and many others—at parties. To Zoya, these clothes were proof she'd reinvented herself. They were practically suits of armor that embodied her determination to protect her son. While her father and brother looked down on women, they still lusted after their company. In some ways, her father and brother feared what they sought. Perhaps Zoya sensed that on an unconscious level. Watching their frustration whenever she became the center of other men's attention gave her confidence.

Zoya didn't just attend parties. She also did the work that fell upon the head of the family on her son's behalf. Her father and brother had cut all ties with her and never offered her help in any way, but in the end, that was actually a blessing for Zoya. The two of them had been conspiring with Novadain, and they'd been apprehended during Alexei's latest round of arrests.

After Zoya shared her life story with Ekaterina at the party, Ekaterina said, "You've become strong for your son. Mothers like you have all my respect."

At these words, the group around Zoya and Ekaterina gasped. It was clear what she meant: Her own mother, the tragic duchess, had never been as strong.



"Her ladyship graced Madam Zoya with her kindness," Margarita said. "It was especially nice to see her ask Zoya about her challenges with child-rearing. Ekaterina used the chance to bring the other married ladies into the conversation. Soon enough, the discussion turned lively as everyone shared their troubles or bragged about their own children. Madam Zoya has always been isolated, so I was thrilled to see her laugh with the other mothers. Her ladyship is skilled at these matters despite her youth."

As a former adult in her late twenties, Ekaterina had had several married friends with children. She knew exactly what kind of topics made them the most talkative!

"Supporting her ladyship means supporting His Grace," Adelina said. "Your father and Andrei are helping him install a new regime, and we will assist them in the way only women can."

"Yes, mother."

Chapter 3: The Hunting Tournament

The sky was an invigorating blue on the morning of the hunting tournament.

At this time of the year in the north, the first hints of fall were already in the air. Fresh breezes were blowing, and the sky was a little paler than the summery blue of Mikhail's hair.

"What fine weather," I said.

"Very pleasant too," Mikhail agreed. "I like that it doesn't get too hot even when it's sunny here."

We were eating breakfast together alongside Alexei and Flora.

This morning, Alexei and Mikhail hadn't gone to the usual training grounds before joining us for breakfast, because we weren't at the Yulnova Fortress at all. Our current abode was one of the secondary residences we owned on the outskirts of the northern capital. It was close to the hunting grounds, so we'd traveled here the day prior. This secondary residence had been built for hunting. It had been made with men in mind and, compared to the fortress, it was a tad unrefined. The walls were peppered with bows, arrows, and spears, not to mention antlers and other hunting trophies. This residence also hadn't been made for long stays, so it was rather compact.

That said, we'd sent servants ahead to prepare it to receive our imperial guest. They'd cleaned every nook and cranny to perfection, and it was very cozy.

Well, I'd labeled it "compact" and "cozy" by the standards of this world, but that might have been unfair. It was still a luxurious mansion. A residence like this in Tokyo would have easily gone for tens of billions of yen.

I shouldn't start comparing things to the Yulnova Fortress. That place could be a World Heritage site! screamed the corporate drone

in me. On the flip side, as the lady of a duke's household, I felt like it was natural to use my home as a basis of comparison. *Still, I can't start thinking that fancy fortresses are the norm...*

Today's hunting tournament would start in the morning. The people of the neighboring village had been hired to act as beaters, and the hounds would also play their part. After the beaters and hounds urged the prey into the hunting area, the participants of the tournament would compete against one another to see who could take down the most prey. In the evening, they'd finish and bring the game back here for us to have a garden party and enjoy the meat together.

"I know you've been looking forward to the hunt, Prince Mikhail. I hope you catch something big," I said.

"Thank you. Who knows? I might just run into a big-horned ox with gold horns. Please pray for my good fortune."

There were big-horned ox horns displayed in this house. That name did not lie: They were *big*. Among all of the horns, only one set was golden. It hadn't been colored for decorative purposes but had been taken from a big-horned ox with naturally golden horns. No one really knew why the specimen had looked that way, but I'd heard it'd been vicious. One of the theories suggested that color was the sign of a disease, and the beast had been in a frenzy because of the pain.

Still, its meat had been eaten, and the rumors said it'd been delicious.

They thought it might have been sick and still ate it? Wow.

"The body of our imperial majesty mustn't be injured. If you do run into one such beast, please leave it to someone else," Alexei said with a solemn look.

Mikhail laughed. "I'll try. But if there is one, and it's as violent as the rumors said the previous one was, it might attack the nearby villages. I can't ignore that."

"Thank you for thinking of the people of Yulnova," I said. I could tell his main motivation was hunting down rare prey. Still, I didn't think his concern was false. I remembered how he hadn't hesitated for even a second when fighting the monster at the academy.

Had his attendant gotten mad at him afterward? It wasn't as if Mikhail had acted recklessly that day, though. He was strong and knew almost no student or teacher had experience battling monsters. He'd calmly assessed everyone's strengths and weaknesses and had concluded that getting involved was the right choice.

Besides, Mikhail never forgot that he was the future emperor; he must have considered the impact running away would have had on his image. Of course, as he was the sole heir to the throne, his death would have guaranteed disastrous consequences for the empire, so running away wouldn't have been a terrible choice. Nonetheless, he would've faced criticism—that much was certain.

With all that in mind, Mikhail had chosen to fight. It was a choice that fit his personality.

The prince really is a good boy. Besides...I agree with his assessment.

I didn't know the people of the Yulnova Duchy all that well, since I'd barely spoken to a few of them and had only waved at a couple of hundred more, but I still didn't want a vicious beast hurting them.

"If such monsters start to appear regularly, I shall do my part to protect our people to the best of my meager abilities," I declared, feeling determined.

"Ekaterina," Alexei said. His tone was so serious that I snapped out of it right away.

I'm sorry, I got carried away!

Alexei stood up from his seat and came to me before taking one of my hands in his. "Ekaterina, my sweet sister, my lifeline, my dearest. You are my life itself—my beating heart. Just thinking of that possibility terrifies me. If I were to lose you, my heart would stop on the spot."

"Brother..."

Forgive me... I just pushed your buttons, didn't I?

"You are a delicate girl with a frail body," he continued. "Yet you never spare a thought for your own safety. I know that you always strive to carry yourself like the sublime, noble lady that you are."

No, no, that's only the way I appear through your very thick rose-

tinted filter. Speaking of which, it seems to be functioning too well this morning.

"But...please, I beg of you..." Alexei squeezed my hand tighter. "Please keep your foolish brother, the one who relies on you to keep going, in your thoughts. My chest aches when I imagine you in danger. I want you to promise me that you will never throw yourself in harm's way to shield someone else again."

You don't need to worry so much. That's not something I just do every day! The monster-at-the-academy event is over, so I'm done with that.

Now that I think about it, maybe things looked *that way during our encounter with the Dragon King. I'm sure Oleg beautified the story a lot when he told Alexei what happened. That was an act of god, okay?* Regardless of the circumstances, it was true that I'd worried Alexei several times. *He said his chest ached... How could I make him suffer that much? I'm such a failure!*

He deserved a proper apology. I brought my other hand over Alexei's and squeezed it between mine.

"I'll never forgive myself for making you worry so much," I said. "I swear to you I will not do anything unreasonable. Please, calm your mind and enjoy the hunt."

"Thank you, my goddess," Alexei said with a smile.

"Your Grace, *I* will protect Lady Ekaterina," Flora said, her voice thick with resolve. "My holy mana awakened for that sole sake. I may still be in the midst of studying, but I swear I will protect her no matter what."

"Thank you. Those are truly heartening words."

Flora had already shown she could drive back monsters with her mana, and her vow seemed to reassure Alexei. His expression softened. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that Mikhail was holding his head in his hands. I felt bad for him.

It's okay, Prince. You don't need to feel down just because you can't come close to Alexei's flowery language. If you could, you'd be too much for the rest of us to handle.

After finishing breakfast, the four of us went to the garden. A lot of the participants had arrived already, and small groups were chatting here and there. Most of them had also been invited to the welcome banquet, but the average age was a little younger than it had been that night because Mikhail and Alexei had narrowed the list to people who could participate in a vigorous sport like hunting.

When they saw us arrive, the crowd grew a little rowdy. Thankfully, everyone was smiling. The warm emotion from the welcome banquet didn't seem to have settled yet, and our appearance had quite the effect on them. The four of us were dressed in much simpler fashion than at the banquet. Alexei and Mikhail wore hunting clothes, while Flora and I had donned simple dresses that didn't impede our movement. We gave off a much younger and fresher vibe than at the banquet.

I could only read admiration and affection on the faces of our guests. However, none of them approached us. It might have had something to do with the imposing hounds of Yulnova Igor had brought to the garden.

In fact, the first to approach us was Regina, the leader of the pack. She rubbed her head against Alexei's hand, then nuzzled up against me and gazed at Alexei. She seemed to be telling him she remembered his request and would protect me. The other hounds surrounded Mikhail and Flora and wagged their tails.

Alexei and I had introduced them to the hounds the day prior. The hounds instinctively submitted to those with strong mana, so all they'd had to do was use some of it to get them to obey. Flora was especially popular. The hounds liked her, but one of them in particular—a large male with black fur—adored her. Apparently, he was the subleader of the pack. He stuck to Flora and even lay down with his belly up to beg for pats. There was something comical in seeing a large, fearsome hound acting like a puppy. His belly area was so large that it looked like a whole sheepskin was wiggling on the ground when he flopped. I couldn't help but crouch and pet him alongside Flora every time he did it. It was so soft...

The black hound, Rex, was Regina's partner. Every time he begged us for belly rubs, Regina smacked him with her paws.

Despite her strikes, Rex was still sticking close to Flora today.

He really never learns his lesson.

The darker the fur of a hound of Yulnova, the more monster blood ran through their veins. Vladforen had explained to me that holy mana users could comfort monsters by helping circulate their mana. I assumed that was why Rex liked being around Flora so much. That said, he wasn't acting as spoiled as he had yesterday. He'd clearly recognized this place and was anticipating the hunt. The hunting ground was the hounds' stage—the place they shone the brightest. They knew they'd be hunting today, and their eyes glowed with excitement. They reminded me of the pumped-up pack of huskies from this one manga about a veterinary student. I could practically see their excited thought bubbles!

Our carefree interactions with the hounds left our guests in awe. I could almost see their thought bubbles too: *These beautiful youngsters have so much mana that the hounds are* that *submissive?!*

At last, someone finally approached us.

"Hi, Count Novak, Lord Kyle. I'll be in your hands today," Mikhail said, speaking to them first. Boris Novak and Aaron Kyle bowed.

Naturally, Aaron had been present at the welcome banquet to greet Mikhail. However, Mikhail had seen *a lot* of people that night. I couldn't believe he remembered their faces and names—even their titles! Then again, Aaron hailed from House Kyle, a family of counts with wealth and influence. As Alexei's mine advisor, he also boasted an important position in the duchy, so maybe Mikhail had looked him up before coming. Either way, the prince had done his homework, and I was in awe that a sixteen-year-old could keep track of so many things.

"With this weather, it's shaping up to be a perfect day for hunting, Your Highness," Novak said.

"I heard the beaters spotted plenty of game. We can expect an interesting hunt," Aaron added.

The two of them were wearing hunting clothes and would participate in the tournament. I usually saw them at their desks in very different clothing, so I was surprised. I'd always taken Aaron in

particular for the indoor type, considering he seemed like such an intellectual, but he looked surprisingly good in his sharp hunting attire.

"My lady and Lady Cherny, the valley in which the women will spend time has many wildflowers in bloom right now. I hope you'll enjoy taking a stroll there," Aaron said.

While the men hunted, the women would relax in a nearby valley outside of the hunting grounds. There was supposed to be a beautiful waterfall surrounded by greenery there, and tents and marquees would be set up with tables and chairs for us to have tea and cakes among the scenery.

Will it be like a picnic? Or more like the fancy camping that had gotten popular in my past life—glamping, wasn't it?

I'd never been glamping, so I wasn't sure I'd know the difference.

"Thank you, Lord Aaron," I said. "I didn't think you were the type to fancy hunting. I'm surprised."

"When I accompany Professor Isaac in the field, we sometimes have to procure food on the go. I often participate in hunts, as it is good practice."

This hunting tournament held in the prince's honor is just a little practice for camping with my granduncle? Dude.

Not that *I* would hold it against him. It was clear he thought of *every* hunting tournament this way. While Aaron was a fifth son, he was still the son of a count...yet he had to find his own food in the wild? Was hunting for rabbits so you could feed your mentor really the job of an assistant? I had a feeling it wasn't.

As always, I can really feel the depth of his love for Isaac.

"I see you and Lord Kyle are close, Ekaterina," Mikhail commented after hearing me use his first name instead of his family name. In the empire, depending on the situation and your degree of familiarity, it was all right to call lords by either their first names or family names.

"She's just doing that because I call him Aaron. She's imitating me," Alexei said, sounding pleased. "Come to think of it, I started calling some of my advisors by their first names because my grandfather did. We're alike in the most unexpected of ways, aren't

we, Ekaterina?”

I nodded enthusiastically, even though I was surprised to hear that. I hadn’t really given it much thought, but Alexei *did* call his younger advisors, such as Aaron and Halil, by their first names. Now, they were really only younger in comparison to his other advisors. They were still much older than Alexei. I should have realized it was unusual! Alexei didn’t have such a relaxed personality that he’d naturally address some people by their first names. If he’d just been emulating our grandfather, it made total sense.

“I see. What a heartwarming story,” Mikhail said with a smile. “I’ve heard my grandfather, the late emperor, often hunted with Duke Sergei. I hope the two of us will continue this tradition. Let’s have a good time today.”



Alexei, Mikhail, and the rest of the participants mounted their horses. They were about to leave for the hunting grounds.

The horse Mikhail was riding belonged to the House of Yulnova. It was the swiftest of the many fine horses in the fortress’s stable. Mikhail had his own favorite mount in the capital, but he’d sailed on the Serno River to come here, so he hadn’t brought it with him.

“This is quite a horse,” Mikhail said. His wording was as careful as ever, but I didn’t miss the gleam in his eyes.

To be fair, the horse he’d been given really was excellent. Its legs were long, and its body was symmetrical and well proportioned. It was visibly strong with a perfectly maintained, glossy chestnut coat. Its mane was beautifully braided, and the grace of its every step was a sight to behold. It was clear that the stable’s staff had prepared this horse for the crown prince with the utmost care.

“Well, it doesn’t come close to Areion,” Alexei said.

Mikhail’s favorite horse was named Areion, and if Alexei said this beautiful chestnut horse couldn’t compare, it was probably a demonic horse of Krymov.

Prince! Could you please, please, please ask Count Krymov to send my brother a horse too? Pretty please! I begged through

telepathy.

Meanwhile, the black horse Alexei rode was in no way inferior to Mikhail's. It was a little bigger, a perfect fit for the tall Alexei. Behind the young duke and prince were Novak, Aaron, and the rest of the participants. All of them had excellent horses. They seemed to have put a lot of care into their appearances for the sake of this hunt in the prince's company. For all I knew, some had procured brand-new horses for the occasion.

I was reminded of a practice called uma-soroe, or "horse gathering." During the Sengoku period, military lords had sometimes commanded their men to gather to check their equipment and horses. Oda Nobunaga was famous for having marched his troops in full gear through Kyoto as a demonstration of his power. According to a popular story, one of his retainers, called Yamauchi Kazutoyo, had earned his lord's attention thanks to a fine horse his wife had helped him buy by giving him her dowry. Speaking of Yamauchi Kazutoyo, he'd been the one who had gone on to become the feudal lord of Tosa. He'd struggled because of the resistance the vassals of the Chousokabe clan—the previous lords of that land—had put up, and he'd eventually ended up discriminating heavily against them.

All that to say that, in an era before cars, horses were a big deal!

The overwhelming majority of the hunting party were men, but there was one woman among them. She wore elegant hunting clothes and rode a horse with a dignified posture, just like the men. She was the granddaughter of the fortress's elderly butler.

In Alexandra's days, she'd always been careful to hide it, but she loved hunting and had pursued her hobby in secret. She'd had to hide it because Alexandra despised women who liked horseback riding. Why? Well, the woman she hated the most in the world, Empress Magdalena, loved riding horses. I had no doubt she'd taken out her anger on anyone who'd reminded her of Magdalena.

At this point, I'm pretty sure I've never heard a single good rumor about the old hag. Bad ones, on the other hand...

In this world, women still wore skirts when they rode horses. They didn't straddle the horse, like men did, but sat sideways on saddles made for that. Novalas's granddaughter had to be *really*

good at riding and hunting if she could manage it while riding this way. Neither Flora nor I knew how to ride a horse. I'd asked Alexei to allow me to learn, and he'd agreed on the condition that I use an appropriate saddle. I was currently waiting for it to be finished. That said, I doubted I'd ever be able to participate in a hunt even if I learned.

"I shall pray for a bountiful hunt," I said. "But my greatest wish is for you to be careful. Please do not get hurt," I told Alexei and Mikhail before they left.

It was now time for us ladies to head to the glamping site—uh, the valley—by carriage. While there was a path for the carriages to pass through, our surroundings were very green.

Are these white birches?

The tree species that seemed most abundant in the area had white bark and crisp green leaves. They were very nice on the eyes.

The moment we stepped out of the carriage, Flora's face lit up. "It's gorgeous!"

She was a very reserved girl and didn't often raise her voice. I couldn't blame her, though, because I screamed too.

This place has tons of negative ions! Talk about serotonin!!! But I only screamed that in my head, because I didn't think she'd know what I meant.

I'd heard about the waterfall, but it was much bigger and noisier than I'd anticipated. While our surroundings were full of white birches, the area around the plunge basin had been cleared out, and tents and marquees had already been set up. Stylish white tables and chairs sat beneath them.

On the shores of the clear stream that flowed away from the waterfall were beautiful wildflowers in bloom, just like Aaron had said. The refreshing coolness of the waterfall and the fragrant smell of the forest wafted through the air and seemed to permeate my body. This place very much reminded me of the Oirase Gorge in Aomori, which I'd visited in my previous life. It was a beautiful haven of greenery and clear waters.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," Flora said. "What beauty!"

I had no doubt this was impactful scenery for Flora, who'd never left the imperial capital before. There were no TVs or pictures in this world. There were beautiful parks in the imperial capital, and you could picnic under the shade of the trees, but it was nothing like the wonders of nature.

In my past life, I'd seen plenty of famous tourist spots on travel shows, in guidebooks, or in the pictures people uploaded to social media, even if I'd never been there. In this world, until you went somewhere and saw it with your own two eyes, there was no way to experience it. The era of information I'd lived in was amazing in retrospect. From the invention of photography to the time I'd been around, there'd been roughly two hundred years. So much had changed in that short period. The way people thought and lived had been transformed forever.

"It *is* wonderful," I said. "I'm sure we'll have the loveliest time here today. Besides, I heard we're close enough to hear the horns and cheers coming from the hunting grounds. I hope we'll be able to keep track of my brother's and Prince Mikhail's exploits."

Novak's wife, Adelina, and his daughter, Margarita, came to greet us, and the four of us sat at one table. After Mina served us tea, she brought sweets to the table. Adelina's eyes sparkled at the beautiful assortment.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see these lovely rose cookies again," she exclaimed. "I was so engrossed in chatting at the banquet that I didn't get to try them. The baked sweets look delicious too. Your chef must be quite something to get such vibrant colors despite the baking!"

"Our head chefs at the fortress and at our estate in the capital are locked in an endless competition with one another," I replied. "After Prince Mikhail praised the fortress's chef's sweets, the first thing he did was send a letter to his rival with the recipe enclosed."

