Author:
SATORU YAMAGUCHI
Illustrator: NAMI HIDAKA



My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

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A peculiar situation has unfolded in the borderlands, with animals coming out of the forest onto the farms! When Katarina heads there on a mission with the Ministry, will she...
➡ Go to resolve the issue, conducting herself with grace
➡ Be enchanted by the first Japanese meal she's seen in a long time.
➡ ■■■■ ■■ to combat doom flags from Fortune Lover II.
➡ Get ■■■■ after having a premonition where she acquires a new farming skill.

My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Character Introductions



Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has a slightly menacing look (in her words: "villainess face"). Regained the memories of her past life and changed from a spoiled noble child into a wild, slightly problematic one. Simpleminded, forgetful, and easily carried away, but honest and loyal. Below average in both academics and magic. Earth Magic user.



Nicol Ascart

Son of Count Ascart, counselor to the King. Beautiful like a doll. Very loving brother. Wind Magic user.



Keith Claes

Katarina's younger brother, adopted by Duke Claes from a distant branch of the family because of his magic prowess. Sensual and handsome. Earth Magic user.



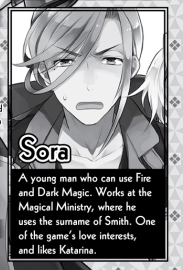
Alan Stuart

Jeord's younger twin and the fourthborn prince. Ruggedly handsome and self-centered. Talented musician. Water Magic user.



Jeord Stuart

Thirdborn prince. Katarina's fiancé. Has the stereotypical good looks of a blond, blue-eyed prince, but has a calculating, dark personality. Met Katarina when he had lost interest in everything else. Fire Magic user.



Sora

A young man who can use Fire and Dark Magic. Works at the Magical Ministry, where he uses the surname of Smith. One of the game's love interests, and likes Katarina.



Maria Campbell

A chosen girl who wields Light Magic despite being a commoner. Hard worker and protagonist of the otome games. A very good baker.



Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of a marquess and Alan's fiancée. Sweet and beautiful. Known as a paragon of ladylikeness among noble society.



Sophia Ascart

Daughter of Count Ascart, and Nicol's younger sister. Bullied by those around her because of her white hair and red eyes since childhood. Calm and collected.

★ Larna Smith

The director of the Magical Tool Laboratory and Katarina's superior. She is talented but weird.

★ Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magic and Magical Poison Research Department. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Raphael Wolt

A talented boy working at the Ministry. Has a very calm personality.

★ Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who dropped grades to end up working at the Magical Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Cezar Dahl

A prince of the Kingdom of Ehmedl. Worked as a mercenary in the past. A handsome young man with tanned skin. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Guy Handerson

A worker at the Magical Ministry. Despite her macho, muscular physique, she is a maiden at heart. Cries by Laura.

★ Ryou Kaburagi

The son of a margrave in Xiamah, a country that borders Sorcié. Cyrus's childhood friend.

★ Haru Kaburagi

The daughter of a margrave in Xiamah, a country that borders Sorcié. She is Ryou's younger sister, and has the looks of a classic Japanese beauty.

★ Jeffrey Stuart

Firstborn prince of the kingdom. Always smiling and cheerful, he comes across to most people as flippant.

★ Pochi

A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

★ Anne Shelley

Katarina's maid. Has been serving her since Katarina was eight years old.

★ Sarah

A mysterious black-cloaked woman. Has been involved in several Dark Magic–related incidents.

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Chapter 1: A Meeting at a Party

I, Katarina Claes, was once a typical duke's daughter—the sort you might find living anywhere throughout the Kingdom of Sorcié. But one day, when I was eight, I took a tumble on the castle grounds, bumped my head, and recalled memories from my past life!

In that past life, I was a nerdy, unremarkable high school girl who lived in a country called Japan. When those memories all came rushing back to me at the age of eight, I was struck by a high fever. Then, once I'd recovered, I realized something even more alarming! Though it was hard to believe, I'd ended up in the world of an otome game that I was playing just before I died in my past life—*Fortune Lover*.

Yes, I was reborn in the world of an otome game! If I'd had any prospect of finding a wonderful romance in this world, then I really wouldn't have minded... But Katarina Claes was a villainess, whose role in the game was to bully the protagonist, before eventually meeting her own doom!

Whether the protagonist met with a Good End—in which case I'd end up banished from the kingdom—or a Bad End—which would mean death for me—all routes led to my doom. That was the fate of Katarina Claes the villainess!

What incredible misfortune. But I didn't give up.

In the hopes of somehow avoiding my own doom, I started tilling my own vegetable patch, learned how to use a sword, and made toy snakes that could easily be mistaken for the real thing. I persisted in these efforts while still finding time to become friends with the romanceable characters from the game, and the protagonist's romantic rivals.

Finally, I was ready to go to school at the Academy of Magic—the setting for the game's main story. I became friends with Maria—the

game's protagonist—and set up a new vegetable patch at the academy. I did a wonderful job on that vegetable patch, if I do say so myself.

In the end, all my efforts paid off. I managed to avert my own doom. *Hooray!* I thought. *Now I'm free, I can enjoy life!* With that belief in my heart, I graduated unscathed from the academy last spring, and started working together with my dear friend—Maria, the protagonist—at the Magical Ministry.

However, this led to a new tragedy! I soon learned that upon being hired by the Ministry, the game's sequel—*Fortune Lover II: Love at the Magical Ministry*—had just begun.

And to my horror, I also learned that, in that sequel, Katarina Claes would return from her exile, alive and ready to work her villainy once more. This time around, a Good End for the protagonist would mean imprisonment for me, whereas a Bad End would mean death. My doom had been upgraded since the last game!

Just when I thought I'd escaped my doom... Though I lamented my fate heavily, I started thinking about how to overcome my fate once again. But it seemed reality had no respect for my wishes, as I soon obtained two items steeped in villainy—a Dark Familiar and the Dark Covenant.

In the midst of this woe, thanks to a mysterious recurring dream I have once in a while, I found out that there were only six months left in the game's story.

Katarina Claes wouldn't lose to a little thing like doom! I swear I'll emerge victorious, and return to my life as a run-of-the-mill duke's daughter!

As I gazed upon a magnificent vegetable patch that had been cultivated in a hidden corner of the Magical Ministry, I replayed the events of my life up till that point in my head, like a trailer about the protagonist of an anime. It was the perfect activity to pass the time while taking a little break from farming.

For the finishing touch, I imagined myself with stars sparkling in my eyes, raising a star-topped staff above my head. In reality, *my* magical staff had a skull on top.

Still, it was a pretty good trailer, if I did say so myself. I wished I could show someone else the trailer for Katarina Claes's life, which I'd created entirely within my own mind.

I glanced sideways at Maria and Cyrus, who were also taking a break, sitting beside me. They were discussing something to do with work, so it really didn't seem like a good time to butt in to describe my wonderful trailer to them.

I was rather impressed by how earnestly they were discussing work while taking a break from our shared hobby. I even felt a little bit embarrassed for spending my time creating an anime trailer in my head while sitting next to them.

I turned my gaze away from them and looked back at the vegetable patch.

Nearly six months had passed already since Maria and I began helping Cyrus work this vegetable patch—which he'd started in secret in a corner of the Ministry grounds, as a hobby—after work. Cyrus, who was a bit overexcited about having more hands to till the field, had expanded it just a little.

It was nearly that time of year when farmers began their fall harvests. I knew I could look forward to some big, juicy vegetables. In Japan, in my past life, it also would have been the season when rice was harvested, and I would get to eat fresh rice.

Those smooth, shiny grains of freshly harvested rice were plenty sweet all on their own; they were delicious. But with a classic accompaniment like a pickled plum or pickled veg on top, it was luxury. I could have any number of extra helpings. *Ah, I really want some rice.*

"Would you like some rice, Lady Katarina?" I heard Maria ask me in her adorable voice, and realized that I'd been speaking my thoughts out loud.

"Yeah. While I was looking at the vegetables in the field, I thought to myself that it's almost the season for harvesting rice, and I really felt like eating fresh rice," I answered.

Cyrus blinked in surprise.

"You know what time of year rice is harvested? You must really like the food of Xiarmah."

Yep. In my past life, I was the granddaughter of a rice farmer, and I even helped plant the paddies and harvest the rice! I said proudly, inside my own head.

"Yes. I love it," I answered outwardly.

By the way, bread made with wheat flour was the main staple in Sorcié's cuisine—in other words, it was just like Western cuisine, and rice wasn't widely available. But in the neighboring nation of Xiarmah, which was more like Japan, rice was the staple crop, and the food seemed similar to Japanese cuisine as well.

Rice was also the staple crop in the territory ruled by Cyrus's family, which was right next to Xiarmah and also had food similar to that of Japan. I had learned this from Cyrus a little while after I started helping him with his vegetable patch.

Ever since then, I'd had an overwhelming desire to travel to his home and try the food there. However, it turned out that a trip to Cyrus's home country would take four days by horse-drawn carriage. It wasn't the kind of distance I could travel on a whim.

"I'm happy to hear that you like the foods of my homeland. My family always sends me some of our prized crops after the harvest each year, so I can share some with you, Miss Katarina," said Cyrus, his eyes half-closed in delight.

"Really? Hooray!" I cried, hopping up and down in celebration.

"I'm happy for you," said Maria with a big smile.

"When the shipment arrives, let's eat them together," I suggested to Maria.

She chuckled, then smiled.

Ah...prized crops from Cyrus's home country. I really can't wait. I wonder if they'll send pickles? But wait, what if they send fresh rice? Just what do they send him each year? Feeling like I just had to ask, I turned to Cyrus again to see him with an apparently peaceful smile on his face.

"Um, Mr. Cyrus, is something the matter?" I inquired.

He laughed and scratched the back of his head with a slight air of embarrassment, before answering in a low voice that only I could hear.

"Oh, no. I mean, when you said you wanted to work on the field

today, I was surprised, given what happened recently. But now that I've seen Maria smile, I'm glad we did."

I'd had no idea that Cyrus felt that way when I suggested working on the field today. I'd only thought that the harvest season was approaching and I should help. I thought I was being considerate.

"Maria still can't help being a little jumpy. But now that she's spent some time with you, I can see she's more relaxed. She doesn't look so tense," Cyrus continued in a low voice.

Right, so Maria's still a bit skittish. Because she'd taken some time away from deciphering her magical covenant, I hadn't seen her for a little while and didn't realize. But, of course she'd be a little jumpy. Only a few days had passed since the incident.

A little while ago, a mysterious gang of people involved in Dark Magic—which I'll call the Dark Magic gang for short—attacked Maria at her family home and attempted to harm her.

Then, by sheer coincidence, I arrived together with Cezar—Prince of Ethenell—and we rescued her. I'll call that whole business the case of Maria's rescue for short. In the end, we only managed to capture some thugs who were hired for that particular job, and failed to apprehend Sarah, the Dark Magic user who was instrumental to the gang's plans.

That was because some handsome, sexy, mysterious older man had appeared and dashingly helped Sarah to escape.

With one roadblock after another, we'd still made no progress in our investigation of the Dark Magic gang following the case of Maria's rescue. It had only brought the fact that Maria was being targeted into sharp relief.

Therefore, it had been decided that Maria and her family would live under the protection of the Magical Ministry until it was judged safe for them to leave. Whenever they went outside the Ministry, they would be accompanied by bodyguards.

Under the circumstances, it would be strange if she *weren't* a little on edge. Today, even during our gardening work, there were apparently bodyguards standing by in case of any danger.

Though, considering that we were on the grounds of the Magical

Ministry, which was one of the top two safest places in Sorcié, and we were with Cyrus—a department head at the Ministry who was skilled in magic, martial arts, and swordplay—there really was no risk of danger.

I'd only asked Cyrus about working on the field because the harvest season was coming up, but I was glad that it had also helped relieve Maria of some of her tension. If she carried on feeling so stressed, she'd only wear herself out.

But Cyrus's expression was just a bit too mushy for comfort as he basked in Maria's smile. I started feeling very strongly that I was a third wheel, and returned my gaze to the vegetable patch, only to notice a number of spots in the soil where little mounds had appeared.

Hmm? Were those there when we arrived? I wondered, and went over for a closer look.

"We've been had! Mr. Cyrus, it's the enemy! The enemy is here!" I cried, prompting Cyrus to leap to his feet and guard Maria behind his back.

"Where?" he asked sharply as he looked at our surroundings.

"Right here. Look at this hole," I said, pointing at the hole that was nearest to me, earning myself a confused look from Cyrus.

"A hole? What are you talking about?"

"That's right. This hole means that we've been attacked by moles, the sworn enemy of all farmers!" I declared firmly.

Cyrus gave me the fiercest scowl, while Maria laughed loudly beside him. This in turn made Cyrus lose his scowl a bit.

"Miss Katarina," he replied, "while the mole certainly is the nemesis of all farmers, I'd like you to avoid using the word 'enemy' for the time being. Under the circumstances, you'll only make people panic."

I gasped in realization.

"Oh, right! Sorry. But the attack on our field rattled me," I apologized hurriedly, while Maria only laughed harder. She was actually holding her stomach.

After taking a look at Maria in her mirth, Cyrus frowned, walked over to me, and peered down at the same hole I was examining.

"You're right. Looks like moles did this."

"It certainly does."

So far, in this life, my own vegetable patch hadn't been attacked yet, but my grandma in my past life had mole attacks from time to time. I remember her being aggravated by that.

"Even though we're on Ministry grounds, moles still found their way in," I mused.

"There's still a bit of nature around here, so of course they would. I was just lucky enough not to have my patch damaged by moles up till now, so I didn't take any precautions. From now on, I will," said Cyrus, before pausing to think for a while, probably about countermeasures for moles.

When I thought about such countermeasures, I remembered my grandma in my past life sticking machines that looked like nails (and made a beeping noise) into the ground she wanted to protect. But after a while, she'd say, "That beeping is so annoying!" and yank them out, so I didn't know how effective they really were. Besides, those machines didn't seem to exist in this world.

The only other method I knew for repelling moles was to put something on the soil that gave off a smell that moles would hate. *What kind of smell do moles hate...?*

"Ah, I know! Pochi, come on out."

As soon as I called him, a black puppy hopped happily out of my shadow and woofed. Pochi was my Dark Familiar and a sort of pet (as well as a dependable partner who could do battle in a pinch). As he was a Dark Familiar, I couldn't bring him out so openly around people who didn't already know about him. But Maria and Cyrus both knew about my situation, so that wasn't a problem.

"Hey, Miss Katarina. Why did you just summon your familiar?" asked Cyrus with a slightly harsh expression.

"I thought I'd get Pochi to poop on the soil to keep moles away."

"Huh?!" cried Cyrus, his mouth hanging open in shock.

"I heard once that if you leave dog poop on a vegetable patch, raccoon dogs won't come near it. I thought it might work for moles as well."

I'm pretty sure I remember grandma getting some poop from a

doggy in the neighborhood (who always barked up a storm when he saw me) and scattering that on her vegetable patch to keep away raccoon dogs.

For some reason, dogs hated my past self and I could never get near them. But now that I had my own pet dog, I wouldn't need to go to the trouble of borrowing poop from other people. I could just tell Pochi to make some.

"Okay, Pochi. I need you to poop!"

Pochi barked happily, seeming to understand my instruction, and assumed the pose to poop, bracing himself against the ground. I matched Pochi by clenching my fists and flexing my own muscles.

"You can do it, Pochi! Groan if you need to. And clench your bottom," I said, desperately trying to cheer him on from the sidelines.

"Excuse me, but as Pochi is a Dark Familiar, he might not be capable of excretion," Maria interjected, somewhat hesitantly.

"Ah... That's right!" I moaned, suddenly clutching my own head. Though Pochi might look and act like a dog, he was ultimately a Dark Familiar, and didn't poop. I had completely forgotten about that.

Pochi must have forgotten too, as he looked surprised, and his face seemed to say, *Oh yeah*. Then he padded over to me and let out a whine that I'm pretty sure meant, *Sorry*...

"I'm sorry for asking the impossible, Pochi," I apologized. When she saw us apologizing to one another, Maria started laughing again.

"In the first place, you couldn't get away with leaving your dog's excrement somewhere as prestigious as the Magical Ministry's grounds," said Cyrus, who had in fact planted a vegetable patch somewhere as prestigious as the Magical Ministry's grounds.

"True. It would smell, and it would be awful if anyone stepped in it," I agreed.

"No, that's not what you should be concerned about... In any case, let's forget about the idea of spreading excrement around. I'll consider which of the techniques we used to use at home can be put into practice here. You needn't give it any more thought, Miss Katarina."

"I suppose not. After all, you're the real pro when it comes to tending the patch, Mr. Cyrus. I'll leave it in your hands," I said. Pochi echoed my confidence with a happy woof.

But I noticed that when Pochi barked, Cyrus flinched a little.

"Mr. Cyrus, do you have a problem with dogs?"

"Ah. No, I wouldn't say that..." he replied, then paused.

"Could it be that you want to get along with dogs, but they just start barking when you get near them?" I asked. I thought he might be like me. But Cyrus shook his head.

"That's not it. I had a dog when I was a child, and he was very affectionate."

