I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again!



6

Author Milli-gram
Illustrator Yuki Kana


I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again!
6
Author Milli-gram
Illustrator Yuki Kana

I’ll Never Set Foot in That House Again! Volume 6 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8


I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again!
6
Author Milli-gram
Illustrator Yuki Kana

Prologue

My name is Chelsea. I'm the adopted daughter of Margrave Sargent and fiancée of His Highness Prince Glenarnold, younger brother to the king of Chronowize.

On the continent we lived on, there were five countries.

While I was in the Holy Country of Celesark in the northeast of the continent, Lord Glen had come to deliver the Spirit Tree cutting for me. I'd visited Celesark to observe the trial to select the next Grand Saintess, and following that, I returned with Lord Glen to the Kingdom of Chronowize. Granted, we had *barely* crossed the border between Celesark and Chronowize, so there was still half a month of traveling before we reached the royal capital.

"I wonder why I feel like we've come home even though we've only just crossed the border?" Lord Glen mused. He smiled at me from his seat across from me inside the carriage.

Lord Glen's dark blue hair—reminiscent of the night sky—reflected the light from the window, creating an angel-like halo. Coupled with his well-proportioned facial features, you might suspect he was an angel. In comparison, I had plain purple eyes and light pink hair that reached down to my chest. And despite being considered an adult at age fifteen, I was still shorter than the average woman.

"I was just thinking the same. How strange," I replied.

Looking at Lord Glen, his enchanting aqua eyes softened as he gave me a bewitchingly sweet smile.

"I'm starting to feel embarrassed with you staring at me like that," he said before standing from his seat and settling beside me instead. In one smooth motion, his arm slipped around my waist and he hugged me close.

After we had once again confirmed our mutual feelings back in Celesark, he'd been acting very sweetly towards me. It made my heart swell so much that I

could barely speak.

“Sitting across from each other is fine and all,” he continued, lifting a lock of my hair to his lips, “but sitting beside each other is nice too.”

On my twelfth birthday, I awakened to the brand-new Skill [Seed Creation], and from that point, my life completely changed. While living an abusive life in the barony I was born in, Lord Glen—the younger brother of Chronowize’s king and a nationally recognized Appraiser himself—had come and discovered my Skill. I was then quickly brought to the kingdom’s capital to live in the lodging house at the Royal Research Institute.

While researching my [Seed Creation] Skill, I created a seed for a second Origin Spirit Tree. After growing it within the citadel, I met and contracted with the Spirit King Element. Unfortunately, this had led to myself and the Origin Spirit Tree being targeted by a group known as the Worshippers of the Proxy, Driven by Envy.

Wanting to ask why the tree and I were being targeted, we had originally aimed to speak to the Proxy, who lived within the Demonic Forest. However, the estate she lived in there was covered by a strong barrier that the Great Spirits had competed with each other to erect. Because of this, we were unable to get anywhere close to the estate and needed to call the already departed Great Spirits back into our world to have them remove the barrier. The only way to bring the Spirits back was to plant cuttings of the Spirit Tree a whole country’s distance away from one another, so we had been gaining permission from each country to do so.

But, quite unexpectedly, I was able to speak with the Proxy directly and learned that she, who had been tasked with enriching the world by the creator gods, was a different being from ‘the Proxy, Driven by Envy.’ The real Proxy wanted to punish the fake Proxy and her worshippers herself, so we continued our plan to call the Great Spirits by planting Spirit Tree cuttings a country away from each.

Also, as contractor to Element the Spirit King, I was the only one who could plant the Spirit Tree cuttings. By now, I was able to call back three of the Great

Spirits, so only one Spirit remained.

“Oh yeah, do you remember how we haven’t gotten an answer from the Kingdom of Vandoll yet?” Lord Glen asked. “Well, we finally got one. It said they’ve actually gone through some political upheaval, so they aren’t able to handle our request yet.”

Spirit Trees grew quite large and required substantial room to be planted. They also required guards due to how valuable they were. This was why we had asked permission to plant them in each country. In order, the countries that had accepted and had cuttings planted were the Radzuel Empire, the Martec Republic, and the Holy Country of Celesark. The last one left was the Kingdom of Vandoll to the north.

“Political...upheaval?” I repeated, not knowing what that meant.

“I don’t know the details, but after the former king collapsed from sickness, someone who wasn’t the crown prince became the new king.”

If a person other than one in line for the monarchy became king, then something must have transpired. It was possible the new king might have even usurped the throne.

“That’s quite serious...”

“It’ll take some time until things calm down in the kingdom, so we probably won’t be able to plant the cutting anytime soon.”

As we chatted, we arrived at a rest spot. In order to give the horses a break after running for so long, Lord Glen and I got out of the carriage and sat down on a log bench while the old coachman and the attendants gave the horses water and apples.

As we watched, the knight we’d sent ahead came running back in a panic. He was one of Lord Glen’s personal knights and was sent out to arrive at the towns we were headed to next to make arrangements for inn rooms and warn regional lords of our arrival.

Hm? Normally we meet at the entrance to town. I wonder what happened? I thought.

The knight jumped off his horse and ran full speed towards Lord Glen.

“What happened?” Lord Glen asked, standing from his seat with a solemn expression.

Gasping for air, the knight reported, “There... There was a landslide up ahead...and we will be unable to pass through it!”

My personal maid Gina thoughtfully handed him a cup of water. He gave her an astute grin as he wiped the sweat from his brow, bowing slightly in thanks before downing the whole cup.

Once the knight had caught his breath, he explained, “I was unable to judge the scale of the landslide. It had collapsed to a point where I could not see the path continue from atop my horse. There were also no casualties as there were no homes nearby.”

“Were other people traveling on the main road all right?” I asked.

The knight flashed another smile. “Yes. They were all able to avoid injury.”

I heaved a sigh of relief at his words.

“It’s good that there were no casualties,” Lord Glen said. Pulling a map of Chronowize out of his Item Box, he spread it out on a nearby log table and asked, “Whereabout was the landslide?”

“Around this area.”

The spot that the knight had pointed to was in a ravine said to be a perilous pass on this highway, about two hours by carriage from our current rest stop.

“If you couldn’t even see the road past the landslide, then it’d probably be impossible to repair with my magic. Tris likely could have been able to do it if he were here, but...”

Lord Tris was among the group that had brought the Spirit Tree cutting to Celesark and someone I worked alongside to research my Skill back in the Royal Research Institute. However, he had contracted with Halnark, the Spirit of Water that appeared when we planted Celesark’s cutting. This meant Lord Tris would be unable to depart Celesark until the Spirit Tree was fully grown. The current plan was for him to commute back and forth between Celesark and the

Royal Research Institute in Chronowize via the newly planted tree.

“Hmm. There’s no use relying on someone who isn’t here...” muttered Lord Glen.

He turned and ordered the other knights, the coachman, the maids, and everyone else accompanying us to gather. Once everyone was together, he spoke.

“Some of you must have heard about the landslide that happened further down the highway. Since there’s no chance it will be cleared immediately, we’ll be taking a detour.”

Everyone in our entourage nodded, saying things like, “Nothing we can do about a landslide,” “We wouldn’t want to get hit with a second one while trying to do makeshift repairs,” and “Taking a detour is the right thing to do in this case.”

“From this rest stop here, we could choose to follow the roads to either the east or west,” Lord Glen said, pointing at both the roads. “If anyone knows what’ll be coming on either, please do share.”

The Spirit King Element—or Ele, as I call him—was in his cat form and floated up to look down the roads east and west.

«Both are suitably maintained. Neither should pose any trouble for carriage travel,» the Spirit King relayed.

From what I saw on Lord Glen’s map, it seemed that the western road was a bit more out of the way, but I kept to myself as I didn’t know much beyond what I was taught in lessons.

One of the knights raised their hand. “I have been to a town to the east where many fruit orchards grew along the road.”

“I recall an acquaintance of mine saying that apples were their specialty,” a maid added.

A few others spoke up of other details they knew about the eastern road. Apparently, the orchard-a-plenty town was the largest nearby and had shop stalls lined up on set days of the week.

“Does anyone have any information on the western road?” Lord Glen asked.

The old coachman nervously raised his hand. “U-Um... Actually, the village down the western road is my hometown...”

When he realized everyone was looking at him, he became flustered.

With a pensive expression, Lord Glen replied, “What sorts of foods does your hometown have?”

The moment he heard that question, the old coachman’s eyes flew open, and he spoke. “O-Our village! It puts a lot of work into our dairy products, and our milk, cheese, and yogurt are very highly regarded! The cream stew made with lots of our cows’ milk is so delicious you’ll never forget the taste!”

“I-I see.” The coachman’s sudden change in demeanor had Lord Glen shocked.

“And the soufflé cheesecake that the women in the village bake is so fluffy and delicious! That’s the only place you’d ever be able to eat it! I absolutely want everyone to try it!” The coachman cried all at once. He quickly realized what he’d done and became flustered again.

If he recommended the town and its delicious food to the point where his demeanor changed, I was incredibly interested.

“I’d like to try that fluffy soufflé cheesecake...” I murmured, imagining how spongy it might be.

Lord Glen suddenly gave a firm nod. “Okay, let’s take the western road.”

“Huh? Did you choose just because I said I wanted to eat there?” I asked, looking towards him. He gave me a smile back.

“Partially, but it looks like everyone else wants to eat it too,” he said, looking around.

Copying him, I looked around too and I saw one knight wiping the drool from his lips, while a few maids clutched their hands together, looking spellbound.

“Micah wants to cook with that milk~! I’m looking forward to this~!” my personal chef Miss Micah exclaimed, her fox tail wagging excitedly.

“Plus, you’d feel like taking the west road after hearing an impassioned

recommendation like that," Lord Glen said, looking towards the old coachman. I nodded in understanding.

And so, we decided on taking a detour along the western road from the rest stop.

1. Treehouse

Traveling on the west road, we headed towards the old coachman's hometown. Ilnato Village.

Just as you'd expect from a village that put so much effort into their milk, cheese, and yogurt—pastures spread out around Ilnato, with grazing cows scattered here and there.

As the carriage swayed, I leisurely took in the scenery of the sprawling plains and livestock at the base of the mountain. Suddenly, I felt Lord Glen's gaze from beside me and turned to look back.

"Chelsea... We're probably...no, we're definitely going to have to camp tonight," he said, a serious look on his face.

"Because we have so many people with us...correct?" I asked. He nodded.

As I had been playing the role of observer to the trial that would choose the Holy Country of Celesark's next Grand Saintess, many maids and female guard knights had accompanied me from Chronowize. If you added Lord Glen and everyone who accompanied him on the way to bring me the Spirit Tree cutting, our group numbered a little more than thirty.

Should we arrive at a normal inn with this many people, the inn might not have enough rooms or be able to get things ready in time, making it difficult for them to take us. That was precisely why we sent a knight to the towns ahead, to make arrangements with the inn or alert the regional lord.

"From what the coachman had said, the village isn't big, so their sole inn is probably full of other people taking the same detour."

I had camped out numerous times before. Back when I lived in my birth family's barony, I even slept on a hard board, so I wasn't particularly bothered by the idea. But it would probably be difficult for the maids who were with me and the knights who would have to stand guard.

"There isn't anything we can do about it," I said.

In response, Lord Glen pulled a coin-shaped seed from his pocket to show me.

“I was thinking we could use this seed if we camped,” he said.

To one side of the coin-shaped seed was a picture of a house, while the other depicted a large tree.

“Oh! We’re using Treehouse Seed!” I said, getting the nod back.

The Treehouse Seed was something I had previously created for Lord Glen as thanks for him teaching me magic. When planted, it grew a tree with a built-in treehouse and would wither and become fertilizer when the trunk was knocked on with a certain rhythm.

“We haven’t had many chances to camp out, so I think it’d be just what we need.”

On the way from Chronowize to the border, we followed the largest road. And during our travels, we either stayed at the manors of regional lords or inns in large towns. In Celesark, there were towns built systematically along the highway, so we always were able to stay at inns. Because of that, there had not been an opportunity to camp since creating the Treehouse Seed.

I nodded in understanding, but there was one thing I was concerned about.

“I seem to remember that the treehouse from the seed was very simple, with no bedding, furniture, or kitchen.”

I recalled the time I had tested the seed; the rooms it created were as bare as could be.

“That’s true. I’ve got furniture and bedding inside my Item Box to furnish the treehouse, but the kitchen would need to be outside.”

If the kitchen was outdoors, we’d either need to set up a kitchenette or put together a wood stove with stones. *Either option seems fun, but if we’re finally staying in a treehouse, then...*

“If it’s all right with you, could we make a new large-scale Treehouse Seed? One with bedding, furniture, and a kitchen included?”

Lord Glen grinned like a child in a sweets store at my suggestion. “Great idea! Let’s make it before we arrive at Ilnato. We can surprise everyone when we

actually get to camp!”

I nodded several times in agreement. It would be fun to imagine what everyone’s reaction would be.

“Then let’s think up an improved Treehouse Seed. First off, do you still have the blueprint for the original seed?”

“Yes, it’s in my storage,” I replied, nodding at Lord Glen. “I’ll get it right out.”

I peered down at the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist. It was connected to my personal storage in the Spirit World, and the Spirits who managed held onto —or returned—any item I willed back or whispered for. Also, since time still passed inside my storage room, I was asked not to store anything that would eventually rot away.

Please give me back the blueprints for the Treehouse Seed, I thought. Soon after, a roll of paper tied with string appeared before me. Undoing the string, I spread the paper out so that Lord Glen and I could look at the plans within.

Written in the blueprint, it noted the tree would grow roughly to the third story of the Royal Research Institute building. The attached house would be made of wooden planks, which had a balcony and stairs about halfway up. It would grow for only a single generation and wilt at a signal. Along with these notes was a sketch of a treehouse.

“It’s not written here, but the treehouse was bigger inside than out, wasn’t it?” Lord Glen asked for confirmation.

“You’re right.” I smiled, remembering the first time I sprouted the treehouse. “Ele was shocked—he couldn’t believe his eyes.”

Lord Glen returned my smile with his own. “D’you think we could use that to house everyone?”

“We should be able to. As long as we draw up blueprints and I wish for it properly.”

My Skill [Seed Creation] allowed me to create any seed that I wished for. If the seed existed already, all I needed to do was think of it—or say its name out loud—for it to manifest. For seeds that didn’t exist, I would need to prepare

blueprints and strengthen the image in my head for it to come to fruition.

I’d tried several times before to create seeds that didn’t exist without a blueprint or a solidified idea, but they’d all ended up coming out with weird effects, so I forgot about them...



Lord Glen pulled paper and a pen from his Item Box and began to draw out the inside of the treehouse. It seemed he was drawing his plan from a top-down view.

“Let’s make the treehouse’s entrance area into a dining hall-slash-reception room; that way, everyone could gather together. And of course, we’ll have the kitchen adjacent to this dining hall,” he said, writing a note that there would be a good number of tables and chairs inside the room. “What do we need for the kitchen?”

My personal chef Miss Micah and the maids who made tea would be the primary users of the kitchen.

“I think it would be good to have the same equipment as the kitchen that was prepared beside my room in the Royal Research Institute,” I said, thinking it would be easier to use with the equipment that Miss Micah and the maids were used to.

Lord Glen nodded in response, writing it all down on the paper.

“Perhaps the treehouse should be two floors since we have so many people with us,” I added.

“Yeah. Then how about we have the kitchen, dining hall-slash-reception room, baths, and toilets on the first level and have all the bedrooms occupy the second?”

He drew a staircase beside the kitchen, then added male and female baths next to that. Then, a hallway was added, with a number of bathrooms on the other side. On the second floor were the stairs, halls, and rooms—with a bed, lamp, and little closet in each one. The plans were starting to look more like an inn than a house.

“I’d like for the beds to be suitably firm, and with fluffy blankets,” I said, thinking back to the hot spring resort within the Shrine of Trials. Lord Glen jotted it down in the notes.

“Do we need anything else?”

The two of us looked at the written plan together.

“This is your room, Lord Glen, and this is mine. This side will have the maids and guard knights, while the rooms for the attendants and coachman will be across here...” As I pointed the rooms out on the blueprint, I realized something. “Will we be leaving the carriages and horses outside?”

If we stayed at an inn, they would have a building for managing carriages and tending to the horses. While camping, the coachman and attendants would typically take care of the horses, and the coachman would sleep on the carriage’s driver’s seat and keep watch.

“If we had some sort of storage for the carriages and stables for the horses, wouldn’t the coachman and attendants be able to rest without worry?” I asked.

“That *would* be a good idea.” Lord Glen nodded. “Then how about we add them at the tree’s base?”

He pulled out another piece of paper and sketched the treehouse. At the base of the tree was a double door, and in the middle was a house-like building. A staircase spiraled down from the treehouse entrance, decorated by chimney-like branches reaching up. At least, that’s what I thought he was drawing, but...

“Please ignore how bad my drawing is,” Lord Glen said, embarrassed. He pointed at the base of the tree. “Could we store the carriages and stables in here, past the double doors? It’ll probably end up being bigger inside, just like the house itself.”

“As long as we draw it like that in the blueprint, then it should work.”

“If we can store all the carriages together, the only thing that’ll need guarding is the treehouse itself. That way, fewer guards are needed to keep watch, and more of them can rest.”

“And if we have stables, the horses will also be able to rest well,” I added.

A watering hole and feeding area were appended to the plans.

“There shouldn’t be anything else... Right?” I asked Lord Glen.

Lord Glen made a thinking gesture, then nodded. “This should be fine.”

I stared intently at the completed blueprint. It was three pages this time, so I made sure to imagine it all for good measure.

An inn-like treehouse where both people and horses could get a good rest. With a big dining table in a room for everyone to gather in, and a fluffy blanket in every bedroom... Let's make the lamps the same shape as the flower ones I'd made before. I want the kitchen to be easy for Miss Micah to use too, and make her happy. The carriage storage needs to be big, and we need enough stables for the horses...

This was probably the longest I'd ever spent looking at a seed blueprint. The more I visualized, the more fun it got.

"I'll make a seed for a comfortable treehouse like the blueprint—[Seed Creation]!"

Concentrating, I used my Skill. And with a light *pop,* a large, coin-shaped seed double the size of the original Treehouse Seed appeared before me. On one side was a picture of a house and carriages, while the other had a tree and horses. I handed the seed to Lord Glen, who fixated on it, using his [Appraisal] Skill.

"It's named the 'Inn-type Treehouse Seed.' When planted, it grows a tree with a carriage storage and stables at the base, with an inn-like treehouse in the trunk. Knocking on the trunk in a three-three-seven beat makes it wither, turning into fertilizer. It lasts a single generation, with no flowers or fruit. It focuses on comfort, with the inside at a comfortable temperature, no matter where it's planted," he read off. A childish grin appeared on his face, and he said, "I can't wait to see how everyone reacts after we plant it."

"Yes. I can't wait either!"

The two of us laughed together, unable to contain our excitement.

+++

We arrived at Ilnato before sunset. It seemed that the village comprised several farms; this meant that the spots where the cows were grazing were included within the village proper. In the center of the town was a restaurant, general goods store, and inn clustered together.

As Lord Glen took my hand and helped me out of the carriage, the knight who had been sent ahead approached us. After saluting, he gave Lord Glen his report.

“I apologize. The inn is fully booked,” he said.

Lord Glen and I had expected that to be the case, so neither of us was surprised. The maids who had gotten out of different carriages before us and the guard knights who had dismounted from their horses didn’t seem shocked either, so they probably anticipated this too.

“Camping it is, then?” I asked Lord Glen excitedly, getting a firm nod back.

In order to borrow a place to camp out, Lord Glen and I headed to meet the village mayor.

“I had no idea that you and your fiancée would be coming here, Your Highness, so I lent out all the rooms for guests. Please, forgive me!”

As soon as we greeted the mayor, he immediately apologized. Apparently he lent the guest rooms in his home to an elderly couple and a pregnant woman. If he was helping people in need, Ilnato’s mayor had to be a good person. We told him we had prepared to camp since our group was large and assured him he had done the right thing. No apologies were needed at all. Feeling apologetic, he graciously lent us a spot to camp near the forest to the west of the village.

Meeting up with the rest of our entourage after they’d finished shopping, we headed to the forest on the village’s western edge. As soon as we arrived, the knights, attendants, and maids all moved to prepare the camp, only for Lord Glen to stop them.

“Tonight—we will be using the Treehouse Seed that Chelsea created to camp!”

When he said that, Miss Micah and the knights who had been present when we’d first created the seed cried out in joy. The other maids and guard knights didn’t know what a Treehouse Seed was and inquisitively tilted their heads.

“I’ll refrain from explaining since you’ll understand once it gets planted,” Lord Glen continued, a grin on his face.

He nodded to me, and I took the Inn-type Treehouse Seed I'd created earlier to a spot a short distance from the others and stuck it in the ground. Strangely enough, it went in easily despite how hard the ground was. As soon as the seed was buried, it began sprouting.

While I sighed in relief, the Inn-type Treehouse Seed grew in a flash. It was so instantaneous that I was nearly hit by the trunk. Spirit-form Ele and Lord Glen each held out an arm to stop me from falling backwards.

"It's dangerous not stepping back immediately," Ele scolded me exasperatedly.

"I'm glad you're okay," Lord Glen said, giving me a wry smile.

"I'm sorry. Thank you both for saving me." I turned my head towards the grown Inn-type Treehouse Seed. "It's so tall..."

The Treehouse Seed we'd grown before came up to about where the third floor of the Royal Research Institute would be, but the new Inn-type one was roughly five stories tall. At the tree's base were two doors large enough for a carriage to pass through and a wide staircase protected by thick branches next to them. Up the stairs was a house with a balcony that circled the entire thing, and foliage grew from the roof in a parasol-like fashion. The original treehouse had a house built on the branches, but the inn-type treehouse was built into the tree itself.

"It's exactly how you drew it, Lord Glen."

"I didn't expect it to be this precise with how awful my drawing was..." he said with a dry chuckle.

Looking around, the guard knights, maids, attendants, and coachmen were all surprised.

"It seems to be different from the seed you created before. Why?" Ele asked me.

"We knew we'd end up camping, so Lord Glen and I made a new Treehouse Seed more suitable for camping while in our carriage."

"I see..."

My explanation seemed to satisfy Ele, so he flew to the inn-type treehouse.

One knight who had been frozen in shock about the treehouse watched Ele go forth. But the knight craned his head back as if he suddenly remembered something. He asked Lord Glen, “Will we be planting multiple treehouses?”

“Nope. This one will house all of us,” Lord Glen said with a smirk, walking to the base of the tree and opening the double doors. “The first floor is storage for the carriages and stables.”

Beyond the doors was a space similar to what an inn would have to store the carriages. And further in were stables lined up along the right side.

“Wow... It’s bigger inside than it looked like it would be!”

“With this much space, we’ll be able to properly check the carriages!”

The coachmen and knights who rode horses were shocked and cried out happily. Seeing them so excited made me feel like I was having fun too.

While others were moving the carriages and horses, Lord Glen and I climbed the staircase to the middle of the tree where the house was. From the front door was a reception room with a table and chairs.

“It’s exactly like the blueprint,” I commented to Lord Glen.

As we stepped inside, Miss Micah followed behind us. But she stopped and gasped loudly. “There aren’t just tables and chairs, but a whole kitchen~?!”

Her tail wagged so vigorously I worried it might fly off, and she bolted inside.

“And the kitchen is set up the same way the one in your room is, Chelsea~!” I heard her shout from inside it. Her reaction was so great I couldn’t help but giggle.

Next to come in was Ele in his Spirit form, floating up the stairs beside the kitchen to the third floor.

“Oho! There are multiple bedrooms!” he commented. I heard a squeak, seemingly from him opening a door, and I heard him cry out again. “There are even beds?!”

While his words still rang in my ears, the maids cheered as they looked at the

baths and bathrooms on the main floor.

“It seems like everyone likes it,” I said, giggling. Lord Glen smiled wide as he nodded, satisfied at everyone’s reactions.

Later that night, Miss Micah used lots of Ilnato’s specialty milk to make us cream stew for dinner. As the old coachman said, the milk was rich and incredibly delicious.

“I bought lots and lots of Ilnato milk and put it in my Item Box. That way, I can make the stew again even after we return to the capital~!”

Miss Micah’s Item Box was one that stopped time inside it, so the milk would stay fresh. I was happy to know that I’d be able to eat the cream stew again.

And for dessert, we had soufflé cheesecake which the maids had bought.

“Ah...!” The cheesecake was so delicious that I didn’t know what to say.

The soufflé jiggled with the slightest touch but was oddly still light and fluffy inside. The maids who had dessert with us chattered about how they could eat it forever and how they wished they’d bought more. And though it was a pity that the landslide had blocked the highway and stopped us from going to the town we’d planned to visit, I was glad to be able to have Ilnato’s cream stew and soufflé cheesecake.

+++

We'd included a nice little bathhouse inside the treehouse plans, which I used to take a refreshing bath. Afterwards, I headed to my room on the third floor. Inside were three beds, one for me and two for my maids, Gina and Martha.

I had the option of having the room all to myself as I had back at the Royal Research Institute, but I was selfish. I really wanted to share a space with Gina and Martha. Whenever I would stay in the manors owned by territory lords, I slept alone. And when I would stay at an inn, I was with Miss Micah. The only opportunity I ever had to share a room with Gina and Martha was when we stayed in communal space. And in those cases, the room was shared with all the other maids and female guards.