I smiled awkwardly. This entire mess had started because I'd suggested to our chef here that he serve rose-shaped cookies at the banquet in Mikhail's honor because they'd been very popular with my classmates at the garden party I'd thrown in the capital. Little had I known I would end up fanning the flames of their rivalry.

The Yulnova Fortress was our family's main residence. However, the imperial family's annual visit took place at our residence in the capital, not at the fortress. During that occasion, lunch had been served to our imperial guests, which meant the status of that residence was technically *higher*. The head chef in particular felt superior. Despite exchanging letters with his counterpart in the capital to gather information, the head chef of the fortress burned with the desire to outdo his rival, and the prince's visit had been the perfect chance to do so.

Instead of replicating the rose cookies from the garden party, the fortress head chef had come up with a new, fancier recipe. I had no doubt he'd gone through much trial and error and spent a lot of time on it to impress Mikhail and me.

In the end, he'd succeeded in leaving me in awe! The rose-shaped cookies he made looked almost identical to real roses! He handcrafted the petals one by one and only assembled them together after they were done baking. At the banquet, real roses and rose-shaped cookies had been arranged together to further enhance the illusion. He'd even added decorative blue butterflies to the display, securing the praise of all our guests.

The chef had also baked rose-shaped cakes in several colors like red or yellow. What he'd made really *had* caught Mikhail's attention, who'd personally complimented the chef. He'd shed tears of joy in response.

And I showered him in praise too!

There was one thing I hadn't told him, though... The rose cookies I'd eaten in the capital had better texture and flavor. They had been crunchier and tastier overall. Somehow, I suspected the head chef knew that even without me saying so. It was all right! Healthy rivalry was good, and I wondered what new sweets our chef in the capital would come up with to strike back.

Interestingly enough, our chef had uttered not one comment about Baroness Cherny's apple pie recipe, which Flora had taught me. It was so perfect that he'd reproduced it without changing anything. He'd made that apple pie for us on the day of the banquet as well as today, and Mina brought it to us cut into small pieces on a

cake dish.

The main reason so many sweets had been served during the banquet, even though the guest of honor had been a man and not a woman, was beet sugar. In recent years, it had become one of the duchy's local specialties.

If you thought of things in that way, Mikhail's words of appreciation were more or less the imperial family's seal of approval on this new local product. Maybe it was a discreet and elegant method of acknowledging our efforts and giving us an economic push. After all, producing sugar in the empire when it had long been an imported product had been one of our grandfather's biggest victories.

I might have been reading too far into this, but I had a feeling he could have done it with that exact goal in mind. This was Mikhail I was talking about. He wasn't just any sixteen-year-old kid.

That got me wondering how Alexei had interpreted the prince's gesture. *I should ask him later!*

Our group and the rest of the ladies chatted, enjoying the delicious snacks and the beauty of nature.

Since Flora and I were sitting with Adelina and Margarita, Novak eventually ended up becoming the topic of conversation. Though she sometimes treated him a little roughly, Adelina was still deeply in love with her husband. When I said that he was a great help in Alexei's office and that everyone relied on him, she rejoiced. Margarita forced a smile at her mother's enthusiastic reaction.

Seeing Adelina acting like a maiden in love reminded me of something I'd once heard: Sergei had played matchmaker for her and her husband at the upscale restaurant Alexei and I had eaten at in the capital.

"How nostalgic!" Adelina said when I mentioned it. "I will never be grateful enough to Duke Sergei. He was a kind, friendly, and very admirable man!" Her cheeks reddened as she turned to her daughter with a smile, "You know, back then your father was just as stern as he is now—and just as wonderful."

"Oh, aren't I glad to hear that," Margarita replied in a deadpan tone. She seemed used to—and tired of—hearing her mother go on

about how much she loved Margarita's father. In an attempt to change the topic, Margarita turned to Flora, who hadn't said much so far. "Lady Cherny, I heard your family also has ties with Duke Sergei."

"I'm surprised you know about that," Flora replied, her crystal clear purple eyes widening in surprise.

Flora's adoptive parents, Baron and Baroness Cherny, had been my grandfather's classmates at the Magic Academy. Sergei had helped them elope before their graduation. For some reason, Margarita was aware of that fact.

"You mentioned it at the garden party you had at the Yulnova residence in the capital, right?" Margarita said. "It was such a nice story! I received letters telling me all about it."

I had a feeling the topic had come up during that party, but...I didn't remember Flora saying anything about them eloping. We'd definitely talked about how the Chernys had been friends of my grandfather, though.

Margarita's information network is fearsome...

"As a vassal of Yulnova, I'm glad her ladyship has friends with fated connections to her house," she added.

"I'm glad to be her friend too," Flora replied, her cheeks flushing red. "I hope I can stay by her side forever."

Adelina's and Margarita's eyes shone. From that one sentence, they seemed to have pieced together that Flora's dream job was becoming my waiting maid. Truth be told, the waiting ladies of eminent noble ladies could hold considerable influence.

"You certainly are worthy of being by her side," Margarita said. "I do hope we will get along."

"Thank you. I'd like that. It'd be an honor," Flora said.

The mother-daughter duo and Flora looked at each other intently. I got the feeling a new alliance had been born.

From time to time, we could hear cheering and the hounds howling in the distance. The hunt seemed to be going well.

I hope Alexei won't get hurt... Ah, he must look wonderful riding through the woods on his black mount! I miss him already. Oh, I also hope the prince found one of those big-horned oxen he was

dying to hunt.

"My lady?"

The voice brought me out of my reverie. *Oops!*

"Do forgive me," I said. "I can't help but worry about my dear brother."

"The two of you truly are close."

The one who'd just spoken to me was Zoya, the widow.

Most of the other ladies were family members of the men participating in the hunt, but Zoya was a little different.

At first, Novalas's granddaughter had been planning to accompany the ladies to the valley. However, after learning at the banquet that I was nothing like Alexandra and wouldn't hold her horse riding against her, she'd changed her mind and decided to take part in the hunt. Margarita had suggested we invite Zoya to fill the gap.

When Zoya had come to greet me, I'd asked her to sit with us, and that was how she'd found herself at this table. The truth was, I had an ulterior motive.

"Tell me, Madam Zoya, what do you think of these?" I asked, pointing at the beautiful wooden tableware. This was part of the set Aurora had gifted me when I'd stayed with the people of the forest. The family Zoya had married into operated the greatest commercial firm in the duchy. The family had no peerage but a long history and considerable wealth. I expected her to be good at judging products.

"I'm still not so confident when it comes to appraising products, but..." Despite what she'd said, Zoya picked up one of the plates and inspected it thoroughly. "I think this is beautiful. Seems durable as well. However, the nobles of Yulnova are not fond of wooden tableware. Wood is easy to obtain, and the poor use such utensils. They have a dated image."

These were all good points, and I grew discouraged. "Ah, I see..."

"However...now might just be the chance to strike with such a product," Zoya said, the corners of her mouth curving upward. "The duchy's traditions are in the limelight because of the welcome banquet. While selling something old as it is won't catch on, a more polished take on an old idea just might. Something new that still

embodies tradition. Well, that's the impression I took from the banquet at least."

"In that case—"

"My late husband often said, 'Seize the moment.' Trends only become trends because a few people catch on early and ride the wave. You mustn't just watch. Involve yourself and foster the trend. If you do it well enough, it might grow beyond anything anyone could have expected."

"Am I to understand you'll help me promote this?" I asked excitedly.

Zoya's face stiffened. "I do have one reservation. Tableware only makes sense when you buy it as a set. There cannot be any defects or differences in size or shape between one plate and the next. Can the artisan who made these make hundreds more with perfect precision? That is an important point to consider before we can consider turning these into a product."

"You make a very good point..." I didn't think the people of the forest could handle mass production.

I should have checked with them how many sets they can produce and in how long... Once Forli was back and the matter of the volcano was settled, I'd need to ask him to get in touch with Aurora for me. *Urgh. I really have no way of contacting her directly myself.*

"I shall get back to you once I have an answer to your question," I said.

"I will be awaiting your summons, my lady."

Zoya seemed serious about taking care of the family's business until her son was old enough to inherit it. As a former corporate drone, I wanted to support working women. If this went well, I'd leave selling the people of the forest's wooden tableware to her.

But I want her to be careful not to overwork!

After the tea and sweets, we had a light lunch. Then, Flora and I decided to take a stroll.

"Please be careful, my lady. There are mischievous fairies in the area. They love to play tricks on people," Adelina said.

To be honest, her warning made me even more eager to go explore our surroundings. *Fairies?! Are we in* A Midsummer Night's Dream*?! I kind of* want *to stumble into one!*

Despite my curiosity, I vowed to be careful. What if I fell for one of their pranks and worried Alexei? That wouldn't do. Flora and I decided to remain where we could still see the waterfall so we could at least find our way back. The perfect maid as always, Mina followed a few steps behind us as we followed the path that ran next to the clear stream of water.

On each side of the path were wildflowers whose names I didn't know. The white ones seemed like some sort of wild roses, the blue ones looked similar to bellflowers, the orange ones were probably lilies, and the light-yellow ones resembled evening primroses.

"How pretty," Flora said. "The beauty here differs from a well-tended garden's."

"I agree. Their beauty is enhanced by their surroundings. Still, the flowers themselves are all lovely too— Oh, look! What a beautiful butterfly!"

Curious and beautiful things caught our attention one after the other, and we kept walking. Every few steps, I turned around to check if I could see the waterfall. After repeating that process a few times, I had a general sense of the distance, so I decided to try the path that led away from the stream when the trail forked.

"Look, Lady Ekaterina, mushrooms! What a cute pattern they have."

"Just like polka dots. Isn't that most curious?"

The mushrooms were red with white dots and had that slightly triangular shape everyone pictured when thinking of a mushroom. They looked right out of a classic fantasy story—the sort that you'd find decorating the garden of a small house occupied by seven dwarfs. The path we were following cut right through the neatly arranged line of mushrooms.

"Are these vivid red dots flowers?" I asked, pointing in the distance. "Or fruit?"

"I'm not sure. The color is very pretty, though."

Flora and I crossed over the line of mushrooms and approached the mysterious red dots.

"So they *are* fruit. So shiny and glossy... I've never seen anything like them," Flora said.

"M-Me neither. I-It's my first time seeing such fruit," I lied, staring at the countless little berries on the cluster of greenery.

Well, it wasn't exactly a lie. It was my first time seeing them in this life. In my previous life, however, I'd eaten *tons* of them.

Strawberries!!!

They were big and brightly colored, just like the strawberries that had taken the people of my past world years to produce through selective breeding. Considering they already looked like that in the wild, the natural size and color of strawberries were clearly enhanced in this world. Either way, they looked delicious.

As a former Japanese woman, I *loved* strawberries. Japan consumed more strawberries than any other country on Earth, and each prefecture had its own signature variety that it promoted heavily. I wasn't a strawberry expert, but as far as I knew, two varieties in particular—the tochiotome of Tochigi and the amaou of Fukuoka—were locked in a fierce strawberry war. At least, that was how I pictured their rivalry. All that to say, most Japanese people were big fans of the fruit!

Come to think of it, why is that?

I really wanted to pick up one and eat it, but...

Is it safe?

These were *wild* strawberries. Actually, maybe they weren't strawberries at all. Maybe they just *looked* similar. Just because they seemed delicious didn't mean they weren't toxic. They were practically radiating deliciousness, but the lady of a ducal house could hardly pick up random berries from a bush in the forest and eat them. It wouldn't be proper, now, would—

"Lady Ekaterina, these are so good!"

W-Wait, Flora!

"Lady Flora, that's dangerous!"

"Don't worry. Animals have been eating the ones closest to the

ground, so I don't think they're toxic."

"But—"

"Here, have one. They're ripe," Flora said, pushing a strawberry (working name) against my lips.

She tried one first to check their toxicity because I looked like I wanted one, didn't she? She shouldn't do such reckless things! But with Flora pressing that strawberry (working name) against my lips, I couldn't scold her for putting herself in danger! *Pretty girls really are something else. Even the way she forces me to keep quiet is cute.*

I opened my mouth and bit into the strawberry (working name).

Wow, it's so sweet! I think it's time to move on to "strawberry (definitive name)." These are just as juicy and tasty as in my past world. No, wait. My body isn't the same in this life, so maybe my sense of taste is different! I have a feeling they might be a little *less sweet.*

Regardless, this was the best fruit I'd had in this life.

"It was amazing." I picked out another dark-red ripe strawberry. "Here, Lady Flora, your turn."

I held it up for her with a mischievous grin, and she smiled before opening her mouth. Flora and I kept feeding each other strawberries and giggling for a while.

Oh! I should give Mina one too, I thought. I picked a strawberry and turned around to call her over, only to find that she wasn't there.

Huh?

"Mina?"

She didn't return despite my call. That was strange. Mina wasn't only a faithful maid; she doubled as my bodyguard, and she never left my side.

Startled, I looked toward the path we'd followed to get here. The waterfall was hidden by the tree, but I knew it was right there. Yet, no matter how closely I listened, I couldn't hear the sound of water.

"Lady Flora!" I panicked and grabbed Flora's hand, retracing our steps in a hurry.

However, when we reached the end of the thin trail and arrived

next to the water, we found ourselves facing a river. It wasn't the shallow stream from earlier but a large, deep river.

Damn, they got us!

"H-Huh? Where are we?" Flora asked.

"It looks like the fairies *did* play a trick on us."

I remembered something and turned around to search behind me. The mushrooms from before were nowhere to be seen.

That line of mushrooms must have been a fairy ring!

Fairy rings were supposed to be entryways to another world—the realm of the fairies. The fairies had gotten us good. I would never have stepped into a mushroom circle, but I hadn't thought much of it because it was just a straight line!

Were we really in the realm of the fairies? Were we stuck here forever?

Oh no... The strawberries!

Didn't they say that you couldn't ever go back if you ate food from the other world?! I was pretty sure that was a thing in both Greek *and* Japanese myths!

Wh-Wh-What do we do now?!

"Lady Ekaterina, can you hear it too?"

Flora squeezed my hand, finally bringing me out of my panic. I tried to listen carefully, and figured out what Flora was talking about. I could hear the howling of dogs and cheers.

We're on the hunting grounds!

In other words, this wasn't the realm of the fairies. We'd just been teleported a little bit farther ahead.

"It looks like we weren't brought too far away from where we were," I said.

Whew... I thought I wouldn't see my brother ever again. I would have died of loneliness, and what about him?! I have no idea what he'd have done after learning of my disappearance. Wipe out the fairies from the face of this world, most likely!

"What should we do?" Flora asked. "Follow the river?"

"No, let's wait here until someone rescues us. We don't know if the waterfall is upstream or downstream. I'm sure Mina will find us if we stay put."

Alexei's obsession with me seemed to have infected Mina as well, so I trusted she'd come looking for us. In the meantime, the heroine and the villainess would have to try their hand at a new genre: survival.

I'd always been an indoor kind of girl in my past life, so I didn't have much practical knowledge on how to survive in the mountains, but I knew some of the general ideas from the many news stories I'd heard about survivors being miraculously found after a shipwreck or another similar disaster. The first cardinal rule was that you shouldn't move from the place you first landed.

We hadn't exactly survived a shipwreck...but close enough.

Luckily, there was a body of water right next to us and sustenance in the form of strawberries.

While I was certain Mina would eventually find us, she couldn't rely on modern aids like GPS. That meant it could take some time, so our best bet was to stay put in a place we could hold out until she got to us. Besides, the riverside was an easy place to search.

Flora and I approached the edge of the water. Unlike the bank of the stream next to the waterfall, which was covered in beautiful flowers, the riverbank here was rocky. I took a better look and estimated it was about four to five meters wide. The opposite side seemed deep, while the water on our side was pretty shallow. With the rays of the sun shining upon it, the water was so clear that I could see not only the fish but their shadows on the riverbed.

"The water is beautiful," Flora said.

"It really is."

We might have seemed too relaxed considering our situation, but there was no use panicking. Since we were stuck here, we ought to enjoy this place as much as we could! And I had just the idea of what to do to take advantage of the fact that there wasn't anyone else around...

"Lady Flora, I'm about to suggest something quite improper...but it's something I have been wanting to try ever since I saw the magnificent water in this area."

"Oh? What might that be?"

"I'd like to dip my feet in the water."

We were at a *river*! Of course I wanted to play in the water! I knew that swimming or racing in the water was out of the question, but I could at least put my feet in the water, couldn't I?

As I was the lady of a ducal house, the answer to that question was that I actually couldn't. I looked in the distance and sighed.

I didn't know how Flora interpreted my sigh, but she suddenly started nodding in agreement.



I removed my shoes and my socks—or rather my stockings. Stockings were a thing in this world, but they weren't like pantyhose. They were the sort you had to keep in place with garters. Every time you had to put them on or remove them, you had to give a bit of a sexy show.

But who cares? No one's looking right now.

Speaking of garters, I'd learned a thing about them after regaining my memories in this world: They were originally for men! After giving it some thought, I remembered that in Medieval Europe, the ones wearing skin-tight socks had also been men. I'd seen plenty of paintings with men in puffy pants that looked like pumpkins wearing them. The history of fashion had followed similar developments in this world, and some of the ancestors of the Yulnova I'd seen in painting wore such outfits.

Now, while there were stockings here too, they were far from being as thin or elastic as in my previous world. However, the ones I wore were of the highest quality, which made them as similar to those of my past world as they got. They were far sturdier, though, and I'd barely ever gotten runs in them. Needless to say, they were *very* expensive.

From what I'd heard, stockings were made by monsters in another country. These monsters produced the thread and made the necessary fabric out of it. In my previous world, there was a monster that sometimes came up in games and the like: Arachne, a woman with the lower body of a spider. I imagined the stocking-making monsters looked something like that. Picturing monsters making

stockings was a bit silly, but in this world, plenty of monsters earned an honest living.

Flora was wearing the same stockings as mine. I'd made sure she got the accessories and underwear she'd need alongside the dresses I'd given her. I knew she'd never accept my gifts if she knew how much they cost, so the price was a secret.

The two of us lifted our skirts enough to unfasten our stockings from our garters and removed them. It was a little odd doing that in broad daylight, but what could we do? As soon as I was done, I pulled up the hem of my skirt and ran into the water.

"So cold!" I yelped.

Flora followed right behind me, and she also let out a little yelp when her feet came in contact with the water. The sun made the surface of the water glimmer as the two of us played and laughed, running around in the shallows.

"There are so many small fish!" Flora exclaimed.

"Ah, I felt something move! Oh my, is it a crab? Hmm, it looks more like a lobster?"

I stared at the little animal, which I thought might have been a crayfish. If push came to shove, this could be food.

Ah, but we can't eat that without cooking it, can we? We'd be consuming parasites...

The crayfish, or lobster, or whatever it was, seemed to read my thoughts, and it quickly retreated under a rock, fearing for its safety.

After playing our fill, Flora and I sat on a big rock on the riverbank to rest. The rock was perfectly positioned for us to have our soles barely touching the surface of the water. We'd gotten slightly cold in the water, and the warmth of the rock heated up by the sun was very pleasant.

The hems of our skirts were pretty wet, so we spread them across the rock as much as we could. Our calves showed—which was beyond improper in this world—but, once again, there wasn't anyone to see, so who cared? Neither Flora nor I had any qualms about exposing our pale legs to the warm rays of the sun and relaxing.

"I'm a little thankful to the fairies," I said. "I got scared when I

noticed we'd been transported someplace else out of the blue, but we would never have gotten to spend such a pleasant afternoon without them."