Now I felt envious. *How many times have dogs snarled and barked at me...? But now that I have Pochi, that's all in the past.* Crouching down, I gave Pochi a pat on his fluffy head. Pochi half-closed his eyes in delight.

"My dog used to close his eyes and wag his tail when I petted him. We were always together, almost like brothers," said Cyrus with a far-off look in his eyes. "But that dog died in an accident. Right in front of me. From that day on, I've been slightly afraid of getting close to another dog—no, close to any animal."

When I heard this, I picked Pochi up—almost unconsciously—and hugged him. Tightly, so I couldn't lose him.

Cyrus fell silent, still with that far-off look in his eyes, probably thinking about his dog that died. But after a while, he shook his head, as if to dispel those feelings.

"All right, after a little more work on the field, we'll call it a day," he announced breezily.

Deciding not to ask any more questions, Maria and I both responded with a "Yes, sir." We resumed our work, and once we were done, we all headed back to our homes.

I only realized that I'd forgotten to ask Cyrus what kind of food his family would be sending him after I'd already gone to bed.

As I gazed absentmindedly out of the window of my carriage, I recalled what Cyrus had told me the previous day. He'd revealed that, ever since his pet dog died in front of him, he'd been scared of

getting close to dogs, as well as other animals. Cyrus had insisted that he didn't have a problem with dogs, but if he was scared of getting close to them, I felt that amounted to the same thing.

So he did in fact have a problem with young women *and* with animals. For a romanceable character, he certainly had a wide range of phobias. Since this was an otome game, his phobia of women had to be rooted in some traumatic incident... But what might that be? I knew that there weren't a lot of young women around when he was growing up, and I'd just learned that his pet dog had died in front of him, but was there something else in his childhood?

Hmm, I don't know. But in the game's story so far, there did seem to be a pattern of horrible things happening in the romanceable characters' childhoods, leaving them with trauma.

Alan, for instance, had been written to have a twisted personality, after being compared to the multitalented Jeord throughout his childhood. Maria was supposed to tell him that he had his own good qualities, and only then did he realize this. But in reality, this hadn't happened with Alan. Instead, he had focused on nurturing his musical talents and had enjoyed a carefree upbringing.

As for Keith, my adopted brother, after being rejected by his biological parents and sent to Claes Manor for adoption, he was also supposed to end up alienated from his adoptive mother, and abused by his adoptive sister. This would make him lose all faith in other people. Eventually, starved of affection, he was written to become a playboy who fooled around with women. In the story, Maria was supposed to teach Keith about true love.

But in reality, Keith was lovingly accepted by the Claes family, and became its upstanding eldest son. He even got along with his adoptive mother, and grew up to become a purehearted young man who was protective of his sister.

I glanced over at my brother, who was sitting next to me in the carriage. Completely unlike a playboy, his back was perfectly straight, and his clothes were immaculate. But the fact that he still oozed sexiness was probably just an unavoidable artifact of his original character design. Of course, being brought up to be such a purehearted boy, Keith had no idea what to do with his oodles of

sexiness. What a lot of wasted potential.

"Such a pity," I couldn't help but blurt out.

When he heard this, Keith turned to me with a look of suspicion.

"What's a pity?"

"Umm, I was just thinking that it's such a waste, the fact that the sexiness you ooze hasn't done you any good," I said truthfully.

For a moment, Keith goggled at me. Then he frowned and sighed deeply.

"Wait, my sexiness hasn't done me any good...? I mean, you're absolutely right, but I can't help but be taken aback by someone saying it to my face," said Keith, seeming a little crestfallen.

"Sorry," I apologized sincerely, feeling terrible.

"Don't worry, it's nothing new," said Keith with a wry smile. Then he continued, "You were so quiet I assumed you were thinking about this evening, but it looks like I totally missed the mark."

"Ah... Yeah, sorry about that."

"Big sis, you know this party is important, don't you?"

"We-ell, I know that..."

Indeed, as Keith had just pointed out, we were on our way to the palace to attend an important party. This was no time for me to be thinking about what Cyrus told me yesterday, or what was supposed to happen in the game, with a derpy look on my face. But...

"When we get to the party, I promise I'll pull myself together and behave myself, so let me space out for now. I promise I'll only do my derp face when it's just the two of us. But if I try to keep myself together the whole time, given my personality, I bet I'll get tired really quick. I'm begging you," I said, looking up slightly at Keith's face, which still oozed sexiness.

After a beat, Keith grudgingly accepted.

"Just when it's the two of us..."

With Keith's permission, I allowed myself to derp out just a bit longer.

I gazed out of the window at the passing scenery again. The weather was fine that day, and a lot of other people were out and about. This was the kind of day I'd like to spend outside in my vegetable patch, but having already worked hard during the day,

now I really wanted to have a break with some tea and tasty snacks, before basking in the sun.

Sigh, parties are such a pain, I thought to myself. But the next thing I knew, our carriage had arrived at the palace.

Today there was going to be a party to mark the anniversary of the Kingdom of Sorcié's founding, and there would be many guests from other countries in attendance.

The vibe was close to that of the International Assembly I'd once attended, except for the fact that this event was not primarily seen as an opportunity for our leaders to foster relations with other countries. Rather, we were told that the king wanted everyone in attendance to enjoy themselves as we celebrated Sorcié. And unlike the Assembly, which was conducted over several days, this would be a one-day event.

This meant I didn't need to go to quite as much effort as I had at the Assembly, but there were still many envoys from other countries and I was expected to greet them all properly. I couldn't behave the same way I would at a party attended only by the subjects of Sorcié.

Besides, with the Dark Magic gang still at large, I needed to be especially careful at large gatherings like this one. The fact that there were so many people at the party meant that I'd be that much less likely to pay attention when I saw an unfamiliar face. Of course, as it was such an important party, due caution had been taken to only let in people with clear identification, but it still had to be difficult to keep impostors out entirely.

I psyched myself up to pay attention to my surroundings, while at the same time making sure not to be rude to the guests from other countries.

The venue set aside for this party was the biggest hall in the palace. It was the same location that had been used for the Assembly.

Today, out of consideration for the customs of other countries, it was decided that it was not essential for attendees to bring a full escort. So I entered the hall accompanied only by Keith.

There were already a lot of people gathered in the hall. As this was a rare celebration for the founding of the Kingdom of Sorcié,

there were apparently more countries represented there than there had been at the International Assembly. There really were all sorts of people there.

I saw some in robes similar to Japanese kimono—which I'd seen before at formal events—others in Arabian-style outfits, and still more in Chinese-style clothes.

Though the diversity of clothing was huge, so were the skin tones and hair colors of the guests. There really were a lot of different kinds of people, so I started to get excited, even though this was a formal event where I really needed to rein in such excitement.

Though the International Assembly was amazing, this is on a whole other level.

As I listened to people who all looked so different happily chatting in all kinds of languages, I felt like I'd gotten lost in a wondrous new dimension.

"This is amazing!" I blurted out suddenly.

"More countries were invited for this than for the International Assembly," Keith remarked beside me. "It's amazing how many different peoples are represented here."

"Ooh, that's exactly what I was just thinking. I'm surprised you figured that out."

"I've been your adopted brother for ten whole years. That much was easy to figure out," said Keith with a chuckle. But next, he went into lecture mode, saying, "Also, I know all too well that you tend to get overexcited and get yourself into trouble at events like this. Try not to do that today, all right?"

Having got myself into trouble at the last big event I attended—the International Assembly—I couldn't say he was wrong.

"Okay, I'll be careful," I agreed, nodding meekly at Mother Keith's warning.

Then we went around the hall greeting nobles from Sorcié and those from other countries who I'd already met at the International Assembly. The fact that there were so many of them might be why I hadn't seen any of my friends yet.

In particular, I still hadn't seen Jeord, who was always the first to show up at times like these. Perhaps the royal family of Sorcié was

still busy getting ready, since none of them had appeared yet.

I'm kinda thirsty.

I turned to Keith, who was deep in conversation with a foreign noble.

"I'm just going to find something to drink," I declared.

He nodded, but his eyes practically screamed the warning, *Don't eat or drink too much*.

I approached the table where the food and beverages were laid out, and got myself a drink. Since I was thirsty, my intention was to have a quick drink and head back to Keith. But...

"That looks yummy..." As one might expect from a party commemorating such an important event, the tables were laid with even fancier—and more delectable—food than usual.

I guess I can have a little bit. As long as I don't eat too much, it won't be a problem. I ended up putting just a bit of food on my plate.

I can't pass up this meat. And I just have to eat this fish. Ooh, I've never seen that dish before. I just have to try it.

Hmm? When did my plate get so full? Well, let's eat it anyway.

Nom, nom. Ah, delicious. They sure can cook at the palace. This is absolutely wonderful.

Ah. When did my plate get so empty? Well, okay, I guess I'll try that dish next, then I'll have some of this one, I thought as I filled my plate again. But at that very moment...

"You're overeating again," I heard a voice say.

I flinched, then froze. I turned to look in the direction where the voice had come from to see an unfamiliar man standing there. Fortunately, he wasn't even looking at me, but a woman standing beside me, a couple of paces away.

Oh, so he didn't mean me, I thought, relieved. When I turned my gaze to the woman next to me I saw she was frozen in exactly the same pose as me, holding a plate piled high with food. I felt a strong surge of affinity with her.

Both the woman and the man were wearing clothes that reminded me of a kimono, so I reckoned they were probably from the neighboring country of Xiarmah, which reportedly had a culture

similar to that of Japan, the country where I lived in my past life.

"Haven't I told you that a lady isn't supposed to stuff her face at events like this?" the man said to the woman.

That's the same thing Keith always tells me. Even though he wasn't talking to me, his words really struck me.

"But elder brother, we will only have so many opportunities to enjoy such a feast in the Kingdom of Sorcié. If I don't eat this now, when will I get to eat it?!" the woman protested defiantly. Apparently they were brother and sister.

Inside my head, I fervently agreed with the woman.

That's exactly right! Because of how important this anniversary is, they've put a special amount of effort into preparing this feast. If she doesn't eat this food now, then when can she?

As I looked at the woman, I found myself nodding vigorously. She must have sensed my intense gaze on her, as she turned to face me and our eyes met with a snap. Now that I was looking her straight in the eyes, I could see hers were just as black as her hair. And I realized she was a very beautiful woman.

After our eyes met, she looked down at the plate I was holding—piled with food, just like hers—and nodded just like I had. Despite coming from different countries, we both understood one thing: No matter how others might scold us and say that ladies shouldn't behave this way, *not* eating the feast before us was simply not an option.

The man who was apparently the woman's older brother didn't seem to notice the vibe between us. After sighing, he spoke up again.

"No, I'm not saying you can't eat it. I'm just telling you not to eat too much."

Again, this was something Keith often told me.

"Forgive my bluntness, elder brother, but with so many dishes before me, I cannot avoid eating more. Even so, I have limited the amount I have taken of each dish," answered the woman.

As this was exactly what I had been doing, I felt another surge of affinity toward her.

That's right. It's not like I took a lot of food on purpose. But with

such a variety of dishes on offer, I ended up with a lot. I nodded vigorously once more. My eyes met those of the woman again and, after realizing I agreed with her, she nodded in response. *Somehow I feel like the two of us would get along.*

"No, in the first place, there's no need to eat such a variety of food. At a banquet like this, the proper approach is to take just a small taste of one or two dishes that appeal to you," said the man.

I shuddered. *What kind of maniac would insist that we only try one or two dishes, with so many laid out in front of us?! I sense great incompatibility between us.*

"It is simply out of the question to be satisfied with trying only one or two dishes with such a wonderful array in front of me. I feel as though we will never understand one another, elder brother," said the woman, who looked as affronted as I felt.

I really *think we'd get along.*

"All right. We'll talk more about this later. But it looks like the King of Sorcié is about to speak, so could you at least put your plate down?" the man said to the woman with a weary expression.

Wow, the king is about to address us? In that case...I guess I'd better get the food on my plate into my belly quickly, I thought, and started eating the food on my plate at breakneck speed.

It looked like the woman next to me had reached the same conclusion.

"Wait, I told you to put that plate down. Why are you eating even faster now?! I can't understand you! What, the lady next to you is doing the same thing?!"

Having finally noticed that I was also shoving the contents of my plate into my face at maximum speed, the man cried out in shock, but knowing that I had to wolf it down quickly, I paid him no mind and continued stuffing my face.

Mmm, this is delicious. I'll have another helping later. Oh, this meat is so perfectly tender.

Having eaten in a hurry—while still making sure to appreciate the flavors—I finished everything on my plate and set it down, then saw the woman next to me doing the very same thing.

Our eyes locked again. We both smiled, then nodded.

At that moment, we heard a horn blare. The entire hall immediately fell silent, then a loud voice echoed through the hall.

"His Majesty, the King of Sorcié!"

Then the King of Sorcié, Orwen Stuart, solemnly entered the hall, ringed by his bodyguards. Next to the king was his queen, with their four sons following behind them. Just as I had anticipated, this was a formal event where the royal family all entered the venue together. After ascending what looked like a stage at the front of the hall, the king faced everyone assembled there and began to speak.

"I would like to thank you all for gathering here today to celebrate the three-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Kingdom of Sorcié..." The king began his greeting with a smile and with thanks, just as he had during the International Assembly. As soon as he finished his address, saying something like, "Now, everyone, please enjoy the rest of the day," there was a wave of applause.

Some guests then resumed their lively conversations, while many others approached the royal family to greet them.

But as I had been told beforehand that our royal family wanted to prioritize guests from other countries, and requested that Sorcié nobles hold back from rushing to greet them on this occasion, there was no need for someone like me to head over there immediately.

So I took another plate and started eating again, but it seems the woman next to me wasn't so lucky.

"We're going to greet the royals. Put that plate down," the man said before snatching her plate. Then he dragged her away.

The girl looked longingly at the food as she was hauled off. Our eyes met one last time.

"Hang in there," I murmured without thinking.

Although she was some distance away and might not have heard me, she seemed to read the words on my lips and nodded as she departed. I was sure that, if only I'd had the chance to talk to her, we would have become friends. *If we meet again, I'd like to talk to her*, I thought as I ate my meal.

"Looks like you're overeating," I heard a voice say.

Hm? Is that about me? Though there's a chance it could be about

someone else again, I thought as I turned around.

But the person who'd spoken was most definitely looking at me. Yeah, those words were absolutely directed at me. On top of that, the person who spoke to me was...

"Prince Cezar."

He was the Prince of Ethenell, a kingdom across the sea, and he was currently studying abroad here in Sorcié.

"Hey," he said in a hushed voice.

As I was overtaken by the charms of a wild-looking, handsome man with tanned skin and a grin, I felt my heart skip a beat. Though Cezar always acted the part of a prince in public, he had once lived the life of a mercenary, and thanks to that, his true disposition was more frank than you might expect from a royal, and was more like that of most young commoners. That was how he had acted when I first met him, so that was how he still behaved when it was just the two of us.

"I cannot thank you enough for your help the other day," I said. Cezar had saved me during the case of Maria's rescue, when I lost control of my Dark Magic.

We had spoken a little the following day when he came to check on me, but we ran into some difficulties that meant he had to leave before I could even say goodbye. This was my first time seeing him since.

"Have you been feeling okay since then?" he asked, seeming concerned.

"Yes, thanks for asking. I'm all better now," I replied energetically.

"Really? Glad to hear it. You were about to collapse the last time I saw you. I was worried," he replied.

At this point I fully remembered what had happened the last time I saw Cezar.

The day after the case of Maria's rescue, Cezar visited my home. Just as I was in the middle of thanking him for stopping me when I lost control of my magic, Jeord suddenly showed up. For some reason he was jealous of Cezar and me, and gave me a grown-up kiss right in front of Cezar!

Having had no prior experience with romance—not even in my

previous life—when I was faced with that situation, my brain had short-circuited and I'd fainted on the spot. Jeord apologized for this soon after, but I hadn't seen Cezar since then—in other words, since he saw me engaged in that kiss.

Ah, now that I've realized that, I'm suddenly really embarrassed. I felt my face turn red.

"Actually... I just wasn't used to that kind of thing. It's not that I felt unwell... I mean..."

I want to explain that I didn't collapse because I was unwell, but rather because I'm not really used to romance, or kissing, or perhaps I should say it was because it was my first grown-up kiss. Wait, should I say that?

Seeing my confusion, Cezar chuckled.

"You and the prince are still young. You've got a lot to learn."

"Huh?" I responded. I cocked my head in puzzlement, not quite taking his meaning. Cezar looked back at me with eyes that were in fact golden, but covered with black glass at that moment.

"Did you find that act unpleasant? Or..."

By that act, he must mean that kiss Jeord gave me. Was it unpleasant? It was surprising, but... While I was thinking that through, Cezar spoke again.

"Actually, never mind. You don't need to think about it too deeply right now. It would be easier for me if you didn't," he said before lightly patting my head.

"Huh..." *I have no idea what he's talking about, but I guess he's saying that, for the time being, we don't need to go over that embarrassing incident?*

"Uh-oh, I guess he spotted me. I can feel his eyes burning a hole in my back. Let's leave it at that for today," said Cezar, before giving me two more pats on the head. "There are a lot of people here today. Try not to wander around by yourself. I'll go and fetch your escort, so just stay put." After saying that, Cezar vanished into the crowd.