"I'd like to share a room with you two," I begged my maids, not wanting to let the chance go to waste. They were taken aback but then quickly agreed.

With all of us gathered in the room, Gina took the right bed, Martha the left, leaving the center to me. After getting ready to sleep, I climbed into my bed. Soon after, my two maids had also settled under their covers, and I closed my eyes. I went over the day's events in my head, waiting for drowsiness to take me...but it wasn't happening.

I rolled over to get a better position to sleep. Then I rolled over again. And again. After doing this for what felt like a hundred times, I heard Gina call out to me.

"Having trouble sleeping?" she asked softly.

"Yes..."

It seemed that I'd been so excited at the thought of sleeping in the same room as Gina and Martha that it completely zapped any sleepiness from me...

"Then why don't we chat until you get sleepy?" Martha chimed in cheerily.

"I think I would like that," I replied, getting giggles in response. "Um... May I ask you both something I've always wanted to ask?"

"Yes, of course," they replied in unison.

“Do either of you...have a fiancé...or a lover?”

“Wha?!” The sound of their collective shock filled the room.

It had been three years since I’d come to live at the Royal Research Institute’s lodging house, and they’d been with me the whole time. Gina was the daughter of a viscount, while Martha was the daughter of a baron. At their ages, it wouldn’t be odd for them to have a significant other. I wanted to support them in their pursuit of love. And if they had fiancés, I wanted to ask them about what they intended to do after marriage.

“I never thought you would ask something like that, Lady Chelsea...” said Gina meekly.

“Th-That caught me so off guard!” Martha said, seemingly trying very hard to hide her giggles.

After a moment, Martha cleared her throat, then spoke.

“I’ll go first. I have lots of siblings. But the only one of us with a betrothed is my eldest brother—who’s inheriting the title of baron.” In a rather indifferent tone, she added, “My father told me that if I wanted to get married, I’d have to get a man and dowry on my own, so I have no intention of either finding a lover or getting married.”

I’d known that Martha had a big family. I’d also heard that she’d become a maid so that her little sisters could get married safely. *I admire her a lot for thinking about her family and sisters’ sakes more than herself,* I thought. *If the day ever comes when she wants to get married herself, I want to be there to fully support her.*

I nodded to myself. As I did, Gina began speaking quietly.

“For me... I...technically have a politically arranged fiancé,” she said hesitantly. The apprehension in her voice made it seem like she didn’t have a positive relationship with whomever her betrothed was.

I asked, “Do you love your fiancé, Gina?”

“No. Not in the least,” she said flatly.

So she doesn’t love him...

“He and I are childhood friends, but... When we were little, he would throw bugs at me, and trip me all the time. Honestly, he’s not the most pleasant person,” she said, heaving a huge sigh that must have shown how little she thought of him. “He’s refused to have weekly tea parties with me after we came of age, and I haven’t gotten birthday gifts from him either. While we meet to attend parties that require us to go together, that’s about as much as we see of each other.”

“Huh?!” It was my turn to cry out in shock.

“I knew you had a fiancé, but I didn’t know he was *that* bad...” Martha said, adding her own heavy sigh.

It was rare for both sides to share romantic feelings in political marriages. Since they’d be married regardless of fondness, it was necessary for them to put forth effort towards making the relationship positive, such as having tea at least once a week or giving each other birthday presents. My etiquette teacher, my adopted mother Ariel, *and* even the queen had all told me that these things were absolutely required, even if the two people didn’t like each other.

“So he doesn’t even want to be on good terms...” I mumbled.

Gina giggled. “I gave up on trying partway through too, so the feeling is mutual.”

I guess it’s fine as long as she doesn’t feel hurt by it... I thought.

After that, Martha began telling us about her siblings, and I began to doze off. I started to yawn, but quickly covered my mouth with my hand.

“Sleepy now?” Gina whispered.

“Ye...s...” I said quietly.

“Let’s get to sleep then. Good night, Lady Chelsea.”

“Good night, Lady Chelsea,” said Martha. “Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Gina, Martha.”

Soon enough, I fell asleep.

2. Within a Dream

When I woke up, I found myself in a fog-filled forest.

“Where...am I?”

Strangely, I seemed to vocalize my thoughts—and in a different voice than usual at that. I tilted my head inquisitively, and even that motion seemed a little slower.

“Something is weird.”

I looked around me, but all I could see was the same fog and trees. There were thick clouds above me and below... *Huh?* The ground was closer than usual, and my limbs were shorter. I reached up to touch my cheeks, and...they were squishier than normal? My hands looked chubbier too.

“Have I turned into a child?”

Squishy cheeks and chubby hands were a far cry from how I was as a small child, but from the feeling, I was definitely in a childlike form. *Which means...*

“This is a dream...” I whispered to myself.

In the distance, I spotted a child around the same height running in my direction. They wore a black hooded scarf with a dash of red hair poking out. As they approached, I noticed their expression seemed to brighten.

“Finally... Finally! I found you!” they boomed.

“Huh?” I responded, tilting my head in confusion.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Um... It’s Chelsea.” I was a bit bewildered, having never interacted with a child this small before.

“My name is Cyril!” The child introduced themselves with a smile.

They resembled Lord Glen’s boyish grin, which eased my nerves a bit. *Maybe he knows about this place?*

“Let’s play on *that!*” he continued, pointing to the fog.

Suddenly, the fog lifted in the direction of his finger, and I could see a big tree. Two strong-looking ropes hung down from a thick branch and were tied on the bottom to a board big enough for a person to sit on.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Cyril’s jaw dropped. “What? It’s a swing! You don’t know what a swing is?!”

I’d lived in the barony I was born in until I was twelve. My household was abusive, so I’d never been able to leave the manor grounds, let alone be allowed to play. After I got my Skill, I lived in the Royal Research Institute as a special researcher, so I’d never seen nor touched any toys like this.

“So, how do you play with it?”

The boy suddenly had a look like he’d realized something.

“If you don’t know how, then I’ll show you!” he said, grabbing my hand and running towards the tree.

I hadn’t ever been dragged by my hand like that, so I nearly tripped as I followed behind. Once we got to the tree, Cyril held the ropes out to me.

“Hold onto these tight, then sit on the board.”

I did as he instructed, gripping the two ropes firmly as I settled down.

“Once you’re comfortable, lift your feet up.”

I hesitantly lifted my feet, and he gently pushed on my back.

“Hwah?!” I squealed, having never felt the sensation before.

“It’s okay. There’s nothing to be scared of,” he said gently.

I swung back and forth as I felt an unfamiliar, weightless sensation. The swinging gradually got higher, and I noticed Cyril moved away.

“Use your legs to go even higher,” he called out.

“H-How?!”

“Uh... Move them forward and back?”

I didn’t quite get it, but when I did as he said, it seemed like I was making myself swing higher or lower.

“Wow, this is fun!” I cried out, having a blast swinging.

“There are lots of other fun things to play on too!”

After I had my fill of the swing, Cyril pointed in another direction. As the fog cleared once more, I saw other play equipment I’d never seen before. One was a thing with stairs, handrails, and some kind of slope, while the other was a long, thin board with something supporting it in the middle.

“That’s a slide, and that’s a see-saw!” he explained, walking forward before gesturing towards me. “I’ll show you how to play with both of them, so come on!”

“Okay!” I replied, letting out a laugh.

Cyril and I spent our time playing within my dream.

+++

It was past noon the day after we’d stayed inside the inn-type treehouse. Chelsea’s personal maids, Gina and Martha, told me that Chelsea wasn’t waking up, no matter how much she was called.

Chelsea usually woke up early, so it was odd that she was still sleeping at this time. Her exhaustion might have just caught up with her now that she was back in Chronowize. If she was just tired, I wanted to let her sleep...but I had a bad feeling about this.

“It’d probably be good to go check on her ASAP~,” Micah said, stopping her preparations for supper and walking over to me.

«Micah is correct. We should check on Chelsea at once,» Ele said in his cat form.

It looked like they felt it too. After nodding to both of them, we all followed Chelsea’s maids to her room. Walking inside, we saw Chelsea in her bed.

«It looks as if she’s sound asleep...»

“Let me use my [Appraisal],” I said, activating the Skill.

[STATUS: Asleep]

“She’s sleeping, which isn’t out of the ordinary... Chelsea?”

I tried calling out to her, but no response.

“Would it be all right if I shook her a little?” I asked her maids. I might’ve been her fiancé, but it probably wasn’t a good idea to touch a sleeping woman.

Gina nodded, so I touched Chelsea’s shoulder, then gave her a little shake.

Again, no response.

If she’d been cursed to sleep or dosed with a drug, it would’ve shown up in her appraisal, but there was nothing. *Something’s definitely off here.*

“I’m gonna use a higher [Appraisal].”

Using my Skill at Sage-level, I looked at Chelsea’s status again. It popped up as I felt a ton of mana leave my body.

[STATUS: Asleep... Trapped in a dream by a Nightmare. Unable to respond to any external stimuli.]

I recited the results out loud, and Ele was the first to speak up.

«What is a ‘Nightmare’? Is it a living being?»

Ele’s been around since the world was first formed, and he *doesn’t know what it is? I don’t understand.*

“I’ll appraise the word Nightmare a bit deeper. Gimme a minute.”

I then expanded the results further, feeling another ton of mana vanish once more as I did. I fought back the dizziness as I looked at what came up.

“It says here that a Nightmare is a being summoned from another world with the purpose of its existence being the execution of a contract. It tells you how to summon it through a dream, and that the contract terms aren’t fixed. Its abilities are interfering with dreams, showing nightmares, and showing daydreams...”

So it’s similar to the concept of nightmares from my past life, but not exactly.

While I thought to myself, Micah leaned in to look at Chelsea’s face. She was

sleeping soundly, with not a hint of distress.



“It doesn’t look like she’s having a bad dream~!”

“She’s a bit slow when it comes to pain and suffering, so there’s a chance she might not look distressed, even if she’s having a nightmare,” I said.

From her time living through abuse at the Eucharis barony, she didn’t recognize the pain of running out of mana, and had collapsed numerous times because of it.

«I hesitate to do this, but shall I use my power to force her awake?» Ele asked, lightning surrounding his cat form.

Wait, is he planning on electrocuting her awake?!

“Hold on! What will you do if violently waking her up hurts her physically?!” I asked, raising my voice.

Ele stopped radiating lightning. «True... I mustn’t harm her. But we cannot leave her as she is.»

Gina and Martha looked terrified seeing Ele’s little cat body surrounded by sparks.

“What should we do then~?” Micah murmured, her ears going flat.

Chelsea had only been asleep half a day, so there was likely time to still save her. We just needed to think of a way *other* than Ele’s lightning!

“Chelsea...”

I called out to her again, but she remained still, deep in sleep.

+++

After trying the slide out a few times, we got on the see-saw. This was all a dream, but it was fun feeling weightless. Every time my side went up, I laughed higher than I usually would have.

Once we’d had a blast on the see-saw, I heard what I thought was an adult calling out to me.

“Huh?” I gasped.

I looked around for the source, but no matter where I looked, the only people were just Cyril and me.

“Was that just my imagination?” I murmured. Suddenly, my stomach growled. “Oh... I didn’t think you could get hungry even in dreams.”

I covered my stomach with both hands as I got off the see-saw.

Cyril’s eyes widened. “How long have you known you were dreaming?”

“Around when I noticed I was in a child’s body, maybe?”

“So basically from the beginning...”

I’d been abused from a young age, so I was nothing but skin and bones as a child. There hadn’t been a single instance where I’d been anything close to a normal, pudgy child, so I was immediately aware something was off.

Cyril looked at me with an indescribable expression. “So that’s why you didn’t know what a swing, slide, or see-saw were.”

“Yes. This was the first time I’d ever played with them, but I had a lot of fun,” I said with a smile.

He tilted his head as he thought for a while, then spoke again. “This is all a dream of my creation. Your real body is sleeping somewhere else.”

I was probably still asleep in my room inside the inn-type treehouse. The last thing I was doing was chatting with Gina and Martha...

“If you know you’re dreaming, then let’s keep playing!”

Cyril beamed, then grabbed my hand and began walking. But I stood my ground.

“I’ve played enough that I’ve gotten hungry. Isn’t it time to wake up soon?” I asked.

Cyril froze in place, then shook his head. “It’s still too early! We need to play more! Lots more!”

The way he was acting was strange. Tilting my head, I asked, “Why do you want to play so bad?”

He dropped my hand. “I thought I could find out what kind of person you

were by playing...”

“Well, we’ve played a lot. Do you know what kind of person I am now?”

“I know you’re super fun to play with,” Cyril admitted, shoulders sagging, “but that’s it...”

“Then why not ask other people what kind of person I am?”

My thoughts came right out of me once again. I quickly slapped my hand over my mouth, but Cyril didn’t seem bothered. Instead, he appeared to be deep in thought, and after a while, he nodded to himself a few times.

“Yeah, that’d work... Then I’ll call in some other people.”

“How?” I asked.

“By doing *this*,” he said with a grin.

He made a throwing motion towards the ground a little bit away. A puff of smoke flew up, and an orange-haired girl with big, fluffy fox ears and a tail appeared from within it.

“Wh-Where am I~?”

The fox-eared girl’s big soft ears pointed back, and her fluffy tail stood up straight in surprise.

“I put those near your real body to sleep in order to bring them to my dream world.”

“Huh~? I thought I was just checking on Chelsea~?!”

From her familiar tone of voice and how she said my name, I realized that the fox-eared girl was Miss Micah as a child.

Cyril made another throwing motion at a different spot from Miss Micah. With another puff of smoke, an adorable boy with angelic features appeared. He had dark blue hair—reminiscent of the night sky—and big aqua eyes that drew you in. I immediately realized it was Lord Glen.

“A boy~? It kinda feels like I know him~?” little Miss Micah said.

Little Lord Glen stepped back, then stiffened at the sight of his unfamiliar surroundings. We were within earshot of each other if I were to call out to him,

but it seemed he didn't notice that Cyril and I were nearby.

"Can he not see us?" I wondered, getting a nod back from Cyril.

"I made it so they can't see past the fog," he explained, making a swirling motion with his finger. "Two should be enough, right? I'll clear the air,"

Miss Micah and Lord Glen's demeanor changed immediately.

"Now there's a red-headed boy and a pink-haired girl~!" Miss Micah said, fluffy tail wagging as she walked closer.

Little Lord Glen became even more defensive, glaring firmly at us.

"This little girl feels just like Chelsea~!" little Miss Micah commented, tilting her head.

The way her big ears are fidgeting is so adorable. And I want to reach out and touch her fluffy tail as it wags back and forth!

"Are you...Chelsea?" Lord Glen asked, edging slowly in my direction.

His voice has a high, childlike pitch, and his little furrowed brow is so cute!

"Yes, I said with a nod.

He looked above my head, then cried out in surprise, "I can't use my [Appraisal] Skill?!"

"I made this dream, so you can't use Skills or magic here," Cyril told Lord Glen from beside me.

Lord Glen looked as if he realized something, then steadied his gaze on Cyril.

"So you made this place... Which means you're the *Nightmare* that locked Chelsea in a dream... Wait, why am I saying everything I think?!"

"It's due to how I made the dream," Cyril continued, a smirk on his face. "The settings are that children cannot lie, and they say what they're thinking when they think it."

"Which means this really is Chelsea." A look of relief washed over Lord Glen's face.

Lord Glen stuck his arms out and put himself between Cyril and me. Whatever

Lord Glen was doing wasn't working since our child forms were about the same height, so I could look over his shoulder to see Cyril.

Miss Micah quickly circled around and hugged me protectively.

"If this really is Chelsea, then I'll protect her~!" she declared.

As soon as they both realized it was me, they decided to take a stand against Cyril.

"You guys know Chelsea well, right?"

Before I could even ask Lord Glen and Miss Micah why they were trying to protect me, I heard Cyril grunt. I peeked at him over Lord Glen's shoulder and saw that he was pouting. Lord Glen stepping in between us must've upset him.

"What kind of girl is she?" he continued, pointing at me.

After a moment of silence, Lord Glen spoke slowly. "I have no obligation to answer someone who trapped Chelsea in a dream."

Miss Micah nodded in agreement, increasing the tightness of her hug.

"Yeah... I didn't think they would tell me about someone important to them that easily, huh..." As Cyril eyed us, his pout disappeared, and he nodded firmly. "Okay. Then let's do this!"

He clapped his hands and the foggy forest disappeared; instead, it changed into a place surrounded by wooden board walls. The sky turned pink, with weirdly shaped clouds floating through it. Though our surroundings had been altered, I wasn't terribly surprised since we were in a dream anyway.

Lord Glen glared at Cyril.

"This is one of the mazes I made," Cyril crooned.

"A...maze?" I repeated the word questioningly.

Cyril tilted his head in worry before looking at me.

"Um, how should I explain it... It's a type of game where you get lost in a winding set of paths as you try to head to your destination? Look, you'll understand once you do it!"

I hadn't known how to play with a swing, slide, or see-saw just from sight—I

learned how by interacting with them. If I wanted to figure out how a maze worked, I just had to do one.

“There are four mazes in total. They’re split between the north, south, east, and west from the viewing platform,” Cyril continued, pointing behind us. “That’s the viewing platform, and this is the wooden maze to the west of it.”

Turning around, I saw a large, round building that looked like it’d come up to about the third floor of the Royal Research Institute. *That seems kind of big for a viewing platform...*

“There’s a stamp at the end of each maze, so use this paper to get all four of them,” he explained, pulling a paper out of his pocket and holding it out to show us.

Lord Glen, who’d been silent until now, fixed his glare upon Cyril again.

“Why should we have to do that?!” Lord Glen demanded.

“I want to know what kind of girl Chelsea is, no matter what,” Cyril replied with a grin. “I asked you guys, but you wouldn’t tell me... So I figured I could find out by seeing her play with other kids!” he said, nodding as if he was saying something brilliant. “If you get through all four mazes, I’ll let you out of the dream.”

“Really~?” Miss Micah asked, and Cyril gave her a firm nod.

“I want to know what kind of girl Chelsea is... I *have* to know. You can solve the mazes however you want. Show me how Chelsea plays with other kids!”

After he said that, Cyril vanished with a flash of light. Once he was gone, Miss Micah’s wariness seemed to disappear too, and her arms loosened from around me. I slipped out and picked up the stamping paper Cyril had dropped. On it was a big circle divided into up, down, left, and right sections. The stamps were likely supposed to go into the circle.

Oh, right... I should ask that now before I forget. I spun around, looking at both Lord Glen and Miss Micah.

“Why were you two trying to protect me?” I asked. Cyril had only played with me inside the dream. He hadn’t done anything bad.

Lord Glen gave me a puzzled look. “You know we’re *inside* a dream right now, right?”

“Yes. Cyril said he was the one to make it.” I nodded.

“Your maids told me that you weren’t waking up even though it was past noon,” he explained, anxiously putting a hand to his chin.

Apparently, Gina and Martha hadn’t been able to wake me, no matter how much they called or shook me. After many failed attempts, they asked Lord Glen to check on me.

“I used my [Appraisal] Skill on you, and it said that you were trapped in a dream by a Nightmare— something with the power to show you bad dreams.”

Cyril and I had played for a long time, and he’d asked to play even more. That might have been his way of trying to keep me here. *He was trying to trap me...*

“From how this Cyril acted, that boy was definitely the Nightmare. We don’t know what’ll happen to you if you spend any more time with him.”

Miss Micah nodded along as Lord Glen spoke.

While I understood why they’d been trying to protect me, one thing still stuck out to me.

“Cyril asked me to play more, and I realize he did it to keep me trapped in the dream, but...I haven’t had a bad dream.”

The toys I’d played with today were things I had never seen before, and Cyril played with me. He hadn’t done anything mean nor shown me anything scary. Nothing added up to being a “bad” dream, so I couldn’t see why Miss Micah and Lord Glen were so defensive.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right~! You didn’t look distressed while you were sleeping~”

“That’s true.”

Both Miss Micah and Lord Glen tilted their heads, confused. It was charming, seeing as they both looked like children right now.

“Why don’t we ask Cyril why he isn’t showing any bad dreams the next time

he appears?” I asked, and the two nodded in unison.

“We can’t be sure he’ll even answer, but let’s try. That means that right now, we should—”

“Solve these mazes so we can get out of this dream~!”

Miss Micah’s shout drowned out Lord Glen’s words.

3. The Four Mazes

For now, we decided to make our way to the stamp point in the western wood maze. However...

“Didn’t we just come through here?”

“It’s a dead end again.”

“It feels like we’re just going around in circles~!”

...We were lost. I wasn’t sure if it was because we were in a dream, but the wood grain pattern across the walls repeated the same way throughout the maze. It was impossible to tell if we were progressing, regressing, or if we’d even moved at all. The sky remained the same hue of pink, and the clouds didn’t move, so we couldn’t tell if time had passed either.

After a while, Miss Micah plopped down on the floor and sighed. “I wish we could make some markings~!”

“Yeah... It’d be easier if we could have a trail or some kind of mark to note our progress,” Lord Glen said as he sighed.

Miss Micah and Lord Glen then started pushing and pulling their arms in and out of the air before collectively sighing once more.

“We can’t use our Item Boxes, so we can’t take anything out to use~”

Both of them had time-stopping Item Boxes. They’d been trying to use them within the dream but to no avail. I also tried willing things back from the Spirit World through the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist, but that didn’t work either.

Even though we can’t use our Item Boxes, maybe we can use things we normally carry around?

“Now that I think about it...I have my pen magic tool.”

I always kept the pen-shaped magic tool my family had given me to celebrate my coming of age on my person. I took it out and tried drawing a big circle on the wooden wall closest to me.

“Oh, I was able to make a mark,” I said with a smile. “Now we’ll know we’ve already been here.”

Both Lord Glen and Miss Micah’s eyes widened.

“Wh-Why do you have your pen~?”

“We’re in a dream, right? How do you have something from reality?”

“Hm? I wonder why?”

I looked carefully at the pen. It was the same aqua blue as Lord Glen’s eyes, and it was definitely the same one I always carried. The three of us tilted our heads a little as we tried to figure out the reason.

Lord Glen groaned, then stared at the pen for a minute before sighing. He must have tried to use his [Appraisal] Skill out of habit.

“Can I borrow the pen for a second?” he asked.

“Of course.”

After I handed it to him, he drew a star on the wall before handing it right back.

“It doesn’t look like you’re the only one who can use it.”

“That’s so weird~! But now we can mark where we’ve been~”

While we didn’t know why it’d worked, it would make getting through the maze much easier. Instead of continuing to dwell on it, we decided to continue forging ahead.

Using the star Lord Glen drew as our point of origin, we began drawing circles on the walls leading down the branching paths we took. If we ran into a dead end, we’d backtrack to the branch and draw an X over the circle. This repeated over and over again...

Just as we were getting tired of walking, we made it to the room with the stamp.

“We’re finally here~!” Miss Micah threw her hands to the air in glee and ran over to it as her tail wagged adorably.

The stamp was on top of a wooden pedestal. Pressing it onto the left circle on

the piece of paper left a picture of a big tree.

“That’s the first one done—” Lord Glen said.

As soon as he said that, we heard the sound of hands clapping together in the distance. Suddenly, our surroundings changed from the stamp room to somewhere high up, surrounded by a railing. We were apparently on the viewing platform now.

“Congrats on clearing the first maze!”

Turning towards the voice, a few steps away from us was Cyril...stood on a pedestal in the middle of the platform.

Lord Glen moved in between Cyril and me again, and Miss Micah hugged me protectively.

“You’re...a Nightmare—something with the power to show people bad dreams, right?” Lord Glen asked, staring at him.

Cyril, for his part, looked puzzled, seemingly unsure how to answer such an unexpected question. After making a thinking gesture, he spoke.

“Yeah, I’m a Nightmare, and I can show bad dreams. But...it’s not like they’re the only things I can make people see.” The expression on his face gave no indication that he was lying.

“What do you mean~?” Miss Micah asked, still hugging me.

“Um... The dreams Nightmares make are like empty rooms,” Cyril explained, pointing to the floor. Before him, a table and chair appeared out of the air. Next, some steaming tea and a plate of cookies on the table, then a flower in a vase after, and lastly a plush bear appeared in the chair.

“I make things one by one with my imagination. It’s easy to imagine things I like or things that are interesting. But imagining and placing things I *don’t* like or find boring is a pain in the butt—or rather, just a pain in general...”

“Could it be...that you don’t like bad dreams?” I asked.

“I... I’d rather put down lots of cute plushes than corpses,” Cyril replied, a bitter smile forming on his face. “If I had to make trap holes, I’d rather make a flower field. And I’d rather play with someone than chase and scare them.”

Just as suddenly the table and chair appeared, they vanished.

So he makes things inside the dream by imagining them. That's like my [Seed Creation] Skill, I thought, nodding to myself. At the same time, Lord Glen seemed to realize something.

"Wait. Chelsea being able to use her pen was because she assumed it was always on her? So she imagined it?"

"Exactly. I'm impressed you realized," Cyril nodded happily. "I was the one who made the dream, so my imagination overrules everything else. But you guys can imagine things too."

"I think I get it~!"

Saying that, Miss Micah stared at the palm of her hand. When she did, a bright red apple appeared on it.

"Just like this~!" she said, showing the apple she thought up while wagging her tail.

"You're amazing too, doing it so quick!"

"I'm not 'you,' I'm Micah~!"

Miss Micah stopped hugging me and walked over to Cyril. Then, she spun around in place before giving him a smile.