Flora smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. You...seem even more mature than usual here in the Yulnova Duchy. Of course, I think your efforts to behave like a strong, noble woman and prove yourself worthy of being the lady of your house are wonderful, but I was worried about you. I feared the summer vacation would end with you having spent *all* your time carrying out your duties."

Flora's kindness moved me. *What a sweet girl she is!*

"Thank you for your concern, Lady Flora. Although I'm not doing much compared to my brother or Prince Mikhail."

Yep! I was far from triumphing over the last boss of this life: the mighty flag of overwork that loomed over my dear brother. If anything, I lacked concentration and effort!

Flora looked at me gently. I could see resignation in her eyes. "You do not understand yourself, do you, Lady Ekaterina?"

What? I had a feeling Alexei had told me something along those lines too... *When was that again?*

I knit my brows as I tried to recall, but Flora laughed and stood up.

"I'll go get our shoes."

I was about to tell her to be careful when something else caught my eye. I'd seen something shine on the opposite shore, something...*golden*.

The huge animal in front of me resembled a water buffalo from my past life. It had black, coarse hair and looked ferocious. That had to be...

A big-horned ox with golden horns!

The large monster stared at me from beyond the river.

Our eyes met!

A shiver ran down my spine at the sight of its golden eyes tinged with red. I felt as though they shone with madness. It wasn't just its eyes. The entire beast seemed to radiate a dark, ominous miasma. It was too far for me to hear, but I could *see* its ragged breathing from the tremors of its large body. The theory that attributed the

golden color of the ox's horns to an illness and its viciousness to the pain it felt was starting to sound accurate to me.

The four or five meters that the river spanned suddenly felt like a very short distance. Especially considering the sheer size of the monster. It was far bigger than the one-eyed bear I'd helped the knights defeat the other day, and that bear had been about two hundred kilos. Somehow, the big-horned ox was much, much bigger!

It reminded me that I'd once read in a farming manga I liked that even light cows usually weighed at least five hundred kilos. Since this monster was far bigger, it could weigh over one ton for all I knew.

An article I'd read online popped into my mind. In the wild, the most dangerous animals weren't carnivores but large herbivores. For instance, it was well-known in Africa that hippopotamuses were much deadlier than lions. In Alaska, there were more deaths related to moose than bears...

Stop, brain! Now is not *the time to be remembering this stuff!*

I couldn't look away from its feral eyes. I was sure it'd come charging at me the second I looked away. It wouldn't care that the river was between us. In fact, I had no doubt it'd cross it in a matter of seconds. I didn't know where that certitude welled up from, but that was what my instincts were screaming at me.

I tried to glare at it to deter it while I pulled my feet out of the water. If I could get to the ground, with earth under my feet, maybe I could fight back. Right now, I was sitting on a big rock, and I had no control whatsoever over that type of earth. Besides, I had a feeling that if I focused on my mana, the ox would attack. The only way out was to back out slowly while keeping my eyes fixed on it. The first step to achieving that was standing up.

I lifted my knees slowly. I tried to move my upper body as little as possible while moving my feet onto the rock. My skirt slid to the side. My legs were probably completely visible now, but I didn't have time to worry about that. My hands were both firmly planted on the rock so I could keep my upper body stable.

I was in a completely unacceptable state of undress for a lady of my rank. The sort where I probably would have to consider killing

myself if anyone saw me. To do that, I'd first need to be alive in the first place, so it was no concern of mine. Besides, there was no one around to see me.

So I thought.

"Don't stop, that big-horned ox had golden horns! We can't let a vicious beast like that escape! Tell Alexei to have the beaters retreat —"

Wuh?

Out of reflex, my eyes darted in the direction of the voice, and met with a pair sky blue irises.

He'd seen *everything*. My posture, the position of my skirt— everything vanished from my mind, and I froze, utterly shocked. On the opposite shore, Mikhail froze too, unable to say another word.

I could see how utterly lost he was by the way he was staring at me. Under normal circumstances, the ever-tactful prince would have apologized and averted his eyes at once.

Yeah, avert your eyes! How long are you gonna stare at me?! You idiot! I screamed in my heart. What actually came out of my mouth, however, was a shrill scream.



Right at that moment, the monster bellowed. The gigantic ox (estimated weight: about one ton) slammed its hoof onto a rock, adding to the cacophony. The rock, roughly as big as what an adult could hold in their arms, split apart, and the big-horned ox turned its mad eyes toward Mikhail. Despite losing its sanity, the ox seemed to instinctively realize that Mikhail was here to hunt it.

The prince came back to his senses and turned to the monster. Then, he yelled in the direction of the forest behind him, "Don't come any closer, I found the big-horned ox! I'll take it down myself!"

At these words, the water of the river surged. All the water in sight was in Mikhail's control, and it cascaded over the ox.

Wh-Whoa! The prince means business!

With that much water, I was convinced the ox would soon be out of commission. The execution had been top-notch, from the quantity of water to the swiftness of his attack.

You really are amazing. I worried for a second with that vicious beast on the same shore as you, but you seem to be doing just fine.

Wait, now isn't the time to stand around gawking!

The prince had kept a wall of water up. I assumed this was his way of hiding me from everyone else's view. I put my skirt back in place in a hurry. That was important, but that wasn't the only thing I had to do. I raced off the rock right as Flora appeared. She came running to me with my shoes in her hand.

"Lady Ekaterina!"

"Lady Flora, a big-horned ox appeared! With golden horns!"

"What?!"

Flora seemed shocked. I assumed she'd heard it bellow, but even if she'd turned her head to look at it at that point, she wouldn't have seen it with Mikhail's water.

I'd felt as though time had stretched endlessly after I locked eyes with Mikhail, but the truth was that it had only lasted a few seconds.

"Prince Mikhail is fighting it," I continued. "Let us get away so we won't get in his way!"

"Understood!"

Flora and I took one another's hands and started escaping. As we did, the same thought kept going round and round in my head.

The prince... The prince saw my thighs! Ugh, he saw them... The prince totally saw my thighs...

Considering the angle, I doubted he'd seen more than that...but still. I was so mortified, I wanted to explode!

Flora and I reached the bush where the strawberries grew, and I put my hands against the trunk of a nearby tree like a monkey in repose. I'd already put back my stocking and my shoes.

How much did he see?

My knees had been closed, and my legs slightly angled. But my skirt had been up all the way to my hips, and the prince had seen me from the front-right diagonal, so...

But he was so far away. The river was four to five meters wide, and he hadn't been right across from me, so there'd been an even greater distance between us. *Still, he saw my thighs. He definitely did!*

It was okay, I told myself. The prince was a gentleman. He wouldn't tell a soul, so I didn't have to worry. Besides, in my previous world, people wore miniskirts, hotpants, and even bikinis without batting an eye. What were thighs in the grand scheme of things?

In this world... They had the potential to be a fatal mistake, considering my position. I'd never even worn a miniskirt myself in my past life, to be honest. I'd worn pantsuits to work and gone through life in jeans with zero sex appeal the rest of the time.

Aaaah, I'm so embarrassed... He saw my thighs...

I was trying to get my brain to stop hyperfocusing on the word "thighs," but the harder I tried, the more I thought about it.

"Lady Ekaterina, you don't need to worry that much. I'm sure Prince Mikhail will be fine. There is plenty of water around for him to use, so he'll be at an advantage. You've seen that incredible mana control of his, right?"

My little Flora, you're such an angel. She thought I was worried about the prince's safety. *I'm sorry, I'm just worried about my thighs. I'm a terrible person.*

"You're right, Lady Flora. I'm sure Prince Mikhail will triumph over the big-horned ox," I said, putting my noble lady mask back on.

To be honest, Mikhail's magic was so impressive that I wasn't the least bit worried about him—which was very coldhearted of me, considering he'd just saved my life.

That's right, I have to thank him. But to do that, I have to talk to him...and I'm too embarrassed to even look at him. Aah!!!

"L-Let's wait for things to calm down and return to the riverbank to ask for help," I said.

Flora nodded. She'd only just said, "All right," when another voice rang out.

"My lady!"

It was Mina, running toward us.

"Mina, you came!" I exclaimed.

"I'm sorry for leaving your side, my lady..." Mina said, pulling me into her arms with the expression of an angered yaksha on her face. She squeezed me tight.

"Hurts, that hurts," I whined. "Everything is all right. I never thought you'd find us that quickly. You're amazing, Mina." She'd found us in such a short time in a forest and with no GPS to help her. It was quite something.

Amazement aside, there was something weird in Mina's hand.

"Um, Mina, what is that in your hand?"

"The culprit," she said. "I was separated from you because of this darned fairy."

I figured.

I looked at the little being in Mina's grasp. With that size, I would have expected his bones to crack under the strength of my battle maid's grip, but he seemed fine.

The fairy was about twenty centimeters tall. He wore a gray clown outfit with a small bright green vest on top.

He looks like a fairy, all right, I thought, *only with the face of an old man. He reminds me of Chiisai-ojisan, the urban legend.*

When I'd heard there were "mischievous fairies" in the area, I'd pictured adorable, youthful little fairies, not *that*. The difference was hard to handle. Thinking that fairies were all cute had been a mistake on my part. Now that I thought about it, the cliché video game cannon fodder that goblins had become were also technically

fairies. There were even particularly heinous ones in old folklore, such as the redcaps that soaked their caps in the blood of their victims. In a way, maybe the urban legends weren't as horrible as their folklore counterparts.

"No! You got it all *wroooong*!" Chiisai-ojisan said, trying to wiggle out of Mina's hand. "These young ladies were cute, so I just wanted them to have a nice *snaaaack*! That's all!"

Oh, so the strawberries were *the snacks of the fairies. Hmm. Mr. Urban Legend sure has a very* unique *way of speaking.*

"You're also pretty, *miiiiiiiss*. So I wanted you to have a snack *tooooo*! I didn't intend on separating *youuuuuu*— Urgh!"

"You can't believe a word he says, my lady. Fairies are liars," Mina said, crushing the fairy in her fist. "He was brimming with malice earlier. He tried to entice you into the realm of fairies and have you eat something so you'd be stuck there forever. The only reason he didn't succeed is that I caught him. That's why you ended up there, next to that bush that escaped the fairy realm."

So these strawberries...were originally from the fairy realm?!



In other words, the selective breeding of my past world had reached a level where it produced food that surpassed the limitations of the human realm? Now that was astonishing!

On another note, Flora and I had avoided catastrophe by a hair's breadth. In this world too, eating something in another realm was a no-no.

"So that's what happened... Thank you, Mina. Without you, I don't know what would have happened."

"Please wait for me for a moment. I'll go attach a rock to him and drown him in the deepest part of the river. Don't worry, I won't be long."

"*Noooooo!!!*" the fairy screamed at Mina's death sentence. "I haven't done anything *wroooooong*! I just wanted them to stay pretty! I'm *niiiiice*!"

Do you realize you just confessed to your crimes? I imagined that if humans wandered into the fairy realm, they stopped aging. There were myths like that in my past world too.

"Our realm is *fuuuun*! You can eat when you like, sleep when you like, wear thin clothes, and dance, and *siiiiing*!"

The "thin clothes" part seemed like an odd addition to the list, while the rest seemed to be more or less in line with the lyrics of the theme song for a famous anime with a certain GeGeGe yokai. In my past life, it would have sounded like a dream. However, in this life...I wasn't that woman anymore! I was a dedicated Alexei fangirl.

"You tried to take me to a world where my brother isn't. How impudent," I said coldly.

Mina and Flora nodded.

"Since we're all in agreement, I shall go drown him," the former concluded.

"*Noooooo!!!*" the fairy started screaming as soon as Mina took her first step. "Forgive me, *miiiiiiiiiss*, I'll give you anything you want! I'll do anything you want, so please save *meeeee*! I'll give you tons of *snaaaacks*! I don't want to be in the water. I hate *fiiiiiiish*!"

Mr. Urban Legend burst into tears. Seeing him cry like that, even though he looked like an old man, was very unsettling.

"Can you swear you'll never try to transport humans to another

realm again?" I asked.

"I swear! I swear *iiiiiit*!"

There's no point in bullying him any more than that, is there? Actually, hang on a minute.

"Those fruits were delicious. Will you truly give me a lot? I'd like to let my brother taste them."

"Of course, anything for a pretty lady devoted to her *familyyyyyy*. I'll give you a basket full of *theeeeem*!"

I'd give Mikhail some as well, then—with my heartfelt thanks.

Oh, I have an idea to hasten my little tableware project.

"You said you'd do anything. Can you go to the people of the forest on my behalf?"

"The people of the *fooooorest*? They have a lot of pretty girls so I like *theeeem*. The emperor bees scare me, so I can't get close, but I'm happy to run your errand for you right this *mooooooment*!"

Nice, I now had a way of contacting Aurora directly. I'd ask her to sell me as many tableware sets as possible and to start making new ones. If producing a large number proved difficult, I could suggest having an artisan of the Northern Capital make them based on their design. The people of the forest could receive payment for their right to the design, and we'd be able to start mass production.

Wait, are design rights a thing in the empire? I'll need to get in touch with our legal advisor, Daniil.

"And may I get seeds and seedlings of this fruit?"

"*Seeeeeds*? They sometimes start sprouting when the fruits get too *riiiiiipe*. No one likes those, so I can give them to *youuuuu*!"

Perfect. I'd offer them to Forli and let our forestry and agriculture advisor do his thing. Before long, the duchy would have a new product to export.

"My lady, do you truly intend on releasing him?" Mina asked, glaring at the fairy as though she were looking at a piece of trash. "Fairies lie. Even if he's telling you he won't, he *will* do it again."

"But we can't *actually* drown him either now, can we?" I said.

"Why not?" Mina seemed dead serious.

Oops, I forgot my beautiful maid's tendency to enter psycho mode.

“M-Mina, the fruit we had earlier was really incredible. I wanted you to try some too.” I picked a strawberry for her in a hurry and held it up in front of her mouth. “Here, please have a try.”

Mina looked at the strawberry in silence before opening her mouth and eating it. “It’s...sweet.”

“And tasty, right? I’m sure my brother would be overjoyed if we could turn this into one of the products of our duchy. But to do so, we need the fairy’s help.”

Said fairy was grinning as he watched us. “You’re all so *cuuuute*! There aren’t many girls as pretty as *youuuu*! Don’t worry, I promise I won’t try to bring other girls to our *reaaaaalm*!”

“I don’t trust him, but if that is what you want, I’ll do as you wish, my lady,” Mina said.

The way she put it reminded me of how Alexei always told me everything would be as I wished it. I was sure of it: She’d been infected by the Alexei virus.

The hunting tournament came to an early conclusion, with the participants having taken down an impressive number of prey. They retired to the garden of the Yulnovas’ secondary residence and enjoyed light snacks and drinks as they recovered from the fatigue of the hunt. Everyone’s excitement had yet to come down, and they shared stories of their feats with pride. The women who’d been taking leisurely strolls in the valley soon joined them and showered them in praise.

“What a splendid hunt! There has seldom been one with so much game caught in recent years, has there?”

“The gods must have given us their blessing. I knew that gods descended upon the duchy whenever His Grace visited the Mountain Sanctuary, but I heard *three* of them descended to see her ladyship when she went on the pilgrimage. I hope this keeps up for a very long time.”

While the guests chatted, the results of the hunt were being drafted out on paper. Before long, papers started going up with

details about the animals next to the name of the person who'd taken them down.

In the past, the game was brought to the garden and prepared in front of the guests. The participants would excitedly point at the ones they'd killed and argue over whose prey would turn out to be tastiest. When Ekaterina had heard of this practice, she'd had to stop herself from vomiting. However, after giving it some thought, she'd realized that there'd been equivalents in her past world too. People picked out fish alive from tanks, went to see tuna cutting shows, or ate sashimi prepared from live fish in front of their eyes.

Regardless of her feelings on the matter, the times had also changed in this world, and preparing game in front of the guests had stopped being the norm. However, as the name suggested, a hunting tournament was a *competition*, so people needed to know who had hunted what. That was why these papers with every detail regarding the game—including the size and a defining feature of each animal—were put up. The servants in charge of compiling this list did not rank anything, but those who'd caught the most impressive game would receive compliments from the other guests.

The papers caught everyone's interest as soon as they were put up. Two items on that list, in particular, were the center of attention. The first was the Silver-Branched Great Stag—one of Alexei's prey.

Normally, antlers fell at the beginning of spring and grew back every year. However, for an unknown reason, the leaders of the herds of an endemic species of stag in the Yulnova Duchy never lost their antlers. The horns simply kept growing year after year, creating intricate patterns. The antlers eventually grew much larger than those of the other stags in their herd, making them stand out in a regal way. These antlers also had a practical use, as they allowed the leader stags to protect the females and fawns from the demonic beasts of the Yulnova forests.

These everlasting antlers were called four-season antlers. As time passed, they gradually turned silver. The longer a male maintained its status as the leader of a herd, the longer it kept its four-season antlers and the more silver they were. Those whose antlers appeared silver enough were called Silver-Branched Great Stag.

Silver-Branched Great Stags were highly intelligent and boasted impressive musculature. However, by the time their antlers started emitting a silver glow, their disproportionate size slowed them down. It was a telltale sign their time as leader of the herd was drawing to a close.

Despite that, Silver-Branched Great Stags were hardened fighters, and they often attacked humans who tried to hunt them down. They were dangerous targets—and the dream opponent of a lot of hunters. It was only natural that the mention of one on the list would garner the admiration of the guests.

The second impressive catch of the day was the big-horned ox with golden horns that Prince Mikhail had killed. That one sparked more than mere admiration. Some people had even sneaked out to the back of the residence where all the game had been gathered in the hopes of catching a glance of it. Big-horned oxen with golden horns were so rare that they'd feared they'd never get to see one in their lifetimes if they'd missed that opportunity.

"Congratulations," Alexei said. "I believe I told you to leave it to someone else, though, if you stumbled into one."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help myself when I saw my heart's desire in front of my eyes. My immaturity shone through, and I apologize for that," Mikhail replied with a smile. He looked around. "Speaking of which, I haven't seen Ekaterina yet."

"Her ladyship is changing. The hem of her dress got wet because of the tall grass in the forest," Adelina said.

As one of the many ladies who cheered on Ekaterina and Mikhail's love, she hoped she'd be back as quickly as possible so she could compliment him on his impressive catch.

As timing would have it, that was exactly when Flora and Ekaterina arrived.

"Here she comes, Your Highness," Adelina said breezily. Mikhail's attention immediately shifted to the two young ladies. Adelina let out a pleased "Oh my..."

Ekaterina and Flora were both wearing white draped dresses that made them look like ancient, elegant statues from days even before the Astra Empire. Their dresses were made out of several pieces of

draped fabric. Each layer of cloth was thin and slightly transparent, but the many layers made it so that no part was see-through except for the sleeves. Still, their outfits certainly caught the eye. Their hair was also tied up in a traditional way, and delicate circlets decorated with white flowers crowned their heads.

Both of them held large bowls in their hands. They were carved from wood and complemented their antique-looking outfits, turning them into visions from the past. On top of the wooden material, the bowls had a unique oval shape that resembled a seashell. On each side of the bowls, delicately carved ivy leaves served as handles. Inside the bowls were mountains of peculiar red fruits.

The two beauties, walking slowly toward the crowd, were like two goddesses who'd just stepped out of an ancient myth. Everyone fell under their charm.



Looks like we got their attention! I struck a victory pose in my heart.

When the fairy had brought us "cute, thin clothes" on top of the promised strawberries, I'd been at a loss for a few moments, but my Japanese anti-waste mindset had kicked in, and I'd figured this was a good chance to promote our duchy's upcoming product. The clothes *were* beautiful.