Oh, yeah. There are a lot of people here today. I was told to be extra careful, but with that spread in front of me, I let my guard down. He said he'd fetch my escort, but with so many people, I bet

it'll be hard for Cezar to find Keith. And I already know where he is. Okay, once I've eaten this I'll head back to Keith, I thought, as I started to stuff the food on my plate into my mouth again.

"You're eating too much, big sis." I heard my adopted brother's usual nagging.

"Oh, Keith, it's you."

"What kind of response is that? You said you were just going for a quick drink, but you never came back, so I started worrying. But I couldn't find a break in the conversation I was in, so I couldn't come look for you. Then Prince Cezar came over and told me where you were."

Cezar said he would go and fetch my escort. It looked like, true to his word, he had told Keith where to find me. Locating Keith, who he'd barely spoken to before, in such a big crowd was no mean feat. I was impressed with Cezar.

"Honestly! Now you've inconvenienced Prince Cezar *again*. Get a grip, big sis."

"Yes, Keith. I'm sorry." He was absolutely right about that, so I made sure to apologize.

Perhaps because I had shown genuine remorse by apologizing, Keith spared me any further nagging. With Keith's permission, I finished what was left on my plate, had a drink, then took a breather.

But then I became aware of something that I'd failed to notice before, since I was so spellbound by the food.

"The crowd seems to have thinned quite a bit compared to earlier," I noted while looking around the hall.

"I don't think people have left. Rather, pretty much anyone visiting from another country has gone to greet our royal family. Look," said Keith, pointing to a long line of guests.

"Wow, unbelievable," I blurted out.

With a typical party at the palace, there would be a fairly long line leading to the royals, but I'd never seen one this big before.

"The list of countries invited to today's party was particularly lengthy. I guess it can't be helped, but it must be tough for them," said Keith as he looked at Sorcié's royal family greeting one guest

after the other with smiles on their faces.

I followed his gaze to find them all beaming just like always, but it really must have been difficult with that many people to greet. Alan—the youngest of the princes—wasn't particularly sociable anyway, and I could see the beginnings of a weary expression on his face.

This made me think that Jeord must be starting to feel tired as well. But he was the kind of person who never let fatigue show on his face, preferring to grin and bear it. I was sure he would still be wearing his usual smile.

When I glanced at Jeord, for just one moment, I felt as if our eyes locked.

Huh? Did our eyes just meet? It's hard to tell with so many people. Could it be my imagination?

"Big sis, what's the matter?"

"Umm, just now, for one moment, I felt like Prince Jeord was looking right at me. But that can't be right, not with this many people. I must have imagined it."

This has to be like that thing in my past life, when people at idol concerts believed that their eyes met those of one of the idols.

"Hmmm... It might not necessarily have been just your imagination," said Keith, frowning slightly.

"Eh?"

"No, I guess it was. Just try not to run off on your own, okay?"

"Okay."

After giving Keith the right answer, I heard another voice call out to me.

"Lady Katarina. I thought I might find you here. I'm so glad I did."

With a big smile on her face, a beautiful young lady named Mary Hunt—known as the flower of high society—walked over to me. She brought many other familiar faces along with her.

"Mary! And you have Maria, Sophia, Master Nicol, and Mr. Cyrus with you too. Did you all come here together?"

The Ascart siblings, Mary, and Maria made up the usual gang, but I was surprised to see Cyrus was also with them. He hadn't said

anything about today's party when I spoke to him yesterday.

"I met with Master Nicol and Lady Sophia before coming here, and then I encountered Miss Maria and Mr. Cyrus just outside. So we all came in together," said Mary, quickly explaining the situation.

"Maria and Mr. Cyrus came here together?!" I cried in shock.

Perhaps Maria wouldn't have minded, but I can't believe Cyrus managed to meet up with his crush!

Just the other day he said he was too embarrassed to ride in the same carriage with her. This is the same Cyrus who could only fidget when left alone with her and couldn't speak a word! Most boys in elementary school are more advanced than that! Well, Cyrus, I'm so happy to hear that you're finally on equal footing with an elementary schooler.

But then Maria revealed the truth.

"No, Mr. Cyrus met me here. Sora accompanied me to the palace."

When I glanced at Cyrus, he gave me a smirk that seemed to say, *Exactly. Did you really think I'd be able to ride in a carriage alone with Maria?*

You're totally still behind most elementary schoolers. At this rate, you're never going to make any progress.

Because of her strong Light Magic, Maria had become a celebrity in Sorcié. As a lot of people wanted to socialize with her, she had started to receive invitations to parties like this one.

I'd heard that, after she was recently being attacked by a group of Dark Magic users, the Ministry had reinforced her regular team of bodyguards, but perhaps the Ministry had also issued an order adding Sora—a powerful Dark Magic user in his own right, and physically tough to boot—and Cyrus—another strong magic user who was also trained to fight with weapons—to her security team.

"Mr. Cyrus, did you ask for Sora to guard Maria during her carriage ride?" I asked Cyrus in a soft voice.

"Yeah. I mean, it's not like I could ride in the carriage alone with her," said Cyrus, quietly, but in a manner that declared it to be the most obvious thing in the world.

Wait, why not?! And does that mean you're fine with Sora being

alone with her?

Cyrus didn't know this, but Sora was also a romanceable character in *Fortune Lover II*.

Though there was no sign of it yet, he might fall in love with Maria. No, there was even a chance that he might already have started to fall for her, little by little.

"Um, are you sure you don't mind Sora and Maria being alone together? Sora might have feelings for Maria too, you know."

He seems to have his guard up around Dewey—the boy genius who was the youngest person ever hired by the Ministry, likes Maria, and already made a move on her—so why not Sora?

If Sora got serious about Maria, then Cyrus—someone who was even less romantically mature than a schoolboy, and kept saying he was too nervous to share a carriage with her—wouldn't have a hope of winning.

But when I pointed this out, Cyrus just blinked in surprise.

"No, even I can tell that Sora doesn't have feelings for Maria."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? It's obvious."

"What's obvious?"

"Miss Katarina, haven't you realized yet?"

"Realized *what*?"

Cyrus fell silent.

"Hang on, Mr. Cyrus, what are you saying? What do you mean?" I asked, raising my voice slightly as Cyrus remained mute.

"Miss Katarina, you *really* don't understand romance yet. I guess you're still just a child," he finally said with a look of exasperation.

E-Excuse me?! Did Cyrus—whose level of romantic experience is less than that of an elementary school boy—really just try to tell me that I'm *a child, and that* I *don't understand romance?! You're the last person I want to hear that from! I can't believe this.*

Before I could think of a comeback, Mary called out to me.

"Lady Katarina, have a look at these sweets over here. They're delicious."

Then she forcibly took me by the arm and dragged me away from Cyrus. Our furtive conversation came to an abrupt end.

Something about Cyrus's look of exasperation still rubbed me the wrong way, but I couldn't help being curious about these tasty sweets.

"Which ones?" I asked.

"These. This is my first time seeing them, so I think it must be a new recipe."

Without hesitation, I tried one. *Yep, this is really yummy.*

"May I try one as well?" inquired Maria, deeply intrigued by news of a new recipe for sweets.

"Go ahead," I answered, though it was hardly my place to give her permission. Maria delightedly popped one into her mouth.

"I shall try one too," said Sophia, jumping on the bandwagon. After downing one, she smiled broadly and reported, "It's delicious. You must try one too, elder brother," she continued.

At his younger sister's suggestion, Nicol also reached out for one of the sweets. He chewed it with his usual lack of expression, but we were delighted to hear him mutter the word, "Tasty," in the end.

"It is so wonderful to finally get to see you, Lady Katarina," said Mary, once we had all enjoyed a taste of the new dessert.

"There are so many people here, it must have been hard for you to find me," I agreed, nodding my head.

"No, I was quite sure I'd find you over here by the food and drinks, Lady Katarina. Locating you wasn't the problem," said Mary.

Oh, so it was really that *obvious where I'd be? I see.*

As I was staring off into the middle distance, Mary continued speaking.

"So many people wanted to chat with me, I simply couldn't move."

"Ah, well, you're all so pretty, a lot of men must have approached you," I said. Mary, Maria, and Sophia were all remarkable beauties.

"That's not all. Of course, we *were* approached by a lot of men, but Master Nicol got even *more* attention..." grumbled Mary, sounding quite fed up.

"Eh? Nicol did?"

But it was Nicol's sister Sophia, not Mary, who answered my doubts.

"Yes. My elder brother's charm is always incredible, but as there were so many guests from other countries, he received even more attention than usual. Naturally, the young women were interested, but everyone—young and old, men and women—wished to speak with him. Among them were middle-aged men of quite high standing, so he really struggled to escape their advances."

Oh, so his devilish aura works wonders on foreigners too, huh? And he managed to charm them all—young and old, men and women alike. I've got to hand it to him—it's no mean feat to remain the most popular even when surrounded by all these beauties.

I was seriously impressed.

"It really was a struggle," Mary—who had been on the receiving end of some attention herself—said wearily. "We even thought about putting a towel over Master Nicol's face."

"I'd heard the rumors about him, but it's still surprising that so many kinds of people approached him," said Cyrus, a total newbie when it came to seeing the power of Nicol's charm.

Since Cyrus was another romanceable character, he was handsome too, but he was basically only ever approached by young women. Unfortunately, Cyrus himself struggled with exactly that category of people. You had to feel sorry for him.

"In particular, it seemed like a lot of brawny foreign men made advances on him today. Such gentlemen probably thought that they would like to cherish my elder brother like a wo—"

"Sophia," snapped the brother in question, cutting her off. She'd started to show off some fujoshi tendencies of late. But despite the harshness of Nicol's tone, his face was more weary than irritated. Whether his weariness stemmed from the advances of brawny men, or from hearing about his sister's strange fantasies, I couldn't tell.

Cyrus seemed to pick something up from Nicol's demeanor that caused him to change the subject.

"But you know, there really are a lot of people from other countries here. Admittedly, I haven't been to a party like this in some time, but I was overwhelmed by the number of guests."

"So this is your first party in a while, Mr. Cyrus?" I asked. *Come to think of it, I've never seen him at one before.*

"I don't feel very comfortable at parties. Since work has been busy as well, I've always just turned down any invitations," was his response.

He was indeed quite busy, considering he was a department head at the Magical Ministry. There were plenty of people at the Ministry like Cyrus who, despite being nobles, I never saw at parties.

Although Larna—the head of my department—was actually Susanna Randall, the firstborn prince's fiancée, I'd heard that she hardly ever attended parties, except for the biggest public events.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cyrus, but could it be that you were forced to attend this party on my account? If so, I am sorry," said Maria with an apologetic expression. It seemed that Maria, always such a kind girl, had reacted not only to Cyrus's excuse about being busy at the Ministry, but his admission that he wasn't comfortable at parties.

Perhaps she thought that Cyrus only attended the party because he was asked to help guard her, but I was willing to bet that he volunteered. Cyrus seemed like he would go anywhere for Maria's sake, come hell or high water.

"No no no, Miss Maria, not at all. I was actually already scheduled to attend this party. But when I heard that you would also be attending, and would require bodyguards, I volunteered myself. I was worried about you," said Cyrus, confirming all of my suspicions.

It must have taken all of his courage to force those final words out. Another man probably would have managed to make more of a romantic approach, but given that his level of experience was below that of an elementary school boy, he was probably already at his limit.

However, Maria's face lit up when she heard this.

"Is that so? Thank you so much. You are so kind, Mr. Cyrus, always thinking about your subordinates," she said, fixing him with the prettiest of protagonist smiles.

Sigh, looks like Cyrus's feelings weren't interpreted as love, but the regard of a boss for his workers. Since Maria is permanently equipped with a magic item unique to otome game protagonists—one that makes her unbelievably dense when it comes to romance—it's difficult for her to come to terms with stuff like this. Don't worry,

Cyrus.

"No, I mean... Yeah, that's right."

If this were Jeord, he would have managed to say something like, "I wasn't just worried about one of my workers, I was worried about *you*. Because I'm in love with you," before fixing her with a princely smile. But Cyrus, with his sub-schoolboy flirtation skills, just gave up.

I don't expect you to pull a Jeord, but if you don't try a little harder, then Maria—with her permanent debuff to her romantic senses—will never know how you feel. I think this every time we meet, but it's hard to believe he's actually a romanceable character in an otome game. I wonder how he's meant to make progress with Maria—and end up with her—in the game. I hope it's not the tragic kind of ending, where he only ends up with her in his dreams. Right now, it looks to me like he's losing to Dewey—who's fourteen*—on initiative. I feel like he's headed for a Good Boss ending at this rate.*

Cyrus's romantic ineptitude so vexed me that I tried to give him a little encouragement now and then, but if he kept saying it was impossible for him to be alone with Maria, there was no hope for him.

It looks like they immediately met up with Mary's group today, and spent no time alone together. Maybe they never will. After volunteering to be Maria's bodyguard, you really made no progress today? That's such a shame, Cyrus. With all of this on my mind, I looked pityingly at Cyrus.

"It looks like the line to greet the royals has thinned out a tad, so I think I'll go and talk to some more people," Keith interjected. "How about you, big sis?"

Indeed, now that I looked, there were far fewer people lined up to see the royal family, and those who had greeted them had returned to the center of the hall.

Hmm... I know it's important to greet the other guests, but I want to enjoy some more food, I thought.

"Even if you are staying behind," Keith remarked without missing a beat, "overeating and overdrinking is strictly forbidden."

Just as one might expect from someone who'd been my adopted brother for ten years, he instantly knew what I was thinking. With

an awkward *oof* sound, I clammed up.

"Also, you can't go off on your own again. Either wait for me here with the others, or come with me," he insisted.

I nodded, knowing all too well that he was right, but then Mary butted in.

"In that case, would you like to stay here and chat while we wait? Also, I can keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn't eat too much."

She directed the second half of that utterance at Keith, almost like she was offering to babysit his kid. I felt like I'd simply been given a new guardian. *I'm a grown woman, you know.*

"In that case, I'll leave her in your hands, Mary," said Mother Keith, leaving me, his kid, with Mary.

"Mary, it looks like *your* child needs your help," murmured Nicol.

Eh? Mary's child? Following Nicol's gaze, I spied Alan, the youngest of Sorcié's princes.

Now that the line to greet them had thinned out, the members of the royal family had started to spread out. Alan looked even wearier than he had when I saw him earlier, and he was surrounded by an insistent throng of young women. The words *Save me, Mary* were written on his face.

When Mary turned her gaze upon him, a look of extreme disgust —not entirely becoming of a young lady—came over her face. If she hadn't been a lady, then she probably would have tutted in irritation as well. Instead she sighed heavily, realizing she couldn't leave the child and follower she had looked after for so many years—though actually, he was her fiancé.

"You will have to excuse me for a moment," she said before rushing off to rescue Alan.

When Alan spied Mary approaching, his expression turned to one of relief. For her part, Mary stood protectively between him and the other young noblewomen, and deftly shooed them away. In romance novels, the prince always rescues the princess, but in this case Mary was the prince and Alan the princess.

Alan, you may look like a dashing prince, and Mary may be as pretty as a princess, but things in the real world just don't turn out

like fairy tales.

I turned my head only slightly to the side of this couple who defied storybook convention to find that the other princes were also beset by young ladies. Jeffrey, the eldest of the princes, was of course used to this, and appeared to handle them with aplomb. The second brother, Ian, had a more serious personality, and could be seen backing away and refusing their advances, a stiff expression on his face. As for Jeord, the thirdborn, he was another crafty prince who seemed to be handling the ladies just as deftly as Jeffrey, but for some reason he didn't look as chipper as usual.

Is something the matter? Come to think of it, when I saw him earlier...

"Aren't there a lot of young ladies crowding around the princes?" I wondered aloud, puzzled.

"I think they're all from other countries," Keith answered. "We have many foreign guests today."

"But why should there be more ladies crowded around the princes just because there are a lot of foreign guests?"

"From what I've heard, a lot of people from other countries don't know who's engaged to whom. And you also have to consider that, in some countries, you can change your fiancée as often as you like."

"Other countries sure are different." Though a few ladies might crowd around the princes at most parties, they weren't usually so brazen about it. But given the circumstances, I could understand why things had turned out like this on this occasion.

"So you see, when you have a lot of people from other countries, they bring all kinds of differences with them, which can make things difficult. You be careful as well, big sis. Now, are you coming with me to greet the royals? Or would you rather wait here with Nicol and the others?" Keith asked me once more.

"Umm, in that case, I'll..."

"Why did she say she wanted to go and talk to them, after they told us they were too busy to come and talk to us today?" I thought I heard Keith grumble.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing... I was just thinking that since we were told that the royals didn't need us to greet them today, maybe we could just skip talking to them," said Keith with a slightly dissatisfied expression.

"I know what we were told, but I'm a bit concerned about Prince Jeord." His appearance when I saw him just moments earlier had given me cause for concern. I hoped he wasn't feeling unwell, but Jeord was fundamentally someone who kept his chin up even when he was unwell.