Cyril looked surprised, and merely blinked in response. "What was that?"

"It's how Beastmen greet each other~!"

He mimicked her, spinning in place. "Like this?"

"Perfect~!" Miss Micah praised him, and Cyril gave her a smile.

As I watched on and thought about how nice it was to see, Cyril suddenly came to his senses.

"A-Anyway, you've got three stamps left. Do your best to get them all!" he said bashfully, then disappeared.

"Cyril's gone~ Where did he go~?"

Miss Micah's shoulders drooped, and she wandered around the viewing

platform. Just as I was thinking what to say to her, she suddenly started running.

"Amazing~!" she cried, standing near the edge and gazing off to the distance.

"What does she see?"

"Let's go ask."

Lord Glen and I both tilted our heads in confusion before approaching her. After we reached the edge, we followed her gaze and saw a field full of sunflowers.

"Wow...that's so pretty. Is it a maze made of sunflowers?" I murmured.

Lord Glen nodded back. "Looks like it."

To the right of the sunflower field was the maze made of wooden planks.

"That's the western wooden maze we were in before, which means this one's the southern sunflower maze."

Thinking back to what Cyril had said, I nodded at Lord Glen's observation. To the left of the sunflower field was...a pitch-black area.

"Is that dark spot a maze?" I asked.

"It's probably one we have to do entirely in the dark. We'd likely have to follow the wall, depending on what little lights we have, sounds we hear, and wind we feel... Though we won't know until we get there."

I imagined walking in utter darkness. *I'd definitely run into things.*

"It seems hard..." I sighed.

"What's the last one~?" Miss Micah wondered, having overheard our conversation.

All of us turned to look right behind us. Directly across from the sunflower field was a maze with walls of ice.

"That one looks cold~!"

"We'd freeze wearing what we've got on now," I murmured.

Lord Glen put a hand to his chin as he thought. "It'd probably be hard for us

to try the other mazes after being chilled, so we should do that one last."

"I agree~!" Miss Micah replied, looking relieved.

"Then which one should we try next? The sunflower maze or the dark one?" I asked the two of them.

Grinning, Lord Glen said. "There's something I want to try, so can we do the sunflower maze first?"

"That's fine with me."

"Okey-dokey~!"

Both Miss Micah and I nodded.

"So, how do we get to it~?"

Looking around, we couldn't see any stairs leading down from the viewing platform. We were up as high as the third floor of the Royal Research Institute, so there was no way we could jump down.

"Maybe there's a staircase along the outside?" Lord Glen suggested.

We circled the whole platform along the railing, but nothing resembling a staircase could be found.

While the three of us worried about what to do, my gaze suddenly fell on the spot under the pedestal in the middle of the platform.

"Isn't that a hole there?"

Lord Glen and Miss Micah both followed my gaze to the pedestal.

"You're right~"

We got closer and saw that the hole led to a spiraling slide connecting to the ground below.

"So we get down by sliding, huh?" Lord Glen deduced, seeming impressed.

The slide's top half had a glass-like covering, making it a tube so no one would fly out while sliding down.

"I'll go down first to make sure it's safe." Not sparing even a second to stop him, Lord Glen slid down the slide. A little bit later, we heard his voice from the

bottom. “It was fine going down, so you guys come down too.”

“Got it~” Miss Micah shouted loudly in response.

“Miss Micah, you can go first,” I said.

She shook her head. “You should slide down and meet with His Highness first~ If you went last, that boy might come and take you away~!”

“All right. I’ll head down first.” I nodded, climbing onto the slide. “I don’t think Cyril would do that to me though...” My whisper disappeared as I made my way down.

The slide spiraled from the inside out before going straight back to the center. It was longer than the one I’d played with Cyril on, and was really fun.

Feeling quite satisfied, I got off at the bottom where Lord Glen was waiting.

“You aren’t hurt, are you?”

He looked from the top of my head down to my toes, checking that I wasn’t harmed anywhere. After confirming I was okay, he sighed in relief. Back in reality, he definitely would’ve used his [Appraisal] Skill to do it. It made me feel warm inside to think he treasured me so much.

A moment later, Miss Micah came sliding down.

“This slide is so fun~! I wanna do it again~!”

It seemed she’d loved the slide, and jumped up and down in place as her tail wagged.

Under the viewing platform at the bottom of the slide was a hall with doors in all four directions leading to the mazes. The one to the west was open, and we could see the wooden maze through it. We moved to the southern door to the sunflower maze.

“Okay, let’s open it,” Lord Glen said before making an attempt. He was having trouble doing it in a child’s body.

“I’ll help!”

“Micah will help too~!”

We worked together to push at the door and finally got it open. On the other

side was a wall of sunflowers taller than us.

“It was pretty seeing it from above on the viewing platform, but it’s amazing seeing it from the side too!” I marveled, clutching my hands together.

“If Chelsea likes it this much, I should make a sunflower maze back in my territory,” Lord Glen muttered beside me.

“Huh?”

I looked at him in shock and saw him covering his bright red face with both hands.

“It sucks having everything I think come out of my mouth while I’m in a kid’s body...” he continued, squatting down.

“I’m happy knowing you’re always thinking about me, Lord Glen.”

As I put something I typically would have trouble saying into words, he peeked back at me through the openings between his fingers.

“If it makes you happy...I’ll try to say things like that more,” Lord Glen said bashfully, standing back up.

“Hm? Where did Miss Micah go?”

I looked around us and spotted her stealthily watching us from the shadows of the sunflowers a short distance ahead.

“It’d be rude to interrupt your lovey-dovey time~” she said, making my face redden too.

“L-Let’s go.”

“Y-Yes!”

With both of us blushing, Lord Glen and I ran to where Miss Micah was waiting.

The maze was made of sunflowers instead of the boards that had made up the wooden maze. There were tall flowers, with shorter ones in between, making it so we couldn’t slip through.

“There are no walls, so we can’t mark where we’ve gone~” Miss Micah commented, ears drooping as she stared at the sunflowers.

“It’s okay. My pen can also write in the air,” I said, using my magic pen to draw a big circle beside a nearby sunflower. “We can get through the maze the same way as before with this.”

But when I said that, Lord Glen raised a hand.

“I mentioned it before, but there’s something I want to try. Can I?”

Miss Micah and I nodded at him.

With a grin, Lord Glen walked a little bit away and pointed to a spot on the ground without any sunflowers, just like Cyril had done. Soon enough, a golem several times taller than the sunflowers suddenly appeared. It looked like a cross between a golem Lord Tris had made with [Earth Magic] before and the artificial golems from the Celesark Shrine of Trials. But what differentiated this golem was its long arms and big hands.

I was utterly stunned by how large the golem was. My mouth gaped as I stared up at it. Miss Micah was similarly surprised, with her tail all puffed out.

“Wow, I really can make something right out of my imagination,” Lord Glen said with a big smile, looking at his golem. “This is a super nice golem who’s gonna help us.”

The golem nodded in agreement, which calmed us down.

“It’s kind of cute.”

“How charming~!”

When the two of us said that, the golem bashfully covered its face with its hands.

“So, how will it help us?” I asked, looking up at the embarrassed golem.

“It wouldn’t be nice to rip the sunflowers up, you know~?”

Lord Glen smiled wryly at Miss Micah’s words. “I wouldn’t go around destroying a view Chelsea liked. The golem is gonna carry us to the spot with the stamp.”

“Carry us?” I repeated.

He looked up at the golem and ordered, “Golem, put both your palms up on

the ground so we can climb on.”

The golem crouched down, cupping its hands like it was scooping water.

“Okay, let’s get on.”

After climbing up on the golem’s palms first, Lord Glen pulled Miss Micah and me up.

“It might shake a bit, so hold onto something.”

I held on to Lord Glen’s clothing as he stood beside me while Miss Micah clutched onto one of the golem’s fingers.

“Golem, stand up with us in the palms of your hands,” Lord Glen commanded.

“We can see so far from here.”

“We’re so high~!”

Miss Micah’s and my voices echoed through the sunflower maze.

“Where’s the stamp?”

Lord Glen looked down on the sunflower field as he stood on the golem’s palm. Miss Micah and I gingerly followed suit, so we wouldn’t fall.

“Over there, maybe?” I pointed out a spot in the distance with an opening in the sunflowers.

“Okay, we’ll head over there.” Lord Glen smiled and nodded at me. “Golem, take us over to that spot without sunflowers, and don’t step on any of them.”



Under Lord Glen's orders, the golem began walking. It was adorable watching it move forward while minding the flowers. Before we knew it, we'd arrived at the sunflower maze's stamp.

After the golem put us back down, I stamped the bottom circle on the piece of paper.

"That's the second one."

Once I'd checked to see the sunflower stamp was firmly imprinted, we heard a clapping sound from somewhere again, and we were brought back to the viewing platform.

Next to the pedestal in the center of the viewing platform was Cyril; his eyes sparkling and seeming quite excited.

Lord Glen and Miss Micah started to move into position to protect me, but before they had a chance, Cyril was already standing right in front of Lord Glen.

"I hadn't even thought of using a golem to get through the maze! You're amazing for being able to imagine something that big!" Cyril chattered at high speed. "What can it do other than carry people? It's got long arms and big hands. Can it fly?"

Shocked by Cyril's enthusiasm, Lord Glen stood there with his lips flapping.

"Ah! Tell me your name too!"

"Glen..."

"My name is Cyril! Nice to meet you! So, about my earlier questions..."

Lord Glen had an indescribable expression as he started answering Cyril's excited questions.

"Uh... It can dig up the ground to plant flowers and play with animals. It can fly in the sky too, and probably attack..."

"Wow, that's cool! How did you imagine it so well?!"

Cyril piled on more questions as Lord Glen answered them. The more this went on, the more Lord Glen seemed to drop his apprehension against the Nightmare. He even seemed to open up to Cyril—chatting about the golem and

also what other imagined things they could make. It was cute to see, especially since they were both in the form of children.

Miss Micah and I stood a short distance away, watching them.

“His Highness said he was a Nightmare, but he looks like a normal kid to me~” Miss Micah commented, her voice quiet so that only I could hear her.

“I think so too. I wonder if he has his reason for all of this?”

“He was asking us to tell him about you, Chelsea~ Maybe that has something to do with it~!”

“You may be right.”

“I wanna know what, but it seems like it’d be hard to ask right now~”

Lord Glen and Cyril continued their lively conversation while Miss Micah and I just looked out at the sunflower maze from above until they finished.

+++

Once Lord Glen and Cyril had finished chatting, we headed down the viewing platform via the spiral slide, stopping in the entrance hall. This time, Cyril came down there with us.

“I was right to make this slide!”

“It’s super fun~!” Miss Micah replied to Cyril’s comment, tail wagging.

“I like it too. It’s a lot of fun,” I said, getting a happy smile back from the boy.

“Which maze are you going for next?”

We answered Cyril by pointing to the black-painted door.

“We’re doing the maze of darkness to the east,” Lord Glen said.

Cyril put a hand to his lips. “Just so you know, this dream already has Mr. Sun in the sky, so you can’t make another one. Also, lights such as lamps won’t do anything to get rid of the darkness. Do your best!”

With that last warning, he disappeared.

“What a busy guy, appearing and disappearing like that...” Lord Glen said with an amused expression as he looked at the spot Cyril had been standing.

We stood at the maze of darkness’s door and worked together to push it open. Beyond the door was pitch black, with no light from the viewing platform seeping in.

“It’s kinda weird~!”

Looking closer, the border between the door and the darkness was distinct.

“It’s less sheer darkness and more like black fog,” Lord Glen commented, sticking one arm through the door to check. Miss Micah and I mimicked him, putting our hands through and seeing the parts that passed the door be swallowed by darkness.

“You really can’t see anything.”

“It looks like Micah’s arm is gone~!”

“We likely won’t be able to see each other when we go in. Let’s hold hands so we don’t get separated.”

Saying that, Lord Glen held out his left hand to me, which I took with my right.

“I’ll hold Chelsea’s hand too~!” Miss Micah said, gently grabbing my left hand.

With our hands together, I spoke, “Let’s go.”

Nervously, the three of us all stepped into the darkness.

“You really can’t see anything...”

Just as Glen had guessed, we couldn’t see each other inside the maze of darkness.

“Holding hands was a good idea,” I murmured, getting a light squeeze from Lord Glen’s hand instead of a verbal answer.

“Now, how are we gonna get through this... There’s no wind, so it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to use that to figure out our route.”

Lord Glen had waved his free hand around to check for a breeze.

“I imagined up a lamp, but it really doesn’t light up~”

Lamps didn’t work, just as Cyril had warned us. It seemed Miss Micah had tossed the lamp she’d imagined as it hit the floor with a *clang*.

“What should we do...”

I could hear both Lord Glen and Miss Micah let out troubled groans as they thought to themselves. As I listened to their voices and stared into the darkness, I noticed a tiny light shining from farther inside.

“Isn’t there something shining over there?”

“Where?”

“Where do you mean~?”

The two of them asked in unison.

“Um... It’s hard to describe in words, so I’ll walk towards it.”

After I said that, I pulled them both by the hand as I headed towards the little light.

“Having you lead me by the hand is a new experience...” Lord Glen said, making me embarrassed.

Once we’d walked a bit closer, it seemed like he and Miss Micah saw the little light too—so faint that it seemed that it might disappear.

“It’s small, but something *is* shining.”

“It’s an itty bitty light~”

Eventually, we reached the little light, and I squatted down while Lord Glen and Miss Micah leaned in.

“A shining...mushroom?”

The source of the faint light had apparently been a small mushroom.

“A light this little wouldn’t be enough to brighten our surroundings up as a lamp would.”

I could faintly see Miss Micah nod at Lord Glen’s observation.

“It’d be great if there were other mushrooms~” she replied, looking around. “I think something’s glowing over there too~!”

This time, she was the one to pull us along towards the little light. Again, we found a mushroom glowing at our feet.

“Maybe we’re supposed to navigate the maze by following the shining mushrooms?”

“That might be it. We haven’t got any other clues, so let’s search as we go.”

“I agree~!”



After that, we found a few more glowing mushrooms but had yet to locate the stamp.

“I’m worried whether we’ll make it to the stamp or not~” Miss Micah said, hugging my arm as she shook.

“If only we could think of something to light this darkness up, but I have no ideas,” Lord Glen said with a sigh.

“The sun and lamps don’t make things brighter, and the only things that do are these little shining mushrooms...” I murmured what I was thinking.

I then remembered that I’d made seeds for shining grass before with my Skill. When grown, they would glow or go dark at my signal, and I had planted them around the base of the Spirit Tree in the capital, so that area had gotten pretty bright.

“Wouldn’t things light up if we covered the ground in the glowing mushrooms, like the shining grass seeds?”

As soon as the words left my lips, tiny lights started popping up around us. The little lights multiplied, and before we knew it, the entire floor was covered with glowing mushrooms.

“There are tons of glowing mushrooms now~?!” Miss Micah cried, tail wagging.

“It *does* get bright when there are so many of them we have nowhere to walk,” Lord Glen said, surprised. He picked up a single mushroom from nearby and looked at it in amusement.

It was a relief to be able to see both of them clearly.

“But we can’t walk like this...” I murmured, looking at the shining mushrooms. “I’d feel bad if we stepped on them, so it’d be nice if there was an open path in them to the spot where the stamp is...”

When I said what I was thinking, some mushrooms vanished, leaving a straight path.

“You’re probably so good at realizing your ideas because you have to imagine things clearly for your Skill,” Lord Glen said, impressed.

“It’s fun seeing things appear just as you imagined them,” I replied excitedly, only for him to slap a hand over his face before screaming.

“Chelsea is just too cute!”

“It’s rough having everything you think come out of your mouth~,” Miss Micah said, giving Lord Glen a pitying look.

I just stayed silent, not knowing what to say.

After that, we followed the path without shining mushrooms to the stamp. There, we found lots of adorable-looking shining mushrooms that were big enough to hold.

4. The Lonesome Nightmare

After obtaining the third stamp, we went from being surrounded by glowing mushrooms in the maze of darkness to being on top of the viewing platform. Cyril was sitting in the middle of the platform with his legs dangling off the side.

“You finished the third maze. Congratulations,” he said listlessly before letting out a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Cyril averted his eyes and shook his head. “Nothing. Next up is the last one... Have fun!”

After saying that, he vanished.

“He seemed distracted,” murmured Lord Glen as he stared at the spot the Nightmare had disappeared from.

“Maybe he has something else going on right now?”

“Let’s ask him about it once we clear the last maze~!”

“Yes, let’s,” I said, nodding firmly to Miss Micah.

We then went down the long slide to the hall beneath and gathered in front of the northern door to the final maze. Together we pushed open the door with a picture of ice on it and were met with cold air.

“I-It’s so cold~!”

Miss Micah shivered and hugged her tail tight. I didn’t think it was very cold, but when I looked at Lord Glen, he was enduring the temperature change by gritting his teeth.

“Let’s get through this maze as fast as possible,” Lord Glen grumbled.

“Agreed~!” Miss Micah replied, nodding multiple times.

As the three of us walked into the maze of ice, we realized how transparent the walls truly were.

“You can clearly see the path on the other side.”

The foxwoman poked the wall of ice beside her with a finger. “It really is freezing~!”

I was curious about how cold it must be, so I mimicked her. The wall didn’t feel that cold to me, so I put my whole palm on the ice.

“I...guess it’s cold?”

The sensation was strange. It felt as if my hand was getting colder, but not, at the same time. *I wonder why that is,* I thought as I tilted my head.

Lord Glen rushed to grab my wrist and pulled me away from the wall. When I looked at my hand, I saw that my palm was bright red.

“Chelsea, you have a hard time noticing your own pain or suffering, so you shouldn’t touch the ice too much. You don’t notice yourself getting too cold, after all...”

Seeing his sad face made me finally realize my hand was so cold that it hurt.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. You’re always so kind...”

Not only did I say my thanks, but I also vocalized what I was thinking.

Lord Glen seemed to be attempting to hide his bashfulness, and he hastily imagined winter clothing like hats, scarves, gloves, and coats into existence.

“Here. Put these on and warm up. I made some for you too, Micah.”

“Thanks~!”

I took the winter clothes from him and struggled to put them on. It was harder than I thought it would be to maneuver as a child, but I eventually got myself dressed up.

I glanced at the wall of ice and noticed that the place my hand had been was still visible.

“My handprint is still there...”

“The spot you touch must have melted,” Lord Glen commented.

Miss Micah’s eyes sparkled. “Micah wants to try~!”

After saying that, she took off a glove. Bearing the cold, she briefly touched

the ice before pulling her hand away. In the spot she'd placed her hand was another handprint.

I smiled at her, and she returned it with a smile of her own.

"It'd be interesting if we could leave other shapes too~"

I nodded at Miss Micah. "If the ice melts just with the touch of a finger, we could draw lots of other things."

Once the thought had left my lips, I touched the ice wall with my gloved hand. I drew a grid inside a circle, and surrounded that with petals to finish the picture. I was happy at how nicely I'd been able to draw a sunflower.

"You had your glove on," Lord Glen spoke from beside me, "but the ice still melted so you could draw."

When I looked closer, my sunflower picture was just as visible as my handprint was.

"Maybe if we imagine it, the ice walls around us might all melt too..."

I hadn't even finished my sentence before the walls of ice surrounding us began quickly melting.

"Huh?"

"Uwah!"

"Amazing~!"

In a few blinks, the ice had vanished. Once it was all gone, we could see a wooden pedestal with a stamp on it.

"I didn't think it would melt away just from thinking of the possibility..." I was stunned.

Impressed, Miss Micah nodded. "Your imagination is just that amazing, Chelsea~!"

"Magic-type Skills require imagination to be used. You should be proud."

Hearing both of their praises made me happy, and I giggled.

And so, the three of us headed straight to the stamp pedestal.

“We finished it so easily~” Miss Micah said.

I stamped the paper, and our surroundings changed in an instant. It was the same foggy forest where I’d first met Cyril. The only difference now being Miss Micah and Lord Glen on either side of me. Before us stood Cyril, but he had a downtrodden expression.

“You collected all of the stamps. Congratulations on clearing the mazes,” he said, forcing a smile.

“Why do you look so sad, Cyril?” I asked.

“Because I promised to let you out once you finished the mazes... I’m gonna be all alone again.”

“Alone?”

When I tilted my head questioningly, he looked hesitant for a second before answering.

“My real body all alone is in a decaying village, in front of a huge burnt tree...”

After saying that, he started talking about Nightmares.

“Nightmares belong to a world different from this one...”

Their world hadn’t developed as fast as the world’s creator god had wanted. The creator god grew impatient and cursed the Nightmares to travel to other worlds, gather information, and return to use that information to develop their home world.

“The curse is really strong, so we’re able to tell people in other worlds how to summon us through their dreams. When they really summon us, we form a contract as thanks... Then, we observe the world we were summoned to until the contract is completed.”

Cyril pointed to the ground and used his imagination to line up various things. A mysterious object that had four wheels like a carriage, but nowhere to tie a horse to and no seat for the driver. Something with fluffy fur, but a fiendish face. A building made of a circle, square, and triangle all put together. They were all things I’d never seen before.

“That’s a car...” Lord Glen muttered, getting a nod from Cyril.

“Those are all from worlds I’ve been to so far,” the Nightmare said. Sighing deeply, he continued, “I was summoned to another world like normal...your world. But for some reason, something arbitrarily contracted with me...”

“What were the terms of the contract?” asked Lord Glen.

Cyril shook his head. “I don’t know. I was only sure it happened because I couldn’t move from near the burnt tree, and I wasn’t getting hungry. But I don’t know who the contract was with or what the terms had been...”

“Huh?” I cried out in surprise.

Hearing me, Cyril got another lonesome look on his face.

“Since I don’t know the terms, I can’t complete them. This means I can’t return to my home world, and I can’t even ask to have the terms changed because I can’t move from beside the burnt tree. There’s no one here!” he said, looking at me with hope in his eyes. “Just when I’d given up, someone...Chelsea came close enough for me to show dreams to! And she has the power to overwrite the contract! I wanted to contract with her as soon as I could, but I remembered that my mother told me to always check what kind of person someone is before I do. That’s what I’ve been doing. I was checking.”

“So that’s why you said you wanted to know what kind of person I was...” I thought aloud, nodding my head. Finally I understood the motivations behind his actions until now.

Cyril burst into tears. “Please! Come to where my real body is and contract with me! I’m just so lonely!”

Seeing him cry like that made my heart ache for him.

“I want to find Cyril’s real body,” I said.

Lord Glen and Miss Micah gave me resigned looks.

“We can’t leave him like this~”

“He doesn’t seem like a bad guy, so let’s find him.”

Hearing their words, Cyril clutched his hands together in a prayer-like fashion.

Looking at the three of us, he proclaimed, “Thank you! I’ll be waiting!”

As he spoke, my consciousness floated away...

+++

When I opened my eyes, I saw a wood-grained ceiling and Ele in his Spirit form looking down at me in worry. As I lifted my heavy body from my bed, I saw Gina and Martha standing near the doorway, looking relieved.

“I’m back...” I murmured.

Ele sighed deeply, silently floating away and looking to both of my sides.

I followed his gaze. I saw Lord Glen in the bed to my right and Miss Micah in the bed to my left. Lord Glen had his right hand to his forehead in a thinking pose, while Miss Micah gave me a little wave.

Back in the dream, Cyril had told me that he put people near my body to sleep to bring them in. Lord Glen and Miss Micah must have been hurriedly tucked into the beds when they suddenly fell asleep.

“We had come to check on you, having been told that you weren’t waking up,” Ele said. “But then Glen and Micah suddenly fell asleep as well... Why must you shock me so?”

Contrary to his words, Ele looked incredibly relieved.

“I’m sorry for worrying you...”

“It isn’t your fault, Lady Chelsea. But how were you able to return from within your dreams?” Ele asked.

I explained what had happened inside my dreams to the Spirit, with Lord Glen and Miss Micah adding their own tidbits here and there.

“I see... So after completing the mazes, you’ll be rescuing the Nightmare...” Ele summarized. “Do you know where the Nightmare’s true body is?”

I shook my head. “We don’t know the exact location. He just said that he was all alone in a decaying village, in front of a huge burnt tree...”

“A decaying village where he’s all alone would probably be called a ghost

village~” Miss Micah chimed in.

Lord Glen pulled out a map of the surrounding area.

“He said that Chelsea had come close enough to him to show her dreams. That means we should be able to find where Cyril is by looking where any ghost villages are, using the inn-type treehouse as a central point,” he said, pointing to the spot we were camping on the map and using his pointer finger and thumb to draw a circle. “First, we should ask in Ilnato about any nearby ghost villages.”

Nodding at his words, Miss Micah and I got out of bed to prepare to leave.

“May I interject?” My maid Gina raised her hand, despite not usually speaking up in situations like this.

“What is it?” Lord Glen asked, urging her to speak.

“The sun has already set, and it is now a time that could be described as the middle of the night. I believe it may be best to leave your investigation until the sun has risen.”

The space inside the treehouse was warped, so there were no windows. This also meant that we couldn’t tell what time it was.

“We’d been sleeping that long...”

Miss Micah seemed to realize something, and cried out, “I hadn’t gotten anything ready to prepare dinner~!”

“The maids cooked something, so we’re all fed. It’s all right,” Martha said with a giggle.

“If it’s already that late, we’ll check things out tomorrow,” Lord Glen concluded.

Everyone present nodded at his words, and we decided to wait until the morning.