I wasn't sure why, but when the fairy came back, he was on the verge of tears, and he gifted us circlets, bracelets, and a bunch of other accessories on top of the clothes. He'd even bowed to me while saying, "I didn't know you had such a scary *frieeeeeend*! I'll give you anything you want, so forgive me, *miiiiiiiss*."

I had no idea who my "scary friend" was, and I'd wanted to ask, but the fairy had disappeared as soon as I'd handed him the letter I'd written for Aurora with an "I'm *oooooff*!"

Now that I gave it some thought, there were only two people he could have been referring to: the Dragon King or the God of Death. I didn't know which, but one of them was probably watching over me and had scolded the old man fairy on my behalf.

I hope they didn't see my thighs...

Urgh, now wasn't the time to worry about that. I had to focus on promoting my product. I could think about the thighs debacle another day!

I walked up to Mikhail, hoping the soft smile on my face concealed the ridiculous thoughts I was having at the moment.

"Prince Mikhail, congratulations on your stupendous catch," I said.

"Thank you, Ekaterina."

Adelina, who was standing near him, smiled when she saw Mikhail starting to blush, but I was overcome by the impulse to strike him with a paper fan in true manzai fashion.

Don't you dare blush! You're thinking of my thighs, aren't you?!

"It looks like you've brought us something rather unusual? What are these?" he asked.

Ah. Sorry about that thought. You're good, Prince.

I hadn't expected the person I was itching to hit to help me promote my new products, so I repented privately.

"I've received these fruits from a fairy," I said. "Since they're a gift from an old fairy, I decided to use these traditional wooden bowls of Yulnova to display them. Please, try one, Prince Mikhail."

"From a fairy? That's quite something. These fruits must be very precious, then. Thank you for offering me one."

I held out the bowl to Mikhail, and he picked up a strawberry and ate it. His eyes widened in surprise. "It's good... Very good. Sweet yet refreshing. I've never had anything quite like it."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"That bowl is beautiful too. It has an antique, elegant look to it. The traditions of this duchy hold many delightful surprises."

"Well, what kind words! You honor us, Prince Mikhail," I said.

This was the perfect pitch to promote sales. Thank you, Prince! You nailed this! I smiled, but when my eyes met Mikhail's, my expression faltered. *How much did he see...? I still need to thank him in private for what he did for me when I get the chance, so I can ask him then. But I don't know if I can bring myself to say it...*

Little did I know that Adelina and the other ladies were bubbling with excitement as they watched Mikhail and me, seemingly lost in

one another's eyes.

Flora was quicker than I to notice that everyone's interest had shifted to the bowls of strawberries at Mikhail's comment, and she started going around, offering some to everyone. I threw her a grateful glance and approached Alexei.

"Please have one, brother."

Alexei smiled at me fondly. "You got these from a fairy?"

"Yes, I met him next to the waterfall."

"It appears my dearest sister has once again enthralled a surprising being," he said. His tone was peculiar—almost sad. He brought his hand to my cheek. "Humans are normally bewitched by demons and fairies, but you charm even them."

Yeah, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but this isn't a case of me charming anyone. Mina just caught a weird Chiisai-ojisan with a penchant for stalking young ladies.

"I only wish for you to stay by my side, but your brilliance is such that I fear you may leave me to fly with your own wings before I know it. Please, take pity upon me, my goddess. You offer me such beautiful things, yet my affection for you grows so fierce that I find myself wanting to lock you away from the world."

"Oh my... Brother!"

I suspected Alexei's rose-tinted filter was getting darker by the day. *Has it been upgraded to a polarized light filter? That's pretty high-spec!*

I was joking, but the truth was Alexei's attachment to me always made me happy.

"My only wish is to stay by your side as well," I reassured him. "I couldn't bear to leave you. Instead of locking me away, I suggest you bind me with a chain and keep hold of the end of it. That way we'll always be linked, brother."

Alexei showed me a broad smile. "So, you'd forgive even these unreasonable whims of mine."

"There's nothing to forgive. I know you care for me more than anyone else ever could." Since Alexei wouldn't so much as look at them, I picked out a strawberry for him and held it out in front of his mouth. "They're delicious, I promise. Do try one, brother."

Alexei seemed embarrassed—a rare occurrence—but he obediently opened his mouth.



"I had a feeling it would end up this way..." I heard Mikhail mumble.

Prince, I know you always feel the need to compete with Alexei's flowery words, but that set was a tad odd, so I don't think you should try to copy them.

Unbeknownst to me, the older ladies in attendance were watching us interact, unsure how to interpret what had just happened. Luckily for them, an unexpected development soon rekindled their excitement, and they vowed to work together to distract Alexei so that their duke wouldn't spoil their fun again.

After Flora and I were done giving strawberries to everybody, Mikhail excused himself and left for the rear garden on his own. Right before he left, he made eye contact with me. I waited for a few moments before discreetly following him.

Unlike the flawlessly polished garden of the Yulnova Fortress, the small rear garden of this residence emphasized natural beauty in the style of a traditional English garden. There were rosemary shrubs with their slender leaves, pale pink oregano flowers, delicate fennel, and many other plants here and there, each forming their own little cluster and releasing invigorating fragrances into the air.

Mikhail was standing in front of a cluster of vibrant indigo-blue sage plants. He turned around and smiled at me.

"Ekaterina."

I hurried to his side. There wasn't anyone but us in the rear garden, not even Mina, who was waiting by the entrance. She'd seen Mikhail's attendant, Lucas, waiting there, and had stopped next to him. They seemed to share some sort of understanding.

"Prince Mikhail, earlier, you—" I was about to thank him for saving me from the big-horned ox, but Mikhail raised his hand to stop me.

"I'm sorry for interrupting you, but there is something I want to ask. Do you mind if I go first?"

"N-No, of course not." I braced myself. What did he mean to ask? What I'd been doing there? Or why had I been in a state of undress?

I'll have you know I didn't wish for it either! I ended up there because of the fairy, and I was in that weird position since I was

trying to back away from the big-horned ox without breaking eye contact. None of it was my fault!

Now, explaining all of that to him would prove a little challenging.

I was playing a simulation of the question he might ask and the ways I might respond in my head when Mikhail spoke up. "It's about the moment I found the big-horned ox. I...think I might have seen an undine on the riverbank at the same time."

Huh? What? Sorry?

At the moment, you found the big-horned ox? On the riverbank? What you saw was me, though?

"The undine was sitting on a large rock on the opposite bank," he added.

Yes, yes, sitting on a rock. That was me, indeed. What's going on...?

"So, what I wanted to ask you is: Have you ever heard something about a water spirit living in that river? I thought you might know more."

So, in other words...you're trying to help me out by pretending you didn't see me at all? Is that it? Are you really proposing we pretend it was a water spirit all along?

I stared at him, dumbfounded, and Mikhail gazed back at me, his sky-blue eyes serene.

"Prince Mikhail..."

Prince, you're...such a good guy!!!

I was so moved that I wanted to cry. I'd messed up in a way that could cost a noble lady her entire future. If the wrong person had seen me, I could have been blackmailed or worse! At the very least, I would likely have become a laughingstock, with no hope of ever getting over the embarrassment I caused my entire family.

Of course, I knew that the prince wasn't one to do something like that, but I'd expected him to tell me *something* along the lines of *I'll pretend I didn't see you* or *We can just say it was a spirit*, not to actually keep up the charade in front of me. That was so thoughtful of him. I was stunned. There couldn't be many sixteen-year-olds with this level of consideration. Forget high schoolers, there weren't many adults who'd even think of that.

Thank you so much, Prince. I can hardly believe what a kind, considerate man you are. I'm so sorry I ever thought of hitting you with a paper fan. That was mean!

"I, um, do not know anything about a water spirit living in that river," I said after a long pause. "But if you saw it, I'm sure there must be one."

"I'm positive I saw one." Mikhail nodded. His cheeks flushed red once more. "In fact, the undine I saw...was very beautiful."

Oh. Wow. Hang on! W-Wait a minute. My cheeks are burning. I thought I'd gotten used to praise because of my brother's endless soliloquies, but somehow this...this feels completely different! Aah, I don't know what to say. What should I do?!

The prince was a force to be reckoned with, getting me, an almost thirty-year-old, to blush like that.

That reminds me...you're more or less the personification of my doom flag, aren't you?! That must be why I'm so bothered by it. I covered my bright red face with my hands and tried to escape reality by focusing on the flags.

"Ekaterina, can I ask you something else about water spirits? Not about the one I saw."

"Y-Yes. I'll do my best to answer your question," I replied, lifting my face.

"There are statues of undines in the Yulnova Fortress's bathrooms, right? After seeing the one in the bathroom I use, I asked the butler about it. He said there was another just like it in the wing where you live. I thought it looked like you...but the statue clearly wasn't brand-new, nor was it very old, so..." Mikhail paused to think, as though he was trying to choose his words carefully. "It got me wondering if Duke Aleksandr, your father, might have had them installed. While I haven't seen it personally, I'm assuming the bathroom of the wing that is only used when an imperial princess marries into the family—the one my grandaunt used, I mean, doesn't have a water spirit statue at all. Or perhaps one with another face..."

I was speechless. Flora had also pointed out the resemblance between the statue and me. And if it resembled me, it resembled my

mother too.

While our grandfather was duke, the old hag and our father lived in the Yulnova Fortress. If the statues had indeed been changed at that time, our father would have been the one to decide on their shape. I brought my hand to my mouth, shocked.

I'd never considered the possibility, but...had our father secretly missed our mother? Since she'd lived in the northeastern wing, the old hag would never have used another bathroom, so he *could* have hidden statues in his wife's image where she wouldn't see.

Nevertheless, I didn't want to accept that. Was it supposed to be some sort of heartwarming story? If he actually cared about her, why couldn't he have lived with her? Why couldn't he have so much as *visited* her? Our mother had kept waiting for him and loving him. She'd kept loving him so much that she'd mistaken Alexei for him at the very end.

"I'm sorry. It looks like I spoke out of turn."

I raised my face in a hurry at the sound of Mikhail's voice. "N-No. It's just that...I don't know when those statues were installed...but I believe the butler should know. I'll check with him."

"You don't need to do that. It's not that important. Please forget about it."

"No, I..."

I could tell that Mikhail had picked this topic because he knew it'd have an impact and make me forget about the other thing I was freaking out about.

How mature can you be?! I take my hat off to you, Prince.

"Prince Mikhail, you're a truly insightful person. Even among our elders who have had years to consider the intricacies of human relationships, few attain this level of consideration and discernment. I must say, I'm truly impressed. You were born with exceptional qualities."

A Japanese proverb said that genius showed from childhood, and I had no doubt it had proven true in Mikhail's case. He must have been an exceptional child.

However, Mikhail laughed. "I wish I could agree, but that couldn't be further away from the truth. I'm sure Alexei remembers. I was an

arrogant, insufferable brat."

"I don't believe you!" I was sure he was just saying that to be modest. I couldn't picture Mikhail in that way at all.

Mikhail looked down. "It's the truth. I'm mortified when I think back on these days, but I was convinced I was the most important person in the world. Ah, except for my parents and grandfather, of course. Let's just say I grew up too pampered and it showed."

Surprise took over my features for a moment. When I stopped to consider what he'd just said, I reconsidered my earlier stance.

As the only son of the then crown prince, everyone knew he'd eventually sit on the throne. Putting it like that was awful, but as an only child, he didn't even have any brothers that could be used as spares—he was one of a kind. It was no wonder people treated him like glass. Who would dare scold him?

If anything, the fact that he'd grown out of being an insufferable brat at the young age of sixteen despite his background was commendable. At the end of the day, he was still a child. It wouldn't have been strange for him to throw his authority around and act high-and-mighty just because he could.

"Even when other children came to the palace to learn alongside me, I did whatever I pleased. Despite their age, the other children understood our positions and always obeyed my every whim. No one ever dared try to beat me at anything—studies, swordplay, even games."

"I see... Well, I suppose that couldn't have been avoided, considering the circumstances."

Noble children usually started getting lessons from private tutors at around five, so I imagined Mikhail was talking about when he was five or six. In my previous world, that'd be barely old enough to start primary school. At that age, kids were selfish, even if they weren't princes.

"The only one who didn't act that way around me was Alexei."

"My!" I exclaimed, my eyes sparkling at the mention of my brother.

Mikhail smiled awkwardly. "Alexei never went easy on me. He's two years older, so I could never come close to beating him at

anything. I'd never known defeat before, and I still remember crying in frustration the first time it happened. The attendants and the other children all panicked, but Alexei looked down on me coldly...and gave me my first scolding."

Yeah, that's Alexei for you.

Come to think of it, Mikhail had once told me Alexei's preaching was dreadful. My brother had only ever scolded me once, but it had been impactful enough to get me, a grown woman, to droop my head in defeat.

Poor Mikhail had to withstand that as a six-year-old! I thought he had a very mature reaction to coming in third place at the academy, but he used to whine and cry when he lost, huh? Well, I suppose he's only like that now because *of his past.*

This conversation made me think of Alexei as a child. He was adorable at ten in that portrait with our grandfather. I supposed he'd become one of the prince's playmates before that, when he was even younger, and Mikhail was five or six... Heh heh, the little prince must have been positively adorable too! He'd kept bad memories of that time because he'd bawled after losing to Alexei, but it must have been such a cute scene for those who'd watched from the outside.

"Did you hate my brother back then?" I asked.

Mikhail laughed. "It depended on the day. Sometimes I did, and sometimes I didn't. He already had a unique charm back then, in that aloof way of his. There were times I didn't even want to see his face, but at the same time, I was desperate to get him to approve of me. One thing's for sure, I saw him differently than anyone else. I think I just wanted to be his friend. But Alexei's always refused to let go of the notion that I'm his future lord, and he my vassal..."

Mikhail stopped talking and let out a small sigh.

I'm sorry, Prince. My brother's just like that—a true-blue original tsundere. You're doomed to only ever see his cold tsun side if you aren't his chosen person. It sounded like Alexei had always been this way.

"But one day, Alexei showed up pulling Vladimir by the hand. He'd gotten lost and kept crying, but Alexei was incredibly soft with

him."

There comes the chosen person! The one who gets to experience Alexei's dere side!

Alexei's type really was someone he felt like he had to protect. I could see why the prince had never unlocked that side of him.

In truth, maybe it's for the best. Imagine if Alexei's ridiculous rose-tinted filter applied to his emperor? He'd become the craziest vassal of all time!

"The way he treated him was completely different from the way he treated me, so I sulked. I remember throwing a tantrum and going, 'But *I'm* the prince! *I'm* the most important person here!'"

That's too cute! I so want to see little Mikhail crying and screaming, "But I'm the prince!"

I let out a small laugh, so I hid my mouth with my hands in a hurry.

"Vladimir was especially brilliant, so I could never win against him when it came to academic achievements. To be fair, even back then, he knew so much he could put most adults to shame. While he was sickly, he was also very kind, and he tried to mediate between Alexei and me. It's thanks to him that Alexei and I finally started getting along."

"So that's how it went..."

If Mikhail had managed to get along with these two, he must have been a very bright child. I actually doubted his story about all the other kids letting him win. I suspected the truth was that no one except for Alexei and Vladimir *could* have won.

I was sure the emperor and empress used to watch over them and look forward to their bright future.

"But then...Duke Sergei passed away," Mikhail said, his tone changing.

I started.

"And Alexei and Vladimir stopped coming to see me," he continued. "After Duke Sergei's funeral, Alexei started spending all of his time in the duchy. As for Vladimir, he fell terribly ill. Neither of them could have done things any differently, I know that. But even when I finally got to see them again, they were both so down.

Vladimir in particular has never been the same."

There was a sad smile on Mikhail's face as he reminisced.

Alexei had had no choice, back then. The old hag had taken full control over the House of Yulnova, while he'd worked tirelessly to preserve what he could and do the work of the head of the house, all alone.

Wait a minute.

Vladimir was a Yulmagna. Did he have any idea that the people of his house had been embezzling ridiculous amounts of money from the Yulnova? No, he had been nine. He couldn't have known, could he? But why would he have changed so much, then?

I stopped that train of thought for now and smiled at Mikhail.

"You must have been very lonely."

"I was... But I suppose that period made me grow up. My father told me something back then—that we were destined to loneliness."

By "we," he likely meant those who were to inherit the throne. My chest ached, and I cast my eyes downward.

The loneliness of an emperor... I couldn't even imagine it.

Let's assume that Mikhail had a friend. They'd end up getting privileged treatment and benefits in some way, even if they didn't wish for any of that. Then, people would undoubtedly appear and try to cozy up to them in the hope of getting something in return. Eventually, that friend would give in to corruption. If that happened, he might have to punish his friend with his own two hands. Power was a poison that was difficult to ignore.

Even if the friend resisted corruption, what use could they be to Mikhail? After he inherited the throne and his every word could sway the empire, who could help him carry his burden? Whatever others said or did, history would only retain one name to bear the consequences—Mikhail's own.

What can I say to him? The only thing I could think of was...

"You said you were destined to be lonely," I said, looking him in the eyes. "While that may be true, and loneliness may be awaiting you...it hasn't caught up with you yet, has it? After all, we're still classmates. We're free to study side by side, are we not?"

You're not emperor yet, Mikhail. You're still a student, and you

get to enjoy yourself like one. You're still sixteen. In the eyes of an old lady like me, you're still a child. Besides, I don't think you need to think quite so deeply about your childhood friendships.

When you were in school, you made friends, had fun with them, and created tons of memories. But people's paths diverged afterward, and you'd find yourself with fewer and fewer occasions to see them. That was normal, and it didn't mean you had to give up on making friends altogether because you might have to distance yourself from them in the future.

After staring at me in confusion for a while, Mikhail smiled. "Thank you. I'm glad I have a friend like you."

Huh? Oh no.

N-Not me! I'm sorry, but I kind of have a predestined fate of my own as the villainess, so the two of us being close isn't exactly ideal for me. In fact, I should stay as far away from you as I can.

Truth be told, my anti-flags measures had been in tatters for ages, and I thought of Mikhail as a good friend too. But when he put it into words so clearly, I just... I... Instead of putting more distance between the two of us, I'd ended up feeling like I had to become his best friend to fill in the gap Vladimir and my brother had left.

Well, at least I'd become more or less certain that this world was not the world of the game, but rather the world that had inspired the game. I had a feeling our lives had progressed in a completely different direction from the game's. Despite that, a monster had still appeared in the middle of the imperial capital just like in the game, so I remained terrified.

As opposing thoughts raced in my mind, Mikhail smiled once more. He looked delighted. "The summer vacation will end soon, but I hope you'll agree to chat with me again, just like this, at the academy." He paused before adding, "There aren't many people I can discuss such topics with."

Uuuuuugh! What kind of monster would I need to be to say no to that?!

"I-If my brother approves," I said.

Trump card: Ask my brother.

Mikhail tilted his head to the side. He looked a little sad.

Argh, why do you have to look like that dog peering into the horn of a wind-up gramophone?! That HMV trademark's ingrained in my brain. I can't handle puppies. Stop, okay? I'll do anything you want, so please, smile!

I was starting to panic when Mikhail whispered, "I guess this is it."

I barely had the time to wonder, *What is?* before someone called out, "My lady!"

Turning myself around, I saw Ivan running toward us. I'd never seen him so out of breath.

"Ivan? What's wrong?"

"His Grace is looking for you. He couldn't find you, so he started worrying."

"Oh my!"

Oops! I hadn't realized so much time had passed! Somewhere, though, I was relieved we'd been interrupted.

"I'm so sorry for causing you such trouble," I said. Then I noticed something odd. "Ivan, your hair is a mess."