"He was handling everyone well enough, with his usual smile, wasn't he?"

"Huh? Uh, no he wasn't. Come on, Keith; you're his childhood friend as well. Couldn't you tell?"

Keith had known Jeord for almost ten years, so I would have thought he could tell if something was wrong with his friend. But Keith just stared back at me, saying nothing.

"Hmm? What?" I stared back at Keith. He looked kind of grumpy as he reached out with both hands...pinched my cheeks, and stretched them out.

"Eep, what are you doing?" I squeaked, bewildered by this sudden development.

"Somehow, I just felt really annoyed," was all Keith said before quickly letting go of my cheeks.

He pinched me because he was annoyed? He's being oddly gentle for someone who's annoyed. I don't get it.

Also, even though he was supposed to be escorting me at the moment, he refused to look at me. When I did get a look at his eyes, I could see he was absolutely upset about something. It was extraordinarily rare to see Keith, who usually doted on me like a mom, sulk like this.

Though this was hardly the time or place, I recalled how cute Keith was when he arrived at Claes Manor all those years ago. He was cute and small like a girl, and his cheeks were so squishy. His head of fluffy flaxen hair, which was quite high above my own head now, used to be below my own eye level, and I could pat his head as much as I liked.

When I recalled this, I felt an irresistible urge to touch that fluffy

head of hair, so I reached up with my free hand and touched it for the first time in a while.

His blue eyes opened wide and stared right at me again.

"You looked so cute sulking there, I couldn't help but pat you on the head, just like old times," I said, sticking out my tongue. Keith's face reddened before my eyes.

Oh no, did I make him even angrier?! I thought.

"You're a vixen without even knowing it... You little devil..." He muttered something weird to himself, but I was just relieved that he didn't pinch my cheeks again.

"Now listen, under no circumstances should you do anything like what you just did to me to Prince Jeord!" he said with a stern look at me.

"Eh? What? You mean patting you on the head?"

"Right... Stuff like that."

"I guess you're right... It would be rude to touch a prince on the head in front of so many people."

"Right... So you won't be doing that."

"All right," I assented firmly, and Keith let me go.

Once I got closer to the princes, I saw the couple that was the polar opposite of the princes and princesses you read about in romance novels—Alan, the youngest prince, and Mary.

"Prince Alan, I'm glad that Mary managed to rescue you," I said.

"Yeah, she really showed off her skills," he replied a little bashfully.

When he was little, Alan would have said that he didn't need anyone's help, but now that he was Mary's obedient pet he was far more honest.

However, Prince Mary, who had just rescued Princess Alan, seemed a little annoyed.

"Whenever you're faced with women like that, you're absolutely hopeless until I show up, aren't you? Please try to learn to handle them a little better on your own."

"Oof. I know, but I can't learn to do that at the drop of a hat."

"In that case, shall we do another lesson in how to handle women?"

"Ugh. Can we not do those anymore?" said Alan with a strained expression.

"Lessons in how to handle women?" I repeated, wondering what she meant.

"Prince Alan isn't very good at repelling young ladies when they approach him, so I came up with some lessons to teach him how. I play the part of one of the ladies approaching him, and Prince Alan is supposed to follow my instructions to turn me away, but he still can't really do it," answered Mary, clearly furious with Alan.

I turned to Alan.

"Wouldn't those lessons be extremely useful? Why don't you let her teach you more often?"

"Don't underestimate Mary's acting talents," he responded in a low voice so Mary couldn't hear. "She really becomes just like a young noblewoman, trying to force herself on me."

"That's our Mary." Mary, who was known as the model for all young noblewomen and the flower of high society, would have to be pretty good at acting. "So what's wrong with that? The more real the better, surely?" I rejoined.

Alan opened his eyes wide, then directed my attention toward Mary as he spoke to me in a low voice again.

"Take a good look at her. She *really* comes straight at me, forcing herself on me with *those* looks. Most young ladies don't have that kind of impact," he said, and I took another good look at Mary.

She was judged to be a peerless beauty even within high society. Her proportions were enviable, her body curving in and out exactly where it should. When I imagined her coming right at me, even I, as a woman, felt like I might have some trouble keeping it together.

"I'm sorry... Prince Alan, I think even I'd have some trouble," I replied, also lowering my voice like Alan.

His face lit up.

"Right? Of course you would. I knew you'd understand," he said, his joy evident despite his hushed tone.

I couldn't quite tell whether he was praising me or something else. Since I understood how he felt about Mary all too well, I believed I had a responsibility as their mutual friend to tell her.

"Um, Mary. About those lessons...it sounds like they might be a little rough on Prince Alan," I said.

A look of contemplation came over Mary's face.

"But if he keeps relying on me, it is Prince Alan who will suffer the most," said Mary the mom. She was absolutely right, but I still thought anyone would be in trouble if this beauty came at them aggressively.

But can I really say that directly?

"Umm, well, it sounds like it might be too soon for him to put your techniques into practice. Maybe it would be better to teach him with something like a textbook to start with."

"But at present, he is already being approached by real young ladies. I think it would be quicker to give him practical lessons."

Hmm, I don't seem to be able to convince her. What she's saying is absolutely right. I guess I'll have to be direct.

"Um, Mary, the thing is that you're *so* captivating that when you approach Prince Alan for real, he gets too nervous," I said.

Alan panicked, giving me a look that seemed to plead, *Don't come out and say it!*

But if I don't say it, we can't solve this.

"Eh? You still feel nervous around me? We've been betrothed since we were eight years old!" Mary looked shocked. From her perspective, Alan was nothing more than her childhood pet, so she probably couldn't understand how nervous she made him.

Still, speaking as a member of the Zero Romantic Experience Brigade, I knew how overwhelming it could be to have an attractive member of the opposite sex inches away from your face.

"That's certainly true, Mary, but you're so glamorous that you can make up for that familiarity. You're so enchanting that even I'd feel lightheaded if you really came at me, and I'm a woman," I insisted.

Mary blinked in surprise.

"Eh? Lady Katarina, you would feel lightheaded if I came right at you?"

"Sure would. With charms like yours, even women would be dazzled by you."

"Is that so...?"

"Yes, so if you're going to give Prince Alan practical lessons, you'll need someone else to stand in for you. I may not be as charming as you, but if you need help, perhaps I could practice with him?" I suggested.

He'll be fine with a not particularly charming villainess like me, right?

"No way!" said Alan.

"Absolutely not," said Mary at the same time.

"About that... It wouldn't just be harder dealing with you. Actually, it might be harder with you than with anyone. I mean..." Alan faltered.

Mary swooped in to support him in turning down my offer.

"Lady Katarina, we know you are busy and this isn't something you should have to trouble yourself with. Thank you, but no. And by the way, I think *you* have plenty of charm yourself."

Looks like I won't be asked to help with these lessons.

"To begin with, I think I'll ask one of my nieces to practice approaching him instead," said Mary.

Alan pulled a face.

"Anything but that."

After deciding to leave those two to their discussion and walking past them, I found Ian, the secondborn prince. At some point his fiancée, Selena Berg, had shown up and he was now escorting her. Yet in spite of the fact that he was escorting Selena around so intently, a number of women still crowded around him.

"Sorry," he finally declared, "but I feel neither interest nor curiosity toward anyone besides Selena, my fiancée. I have no intention of getting to know you."

This made Selena blush bright red. They seemed to be as lovey-dovey as always, which was nice to see.

Next I found Jeffrey, the firstborn prince, skillfully fending off the women who approached him.

I wonder where Susanna Randall, his fiancée, might be. I looked around the room, only to find her conversing excitedly with an older fellow who looked like some kind of scholar. From the way her eyes were sparkling, I assumed she had to be talking about her favorite

subject: magical powers and spells.

She didn't seem concerned about Jeffrey at all. Likewise, he didn't seem to be in a hurry to tear Susanna away from the conversation she was enjoying. It was business as usual for those two.

After passing by the three other princes, I finally came to Jeord, the one I was looking for. Just like I saw with Jeffrey from moments ago, Jeord was deftly handling the ladies crowded around him.

When I looked at the brothers, I felt that, on the inside, Jeord was like Jeffrey and Alan like Ian (though Alan was a wuss when it came to women).

As soon as I approached, Jeord started shooing the other women away and stepped closer to me.

"Katarina." He greeted me with such a lovely smile that I got a little flustered.

I didn't use to feel that way around him, but following the case of Maria's rescue, when he'd felt jealous toward Cezar and me, he had given me a grown-up kiss. I'd found it so shocking that, for a little while, I couldn't look him straight in the eye, but somehow I found I was able to now. But when he smiled at me too sweetly, I ended up remembering the event and feeling flustered again.

Jeord smoothly took me by the hand to escort me, then turned to the group of women who had gathered around him.

"As my fiancée has arrived, I will have to excuse myself from our conversation." He gave them a forced smile and left it at that. Though his words were peaceful enough, there was something about his attitude that made it clear he would brook no argument.

Most of the women silently departed, but a few more assertive women remained.

"She may be your fiancée, but surely it's only a political engagement. In our country, trends are starting to shift away from political marriages, and more people are choosing to marry for love," said one of them, taking a step forward.

Casting aside political engagements to marry your true love. This really is an otome game. Maybe there's an otome game story playing out in this woman's country just like here in Sorcié? I wondered

absentmindedly to myself.

"I see," Jeord replied with another truly gorgeous smile. "In the case of a purely political engagement, one may well decide to put it aside for love, but since I happen to love Katarina from the bottom of my heart, there is no need."

When they heard this, the remaining women froze. Some of the noble ladies even allowed their mouths to hang open in shock, staring at us wide-eyed.

Understandable. As the person he was talking about, I'm shocked too. It's astounding that such a stunning prince would say he loves a woman with no particular talents and a villainess face.

Uh-oh, now that I've actually thought about it, my face is turning red.

Right, quick, think about something else. Umm... Oh, that time I tracked dirt all over the manor after working in the vegetable patch and my mom got angry at me.

While I was trying to remember something that would put me in a cold sweat, in order to cool my face down, Jeord continued speaking.

"Now then, ladies, you will have to excuse me." Then he escorted me away from them with long strides.

Naturally, no one came after us, but Jeord continued his brisk pace. He still hadn't said anything after excusing himself. Once we had arrived at a spot set aside as a break room, Jeord spun around to face me with a serious expression.

"What were you discussing with the Prince of Ethenell earlier?"

By the Prince of Ethenell, he must mean Cezar. Did he see us talking over by the buffet table?

We were quite a long way away, and Jeord was supposed to be busy greeting visitors along with the other royals. I didn't think he would have noticed. Maybe it wasn't just my imagination when I thought our eyes met.

"Katarina," said Jeord impatiently. He had a somewhat worried look in his eyes.

"Um, he just asked me how I was feeling. That's all we talked about. Then Prince Cezar went to fetch Keith."

It wasn’t as if I’d done anything wrong, but when I saw the look in Jeord’s eyes I still felt a pang of remorse.

“I see... I thought he might have made another pass at you,” he muttered, almost as an aside.

Wait, Cezar’s never made a pass at me before, I thought. But when I saw that Jeord’s expression had relaxed a little, I decided not to say anything.

“You did seem to be acting a little differently when you were greeting the guests. Would that have anything to do with me and Cezar, by any chance?”

“Was I acting differently?” Jeord looked a little surprised.

“Yes. How to put it? You seemed tired to me—maybe even ill.”

“I see... I thought I was managing as well as I normally do.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure no one else noticed. I only did because I’ve known you for so long. I’m sure the same goes for your other childhood friends.”

Since we met when we were eight years old, I had known Jeord for a full ten years. Though it was harder to tell when he was feeling unwell now than when we were children—he’d gotten better at hiding it—all the time we had spent together did not amount to nothing. When I saw him wearing a smile that looked like a mask, I would naturally realize that he was pushing himself too hard.

“I think you are the only one who understands me so well, Katarina.”

“No, that isn’t true,” I said, trying to refute him, but Jeord silenced me by pressing a finger against my lips.

“It is true. Whenever I feel weak, you tell me just what I need to hear, and stand by my side. It’s because of you that I have the strength to go on. So I hope you will stay by my side forever, Katarina,” he said with a smile.

I was mesmerized by his beautiful face. Though I’d been looking at it for ten years now, I couldn’t help but take note of just how beautiful it was. And when my eyes fell on his shapely lips, I remembered the grown-up kiss he’d given me only days ago. I felt my cheeks start to burn again.

Jeord extended his hands toward my cheeks. They were big,

strong, warm hands.

They're so warm... Hmm? Aren't they a bit too *warm? In fact, they're not just warm, they're hot.* I reached out toward Jeord's face—which had come up right in front of my own for some reason—and placed my hand on his forehead.

"That's hot! Hold on, Prince Jeord, you're burning up. You most definitely have a fever!"

I began noticing other things that conclusively pointed to him running a fever. Now that I looked at him more closely, I realized his eyes were watering too. *This is definitely because of the fever.*

When he saw how panicked I was, Jeord pulled back a little and started to sulk a bit.

"I'm really fine," he insisted.

"No, if your temperature is this high, you are definitely *not* fine. You must have been feeling this way the whole time you were greeting nobles. You knew you were ill, and you forced yourself to keep going anyway!" I said, pressing him.

"I have been feeling unwell for a little while now, but I only discovered this fever when I woke up this morning. But this is nothing. Really. No one else noticed, so it isn't a problem." He'd finally admitted he was unwell, but he still insisted that it wasn't a problem. He was so awfully stubborn.

"It is too a problem."

"It's fine; I'm not bothering anyone."

Good grief, you're stubborn!

"That's not what I meant."

"I can still perform my duties."

"For goodness' sake, I'm not talking about your *duties*, Prince Jeord. I'm only this worried because you keep pushing yourself despite being so unwell!"

He said nothing.

Great, looks like he finally understood me.

"Now then, Prince Jeord, I'd like you to wait here for a moment, please. I'll go and make the proper arrangements," I said, before plonking Jeord down on a nearby couch and leaving the room.

All right, now to find someone to tell about Jeord's condition—

someone who might be able to help, I thought. I walked briskly out of the break room, when who should I spy but the perfect person for the job? *What great timing.* I immediately called out to him.

"Prince Jeffrey."

"Oh, Lady Katarina. What are you doing here?" Jeffrey answered with a smile.

I explained that Jeord wasn't feeling well.

"I see. I was concerned, since he has looked overworked lately, but I had no idea that he'd actually made himself ill," he said with a sad expression.

"Well, Prince Jeord is quite good at hiding this sort of thing," I explained, "so you couldn't have known."

After looking startled for a moment, Jeffrey smiled.

"I guess you're right. And he should be all fine, as long as he has someone like you to notice how he's feeling."

Really! If only Jeord didn't keep overdoing it, those closest to him wouldn't have to feel so sad. Next time I see him, I'll really let him have it. Though, actually, something Jeffrey just said kind of bothers me.

"Has Prince Jeord been busy lately?"

"Yeah. He's been investigating the identities and origins of the people involved in that incident you and Miss Maria were caught up in. I was doing my part as well, but since Jeord was already working so hard, I guess I left too much of the responsibility to him. Now that I've realized my mistake, I'll tell Jeord not to overwork himself."

I see; he means the case of Maria's rescue. Though we caught a few of the gang's underlings, I've heard that we still don't know anything about the people at the top—the ones who give the orders. Jeord must have thrown himself into that investigation.

Since he still has his usual public duties as prince, now that he's investigating the case—in addition to still coming to check on me whenever he has the time—he really has been overdoing it. No wonder he ended up becoming ill.

"Well then, let's tell Jeord to put the case to one side for the time being and get some rest," said Jeffrey.

"Yes. Thank you for your help."

Now that Jeffrey had said that, I was sure Jeord would be all right.

Jeffrey called over a servant standing by right next to him and gave him some instructions, after which he moved aside.

"All right. Now, we just need to make Jeord himself *want* to take a break, and he'll soon be right as rain," said Jeffrey with a grin. "Lady Katarina, I'm counting on you to convince him."

We then entered the room where Jeord was seated together.

As we entered the room, Jeord gasped and got out of his chair.

"I've heard about what happened from Lady Katarina," Jeffrey said. "Try not to work yourself too hard. You can always count on your brothers; you just have to ask."

Jeord looked perplexed for a moment, then uncomfortable.

"I really don't feel all that unwell," he protested.

I walked up to Jeord and put my hand on his forehead again. Of course, it was still burning hot, just as it had been minutes earlier.

"Yep, definitely still hot. See, you really *aren't* fine. I don't want to hear any more bravado from you," I said, letting my hand rest on his head. "Prince Jeord, you're going to be taking a break from work, and I won't hear any objections. You need to stop whining and actually get some rest."

I lightly slapped the top of his head.

Jeord didn't often throw tantrums like this, so I decided to try scolding him like a big sister.

"Whining...?" Jeord started sulking like a child.

"That's right. You're to stop whining and get some rest. There's a good lad," said Jeffrey, sidling up to Jeord and grabbing hold of his shoulders. "Now, let's go; your room is ready and waiting." He then proceeded to drag Jeord out of the room by his shoulders. Before they departed, he said, "Lady Katarina, you may return to the hall with that servant over there. I'll be back once I've taken Jeord back to his room and shoved him into bed."