+++

The next day, after finishing breakfast, we asked Ilnato's mayor if there were any ghost villages nearby.

"I seem to remember hearing that a settlement to the west of the village had been abandoned long before I was even born."

The mayor had mentioned that he'd taken over the job a few years prior. At his age, and with his graying hair, he was probably older than His Majesty the King. We asked him for more details, and he told us that the settlement had been aging and losing population. At one point, a forest fire caused by a lightning strike burned the whole place down. Instead of rebuilding, the citizens all moved to Ilnato.

"It should be around here if I recall correctly." He spread out a map on the drawing-room table, pointing to where the settlement had been.

We thanked him for his time and immediately set out for the village.

"I'm good in forests~!"

Since no one had been to the settlement in years, the road had become overgrown with grass and trees. Miss Micah showed us the easiest path to walk as we progressed through the forest.

As we continued, minding our steps, a charred stone wall came into view.

"This is apparently the edge of the settlement. That wall was the foundation of a house," Lord Glen said after staring intently at the stones, telling us the appraisal results.

"I wonder where Cyril is?"

Looking around, we could only see the stone wall and forest trees. There was no big, burnt tree in sight.

"It must be further in~"

Nodding at Miss Micah's words, we headed deeper into the ghost village. After we passed a fifth stone wall, we saw the charred remains of something large in the distance.

"Is that the burnt tree he mentioned?"

“It has to be~!”

We continued forward. Past a seventh stone wall was a clearing, and we could clearly see a massive, charred tree.

“Heeeeey! Over here!”

At the base of the tree was a child waving at us, with red hair sticking out of a black hooded scarf.



“Cyril!”

As we all ran over, Cyril smiled happily.

“You really came!”

“Of course we did~!” Miss Micah said, puffing her chest out.

Ele, who’d been following us in Spirit form, suddenly pointed at the burnt tree and exclaimed, “How in the world has this happened to you?! This here is a Spirit Tree!”

Lord Glen gasped, his eyes darting to the tree.

“He’s right. It really is a Spirit Tree,” he said, reading off the results of his appraisal. “It’s apparently on the brink of death, and burned down after being struck by lightning. While it has lost its ability to function as a Spirit Tree, it will still remain as one until it’s returned to the earth.”

Ele floated up to the blackened tree and touched it softly. Frowning, he sighed deeply. “As I mentioned previously, Spirit Trees have minds. After this tree burned down, the Spirits, humans, animals, and plants around it all disappeared. In its loneliness, it summoned that Nightmare.”

Cyril tilted his head in confusion at Ele.

“Wait a sec! Who’s this floaty guy? And trees in this world can talk?” he asked, pointing at the Spirit.

Nodding, Ele puffed his chest out towards Cyril. “I am Element, King of the Spirits. I am contracted to Lady Chelsea.”

“I’m Cyril the Nightmare. I’m gonna be contracting to Lady Chelsea in a bit!” Cyril introduced himself, breathing heavily in excitement.

I gave Cyril a simple explanation of Spirit Trees and Spirits.

“I understand that it’s a special Spirit Tree. But how did it summon me?” Cyril asked.

“The summoning circle descended from on high like a divine revelation after the tree was burned,” Ele answered. “The tree utilized this by carving the circle into itself. It apologizes, as it had no idea that the contract would be made

automatically upon summoning you, thus trapping you beside it."

"I wonder why the contract was automatic? And what was the contract anyway?"

Ele shook his head. "The tree knows not. Do the appraisal results say anything?"

"A basic appraisal didn't even mention that it was contracted. I might find things out by appraising it deeper," Lord Glen said, staring at the blackened tree. A few moments later, he let out the breath he'd been holding, seemingly finished with the Sage-level [Appraisal]. "The contract terms are returning the Spirit Tree to the earth, and staying by its side until then. The contract length is however long it takes for the tree to be reduced to soil."

I tilted my head, confused. "*Can* Spirit Trees be returned to the earth?"

Spirit Trees were usually glass-like and sparkling, so I didn't know how easily it could become soil.

At my question, Ele touched the giant tree again, and his expression clouded. "Spirit Trees on the verge of death can be returned to the earth by the prayers of the Spirit Tree of Origin's Maiden."

"Who's the Maiden of the Spirit Tree of Origin?" Cyril asked.

Ele looked away. There was only one person that could make him respond like that.

"Sakura..." I concluded.

Ele gave me a small nod. "The first-generation Spirit Tree of Origin called her Sakura back in the Demonic Forest, so there's no mistaking it."

Sakura was the Proxy that the creator gods had tasked with making this world abundant, and was currently in her manor within the Demonic Forest. The Spirits had a barrier around it, so she couldn't leave.

"So that means we can't return the burnt Spirit Tree to the earth right now, and thus Cyril's contract can't be completed," Lord Glen summarized.

"We might not be able to complete the contract, but Chelsea can overwrite it! I won't have to be all alone anymore!" Cyril cried.

I tilted my head in thought. *It's true that if Cyril's contract is overwritten and he comes with us, he won't be alone. But what about the charred Spirit Tree on the verge of death? If Cyril's contract is overwritten, he'll leave, and the tree will be all alone again until it's able to return to the earth.* With all this in mind, I was at a loss as to what to do.

"If only we could grant the Spirit Tree's wish..." I whispered.

I clutched my hands together as if I was praying. Then, the back of my left hand suddenly heated up, and an image of a cherry blossom appeared on it.

"I feel Sakura's mana!"

"Could that be your crest as a Grand Saintess?"

"It's so pretty~!"

As Ele, Lord Glen, and Miss Micah spoke, I felt a warm but invisible flow coming from my chest.

Thinking back, when I'd been given the cherry blossom crest, I'd been told that Sakura's mana would flow into me for the ten years after being appointed a Grand Saintess. The warm, invisible feeling must have been her mana.

"Sakura's mana has begun to envelop the Spirit Tree!" Ele reported happily as the near-death tree fell before our eyes, becoming a mound of earth.

It seemed that "the prayers of the Spirit Tree of Origin's Maiden" really meant Sakura's mana.

"Looks like it's gone back to the earth," Lord Glen said, telling us the appraisal results after staring at the mound of soil for a moment.

Before I knew it, the cherry blossom crest on the back of my left hand had vanished, and I couldn't feel Sakura's mana anymore.

"Her mana is just as warm as ever..." Ele said, a forlorn expression on his face as he looked at the fallen Spirit Tree.

"I'm glad we were able to do that for the Spirit Tree..." I said, sighing in relief.

"Amazing! The contract's been fulfilled, so I can contract with whomever I want. But I still want it to be you, Chelsea! Contract with me!" Cyril's face was

flushed bright red.

Cyril hadn't seemed like a bad person when I'd played with him in my dream. There probably wasn't any reason *not* to contract with him.

But just as I was about to answer him, Lord Glen put up both hands to stop me.

"Wait."

Cyril gave him a perplexed look.

"Before you contract with Chelsea, let me use my [Appraisal] Skill on you to see what kind of person you really are," Lord Glen said with a serious look.

The Nightmare tilted his head. "You said that before. What is 'Appraisal'? Is it a Status Check or something?" he asked, using a term I wasn't familiar with.

Lord Glen nodded. "Based on the Skill level, it'll show me your name, gender, race, titles, health conditions—lots of things."

When he heard that, Cyril made a little thinking motion before nodding. "If it gives you info, then you should use it. It'd be relieving to know things are okay when making a contract. But..." He trailed off as he scratched his cheek, "...Chelsea'll learn that I'm actually a girl and also older than her, huh?"

"You were a girl?!" I cried in surprise.

"You don't look older than Chelsea~?" commented Miss Micah as she tilted her head.

Visually, Cyril wore a hooded scarf, had a baggy shirt and pants, and long red bangs blocking half of their face. They looked like a child, and I couldn't tell if they were a girl *or* older than me.

"Nightmares stop aging once they reach a certain age, which in my case, was when I was a child. My family had the idea of me dressing up in a way that hides my gender. They thought it'd stop people from looking down on me when I was summoned, which happened when I wore girly clothes," Cyril continued, blushing.

"I see..."

“I like dressing in a gender-ambiguous way, so I’d appreciate it if you just kept interacting with me the same way you did before.”

I nodded.

“I’ve got permission from the person herself, so I’m gonna use my [Appraisal] Skill,” Lord Glen announced, staring at the spot above Cyril’s head.

“What does it say? Does it say I’m a baddie?” She asked curiously.

“You have no criminal past. You’re from a different world, and with a ton of abilities I’ve never seen before. Honestly, I’m super interested in them...” Lord Glen kept staring above her head.

Cyril smiled hesitantly. “So...it’ll be okay for me to contract with Chelsea now, right?”

“Yeah,” Lord Glen affirmed with a nod.

Following his words, I said, “Then...what should our contract be?”

“Oh yeah, we hadn’t thought of any terms... What do you want to do?”

Cyril and I looked at each other.

“Can the terms be something unrelated to dreams?” Lord Glen asked.

“Yes, as long as it’s something I can do. If possible, I wanna go somewhere with lots of people.”

“Why~?”

“With lots of people around me, I’ll be able to peek into more people’s dreams and learn about this world,” Cyril explained.

“So the area in which you can show dreams is the same as the area in which you can peek into dreams too?” Lord Glen asked.

“Yup!”

“Okay.” I nodded. “If Cyril wants to broaden her knowledge about our world... Then how about making the contract be that you’ll tell me what you learn?”

“That sounds great! For how long?”

“Until you feel that you want to go back home.”

Cyril blinked at me in confusion. “Huh? Is it really okay to make it so favorable to me?!”

“Do you find it favorable towards you?” I asked.

We couldn’t decide, so we looked over to Lord Glen.

“It benefits Chelsea too, so it’s okay,” he said decisively, flashing a child-like smile.

“If you say so, Glen... Then let’s get contracting!”

Saying that, Cyril started making strange movements with both her hands. Spinning them, lifting them, lowering them... After she did, a bright white cloud big enough to fit in my arms appeared before me.

“This is a Contract Cloud. It’s made using daydreams. Here, put both hands inside it.”

Following her instructions, I slowly inserted my hands into the white Contract Cloud.

“Staying like that, say the terms of the contract and the length.”

“The terms are that Cyril will tell me what she learns. The length is until Cyril decides that she wants to go home.”

When the words left my mouth, the white Contract Cloud squished down, becoming a candy-like white chunk on the palm of my hand. Cyril picked up the now bite-size cloud and popped it into her mouth, smiling happily after she swallowed it with a gulp.

“Contract, contracted! I can finally use my *real* powers!”

What does she mean by “real powers”? I wondered.

Suddenly, Cyril’s body began rapidly shrinking.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“She’s so teeny tiny now~?!”

As we watched in shock, Cyril gradually shrank to about the size of my thumb.

“With a proper contract, Nightmares can alter their size or make themselves invisible,” she explained, summoning a fluffy cloud about the size of my palm and jumping onto it. Then, she came up in front of my eyes. “And by hopping on my Floating Cloud, I can collect info more easily.”

Puffing her chest out as if she was saying how amazing she was, she flew around my field of vision on her cloud.

“You being as big as my thumb and being able to fly around reminds me of Root...”

The Communication Spirit Root looked like a ten-year-old boy with butterfly-like wings on his back and was about the same size as Cyril. *The way she’s flying around is just like Root.*

Just as I thought that, the aforementioned Spirit flew out of the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist.

«You called, Lady Chelsea?» he said, flying around me before noticing Cyril on her cloud. «Huh?! There’s a girl who’s smaller than me!»

He slowly approached her, trying not to cause a scare.

Cyril looked back at Root, eyes widening in surprise.

«My name is Root, and I’m a Communication Spirit. Nice to meet you!»

“I’m Cyril. I’m shocked you realized my gender.”

Normally, the only people who could hear the voices of Spirits were those contracted to them, people blessed with the guidance of the Spirits, and people with certain Skills. I’d thought Cyril wouldn’t be able to hear Root, but apparently, I was wrong.

“Nightmares are beings from another world, so many unexpected phenomena may occur,” murmured Ele, who’d been silent for a while. “You’ve gone and made another contract...”

“Should I have not?”

“It is fine, as long as it doesn’t have any negative effects on you,” he said before turning back into his cat form and jumping on my shoulder.

5. Returning to the Capital

The day after I contracted with Cyril, we were back on the road to the capital. Before leaving, we met with Ilnato's mayor to thank him for lending us a spot to camp and to inform him of our departure.

The detour was better maintained than expected, and we got through it without much trouble. Eventually, we made it to the highway we'd originally intended to take and arrived at the capital a few days later than we had planned.

I'd thought we'd head straight to the Royal Research Institute's lodging house where my rooms were once we got inside the citadel, but we kept going. Before I knew it, the royal living quarters in the center of the citadel came into view.

"We're headed for the royal quarters?" I asked in confusion as I peered out the carriage window.

Lord Glen chuckled. "Remember how you were going to move somewhere else in the citadel once your job as overseer was finished?"

Now that he mentioned it, the king *had* said that my living quarters would be relocated once I was of age, as per the perks of being a research fellow, and that my new quarters would be issued to me once I was done overseeing Celesark's Floral Crucible.

I nodded in response, and Lord Glen pointed at the royal quarters.

"Your new rooms are in there."

"Huh?!"

Only members of the royal family and those who served them directly were allowed to live in the royal quarters. As the adopted daughter of Margrave Sargent, I wasn't a royal, nor a maid or attendant serving the royal family.

"Is it really okay for me to live there?" I asked nervously.

"It's true you aren't a member of the royal family," he said with a gentle smile, "but research fellows are in the highest position in the Royal Research

Institute and are treated on par with the royal family. You know how you have guards?”

“Yes. I always have my personal guard knights with me, so I understand that.”

My guard knights accompanied me everywhere as a means of constant protection.

“Right. And you’re the fiancée of a royal family member, so you need even more guards.”

My adoptive mother, Ariel, had taught me that fiancées to royal family members and other high-ranking nobles typically had guards... In my case, I had knights.

“What’s more, you’ve got titles from both the Radzuel Empire and the Holy Country of Celesark, and an alias from the Martec Republic. That means you’d need just as much protection as the royal family, if not more. This is why the royal quarters were chosen for your room since they’re easiest to guard.”

Emperor Royz of the Razuel Empire had given me the title “Savior of the Radzuel Empire,” which welcomed me as a friend of the beastmen despite being a human. It had the effect of letting me read the beastmen’s language and allowed me to enter and leave Radzuel freely.

In the Martec Republic, I’d been given the alias “The Saintess of Abundance” for bringing the dried earth back to life. It didn’t have any effects, but it was proof of my achievement.

Finally, in Celesark, I’d gotten two titles: “Friend of the Grand Saintesses” and “The Grand Saintess of Cherry Blossoms (Hidden).” The first allowed me to enter and leave the country freely, while the second allowed me to receive the First Grand Saintess Sakura’s mana, and let each of us know where the other was.

“Or...that’s the cover story, anyway. The real reason was that I asked for your quarters to be moved there because I wanted to spend more time with you.”

For a while, I’d met with Lord Glen nearly every day for tea parties to increase my mana pool and to learn various things from him during them. Once we’d gotten to a good point to stop the meetings, Lord Glen’s governmental work

had increased drastically, and we hadn't been able to meet in my laboratory as often. While we still had tea parties once a week since we were engaged, I felt much lonelier compared to when we had been able to meet every day.

"With you living in the royal quarters, we can meet whenever we want... Every single day. Do you not want to?" Lord Glen asked, blushing faintly and making my heart skip a beat.

He feels the same way as me! I thought. "Oh, I do. I was sad that we've had less time together, so moving here makes me really glad."

Just as I answered him honestly, the carriage stopped.

"We're here."

The carriage door opened, and Lord Glen stepped out first. Then, he held out a hand to help me out, which I took. As I stepped down, I saw a door I'd never seen before right in front of me.

"This is the western entrance for members of the royal family only. From today on, you'll be coming and going from here."

"Okay," I said, giving him a nod.

Lord Glen then brought me inside the building while our hands remained linked.

I had only ever been inside the royal quarters a handful of times, so I couldn't help but let my eyes wander about. The wallpaper and carpet had a more subdued air than what was used within the palace, and the royal guard stood at strategic points throughout.

Lord Glen led me by the hand up to the third floor, stopping before a door with a strange pattern on it.

"These are your rooms. Go on in."

I opened the door nervously. Inside, I was met by furniture adorned with colors similar to what I was used to. Immediately to the right of the door was a low table and a big sofa, plus a dining table and chairs. In the middle of the room was a large, adorable canopy bed. And along the left wall were doors to my dressing room, bathroom, and a walk-in closet. The walls and ceiling had

ornate decorations you'd expect of the royal quarters, but they were in subdued colors, and the carpet was a fluffy, long pile.

A sense of relief came over me as I marveled at my new room. I felt that I wouldn't be nervous living here since it had the same atmosphere as my place back in the Royal Research Institute lodging house.



“Thank you so much for the lovely room.”

Lord Glen shook his head. “His Majesty picked the location, and Her Highness handled the interior design and furnishings.”

“Both the king and queen?! I must thank them immediately!”

“I wanted to be the one to get it all ready, but...”

Lord Glen murmured something while I was thinking about how to thank the king and queen, but I didn’t catch it.

“You’ll be able to meet with them sometime in the next few days; you can just leave the thanks until then. The journey back home must’ve been tiring, so rest for today,” he quickly said.

Before I even had a chance to ask him to repeat himself, he left.

+++

“Good morning, Lady Chelsea.”

The next day, I woke up to Gina and Martha greeting me.

“G-Good morning, Gina, Martha,” I replied in surprise, only for them to give me a confused look. “I didn’t see any of my maids last night, so I worried you weren’t my personal maids anymore...”

Hearing my response, they blinked a few times.

“We will continue to be your personal maids until you want us gone.”

“And even if you *do* say that, we don’t want to go!”

Their replies brought a smile to my face.

“Your other personal attendants will also continue serving you in the royal quarters.”

“We were all given the evening off after our long journey.”

My personal attendants... So my maids, knights, and Miss Micah as my chef? But what if they don’t let her into the kitchen since she’s a beastwoman?

“Miss Micah too?” I asked, praying that she wasn’t being discriminated against.

Gina smiled. “Of course. She’ll be cooking for you from this morning’s breakfast on.”

“Thank goodness!” I said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Let’s get you ready so you can enjoy Miss Micah’s breakfast!” Martha said, gripping her fists tight.

First, I got out of bed and washed my face.

“Since you’ve only just arrived back in the country, you will have a few days off. What would you like to wear today?”

After going over my schedule for the day, I chose a simple yet comfortable dress from the options the two maids had brought from my closet and changed into it. The walk-in closet was several times bigger than my room back in the lodging house and was apparently filled with newly tailored clothing and gowns.

“Your new clothing are gifts from the royal family, the Sargent Margravate, and His Highness!” Martha said emphatically.

“I must write them all thank you letters then,” I said, recalling when mother had taught me that those who sent gifts must get a letter of thanks in return.

“Then I will bring you your letter set after breakfast,” Gina said with a smile. She began doing my hair and continued, “Your meals within the royal quarters will be served within the dining room. If you are feeling unwell, they can be brought to your room, so you needn’t hold back.”

Once I was ready, my guard knights led me to the dining room on the second floor. When I stepped inside, Lord Glen waved from where he was already seated.

“Good morning, Chelsea.”

“Good morning, Lord Glen.”

I hadn’t thought I would see him this morning, so I was thrilled! I smiled at him and he returned it with an enchanting smile of his own. *But why is he here?*

“Could it be that we’ll be eating together today?” I asked, getting a firm nod in response.

“Not just today, but every day... Let’s eat breakfast together whenever we don’t have other plans.”

Back when I’d been living in the lodging house, we hadn’t been able to meet on my days off.

“So not only will I get to see you every day, but we’ll be eating breakfast together too? It’s like a dream!” I cried, clapping my hands over my cheeks as a smile broke out onto my face.

It seemed that seeing me like that put Lord Glen in a good mood, because his smile never faded.

I was led to the seat across from him and sat down. The table was surprisingly large and had more than ten chairs.

“Could it be that we’ll be dining with the other members of the royal family as well?”

We were in the royal quarters, so the king, queen, and the first prince could also be here.

Lord Glen shook his head. “The royal quarters are huge, split into the east, center, and west wings. Each wing has its own dining room,” he explained, holding up three fingers. “His Majesty and his family live in the eastern wing and eat in the dining room there, while you and I use the western one. If we were to eat with them, we’d have headed to the central dining room.”

The royal quarters were quite large from the outside, so the dining rooms must have been split into three out of consideration for the traveling distance.

As I nodded in understanding, I noticed one thing.

“So you also live in the west wing, Lord Glen?” I asked.

He tilted his head. “Huh? Did I not mention that? My rooms are three doors down from yours.”

He’s on the same floor and only three doors away... Does that mean we might coincidentally pass each other in the hallway? The thought of this happening

made my cheeks heat up.

“I’m surprised that our rooms are so close,” I said, feigning calm.

Lord Glen chuckled. “I can meet with you whenever, so if anything happens... No, even if nothing is happening, I’ll be happy if you call for me, Chelsea.”

“O-Okay...”

As we chatted, our food was brought out to the table. Today’s breakfast was steaming corn soup, salad, and eggs Benedict. Since they weren’t common foods in Chronowize, I immediately knew Miss Micah had cooked them.

“Thank you for the meal,” Lord Glen and I said in unison.

After I gave my prayers, I began eating. I sliced into the eggs Benedict with my knife and watched the yolk ooze out. Glancing over at Lord Glen, he was eating leisurely, reflecting on his happiness.

+++

Once we were finished with our breakfast, he asked what my plans were for the day.

“I was told I’ll be having some time off, so I don’t have any plans.”

“Then how about you let me show you around the royal quarters?”

Since I’d only been here a handful of times, I could count the number of places I knew on one hand.

“Yes, please,” I answered, getting a happy smile back.

Leaving the dining room, Lord Glen took my hand and interlocked our fingers.

“I said I’ll be showing you around, but we can only go to a few places.”

If I remember right, this is how lovers hold hands... I was so focused on our fingers that I didn’t register what he was saying.

As I stared at our linked hands with a blush, Lord Glen murmured, “I wouldn’t usually hold your hand like this, considering our positions, but the royal quarters are my home, so... Do you not like it?”

If he'd been a dogman, I was sure his ears would have been down flat. It was cute to see him so discouraged compared to his usual demeanor.

"I like it..." I responded quietly enough that he might not have been able to hear me, getting a full grin back.

In the eastern wing were the king, queen, and first prince's personal rooms, as well as the treasure room.

"Since the eastern wing has so many important people and things, it's secured with a lot of royal guards and several barriers. You shouldn't go there unless you have business to attend to."

I nodded in response. If I went to the eastern wing without a reason, people might suspect I were up to something devious.

In the center was His Majesty and Lord Glen's office, along with guest rooms for state guests.

"You can come to my office anytime."

Despite Lord Glen saying that, I knew how much more work he'd been getting and how busy he was, so I just gave him a small smile back.

Within the western wing was the royal family's library, which was free to use by anyone with permission.

"You've been granted permission automatically since you live in the royal quarters, so feel free to use it. But you can't take any books out; you'll need to read them inside."

"Understood."

I'd heard it contained many books that weren't in the palace library, so I wanted to explore it when I had the chance.

"Oh, yeah! Between our rooms is a room with your own personal teleportation circle, so you can use that to go to and from the Research Institute."

"I've been given something that valuable?!" I cried in shock, blinking a few times.

Lord Glen just smiled brightly. “Teleportation circles are something I developed, so I can make as many of them as I have the materials for. Don’t worry about using it.”

I was so shocked that all I could do was say thank you.

“All right. That’s it for the inside of the royal quarters. Let’s go to your garden while we’re out here,” he said, walking towards the west wing’s gardens.

The gardens inside the royal quarter’s barriers apparently were maintained by special gardeners, so it was always overflowing with cheery flowers. A bit from the garden entrance was a place just for me. Whenever I was there to take care of it, I’d used to plant seeds made with my [Seed Creation] Skill for research. Since I’d been in Celesark until recently, the garden only had normal flowers.

“Let’s have a little break.”

“All right.”

The two of us headed to a nearby gazebo. Inside was a long bench, which we sat down on as we gazed at the surrounding flora.

“What are you gonna plant next?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. It might be nice to plant some fast-fruiting seeds to make jam with, or experiment with other useful seeds.”

“What kinds of seeds do you mean when you say ‘useful’?”

“For example...things like Lamp Seeds—a seed that has the same effects as existing magic tools,” I said, pulling out my pen tool that could write anywhere. “I could make a seed that has the same effect as my pen, or make it so you could snap a branch off after it grew and use that to write with.”

“So you could get the same effect as a magic tool you don’t have on hand by making a seed for it... That’s an interesting idea.”

I told him my other ideas too, such as a seed that would put up a barrier when planted; a seed that’d make a golem appear; or make the wind blow; or seeds for things that differed from plants. But for some reason, we dropped into silence once I was finished talking about seeds.

Should I talk about something else?

I peeked over at Lord Glen, and he looked perplexed. He might have had something *he* wanted to talk about. I waited for a bit, and he seemed to have made up his mind, beginning to speak.

“I’ve had something I’ve wanted to do since our feelings became mutual...” he said, looking straight at me despite his embarrassment.

“What would that be?” I asked.

Lord Glen took a few deep breaths before speaking. “Um... It might be a little late for this, but would it be all right if I called you by a nickname?”