"Yes, I...had a bit of an encounter with an ill-natured fox." He combed through his hair with his fingers, a look of annoyance on his face.

A...fox? I looked around but couldn't see any. Instead, I noticed someone else's appearance was in disarray.

"Oh dear, Lucas, your jacket." The sleeves of Mikhail's attendant, Lucas, were torn and dirty at the hem.



Had the fox done that too? But hadn't he been standing by the entrance of the rear garden with Mina?

"Are you hurt?" I asked Lucas. "You should have a doctor take a look."

"Thank you for your concern, my lady. This is just damage to my clothes. I'm fine," Lucas replied with a smile. As always, his eyes appeared as narrow as pieces of thread.

Ivan glared at him.

"I'm sorry for taking up so much of your time, Ekaterina." Mikhail said. "Let's go back." He offered me his right arm, and I forgot everything that had just happened.

Th-Th-The prince...escorting me? Am I gonna be okay? Are the flags going to come back to haunt me?!

I couldn't very well refuse, though! It'd be bad manners. Besides, considering everything we'd talked about, it'd be terribly mean.

All right, let's do this. Remember, Ekaterina: Your partner is a puppy!

After jumping through the hoops of escapism, I put my left hand over Mikhail's arm.



The garden party that followed the hunt ended before the sky darkened entirely.

The bellies of the guests were full—the meat of the big-horned ox that melted on the tongue had been especially popular—and they left, happy and sated.

Ekaterina, Alexei, Mikhail, and Flora walked back inside the secondary residence where they'd be spending another night. They hurried to their rooms for a well-deserved rest.

As soon as he entered the room that had been assigned to him, Mikhail let out a deep sigh. He turned to his attendant and smiled.

"I made you work hard earlier."

Lucas lowered his head. "I'm sorry I couldn't buy you any more time. The Yulnovas can't be underestimated. They keep...fearsome beasts. He'd have knocked me out in a matter of seconds if he had

tried.”

Lucas smiled, his thin eyes narrowing further. These eyes, along with his slender frame, gave him the air of a fox. Fox spirits dwelled in the empire. They held bewitching powers and could take on the appearance of humans and have children with them.

“Frontal assaults aren’t your thing. Don’t worry, that was plenty for today.”

“Did you make any progress?” Lucas asked, brimming with curiosity.

Mikhail’s expression soured slightly. “She called me her friend.”

“Modest progress, then.”

“She used to look at me like I was a worm. I’d say her seeing me as a fellow human is a big step forward.”

Lucas sighed. “So many other ladies worship you, Your Highness.”

“I know that, but I can’t help it. I like *her*.” After a long pause, he said softly, “I’m in love with Ekaterina.”

Mikhail dragged himself to his bed and let himself fall back onto the mattress. He pressed his hands against his face.

“Love really makes it hard to control oneself... Ah, I can’t even keep a straight face anymore,” he whined.

“To think the day would come when I’d see *you* in this state.” Despite the teasing words, Lucas’s tone was gentle. “You used to show the same distant kindness to every young lady, no matter how pretty, yet here you are. Is Lady Ekaterina truly that special?”

Mikhail started pondering over it. In a matter of seconds, a strained grin appeared on his face.

“Words have no shape either, but don’t you think they still fall short compared to feelings?” he mused. “I’ve tried to put what I like about her into words before—she’s kind, smart, beautiful... But I feel like doing so just makes her seem ordinary. Whenever I try to put my feelings into words, they just come out sounding hollow or cliché. But Ekaterina is...” Mikhail paused, struggling for what to say. In the end, he could only come up with two words: “Strange *and* cute.”

While Ekaterina’s beauty was oddly mature, she was cute on the inside.

Mikhail had seen her for the first time on the day of the entrance ceremony. After Alexei's address as the representative of the current students, Mikhail had taken to the stage as the representative of the freshmen.

He'd first noticed Ekaterina right before doing so, when he'd been waiting in the wings of the stage. A beauty with indigo-blue hair had been sitting in the first row. Her color and seat had been enough for him to figure out that she must have been the young lady of the House of Yulnova. Back then, she'd radiated grace and looked almost like an adult, yet she'd seemed anxious. The moment her eyes had met her brother's, however, her face had bloomed into a smile. She'd happily waved at him, and her smile had been completely free of pretense—an unrestrained, radiant burst of joy.

Mikhail hadn't fallen in love then and there. At the time, he'd simply thought she had a cute side. However, every time he met her, she'd shown him more of her cute and peculiar sides, and with every new one, he'd fallen a bit deeper.

At first glance, Ekaterina was the perfect noble lady. Every one of her gestures was oozing with elegance, and her every word was refined. Yet she'd become close friends with Flora, a commoner-born girl from a baron's house, learned cooking from her, and taken to bringing Alexei lunch every day.

She also had no idea how to guard herself like any high-born noble would. The first time the two of them had exchanged words was on a lunch break. When he'd approached her, she'd flinched like she'd just seen some hairy caterpillar crawling her way. She had offered him a taste of the food and asked Flora to give him one of the buns she'd made. Mikhail had accepted it, figuring showing others he was close to Flora would establish her standing at the academy.

Then, he'd asked for one of Ekaterina's. As a member of the imperial family, he had no choice. He had to show that he wasn't giving preferential treatment to one person only. He had to treat his subjects equally. This was especially crucial considering he was talking with unmarried young ladies.

Ekaterina's reaction, however, couldn't have been further from

that of a noble lady of her rank. As someone who'd have to show her own vassals the same consideration, she should have understood what he'd been doing, but she hadn't seemed to grasp it in the slightest. She'd simply assumed he was hungry and had opened her basket for him with the warm smile of an older sister.

She was a little cheeky like that. Mikhail hadn't been able to stop himself from thinking that was adorable.

The next time she'd made a strong impression on him had been when they'd fought that monster together.

"Facing it alone was reckless, but it's thanks to you that no one got hurt. It was commendable."

When he'd told her that, tears had welled in Ekaterina's eyes. Moments before, she'd sunk to the ground with Flora before jumping into Alexei's arms to cry her eyes out like a baby.

Mikhail had been taken aback by the gap between that Ekaterina and the one who'd valiantly stood up to the monster while showing her tremendous talent for mana control. Had she been trembling in fear the entire time? Despite that, she hadn't run away and had kept fighting by his and Alexei's side. Mikhail had found her so precious then that he'd taken her hands in his before he could stop himself.

Ekaterina was popular at the academy. Her captivating figure was a common topic of discussion among the boys. Whenever Mikhail heard anyone breathe a word about it, he made sure to insert himself into the conversation by asking, "What are you guys talking about?" with a smile. The prince's appearance always brought such topics to a close. He knew that, and he did it intentionally.

Her form, reminiscent of a water spirit's, came back to him, and Mikhail shook his head in an attempt to chase the thoughts.

Her skin was so pale... No, stop thinking about it!

Mikhail had expected as much, but her popularity in the duchy was just as high. Although Alexei seemed to be doing a splendid job at keeping potential suitors away. Ekaterina's obvious lack of awareness about her own charms worried Mikhail to no end.

Her lack of awareness extended beyond that. Ekaterina had no

idea how to control information. From the conversation they'd had earlier that day about the statues, Mikhail had been able to confirm that Ekaterina hadn't grown up in the Yulnovas' main residence, and that the one who'd made it so was his grandaunt—Ekaterina and Alexei's own grandmother, Alexandra.

From the way she'd acted, Mikhail could tell that not only had she not grown up in the main residence, she also hadn't been taught the ways of high society. Rumors of Alexandra persecuting her daughter-in-law and granddaughter often floated around in high society. Mikhail now knew them to be true.

To be fair, he'd always hated Alexandra. She'd spoken ill of his mother whenever he'd seen her and had always been cold with Alexei. There truly hadn't been anything to like about her. Even though she'd married into a ducal house and thus left the imperial family, she'd brandished her authority as an imperial princess every chance she'd gotten. Despite that, she'd never fulfilled her duties. She'd been the very example of what a member of the imperial family should *not* be like.

For all her flaws, Alexandra *had* retained a use. By marrying the man the previous emperor trusted most, Duke Sergei, she'd made him the previous emperor's brother-in-law—an almost member of the imperial family. His grandfather had even referred to Sergei as "my older brother Sergei" in informal settings. All that had helped Sergei increase his authority and push for innovative policies. Though with Alexandra's hatred for reform and traditions, the husband and wife had never gotten along well.

Despite the environment she'd grown up in, Ekaterina was cheerful and kind. She lacked awareness, but she was astonishingly smart. She'd taken first place after the first examination at the academy and had discussed trade with Mikhail's mother during the imperial visit with such ease and insight that Magdalena had taken a liking to her. The glass pens she'd invented also showed how ingenious she was.

When the results of the first examination had been put up, Ekaterina had said, *"Prince Mikhail, I'm most impressed by your willingness to confront the heavy burden that rests upon your*

shoulders."

With each passing day, these words steeped deeper into Mikhail's chest. Few truly understood the weight of the crown, especially among people their age. She belonged to a ducal house but hadn't been raised as a high-born lady. Somehow, he had the feeling she pictured the burden he carried far more clearly than any other.

Mikhail's hunch had turned to certitude today. At the mention of the word "loneliness," she'd looked terribly pained. She'd seemed to contemplate the deep loneliness of an emperor very seriously.

She hadn't pretended to understand his feelings. She'd given it as much thought as she could and had come up with the only answer she could give in earnest. And she'd done so with such kindness.

When the time comes for me to ascend the throne...if only a woman like her could be by my side.

Mikhail didn't understand *how* Ekaterina could be the way she was. It was the greatest mystery he'd ever stumbled upon.

His parents—the emperor and the empress—both seemed quite fond of her. As such, getting the imperial family to send a formal proposal to the House of Yulnova for Ekaterina's hand would be easy. But Mikhail didn't want that. He wanted Ekaterina to come to like him on her own.

As Mikhail was the heir to the throne, this was a luxury he normally couldn't have asked for. However, his parents were a love match. His father had spent his three years at the academy relentlessly pursuing his mother until she'd agreed to marry him. That was why they supported him fully.

There was much scrutiny on Mikhail, and everyone was eager to find out who would be chosen as his future wife. With his visit to the Yulnova Duchy, rumors about Ekaterina being the likeliest winner had already started to emerge, and there wasn't anything Mikhail could do about it. Not even the imperial family could prohibit gossip.

Since he couldn't get rid of the rumors, Mikhail had decided to embrace them. If he made the imperial family's interest in her clear, she'd get special treatment as Mikhail's potential fiancée. Hopefully, this would protect her.

While he made no efforts to hide his feelings for her, Ekaterina

seemed entirely clueless about them anyway. For all her wisdom, this seemed to be another area in which she desperately lacked awareness. Sometimes, Mikhail wanted to tell her how he felt directly, but he had a hunch she'd just panic and run away. She was almost like a rabbit. If that happened, Alexei would happily hide her away, and he would never get another shot.

Mikhail actually doubted Alexei had any intention of letting her marry in the first place.

She was stuck to Alexei's side almost all the time, so Mikhail believed she wasn't in love with anyone yet. He didn't know why she'd been so startled by him at the start, but she didn't seem to hate him.

I have to get closer to her slowly until I can catch her. Though, can I really avoid duking it out with Alexei?

When I'm emperor, I'll work him to the bone as payback!

Just like his grandfather and Sergei, Mikhail intended to give Alexei an important position and rely on his help during his rule. Alexei would be right there, with Mikhail and his empress. Even if he allowed Alexei to rise to the highest rank there was, Mikhail fully trusted Alexei wouldn't abuse the power.

Alexei wasn't a selfish man—unless it involved Ekaterina. To keep her safe, he'd do absolutely anything. As far as Mikhail was concerned, that was perfect! He didn't want Ekaterina to fix her shortcomings. In fact, he wanted her to stay just the way she was. His mother, Magdalena, had been criticized many times because her speech and conduct didn't match that of an empress. She hadn't given in and had worked to improve the empire in her own way.

The emperor was destined to be lonely. But if there could be a future in which the three of them supported one another and ruled over the empire, then...

If that happens, Alexei and I will keep fighting for Ekaterina's attention forever, won't we?

"Your Highness, here is your change of clothes."

Roused from his thoughts by his attendant's voice, Mikhail sat up. "Thanks."

Chapter 4: Return to the Capital

After waking up in the morning, Flora and I went to the Yulnova Fortress's kennel. The hounds gathered around us as soon as we arrived. Most of them had participated in the hunt the other day, and they still seemed in particularly good spirits because of the mountain of treats they'd earned.

The one exception was Regina. She usually came up to me the moment she saw me, but today she refused to even get up. Her head was on the ground, resting between her paws. She raised her big golden eyes to me. Her sad gaze seemed to ask, *Are you leaving?*

"Regina," I said, walking up to her and petting her head gently. "You already figured out we're going back to the capital, didn't you?"

The events I'd scheduled for the prince's visit were over, and with the end of the summer vacation drawing near, Alexei and I also had to return to the academy. To simplify things, we'd decided to travel with Mikhail and Flora on the way back. Today was the day of our departure.

"You're my dear friend, so I wanted to see you before I left, Regina. I wish you could accompany us, but the capital is too warm for you. Brother and I will be back next year. Can I count on you to protect me once more when we do?"

Regina, who'd been listening quietly, lifted her head and let out a small howl as though to agree. Then, she stood up and rubbed her head against me. A moment later, she walked to her mate, Rex, who was sprawled in front of Flora, and stomped on him mercilessly.



It was already time to depart.

Two carriages bearing the crest of our ducal house were parked

in front of the main entrance of the fortress, awaiting me, Alexei, and our noble guests. Most of the servants, as well as the knights who'd escorted us, were standing in line to see us off.

"Thank you for your warm welcome, everyone," Mikhail told them.

At these words, the people forming the neatly ordered lines all bowed in unison. There were so many people doing it at once that it looked like some sort of human wave.

"I'm leaving the fortress to you," Alexei said. "I trust you will take good care of it."

This time, Raisa, the servant who was standing closest to Alexei, was the only one to bow deeply.

"Thank you, Your Grace, my lady. I swear to fulfil the important duty you've given me to the best of my abilities."

This should have been Novalas's place, but he'd finally retired, and Raisa had been appointed as his successor. Having a woman as the butler of the main residence was a rare occurrence, even in the long four hundred years of the House of Yulnova's existence.

While it was true that Novalas had retired, he hadn't exactly made that choice of his own volition. He'd once again insisted that he be allowed to see us off as his "last act of service" to our house. While everyone had been wondering how many lasts he'd asked for already, Alexei had replied with a curt "I thank you for your services up until now," closing the matter for good.

During our father's rule, another housekeeper had been brought in to the fortress and had played a key role in the embezzlement of huge amounts of money. While Novalas hadn't been an active participant in this mess, he'd turned a blind eye to it and never intervened. Even when Alexei had returned to the duchy alone while Aleksandr and Alexandra remained in the imperial capital, Novalas had never tried to assist him. The weather vane had never expected our father to pass away so early, and thus he never turned to Alexei —not until it was too late.

He hadn't done anything bad enough for Alexei to fire him outright, but he had incurred his displeasure over the years. Everyone agreed that he'd long reached the age for retirement, so

his being "encouraged" to do so was acceptable.

At long last, the Phoenix Weathervane would stop rising from the ashes.

That said, his tenacity to have held on to his job at his age was remarkable. He was full of vitality, and I expected him to stay alive and kicking for *many* more years. People actually doubted the man could die at all.

When I'd heard that Novalas had finally retired, I'd been the one to push for Raisa to take his place. Alexei had been surprised at first, but he'd readily agreed. This time, I knew that he hadn't done so just to make me happy. As the head of the house, he genuinely thought she was the most qualified person for the job.

Besides, while it was rare, it wasn't the first time a woman had become the Yulnovas' butler. Although, to be perfectly accurate, most of those instances had been housekeepers doubling as butlers after the sudden death of the previous butler. Still, the precedents showed one thing: While the housekeepers of noble families were almost exclusively women, their duties and knowledge were vast enough that they were qualified to take on the role of butler.

Raisa had already been shouldering a good chunk of Novalas's work, and she was a great talent recognized by our grandfather. She had no ties to any of the branch families but had deep connections to the Order of Yulnova and its endlessly loyal knights. No matter how you looked at it, she was the perfect candidate, even if Alexei had warned me there might be complications when we'd discussed it.



"There will be opposition to a woman butler. At first, we will stay in line with the precedents and have her serve concurrently as housekeeper and butler," Alexei said. "Then, when the time is right, I shall appoint her in an official capacity. Does that sound reasonable?"

"Yes, brother," I agreed. "Thank you for your consideration. I'm sure Raisa will find it easier to start working this way."

"While she'll hold both positions for the time being, I doubt she'll have the time to fulfil her duties as housekeeper. I must find her replacement."

"I may have an idea," I replied with a smile. "Novalas's...great-granddaughter, I believe, is a dependable and levelheaded woman. From what I hear, she has been supporting him in his work for quite some time. She's also on good terms with Raisa and is a close friend of Count Novak's daughter, Lady Margarita. She's married too, so she's left House Novalas already."

I tilted my head to the side and pretended to ponder it. "While you may be seen as weak if you appoint a member of House Novalas so soon after they've earned your ire, we must also consider that House Novalas is a close and long-standing vassal of House Yulnova. If you're too strict, the balance of power in the duchy could grow unstable. Choosing a woman with Novalas blood, but who now belongs to another family, may be the most appropriate way to handle this situation."

Alexei laughed. "Choosing the housekeeper is the prerogative of the lady of the house, so do as you please, Ekaterina. Those who fear me will surely realize that House Novalas is treading on thin ice and was only spared because of your mercy. Ah, my dear Ekaterina, this beautiful head of yours seems to be a wellspring of wisdom." He let out a deep sigh. "Now that I give it more thought, Raisa is the obvious choice. I was so caught up in finding the right *man* for the job that I didn't see it. I'm sure grandfather would have chosen her without hesitation. Your way of thinking truly is the same as his."

"All I can do is have ideas," I said, looking up at Alexei. "The only reason we're able to carry them out is because you seized control over the duchy so swiftly. *You* are grandfather's true successor, and no one else. I know that for a fact."

Alexei took my hand in his and kissed the tip of my fingers.

"Ekaterina, my sweet sister... How can you always be so humble and innocent? Your voice flows through my soul and cleanses it like a clear stream."

How powerful could Alexei's rose-colored filter even get?



"I'm glad you'll be the one protecting this place in my brother's absence," I told Raisa before we left. "I'm sure our grandfather is just as happy about it."

Raisa was always so professional, but when I mentioned Sergei, her voice caught in her throat, and she had to compose herself.

"Such kind words..." she finally replied.

The little servant girl from a poor village now stood in the highest position a servant could occupy, all because Sergei had seen something in her. She schooled her expression and waved at the gatekeeper. Slowly, the gate of the fortress opened. I could hear cheers from beyond the gate. The people of the northern capital, our subjects, were packed in front of the fortress to catch a glimpse of us and Mikhail before we returned to the capital.

"I pray for your safe travel," Raisa said.

All the servants bowed respectfully, and we boarded our respective carriages.

"His Grace departs!" Rosen exclaimed.

The carriages set out, accompanied by the melody of the horns of the order.



This really was a packed vacation.

On the first night of the journey, I sat alone in the room rented for me. Mina had already retired for the night, and I'd turned off the lights. I was gazing up at the night sky through the window.

We'd stayed in this same residence on the way to the northern capital. It belonged to the lord of a small territory, and he'd happily welcomed the four of us. In fact, the round-faced old lord had trembled with emotion at our arrival.