"Thank you so much," Jeord murmured quietly as he was hauled away.

Since he had his head bowed, I didn't get a good look at his face. I felt like I'd been quite meddlesome, so I was relieved to hear him

say that.

"Please get some proper rest, and get well soon," I called out after him.

After watching the two princes leave, I returned to the hall with the servant who had been standing by.

As soon as I entered the hall, I was greeted by Keith.

"Big sis," he called as he walked over to me. It looked like he'd been waiting for me near the entrance to the hall. "After you didn't come back for a while, I started to worry. Where's Prince Jeord?"

Keith cast his gaze about the hall looking for him. I reported what had happened to my younger brother, explaining that Jeord had fallen ill and returned to his private chambers.

"So...you were completely right, big bis?!" gasped Keith, wide-eyed.

"Honestly, Prince Jeord is always working too hard; it simply won't do. I gave him a bit of a talking-to today, but I'll have to be even firmer the next time I see him," I said, still angry with Jeord.

Keith's expression stiffened for a moment, but then he started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking that you're probably the only person who can get away with treating Prince Jeord like that... Then I imagined what it must have looked like when you scolded him and couldn't help laughing," he said, then chuckled again.

When I told him how Jeord had looked when I scolded him—that he didn't seem too dejected, but had definitely sulked a little—Keith laughed even harder.

Was it really such a funny story?

After Keith informed me that our friends were all still waiting by the buffet table, we headed back there together. But on our way there, I suddenly locked eyes with a woman who was passing in front of us. It was the very woman I'd felt so much affinity for when I encountered her on my previous visit to the buffet table.

"Big sis, is she an acquaintance of yours?" asked Keith in a soft voice.

"We only spoke briefly at the buffet table, but I immediately felt a

sense of camaraderie when I saw how she eats food," I explained.

"And what sort of person would cause you to feel *that*, just by eating in a certain way?" wondered Keith, furrowing his brow slightly.

By the way, the woman in question was still being escorted by the man who appeared to be her older brother—the one who had chided her for overeating earlier.

Come to think of it, that brother of hers saw me eat too.

They stopped and nodded their heads, so I felt like I should probably greet them. I stepped forward and gave them a proper curtsy.

"I am Katarina Claes, the daughter of Duke Claes of Sorcié," I said, prompting a surprised stare from the woman.

But then she stepped forward as well and primly returned my greeting with a bow.

"I am Haru Kaburagi, daughter of Margrave Kaburagi of Xiarmah."

Both her beautiful kimono and her name kind of reminded me of my past life in Japan.

"And this is my elder brother..." said Haru, indicating the man standing next to her, whereupon he stepped forward.

"My name is Ryou Kaburagi," he said, matching his sister's elegant bow.

Not wanting to be left out, Keith said, "And I am Katarina's adopted brother, Keith Claes." Then he bowed as well.

Ryou turned his gaze to me.

"I would like to apologize on behalf of my sister, for her unrefined behavior earlier."

Is he talking about the way Haru was eating earlier? Before I could gush, "Not at all, it was magnificent!" Keith interjected.

"Not at all, I'm sure my sister was doing much the same thing, so I would owe you the same apology. Please do not worry about it," he responded.

I can't believe you, Keith. You weren't even there, and yet you assume my behavior was unrefined?! And why does Ryou here seem to be going along with Keith? What's going on?!

Then, with a beleaguered look on his face, Ryou began a leisurely

recitation of his woes.

"You cannot know how much it means to hear you say that. You see, no matter how many times I caution this sister of mine, she never acts like a lady. Even at this age, she can always be found running around outdoors, and when she comes to gatherings like this, she does not hesitate to stuff her face full of food. Just keeping an eye on her is exhausting..."

Oh, Haru likes to run around outside too? So it's not just our love of food; we have that in common too, I thought.

"Oh, I know exactly how you feel!" cried Keith, vehemently commiserating with Ryou. "No matter how many times I tell her not to act that way, she never listens. I warned her many times before we arrived today, but she *still* went straight to the buffet table and became so absorbed with eating that she never came back."

Keith's expression was just as weary as that of Ryou. *Maybe I should say I'm sorry.*

As two men with incorrigible sisters, they seemed to share a deep sense of affinity as well. I watched them shake hands.

"Excuse me, Haru. Do you enjoy eating food as well?" I asked, thinking that I might as well talk to Haru while our brothers were enjoying themselves.

"Yes, I do. When we were invited to today's party by the Kingdom of Sorcié, the food was the thing I was most excited about, so I went straight to the buffet table the moment we arrived," declared Haru with a smile.

Even I knew that when you find yourself at an international celebration attended by bigwigs from many countries—such as this very party—you aren't supposed to make a beeline for the buffet. But I understood all too well how Haru felt.

"The food here at the palace is delicious, isn't it? I also always end up eating too much. The dessert selection was especially plentiful."

"Did you say dessert?!" cried Haru, leaning forward.

"Haven't you tried any of the desserts yet?"

"No, I have not. My brother took me to greet your royal family, and I've only just come back."

"Well then, shall we go and have some sweets? There are still plenty that I haven't tried yet."

"Yes, let's go now!"

And so it was that Haru and her brother accompanied us to the buffet table. Having really gotten in sync, Keith and Ryou kept reminding us not to overeat and to practice moderation as we made our way there.

"Welcome back, Lady Katarina," said Mary, running up to us once she spotted me.

Behind her was Alan. *They must have met up here since I saw them last.*

Mary stared past me at Haru and Ryou, seemingly perplexed. Her eyes seemed to ask, *Who might you be?*

"Oh, these two are guests from Xiarmah. We met them earlier," I said as I began to explain the events up till that point.

"Cyrus!" Ryou suddenly cried. "That's you, isn't it?"

He was looking at Cyrus, who was approaching the buffet table with Maria.

Huh? Do Ryou and Cyrus know each other?

"Ah, Ryou, it's you. Long time no see," said Cyrus with a surprised look on his face.

So they do *know each other.*

Noticing my quizzical gaze shifting between the two of them, Cyrus provided an explanation.

"When we were children, our two homelands bordered each other, and we often used to play together. But after I came to the royal capital to attend the Academy of Magic, we fell out of touch."

"*Exactly*, Cyrus. When you were accepted to the academy, I came to congratulate you, but I've hardly heard a peep out of you since. Even when I come to gatherings in Sorcié, like this one, you're never there. Considering how close we used to be, you're awfully cold now," said Ryou, pouting ever so slightly.

"That's not true. I wrote letters to you a few times, didn't I?" said Cyrus, chuckling wryly and attempting to defend himself.

"It really was only a *very few* times," Ryou countered. "And what you wrote was always so vague. I never told you, but I was worried

that you might be having a really hard time at school." He then grabbed Cyrus by the shoulders and pulled him closer. "But now I see how you've been living, surrounded by beautiful women. You've overcome that aversion of yours, haven't you?"

Ryou spoke to Cyrus in a low voice, but since I was closest to them, I still heard him. I kept my face in a studiously neutral expression, pretending that I hadn't heard a thing, just as a lady should.

Ryou must know that Cyrus finds it difficult to handle young women. Knowing that, he tried to be considerate about it. After only having watched them interact very briefly, I could already tell that they had a strong friendship.

"Ryou... The truth is, I still haven't overcome it. In fact, I think it's worse now than it was in my younger days," Cyrus furtively replied with a downcast look on his face.

Regrettably, I heard this too. But any proper lady knows how to pretend she hasn't heard such things.

Ryou's eyes widened.

"Seriously?! Then how are you able to spend time around beauties like these ladies?!" exclaimed Ryou. In his shock, he raised his voice a little.

Even Mary might have heard this utterance. But since she was also a lady, she likewise maintained a neutral expression, as if she hadn't heard a thing.

"Miss Katarina over there—and Miss Maria, the woman with the blonde hair who just came with me to the buffet area—are my workplace subordinates, and the other ladies are their friends. As long as I'm in my professional mode, I can just barely manage to talk to women," muttered Cyrus, still speaking softly.

"I see. 'Professional mode,' huh? Well aren't you grown up? But you know, if you keep that up, you'll be single for the rest of your life."

"My big brother has already taken over as head of the household, and my nephews are all growing up into fine young men, so there's no problem there."



"Really, Cyrus...? Ah, let me see. You haven't overcome your aversion to women—in fact, it's gotten worse. And now you're saying you don't mind being single? Hmm, what can we do about that?" said Ryou with a vexed expression.

Hold on, did Cyrus just say what I think he said? You're giving up already?! What about your feelings for Maria? Cyrus, are you really telling you can't succeed in love without the help of a villainess who's supposed to get in your way?! I chided Cyrus in my head in the style of a straight man in a comedy duo. But then I heard another voice suddenly chime in from another direction.

"Umm, Cyrus, do you remember me?"

It was Haru who said this as she approached Cyrus.

As she slowly stepped closer to him, her pretty black eyes misted over, I couldn't help but remember a term I used to hear used in Japan to describe an idealized beauty—Yamato nadeshiko, a term which was also used to refer to a kind of dianthus flower.

But of course, with a misty-eyed beauty suddenly approaching him, Cyrus was starting to look flustered.

If Ryou hadn't been holding on to his shoulders, he definitely would have backed away slowly, then fled.

"U-Umm, I don't believe I've ever been acquainted with a woman matching your description," said Cyrus.

"Cyrus, it's me, Haru. When we were children, I often used to play with you and my brother," said Haru.

Cyrus's eyes widened.

"Haru... Wasn't Ryou's little brother called Haru? Wait, you're *that* Haru?"

"Yes. My hair was short back then, and I always used to wear boys' clothes, since they were easier to move around in. I had an inkling that you might have mistaken me for a boy back then, but actually, I'm a woman."

It seemed that Haru had had a more boyish appearance when she was a child, leading to Cyrus being mistaken about her gender. He had once told me that, when he was a kid, there were no girls his age around in his hometown, but it sounded like he was incorrect. *Cyrus, you're so dense.*

"I-I see. You weren't his little brother, but his little sister..." replied Cyrus. He continued to look flustered.

Well, I guess anyone would be a little flustered if it turned out someone they'd thought was a boy turned out to be a girl, and grew up into a beauty like this. And Cyrus has a hard time dealing with young women.

"Well, it really has been a long time. You're even more handsome now than you were then," said Haru with a big grin.

Cyrus managed a slight smile in return.

"Oh, thank you. Well, you've changed a fair bit yourself, Haru."

"Indeed. My family was starting to get angry with me for not wearing women's clothes, saying it was about time for me to start dressing properly. I still tend to wear men's clothes back at home, but I'm sure to be on my best behavior at formal events."

"I see. That's, uh, very admirable." Cyrus's speech faltered slightly, and he seemed to be switching into professional mode.

Apart from that, I was surprised to hear that Haru still wore men's clothes back at home. As someone who wore work clothes while tending my vegetable patch, I felt we shared some common ground there.

"Excuse me, Cyrus, but do you have a fiancée at the moment?" asked Haru nervously. She must not have heard Cyrus's furtive conversation with her own brother. So she couldn't have known he had an aversion to young women.

"Ah, no, not at the moment," he replied.

"Is that so? Do you have feelings for anyone?" asked Haru, leaning forward.

Cyrus glanced at Maria. He seemed to think for a moment.

"N-No one," he said after some reflection, clearly too embarrassed to admit the object of his affection was in the room with them.

Haru's face lit up when she heard this.

"I see! In that case, would you be willing to get engaged to me?" she said, leaning even further forward.

"Huh?!" cried Cyrus, standing there frozen with his eyes wide open.

“I would like you to make me your bride,” added Haru, her eyes sparkling.

Everyone present was taken aback, completely at a loss for words. Maria, by the way, was no exception; she seemed thoroughly surprised.

Despite having admitted his love for Maria to himself, Cyrus continued to progress more slowly than an elementary school boy.

I had a feeling that I was about to be caught up in a very difficult situation.

After that, Haru repeated her request to Cyrus to make her his bride. Cyrus was unable to rally from his confusion and could only manage the noises like *ah* and *uh* in response. It was chaos. While I was wondering what to do, Ryou helpfully spoke up.

“Hey, Haru. Cyrus is clearly confused, since you chose to spring this on him so suddenly. You’ve let him know how you feel, so let’s save further discussion for another day,” he said, doing his best to calm Haru down.

The look on Haru’s face showed she was obviously dissatisfied.

“We’ll discuss it another day,” Ryou repeated, raising his eyebrows. “Okay?”

With this, Haru reluctantly agreed.

“Cyrus, I’m sorry my sister brought this up all of a sudden. We’ll probably end up seeing you again to discuss this. I hope you don’t mind. I would also like to take this opportunity to apologize to your subordinates and their friends for the commotion.” Then Ryou left, almost dragging Haru behind him.

Even after they had left, however, Cyrus hadn’t recovered from his state of confusion.

“Mr. Cyrus,” I called out firmly. He flinched, then slowly turned his head to face me.

“I thought she was my childhood friend’s little brother...” he said, almost like he was talking to himself.

“So I just heard. But in fact you were mistaken, and she was actually his sister.”

“I can’t believe it... *Haru* was a woman all along? And after

growing up to be such a beauty, she just...reappeared."

Mmm, yep, Haru really is very pretty, isn't she? Just as pretty as the legion of beautiful women we have here.

"And she said she...wants us to get engaged..." continued Cyrus.

"Why, aren't you used to women proposing to you, Mr. Cyrus?"

I could see why he might have been shocked, given that he was under the false impression that Haru was a boy, but surely someone like Cyrus was used to women saying, "I want you to make me your fiancée."

Putting to one side the fact that he had an aversion to young women, Cyrus was just as handsome as one would expect a romanceable character to be. He was known to be good at his job as the head of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, and to top it off, he was physically strong and possessed powerful magic. He was someone the women of the world shouldn't be able to leave alone.

In fact, just within the Magical Ministry I'd overheard a number of single women saying things to the effect of, "Mr. Cyrus is so handsome. I want to marry him."

What I couldn't understand was why someone as popular as him would be so flustered by one little proposal.

"I've been sounded out about engagements before, and I've had women flirt with me, but I've never had someone ask me to get engaged to them so straightforwardly, and right to my face as well. The fact that I knew her from my childhood made it all the more bewildering," said Cyrus with a troubled expression.

So that's why. Cyrus had the appearance of a capable and intellectual man, and most people probably assumed he was very used to dealing with women. So though some less direct attempts might have been made to entice him, no woman had ever professed their feelings right to his face. *With those looks and his other attributes, no one would guess he was so scared of young women that he can't even look them in the eye.*

"Ryou said they'd come and see me another day. What should I do...?" muttered Cyrus, looking like he was about to descend into confusion again.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cyrus." At that moment, Maria, the protagonist of our story, spoke to Cyrus somewhat nervously, but with apparent concern.

When he saw Maria's face, Cyrus—who had been frowning heavily up to that point—gasped and then assumed a more dignified expression.

"I'm sorry, Maria. I lost my composure, and while I was supposed to be serving as your bodyguard and escort," he said with a face befitting a boss.

When he remembered he was supposed to be escorting and guarding Maria, he must have snapped back into professional mode, or else he just didn't want to look ridiculous in front of the woman he loved. Whichever it was, I was just glad to see him doing his job again.

"Well, that proposal was clearly sudden, so I don't think anyone can blame you for getting flustered. Please don't feel bad about that. More importantly, don't you think you should go after her?" said Maria. She must have been concerned about Haru, who had continued to complain as her brother dragged her away.

Haru was clearly dissatisfied, wasn't she? And though Ryou said that they'd talk about it another day, one would have thought that Cyrus maybe should have gone after Haru to discuss it a little further with her then and there. But Cyrus isn't about to do that.

"I wouldn't go off to speak with someone else while I'm supposed to be busy guarding you. They said we could discuss it another day, so I'll do just that," said Cyrus firmly, giving exactly the response I'd expected from him. With him acting more assertive, he no longer came across like he was even less capable than a schoolboy. He seemed like a gallant man.

I looked over at Maria, wondering if this might be enough to set her heart aflutter, but I didn't see any sign of that whatsoever. She looked the same as she always did.

"Thank you, sir," said Maria, lowering her head.

Despite being so beautiful, so clever, and having such rare magical abilities, not only had I never heard any romantic gossip about Maria, but I hadn't even seen her acting friendly with any man

in particular.

Though, in circumstances similar to Cyrus, she had plenty of single men at the Ministry asking her to go out with them, or even to marry them.

Moreover, she was the protagonist of an otome game, and she was meant to run across many story flags leading to her falling in love. But there had been no sign of that happening. Instead, the first game had concluded with a Friendship End. I wondered if the span of time covered by the sequel would also finish without her ending up with anyone.

"Lady Katarina, what's the matter?" asked Maria.

Whoops, I was so busy thinking about Maria I lost sight of my surroundings for a second. When Maria called out to me, I snapped to attention.

"Nothing. I was just thinking about what to eat next," I answered.

Maria's face lit up.

"In that case, shall we go to the buffet table together? It looks like they've just brought out some new desserts," she offered.