“Yes, that would be fine,” I replied, nodding immediately.

He heaved a sigh of relief. “Then let me call you Lucy from now on.”

“Hm? Not Chel or Cherrie?”

Nicknames were affectionate names for people, and while what you could call someone wasn’t set in stone, it was rare for someone to use the last part of your name.

Lord Glen averted his eyes. “Other people might call you one of them, right? So I, uh...I wanted something just for the two of us.”

He wants a nickname just for the two of us... So he wants to keep it for himself? When I realized that, my face heated up in a flash.

I’d had insulting nicknames before and never something affectionate. My new family, the Sargents, knew that I had barely even been called by my name back in the barony where I was born, so they purposefully called me Chelsea.

“I’m...really, really happy,” I said, expressing my feelings and getting a happy smile back.

“And, um... Could you call me by a nickname too?”

I ended up just staring at him, puzzled. “Your full name is Glenarnold, so I’d been thinking I was calling you by a nickname already!”

Smiling wryly, he replied, “That’s more like a name I call myself than an actual nickname. I’d like something only you would use, if that’s okay.”

For some reason, his words made my heart twinge.

“Th-Then...Lord Arnie...”

Lord Glen tilted his head, confused. “Why ‘Arnie’?”

“I was copying what you did by taking from the latter part of your name.”

It’s not that odd of a nickname, right? But what if he doesn’t like it? I glanced up at his face in worry, only to see a sweet smile that melted my heart.

Still smiling, he pulled me into his arms and whispered in my ear, “Lucy...”

The moment he called me by the nickname, I nearly went limp, unable to move. He might have been able to hear my heart pounding.

“Lucy?”

“...Y-Yes?”

I managed to squeak out a response, and he laughed.

“Lucy. Call me by my nickname.”

“Lord Arnie...” I said. My voice was so faint that I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me.

It was his turn to freeze up this time. I could see his ears and neck turn bright red.

“Ah... Yeah. It really makes you too happy for words, huh?” Lord Glen murmured, squeezing me tighter. “I just want to steal you away...”

“Huh?!” I cried in shock.

He let out the sigh he’d been holding back. “You’re just so cute that I don’t want to let anyone else see you. I want to keep your voice saying my name all to myself.”

I didn’t usually see him express his feelings like this, so while I was a bit surprised, I was also happy.

“Then...how about we only call each other by our nicknames when we’re alone?” I whispered into his ear. Lord Glen nodded back.

“Thank you, Lucy. It’s our little secret,” he whispered, moving hesitantly before hugging me more gently than before.

+++

On our way back to our rooms, we met one of the king's chamberlains.

"Your Highness, this is addressed to you and your fiancée from His Majesty," the chamberlain said as he offered the letter to Lord Glen.

Accepting it, Lord Glen then opened the letter immediately and read its contents aloud. "There's something I want to tell you, so come to my office."

I froze at his words. My etiquette teacher had taught me that it was necessary to be dressed in a gown when meeting royalty, and at that moment, I was in a simple dress.

"I need to get changed!" I said in a fluster, only for Lord Glen to shake his head.

"This is an informal meeting, so what you're wearing is fine," he said, taking me by the hand and walking.

We headed straight to the king's office in the center of the royal quarters. After speaking with the guard next to the entrance, we went inside.

We were greeted not only by His Majesty himself, but Her Highness the Queen too.

I curtseyed to them, getting a smile and nods back as they motioned for us to sit down. Lord Glen and I sat on the three-seater and straightened our postures. It was hard to relax in front of such important people.

"This is unofficial, so you can relax," His Majesty said with a smirk. "I heard the two of you got back from Celesark yesterday. I also heard that you hit a landslide on the way back. Are you okay?"

Lord Glen nodded. "Thanks to the outstanding knight who scouted ahead, we were unharmed. We took a safe alternate route and were able to arrive back a few days later than scheduled."

"Oh? I'll have to reward that knight. What would be good?"

"I'll ask him if there is anything he would like later," Lord Glen answered.

Following this, Her Highness spoke to me. “The long trip must have been hard, yes? Glen’s [Cure] Skill heals physically but can’t do anything for the heart. Are you all right, Chelsea? You aren’t having any troubles, are you?”

“I thank you ever so much for your concern. My mind and body are both healthy,” I replied with a smile.

The queen let out a relieved sigh. “Oh, yes, how do you like your new rooms?”

“It has the same air about it as my room in the lodging house, so I was able to relax and sleep comfortably. I was told that His Majesty chose the location, and that you were in charge of the interior, Your Highness. I thank you so much for giving me quarters that will let me rest properly.”

When I thanked them, the king grinned and looked at Lord Glen. “All I did was grant Glen’s wish by picking that spot.”

“B-But you had the final say, Your Majesty!” Lord Glen retorted, face red.

“Little Glen said he wanted to set up the interior too.”

“Your Majesty!” Lord Glen cried out, panicking.

“But he’ll be able to make everything to his tastes once you’re married, right?” the queen added with a devilish smile. “So he let me do your rooms’ interior.”

Change everything to Lord Glen’s tastes once we’re...married? I hadn’t actually thought much about the actual marriage part, so my face nearly burst into flames when I heard the word.

“From the looks of it, you two haven’t had a talk about your marriage. You only have so much time, so make sure you discuss things,” Her Highness chided, giving Lord Glen a stern look and me a smile.

“All right. Let’s get to the real reason I called for you,” His Majesty said, changing the subject. “It’s a bit sudden, but we’ll be holding a party next week to celebrate Chelsea having successfully overseen the Holy Country of Celesark’s Floral Crucible.”

“That really is sudden,” Lord Glen said, sounding particularly huffy.

I tilted my head in confusion, not knowing why he was upset. Her Highness

just giggled. “Glen’s sulking because he doesn’t have time to ready a gown for you before the party.”

I was shocked because the queen seemed to know exactly what I was thinking, but also why Lord Glen was sulking.

“What’s wrong with wanting to dress my fiancée up...” he mumbled.

Lord Glen might have been more possessive than I’d thought. I wasn’t sure whether to be happy or embarrassed...

“The royal family will be preparing her gown and accessories as a reward for her accomplishment. She’ll be wearing it to the party, so give up,” His Majesty resolutely said.

Lord Glen could only muster a tiny nod in response.

“Your gown and accessories will be borrowing the royal color, so look forward to it!”

You were only allowed to wear purple, the royal color, when it was given to you by the royal family. Although I was a little stunned that I was getting something so special, I probably needed to just gracefully accept it since it was being treated as a reward.

“I thank you ever so much,” I said, getting satisfied smiles from both the king and queen.

6. The Celebratory Party

The day of the party arrived in a flash.

Because the festivities were to be held in the evening and night, I began getting ready after eating lunch. Everyone would be gathering to celebrate my success in my role as overseer and returning home, so basically, I was the star of the show. As a result, my maids were highly motivated to dress me up today.

I got thoroughly polished up in the bathroom and squeezed into a corset in my dressing room. As I stood with my back straight, one of my personal maids carried a carefully stored dress to the walk-in closet.

“This is your gown for today.”

The purple gown I received as a reward for doing my duty had fist-sized artificial flowers sewn all around the hem. When I twirled, the flowers spread out wide in a cute and showy fashion.

“We will also be putting on the earrings and necklace that you were granted.”

The accessories, made from purple magic stones and amethyst, were apparently enchanted against eavesdropping, and would return to me if they were lost.

With makeup that matched my gown and hair up to show off the necklace, I gave off a completely different air than usual.

“Lady Chelsea, you look so beautiful!” Martha praised me, overcome with emotion.

“Thank you,” I said, before asking the question that had been on my mind the whole time. “Is Gina off today?”

I hadn’t seen my head maid Gina since breakfast, which was odd considering how much she loved getting me ready for special events like this.

“Yes, her fiancé is forcing her to come to the party today.”

“Forcing her?”

“She was incredibly disappointed that she couldn’t help you get ready when it’s a party especially for you. She also said she wanted to curse her fiancé,” Martha said, giggling.

“Maybe I’ll see her at the party.”

As we were chatting, Lord Glen arrived at my door. Since he was attending as the king’s younger brother, he was also wearing royal purple.

“I’ve come to pick you up,” he said as he walked into the room before covering his mouth with a hand as he stared at me. “I have to hand it to Her Highness’s fashion sense...”

After saying that, he walked up to me.

“You’re even cuter than usual, Lucy,” he whispered into my ear. “You had me captivated.”

Whispering in my ear so quietly that no one else can hear, using my nickname, and praising me?! I was so happy, and my heart was beating so fast that my mind blanked.

“Th-Thank...you...” I managed to squeeze out an answer. As my face burned up, Lord Glen took a step away. He looked happy, and he had an enchantingly sweet smile on his face.

He’d called me by my nickname, so I wanted to return the favor...

Grabbing both of his arms, I stood up on my toes and whispered, “I’m happy that I’m wearing the same color as you, Lord Arnie.”

I then immediately stepped back as he slapped both hands over his face, ears bright red.

“My fiancée is just too cute!” he murmured.

Martha then clapped her hands together lightly. “Please leave that type of talk for the waiting room.”

After taking a few breaths, Lord Glen pulled his hands away from his face, stood up straight, and held out his hand towards me.

“Shall we, then?”

“Yes.”

Nodding back, I gently rested my hand on his.

+++

When my engagement with Lord Glen had been first announced, I'd used a teleportation circle in the royal quarters to go to a royals-only waiting room near the party hall. This time though, since we were announcing my return, we were to go to the waiting room for state guests. The engagement wasn't as secretive as before, so we decided to go on foot instead of using the teleportation circle.

Arriving at our destination, I could hear the familiar buzz of people in the nearby hall. However, the only people in the waiting room were me, Lord Glen, and our guard knights and maids, who were standing a distance away politely. There was still time before we'd enter the party hall, and I began to feel nervous. Reflexively, I tightly squeezed Lord Glen's hand.

"Do you remember how I taught you to draw a picture on your palm and swallow it to ease your nerves before?" he spoke gently.

"Ah, I remember drawing a tulip then."

Smiling, he said, "It's touching to think that it's been a whole two years since our engagement was first announced."

I smiled back at him. It was then we heard a man's voice from the party hall.

"Gina Percy!"

Huh? Isn't my maid Gina's full name Gina Percy? I thought, then murmured, "I wonder what's happening?"

"Dunno. Let's find out."

Lord Glen and I moved to the waiting room's entrance to peek into the hall.

"I hereby call off our engagement!"

Standing across from the loud man was Gina in a formal dress.

"What the hell is he doing at a party to celebrate my Lucy's triumphant return?" Lord Glen grumbled, his voice deeper than usual.

I glanced at him. His expression was blank, and his eyes were narrowed at the

scene before us... *Lord Glen's really mad!*

As I tried to think of what I could say to him, I heard Gina speaking very politely from the hall.

"And may I ask your reasoning?"

The man seemed to be looking down on Gina.

"Reasoning?! As if you don't *know*?! You pushed my beloved Olivie down a staircase, injuring her! I understand how you would be jealous of her gorgeous loveliness compared to yourself, but that is no reason to resort to violence!" he said, closely hugging a woman I'd never seen before.

"The man's name is Franklin. He's the eldest son of Count Hiscox and Gina's fiancé. The woman is named Olivie. She's the adopted daughter of Baron Tanner, and it says she's a Worshipper of the Proxy, Driven by Envy."

Worshippers of the Proxy, Driven by Envy were members of a dangerous organization targeting me and the second Spirit Tree of Origin. The Proxy, Driven by Envy had turned out to be a different person than Sakura, who was actually the real Proxy. Sakura had been tasked by the creator god to bring the world to prosperity, and was now living quietly in a manor inside the Demonic Forest.

"And when was this assault?" Gina asked back, showing her revulsion.

"Are you saying you can't even remember an event from a month ago?!" Franklin spat.

I tilted my head, confused. "But a month ago, Gina was with me in Celesark."

Seeing as Gina had been nowhere near Chronowize's capital then, it would have been impossible to push anyone down any stairs. Plus, considering Gina's personality, she would definitely say she'd rather be serving me than harming someone out of spite.



“The woman might be tricking the man,” Lord Glen said.

Suppressing the emotions welling up within me, I quipped, “Even if the man is being fooled, I can’t forgive him for speaking to Gina like that.”

Lord Glen seemed dazed by my anger, and he blinked repeatedly.

“I understand your grievance. But this is a celebration party, so we will discuss things in detail at a later date,” Gina said. “I do apologize ever so much to everyone in attendance for this disgraceful outburst.”

She seemed to have noticed us watching from the waiting room. And after saying her piece, Gina looked at Lord Glen and me, then bowed.

“You’re running away?!”

She ignored the man and departed from the hall.

“...Gina!” I gasped.

Just as I was about to leave the waiting room, Lord Glen stopped me.

“Lucy, you’re the star of this event... It would be a problem for you to chase after her.”

“Then I need to at least ask someone else via telepathy...” I murmured back, immediately using it to speak to Miss Micah. <Miss Micah, can you hear me?>

<Chelsea?! What’s wrong~?>

Telepathy was an ability I’d gained from contracting with Root the Communication Spirit. It allowed me to speak to anyone I was touching from within my mind. Once I’d acclimated to it, I could telepathically speak with anyone I’d spoken to previously, even if I wasn’t currently touching them.

<Gina’s fiancé just broke off their engagement right in the party hall...>

<In the party hall~?! I think I know *exactly* what you want~>

<Would you be able to check on her for me? And I don’t believe she’d have eaten anything since early in the day. Please bring her something yummy to eat.>

<Leave it to me~! I’ll get something ready in a jiffy~!>

Once we were finished talking, I let out a sigh.

“Finished?” Lord Glen asked.

“Yes. I asked Miss Micah to check on her.”

Lord Glen gently rubbed my back and said, “Let’s leave Gina to Micah for now...”

While Miss Micah and I had been conversing, Gina’s fiancé and his mistress had been kicking up a fuss, saying rude things about Gina. The other nobles in attendance were in a fervor over what had just occurred.

“If you enter the room as the star of tonight’s party, all conversation will switch to you instead of Gina, and things should settle down. Are you okay with going in a bit early?”

“Yes!” I gave Lord Glen a firm nod.

I could handle a little extra attention if it meant stopping people from bad-mouthing Gina. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down, then placed my hand on his arm.

“I’m ready to go whenever you are,” I said, smiling like I had no idea what had happened inside the hall.

Lord Glen smiled back at me. “Okay. Let’s go.”

I straightened my posture as we entered the hall from the state guest waiting room. Seeing us adorned in our royal purple clothing, Gina’s fiancé seemed to realize the situation, and his mistress shut her mouth. I could also tell that the other nobles had begun to chat about different rumors.

As Lord Glen and I reached the middle of the hall, he looked at me with a soft smile. I spoke to him telepathically, so no one else would hear.

<We’ve successfully changed the subject on everyone’s lips.>

<Yup. Now we just need to keep an eye on those two as we enjoy the party,> he replied.

<All right.>

I smiled back at him, and the party commenced.

His Majesty said some words, and I was awarded the purple gown and accessories I wore today. My role as the observer for Celesark's Floral Crucible to choose the next Grand Saintess had been important. And apparently, the queen had once received a similar purple outfit when she'd observed the previous Floral Crucible.

After accepting my rewards, it was time for chatting, and a stream of nobles came by to greet us. Among them was the son of Count Hiscox, Franklin—the same man who'd just broken off his engagement to Gina—and Olivie, the adopted daughter of Baron Tanner. The man looked as if nothing had just happened at all, while the woman glared at me.

"Is it really okay for her to act hostile to me like that so openly...?" I murmured.

Lord Glen put a hand to his mouth to suppress his laughter, having seemingly heard me.

Interlude 1: Gina, Martha, and Micah

After having her engagement broken off, Gina walked quickly through the palace hallways.

Gina and Franklin Hiscox's engagement had been political—made to strengthen the bonds between their family's territories. Franklin couldn't simply call off a political marriage just because he wanted to.

"He must not have known that..." she muttered to herself.

Eventually, Gina made it to her guest room in the royal quarters that had been prepared for her for the night. She threw open the door and found Martha, her coworker and fellow personal maid for Chelsea, sitting on the couch inside.

"Huh? Did you forget something?" Martha asked lazily, seeing as it wasn't yet time for the party to begin.

Smiling bitterly, Gina started taking her accessories off. "I told you that my fiancé was forcing me to attend Lady Chelsea's celebratory party with him tonight, right?"

"I clearly remember you sobbing that you wanted to serve Lady Chelsea instead."

"The moment I stepped into the party hall, he told me he was breaking off our engagement."

"Wha— Why?!"

Gina put her accessories in the jewelry box, then Martha helped her out of her gown and corset.

"Apparently, I shoved his mistress, daughter of Baron Whatshisface, down the stairs and injured her a month ago."

"I see! How can that be?!" Martha quipped loudly. "We were in Celesark a month ago, so that's *literally* impossible."

"Right? I think he made the whole thing up so he could get off on the feeling

of breaking the engagement in front of so many people.”

“Or maybe he wanted to show off to his mistress.”

“That seems more likely.”

Once Gina was dressed and back in her maid uniform, a knock rang out.

“It’s Micah~!”

Martha opened the door and saw Micah in the doorway holding a tray.

“Ah, hello.”

“Is something the matter?”

Micah pointed at the food on her tray as Gina and Martha greeted her.

“Chelsea spoke to me telepathically. She asked me to bring you something yummy since you’d probably be hungry~” the foxwoman said as she set down a slice of quiche on the guest room’s table.

“Thank you, Miss Micah.”

“Say thanks to Chelsea instead~!”

“I see... Lady Chelsea really is a warm and kind person,” Gina said. A warm feeling welled up in her chest as she began enjoying her quiche.

“So your former fiancé broke it off right in front of everyone, right? Is that gonna be okay?” Martha asked.

Tilting her head, Micah asked, “Would you be able to tell me what all happened~?”

“Okay, so...”

As Martha recounted what she and Gina had talked about, Micah’s tail puffed out in rage.

“He’s the worst, getting a mistress and calling off your engagement like that~! If this was Radzuel, he and his hussy’d get demolished~!”

Wiping her lips after finishing her quiche, Gina grinned. Her face was smiling, but her eyes certainly weren’t.

“He didn’t like the fact that I worked at the castle. He always made digs at me

like, ‘you might work at the castle, but you must just be a scullery maid!’ I had told him in a letter that I was serving Lady Chelsea as one of her personal maids, but... He probably threw it out without reading a word of it.”

Micah seemed to realize something when she said that. “Chelsea’s ranked on the same level as the royal family~! What if he finds out you’re serving someone so high up and changes his tune, begging you to forget about him calling things off~?”

“That’s true... I need to be careful!”

While she was angry that Franklin had called off their engagement in front of an audience, Gina was relieved from the bottom of her heart that she wouldn’t have to marry an idiot who didn’t understand the point of a political marriage.

7. Making Battle Plans

As soon as the party ended, Lord Glen and I headed to Gina's guest room.

"I'm sorry for coming by so late. I was just so worried about you..." I said. Gina greeted me warmly, and was already changed back into her maid uniform.

As we entered the room, I saw Martha and Miss Micah were here as well.

While I was trying to think of where to start, Gina said, "Lady Chelsea, thank you so much for having Miss Micah bring me a meal."

"Oh, you should be thanking Miss Micah for bringing it to you."

When I said that, she and Miss Micah locked eyes and giggled. We all sat down on the sofas, and Lord Glen spoke up.

"Were you close to that man...Franklin, was it?" he asked.

Gina shook her head. "While we have known each other since youth and could be considered childhood friends, we aren't close. Our engagement was purely political. I wanted to serve Lady Chelsea for as long as possible, so I'm glad for this turn of events."

She didn't look as if she was putting on a brave front or mourning the loss; instead, she looked quite refreshed. We asked more about the man. She told us that he had long since found fault in her occupation, didn't even know where she worked, and didn't even send a single flower on her birthday... Despite being engaged, he treated Gina horribly.

Hearing all this was the last straw, and the anger I'd suppressed earlier exploded.

"I can't believe he was so awful to you all this time, And breaking off your engagement in front of so many people? He's absolutely despicable!" I cried angrily, shocking Gina, Martha, and Miss Micah.

"I didn't think Chelsea would be *this* mad~!" Miss Micah said, getting nods of agreement from the two maids.

Gina was my personal maid and had been with me since I'd first come to the

Royal Research Institute. She was like family to me, so I felt nothing but indignation towards the man.

"You should be the one breaking things off publicly," I emphasized. "For trying to accuse you of *imaginary* sins!"

Lord Glen nodded firmly. "You're right. It's so outrageous that we'll have to make him pay," he said, smiling like a demon lord. "I've put barriers around this room against both eavesdroppers and intruders. There's something you need to know, Gina."

Prefacing things like that, he explained that Franklin's mistress, the adopted daughter of a baron, was a Worshipper of the Proxy, Driven by Envy.

Both Gina and Martha were familiar with the Proxy from previous incidents. Back when I'd visited Lady Noel's house, Martha and I had been held captive by men in black...Worshippers of the Proxy, Driven by Envy. They'd also used monsters to try and attack the second Spirit Tree of Origin that was within the fortress walls.

"Having a member of the organization targeting Chelsea cajoling the fiancé of one of her personal maids leads us to believe something is going on behind the scenes."

At Lord Glen's words, I realized something.

"I'm sorry, Gina," I said, lowering my head. "I might have gotten you caught up in this."

"There's no need for you to apologize, Lady Chelsea," Gina replied, shaking her head. "They should be the ones apologizing."

"Yeah~! The people doing bad things are in the wrong~!"

Gina and Miss Micah's responses made me feel a little better.

"Either way, we need to be careful of this mistress. You'll be talking with him tomorrow, right?" Lord Glen asked, getting a nod from Gina in return. "We should discern their motives before meeting with them."

"But how do we investigate~?" Miss Micah asked.

As soon as she did, Cyril appeared out of nowhere on her little cloud.

“This is my time to shine!” she announced.

Lord Glen was confused by the Nightmare. “I put a barrier up against eavesdropping. How did you hear all of what we’ve been talking about?”

“It’s simple! I’ve been with you guys since Chelsea got changed earlier!” Cyril said, puffing her chest out proudly on her cloud. “And I’m not the only one, okay?”

«I’m sorry, I was here too.»

A second after I heard his voice, Root the Communication Spirit appeared right beside Cyril.

“Chelsea was wearing such a beautiful dress, and we hid and were following her this whole time!”

Cyril and Root had been getting along swimmingly since they’d first met, and they were always together.

“As long as you aren’t doing anything bad, it’s okay for you to be with Chelsea.” Lord Glen sighed in exasperation.

The Nightmare just stuck her tongue out at him.

“Root and I are contracted to Chelsea, so we don’t need your permission to be with her!” Cyril said, taking Root by the hand and fleeing above our heads.

“Um... So what did you mean by ‘shine,’ Cyril?” I asked, getting things back on track.

She froze. “Oh, yeah! I can ask them what those people are gonna do, and make them remember things that happened in the past. Everyone’s honest in their dreams!”

Now that I think about it, when we were trapped in Cyril’s dream as children, we said everything we thought of or felt.

«I-I can help too!» Root added. «I can know what someone’s thinking by touching them, so I can tell you while you’re all talking!»

I recalled how Root had told me what Lady Noel was thinking back when I’d first met him.

“Chelsea and I are the only ones who can hear Root’s voice. We’d have the advantage if we had him tell us their thoughts during our negotiations,” Lord Glen said, his evil smile appearing again.

“Both Root and I want to help Chelsea. Will you let us?” Cyril begged, clutching her hands together.

“If it won’t put either of you in danger, then yes.”

Hearing us accept their help, Cyril threw her arms up and cheered while Root flew happy circles around our heads.

“I can finally be helpful, so I’ll head off right away! I’ll report back tomorrow!” said Cyril, vanishing in a puff of mist.

“Let’s wait until tomorrow, then,” Lord Glen said.

I nodded, and we dispersed for the night.

+++

The following afternoon, we all gathered in the royal quarter’s western drawing room. It wouldn’t be odd for Lord Glen and I to talk there or for my personal maids Gina and Martha to be on standby as well. We even had Miss Micah bring us sweets, so it was seemingly just an average day.

Once everyone was present, Lord Glen set up anti-eavesdropping and intruder barriers around the room.

“We might be talking for a long time, so Gina, Martha, and Micah should sit,” he said.

Though the maids hesitated, Gina and Martha sat on the three-seater sofa while Miss Micah sat on the single-seater.

“All right. Could you tell us what you saw in their dreams last night, Cyril?”

The Nightmare nodded happily. “Yup! But I’m bad with words, so I’ll just show you it all as a daydream,” she said.

Cyril held her right hand out towards the wall. As she did, a large picture of

Gina's former fiancé and his mistress appeared there. They looked just as realistic as the drawings made by my brother Felix's [Picture] Skill, which made me a bit uncomfortable.

"It's like a movie... I mean, a projection magic tool."

"Isn't it easier to understand like this?"

As Lord Glen and Cyril spoke, the pictures started moving and talking. It seemed to be when the man and his mistress had first met and fallen in love.

"The guy met Miss Homewrecker two months ago, and she sank her claws into him quick."

Two months ago... That was when Gina and Martha were with me in Celesark's Flower Garden.

"After breaking the engagement off, he dreamt of getting engaged to Miss Homewrecker, marrying her, and spending his time having fun without working. I'll spare you all from seeing that though," Cyril continued as the scene changed.