Just like on the inbound trip, I'd spent most of my time in the carriage waving my hand at the people watching our procession. This time, however, there were many more people cheering for us because of Mikhail's presence. Honestly, I respected him for being

used to such things.

I had no idea at the time that another reason the cheering was more enthusiastic this time was because my popularity had skyrocketed in the duchy.

So much happened...

When I'd first arrived in the duchy, I'd felt nostalgic because of the smell of the wind and the color of the sky, though I'd also felt like I'd been traveling abroad because the area looked so much like the pictures of Switzerland and northern Europe I'd seen in my past life.

I was now used to the scenery of the duchy: the buildings that mixed stone, wood, and bricks; the beautiful townscapes where refinement and rustic charm coexisted in harmony; the people of the duchy, who waved and smiled at me every time I went out. As the lady of the House of Yulnova and the younger sister of their duke, I had become used to waving back. Still, whenever I thought about it a bit too deeply, I got embarrassed.

I'm so sorry this fake old office worker in disguise is waving at you.

After we'd reached the fortress, I'd seen the remnants of the old regime that opposed my brother, led by Novadain, waiting for us. I'd even met the duchy's local villainess, Kira.

Except my brother destroyed them all with ease at the banquet, heh heh.

Actually, I shouldn't say "with ease."

Alexei and his allies had spent a lot of time and effort gathering information and preparing for the showdown. That was the only reason everything had gone so smoothly on the night of the banquet.

Alexei is the coolest in the world!

As a result, House Novadain had been stripped of its peerage and assets, and the local villainess had ended up becoming a commoner.

That's what happens to villainesses who stand out...without fail. I shuddered at the thought.

I had some sympathy for her, as a fellow villainess, so I'd actually found her a job.

I'd struggled at first to come up with something a fifteen-year-old former noble girl with no experience could do. Becoming a private tutor was kind of the go-to for cultured fallen nobles with a firm grasp of etiquette, but for someone like Kira, I figured that'd be...a challenge. In this world, the first thing most people would've thought of was getting her to marry. She was the right age for it, but with the Novadain name having been thoroughly dragged through the mud, that hadn't been an option either. In the end, I'd settled on her becoming a maid. At least she had an idea of how that job worked.

I'd expected as much, but Kira hadn't exactly been on board at first. That said, she had no other prospects, so she'd ultimately accepted. She'd traded her sausage curls for more practical braids and now worked at our legal advisor Daniil's house. While she complained a lot, she apparently was a hardworking maid.

She really doesn't like losing.

Hearing about how she was doing as a maid reassured me. If I lost my status, I could also become a maid and earn enough to support Alexei.

Thanks for giving me hope, Kira.

After the entire Novadain controversy, I'd left on my first pilgrimage to the Mountain Sanctuary. Now, that journey had been very, *very* eventful. I'd stayed with the people of the forest, met Selene the Maiden of Death *and* the God of Death, met Granduncle Isaac for the first time, seen three gods at the sanctuary, and even received a divine message about an upcoming eruption.

Speaking of that, Forli had returned from his inspection at the volcano. We'd managed to hear his report right before we left for the capital.

The people of the neighboring villages had been noticing signs such as smoke and tremors, and they were starting to feel anxious about it. If you compared the frequency of these signs to past records, it didn't seem like the eruption would happen right away, but we didn't have years to prepare either.

Aaron had gotten started on rehabilitating the worn-out accommodations around the old mine as fast as possible so the

villagers could move there. Leaving your entire life behind was a difficult thing to do, but since a god had been the one to warn us about the eruption, most people had agreed to do so.

At the moment, Forli was in the middle of deciding what to have them do after they moved. He was debating between assigning the villagers work in the mine or having them help with our afforestation plans since they knew the mountains well. He would take their input into account. Once the final decision was made, he'd leave the rest of the planning to the relevant departments.

After receiving that divine message, I'd hurried back to the Yulnova Fortress, only to run into the otome game's final boss—the Dragon King, Vladforen.

My most vivid impression of our encounter was still his peerless beauty. In his human form, he'd been so gorgeous that I couldn't even remember his exact features. In the early days of the Hollywood movie industry, directors had put a stocking over the camera to make actresses prettier, and my memories were putting a similar filter over his face. Not to make him prettier, though, but because my mind was incapable of reproducing such beauty faithfully without relying on tricks.

Still, I'm kind of impressed that my memory can play these tricks in the first place. My brain could direct a movie!

For all Vladforen's beauty in his human form, his dragon form had somehow been cooler. He'd looked exactly like a fantasy story dragon, and he'd been *huge*! I thought my jumbo jet comparison was still spot on. If you looked at a jumbo jet from right under it, you would be blown away by its size. The best part was that, unlike a jet, Vladforen was a living being! He'd exuded almost as much strength as the gods, and his wings had even flapped. It was hard to put it into words, but it'd been really awesome—like witnessing the grandeur of nature.

And this incredible guy had told me the craziest thing. He'd asked if I'd...be his...

No, I can't. I'm gonna freeze again.

I couldn't even think about it. Besides, the one I adored was my brother, and I was happy dedicating my entire life to him! I clenched

my fists. I'd marry whoever was convenient for him, and that'd be it. In fact, it'd be easier that way...

"Ekaterina."

I was staring into the distance when I heard a beautiful sound outside my window—a bass (or bass-baritone), melodious voice.

I gasped and looked around for the source. The night sky of this world was completely incomparable to the ever-illuminated night sky of Tokyo. Here, night was truly dark; the stars and moon were the only sources of light. Maybe that was why the moon felt infinitely brighter here than it had in my previous world.

My gaze was drawn to the silhouette of a bird of prey rising in the moonlight. Its eyes glowed red.

"D-Dragon King...?" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet.

I threw a shawl over my negligee and opened the large window. The black bird of prey had settled on the exterior frame. I barely had the time to get a look at it before it disappeared—and Vladforen appeared in his human form! He crossed his long legs and sat elegantly on the window frame.

"It's been a while," he said with a smile, his fiery eyes gazing at me.

"I-I-It has, indeed," I answered reflexively before coming back to my senses.

While Vladforen was sitting on the window frame, he was facing toward me, so he basically had one foot *in* my room. This was the middle of the night, and a man was stepping inside my room—a lethal scandal for an unmarried noble lady.

Uh-oh, trouble's afoot!

Now's not the time for jokes, girl! He's close—too close!

"It's an honor to receive your visit, but...a man entering the bedchamber of a woman at this hour is against our customs," I said.

"I figured as much," Vladforen replied calmly. "But I wanted to speak with you."

I made eye contact with him without meaning to and immediately averted my eyes.

Aaaah, he's just as handsome as last time! I can't look him in the eyes. It's too much.

"My domain stops at the edge of the Great Northern Forest, and you'll be out of it before long. I wanted to see you and hear your voice before you left. However, I knew it'd cause an uproar if I showed myself in front of others."

That was a fair point. I could only imagine the mess if he appeared while the prince *and* my brother were both there. That said, this was still a terrible situation in its own right!

"I appreciate your concern. However, if anyone were to see us right now, my reputation would be in shambles. I'd disgrace my house. I can't bear to think of how sad my brother would be if that happened."

Actually, I was pretty sure Alexei would challenge the Dragon King to a duel then and there. The duchy would be in for a localized ice age.

I was so busy worrying about Alexei that I completely forgot about the risks—beyond scandal—of a man barging into my room in the middle of the night. To be fair, I'd pulled so many all-nighters alone with men (colleagues) working in locked rooms (server rooms) during my years as a systems engineer that I was completely desensitized to it.

"As always, your first thoughts go to your brother," Vladforen said.

"Of course they do!"

Vladforen laughed and backed up. "I wouldn't want your guards to intrude, so I've erased my presence. And I'll appear as a bird to anyone who might look this way, so your honor is safe. Don't worry. Still, I don't want to go against your wishes. *This* is fine, right? I'm not in your room anymore."

I looked down at his feet and saw he wasn't standing on the window frame—he was floating midair! The first time I'd seen his human form, he'd also been standing in the air like this. I still had no clue how that worked. Actually, I was just as confused about the fact that other people would see him as a bird. What was the trick behind that?!

Vladforen narrowed his crimson eyes and let out a soft chuckle. "I've seen human men call out to the women they love through their windows before. It seems I've become rather humanlike."

No, good sir, humans don't float in the air, I thought. The thing about windows and lovers did ring a bell, though. But I couldn't recall... *Oh, right! It's* Romeo and Juliet*!*

But during that scene, Juliet was on a balcony. There was no balcony here. And that wasn't the only difference.

I'm gonna freeze if I let my mind go in this direction. Do not think of the partner thing, Ekaterina. Do not!

Even with all the consideration Vladforen was showing me, this was still an awkward situation for a noble lady. However, I could tell he was doing his best to account for our...*cultural* differences. He could have kidnapped me if he wanted to. I couldn't just tell him to go away—I owed him more courtesy than that.

When someone shows you consideration, you should return the favor, right? Besides, there was something I wanted to check...

"You didn't take me away without checking my availability first, so I suppose that's a big step toward becoming a gentleman," I said, trying to sound playful.

Vladforen looked at me with a surprisingly serious expression. "I do not care about becoming a gentleman, but I don't want to do things that would make you unhappy. You are special to me."

I'm really going to freeze if you keep this up. Please stop.

Vladforen couldn't hear my inner cry, but his expression shifted nonetheless. "That doesn't matter right now, anyway. There is something I must tell you."

"What is it?" I asked, tilting my head.

"You need to be more cautious. How could you let a mere fairy deceive you?"

Touché. But, hey, it wasn't my fault!

"So you were the one who scolded that fairy on my behalf!"

"Indeed. I made it clear the next time he trifled with you, I'd toss him into a seething volcano."

I-I see. That explains why the Chiisai-ojisan was so freaked out when he came back. Being thrown into lava likely meant instant death, even for an urban legend. *Wait, I knew it! The Dragon King saw it all. That means he must have seen my thighs too!!!*

"I also told him to follow your orders. Fairies are not evil by any

means, but they do not possess a shred of sincerity either. Never release one based on a mere promise again."

"Back then, my maid wanted to drown him in the river. I was just looking for a way to prevent that," I protested, looking at the floor.

Seriously, though, sticking rocks to an old man and drowning him... I'd have nightmares about that! That sort of scene was straight out of a Showa-era yakuza movie.

Using him to contact the people of the forest and obtain strawberries had been the only idea I'd had at the time. It wasn't like I'd really been counting on him. Even if he'd fled without upholding his end of the bargain, I wouldn't have lost anything. Back in my corporate drone days, my motto had been "Use anyone who's still standing—even if they're the devil himself!" That was because I'd been under pressure all the time, cleaning up messy projects going up in flames. These days, I didn't have any reason to go that far.

"You barely avoided getting stuck in the fairy realm. With your carelessness, he'd have gotten you on his next attempt," Vladforen said.

He hit where it hurt. Mina's quick thinking had saved us at the last minute, but Flora and I *had* almost ended up in the fairy realm. I couldn't deny that I'd messed up. I had a feeling I was just like the average Japanese tourist visiting an unsafe foreign country. I'd been so used to Japan being peaceful and orderly that I'd walked around with my wallet sticking out of my bag without a second thought. I shouldn't! As a young woman, I had to be a little more on my guard. I clenched my fists (in my mind) and swore to do better.

"Thank you for warning me. I cannot afford to be taken to a world where my brother isn't, and I shall endeavor never to let anything of the sort happen again!"

"That's good...but what energized you so suddenly?"

My sudden bout of peppiness confused Vladforen, but before I could say more, someone knocked on the door.

"Lady Ekaterina, are you still awake?"

Flora's voice startled me so badly that I stopped moving.

Oh no! I spoke too loudly for this time of night. Flora was in the

room right next to mine, so it was no wonder she'd heard me. I even had the window open! *What should I do?!*

Despite my panicking, Vladforen looked perfectly composed. "Calm down. I told you other people will only see me as a bird."

In others' eyes, I'd look like I was talking to a bird... *Am I a fairy-tale princess or what?*

"Is that the girl who's always with you these days?" he asked.

"Yes, that's my good friend Lady Flora. She has holy mana."

Vladforen let out an interested "Oh?"

His reaction jogged my memories. *He's got a deep connection with saints who have holy mana... Wait, how could I forget?*

Everything that happened during the summer vacation had been so far removed from the original scenario of the game that I'd completely stopped thinking about it, but the Dragon King was supposed to be a dateable character. In other words, he was one of Flora's potential love interests! I hadn't played that route, but I was pretty sure this wasn't how they were supposed to meet in the game. Regardless, maybe she'd hop onto his route if they did meet...or maybe she'd gotten on his route the moment she'd stepped foot in the duchy!

Flora didn't seem to be on the prince's route anyway. *Or maybe she is and she's not aware of her feelings yet?*

There was no way I could tell if that was the case, but I figured her meeting Vladforen could only be good. Right?

Well, if I didn't seize this opportunity to have them meet, I'd keep overthinking it later. Jumping into things was sometimes the easiest way to preserve one's mental health.

But it's the middle of the night. I'm sure Flora's only wearing a negligee right now! That wouldn't do. I couldn't let the purehearted heroine of an otome game meet a man in such a state. *Big sister won't let that happen, my little Flora.*

I was so busy torturing myself in my own head that I took too long to answer Flora. Just like that, my time was up. She hesitantly pushed the door open.

"Ah! You *are* up. I'm sorry for bothering you so late," she said, poking her head through the gap of the door. She bowed her head

as she apologized.

I channeled my best noble lady energy and showed her a gentle, composed smile. “Lady Flora, what brings you here at this hour?”

“I heard your voice, and I got worried that something might have happened to you, so I...”

“Lady Flora...”

I’m so moved. She was worried for me, huh? That’s so sweet!

“Thank you for your concern. As you can see, there is no cause for worry.”

I was still debating whether I should have the heroine meet her potential suitor or not, and my tone came out uncertain. Flora seemed to think it was strange, and she looked around my room intently. Finally, she noticed Vladforen right outside the window.

“Lady Ekaterina, don’t you find it strange that such a large bird would be there so late at night?”

“I-It is most curious, indeed.”

Phew. She really sees him as a bird.

Flora didn’t seem to notice my relief, and she kept staring at the “bird.” Suddenly, she gasped and dashed into my room, exclaiming, “Lady Ekaterina! That isn’t a bird!”

She put herself between Vladforen and me, and I felt mana well up within her.

“Lady Flora!”

I couldn’t stop her in time, and a flash of light erupted from her body. The light wrapped itself around Vladforen.

It was the same holy spell she’d used to repel the monster that had appeared at the academy. At the time, Alexei, Mikhail, and I fighting together hadn’t amounted to anything, but the monster had disappeared immediately when Flora’s light hit it. Back then, she didn’t understand her own mana, but she’d spent her time since diligently studying and honing her control. Her holy mana was now much stronger. Yet Vladforen easily flicked away her burst of light, and it vanished into the darkness of the night.

As far as I was concerned, nothing had changed. Vladforen was still right there, floating outside the window. Flora, however, looked flabbergasted.

"A...human?!"

Ah. She can see his human form now, huh? It looked like Flora's mana had gotten rid of the trick he had been using to make himself appear as a bird.

Vladforen stared at Flora. Then, he glided through the air and landed softly inside my room. Flora backed up a few steps, but she still made sure I was behind her.

"She certainly is a saint," Vladforen whispered. "And one of rare talent, it seems. She's an unpolished gemstone, but her potential shines through."

Despite the awkward situation, I couldn't stop myself from smugly agreeing. "She really is, isn't she?"

Still, Flora was only in her negligee. I felt bad for her, so I wrapped my shawl around her shoulders. While doing so, I ended up more or less hugging her from behind.

"L-L-Lady Ekaterina?" Flora stammered.

I patted her flushed shoulders and looked at Vladforen sternly. "I know you mean no harm, but staring at a young lady who isn't fully dressed is terribly rude per our standards. My precious friend is embarrassed. Please, I ask that you take your leave for tonight."

A strained smile appeared on Vladforen's gorgeous face, and he hummed. "My interest was piqued, and I acted rudely for it. Forgive me. My apologies to you as well, Miss Saint."

Flora seemed taken aback by the polite apology. "What?"

"But considering things have come to this, don't you think I should greet them appropriately?" Vladforen asked, looking at the door behind me.

I was about to ask what he meant when I noticed the silent residence had become *very* noisy.

Oh no, Flora used her mana earlier!

Mana holders could feel when others used mana in their vicinity. Flora's mana was powerful enough for the Dragon King to call her a rare talent. In other words, every mana holder in the residence would have felt it go off!

I paled as I heard footsteps in the corridor. They were approaching fast. Unsurprisingly enough, the first person to barge

into my room was Alexei.

"Ekaterina!"

That was quick! As expected of you, brother!

"My lady!"

Mina and Ivan arrived at the same time, right after him. They'd been super fast too! Now wasn't the time to think about such things, but I was really growing more and more convinced Alexei had infected them.

Alexei didn't waste any time dawdling by the door. Just like Flora had, he put himself between Flora and me and faced Vladforen. Mina and Ivan reinforced the formation by rushing to his left and right sides respectively.

"Who are you?" he questioned, his voice low as his hand found the hilt of his sword.

I panicked. Alexei was strong, but not even he, Mina, and Ivan together could hope to defeat Vladforen.

"Brother, wait!" I exclaimed, running up to my brother and grabbing his arm.

Just at that moment...

"Ekaterina!"

"Prince Mikhail!"

...Mikhail made his appearance.

You shouldn't be here. You're the heir to the throne and the biggest VIP in the area!

Alas, I should have seen it coming. At the Magic Academy, and when the big-horned ox had shown up, he'd also dashed headfirst into danger.

I turned around nervously. Sure enough, Mikhail was glaring at Vladforen too. Mikhail was smart, and he'd understood at a glance that Vladforen wasn't a regular person. And he also understood that this beautiful man was here to see me.

Alexei, Vladforen, and Mikhail—it was the first time these three dashing men found themselves in the same room. The air couldn't have been more tense. I thought I might pass out from stress.

What am I supposed to do?! Why did you all gather here? That's the last thing I needed!

I squeezed Alexei's arm harder and harder. At this point, I wasn't trying to stop him anymore, I was using him to calm my nerves. All the skills I'd learned in my previous life were utterly useless at this moment. If anything, I had the feeling my experiences held me back.

Finally, Vladforen smiled and spoke up. "Since I was asked, I shall answer. I am Vladforen, the one you humans call the Black Dragon. I am the ruler of the demonic beasts of this land, the Dragon King."

Mikhail gasped. "The Black Dragon...!"

Lucas, who'd been standing behind Mikhail, moved to stand in front of him protectively.

"I knew it," Alexei whispered. He glanced down at me before fixing his gaze on Vladforen once again. Alexei's pride as a noble was the foundation of his character, and he had to return politeness with politeness. "You have introduced yourself. I shall do the same. My name is Alexei Yulnova, and I rule over this duchy."

"You're Ekaterina's brother."

"Do not call the name of the lady of the House of Yulnova with such familiarity," Alexei retorted, anger shaking his voice. "It doesn't matter who you are. I shall never forgive you for frightening my dear sister so."

"Brother, I'm not! I'm not scared!" I screamed, pulling on his arm.

The Dragon King's getting slandered when that isn't at all what's going on. I'm just freaking out because I don't know what to do now that everyone's gathered in my room!

Every one of the people here was a kind person I wasn't afraid of. But having these three face off was a dreadful situation.



On some deep, subconscious level, I'd always been afraid of love, in this life and in my previous one. I'd unintentionally averted my eyes this entire time, but I had the feeling I was about to have to face things I didn't want to face, and that terrified me. It was like a ghost had appeared out of the shadows.