"Yes, let's go!" I answered energetically. The rest of our group accompanied us, though Keith couldn't resist another motherly lecture.

"You're eating *again*? Try not to overdo it."

As everyone seemed to be wondering where Jeord was, I simply informed them that he wasn't feeling well and had left to get some rest. I thought that if I gave them too many details, Jeord might be upset.

When we got to the buffet table—though I had to stop myself from taking too many sweets—we had fun all chatting together for the first time in a while. But as everyone had their own responsibilities, we couldn't just hang out there for too long. After agreeing to meet for tea some other time, my friends all went away to greet the other guests and uphold their social duties.

While Keith and I were greeting some of the other guests, we ran into Cezar again.

"Prince Cezar Dahl. I must thank you for your consideration earlier," said Keith.

That's right. While I was stuffing my face at the buffet table earlier, Cezar went to fetch Keith, because he knew it was dangerous for me to be left on my own.

"Thank you very much," I said, following Keith's example.

"Oh, no. It was nothing. Please don't worry about it," said Cezar with a princely smile.

Following a tactful conversation, we said our goodbyes and moved on, just like we had with the other guests.

Since Keith was by my side, Cezar never let his princely smile slip. Given the circumstances, I knew he had to keep up his facade, but I couldn't help feeling a little dejected as we parted ways. When I looked back one last time, our eyes met, and Cezar gave me that genuine smile I knew so well. So I smiled back at him.

Cezar was another romanceable character in *Fortune Lover II*. I knew we might cross paths again.

Though he hadn't shown any signs of having fallen in love with Maria yet, I figured this was because I—Katarina, the game's villainess—had gotten involved. I decided to be more careful in future as I kept an eye on their progress.

To avoid running into one of the game's Bad Ends, I would also have to be wary of the organization involved in Dark Magic. *I guess I've got a lot to think about. Ah, what a melancholy feeling.*

"I'm tired," I sighed. I sat down heavily in the chair in the break room and put my feet up.

Although we had only walked around making perfunctory greetings, due to the sheer number of guests at the party, the sun was already starting to set by the time we were done. The party would soon be over.

Exhausted from behaving like a proper noble lady for quite a long time, I asked Keith if I could go to the break room and rest.

"Big sis, that's not very ladylike," said Keith as he watched me slouch off. But though his posture remained upright, he was likewise starting to show his fatigue on his face.

I mean, there were a lot more foreign guests than usual, so we had to be extra attentive. Though I had just followed Keith's lead,

when I considered how he had varied his greetings and choice of conversation topics in accordance with the circumstances of each country, I realized just how amazing he was.

"Keith, you really are amazing."

Ah! Did I say that out loud? My head was getting a little fuzzy. I was so worn out I was starting to feel drowsy.

"Big sis?" Keith looked at me quizzically as I dazedly continued.

"You actually learned about all the other countries, and then used that knowledge in a public setting. I think that's amazing. You should feel proud."

"Big sis..."

"You were so cute when you were little, but now you're such a handsome, upstanding gentleman..."

He really was so upstanding. It was so reassuring to have him at my side. I started to feel even more groggy.

"Hey, big sis, what are you talking abo— Hang on, you're not about to fall asleep here, are you?! Hang on, sis, don't close your eyes."

Keith seemed desperately to want to tell me something, but it was no use. I couldn't keep my eyelids open any longer.

I was exhausted and increasingly sleepy. *I'm losing consciousness...*

I saw a room with pale pink walls, a bed with a metal frame and an azure cover on top, and a black table. *This room belongs to Acchan, my best friend in my past life. I'm having* that *dream again.*

Since starting my job at the Magical Ministry, I'd occasionally had a recurring dream where I watched Acchan playing *Fortune Lover II*. Though I couldn't have this dream just by willing it, no matter how long I slept, it would come to me now and then. I never knew when it would pop up.

I had no idea why I kept having this dream, but I tried not to think too hard about it. I figured some god or other powerful entity was lending me—someone who hadn't ever played the sequel—a hand. For the time being, I focused all my attention on the screen, hoping to catch a hint about what was to come.

Now then, will I manage to find out something new this time? I stared hard at the scene from the game unfolding on the screen in front of me. I could see Sora.

Aw. Given what just happened with Haru, I was hoping I'd get to see Cyrus's route, I thought. But these dreams never went the way I wanted them to, so I gave up on that hope and kept watching.

"Today I'm scheduled to work outside the office on behalf of the department," Sora was saying.

"That must be difficult," Maria replied.

The two continued to make small talk after this.

How do I put this? This seems like a really peaceful, uneventful, everyday scene. Perhaps this is just that kind of route, where Maria develops a romance with Sora as they work together at the Ministry.

But if all I get to see is this everyday conversation, it doesn't look like I'll be able to uncover any hints. Or perhaps there is some deeper meaning in their casual conversation? I racked my brains, but came up with nothing.

Ah! Sora told Maria just the right pickup line, and she blushed. This was something I had never seen in real life. In reality, Sora and I usually worked together, and he never got to spend time alone with Maria. *Hm? Hold on, maybe he* has *been alone with her, and took the opportunity to hit on her? Next time I see him, I'll ask.*

While I was pondering that, I heard another character's dialogue.

"Sora Smith. It's time to head out," said the voice, and a man who looked like a background character if I ever saw one appeared on-screen.

Hm? Who's this? If he's talking to Sora about work, he's probably someone from the Magical Tools Laboratory, but I've never seen him before.

Our department was famous for being full of oddballs, with our departmental head, Larna, being the foremost among them. Everyone was just brimming with character, and there wasn't anyone who looked as *normal* as this guy.

The only coworker I had who looked normal was Nathan Hart. He sort of fit this character's description, but not only was Mr. Hart incapable of finding his way around outside, he couldn't even be

counted on to find Sora on his own.

But my question was soon answered as Sora's response appeared on-screen.

"Yes, I'll be going now, boss."

Eh?! Boss?! He's Sora's department chief?!

"I'll see you later," said Sora to Maria.

"Okay. Take care," she replied.

After the two exchanged a smile, just like lovers might, I watched Sora walk away and felt completely bewildered.

Sora just called that background character "boss." In other words, that man runs the department where Sora works. Could it be that Sora isn't an employee of the Magical Tools Laboratory in the game?

Since he belonged to that department in real life, I'd just assumed he'd be working there in the game as well. Maybe that had changed because of me—an irregularity who disturbed the game's story? If so, what department did the game's Sora work in?

I know I saw all the heads of the departments at the Ministry once, when I arrived and introduced myself, but was there a background-looking guy like that? Or was he just drawn that way in the game in order not to stand out, while in reality he actually looks different?

I didn't know. The one thing I did know was that, within the game, Sora definitely wasn't one of Larna's subordinates. No matter how much of a background character this was, surely the devs were at least capable of making male and female characters distinguishable.

I felt like the note I'd found said that, following a certain incident, Sora ended up at the Magical Ministry in the game just like he had in real life. But it seemed odd that Larna, magic nerd that she was, wouldn't have dragged a promising new employee with Dark Magic into her department.

What's going on? Fortune Lover II *seems even more out of whack with reality than the first game. Why are there so many differences?*

"—rina. Lady Katarina."

As I regained consciousness, I could hear someone calling my

name. I opened my eyes to find my friends standing there, peering down at me.

"Mary, Sophia, Maria. What are you all doing here?"

I was pretty sure I remembered dozing off in this chair while taking a break with Keith.

"The party's nearly over, so we were all trying to find you to say goodbye. Then we heard you were taking a break, so we came here, only to find you sleeping peacefully. We didn't have the heart to wake you up at first, but now that it's time to go home we decided we just had to speak with you," explained Mary.

"Has it really been that long? I only meant to doze off for a minute. Thanks for waking me up. By the way, where's Keith?"

Although Keith had definitely been with me when I came to the break room, there was no sign of him now.

"We told him we would take care of you, and chased him awa— I mean, sent him away to return to his formal duties. Now that you're awake, Lady Katarina, I'll let him know he can come back."

Hm? I thought I heard her say they chased *him away for a moment. Must be my imagination.*

"Thank you," I said.

"Oh, no. I only wish I had been able to pick you up, carry you to my carriage and take you home. Curse my lack of physical strength."

Everyone laughed at this joke from Mary.

Back at the Academy of Magic, since we were all required to live in dorms there, we girls had many opportunities to chat exclusively with each other, but we hadn't been blessed with many chances lately. It was always so much fun to hang out with them.

While we were enjoying our girl talk and shrieking with laughter, Keith returned and I had to head straight home with him. On our way out of the hall, I suddenly remembered Jeord's condition and found someone to discreetly find out from Jeffrey how he was doing.

I was relieved to hear his reply: "He's asleep in bed, on his best behavior."

Finally, the exhausting party came to an end, and Keith and I returned to Claes Manor in our carriage. I was so worn out that I thought I might start to get drowsy during the carriage ride, but

thanks to having slept for a while in the break room, I didn't feel all that sleepy.

I cast my mind back to the dream I'd just had. It wasn't so clear-cut as some of the other dreams, where I could think to myself, *This is an event*, or, *This girl is a love rival*. All I'd learned was that, in the game, Larna wasn't Sora's boss. How this would help me avoid doom flags remained a mystery.

That was all the dream had told me, but then it occurred to me that, in the world of *Fortune Lover II*, Larna might not even work at the Magical Ministry. Or, if she did, she might be very different from the Larna I knew in real life.

I mean, after seeing how excited she always looks when she interrupts my Dark Magic training, there's just no way she would miss the chance to recruit Sora, with his Dark Magic abilities.

"Hey, Keith. Do you remember why Miss Larna is so obsessed with magic and spells?" I asked Keith, who was sitting across from me.

"She said an acquaintance of hers gave her books on magic as a present, right? Hey, wait—big sis, weren't *you* the one who told me that story?" answered Keith with a look of disbelief on his face.

"Ah. Now that you mention it, I guess I was."

I'm pretty sure I heard that story that time Keith was kidnapped, while on my way to rescue him. Then I told him about it afterward. Now I remember.

Larna spent her days lost in boredom as a child, until someone gave her a big stack of magic books that would be difficult even for an adult. The Larna we knew today only existed thanks to that person's influence. Conversely, without that person the Larna we knew wouldn't exist.

A number of other factors did come to mind, but I resolved to ask her about that person the next chance I got. I would also ask exactly how she came to work at the Ministry.

If I could figure that out, I might start to understand why *Fortune Lover II* was so different from reality. Since I hadn't played the game, I had to make sure I investigated every lead I found, no matter how insignificant it might seem. After all, I couldn't know

what might lead to my doom.

While I was racking my brain over these questions, our carriage arrived at Claes Manor. After getting home and changing into my pajamas, the drowsiness I thought had gone away suddenly assaulted me again, and I immediately fell asleep.

★★★★★★

"Come in," I called out as a knock sounded at the door. The door opened and my elder brother Jeffrey walked into the room. His brow was furrowed slightly.

The memory was still fresh in my mind of how, just a few days prior, I was played for a fool at a party due to my brother's irresponsible claims, fouling up my chance to speak with Katarina.

But it wouldn't be any fun if Jeffrey suspected I was still upset about that, so I feigned my usual serene expression.

"Jeord, how are you feeling?" asked Jeffrey.

I forced a smile.

"After getting some rest, I feel much better. I should be fine now."

"Hmmm..." Jeffrey intoned. He pouted for a moment, then walked briskly over to me and stuck out his hand. His approach was so sudden that I was unable to evade him. After resting the palm of his hand on my forehead, Jeffrey scowled. "What do you mean, you're fine? Your fever hasn't gone down at all. You'll have to stay in bed tomorrow as well."

"I don't think there's any need to go that far," I immediately fired back. "I am sure it will subside after another short rest."

Though I was well aware that I was running quite a high fever, I knew from experience that I would be more or less recovered after one more night's rest. I had learned to manage my own health when I was still a child.

Due to the mayhem that unfolded before my father could inherit the throne—thanks to the number of illegitimate sons left behind by my promiscuous grandfather—and the fact that my twin brother Alan was a very sickly child, I never warranted much attention from my

parents as a child.



In the flurry of disorder that accompanied my father's ascension to the throne, some of our relatives saw an opportunity to seize custody of my two older brothers, so I had very little contact with them. As a young child, I had no family around at all.

Now that I was grown up, I realized that much of this had been unavoidable due to the circumstances, but I hadn't understood any of this as a small child. I remembered spending many a day with my face wet with tears.

However, even as a small child, there was plenty I did understand. For one thing, I knew that if I cried, or was taken ill, I would only be making trouble for our servants. So I learned not to let other people see me cry, or to let anyone know when I felt unwell. That was how I lived. I learned to conceal my vulnerabilities, and keep a smile plastered on my face at all times, like a mask. I felt as if I were walking aimlessly through a monochrome world.

Until I met Katarina Claes, that is.

"Jeord, you're so stubborn. If anyone else heard you say that, they'd probably believe you," said Jeffrey with a sigh. "I know you have a reason for always pretending you're okay and carrying on regardless of any problem. But right now, you've been told you need to get some rest, and you should be grateful for the opportunity. Things aren't going to go your way this time." He said this with a knowing expression.

"For what reason?" I could already hear the answer in my head, but I asked anyway.

"Naturally, I mean Lady Katarina," he said.

Precisely the answer I had expected.

Before I met Katarina, none of our servants had noticed me looking ill. The smile I'd kept plastered on my face was perfect. I fooled them every time. But sometime after we first met, there was a moment when I had promised to meet her, and found I felt slightly unwell. It would have been too much trouble to cancel our appointment, so I decided to conceal how I felt with my perfect smile, as usual.

But she saw through me immediately.

Originally, I had thought Katarina was rather dense, so I'd been

extremely surprised at her perceptiveness on this occasion. And she was so kind to me. I had never been treated that way before, and I was deeply moved.

After that day, Katarina would always immediately recognize any changes in my health (though she never seemed to realize the most important thing—how I felt about her). When this state of affairs had repeated itself enough times, I finally grew sick of putting on airs around Katarina, and started to act how I really felt. Even though I was no longer perfect, even though I had started to show my faults, Katarina treated me in exactly the same way.

Even now, there were often times when I did not feel like showing any weakness, and donned my mask of smiles again. But when it came to Katarina, I knew I could never fool her. Whenever she was involved, I found more and more that I couldn't suppress my emotions around others either...but I wasn't convinced this was such a bad thing. Katarina had not only changed my world, but me as well.

I can't let anyone steal her from me. Even if my rival is a foreign prince, who happens to be more coolheaded than me and can deal with adversity with more maturity, I cannot stand to lose this battle. More importantly, I can't allow any shady figures to do Katarina harm, I thought. But despite my desperate efforts on those fronts, here I was laid up in bed. I felt pitiful.

"Lady Katarina really is precious to you, isn't she?" said Jeffrey earnestly. Though I did nothing in particular to affirm this, he smiled gently. "But overdoing things to the point where you make yourself ill, even for her sake, is completely wrongheaded. Lady Katarina was worried about you. If you care about her, then rest up so you can be truly healthy the next time you see her." He then patted me gently on the head, almost like he was dealing with a child.

Though I still had very complex feelings about this, I resolved to get some proper rest.

Chapter 2: What Is Dark Magic?

Though I was exhausted from attending the party, after sleeping that night I was fully recovered. Today was going to be another day of work at the Magical Ministry.

Anne woke me up, as usual, and helped me get ready. I dozed off in my carriage en route, then found that we'd arrived. After getting out of the carriage and greeting the guard at the gate to the Ministry, I headed to my department.

Today was a lovely day, with fine weather. I would have loved to work outside on such a day, but I had been told that, for now, my Dark Magic training and my work deciphering the Dark Covenant had to come first.

Although I didn't mind my Dark Magic training so much, my work deciphering the Dark Covenant—which took place in the afternoon, when my stomach was full from my lunch—was always a bitter battle with sleepiness.

How can I beat my own sleepiness? I always wondered. I had tried pinching myself, hoping the pain would keep me awake, but sleepiness always won out in the end. I'd also thought about skipping lunch, but since that was the thing I looked forward to most each day, that would be tough. In fact, on an empty stomach, I'd probably think about nothing else. This would also probably make deciphering the covenant impossible. While I was carefully considering these options, I arrived at the door to the Magical Tool Laboratory and knocked on it.

"Come in," a woman's voice called from inside.

Huh, a woman's voice? This early, I thought only Sora would be here, but I guess I was wrong.

"Good morning," I said, stepping inside to find, to my slight surprise, someone I seldom saw at the office so early.

"Eh? Miss Larna, what are you doing here?"

Though Larna was supposed to be the head of our department, she was so often out of the office, preoccupied with independent research into magic and magical powers, that to find her in the office was a rare thing indeed (although ever since I found out that her true identity was that of the firstborn prince's fiancée—Susanna Randall—I'd started to suspect that she was often out on errands as her alter ego).

"Oof. I came here to investigate something that suddenly caught my attention at yesterday's party... Is it really the start of the work day already?" said Larna with a big stretch. I realized that, rather than coming in early, she'd been here investigating something ever since last night.

Looking more closely at her desk, I discovered the wrappers of some sweets she'd eaten, and documents scattered everywhere.