The next picture showed the mistress wearing a hood in a dim alleyway, along with a man we'd never seen before.

"*From today forward, you are the daughter of Baron Tanner. You know what you need to do, right?"*

"Yeah, yeah. I need to seduce Franklin, the eldest son of Count Hiscox, and steal the position of his fiancée."

"And what do you do after that?"

"Keep watch on him so he doesn't try to rekindle his old engagement..."

"*As long as you understand."*

"I was entrusted with this sublime mission because I was the only one of the appropriate age, appearance, and gender for it. Of course, I understand!" the woman said, cackling shrilly.

"*Her Ladyship the Proxy will surely be pleased with your work,"* the unknown man said.

The mistress pointed at him, tilting her head.

"*And what are* you *supposed to be doing?"* she questioned, looking at him scornfully. *"Don't tell me you're jobless here... Are you?"*

The man pouted. "*I am to become Gina Percy's new fiancé after she loses Franklin. Then, I'll get information on* that *woman!"*

"...Can someone like you even handle that?"

He gave the woman a disgusting smile as he looked down at her. "*I can do anything for Her Ladyship the Proxy. There's nothing that you can do that I can't."*

The pair's conversation ended there, and the image disappeared from the wall.

I was probably who the man referred to as "that woman."

"That's the end of the daydream. I helped Chelsea!" Cyril said from her cloud, puffing her chest out proudly.

"Thank you, Cyril. What can I do to thank you?"

"You're my contractor, so you don't need to thank me. But if you want to do something... Let's play inside your dreams again sometime."

"Okay. I'll set some time aside just for you."

"Yay!"

Once I'd made a promise with Cyril, Lord Glen started speaking with a hand to his chin.

"So summarizing what we saw from the dreams... The Worshippers are planning on switching Gina's fiancé with one of their own to get information on Chelsea."

As I listened to him, a question sprang up in my mind.

"Why did they choose a method that would take this long? Wouldn't it be easier for them to switch places with someone closer to me?" I asked, confused.

Lord Glen gave me a wry smile. "It's not as easy as you think to get close to

you.”

What does he mean? I tilted my head, still confused, only for Gina to heave a huge sigh.

“His Highness uses his [Appraisal] Skill to thoroughly investigate anyone allowed by your side. Not only would the Worshippers be rejected in the investigation stage, but *anyone* even remotely suspicious would be rejected too. He also conducts further investigations irregularly for people allowed near you, so they wouldn’t be switched midway.”

He’s really doing all that?! I looked at Lord Glen in shock, but he just turned away. It seemed as if he hadn’t wanted me to know that, so it might have been best for me not to pry any further...

“The only way someone could weasel any info out about you would be if they did it from a position where His Highness wouldn’t appraise them~” Miss Micah explained.

I nodded at her simplified explanation. Apparently, the Worshippers were being more discreet this time.

“If their first step of getting Gina’s engagement canceled doesn’t work, the mistress might try something else. We could attempt to catch her, but...” Lord Glen paused, looking over to Gina herself. “What do you want to happen with your engagement to Franklin? Do you want it reinstated? Or would you like to forget about it?”

“I’d like to make it so it never happened,” Gina stated plainly.

“Then we’ll have Gina and Franklin’s engagement either completely revoked *or* canceled. It won’t be him simply calling it off anymore, but Gina not having a fiancé is just what the Worshippers want, so there shouldn’t be any issues.”

If the engagement were revoked, it would be treated as if there had never been an engagement in the first place. If it were canceled, it would be acknowledged as having been on at one point, but also that they had separated amicably.

But can they really claim either of those methods after Franklin broke it off publicly at a party? I wondered to myself, feeling a bit gloomy.

“When are you planning on discussing things with him?” Lord Glen asked.

“I have never gotten a reply from him any of the times I’ve tried contacting him before, so we won’t be able to do anything until he reaches out to me.”

So even getting in contact with him has only been on his terms?!

My gloomy feelings just kept growing. But Lord Glen seemed to notice, gently rubbing my back.

“It’s okay, Chelsea. I told you I was going to make sure he paid for this, right?”

“Yes, you did...” I replied, nodding as I remembered what he’d said last night in Gina’s guest room.

After taking a deep breath, Lord Glen declared, “Then...in the name of Glenarnold Snowflake Chronowize, younger brother of the king, I will have preparations made for Gina Percy and Franklin Hiscox to discuss things. Viscount Percy, Count Hiscox, and Chelsea Sargent will attend as witnesses.”

He had a devilish grin as he made this statement, which surprised not only me, but my maids as well.

Though Lord Glen had been given the rank of duke when the crown prince had been born, he hadn’t been removed from the royal family itself. That meant any summons made in his formal name would be treated as being summoned by a royal. Thus, they couldn’t be refused without a *very good* reason. This also meant that no one outside other than those specified could attend the summons.

“Last night’s party was organized by the royal family to celebrate Chelsea’s achievements. He has to pay a *hefty* price for ruining it,” Lord Glen growled. His voice was so low that a shiver ran down my spine.

Hearing him like this made me realize he was even more angry than I was.

+++

Two days later, everyone Lord Glen had summoned in his declaration gathered in a room in the royal residence.

Here we had Gina, the noblewoman who'd had her engagement broken off; Gina's father, Viscount Percy; Franklin, the nobleman who'd done the engagement-breaking; and Count Hiscox, Franklin's father. Lord Glen was in attendance too, of course, as well as myself as his fiancée. Root the Communication Spirit was also stealthily present.

"I appreciate you all for responding to my summons," Lord Glen began, speaking similarly to His Majesty the King. Everyone present lowered their heads deeply in response.

"We are grateful that you've given us this opportunity to speak, Your Highness," said Count Hiscox, who had the second-highest rank.

Once the greetings were out of the way, we all sat down at Lord Glen's signal.

"The reason I have gathered you all here today is as follows... Prior to the celebratory party held a few days ago, the son of Count Hiscox one-sidedly broke off his engagement to the daughter of Viscount Percy."

One of Count Hiscox's eyebrows shot right up hearing this, but he didn't say anything. Root circled around the room at the time and stopped above the count's head.

«He thinks, 'So it really was because my fool of a son broke off his engagement... How could he pull something like that while I wasn't there?!'» the Communication Spirit conveyed.

According to Root's words, the count hadn't been present in the hall when his son and Gina had had their altercation. Franklin had probably been attending in his place.

"Normally, we royals wouldn't stick our noses into matters between members of the nobility, but...I must do so this time," Lord Glen said. "After all, the party was held *by the royal family* to celebrate my beloved fiancée's achievements."

When he said “beloved,” Lord Glen gently pulled me closer to him by the waist. My cheeks reddened slightly out of embarrassment since we were in front of other people.

“What’s more...the daughter of Viscount Percy, the lady who Count Hiscox’s son broke off his engagement to, is the head of my fiancée’s personal maids. There seems to be quite a few viewpoints in play here, so I decided to hear the story from both family’s sides.”

Lord Glen had a demonic smile on his face, but he wasn’t sneering so hard it went up to his eyes, at least.

“...His Highness’s fiancée’s personal maid?!” Franklin gasped as he began to tremble.

Root flew over above his head. «He thinks, ‘I’d heard Gina was working in the palace, but she never mentioned being someone’s *personal maid*!’»

Gina said she’d included where she worked and for whom in her letters. *Franklin really didn’t know where she worked?!* I was shocked, but I didn’t let it show on my face.

“You mean you weren’t aware of where your fiancée worked? She’s been my fiancée’s personal maid for nearly three years now,” Lord Glen asked, head tilted lightly.

Franklin glared at Gina.

«He thinks, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?! You really are a useless woman!’»

I won’t forgive him for insulting Gina! I gritted my teeth hard to keep myself from looking angry.

“Then let’s get to the point. Franklin Hiscox, do you remember the reason you gave for breaking off your engagement with Miss Percy? Answer me.”

Gina’s ex-fiancé suddenly shot her another nasty glare as he spoke. “With all due respect, Your Highness, allow me to explain. One month ago, Gina pushed a lady I am close to down the stairs, injuring her! I believe she was jealous of our relationship... However! Violence should never be the answer! I do not want a brute like her as my fiancée, so I ended our engagement!”

«He’s saying exactly what he’s thinking,» Root told us, smacking at the man’s head.

Viscount Percy was visibly angry but stayed silent; meanwhile, Count Hiscox leveled his son with a look of fury. It seemed that the two fathers had realized that Franklin’s telling of events was impossible.

“As I mentioned before, Miss Percy is the head of my fiancée’s personal maids,” Lord Glen rebutted.
“She goes wherever my fiancée goes. Now...what exactly was the recent party being held to celebrate?”

«He thinks, ‘What was it held for? I only remember that it was celebrating something or other.’»

Franklin’s mouth gaped as he was unsure how to respond.

“The party was held to celebrate my fiancée returning from fulfilling her duties in the Holy Country of Celesark for the last three months. Now, Miss Percy, where exactly were you one month ago?”

“One month ago, I was with my mistress Lady Chelsea in the Holy Country of Celesark,” Gina replied proudly to Lord Glen’s question.

“Chelsea, my beloved fiancée, was Miss Percy with you a month ago?”

“Yes. One month ago, I was undertaking the incredibly important task of overseeing the selection of the next Grand Saintess of Celesark. Gina—being the head of my personal maids—was attending to me every day we were there,” I said, emulating Gina. I made sure to mention that she served me, to emphasize our master-servant relationship.

«He’s thinking, ‘That... That can’t be true... It’s a lie. Gina had to have been in the capital...’»

Franklin had gone so pale that he looked as if he’d faint.

“One month ago, the one who pushed Mister Hiscox’s beloved Miss Turner down the stairs and injured her was not Miss Percy. You are falsely accusing her,” Lord Glen said simply.

Franklin screamed, “That’s impossible! Olivie told me that Gina pushed her

down the stairs! She even showed me her injury! I'm not lying!"

"Did you *see* Gina push her down the stairs with your own eyes? Or did you only *hear* that she did?" I asked, causing the man to tense up. "Which set of stairs was she pushed down? And was it from the very top or from the second step? Most fragile noblewomen would be more than slightly injured if they were to fall from the apex of a staircase. Depending on how they fell, their injuries could range from scrapes to bruises, and maybe even broken bones. How injured was your lady friend?"

As I matter-of-factly piled the questions on, Franklin answered in a daze. "Where... Olivie said she was pushed from the very top of the stairs in the cathedral... She only had a bruise on her arm. It wasn't that bad... But Olivie is supposed to be a fragile lady... Was...was I fooled?"

Franklin's shoulders went limp, and he stared down at his lap.

«He just started waxing about how he met this Olivie lady, so I'm gonna switch to someone else,» Root said, moving off Franklin's head.

"Your son used a false accusation to publicly break off his engagement with Miss Percy at a party celebrating my beloved fiancée. How do you plan on dealing with his misconduct?"

"I will disown Franklin and adopt a child from one of our relatives to raise as my successor. By disowning Franklin, the Hiscox family will take full responsibility for canceling the engagement. I apologize profusely for my fool of a son's conduct," announced Count Hiscox, standing and bowing deeply to Gina and her father.

Viscount Percy seemed to accept these terms, and heaved a sigh as he nodded back.

"While I'd like to end the matter here... Unfortunately, I cannot," Lord Glen said, looking serious. "I would like for the engagement between Mister Hiscox and Miss Percy to be canceled today while postponing Mister Hiscox's disownment by one month."

"May I ask why, Your Highness?" asked Viscount Percy, speaking up for the first time. Root quickly flew above the man's head.

“I surmise that this whole ordeal was caused by the word and conduct of Miss Olivie, daughter of Baron Turner. Do you all not wonder why Miss Turner would do such a thing?” Lord Glen asked.

Both Viscount Percy and Count Hiscox seemed to come to realizations simultaneously.

«He’s thinking, ‘It seems quite childish for this all to have been to set my daughter up...’» Root said, repeating what Gina’s father had thought.

“What if Miss Turner’s aimed to sow discord between your families?” Lord Glen asked. “Or to set both families up to lose their ranks? We won’t know until we ask Miss Turner ourselves.”

«‘He’s right!’» Lord Percy thought, swallowing hard.

Lord Glen continued, “I believe we should let Miss Turner prolong her plot for now. In the meantime, we will investigate her and any other disturbing elements that arise.”

“I see...” Viscount Percy grunted, looking convinced.

“With all that said, I’d like for Mister Franklin Hiscox here to keep watch on Miss Turner over this month,” Lord Glen said, looking at Franklin.

Franklin slowly lifted his head to look at Lord Glen, and Root excitedly shot over to the man’s head.

«He’s thinking, ‘Keep watch on Olivie? So he’s telling me I need to stay with the woman who tricked me?’»

“If we find that Miss Turner is the cause of this whole mess, we can have your disinheritance revisited, though we won’t overturn the decision on ending your engagement. There would be room to consider extenuating circumstances if you were only fooled, after all.”

As Lord Glen continued speaking, you could see the light returning to Franklin’s eyes.

«‘There was nothing between Gina and me, so I don’t care about the engagement. But I’ll do anything if I can avoid being disowned and becoming a commoner!’»

Lord Glen seemed confident when he heard the man's conveyed thoughts, and he stared straight at him. "So, can you pretend to love Miss Olivie Turner for one month?"

"I can."

Root added, «'I will! I'll get payback on that woman!'»

Hearing Franklin's response and Root's words, Lord Glen quietly nodded.

After that, they talked a bit about what to do about the relationship between the Hiscox and Percy families. It seemed things would be put on hold until we knew the true culprit behind the situation. Count Hiscox, his son, and Viscount Percy all left the room. Lord Glen, Gina, myself, and Root remained.

"As things stand, Count Hiscox's family will take the blame for the engagement falling through, making it so Gina was the one to call it off. Just as you wanted, Chelsea."

Hearing Lord Glen say that, I asked Gina, "Are you all right with the engagement being done away with?"

"It seems you don't quite understand how I feel," Gina said, a heartfelt smile on her face. "I'm thrilled that the engagement is off. Quite honestly, I would have refused to marry him."

Her resolute words came off like she was refreshed by the whole experience. *How relieving.*

Root the Communication Spirit floated in front of my face.

«Did I help you?» he asked.

"You helped a lot, Root. Thank you! What do you want as a reward?" I asked.

The little Spirit crossed his arms, thinking hard. A moment later, a bright grin rose to his face.

«I want sweets I can share with the Storage Spirits!»

Hearing him say that made me distinctly happy. "I'll make lots with my Skill later, okay?"

«Yaaay! I'll go tell everyone!» he cheered, disappearing into the Spirit Tree

bracelet on my left wrist.

“We’ve got Gina’s engagement out of the way, just like our enemy wanted. Next up is the man who’ll be targeting her,” Lord Glen asserted.

“Are we going to capture him?” I asked.

“Of course. And after being apprehended, we’ll get Miss Olivie Turner too. There’s a lot we need to hear from that woman’s mouth. I look forward to seeing the fruits of Franklin’s work,” Lord Glen said, smiling like a demon lord.

8. The Two Letters

A few days after the meeting, Gina came to me looking perplexed.

“Excuse me, Lady Chelsea. I received letters the other day...”

I wanted to ask her what the letters were about, but I held back, deciding that Lord Glen should also be around to review the contents.

“We’ll read them with Lord Glen,” I said, getting a nod back from Gina.

Considering the time of day, Lord Glen was likely in his office. I requested time to see him, and he replied that I could come in anytime.

After ensuring that I looked presentable, Gina and I headed to meet with Lord Glen. As we walked into his office, he smiled happily at me.

“I was just thinking about taking a rest. Thank you,” Lord Glen said, sending all his aides out of the room on break. “You said you had something to talk about, Chelsea. Is it related to Gina?”

“Yes. Gina said she received some letters,” I responded.

Lord Glen took my hand and led me to sit on the three-seat sofa. Then, he urged Gina to sit down opposite us. Being a maid, she tried to refuse but grudgingly sat down when Lord Glen told her we would probably be talking for a while.

“So what did these letters say?” Lord Glen asked.

Gina slowly set out two letters on the table. “I thought they might have been tampered with, so I haven’t opened either.”

One of the letters used high-quality paper for the decorated envelope and was firmly sealed with wax. The other letter was very plain but also firmly sealed with wax.

“You made a wise choice. The plain letter is enchanted to raise your mood and dull your decision-making when opened,” Lord Glen said, relaying the results of his appraisal as he pointed to the plain letter. “The wax seal has a minuscule magic tool buried inside. Things like this are pretty common, so it’s

easy to cancel out. You should open the other one first."

"Understood."

Nodding, Gina took a small knife from her maid uniform's pocket, quickly sliced through the seal on the decorated envelope, and extracted the letter. As she read it, her expression grew more and more confused. Once she was finished, she tilted her head, handing the letter over to Lord Glen and me.

Taking the letter, we read it together.

Dear Gina Percy,

I have loved you since the first time I saw you. Please, begin a relationship with me on the premise of marrying.

—Alistair Clark

Once we finished reading, Lord Glen and I glanced at the doorway, where Lord Glen's personal guard knight Alistair Clark stood.

"Alistair Clark. Did you send this letter?" Lord Glen asked.

"Yes, I did," Alistair answered, blushing bright red before bowing. "May I be permitted a moment to speak here, right now...with everyone present?"

A resigned smile rose to Lord Glen's lips as he looked at Gina. "Is that all right with you? Do you not want to speak to him alone?"

"He was with us as Your Highness's guard on the day of our meeting. I'd like to ask him why he would send a letter like this when he knows the current situation," Gina said, giving the knight a little scowl.

"Is that okay with you too, Chelsea?"

"Yes. It's fine."

After nodding to Lord Glen, I secretly called for Root and asked him to tell us what Alistair was thinking. The Spirit nodded, moving above the knight's head.

Alistair walked a few steps away from the doorway, straightened himself up, and faced Gina before beginning to speak.

"I fell in love with Miss Gina from the first time I saw her! Just as I was about to confess my love, I learned that she had a fiancé, and I promptly gave up! But

after the recent trouble, her engagement has been called off by the fault of the other party. Quite honestly, I was worried that if I missed this chance, I would never get another one, so I sent the letter."

«This guy is saying exactly what he's thinking!» Root declared.

"I realize that because of the situation, it might have been best to wait until things were finished to send my letter. But when I thought of the possibility of men other than the one from the Worshippers courting her...I couldn't help myself! I love Miss Gina so much that I couldn't hold back! That was why I sent my letter," Alistair said. "Miss Gina, will you please date me on the pretext that we will marry in the future? His Highness and Lady Chelsea will absolutely be getting married. If we were to marry, I could continue protecting His Highness, and you could keep being Lady Chelsea's maid."

His words must have been enticing, because Gina looked quite charmed. Seeing the change in Gina's expression made Lord Glen grin.

"Oh, that's right. His Majesty told me to reward the guard knight who helped us avoid the landslide. And you were the one who went ahead to the next town for us, weren't you, Alistair?"

When I thought back to that day, I realized that Alistair *had* been the one who'd let us know about the landslide up ahead.

"Alistair is the third son of Count Clark, so he won't be getting the title. But I *could* have him appointed the title of Chevalier for one generation as his reward. As the wife of a Chevalier, you would be able to continue being Chelsea's personal maid for your whole life."

«He thinks, 'His Highness is helping me. There'll be a storm tomorrow!'»

I nearly burst out laughing hearing Root's words.

"In my opinion, I would encourage you to choose Alistair—both from his appraisal results and position. If you were to begin seeing each other, I would speak to Viscount Percy for you."

Caught up in Lord Glen's momentum, Gina was about to speak, but I held up a hand to stop her.

“I understand that Alistair is serious and that he has Lord Glen’s support,” I said, “but it is because of these circumstances that I would like for you to give Gina time to think on this.”

Gina had had so much trouble with her former political fiancé. I wanted her to think long and hard about her next relationship.

When I said that, Gina gave me a happy smile. “Thank you so much, Lady Chelsea. I will answer Sir Clark properly once I’ve had time to think on this.”

«He thinks, ‘I’m just thankful that she’s thinking about it...’»

Apparently, Alistair has a very positive personality. He might be just right for Gina, who broods over things. As I was thinking, discussions over the first letter finished.

“Next up is the second letter. But first, I’ll cancel out the effects of the magic tool hidden under the wax seal.”

Lord Glen reached out towards the seal of the plain letter on the table and murmured something.

“I used magic to stop the effects. My appraisal reads it as being safe now. Go ahead and open it.”

“Yes.”

Gina nervously slid her small knife under the wax seal before slipping the letter out of the envelope. Her eyes scanned over the contents as her expression slowly morphed into one of disgust. Reaching the end, she put the letter down on the table.

“They must be mad...” she muttered.

It’s rare for Gina to talk like that, I thought. Root seemed to catch on and flew above Gina’s head.

«She thinks, ‘Disgusting doesn’t even begin to describe someone who’d send a letter like this to a person who doesn’t even know them.’»

Wondering what it must have said for her to be that disturbed, I looked at the letter. It read that the sender knew her next day off and that he’d be waiting in the botanical gardens on the east side of the capital until she came.

That really is gross. Or rather, downright scary...

“The sender is Nicholas, son of Viscount Oldriche... Another adopted child. I heard that Viscount Oldriche and his wife were unable to conceive, and there were no children in their extended family to adopt as a successor, so they adopted.”

The woman who’d seduced Gina’s former fiancé had been the adopted daughter of a baron.

“I wonder if the Worshippers are arranging for their members to be adopted into noble houses,” I said.

Lord Glen sighed heavily. “That sounds likely. You might know this, Chelsea, but there are a lot of people who I need to greet at parties... I always end up using my [Appraisal] Skill so I don’t get their names wrong.”

At our engagement announcement, we had greeted so many people that I’d lost track of all the faces partway through. When I’d told Lord Glen, he’d said this also happened to him sometimes, and he’d use his Skill before responding to them.

“From all the people I’ve appraised until now, there haven’t been any Worshippers in Chronowize’s nobility. One needs to be a certain rank to be allowed inside the citadel to interact with Chelsea and the Spirit Tree. That must be why they’re getting people adopted,” Lord Glen said, his gaze returning to the letter. “This is a pretty scary letter to get from someone you don’t know.”

Gina and I both nodded firmly, while Alistair scowled.

“Normally, no one would read this and want to meet this person at the botanical gardens. However, with the mood-enhancing and judgment-impairing effects I canceled out, you might’ve thought they understood you and would’ve met with them.”

“Thank you so very much for checking the letter before I opened it, Your Highness,” Gina said, bowing deeply to Lord Glen.

“You’re Chelsea’s personal maid, of course I’d do that much.”

«‘He’s saying it as if it were nothing, but magic tools of that type aren’t that

easy to cancel out at all... I truly must thank His Highness... No, thank Lady Chelsea!'»

Root's words confused me. *Lord Glen is the one who does all the work, so he's the one Gina ought to be thankful for...*

"The timing. The suspicious effects on the letter. The sender is the adopted son of Viscount Oldriche, who would have had to give up his rank. These three things make it extremely likely that this Nicholas character is one of the Worshippers. Now, how are we going to get the jump on them..." Lord Glen said, a demonic smile on his face.

This Nicholas Oldriche is inviting Gina to a specific location on a set date. Would we not just be able to go early to the same place and wait for him? But he knows enough to be sure of what days Gina isn't working, so he might catch us if we looked as we usually do. That would mean...

"How about we all disguise ourselves and go to the botanical gardens with her?" I asked.

I'd heard from my plant-loving friend Lady Noel Wisteria that the botanical gardens on the eastern side of the capital were quite large, with a number of different greenhouses.

"The gardens are big, so I don't think he'd be able to tell it was us if we blended in with the other guests..." I continued.

Lord Glen looked at me blankly. "That seems like a great idea, but...you'd be going too, Chelsea?"

"Yes. I have the ring you gave me, so I wouldn't get hurt. And even if I were to be kidnapped, I could call for help through my bracelet, and I wouldn't starve thanks to the seeds I can create. And, um...I was taught some attack magic while in Celesark, so as long as the target is stationary, I can hit them."

I tried desperately to convey that I wasn't just a damsel to be protected—I could fight and hold my own. Lord Glen shot me a wry smile in response.

"You really do have Sargent blood in you, Chelsea."

The territory ruled by Margrave Sargent was on the border, touching both the

Demonic Forest and the Radzuel Empire. Monsters spilled from the forest, and rogues would come from the empire. The Sargents protected not only their territory, but the whole country. Because of this, they naturally learned methods to guard themselves and fight back.

On paper though, I was the adopted daughter of Margrave Sargent, and my birth mother had been his younger sister. I was extremely happy to feel like I had Sargent blood in me too.

“It should be okay for you to come along as you are now, Chelsea.”

“Thank goodness...” I said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Let’s go with Chelsea’s suggestion. As for what everyone’s disguises will be...”

“Please leave the disguises to me... No, to the maids!” Gina declared.

«She’s thinking, ‘We cannot choose what Lady Chelsea will wear right here... I must speak with the maids in charge of her outfits, as well as with Her Highness the Queen...’»

Why would the queen have anything to do with this? Though I wondered, I didn’t say anything.

Lord Glen grimaced for a moment. “Please make it something easy to move in... I’ll decide how the arrest will take place with the knights.”

Alistair nodded in response.

And so, everyone prepared for Gina’s next day off.

9. Choosing Outfits

The next day, Her Highness invited Lord Glen, Gina, and me to the royal quarters. We were brought into a room that looked to be for meetings, with a large table and many chairs inside. She urged us to sit down at the far end of the room.