"Stay back, Ekaterina."

"I will not leave your side, brother!"

What if my brother and the prince got into an actual fight with the Dragon King? Then what?! Vladforen's appearance in his dragon form flashed before my eyes, and I shuddered. They'd be utterly powerless against him. If anything happened to my brother or to the prince, the Dragon King would become the sworn enemy of the Yulnova Duchy and of this entire empire. The emperor would have to hunt him down to preserve the honor of the nation, and he'd send the entire army after him. Then, the Dragon King would enter the capital...and the empire would fall.

I couldn't let that happen. Even if I were to forget about the devastating consequences, I refused to let my brother and Mikhail get hurt.

"Everyone here is dear to me, so please, I beg of you, do not fight!" I exclaimed.

I was desperate, but later I'd want to throw myself under the covers and shout, *Why am I fancying myself the heroine of a Showa-era ballad about stopping men from fighting over me?!*

The riskiest person right now was Alexei. For my sake, he'd fight anyone. I was much less worried about the Dragon King and the prince. In other words, as long as I clung to him, I could avoid a battle. So, I stuck to his arm in a way that would put koalas and sloths to shame.

"Brother! Do you love me?!"

"Of course I do, my dearest Ekaterina."

Immediate reply. As expected of Alexei.

"Then please, listen to me and calm yourself. I couldn't bear it if you got hurt because of me. I just...couldn't live with myself..."

"Ekaterina..."

At the sight of the tears that had formed in my eyes, Alexei

stopped moving.

Someone chuckled. The soft sound soon turned into a full-blown fit of laughter. Vladforen looked like he couldn't restrain himself any longer.

"You still act just like a child, Ekaterina," he said.

Excuse me? I'm in the middle of trying to avoid the ruin of the empire here!

I mean, sure, from the outside it probably just looked like Alexei and I were gushing over one another, but still!

Next, I heard a long sigh. That was Mikhail. "Um, may I address you as 'Dragon King'?"

"That will be fine. Who are you?" Vladforen asked.

"I'm Mikhail Yulgran, the crown prince of this empire."

"Your Highness," Alexei warned.

According to the rules of etiquette, Mikhail shouldn't have introduced himself. Alexei should have been the one to say his name and title for him. However, since he didn't know whether he was facing a friend or a foe, Alexei had probably concealed the prince's identity on purpose.

Mikhail shook his head. "It's all right. If the legends are true and he is indeed the oldest and strongest dragon, I doubt he cares much about my title."

Vladforen hummed, as though Mikhail had aroused his interest, and his blazing-red eyes focused. Mikhail's sky-blue eyes met his.

"Dragon King, I hope you do not mind me asking, but what is your relationship with Ekaterina?"

At the direct question, Vladforen's gaze sharpened for a split second. However, his smile soon returned. "Our relationship, huh? Well, I suppose it is the same as your own."

Both men suddenly turned to me. I was still koala-clinging to Alexei's arm. My eyes widened in surprise at the attention.

Vladforen chuckled while Mikhail let out another deep sigh.

Um... What is it? Why did it seem like these two understood one another? This was their first meeting, wasn't it? *Vladforen, what do you mean our relationship is the same as my relationship with the prince? And you, Prince! Why do you look like you got it when even I*

don't?!

Argh, I'm getting annoyed!

I was probably the one at fault for not being able to piece together something everyone else understood, but that pissed me off even more!

"Thank you for agreeing to answer," Mikhail said. "I now fully comprehend the situation."

Vladforen laughed. "You're an entertaining man. I met the emperor of the Astra Empire once a long time ago, but he was just a plump and haughty fellow who did nothing but sit on his palanquin as his slaves carried him everywhere. You seem very different."

The emperor of the Astra Empire? Which one? Oops, my history-buff blood is getting the better of me.

That aside, the prince was holding his own remarkably well. Vladforen didn't seem to scare Mikhail. He was being polite, but he was still talking to Vladforen as though he were his equal. Even though Vladforen was in his human form, he was plenty awe-inspiring, and everyone here could tell he was no regular human. To have that strength of character at Mikhail's age was quite something.

"Ekaterina."

"Yes!" I yelped as Vladforen's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Are you happy by your brother's side?"

I blinked at the unexpected question but didn't hesitate. "Yes, very much so."

There was no greater happiness for me than being by my brother's side. He loved me unconditionally, and he accepted my affection too. He was genuinely happy whenever I showed him my best efforts. In my previous life, I'd worked myself to the bone until I'd died from overwork without ever receiving anything in return. That was why I realized how blessed I was now. When I had been a corporate drone, my hard work had been treated as though it was worth nothing. Whenever I remembered that, I thought of how content I was in this life. I had a dear friend who'd rush to me whenever she thought I might be in danger, even though she might put herself in harm's way. I had Mina and Ivan to protect me. Sure, there were death flags looming over me and the empire, and being a

noble lady wasn't easy for a former commoner like me, but at the end of the day, I considered myself lucky.

"I see." Vladforen grinned. "In that case, you should keep things the way they are for the time being. Women are the most beautiful when they're happy."

Oh... Wait, why am I sighing dreamily to myself over that?!

That face of his really was dangerous. It had gone straight to my chest.

Yes, exactly. Romance is dangerous*. I'm much safer staying with my brother.*

Vladforen was still grinning, but he narrowed his eyes.

"Don't think I'll leave things at that forever," he murmured.

AAAH! My grip on Alexei's arm tightened. *His voice! When he whispers, it's even harder to deal with!!! Oh no, this is bad. I don't know why or how, but this is* very *dangerous!*

Alexei hugged me and glared at the Dragon King. "I thought I made it clear I would *not* allow you to scare my sister."

"You and Ekaterina don't resemble each other much, but you sure are two peas in a pod," Vladforen said.

Alexei seemed confused. I had no idea that Alexei and I were just as dense as each other.

"Not fearing me is foolhardiness, but I suppose that is the perfect temperament for Ekaterina's protector," Vladforen said, his tone dripping with arrogance. Then, he turned around and walked up to the window. "I apologize for the commotion, Ekaterina. I shall take my leave now."

"W-Wait!"

The one who'd stopped him was Flora.

"I didn't know you were an acquaintance of Lady Ekaterina... I'm sorry for being so rude to you earlier," she said, bowing politely.

For the first time tonight, Vladforen seemed bewildered.

"Saints have always confronted me in our first meetings. Having one bow her head to me is a peculiar feeling." He paused. "I was in the wrong for not respecting human customs. You need not feel bad for what happened."

He took another look around the room, his eyes holding on Alexei

and me, Flora, Mikhail, and even Mina, Ivan, and Lucas.

"This ended up being a surprisingly fun night," he said before turning back into a black bird and flying away.

I followed his path with my eyes. The light of the moon was peeking through the gaps in the clouds...until it wasn't. There were no clouds anymore, and no moon either—only darkness. It took me a few seconds to realize that neither the clouds nor the moon had disappeared. We were just in *his* shadow.

I gasped at the tremendous pressure of his mana coming from above, while everyone with mana in the room rushed toward the window at once.

I didn't think they realized what had happened at first. Even if they looked up at the sky from the window, his shadow was just too large to make out its outline. Then, he flew a bit farther, and it became clear. Vladforen was soaring across the night sky in his true form: a gigantic black dragon with massive wings.

Against the moonlight, only the outline of his body was apparent, but it was enough to show off his sheer size. Alexei, Mikhail, and Flora were at a loss for words. Even I, who'd seen it before, was shocked anew now that I could compare his size to that of a city where people lived.

My second thought, however, was that I'd been correct the first time around. His dragon form was super-duper cool!

Mikhail put his hand against the window frame and gripped it tight. "Alexei... When I first arrived in the duchy, you told me you wished to report something to my father about Ekaterina's journey."

Whoa! I was taken aback. This was all Mikhail had needed to figure out that I'd met Vladforen during my pilgrimage. As always, his intellect shone through.

"I know you," Mikhail continued. "There's no use asking because you won't say a word. I'll wait and be there when you talk to my father."

"If His Imperial Majesty allows it," Alexei replied quietly.

"I'll see that he will."

Alexei's response was curt. "As you wish."

Mina rushed to put a shawl over Flora's and my shoulders. I'd let

mine fall when Alexei had arrived and completely forgotten about it henceforth.

It was only then that Mikhail seemed to realize that Flora and I were in our nightclothes—light negligees for the summer at that. He flushed red and averted his eyes.

Yet another familiar voice rang out then. "My lady!"

It was the sound of an old man who was very out of breath.

"This old soldier has come for you! Are you all right?" he called as he arrived at my still-open door. It was the owner of this residence, a minor local noble. He held an antique sword and shield that both looked way too heavy for him.

Come to think of it, I heard he has neuralgia. He must have felt Flora's mana at the same time as the others, but going up the stairs would have taken him quite some time.

"Dear, be careful..." an old woman said, hiding behind the door in fear. She was holding a small lantern and lighting up her husband's path.

Behind him, the knights were on their way too, at last—although it was a little mean to put it that way. I could hear their footsteps. I imagined Vladforen must have done something to interfere for them to have taken so long to come.

Alexei and Mikhail exchanged a look in silence. They both stepped forward to conceal me and Flora. They'd placed themselves strategically so that the people in the corridor couldn't see us anymore.

"I thank you for rushing to my sister's aid," Alexei said. "We've just confirmed that she is fine."

In a masterful show of coordination, Mikhail added, "Flora noticed a demonic bird outside of Ekaterina's window, and she drove it back with her holy mana. The demonic bird seemed to have only been lost, and no one was hurt."

Thanks to their seamless story, Flora's honor and mine were safe, and the loyalty of the lord of this residence wasn't cast into doubt.

All was well that ended well.

The next morning, our group got ready to leave the local lord's residence. Though he had clearly not slept enough, he was in high spirits and saw us off with his chest puffed out in pride. His wife, on the other hand, seemed a little uneasy, but she remained cheerful.

Their good mood made sense. Flora and I had apologized profusely, while Alexei—*and* Mikhail—had praised them for their touching loyalty to the House of Yulnova. The old couple had been so moved by the praises of their duke and prince that tears had welled up in their eyes.

I learned that the husband had been one of our grandfather's attendants, and he seemed to care deeply for us. I couldn't help but feel extra sorry for what'd happened when I saw the husband and wife wipe away their tears while murmuring how relieved they were that "Duke Sergei's grandchildren were safe."

In the end, the Dragon King's nocturnal visit was covered up to perfection.

After leaving the old lord's residence, we followed the same path we had on the way to the duchy and boarded the *Rapidus*. The journey downstream was even more comfortable than the journey upstream had been, and I had a pleasant time as the high-speed ship sailed along the Serno River. Ships were confined spaces, away from prying eyes, so Mikhail, Flora, and I let loose a little. Alexei was the same as ever, but he watched over me with fond eyes.

I often invited Flora to come to the deck to look at the river and sing with me. Two pretty girls singing together tended to catch the attention of the crew of the *Rapidus*. Sometimes, I noticed them slowing down to listen closely...and being taken aback by the unfamiliar melody.

I couldn't blame them. The song we were singing the most often was a hit from my previous world, with the lyrics translated into the language of the empire. To be more specific, it was the world-famous song from an animated movie about the queen of an ice castle. After translating the theme song from *Project Something*, I'd gotten in the habit of translating songs from my previous world when I had free time. It was my secret hobby.

This ice queen song was the number one heroine song in my

mind, so I'd always wanted to hear Flora sing it. I grabbed the perfect opportunity and taught her the lyrics and tune. When she lifted her beautiful voice to sing, the sound was mellifluous.

I wouldn't have expected any less from the heroine.

I used to be in the choir club, so I knew how to stand, how to open my mouth, how to stay on pitch, and all those things. In my past life, I'd been pretty good at staying on pitch and could easily score over ninety points at karaoke. However, I didn't have the kind of voice that would get people picked for solos in that life or this one. By contrast, Flora had a clear, stunning voice. Had she been in my choir club, she would have gotten tons of solo parts without a shadow of a doubt.

That reminds me, I wanted to go horseback riding or do vocal training to work on my stamina!

Alexei had agreed to the horseback riding, but he'd insisted on getting me a proper saddle first. On top of that, I'd need access to a horse and riding ground to practice, so it wasn't something I'd be able to pursue daily while at the academy. To sing, on the other hand, I needed nothing but my body. I'd always loved singing, and I was rediscovering how fun it was. I decided to tell Alexei I wanted to learn singing.

Needless to say, he gave me his approval instantly.

"I shall prepare a teacher worthy of you. Your voice is as beautiful as that of the heavenly bird who resides in the celestial garden. Wherever it echoes is heaven itself." He paused. "However, I worry that if you make it more enchanting still, the God of Music may invite you to his garden of melodies and refuse to ever return you to me."

"Oh, brother!"

His rose-tinted filter never stops working, does it?!

"Truth be told, I think Lady Flora's singing is far more pleasing than my own," I said.

"Lady Flora's singing is wonderful, yes, but only your voice can entrap and melt my soul."

Boy, even his soul looks at me through that filter. But my own soul is even better at being a fangirl for Alexei. Considering my reincarnation and all, I'd say I'm unmatched on that front!

I'm not sure why I'm bragging over something that weird, but whatever.

Despite that last thought, I puffed up with pride.



The crew had installed a cute table with chairs for me on the deck, so I sat there to read a letter and draft a response. From my spot, I could listen to the sound of the wind caressing the surface of the river. It kind of felt like I was at a resort.

"Is this the letter you received right before we boarded this ship?"

I looked up at the sudden question to see Mikhail.

"Indeed," I said with a nod. "This is from a new friend of mine in the duchy."

The letter was from Madam Zoya, the widow. After she'd implied to others that she might be able to source the tableware of the people of the forest I'd showcased, she'd been drowning in inquiries. The prince's praise for our traditions seemed to have gone a long way with the elite of the duchy. According to her, interest was so high that we could sell the tableware individually, rather than as a set, and still make a considerable profit. I could feel her eagerness for the chance to handle this business, even if she hadn't stated it directly.

"The largest firm in the duchy belongs to her, and it appears our new venture will do wonderfully thanks to you, Prince Mikhail."

"Could that have to do with the fairy fruits you presented to everyone after the hunt?"

I started at the close guess and Mikhail smiled mischievously. He'd spoken those lofty words of praise on purpose back then, hadn't he?

"You are keen on the uptake, as always," I told him.

Mikhail looked in the distance. "It's habit. Mother has a tendency to do these things too..."

Is that so? Empress Magdalena was from the House of Yulsein, who operated the greatest trade port in the empire and always encouraged commerce. It looked like she'd used her son for publicity

stunts. *Honestly, I totally get it.*

"I am hoping to start commercializing the wooden tableware I used for the fruits. This tableware is handcrafted by the minority group that lives in the forests of the duchy. Since I first laid eyes on it, I've thought it is wonderfully unique. I'd like for them to have a source of income so that they may continue to be true to their way of life, regardless of the way the empire may change or develop in the future."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wondered if that was really something I should talk about with a sixteen-year-old—but my doubts cleared in an instant. The prince wasn't any old brat. Mikhail looked at me with a serious expression.

"It seems you are looking to the distant future," he whispered.

Not quite... I just have memories from my past life. Please don't make it sound like I'm some visionary. I'm just a regular office lady, nothing more.

"Doesn't everyone? We all make arrangements based on what we anticipate," I said with an awkward laugh.

"Fair enough." Mikhail smiled and took my word for it. The fact that he knew exactly when to quit only made him scarier. "That reminds me—about the hunting tournament. Alexei plans on giving you the antlers of the Silver-Branched Great Stag he caught, doesn't he?"

I nodded with a smile. "Yes! Once they've been cleaned and polished, he'll have them mounted in my room."

The antlers of the stags shone with a beautiful silver gleam once they were polished. In my previous life, people had stuffed the head of a stag to display it, but taxidermy mounts weren't popular in the empire. I'd been very relieved to hear that Alexei's gift was only the antlers and not the entire head of the stag.

"Would you accept the golden horns of the big-horned ox I caught? I want to give them to you."

My eyes widened in surprise. I paused for a moment before shaking my head. "Those are *far* too precious. Please give them to someone worthy of that gift. I'm sure Her Imperial Majesty the Empress would be overjoyed."

Her son had grown into a fine man capable of taking down such an impressive beast. I had no doubt she'd be very proud.

"Right..." Mikhail's disappointment was clear on his face, which was rare enough to mention, but he quickly covered it with a smile. "In that case, I'll give them to my mother and tell her it was your idea."

"What?" I raised my eyebrows in confusion. "Please don't! You cannot say such a thing to your own mother. Tell her *you* thought of it!"

My mind went straight to a friend of mine who'd gotten married and had become a mother pretty young. She'd been on the verge of getting overwhelmed by her responsibilities. Then, one day when I'd run into her by chance, she'd shown me something with the brightest smile I'd ever seen: a picture of her that her child had drawn.

"My baby has grown up enough to think of giving me gifts. I've never been happier, but at the same time, I'm a little sad. It's like my baby is already all grown up..."

She'd bragged so much afterward that I hadn't even been able to joke that it might have been a little early to worry about her child's maturity.

My point was that presents had to come from the giver! Thinking about what to give on your own was the only way to show sincere appreciation.

"O-Okay, I got it," Mikhail replied.

"I hope that's true."

The prince was very mature for his age, but he didn't get the subtleties of human interactions yet. I supposed boys were usually slower to figure out such matters. My friends with younger brothers had been exasperated with them day in and day out. That said, I was a little relieved to see Mikhail behave like a high school boy for once.

Speaking of Mikhail, he watched me go from annoyed to satisfied with a confused look on his face.

"Treat your mother with care," I added firmly.

Before we'd left for the capital, my brother and I had visited our

family's mausoleum to pay our respects to our mother. This conversation, though more lighthearted, had reminded me of that.



Eventually, the *Rapidus* reached the capital's harbor. We thanked the captain and the rest of the crew and disembarked. This long summer vacation was nearing its end.

We promised to see each other soon at the academy. After waving one another goodbye, we went our separate ways in three carriages. The one Flora was using was also a carriage of the House of Yulnova, which we'd lent her to make the end of her journey easier.

When the new semester started, we'd be reunited.



The harbor where the *Rapidus* had stopped was close to the imperial palace, and it didn't take long for Mikhail to return home after parting from Ekaterina and the others.

The palace towered like a beautiful fairy-tale castle in the heart of the capital. It had once been a boorish military stronghold, but it had gone through countless changes after the empire found lasting peace. Eventually, it'd become what it was today. While its history was similar to that of the Yulnova Fortress, its architectural style was very different. With its countless spires and white walls gleaming beneath vivid blue roofs, it resembled a majestic bird.

"Welcome back, Your Highness."

"Hi," Mikhail said with a smile to the servants who'd assembled at the entrance to greet him.

Among them was one of his father's closest attendants.

"Your Highness, Their Imperial Majesties are awaiting you. They're eager to see you in good health and hear about your travels."

"Got it."

The imperial palace was separated into two areas: the living

quarters of the imperial family, and the part where governance happened. According to the attendant, Mikhail's parents were currently in that second area. They must have been busy, yet they'd still made time to see him after his trip. That pleased him. However, he had no doubt they'd want to poke him about his progress in the Yulnova Duchy, and *that* annoyed him in advance. As a prince, Mikhail had never really had much of a private life, but having his parents inquire about his love life was more embarrassing than anything else.