"I'm getting sleepy... Maybe I'll have a nap in one of the spare rooms," said Larna, ever the free spirit.

Then I remembered a thought that had occurred to me yesterday, while riding in my carriage.

"Excuse me, Miss Larna, but I remember hearing once that, when you were very young, there was someone who gave you a lot of books on magic and magical powers," I said.

This seemed to rouse Larna from her drowsiness, her sleepy face turning serious in the blink of an eye.

"Why would you bring that up, all of a sudden?" asked Larna in a tense tone of voice.

Is this something I shouldn't have asked about? But I remember her telling me about it like it was no big deal.

"I was just wondering how you came to work at the Magical Ministry, and thought the person who gave you those books might have inspired that. Should I not have asked you about it?"

Since I didn't think there was anything to feel guilty about, I was honest about what was on my mind. After she heard this, Larna seemed less tense.

"No, there's nothing wrong with asking about it. Only, things have been so precarious lately that I've started to get overly sensitive. Sorry about that."

Is that really something to act so sensitive about? I wondered, but shook my head to show there were no hard feelings.

"That might be right," I heard Larna mutter absentmindedly. "Maybe that person *did* inspire me to join the Magical Ministry." With a far-off look in her eyes, she continued, "If I hadn't met that person, I might still just be one of Marquess Randall's pawns."

"Miss Larna." Seeing her with a wistful expression I'd never seen before, I felt the need to suddenly call out to get her attention.

Larna looked back at me with a smile.

"That person was special to me. Someone who is still never far from my mind. But I can't just tell you who it was."

"You can't?"

"There was a lot that went on back then. There are some higher-ups who would be angry if I so much as told you this person's name."

I didn't know what to say. *If just hearing this person's name would make other people angry, does that mean they did something pretty bad?* I swallowed.

"But that's only because those higher-ups believe the official narrative. I still believe in that person."

The official narrative? Does that mean that person was framed to cover up someone else's wrongdoing? There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask, but I decided to stay quiet and listen to what Larna had to say.

"Lately, now that I've come to talk to you more often, I've started to think that you really remind me of them, Miss Katarina."

"Eh? Do I look like them?!" *Did they also have a villainess face?* Even though I'd decided not to ask any more questions, I still ended up blurting out a question.

After snorting with laughter, Larna shook her head.

"No, it's what's *inside* of you. Like the way you think. So I would like to tell you about them, one day. But it's a long story, so can we find another time to talk about this?"

"Yes, please." *I think the same way this person does? Now I really want to hear more about them.*

Just as we reached this conclusion, there was a knock at the door

and Sora walked into the office.

Larna hurried off to a spare room and went straight to sleep.

"Morning."

"Morning."

After exchanging greetings with Sora, I went about cleaning up the office a bit and getting things organized.

"Well done for putting up with yesterday's party," said Sora.

"You were the one who brought Maria to the palace, right? Well done to you too," I replied in kind, but then something caught my attention. "Ah, come to think of it, how did Maria get back home? Did Mister Cyrus accompany her?"

Cyrus was so tense at the party. Would he have been able to handle a carriage ride with Maria?

"Nah, I was in the carriage with Maria on the way back as well. Department Chief Lanchester was in a different carriage, behind us," said Sora with an exasperated shrug.

I guess riding in the same carriage as Maria was really too much to expect from him. He's still hopeless.

"Speaking of Department Chief Lanchester, it's hard to believe that he really can't share a carriage with the woman he loves—especially with his looks and his manners. At this rate, he'll never make any progress," said Sora with a wry smile.

"He really won't, will he? I think even kids these days could do a slightly better job of appealing to...wait, Sora, you *knew* Mr. Cyrus felt that way?!"

Sora had made his comments about Cyrus so casually that I nearly let them pass without paying them any attention, but he only could have said those things if he'd realized that Cyrus loved Maria.

"How could I *not* realize, seeing the way he acts around her? He manages to reel himself in a bit around the office, but seeing him last night, you'd have to be seriously dense not to know how he feels. Though, it seems like the woman he loves is equally dense and hasn't realized yet."

I can't believe it. Are Cyrus's feelings really that obvious? But since Maria is equipped with that item exclusive to protagonists that

makes her unaware of these things, she still hasn't noticed. What a pity. When I used to play otome games, I always thought it was cute how the protagonists were so dense when it came to the romanceable characters' feelings, but in the real world...

"It must be tough, finding yourself in love with someone so incredibly dense," I said earnestly.

"It sure is," agreed Sora, with a far-off look in his eyes. I thought I detected a mournful note in his voice.

While Sora and I were talking and doing our work, our senior colleagues in the department arrived and the office was suddenly much livelier.

"Morning. Lady Katarina Claes, your efforts at yesterday's party are appreciated," said Cornish, the narcissist. Today, he was once again wearing an outfit covered in frills, and he struck an odd pose as he spoke to me.

"Good morning. Mr. Cornish, didn't you attend the party?" I asked. Since I was quite sure Cornish was also a noble, I thought he might have been there too.

"Letting a weirdo like this go out in public would bring shame on his family, so he doesn't get too many invitations," explained Lisa Norman, standing next to him. As always, she spoke through a plush raccoon.

"Ha ha ha, in fact, the reason I'm never invited to parties is because I'm so charming, I'd end up capturing the hearts of all the women there," said Cornish, offering a correction none of us quite understood.

I'd say that Miss Norman's testimony is probably—no, definitely closer to the truth.

Since these two were childhood friends, they kept on chatting, apparently having a great time, as they went to their desks.

"Miss Katarina, were you all right at the party yesterday? You weren't bothered by any strange men, were you?"

The one who asked me this, with a look of concern on her face, was the lovely Laura (real name Guy Handerson). Today, as always, she came wearing perfect makeup and an outfit in keeping with gothic lolita fashion.

I always wondered where she managed to find gothic lolita clothing that fit such a muscular, macho body. Maybe she bought them at a store that specialized in them? Or perhaps she made them herself.

"I was totally fine," I replied cheerfully, while continuing to wonder about those clothes.

Laura suddenly leaned forward.

"Really? My dear Katarina, you are so adorable I can't help but worry," she said, her concerns sounding exactly like those a mother might have.

Laura, your junior colleague isn't as cute as you think she is, so don't worry. It took a little while for me to convince her of this. Since starting this job, I'd often found myself being looked after by Laura, to the point where she'd even started to dote on me like a little sister. Maybe that was why she'd started to see me through the same rose-colored glasses that a parent might.

"Ah, Guy, just the person I was looking for. The higher-ups have just reminded me that you still need to submit your report for that assignment we were given the other day. I'm hoping you can take care of it by the end of today."

The one who tossed these instructions Laura's way as he walked by us was Nathan Hart—someone who, due to his terrible sense of direction, couldn't even be depended on to find his own way to the bathroom, let alone go out on assignments alone. He was often paired up with Laura, and they were on fairly good terms.

"Eh? That assignment the other day? You mean that odd mission where I was forced to go out in disguise? You're joking! I haven't written a single line yet!" Laura almost screamed.

"That's your fault for not writing and submitting it right away. Please, you need to get it done," declared Mr. Hart, but Laura was not about to take this lying down.

"But I've been busy since then. You see, I'm so good at my work that my skills are very much in demand, so I have a lot on my plate right now. I haven't had the time to complete a report!" said Laura sadly, wiping her eyes with a lace handkerchief. She looked almost like a frail woman moved to tears. Though in reality, she was a

macho bodybuilder who was only pretending to cry.

"You can't have been that swamped lately," Mr. Hart said firmly, the light glinting off his thick spectacles. "I've seen you going off for fun lunches with coworkers, and taking tea breaks just like you normally do. You just forgot about the report, didn't you?"

Laura's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"This is why I can't stand clever people. You always have such a firm grasp on things... Fine, you're right, I completely forgot about that report!" she cried, suddenly defiant, then carried right on talking. "I know I should have done better. But there's no way I can finish it today! You see, writing reports is my least favorite task of all. I hate making note of every petty detail, so there's just no way I can complete a report covering such a span of time in a single day!" With this final declaration, she was now completely defiant again—utterly unapologetic.

If I had been in Mr. Hart's position, and someone had said all of that to me with such confidence, I would have been tempted to say, "Never mind, then." But Mr. Hart was not so easily won over.

"It's no use arguing. You're already quite behind schedule, so please finish writing it today, no matter what," he responded, without a hint of hesitation and with a deadly serious look on his face.

Now then, what's Laura's next move? I thought, gulping as I watched their confrontation unfold.

"All right... It can't be helped, so I'll just have to see that it's done. But it'll still be impossible for me to do it alone, so you'll have to help me, Nathan!" cried Laura, clinging to Mr. Hart for support.

He must have been used to these appeals from Laura, because he simply slipped away from her and headed to his own desk.

"Please, you can take care of that yourself. I have my own work to do."

"But Nathan, you can knock out one more little report in no time! Please."

"You say that, Guy, but it's because *you* keep forcing your own paperwork on *me* that you haven't gotten any better at doing it. You have to handle this yourself."

Oh, so Laura is always forcing Mr. Hart to do her paperwork for her. Why, that simply won't do. Of course he would tell her to do it herself.

"I understand that all too well, but there just isn't enough time left today for me to finish it. Just help me for today, please. I'll buy you lunch."

"No, see here..."

"Please, Nathan. One day, I'll pay you back twofold for this favor."

Laura was so desperate that Mr. Hart was starting to falter.

As a junior colleague Laura had doted on many times before, I couldn't bear to watch her throw this tantrum any longer.

"Mr. Hart, I beg you, please help Laura this once," I said without thinking first.

"Oh, Miss Katarina, you are such a thoughtful child when it comes to your senior colleagues," said Laura as she wiped her eyes—despite having shed no tears.

Mr. Hart let out a heavy sigh.

"Okay, Guy, but this really is *the last time*," said Mr. Hart, finally agreeing. Just like Laura, he always looked after others, so I thought he would ultimately give in. And I was right.

"Thank you, Nathan," said Laura happily.

As Laura (with the build of a macho muscle man) embraced Hart, the latter had a somewhat strained expression on his face.

Having watched this all play out from a short distance away, Cornish the narcissist gave a nihilistic sneer.

"Hmph, what an unsightly display."

"Oh, yeah. Cornish, please make sure you submit your own report by the end of the day," Mr. Hart snapped.

In the blink of an eye, Cornish grimaced and cried out.

"Aah, but I have work to do outside the office today..."

With this barefaced lie, he attempted to exit the office, but Miss Norman seized him and escorted him back to his desk.

I'm sure Miss Norman will take good care of him. My senior colleagues really are a bunch of characters. Though they are all very capable as well.

Now then. After watching all that play out, there wasn't much

time left until office hours started, but since Larna had run off to pursue her magical hobbies, putting her professional duties to one side, I went around the office checking on everyone in her place. Raphael, who was often called "the real head of the department," hadn't arrived yet.

According to my schedule, I was supposed to take a Dark Magic lesson from Raphael later on in the day, but as he was so busy, these lessons often ended up being canceled. His hands had been especially full dealing with the aftermath of the incident with Maria, so we still hadn't done any training since then. On days like these, I would usually end up helping Mr. Tank Top carry boxes around, and it was looking like I'd be doing that again instead.

"Miss Katarina, you have a message from the real head of the department. Though his hands are full and he'll be a little late, it looks like you can still do your training today. He'd like you to wait in the room you always use," said Mr. Tank Top when he saw me. He was wearing a yellow tank top today.

So, back to Dark Magic training today... I feel kinda melancholy about that.

But when I remembered that the work day still actually hadn't started yet, I was more worried about Raphael's circumstances, considering that he already had more work than he could handle.

"Thank you for passing on that message," I said to Mr. Tank Top, but then decided to question him about something that was bothering me. "Excuse me, but why is your tank top yellow today?"

I was pretty sure he had still been wearing a white tank top, like always, the last time I saw him, but maybe he just wanted a change of pace. Once, when I'd had the opportunity to ask him why he even wore tank tops, the reason he gave me was even more ridiculous than I had imagined. So I thought he'd probably have a ridiculous reason for this too.

"Ah, well, this color is part of my fall style," replied Mr. Tank Top with a breezy smile. I didn't quite follow his meaning.

"Your fall style?"

"This yellow is meant to look like the leaves in fall. This is the color they take on. Don't you think it's an autumnal look? I always

make sure that my clothes change with the seasons," explained Mr. Tank Top proudly.

But, isn't the tank top itself at odds with fall? Now that the days were starting to get chillier, there was nothing about walking around in just a tank top that evoked fall. No one would look at his yellow tank top, meant to look like autumn leaves, and think, "Ah, so this is your fall style."

All I could think to say about it was that I thought his fall style was fundamentally wrong. However, it didn't feel right to aim that retort at Mr. Tank Top, who seemed so proud of his style. If he thought it was right on the money, then perhaps it was just right for him.

While I was puzzling over what to say next, Laura walked past us and quietly whispered in my ear.

"He changes the color now and then, according to how he feels. But he'll soon change it back again, so just ignore him."

I took her advice to heart.

"I see. Isn't that nice? Now, you'll have to excuse me," I said, swiftly leaving Mr. Tank Top behind.

I did feel that I had learned something new. *Mr. Tank Top changes the color of his tank top based on how he feels.* Though, this seemed like an incredibly useless piece of information.

After gathering my things, I exited the Magical Tool Laboratory and headed to the room where Raphael and I conducted our Dark Magic lessons. With nothing to do while I waited, I started to get restless and decided to sweep the floor for a bit, but I was finished before long.

It didn't feel right to just do nothing, so I took out my notes from our previous lessons and started to review them.

I am able to summon my Dark Familiar (Pochi). I can make him bigger too.

I can summon a dark staff (with a skull on top).

I can make a lump of darkness, from the size of a bean up to the size of a tangerine.

I can absorb darkness.

To these notes, I added another about what had happened the

other day.

I can summon a big mass of darkness (shaped like a snake) and constrict people *with it.*

These last words ended up looking messy.

When I went to rescue Maria, I had lost control of my Dark Magic and used it to constrict the men who had tried to harm her. I could still remember very clearly what had happened. I felt so cold, and nothing that was happening seemed real—almost like I was watching it all play out on a TV screen.

When I discussed the matter with Larna and the other managers, since barely any time had passed since the incident, I didn't really think too much of it. But now that a few days had passed, and I was able to reflect on it with a clear head, I had started to feel scared of myself.

Larna, Cyrus, and I had come up with a few plans for preventing future mishaps. First, I was to do my best not to get too emotional, or to let negative emotions build up inside me. Second, whenever I found myself in a situation where I had to use Dark Magic, I was to exercise due caution. I intended on following these rules to the letter.

But when I remembered that sensation—of the darkness swallowing up my entire being—I felt the same terror well up inside of me again. I couldn't say for certain that the darkness would never swallow me up again.

Though nobody else knew about this, my original role in this world—the setting of an otome game—was that of the villainess. That fact scared me too. I was terrified of the possibility of being swallowed up by that fate—being swallowed up by the cold, the blizzard, and forgetting who I was.

Though I hadn't really thought about it very deeply until now, Dark Magic was starting to seem very scary. Would I ever be able to control it completely?

What if I'm engulfed by the cold again, and end up hurting someone? Someone...I really care about...

"Don't worry," I heard a voice say, and felt a hand on my shoulder. At that moment, I realized I was shaking violently. My

whole body was trembling uncontrollably. Then I felt that warm hand on my shoulder. The person attached to that hand continued to speak in a kind, relaxed tone of voice. "Don't worry. You're okay, so just breathe in and out, slowly."

I did what the kind voice encouraged me to do, taking several slow breaths, in and out. After doing that, I felt my tremors start to gradually subside. When the shaking had finally stopped, I felt the hand on my shoulder come to rest softly on my head, and begin to gently stroke my hair.

"Well done. You're all right now."

I saw a pair of kind, gray eyes in front of me, creased in a smile.

"Thank you, Raphael."

When I said that, Raphael's gray eyes creased further as his smile deepened.

"Has Dark Magic started to frighten you?" he asked in a soft voice, once I'd finally calmed down.

His gaze was fixed on my open notebook. *Maybe he saw how messy those last few words were.*

"Ever since the other day, during that incident when it looked like Maria might get hurt..."

Everyone in the department knew that when I arrived on the scene of Maria's capture, I helped to rescue her, but only a select few had been informed that I'd lost control of my Dark Magic. Since Larna and Cyrus were there for my debriefing, they knew what had happened—and, considering how he'd barged into my family's manor the following day, Jeord must have heard as well—but since Keith hadn't mentioned it to me, perhaps he didn't know about it.

In Raphael's case, I didn't know whether he knew the full story. I felt like, if he didn't know, I would have to explain it to him, but I suddenly found that I couldn't get the words out.

As I stood there with my eyes downcast, unable to string a sentence together, I heard that kind voice again.

"Katarina, I already heard what happened with Maria—and what happened to you—from Miss Larna."

When I heard that, I quickly looked up again to see his expression was just as gentle as his voice. Relieved, I finally relaxed

my shoulders.