“I’ve heard you’ll all be disguising yourselves,” she said.

It seemed that both His Majesty and Her Highness had heard all about the trouble this time, and that we would be disguised and lying in wait to catch the Worshippers behind it all.

“Please, do let me help you with that!” Her Highness continued, her smile not allowing any refusal as she called her maids into the room.

“There’s no stopping Her Highness when she’s got that smile on her face...” Lord Glen whispered quietly so that only I could hear.

“It’s not every day you get to do something as interesting as pick out disguises, so let’s have fun with it!” the queen said, telling her maids to sit down.

Unlike Gina, who’d looked incredibly stressed as she sat, the queen’s maids all seemed used to it, and they greeted us with smiles as they immediately sat in their chairs.

Once everyone was in a seat, the queen looked at Gina.

“First off, we need to know where you’re going. Where are you supposed to meet this man?”

“In front of the gate to the botanical gardens on the eastern side of the capital,” Gina replied seriously, sitting up straight.

Her Highness gave her a troubled smile. “Please, do speak to me just as you would a friend. You too, Chelsea.”

“Y-Yes!” I replied, nodding frantically. The queen giggled at this.

Honestly, it would be hard to treat Her Highness the Queen as a friend... I can

at least be firm with my opinions. Lord Glen looked resigned, and gave me a small nod.

"The eastern botanical gardens... Does anyone know what sort of place it is? And who would visit there?" Her Highness asked, looking towards her maids.

One maid raised her hand, smiling. "It just so happens that I visited the gardens recently on my day off, so I may be able to help," she started, before giving us a detailed explanation of the botanical gardens.

The capital's eastern botanical gardens were on a massive plot of land, with a number of greenhouses, a restaurant, and accommodations on-site. The greenhouses each had different plants according to a theme, and were quite impressive. As there was an entrance fee to get inside, all the visitors were either nobles or wealthy merchants.

When the maid finished speaking, Her Highness lightly brought her hand to her chin in thought. "So they would stand out if they wore the type of commoner clothes one would wear when out incognito?"

The same maid nodded in response to the queen's question.

"We can just have the knights dress up like nobles," Lord Glen commented roughly.

The queen tilted her head. "Will only male knights be going to capture the target?"

"No, there will be a few female knights as well."

"Then we'll have the male and female knights pair up and act as if they're on dates, patrolling the gardens. Make sure they're careful to dress just like they're ready *for* a date. And maybe the other male knights could act as if they're waiting for someone in front of the gate..."

"That's a good idea. I'll let the knights know," Lord Glen responded, getting a short nod back from the queen.

"Next, we'll decide on outfits for you three," the queen said to Lord Glen, Gina, and me as one of her maids began taking notes. "What should Gina wear?" Her Highness wondered, head tilted.

The maids all began giving their opinions.

“As the one who was invited, Gina is the star, so what about a showy day dress?”

“Wouldn’t she stick out like a sore thumb wearing something showy to a function other than a tea party?”

“It’s like their first date, isn’t it? Something wholesome might be best.”

All of the maids were quite enthusiastic and forthcoming with their opinions, despite being in front of Her Highness and Lord Glen. They must have spoken to the queen like this all the time.

As she listened to the maids’ opinions, Her Highness’s gaze fell upon Gina herself.

“What would *you* like to wear, Gina?”

“I believe I will leave my outfit to all of you.”

“Hmmm?” the queen murmured before shifting her gaze to me. “What do you think, Chelsea?”

“The man she’s meeting with has looked into her job and her days off, so he might get suspicious if she appears in something too different from what she normally wears. Why not have her dress like normal, only adding a few accessories?” I answered.

Nodding lightly, Her Highness agreed. “Yes, our plans would all go up in smoke if he got suspicious.”

With that, it was decided that Gina would dress similarly to her usual style, with an embroidered white blouse, navy blue skirt, and a big ribbon around her collar.

“The knights will all be on guard, but there’s always the chance something could happen. We should have her outfitted with magic tools to protect her and let us know her location,” Lord Glen suggested.

Gina would also be fitted with decorative stone-type defensive magic tools on her blouse’s collar and cuffs, and have a tool that sent us her location hidden in the embroidery on the hem of her skirt. The defensive tools would

automatically cast defensive magic when they took a hit, while the other tool would beam its location to a paired tool, letting us know where she was. Both of them were very small, and would only work once.

Will that really be enough to protect Gina? I was worried.

As if hearing my thoughts, Lord Glen brought up another protective accessory. “Do you think we could also have a brooch-shaped magic tool on her that records moving pictures? If we had images, we would have proof of anything the perpetrators did.”

“Evidence is very important! If we put a brooch in the middle of the ribbon on her collar, it wouldn’t stand out, and it would give us a good look at the man’s face,” agreed Her Highness.

Lord Glen nodded. “Then I’ll ask to take that out from the treasure room the day of.”

Treasure room? So they’re talking about a national treasure?! Though I wanted to ask about it, the smiles on both the queen’s and Lord Glen’s faces didn’t invite any objections.

“National...treasure?” Gina murmured, her resigned gaze staring into the abyss.

“Now that we’ve decided on Gina’s outfit, let’s think of what to dress Chelsea in!”

Gina and Lord Glen’s eyes lit up at the queen’s words.

“Lady Chelsea’s personal maids have an idea!” Gina said, throwing her hand up.

The queen smiled in amusement, tilting her head. “And what would that be?”

“We’d like to suggest that Lady Chelsea dress up in boy’s clothing as a butler-in-training!”

I could only blink at Gina’s suggestion. I’d never imagined that they would suggest I dress like a boy!

“Oh my... What an interesting idea!” Her Highness was thrilled at the suggestion, and she shook her fists in the air in excitement.

“The Worshippers know what Chelsea looks like, and since most of the garden’s visitors are nobles, it wouldn’t be odd for them to have maids, attendants, or butlers accompanying them. And Chelsea is just the right height for a butler-in-training... That’s a great idea,” Lord Glen agreed, smirking like a young boy.

If I’m disguising myself, then going all out and dressing like a boy might be best!

“Are there any other suggestions?” the queen asked her maids, glee written all over her face. The maids all shook their heads, praising Gina for the great idea.

And so, it was decided that I’d dress as a butler-in-training.

“Finally, we have Glen’s outfit to decide...” Her Highness said, pausing for a moment. She had the most amused smile on her face. “If Chelsea’s going to be a butler, wouldn’t she need someone to serve? Why don’t we have Glen become a *noblewoman*?”

“Huh?!” Lord Glen blurted out in shock, his eyes going wide.

A noblewoman... So Lord Glen would be dressed like a lady? Clutching my hands together, I cried out, “It would definitely suit him!”

Her Highness, her maids, and Gina all nodded in agreement.

“No, wait—”

“Glen’s looks would stand out even if we used a magic tool to change his hair color. Our target would definitely notice him if he wasn’t dressed as a lady. That’s why I recommended that first!” the queen continued, cutting Lord Glen off.

“Lord Glen really is gorgeous—like an angel—so he would definitely be recognized if he only changed his hair color,” I agreed. Lord Glen was absolutely silent.

“What clothes do you think would suit him? We won’t know until he tries them on, will we?”

“I’ll have preparations made immediately!”

One of the queen's maids answered the queen instantly. All of the maids and attendants worked together to move the table and chairs away from the center of the room, and brought in clothes for Lord Glen to try on. The man in question had a hand on his forehead as he heaved a massive sigh.

Once the clothes were all prepared, Her Highness spoke to Lord Glen. "Stand in the middle of the room, please."

He made no effort to leave his spot beside the wall.

"You leave me no choice... I'll just have to tell Chelsea about when—"

"Okay! I'll try on the dresses, so *please*. Don't," Lord Glen cut her off this time, and he took his place in the center of the room.

I really wanted to know what the queen would have told me, but I also wished to see him try on the clothes, so I decided to ask Her Highness later in secret.

The queen nodded, giggling as her maids all surrounded Lord Glen.

"How about we try this orthodox dress first?"

"Something that'll hide his physique a bit better might be best."

"Why not put ribbons on his shoulders to fudge them up?"

"In the first place, I would be worried about his waistline in a dress."

"Wouldn't we just need to squeeze him into a corset?"

"That might work, but how about something separate?"

"If we go with something separate, he could wear a vest to hide his chest."

The maids brought out many different outfits to have Lord Glen try on.

"I didn't want Chelsea seeing me like this..." he grumbled, despite looking resigned to his fate.

In the end, it was decided that Lord Glen would wear a big-collared blouse and a dress made from floral lace. Finishing the look would be with a long, frilled, high-waisted skirt.

"We must have accessories that will match his outfit and a silver-thread wig

ready for the day of.”

“I’m so excited!” I squealed.

I’d let my true thoughts slip out, and Lord Glen dropped his shoulders.

+++

That night, I sat on the edge of my bed in my quarters, thinking of the magic tools that would be protecting Gina.

The tiny ones on her blouse would guard her against attacks to a point, and the one on her skirt would let us know where she was in the unlikely event that she was kidnapped. *But aren’t there other things she’d need to look out for?*

While I sat there groaning at what to do, a knock rang out, and Miss Micah walked in. She was holding a basket with a pot of tea and some treats inside.

“You were deep in thought during dinner too~ What’s up~?” the foxwoman asked.

She put a small plate with a number of round donuts on the table and poured tea into the little handleless cups that were stored on the top of the teapot. Steam rose from the cups, and a sweet scent began to fill the room.

I got off my bed and sat at the table, and Miss Micah sat across from me.

“To tell you the truth, Her Highness invited us to her rooms earlier today, and...”

I told Miss Micah all about how we were deciding on our disguises and my worries about whether Gina would be safe with only two types of magic tools on her.

After taking a sip of her own tea, Miss Micah spoke. “It doesn’t sound like either of those magic tools’ll do anything against mental attacks~!”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered how the letter Gina had been sent had had a magic tool that would elevate her mood and dull her decision-making skills hidden under the wax seal. It wouldn’t be a stretch to think the man would try attacking her mentally!

“We’ll need to have another magic tool prepared for her...” I said.

Miss Micah tilted her head in confusion. “Why not just make one with your Skill~?”

My Skill did let me create any seed I wished for... And just the other day, I had wondered if I could make magic-tool-like seeds...

“I’ll have to draw up a blueprint with all of the details...” I murmured. Suddenly, a pen and paper appeared before me from the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist. “Wait, are you here, Root?”

At my question, Cyril on her little cloud and Root with his butterfly-like wings popped into view.

“She caught us.”

«It was because I got the pen and paper out for her.»

“So you were here too, Cyril.”

Though I was surprised that the two had appeared, I started writing about the seed I wanted to create on the paper.

“It would block mental attacks while being held...and would just return to the earth if dropped...”

As I wondered what else to write, Miss Micah made a suggestion. “Why not make the seed in the shape of a necklace~?”

If Gina had it around her neck, she wouldn’t forget it in her pocket if she changed clothes.

“That’s a great idea! Could you draw it for me?”

“Of course~!”

I passed Miss Micah the pen, and she quickly drew a clear picture of a necklace. It resembled the engraved anti-poison necklace that Lord Royz had given me, and I remembered Miss Micah had the same one...

As we chatted, Cyril and Root split a round donut in half to share. I took a donut for myself and drank my sweet tea.

After a little break, I looked hard over the picture of a necklace Miss Micah

had drawn, and the explanation of what effects I wanted the seed to have. While it was a bit rough for a blueprint, I wanted the seed itself to have the effects, so I was pretty sure I could make it.

"I'll make a necklace-shaped seed that blocks mental attacks—[Seed Creation]!"

Wishing to protect Gina, I used my Skill, and a seed that looked just like the anti-poison necklace that both Miss Micah and I owned *popped* into existence. The chain felt like metal, and a completely round, black stone was attached at the top of the pendant.

"It looks just like the blueprint, but we don't know if it has the effect~"

Neither of us had the [Appraisal] Skill, so we had no idea whether I had succeeded or failed.

"We'll have to have Lord Glen appraise it... But it's already late, so we should wait until tomorrow."

But just as I said that, a knock rang out, and Lord Glen walked in. Flying around him were Cyril and Root, who had apparently gone to get him.

"Is something up?" he asked.

"I'm sorry for contacting you so late. Actually, I..."

After I explained things, Lord Glen immediately appraised the seed necklace for me.

"The seed is named 'Status Ailment Blocking Seed: For Gina Percy Only.' While she's wearing it, she won't be affected by any status ailments, and when dropped to the ground, it will return to the earth," he recited, blinking a few times. "Only for Gina, huh? You made a pretty good seed there. We won't have to worry about anyone else misusing it."

I was happy to hear him praise me so openly.

"And it's interesting that you made a seed in the shape of a necklace."

"Miss Micah was the one who had the idea," I confessed. Miss Micah puffed her chest out proudly.

“Do you think you could make a ring-shaped or hairpin-shaped seed next time?”

“Chelsea could definitely do that~!”

“I don’t think I could do it without drawing a detailed picture of them on the blueprint...” I said, showing Lord Glen the blueprint I’d used. On it was the necklace Miss Micah had drawn for me, which you could definitely tell *was* a necklace. If I had drawn it, there would’ve been no way to tell what it was supposed to be...

“A picture, eh? That’d be difficult.”

Lord Glen wasn’t very good at drawing either, so we smiled bitterly at each other.

10. In Custody

Today was finally Gina's day off. In preparation, I'd given her the necklace-shaped "Status Ailment Blocking Seed: For Gina Percy Only" yesterday.

To look the part of a butler-in-training, I was dressed in the navy blue outfit butlers typically wore, with my hair pulled into a low ponytail right behind my neck. I was also using a color-changing magic tool to change my conspicuous light pink hair to honey blond. The butler-in-training uniform was a lot easier to move in than I had expected—to the point where I wished I'd have another opportunity to wear it.

Once I was fully disguised, I headed to Lord Glen's room.

I gave a quick knock before entering. Inside, I found him surrounded by the queen's maids. His silver-thread wig and light makeup made him look magnitudes more beautiful than normal. If he put on a few small accessories, they would accent his beauty and femininity even further. No matter how you looked at him, he was a lady... It was enough for me to doubt if he was male in the first place.

"Chelsea... You're still cute even when you're dressed like a boy."

"Lord Glen... You're more than pretty—you're truly beautiful!" I clutched my hands together in front of my mouth and stared at him in rapture.

"You're complimenting me, but it certainly isn't making me happy..." he said, heaving a huge sigh.

"You're still gorgeous, even just sighing!"

A wry smile rose to Lord Glen's lips.

Since we were both ready, it was decided that we'd leave for the capital's eastern botanical gardens. It would be suspicious for us all to go at the same time, so Lord Glen and I got in our carriage and left a good deal earlier than Gina and Viscount Oldriche's son were set to meet.

From the moment he stepped out of his room, Lord Glen walked exactly like a

lady would, and sat in the carriage with his legs together.

“Lucy.”

Hearing Lord Glen call me by my nickname made a grin rise to my lips in glee.

“Yes, Lord Arnie?”

Hearing my reply, he shot me an apologetic look back.

“From this point on, let us call each other by our nicknames,” he said in a very ladylike tone. “Were we to use our real names, others would realize who we are.”

“Understood, Lady Arnie.”

I followed his lead, changing my manner of speaking to that of a butler-in-training. He smiled bitterly.

“I would much prefer for you to call me by my nickname while I look like myself...but I suppose there is nothing we can do about it at the moment.”

As we chatted, we eventually arrived at the botanical gardens. I stepped out first, offering my hand to Lord Glen. He rested his hand on mine, expression composed, as he descended from the carriage.

A few steps later, he stopped completely and murmured, “Might I ask that we speak through telepathy?”

I nodded, initiating a telepathic conversation. <Is something the matter?>

<I figured a lady having a full-on conversation with a butler as they walked together would stand out too much.>

<Right...>

<Looks like the Worshippers aren’t here yet.>

At his words, I tried looking around in a way that was as inconspicuous as I could muster. There were about five people in front of the gardens’ gate, all looking as if they were waiting for someone.

<For now, we should act as planned and kill some time by walking around the gardens until it’s time for Gina to meet up with him,> Lord Glen suggested.

<Okay.>

I walked behind my “mistress” on the left, so as to stay out of “her” way while being ready to move to protect “her” if it became necessary, as a proper butler-in-training would.

After we passed through the gate, we were met with the sight of flowers blooming in all sorts of colors. Normally, I would have stopped in front of any flowers I liked, but I had to keep up my act and follow Lord Glen!

He was acting just as a young lady would, walking slowly and stopping every once in a while to enjoy the flowers. *With the way he’s acting, I can’t help but see him as a true lady!*

Lord Glen noticed me staring and tilted his head lightly in question.

<How do you know how to act so ladylike, Lord Arnie?> I asked telepathically, voicing my internal struggle.

He grimaced for a second, then continued walking.

<The truth is...I was made to take lessons in ladylike behavior with His Majesty and Her Highness when I was really young. I guess this is like muscle memory kicking in.>

I nearly yelped in shock.

<Not just you, but His Majesty the King as well?> I asked in my mind while hurriedly following behind him.

<Yes. It was about fifteen years ago, I think? I was six, and the queen was still His Highness’s fiancée...> Lord Glen began, stepping into one of the gardens’ greenhouses and stopping in front of begonias that bloomed as they hung down from above. <His Majesty had asked Her Highness if her lady lessons were really as hard as she said they were.>

He looked down, letting out a little sigh. I knew he was exasperated out of annoyance for what the king had done back then, but to a passerby, it would have looked like he was letting out a sigh of admiration at how wonderful the begonias were.

<The question made Her Highness absolutely furious, and she told the two of

us to try taking the lessons then. His Majesty and I were forced to join her.>

Back when I'd first been adopted by Margrave Sargent, I'd started lessons on being ladylike. I could swear from the bottom of my heart how difficult they were.

<Anyway, we, uh... We had to start with the visuals, so we got squeezed into corsets and put in heavy gowns and high heels... Then, every day for an entire month, we learned about posture, how to walk, how to sit, how to put our legs while we sat... Every single day we had to act exactly like a lady would.>

<Not just once, but for a whole month?!>

In my shock, I ended up just staring at him. He gave me a ladylike smile before beginning to walk through the greenhouse once more.

<His Majesty looked like he was doing it all easily the first couple of times, but by the end of that month, he was absolutely exhausted.>

Fifteen years ago, His Majesty the King would have been eighteen years old; an adult who had an adult workload of responsibilities. That meant he would have been doing them while doing all of those lessons in being ladylike. It must have been extremely tough.

<It's because I've gone through those lessons that I know what they entail and how difficult they are,> Lord Glen said, suddenly turning and giving me a gentle smile. <That's why I know how hard you worked to cram it all within the short timespan you had to learn it. You did amazing, Lucy.>

<That makes me happy to hear since I didn't expect you to praise me like that,> I told him, blushing right to my ears as he patted me on the head. <That's the first time you've patted me on the head since we've been engaged...>

The feeling of happiness from being praised, bundled with embarrassment from being patted on the head, made it difficult to look Lord Glen in the face. Before I realized it, I was looking towards the ground.

<I figured patting my fiancée's head would be treating you too much like a child... But right now you're supposed to be a butler-in-training, so I thought it would be okay.>

I rushed to lift my head. <That's right! I'm a butler-in-training! I can't be facing downwards!>

It seemed Lord Glen found my reaction funny because he covered his mouth with both hands as he stifled a laugh.

<Lord Arnie is acting like a lady, so I need to act like a butler-in-training!> I decided to myself, eagerly looking towards him. "Lady Arnie, where shall you be heading next?"

When I asked verbally instead of telepathically, he tilted his head a little bit before pointing. "Let us go to the next greenhouse."

"Understood, Lady Arnie. I shall accompany you."

Lord Glen gave me a small nod at my response, walking towards the next greenhouse. I got right into my role as a butler, following him through two other greenhouses before we headed back to the gate.

I'm glad we came here today. Despite our roles, this still feels like a normal outing with Lord Glen.

As I thought that to myself, the bell rang, signaling the start of the afternoon.

Relaying this telepathically, Lord Glen nodded in response. I looked towards the front gate and saw Gina standing there looking nervous. Then, a man I'd never seen before came running over to her. He spoke to her, looking happy as he did. From a glance, it looked like the unknown man liked her, but...

<I appraised him, and he's definitely Viscount Oldriche's son Nicholas—the same one who sent her the letter,> Lord Glen stated, immediately clasping his hands together as if in prayer.

Soon, a gentleman who had been standing nearby—who was actually Alistair—began walking towards Gina and Nicholas. I also spotted a few other disguised knights begin moving. The gesture Lord Glen had made was one of the signals decided on for if the man who appeared was the one they were to take into custody, and the one for if he was dangerous, at that.

[Charm] was a rare Skill, and when used for good, the user could attract people and build themself a fortune. But in the wrong hands, it could be used to

delude people. It was one of the Skills that required training to control at the Royal Research Institute.

<Judging from his age, he should have taken control training at the Research Institute at the same time I was there. But I don't recognize him at all. Did he not get put in the records since he wasn't originally a noble? Or no, maybe he was intentionally left out...>

While Lord Glen was commenting telepathically, Gina and the man continued their conversation. At first, it looked like she was going to turn him down, but I noticed she started looking a bit blank partway through.

<Did the seed necklace I gave her not work?> I asked, going pale.

Lord Glen immediately shifted his gaze to her. <No, it's definitely working. She doesn't have any status ailments.>

Then what's wrong? Resisting the urge to tilt my head in confusion, I looked at Gina, only to notice that Cyril and Root were floating behind her head.

<Cyril and Root are over there with her...>

<You're right... Good thing Nicholas didn't notice them.>

<Could they have gone over to tell Gina that Nicholas has the [Charm] Skill?>

<Sounds plausible, going by how they've been acting lately. Maybe that's why Gina is acting that way.>

As we came to that conclusion, the man grabbed Gina by the wrist. She didn't resist, but she did look disgusted for a split second. He didn't seem to notice, forcefully pulling her as he began to walk away.

<He's taking her away!>

The very second I thought that, Alistair intercepted and split them apart.

"What are you doing?!" Nicholas screamed.

"Keep your hands off of my beloved!" Alistair shouted back. When he did, Gina dropped her blank act, and her face went red. She was adorable, mouth opening and closing in embarrassment.

"My [Charm] didn't work?!"

It seemed that Nicholas had finally noticed her expression. He made to run, but...

“I won’t let you get away!”

Alistair grabbed the man by the wrist, twisting it behind him as the knight pushed him to the ground. Gina seemed shocked at how quickly he’d done it.

“Amazing...” I murmured.

Seeing Nicholas get caught, a few other men began trying to flee, but Lord Glen cast a spell.

“...*Bind!*”

The men were hit by the magic and fell to the ground. The other disguised knights who’d been nearby then swooped in and took them into custody.

“Put a Mana Sealing Bracelet on Nicholas Oldriche,” Lord Glen commanded. His voice and tone were back to how he usually spoke.

Once I saw one of the knights follow Lord Glen’s order and slip the bracelet on Nicholas’s wrist, I let out the breath I had been holding.

Interlude 2: Glen

Thanks to the necklace-shaped seed Chelsea had made for her, Gina hadn't been affected by Nicholas's [Charm], and we'd been able to safely take the Worshippers into custody.

When someone was under the influence of the [Charm] Skill, they still kept their memories while being controlled. Even if the charm effect were cleansed with the [Cure] Skill, their memories would still be there, and many people had to live with the guilt of what they'd done. I was glad that Gina wouldn't need to keep serving Chelsea while retaining memories of harming Chelsea in some way.

All of the Worshippers who had been captured were thrown into the prison tower. We'd begun with questioning Nicholas Oldriche normally, but he was very tight-lipped.

"I've got no choice, then... I'm gonna have to do some heart-crushing here..." I murmured. Nicholas snorted a laugh.

"You didn't get much from interrogation, so it's on to torture now, huh! No matter what you do, I won't say a thing!" he said, smirking.

"Oh, we're not going to torture you," I said flatly. *Why should we have to get our hands dirty like that?*

I called Micah into the interrogation room.

"Do your thing."

"Leave it to Micah~!" the foxwoman said.

She sat across from Nicholas and straightened her posture.

"Micah will now begin her [Interrogation]. Please answer in detail," she said in a different tone than usual as she looked at him. "What were you doing to Gina Percy?"

"We had Olivie Turner get close to Gina Percy's fiancé, Franklin Hiscox, and break off their engagement. Then, I used a letter to call Gina Percy to the

botanical gardens so I could compel her to make me her new fiancé with my [Charm] Skill," Nicholas answered, shock written over his face.

Micah's Sage-level [Interrogation] Skill was something *extremely* troublesome for criminals because it made them answer anything she asked while using it. It cost quite a bit of mana to use, so she couldn't do so for very long, which meant we had to time it right.

"Wh-What is this?! Why did I answer?!" Nicholas cried, shaking.

"Why did you target Gina Percy?" Micah asked.

"Because Gina Percy is Chelsea Sargent's head maid. The top brass said if Gina was under our control, we could pull Chelsea Sargent down from the center stage."

"By 'the top brass,' do you mean Viscount and Viscountess Oldriche?" I asked.

I had met Viscount Oldriche and his wife at numerous parties. I didn't often see them, so I always used my [Appraisal] Skill to be sure of their names. This was why I already knew the answer to my question.