Still, the one who'd set things up so he could spend part of the summer in the Yulnova Duchy was his father. He'd never spoken of his feelings for Ekaterina to his parents, and the fact that they'd seen through him so easily had been a bit of a shock. Though he supposed there was nothing he could do about it, considering with whom he was dealing. His father was the emperor—the last person from whom you could hope to keep anything.

Will I ever be like him? Mikhail wondered.

When he found them, his parents were sitting side by side in a small lounge.

"Welcome back."

"I just arrived," Mikhail said, only sitting down after his father had gestured for him to. No one sat before the emperor invited them to, not even his blood and flesh.

"I'm glad to see you well. How was Yulnova?" Magdalena asked. The empress wasn't one to conceal her expressions, and the return of her only child brought a sunny smile to her lips.

"It was a fun trip," Mikhail said. "Alexei has been asserting his control over his duchy, and I could feel sincere loyalty toward the imperial family from everyone there, regardless of rank. The northerners are earnest, simple people."

"Good," Konstantin said with a solemn nod.

"I suppose it is only natural, considering the large numbers of demonic beasts in their land, but the people there are fairly used to them. They organized a hunting tournament in my honor, and no one batted an eye upon encountering one. They hunt them as they would regular animals. The villagers who acted as beaters seemed

just as used to them. The knights of the Yulnova are known for their bravery and strength, and I see why that is. They recruit the strong with no care for their birth, and their land gives birth to hardened men."

Mikhail's comments were more akin to an inspection report than to the carefree tales of a young man's journey. As an emperor in the making, he'd learn to pay attention to such details from a young age.

The Yulgran Empire had come to be after four brothers, the princes of a small country, had brought together all of the surrounding countries. As such, the current nobility had diverse origins. There were the three grand ducal families that'd descended from the first emperor's brothers, there were those who'd descended from the original vassals of the four brothers, and those who'd descended from the foreign nobles who'd been conquered and had eventually sworn allegiance to the brothers. Over the course of the empire's history, there had been countless power struggles between these groups, some of which had led to civil wars. The empire had been stable for a long time, but the imperial family still made every effort to keep the power balance stable. Mikhail knew he had to take over this crucial job one day.

"Have you done as my father asked?" Konstantin asked.

Mikhail nodded. "I made sure flowers were laid on Duke Sergei's grave on his behalf, as he wished. The anniversary of the death of Alexei and Ekaterina's mother is coming up, so they went to the mausoleum. I entrusted them with the flowers."

Like the imperial family's, the mausoleums of the three grand ducal families were gigantic catacombs—endless underground mazes with countless rooms for the successive heads of the houses and their families. While Alexei and Ekaterina's mother, Anastasia, had been separated from her husband in life, she would rest alongside him for eternity.

Their grandfather, Sergei, also rested in the Yulnova's mausoleum, but their grandmother, Alexandra, had been buried in the imperial family's mausoleum at Alexei's request. Despite having been loved and cherished by many during his lifetime, Sergei was

now alone. The previous emperor, Valentin, had thought of Sergei as his own brother, and he'd asked Mikhail to at least offer him some flowers.

Since only the members of the family and those who guarded the mausoleum could enter it, Mikhail had entrusted the flowers to the Yulnova siblings. He still remembered how Ekaterina had looked on that day, all dressed in black with a veil covering part of her face—somewhat sad, and exceedingly beautiful.

He couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face.

"Oh, that reminds me, I've brought you a gift, mother," he said.

"My! What is it?"

"It still hasn't been processed, so it may not be much to look at yet, but... Lucas."

"Yes, Your Highness."

At the prince's orders, the young man with thin eyes stepped forward holding a large package in his arms. He put it down on the table that separated Mikhail from his parents and started unwrapping it.

"Goodness!" Magdalena exclaimed while Konstantin hummed.

It was the golden horns, of course. Even the emperor was surprised by their size, let alone the empress.

"These are the horns of a demonic beast I hunted in the Yulnova Duchy. Apparently, their horns are normally white, but rare specimens have golden horns like these... I was quite lucky."

"These horns are so large! The monster they belonged to must have been enormous," Magdalena said.

After Mikhail described his encounter with the big-horned ox, Magdalena's eyes watered.

"You've grown so much..."

Magdalena was a proficient rider and enjoyed hunting, so she was well aware of the risks that came with facing a beast that large. Though she was the empress, she was also a mother. The image of the small baby that Mikhail had been was thoroughly engraved in her memories. The thought that her baby had grown into a man capable of hunting down such a monster moved her beyond words.

She quickly got over her emotions, and a devilish smile replaced

her motherly expression.

"Are you sure you meant to give this to me?" she asked. "Isn't there *someone else* you're thinking of?"

Mikhail let out a laugh but played dumb. "Not at all. You're the only one who came to mind, mother. I wanted to thank you for everything you always do for me."

Magdalena took a good look at her son's face and seemed to figure out the situation instantly. She burst out laughing.

"Is that right? I'll happily accept these, then. Where should I display them, I wonder? Ah, what a nice issue to think about!" Then, she stood up, saying she had work to finish.

"What a good girl. She brings me much to look forward to," she murmured as she turned to the door.

Magdalena was probably referring not just to the horns but also Ekaterina's glass pens. After Alexei had given some to the emperor, the latter had ordered more for Magdalena. Obviously, that part had been kept secret. However, her brother, the duke of Yulsein, had ordered some of his own and was anxiously waiting for them to be finalized, so she had a pretty good idea of what the emperor was planning.

"I will soon hold a tea party with the wives of the foreign ambassadors. Ekaterina showed interest in foreign cultures and trade, so I was thinking of reaching out to her," Magdalena continued. "Do you think she'd enjoy that?"

"I'm sure she'd love to attend," Mikhail said. "Even in the duchy, she created ties with a commercial firm and endeavored to protect the culture of a minority group."

"Well then. She reminds me of my old self." Magdalena laughed. "I hope she keeps at it."

With that, she left the room.

"So, how did it go?" Konstantin asked once he and his son were left to speak man-to-man.

Argh, there he goes, Mikhail thought. Aloud, he said, "I think we've become good friends."

"That's good," Konstantin said with a satisfied smile.

Seeing that expression on his father's face made Mikhail relax,

and he sighed. “However, I met a rival in Yulnova.”

“Oh?”

Konstantin waited for him to continue speaking, and Mikhail straightened his posture. “Alexei will soon request a formal meeting. Or perhaps he plans to share the news with you while delivering mother’s present. Either way, I want to be present when he comes.”

Konstantin frowned. He failed to see the link between Alexei’s upcoming report and Mikhail’s love matters.

“When we visited the Nova’s residence, they mentioned a dragon dwelling in their duchy. Do you remember?”

“They did mention that.” Konstantin rubbed his chin and fell silent, then his eyes widened in surprise. He seemed to be running through the entire conversation in his memory. Back then, Magdalena had mentioned the Sein dragon and how it could take the appearance of a beautiful woman. In other words, the dragon of Yulnova was...

Konstantin stared at his son, and Mikhail returned his gaze in silence.

The emperor chuckled quietly before bursting into laughter.

“Your mother also had the most unbelievable suitors, but it looks like Ekaterina has her beat.”

“*Mother* did?” Mikhail was scared to ask, but he couldn’t help himself. “Who was it...?”

“My greatest rival was the prince of a large country from beyond the Summit of the Gods.”

The emperor’s swift reply surprised Mikhail.

“He told me he wanted to bring her back to his country, and I challenged him to a duel,” Konstantin continued. “Magdalena got mad. She said she’d take on the both of us herself if we didn’t stop this charade, and the fight ended without either of us even pulling out our swords.”

“I wouldn’t have expected anything less of mother.” Mikhail could picture the scene as though he’d been there.

“These sorts of things are tough while you’re living them, but they become fond memories, Mikhail.” An amused smile crept on the emperor’s lips. “Well, keep at it.”

In the Shadow of the Garden (or the Day They Showed Up at the Fortress)

While the gardens of the Yulnova Fortress weren't as lavish as the ones of our residence in the capital, the one the imperial family visited every year, the rose garden was still home to a great variety of blossoms. It wasn't the season for them, though, so there were barely any flowers at the moment. Even if a bud formed, the gardener would cut it off to let the stems rest. However, there were a few varieties of wild roses—so unsophisticated they could hardly be called "roses"—that bloomed in the summer. Their white, yellow, or pink petals colored the otherwise bare rose garden, and their rich fragrance wafted through the air.

After dropping by the kennel, Alexei, Mikhail, Flora, and I took a stroll through that very garden.

"That's Yulnova for you. You have so many roses, even wild ones," Mikhail said.

"Did you know wild roses like these are often used to graft other sorts of roses?" I asked. "The gardener told me all about it. If you have roses in the gardens of the imperial palace, it's likely their roots are those of wild roses."

I was repeating what the gardener had told me, but truth be told, I'd known about that process because I'd read about it in my previous world.

"Is that so? There *are* roses at the imperial palace. Although we have a lot more laleler since they're my mother's favorite. Do you know those? They're also called tulips."

"How rare!" I exclaimed.

In my previous world, tulips had been common and accessible

almost anywhere, but that wasn't the case here. They'd only started being imported from beyond the Summit of the Gods fairly recently, so they were still hard to come by. There had been a time in my previous world when tulips had been prized and expensive. Back when they'd just been imported into the Netherlands from the Middle East, the bulbs went for such high prices that they became the subject of a speculative bubble—an era that was later referred to as tulip mania!

"But I would have assumed Her Imperial Majesty favored lilies over any other flowers as they're the symbol of her birth house," I added.

"She says laleler are just as nice because their shape is similar. Truth be told, she doesn't pay much attention to flowers. What she *really* likes about laleler is that they're so uncommon that people can only see them at the imperial palace. That gives her another card to play diplomatically."

"That sounds like Her Imperial Majesty," I said with a hum of admiration.

"Laleler are at their most beautiful at the beginning of spring, but if you're interested in seeing them, you can come to the imperial palace any time. We have paintings and tapestries of them—as well as a gardener who came all the way from beyond the Summit of the Gods."

I am *interested!* My eyes sparkled despite myself, and I was about to tell Mikhail I'd love to, when I came back to my senses.

"If my brother allows it," I said instead.

"Of course I will," Alexei said immediately. "Everything shall be as you wish it." His tone was gentle, and he put his hand on my shoulder. "I'll take you along when I go to the palace. That way, I won't have to worry."

"Thank you very much, brother."

"The imperial palace is the most secure place in the empire. I don't think you have cause to worry, regardless," Mikhail mumbled quietly.

Right after that, Flora hesitantly interjected. "Um, Lady Ekaterina? I-I think I saw something strange over there."

Alexei, Mikhail, and I turned to look in the direction Flora was pointing. However, we couldn't spot a thing. There were only green rose stems and colorful wild roses around. In the shadow of the wild roses, some leaves seemed to twitch, but that was all.

"What did you mean by that, Lady Flora?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. It must have been my imagination."

Flora seemed embarrassed as we continued walking. Still, what she'd said bugged me, so I turned around to double-check.

I didn't see anything weird this time either: green stems, colorful roses, and two little root vegetables holding leaves as they happily trotted under the shade of the roses. Nothing to worry about.

I took another step forward before it hit me.

Wait, what? I saw something that shouldn't be there, didn't I?

I snapped my head back with a speed that did not befit the dainty lady of a noble house, but the little root vegetable intruders were nowhere to be seen.

Yeah... I must have imagined them. Maybe it was some sort of optical illusion. I'm not sure what kind of optical illusion would have shown me two root vegetables holding leaves, but hey.

"Is something wrong, Ekaterina?"

The worry in Alexei's tone brought me out of my thoughts. "N-No... It's nothing. I thought I saw something, but I was wrong."

I tried to cover up my awkwardness with a laugh. The thing was: I couldn't get rid of the certainty that I *had* seen something!

An illusion. It's got to be an illusion.

I kept repeating that in my mind to convince myself and turned around once again to confirm nothing was amiss...only to see a root vegetable pulling on the roots of a rose plant.

I knew it!!! Why are the handsome sugar beet and its friend here?!

Our eyes met. Well, the sugar beet didn't have eyes, so that was a poor way of putting it, but I couldn't think of any other way to describe this feeling. The next second, the two sugar beets started making a run for it.

I'm not letting you two get away!

I let my mana run through the ground, and it heeded my call.

Earth erupted, taking the shape of a hand, and grabbed the two little runaway sugar beets.

Yay, I did it!

Squeezing too hard would have crushed them, so I was proud to have controlled the strength of my golem hand. The leaves of the sugar beets poked out from between the earthen hand's fingers. They squalled high-pitched sounds as they wiggled their leaves. It was kind of adorable.

"Well done, Lady Ekaterina. Those things were what I saw!"

"What peculiar...plants? Why are these turnips moving?"

Flora was surprised, while Mikhail was confused. Two very normal reactions to have.

"They're sugar beets, the raw ingredient used to produce a type of sugar," Alexei said. "These reverted to their original form, hence they can move. However, I'm not sure how they found their way here either. I shall need to strengthen the fortress's security."

Alexei, on the other hand, was calm personified. After answering Mikhail's question, however, a sweet smile took over Alexei's face.

"Ekaterina, you reacted wonderfully. Not to mention, it was so kind to capture them without hurting them... You're so merciful and noble. No one could be as qualified to be the lady of our order."

Calm but as obsessed with me as usual—calmly obsessive, that was Alexei in a nutshell.

At this moment, a voice rang out.

"Your Highness, Your Grace."

The one who'd called out to them was one of Mikhail's guards, accompanied by a knight of the duchy. Behind them were two men bowing nervously. One was an old man, while the other was a short but well-built middle-aged man.

I feel like I've seen these two men before.

They seemed entirely out of place in the fortress, but I could tell they'd worn their best clothes in an effort to make a good impression. I looked at them closely while I scratched my head (on the inside) until I finally remembered them.

"My! I met you on my pilgrimage, did I not?" This was the old man who'd asked for my help with the one-eyed bear and the mayor

of the village!

"Thank you very much for your help, my lady," the old man said, bowing lower. It hadn't been long since my pilgrimage, but he looked much better.

After I acknowledged them, the two knights relaxed, and we got to speak with the old man and the mayor with no fuss. Although the second they learned that the two men next to me were "His Highness the Prince" and "His Grace the Duke," they almost passed out from the shock.

"I'm glad to see you in good health. How are your grandchildren?" I asked after the old man calmed down.

"Thanks to you, they've become friends with the children of the village. My grandson wants to become a knight to protect you when he grows up, my lady. He's taken to swinging a wooden stick around all day."

"What a noble pursuit," Alexei said.

"So, what brings you here today?" I asked.

The one to answer my question was the mayor. "The field you tilled for us has become magnificent. All the villagers came together to find a way to repay you, and we finally reached an agreement, so we decided to visit."

Huh?

"Are you perhaps talking about that abandoned field on the outskirts of the village?"

"Yes! We grow sugar beets there, and they've been growing bigger by the day. They're plump and round, with lively leaves."

I am pretty sure "lively leaves" are not *a common measure of a crop's growth.*

Could the sugar beets be growing faster because I had used mana to till the field, since they were originally demonic beasts (demonic plants)?!

"They're also very sweet, so we picked out the best-looking ones to offer you, my lady! They're all in the wagon we brought with us. However, when we arrived at the fortress and started giving them to your servants, two sugar beets ran away. We hadn't noticed some immature roots had gotten mixed in... I'm terribly sorry about that.

We've been chasing them ever since."

Oh? Then the two intruders I'd caught weren't the handsome sugar beet and its companion, but two different sugar beets from that field?

No! I don't know why, but I have a strong feeling they're the two sugar beets I saw back then. Besides, I remember Forli saying he'd never seen two immature roots sticking together like that. Had they hopped onto the wagon on their own? *Are you two hitchhikers?*

"They ran around for so long and with so much energy. They must be delicious, my lady. Please have them for dinner if you'd like."

"Eeeek!" the sugar beets cried.

A lively vegetable... I couldn't help the sense of discomfort I had at hearing crops described this way. Leaving that aside...

"N-No, I, um, couldn't. Doesn't the saying go 'even the hunter refrains from killing the bird that has flown to him for shelter'? I successfully caught them without hurting them, so I could...um...keep them? Perhaps."

I couldn't eat crops I personally recognized for dinner. That was absolutely out of the question.

"You're so kindhearted, Ekaterina. If you'd like to keep and raise them, you can do so. They aren't dangerous, so I don't see any issue." As always, Alexei masterfully balanced his overblown love for me and the dignified composure of a duke.

"They're sort of cute," Flora said with a grin. "It's fun to see wiggling veggies."

"So, can we expect the sugar beets that *didn't* run away at dinner? I'm...a little curious about how they taste. Perhaps." I couldn't read Mikhail's expression.

I'm sorry for whatever just happened, Prince.

Now that the security of the sugar beets was guaranteed, I let my golem hand crumble. Some leaves stuck out from the lump of earth, but they didn't move.

Oh no! Did I squish them to death?!

I ran up to them, only to find that they were just fine. They seemed to be lazily soaking up the nutrients of the rose garden's

earth, relaxing like humans might in a hot bath.

They sure are easygoing, I thought. The tension left my body.

They were root vegetables, but these two troublemakers seemed to understand human speech. Actually, I was pretty sure they did. Why had they gone through the trouble of hitchhiking to come here? They couldn't have taken a liking to me and wanted to stick with me, could they?

Despite all my (silent) complaining, I tied a ribbon on each of them so everyone could recognize them easily. Then, I made sure to warn everyone, including the gardeners, the knights, the chefs, Lisa, and Novalas, that no one was to eat them. I even asked Regina and the rest of the hounds not to chew on them if they came across them.

I was still worried, though.

They're not gonna follow me all the way to the capital, are they?

You can't come, all right? Don't you dare come! I mean it, okay?!

Afterword

I'm Chidori Hama, and thank you very much for reading my book. I can't believe we're already at volume 5! It's all thanks to you for purchasing the previous books. Thank you all so much!

This fifth volume was also dedicated to summer vacation. Out of five volumes, three of them were all about summer vacation. I'm sorry about that!

While the fourth volume was filled with unexpected meetings with gods and other nonhumans, this volume focused on Mikhail and Flora's visit to the Yulnova Duchy. In the end, the characters were the same as at the academy—only in a different location. Still, there were quite a few fantastic elements, as well as some portrayals of high society, so I hope you enjoyed a taste of that otherworldly feeling and felt as though you were traveling yourself while reading it!

When I published the episodes that make up this volume on the internet, some readers commented that it was "finally Mikhail's turn." Despite being targeted at women, I believe this series is well-known for having almost no romance at all. This time, however, Mikhail did his best to catch Ekaterina's attention—though he didn't do enough to make her freeze out of shock. Sadly for him, the wall that is Alexei is a tall one, and Ekaterina is as dense as a brick. With that in mind, how far can our dear author-approved crown prince go?

Speaking of the original web novel, I had a tag on it that read "Romance is on extended leave." Now the question remains: Will romance make a comeback or stay on vacation?

Before all else, though, Ekaterina and Alexei's brother complex and sister complex are thriving. I must apologize for your trouble, Mikhail!

On another note, I've been assigned a different editor from this volume onward. My new editor is a very capable person. Despite a

hectic schedule this year with my day job, I was able to work on this book comfortably thanks to them.

Many people have helped bring this book to publication, such as proofreaders, designers, and more. I'm beyond thankful for all the efforts these people have put in to make this such a wonderful finished product. And, of course, seeing Wan Hachipisu-sensei's beautiful illustrations made me very happy once again. Thank you very much.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank all my readers from the bottom of my heart. I hope you had a fun time reading this volume!

Chidori Hama

Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu



Goodbye, Overtime!

This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother

5



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by Chidori Hama

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