Nicholas frantically shook his head. "No! Mother and father have been good to me... They have nothing to do with this!"

"But you're their adopted child. Naturally they would be under suspicion as your parents."

Hearing my words, he started sweating bullets and began speaking out of his own will.

"They really have nothing to do with this! The top brass only thinks of me as a pawn. I had no choice but to follow their directions this time. If I didn't, they said they'd hurt mother and father!"

His words didn't sound like lies. It seemed that because Viscount Oldriche and his wife hadn't been able to have children, they treasured their adopted son Nicholas quite a bit. And because of this, he'd developed feelings for both of them.

"The top brass had a bunch of other people adopted into noble families just like me, with orders to take them over. They also told us to become

government officials. That way, we'd get close to Chelsea Sargent and the Spirit Tree!"

So we were right to think that the Worshippers had gotten their claws into Chronowize's noble houses.

"I'll tell you everything I know, so please! Don't do anything to mother and father!" Nicholas screamed, spilling everything.

+++

The day after Nicholas's interrogation, we took Olivie Turner into custody. Franklin Hiscox turned out to continue to be just the kind of guy she could get wrapped around her little finger, and he didn't keep watch over her. In the end, Count Hiscox had to hold her under house arrest in a detached building on their property.

Olivie had been thrilled, thinking we were there to save her, but she'd gone pale when she'd learned she was headed for prison. Worse, she'd gone a bit crazy after we told her she'd failed in her "sublime mission."

"You're lying! I fulfilled my mission! I didn't fail! I'm not a failure! I did it right!" she spat.

It seemed that Olivie had lost her mind, so we were unable to interrogate her, and we had no choice but to keep her in custody in prison.

Epilogue

After a long break, Lord Glen and I returned to my lab in the Royal Research Institute for the first time in a good while. We sat across the table from each other, eating castella made by Miss Micah while drinking tea prepared by Martha. Outside the lab's window, I could see the branches of the Spirit Tree sparkle.

"Thanks to Micah's help, we learned a lot," Lord Glen said, telling me what he'd uncovered.

One of the things he'd learned was that the Worshippers of the Proxy, Driven by Envy had had some of their followers adopted into noble families in order to take them over.

"We're investigating all of the families who adopted children," he continued, looking exhausted.

Apparently, since there were few people with the [Appraisal] Skill, Lord Glen himself was one of the people helping with the investigation.

"That's a bit of progress made against the Worshippers," I commented. *Sakura, the real Proxy, would definitely be happy to hear about it.*

While I was thinking that, Lord Glen shot a look over to Alistair, who was standing in front of the lab's door, and said, "Speaking of progress, Gina and Alistair got engaged."

Alistair blushed bright red, but stayed silent, continuing his duty as a knight. It seemed that Gina had fallen for him after he'd saved her.



“I heard that. If anything happens to make Gina cry, I will...get very angry with him,” I said. *I’ll use every power at my disposal to get angry with him!*

Just as I expressed that, Cyril appeared on her little cloud and Root flew around with his butterfly-like wings.

“I’ll help you then! I don’t like nightmares, but I’ll make you have them!”

«We’ll protect Miss Gina since she gives us sweets! I’ll, um...I’ll tell them everything you’re thinking!»

Lord Glen shot another look at Alistair as he tried to hold back his laughter. Alistair seemed to want to say something, but held off, prioritizing his duties. Since Alistair did his job properly, he probably wouldn’t make Gina sad. They were both considerate people, so I was sure they’d treasure each other and be happy forever after.

While I thought about their future, a knock rang out, and Lord Tris and Halnark the Spirit of Water walked inside.

“Long time no see, Miss Chelsea!” the brown-haired, bespectacled Lord Tris greeted, giving me his usual bright smile.

“I finally get to see Lady Chelsea!” Hal said with a grin, riding on Lord Tris’s shoulders in her toddler-like Spirit form. The two looked like parent and child, albeit with different-colored hair.

Lord Tris and Hal were living in Celesark near the Spirit Tree I’d planted there. They were apparently commuting to the Royal Research Institute through the trees nearly every day.

“It’s been quite a long while, Lord Tris, Hal,” I said, greeting the two for the first time in a month and a half.

Hal jumped off Lord Tris’s shoulders and floated in the air towards Cyril and Root, who were behind me.

“Who’re you?” she asked, tilting her head, confused.

“I’m Cyril. I’m a Nightmare contracted to Chelsea,” Cyril replied, looking nervous.

«Cyril's my friend!» Root said, flapping his wings and moving in front of Cyril.

"You're friends? I wanna be friends too!" Hal said. She jumped in and the three of them began to play together.

"I heard you made a new seed. What kinda seed was it?" Lord Tris asked.

"It was a necklace-shaped seed..." I said.

I willed the blueprint I'd drawn up with Miss Micah out of the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist and showed it to Lord Tris.

"So the *pendant* is the seed! Do you have the actual thing?" he asked as he looked over the blueprint, immensely curious.

"I gave it to Gina, so I don't have it here." His shoulders drooped, and I giggled. "It's okay. I'll make a Status Ailment Blocking Seed—[Seed Creation]!"

I cast while thinking about giving it to him, and a necklace-shaped seed appeared in my palm with a little *pop.*

"'Status Ailment Blocking Seed: For Tristano Forium Only.' Blocks status ailments while it's equipped. Returns to the earth when dropped to the ground..." Lord Glen immediately read off the appraisal results, sighing for some reason.

"For me only?! Wow!"

When I handed the necklace-shaped seed over to Tris, he was so happy he could've burst into dance. Then, he started looking at the seed from every angle.

Lord Glen, on the other hand, stared straight at me. *Is something wrong?*

When I wondered that, he stood up and moved next to me. He leaned in close and whispered into my ear, "I want a necklace just for me from you, Lucy."

Hearing him speaking in a gentle, pleading tone, different from how he usually spoke, while also using my nickname... I froze up and felt my face start burning.

"E-Err... Um... Does it have to be right now?"

I couldn't very well use my Skill properly as I currently was, and if possible, I

wanted to make one for Lord Glen that was special in both appearance and effect. I told him this and he nodded, though he still didn't look happy with the answer.

"You and His Highness have gotten closer since I last saw you, huh, Miss Chelsea?" Lord Tris said suddenly. He should have been looking at his necklace-shaped seed, so this made Lord Glen and me blush.

Side Story: A Day in the Life of Halnark, the Spirit of Water

Being Halnark, the Spirit of Water, my day began with checking on the Spirit Tree that was planted in the Holy Country of Celesark.

“You’ve got your glamour on right today too!”

Normally, Spirit Trees had glittering crystalline leaves, branches, and trunks that were so pretty that they were prone to being the target of baddies. Because of this, the trees would normally put a glamour on themselves to make them look like normal trees.

“And the barrier seems all good too.”

Since I feared that just glamouring wouldn’t be enough, I’d had a powerful mage—in this age, it was Lady Chelsea’s fiancé—put a barrier around the Spirit Tree to make it so those with ill will would be bounced away if they approached it.

“Make sure you grow up big, okay?” I said to the Spirit Tree, which had a will of its own and rustled its leaves at me.

Next, I had to wake up my contractor Lord Tris!

I floated my Spirit body, which looked like a human toddler, up into the air and headed to the manor near the Spirit Tree. Said manor was used as something like a dorm for the Winged Ones assigned to guard the tree, and Lord Tris had permission from the Grand Saintesses to borrow a room for himself.

My contractor Lord Tris had fluffy brown hair and blue eyes, and usually wore glasses. He was a researcher at the Kingdom of Chronowize’s Royal Research Institute and also the son of Marquis Forium. He really should have been living in Chronowize, but being contracted to me meant that he couldn’t leave Celesark’s Spirit Tree’s side for long. Back when I’d come into this world—or more specifically, when Celesark’s Spirit Tree cutting had been planted—he’d

been the only person other than Lady Chelsea who I could contract to, so I'd had no choice but to contract with him. But I still feel bad about it!

"Lord Triiis, it's morniiing!"

I stood by his side and called to him. I tried doing this first thing every morning, but it had yet to rouse him once.

"Yeah, that didn't work."

Once I saw that he showed absolutely no signs of waking up, I floated up in front of his face. Then, I used my little toddler-like hands to smack his cheeks. I had tried tickling the bottoms of his feet, pulling at his ears, and headbutting him in the stomach before, but this was the method that was most effective while hurting him the least.

A moment later, he sleepily sat up.

"Good morning, Lord Tris!" I said again as he stretched both his arms up into the air.

"G'morning, Miss Hal! Thanks for waking me up today too!"

He gave me a weak, defenseless smile, still half asleep. The fact that I considered this my dose of eye candy every morning was my little secret.

"Ahem! Praise me more!" I said, puffing out my chest right in front of him. He patted me on the head.

"You're so great, Miss Hal! Amazing! I'm so thankful!"

I had him pat my head until I was satisfied before floating away. That was the signal for him to get out of bed, wash his face, and get ready. While he was doing all of that, I went to the cafeteria to get his breakfast.

As I floated in, I was hit with the smell of coffee.

"Morning. Today's breakfast is the salmon bagel sandwiches you love, Hal!" The cafeteria lady beamed.

"Yaaay!" I cried, throwing my arms into the air in glee.

Everyone who lived in the manor was casual with me, a Spirit. They didn't try to use me or show me too much respect. We had a very comfortable

relationship, which made life a lot easier.

With a bright smile on my face, I floated up to the counter with two trays. After the cafeteria lady loaded each one up with a salmon bagel sandwich and a cup of coffee, I brought the trays to our usual spot.

As I sat in my chair and waited, Lord Tris came into the cafeteria wearing his Chronowize Royal Research Institute uniform.

“Really, Miss Hal, thanks for everything!” he thanked me again, a sincerely happy smile on his face.

I’m the one causing you trouble, so I really don’t need that thanks, you know. Swallowing my words, I puffed my chest out again.

After that, we leisurely ate our breakfast before Lord Tris put me on his shoulders and headed to the base of the Spirit Tree. All around Celesark’s tree were Winged One guards.

“Great job, guys!”

The Winged One guards all thumped the right sides of their chests with their left fists as Lord Tris walked by. This was a Winged One greeting. I thumped my own right chest with my left fist from my spot on Lord Tris’s shoulders, making the guards break into smiles.

Lord Tris watched this from the corner of his eye, standing at the base of the tree.

“We’ll be getting going then,” he said.

He touched the Spirit Tree’s trunk and looked as if he was sucked inside it...to the Spirit World.

The Spirit World had much the same structure as Lord Tris’s world, but it was very small, and only Spirits could live there. Apparently, if beings other than Spirits spent too long inside, the reason of the world would force them back out.

“No matter how many times I see it, it’s still strange,” Lord Tris murmured. He turned around immediately after entering the Spirit World and looked back at where he’d just come through—an arch-like entrance in the Spirit World called

the Gate in a Garden.

From the front of the gate you could see outside of the Spirit Tree, but when you circled behind it, it was black and unpassable. From the Celesark gate that we just entered through, we could see Winged One guards touching the tree trunk, trying to pass through too. But the only ones who could come and go from the Spirit World were Spirit contractors and those who had the blessing of the Spirit's guidance. No matter how much the guards touched the tree, they couldn't get through.

"Let's go already, Lord Tris!" I cried from on top of his shoulders, pointing towards Chronowize's gate, which was right across from Celesark's.

"You're right!"

Smiling, he made sure that no one was in front of Chronowize's gate before passing through to the outside—in front of the Spirit Tree.

"Weather's sunny in Chronowize too!"

Looking up through the sparkling leaves of the Spirit Tree, there was not a cloud in the sky.

Lord Tris made his way to the Royal Research Institute. Until lunch, we would go about his normal routine together.

First, we went to the teleportation circle on the north side of the Research Institute and watered the plants and weeded the fields. Next, we returned to the lab, sorted documents, scrutinized data, and checked to see that there weren't any changes in the seeds that Lady Chelsea had made. We also did jobs for the chief and got seeds from Lady Chelsea until lunch came around.

From lunch to evening, Lord Tris and I each went off on our own. This was because the Master I'd had more than a thousand years earlier had once told me, "Humans can get sick from being with someone all of the time. They need some time to themselves."

"Lunch! I'm gonna go see Lord Ele!"

"See ya!" Lord Tris said, waving at me with a smile.

Still in my toddler-like Spirit form, I floated up to where King Ele was—the

sofa in the lab closest to the second-generation Spirit Tree of Origin.

“I’m back to bug you again today, Lord Ele!”

He was curled up in a ball on the sofa, napping in his cat form. He glanced at me before immediately closing his eyes once more, signaling his permission. I took my temporary snake form, rolled up beside him and began my own nap.

+++

After my nap was all finished and I was thinking about what to do next, Lord Tris came to find me.

“Miss Hal, are you free right now?”

«What’s up?» I asked in my snake form, tongue flicking.

He smiled brightly. “I’ve got the afternoon off. Wanna come shopping downtown with me, as thanks for all your help every day?”

«Absolutely!»

This would be my first outing downtown since contracting with Lord Tris. There was no way I *wouldn’t* go! And if he was gonna thank me for all of my help, he was definitely gonna buy me the sweets I loved!

After my immediate answer, I changed back to my toddler-like Spirit form. After seeing my aqua-colored pigtails bounce and being sure I was properly in Spirit form, I floated up, grabbing Lord Tris’s hand.

“Let’s get going already!”

Lord Tris lifted his free hand, stopping me. “You’re gonna scare the townspeople. Please don’t float.”

“Ah!”

In the past, there had been lots of Spirits floating around, and people had traveled on brooms and carpets. But nowadays, the only people I saw floating were me and Lord Ele.

I quickly got Lord Tris to put me on his shoulders. “Is this okay then?”

“Yup, and it’ll make it so I won’t lose you in the crowd! Now, let’s grab a carriage and go.”

We went to the carriage stop near the Research Institute and hopped on one that was heading downtown.

On our way, we passed through a big gate outside of the citadel. As I looked at the people and shops beyond the carriage window, a sweet aroma drifted past us.

“Something smells good...” I murmured. Hearing me, Lord Tris asked the driver to stop.

“Let’s get off here. We can eat and sightsee as we go.”

Once we stepped down from the carriage, I could smell the sweet aroma again! Before I had a chance to head towards it, I got lifted back onto Lord Tris’s shoulders.

“Let’s go eat some crêpes first.”

Apparently, the sweet aroma had come from a crêpe shop. There, he bought two crêpes. One with strawberries and lots of cream, and the other with chocolate and bananas.

“Guess I gotta put you down to eat, at least,” Lord Tris said with a smile, setting me down on a bench near a fountain. “We’ll go halfsies on both of these,” he continued, giving me the strawberry and cream crêpe.

In reality, Spirits only needed water and air to live, so we didn’t need to eat like humans. But we could still taste delicious things, so we ate food as we desired, without needing any nutrients from it.

“Yummy!”

Partway through, I got my share of the chocolate-banana crêpe and was able to enjoy both.

Once we were finished eating, Lord Tris lifted me back onto his shoulders and started walking again. Our next stop would be a hair decoration specialty store with lots of ribbons on sale.

“Here, we’re gonna find you some other ribbons that suit you.”

The wide, light purple ribbons I wore at that moment were something that an old contractor of mine had given me. When I thought about my new contractor Lord Tris giving me ribbons too, I nearly jumped out of glee.

“What color d’you think would suit Miss Hal best?” he asked the shop lady.

The shop lady observed me closely from my place on Lord Tris’s shoulders.

“What do you think of this color?” she asked, pulling out some navy blue velvet ribbons.

“These ribbons seem kinda strong and cool, huh!”

Lord Tris’s description of them was odd, but it felt new and special!

“I want these ones!” I said, smiling wide just like he did while pointing to the navy velvet ribbons. He immediately bought them for me, and the shop lady put them in my hair.

Taking the opportunity to look at my new ribbons, I peered into a mirror, and noticed only my head was dressed fancily.

“They don’t really go with my clothes.”

I was wearing a hooded shirt and overalls that poofed out like pumpkins. Very *not* fancy.

“Of course we’re gonna get you new clothes too!” Lord Tris said.

Before I knew it, we were at a clothing shop that tailored clothes to order. First, they needed my measurements, which an employee got for me. Then, I had to choose clothing styles and fabrics that I liked.

“Oh my. Lord Tris?”

As he piggybacked me around the store, a lady I didn’t know called his name.

“Oh, it’s Miss Noel.”

The young lady Lord Tris called Noel had wavy honey-blonde hair and blue eyes just like him. She looked a bit more adult than Lady Chelsea.

“Who’re you?” I asked in a manner that matched my toddler-like appearance, and she immediately greeted me.

“My name is Noel. I’m the daughter of Marquis Wisteria. Please, just call me Noel!”

“I’m Hal!”

Since I couldn’t tell her I was a Spirit here, I just told her my name. She opened her mouth a little, seemingly having things she wanted to ask, but she then closed her mouth as if she decided this wasn’t the place to ask them. Then she glanced over to Lord Tris and let out a tiny sigh.

Having lived the same few thousand years that King Ele had, I knew immediately. That was the look of a maiden in love! She had a thing for Lord Tris!

Now, what to do... As I tilted my head and thought from my spot on his shoulders, Lord Tris missed the memo.

Smiling brightly, he said, “We came out today to pick out some outfits for Miss Hal.”

“I-I see...” Noel replied, smiling and nodding stiffly.

Lord Tris continued not noticing anything, and returned to choosing outfits for me with the shopkeeper. “If we wanna match the ribbons, should we go with velvet for the outfit too?”

I heard him talking, but I was only interested in Noel. “Put me down, Lord Tris.”

I got him to lower me to the ground, and I walked up to Noel. Then, I pulled at her hand.

“Noel, bend down.”

“Huh?”

Normally, I would just float up to talk to her, but I’d been told not to float today, so I had to get her to come to my level. She didn’t understand what exactly I was aiming for, but she bent down and tilted her head a little bit. *What a good girl.*

Thinking that, I whispered right in her ear, “Noel. Do you like Lord Tris?”

My five-word question was enough to set her face on fire. It was adorable how she opened and closed her mouth, unable to form any words.

“Lord Tris and I have a master-servant relationship, so you don’t need to worry!” I said, telling her the thing she probably wanted to hear most—what I was to Lord Tris.

Noel was shocked, and she grabbed me by both shoulders. “You’re an attendant at your age?!”

She’d said it kind of loudly, and Lord Tris came rushing over from where he’d been picking out my clothes. “Miss Hal’s not my attendant.”

“Huh, but...”

Noel was confused. She seemed to have believed me.

Ohhh... Saying I was a servant was the wrong way to put it since I look so little... I needed to tell her exactly what I was ASAP.

“Lord Tris, we gotta leave picking out clothes for another time. I wanna talk with Noel,” I requested. Surprisingly, he shook his head no.

“I can’t take you into town often, Miss Hal, so I want you to leave the talking till after we pick out your clothes.”

“That’s true... A little girl like her can’t go shopping without family, huh...” Noel said, nodding in understanding from her crouching position.

Mrgrgr! She’s getting stuck at my apparent age again! I’d never had this much trouble with my appearance before...

“Okay... But I want Noel to pick out my clothes!”

For now, I decided to get Noel caught up in my shopping and talk to her after.

We picked out lots of different clothes. A dress made with the same velvet as my ribbons, a blouse made of smooth fabric, and a frilly skirt. Since they were made to order, we’d have to come by at a later day to pick them up.

With the clothes now out of the way, I got Noel to make a little time to talk with us. Since what we were gonna talk about was a secret, we got in Noel’s carriage, which had the Wisteria family emblem on it. If we closed the door

really well and it started moving, the sound of the wheels would keep the driver from hearing what we were saying, as long as we kept our voices low enough.

“So... What is the relationship between the two of you?” Noel asked, sitting up straight as she stared at Lord Tris.

He had a fake smile on his face, so I knew he was probably thinking of a lie to tell her. *You shouldn’t lie to a maiden in love!*

“Let me introduce myself again. I’m Hal, the Spirit of Water. I’m Lord Tris’s contract Spirit.”

“Hwuh?!” Noel blurted out in a weird voice, before slapping a hand over her own mouth. “Really?” she asked again, staring at me closely.

“Yup.” I nodded, floating up into the air over to her from my spot beside Lord Tris.

Noel was shocked at first, but her gaze quickly shifted into an expression of someone having fun. “You can float? Amazing!”

“I can change forms too!”

Her praise made me so happy that I turned into my temporary snake form without thinking, and she froze in place.

Whoops, did I mess up?! As I looked up at her, she slowly clasped her hands together as if she was praying, her face going red as elation welled up within her.

“Hal... No, Lady Hal! It’s amazing that you can transform! And snakes are the best!”

“Miss Noel has always loved plants and animals. That’s why I figured she’d be fine seeing you turn into a snake,” said Lord Tris, smiling.

Whatever. I’m just glad I didn’t shock her! Relieved, I turned back into my toddler-like Spirit form.

“I told you what Lord Tris is to me, so tell me what the relationship between you two is next!” I realized I hadn’t been told about this yet. Noel looked excited as she wondered how Lord Tris would respond.

“Miss Noel and I have just known each other a long time because of our families,” Lord Tris said indifferently, looking at Noel for agreement.

Noel’s expression changed; the light faded from her eyes and her smile went stiff. They weren’t engaged, they weren’t lovers, they weren’t even friends. He’d just said that their families knew each other—he hadn’t even called her a childhood friend either. There was mutual trust, but that was about it.

That’s way too harsh for a maiden in love! I want Noel to do her best!

Lord Tris was smiling away, seemingly unaware of how horrible he had just been. I ended up giving him a disappointed look.

Since our secret chat was over, we headed to a tea room that Noel recommended, just one street off the main road. While it looked normal from the outside, there were plants everywhere inside, giving you the feeling that you were in a forest or out in the grasslands.

“This is a super nice spot!” Lord Tris complimented, a smile on his face.

Noel blushed. She might’ve researched places he might like beforehand in case she ever got to go somewhere with him. She really must’ve liked him.

After that, I asked about their past together, and ended up learning about how Noel had tried various things to try to catch Lord Tris’s eye, but that he’d just ended up lecturing her because he thought she was going wild.

+++

Later, Noel had us dropped off at the Royal Research Institute before sunset. From there, Lord Tris and I went back to Celesark’s tree through Chronowize’s Spirit Tree.

“We’re home,” Lord Tris greeted the guards.

The guards thumped their left fists on the right sides of their chests. Deciding I should do the Winged One greeting sometimes too, I thumped my left fist on the right side of my chest, making the guards slap both hands over their faces or hug themselves while flailing.

Lord Tris and I headed to the manor's cafeteria and enjoyed our dinner together. The entrée for the night was fried chicken with herb and pumpkin potage. After we ate, I chatted in the lounge with off duty guards and read books. Before I knew it, it was time to go to bed.

It seemed that Lord Tris had gone to have a bath, because he came back to the room with wet hair.

"I'll dry your hair for you!" I said. I used my powers to take a moderate amount of moisture out of his hair, drying it instantly.

"Thanks! You're super great at dealing with water as the Spirit of Water, Miss Hal! Whenever I try to do the same thing with my [Water Magic] Skill, my hair just gets all dry," he said, pinching a tuft of his fluffy brown hair.

"Hair needs moisture too," I replied, reciting the Proxy's words.

He smiled and replied, "I see."

Once he was ready for bed, we said our goodnights.

"Nighty night, Lord Tris."

"Good night, Miss Hal."

Lord Tris climbed into bed and fell asleep instantly. Once I was sure he was snoozing away, I left the room through the window. I sat on a branch near the top of the Spirit Tree as the wind blew at my aqua-colored hair. I started to recount the day's events. How I'd been given new ribbons. How I'd eaten crêpes and had clothes bought for me. How I'd met Noel... *So many things happened today.*

"It was fun going out. And I hope things go well between Noel and Lord Tris," I muttered.

The Spirit Tree's leaves rustled as if it was nodding along.

I'd lived a really long time, and though I'd seen more maidens in love than I could even count, not a single one had had the same ending. Lord Tris hadn't noticed Noel's feelings at all. Would her love bear fruit? Would Lord Tris notice someday, or would they drift apart?

Thinking about their future, I changed to my snake form, curled up on the

branch, and fell asleep.

Afterword

Hello, long time no see. This is Milli-gram.

Thank you so much for buying Volume 6 of *I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again!* Volume 6 was stuffed full of my tastes. In particular, I liked the first half's little Chelsea and company so much that not only did I have them drawn in a normal illustration, but for the frontispiece too!

The second half of the book was about a so-called broken engagement from an outsider's point of view. It was fun getting to write Dark Glen for the first time in a while. I wanted to write about Tris for the bonus story, and it ended up being from Halnark the Spirit of Water's point of view. I hope you enjoyed it.

Now, please let me give my usual round of thanks.

Thank you to the illustrator, Yuki Kana-sensei, who drew Chelsea and company so cutely. My editor Y-san, who fixed lots of things. The salespeople, proofreaders, designers, printers, book stores carrying *I'll Never Set Foot*, and the people who work there. R-san, M-san, and my family, who worried about my health. Everyone who picked this book up. Thank you all so much!

And this is a little bit of personal business, but Volume 6's release date ended up having to be delayed a bit because I was admitted to the hospital for surgery. I'm so sorry for the wait. They got all the bad stuff out, so I'm improving.

Your health really is important. I hope you all keep an eye on your water intake and internal temperatures, no matter what your age or gender.

I hope everyone who has anything to do with this book stays healthy!

Milli-gram