Though I'd had to fight a number of hostile people before, up till that most recent incident, it was always one of my allies—or Pochi—who had taken care of them. I'd never actually had to raise my hand against someone before. But at that moment, I tormented those people without mercy, even as they cried out "Spare me," and "Stop." Even when they had clearly lost the will to fight.

At that moment, if Cezar hadn't stopped me, then I bet I would have...

Following that incident, it wasn't only Dark Magic that scared me. I was scared of Katarina Claes—of myself. In fact, I started to think that anyone who heard that story might be scared of me too. I was scared that they might start to look at me with eyes filled with terror, the same way characters looked at Katarina in the game. But I didn't see any sign of that in Raphael's gray eyes.

Now that my shoulders were no longer so tense, Raphael gave them a gentle pat.

"The first time I used Dark Magic," he said softly, "was a short while after I was forced to assume the identity of Sirius Dieke. At that time, I thought of nothing but getting revenge for my mother. To that end, I thought I would be willing to do anything, and I never hesitated to use the Dark Magic powers I'd obtained. I did things so terrible that the old me never would have considered doing them. Even then, I felt nothing. At that time, I think the darkness was already beginning to engulf me."

This was the first time I'd heard Raphael speak about the time in his past when he used Dark Magic. After Raphael and his mother were abducted by Marquess Dieke's wife, his mother was killed and he had Sirius Dieke's memories implanted in his head against his will. He was very nearly transformed entirely into Sirius Dieke. In the end, Marquess Dieke's wife failed in her scheme. Though Raphael came to carry Sirius Dieke's memories, he did not become Sirius himself, as she had hoped.

But at the time, Raphael's memory of his mother's final moments were twisted by Dark Magic. Swearing to get revenge for his mother, Raphael carried on pretending to be Sirius, and had nothing to live

for besides vengeance against the marquess's wife and the rest of the Dieke family. In his second year at the Academy of Magic, Raphael finally conquered the Dark Magic inside of him, and regained his true memories. After that, he was able to live as Raphael Wolt once more.

When he started working at the Magical Ministry, Raphael told me that last part, but I had never asked him to go into any more detail about his past. I couldn't possibly have asked him. That was because, although he spoke about it with an air of indifference, his past was so tragic that I felt like my heart would break just from hearing about it. I didn't want to force him to reflect on it for one moment longer. Though I'd heard him mention some scant details about his past now and then, this was the first time he'd spoken to me directly about his experience with Dark Magic.

"Back then, I did things that I could never bring myself to do now. Or rather, it was all so unreal that it didn't even feel like I was the one doing those things. Like someone else was doing them instead."

When I heard this, I opened my eyes wide in surprise. What he was describing was exactly how I felt in the moment when I lost control of my Dark Magic. When he saw my reaction, Raphael nodded.

"When Miss Larna told me what happened to you, it brought up those memories from my past. When I was engulfed by Dark Magic, I didn't feel like myself. When I did those things, it felt like I was watching it happen through a pane of glass."

"That's exactly the same feeling I had... Like I was watching someone other than me do those things. It was like it all had nothing to do with me, so I felt nothing in my heart. Though I'd usually feel concerned if I saw people suffering like that, even if someone else was hurting them, I honestly felt nothing at all."

I said this all at once, practically without taking a single breath. It was the first time I'd expressed how I'd felt at that moment so clearly. Thanks to Raphael, I was finally able to get out the words, and describe it in such detail.

"I see. So it really was the same feeling," said Raphael, nodding

slowly before continuing. “In fact, most people who have been targeted by Dark Magic find their memory turns fuzzy, and they remain dazed for a while afterward. So perhaps the people using Dark Magic find that their minds turn hazy as well, when the magic consumes them.”

“I see...”

So Dark Magic users can end up in the same state as people attacked with Dark Magic, if the darkness swallows them up. And that’s how they end up feeling nothing, even when they hurt people.

“Maybe Dark Magic really is evil, and we shouldn’t use it anymore,” I said.

Mr. Hart had once said to me that Dark Magic might also be used to help people, causing me to revise my original opinion that it was inherently evil. But perhaps it really was.

A heavy silence filled the room for a moment.

“Katarina, you once asked me what I thought the creator of Dark Magic was thinking when they created it. I became extremely curious myself, and I’ve investigated all kinds of sources since then.”

Come to think of it, I did say something like that to Raphael, following that conversation with Mr. Hart. But Raphael never brought it up again, so I thought that was the end of it.

“Well, what did you find out?” I asked nervously.

Raphael just shook his head.

“Nothing definitive.”

“I see. I guess that makes sense. After all, Dark Magic itself used to be a secret.”

The existence of Dark Magic had always been kept secret by the royal family, until it escaped into the world as a result of the battle over the succession to the throne. Even if someone wanted to investigate it, there might be no records to consult.

I did know that, but I just thought that, if I only knew why Dark Magic was created—perhaps to help someone in particular—it would make it a bit less scary...

Seeing my slightly downcast expression, Raphael continued speaking.

“That’s right. Dark Magic was kept a secret by the royal family,

and access to any records on the subject was forbidden. But I was already using Dark Magic before its existence was widely known. And the royal family is aware of the training we're doing right now. Because of these circumstances, I was able to convince them to show me those forbidden records."

"Eh? Really?! So you've seen them!"

"Yeah. Because the royal family is aware that we're both involved in Dark Magic already, I'm sure that, if I asked, you'd be allowed to see them as well."

"Really?!"

"But they're written in the ancient script—especially ancient, in fact—so you might have a hard time reading them."

"I see..." I said, by which I really meant *Never mind, then*.

I've already had my fill of ancient script with the Dark Covenant.

"But Raphael, since you said you didn't learn anything new, even after reading those records, then I wouldn't be able to learn anything from them anyway."

I wasn't trying to make excuses, simply because I couldn't read the ancient script at all, but if the brilliant Raphael couldn't tell what the records were trying to say, then there was no point in me looking at them. *Sounds like I don't really need to investigate those forbidden records. Yep, we can leave them alone.*

"I don't mean to say that I learned *nothing* from them," replied Raphael smoothly. I quickly turned my head to face him again. With an uneasy look on his face, he explained. "Even after reading the forbidden records, I didn't determine anything for certain. They were so old, and so few, and so vague, that I can't say anything definitive. But I did form a hypothesis."

"A hypothesis?"

"Yes, a hypothesis. This is just something that occurred to me while I was looking at the records, and I'm not certain about it. It may just be my imagination running wild, but would you like to hear it?" Raphael asked gently.

I nodded firmly.

"First of all, I'm going to tell you a very old story I read in those records," said Rapahel, before launching into his tale.

Once upon a time in Sorcié...

It is said that the kingdom known as Sorcié began when a number of people who had magical powers, and could cast spells, came to settle in one place. This land, where no one had ever lived before, certainly could not be said to be fertile. But by using their magic, these settlers who came from far away made the land fertile, and proceeded to develop it.

In the course of making their lives more abundant, they continued to develop their magic, and their research flourished. They created many new forms of magic. Eventually, they came to build a kingdom on the land they'd settled. Thanks to their magical powers, the kingdom grew more and more prosperous, and that prosperity allowed them to develop their magic even further.

However, as their kingdom grew and grew, some greedy men from other lands gathered around Sorcié and came to rob the kingdom of her riches. With the use of magic, the people of Sorcié managed to keep the greedy men at bay, but the marauders' numbers did not decrease. Some of them even banded together to attack the kingdom in coordination.

With their kingdom invaded, the people of Sorcié knew they must fight to defend their way of life. They went into battle, using magic as a weapon. After fighting many battles to protect their kingdom, the invaders finally relented and left, but the battles had greatly harmed their prosperous land and the people who lived there.

In the center of that devastation, there emerged a wizard. A wizard with immense power, who gave hope to the people in that blighted land. That wizard, a true genius, invented one new spell after another, healing both the land that was ravaged by war and the people's wounds. The wizard came to be praised as the kingdom's proudest citizen.

But one day, the wizard created a kind of magic that never should have been made. That magic claimed many lives, and caused all the land to wither. Having seen how dangerous this magic was, those who survived were sworn to secrecy, and the wizard was imprisoned for the rest of his life.

Following these events, magical research became a taboo subject, and the use of magic began to decline. Eventually, many people who had no magical powers, but once used to dwell on the outskirts of the kingdom, came to live in Sorcié. The number of people with magic decreased, and the kingdom's magical potential dwindled.

"Have you heard the very beginning and the very end of that story before?" asked Raphael.

"Yes. I think I learned about the founding of the kingdom and the gradual decline of magic users, and magic itself, in history class. But I'd never heard about those battles or the story of the wizard before."

"Same here. This was my first time hearing about those battles, or the genius wizard who arose afterward. I think that the dangerous form of magic that wizard created was probably Dark Magic."

I suddenly felt myself gulp as I waited for him to continue.

"So, next I went through all the sources one by one, to see if there was anything else written about the wizard. And I found one source that contained a similar account. It was written like a fairy tale."

That man possessed strong healing magic. He used it to soothe the withered land and the wounded populace, then healed them all. But he couldn't heal the wounds the battles left in the people's hearts. This troubled that kind man, and one day he created a new kind of magic to help those people who suffered with broken hearts. And so he managed to soothe the hearts of many people. Thanks to him, they were all going to be happy again.

But then men of greed stole someone precious to him, in order to claim control of him. Having lost someone so precious to him, the man grieved, and a form of magic created for healing was stained by evil.

"I found this in a book of stories. It almost felt like it was tucked

away there in order to hide it, and written in a way that was deliberately hard to understand. At first glance, I wouldn't have thought it had anything to do with the first story I told you, but when I looked into it further, I found that they were both written around the same time, and the situations described in them were very similar. In some other records, I read that the wizard created an evil form of magic, and was himself considered evil. But this story alone was different. It doesn't even call him a wizard. This story, slipped into this book of tales almost as if to hide it, may have been left behind by someone who thought highly of the wizard, and wanted to preserve his honor."

"In other words, you're saying that the wizard who created Dark Magic did it to soothe people's minds? But Dark Magic works by feeding on people's lives. Surely no one would steal a life just to heal someone else?"

"Yes, about that. We might be wrong to think that Dark Magic must always feed on people's lives in the first place. I became able to use Dark Magic because someone else gave it to me, and you got it by obtaining a Dark Familiar. Neither of us had to take someone's life to use it."

"Now that you mention it, that's true."

"Besides, none of those forbidden records, or any of the other old records I consulted, said such a thing. A newer version of Dark Magic may have emerged as something that relies on taking people's lives, but maybe it didn't when it was first created."

"I see..."

"In other words, perhaps the original Dark Magic was created without taking people's lives, and it may have only existed to soothe people's hearts."

"That's totally different from how it works now." *Current Dark Magic requires the taking of lives, and it's used to control people. It's an evil thing.*

"Right, so it was originally meant to heal people. And though it was successful at first, they lost control of it."

"Lost control?"

"When I heard how you lost control of your Dark Magic the other

day, I was reminded of that line from the story: 'Having lost someone so precious to him, the man grieved, and a form of magic created for healing was stained by evil.' I thought that perhaps the wizard had someone precious taken from him, and lost control of his Dark Magic as well."

When Raphael said this, I recalled what happened during the incident with Maria. After seeing Maria, her mother, and Cezar hurt, something *cold* welled up from deep inside of me, and I was swallowed up by it. Once I was consumed by it, I didn't know what was happening any longer.

If the wizard was consumed by the same thing, and that resulted in the loss of many lives... I was no longer able to think of this as something unrelated to me. It frightened me, and made me terribly sad.

The wizard, who used magic to heal the wounds people sustained in battle, then created a new form of magic to soothe their hearts as well, must have been a kind man. But then someone precious was taken from him, he lost control of his powers, and ended up taking many people's lives. Then he spent the rest of his life in prison, treated like a criminal. If that really happened, how much must that have hurt him*?* I held my hands in front of my chest and squeezed them tightly into fists.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," said Raphael, noting my expression. Then he added, "I just wanted to tell you that I think it might have been feelings of anger that caused you to lose control of your Dark Magic—in other words, to be consumed by it."

"Feelings of anger? Now that you mention it, that did come up when I was discussing it with Miss Larna."

Larna and Cyrus had said they thought that anger was probably the cause.

"When I heard that, I thought back to what happened when I used Dark Magic. I can remember feeling a powerful rage about what happened to my mother, and that's when I felt my consciousness start to turn strange. Then I remembered the story I read, and I started to think that Dark Magic is magnified by anger—and perhaps sadness as well—but in any case by negative emotions.

Whether or not you're an experienced user, there's always a chance that you'll lose control."

"I might lose control even *with* experience?" *I'd sort of assumed that, if I got better at using it, like a user of any other form of magic, I wouldn't keep losing control. Was I mistaken?*

"Considering what happened with the wizard—the first person who ever used it—I think there's a high chance of that being the case."

"So I have to fear losing control for as long as I keep using Dark Magic? Then I'd rather not use it."

I never want to feel that scared again.

"I guess you wouldn't. But look at it another way. When you use Dark Magic, try not to feel angry, and if you start to feel angry, stop using it. Just try not to use Dark Magic if you feel angry. If you follow these rules, I don't think you'll lose control again."

"Don't get angry, and stop using it if I do? Is that even possible?"

In fact, I think I only used Dark Magic in that moment because *I was consumed by anger. At that point, would I really be capable of just containing my anger?*

"Of course, it's easier said than done," said Rapahel with a slightly troubled expression. "The truth is, Katarina, I once tried to control you with Dark Magic, back at the academy. But it didn't work. Back then, you didn't have a shred of anger or envy in you."

He said this so nonchalantly, but I was shocked.

"Really?! But the other day, I was *so* angry, I really thought the darkness would swallow me up. I totally do get angry."

"The thing about that is, you only got angry because you thought Maria and Prince Cezar were going to be harmed, right?"

"Yes, I suppose so." I wasn't about to forget the anger that welled up inside of me at that moment.

"You never used to get angry back at the academy, even when people were prepared to denounce you. But when the people you care about get hurt, you get angry. You don't feel anger for your own sake, but for the sake of others. That's why you only just recently felt the kind of anger that would allow the darkness to consume you."

Now that Raphael had reminded me of it, though I could remember feeling frightened and wondering what I should do when I was framed at the academy, and was about to be denounced, I didn't feel anger well up inside of me. After all, I was the only one in danger then, and I believed that the people I cared about would be okay. I didn't know what anger meant.

But after learning the horrors that Raphael endured, and when Keith was kidnapped and hurt, and when people tried to hurt Maria, I had an intense feeling of anger. Now that this feeling had awakened in me, I didn't think it would ever disappear. In fact, I still hadn't forgiven the Dark Magic gang for hurting the people I cared about.

"Yeah, I can't forgive anyone who hurts the people I care about. So I can't ever forgive that Dark Magic gang. If they try and do something to someone I care about again, I think I'll get really angry again."

I knew that, in order to avoid being swallowed up by Dark Magic, I mustn't get angry. But if I again found myself in a situation like that one, I wasn't confident that I'd be able to keep my cool.

"That's just who you are, Katarina. And I don't think it's easy for anyone to suppress their anger. But if you only ever get so angry for other people's sake, don't you think you might be able to return to your senses by thinking about them?"

"Thinking about them?"

"If you keep on allowing yourself to be consumed by the darkness, and keep losing control, then you might end up doing even more harm to the people you're trying to protect. During this last incident, if you hadn't regained your senses, then Maria, the very person you'd just saved, would have come to even greater harm."

When I heard this, I reacted with a sharp intake of breath. *Sweet Maria... If I'd just allowed the darkness to swallow me up, how much would I have hurt her?* I hadn't really thought about it before.

"Next time you get carried away in your anger again, and start to use Dark Magic, you have to remember the people you care about, right away," said Raphael.

Consider that, if you give into anger and lose control of your magic, you may hurt the very people you're trying to protect.

"Ah!" Raphael's words had reminded me of something Larna had said to me. *That's right, I went through this same debriefing with Larna. How did I forget about that?*

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just remembered that Miss Larna said something similar to me."

"I see. So Miss Larna thought the same thing." There was something slightly conflicted about Raphael's expression, but he was smiling.

In other words, I just need to think about the people I care about when I use Dark Magic, and I'll be fine? Having decided to make sure I didn't hurt anyone—no, having decided to *protect* everyone—with my magic, I was starting to feel a bit more optimistic about it. I nodded firmly, as if to convince myself.

Raphael observed me with that same gentle look in his eyes.

"Now, to return to the topic I originally meant to talk about, the hypothesis I came up with after reading the forbidden records was ultimately this: Just like you said, Dark Magic was originally created to help people. It wasn't meant to be evil, but rather a gentle form of magic meant to heal people."

Raphael paused for a moment before continuing.

"I've always felt like there was something different about the Dark Magic you use in our lessons, compared to the murky kind of magic I used to use. There's something gentle about it. Then when I read that tale in the forbidden records, I started to think that your Dark Magic isn't evil at all. It's the same gentle, healing magic that it was originally created to be."

"A gentle kind of magic..." I murmured, then frowned slightly.

"In other words, I just wanted to tell you that you're okay, Katarina. But it ended up taking a long time to say. Sorry." Raphael then patted me on the head.

Though I'd thought only minutes earlier that I never wanted to use Dark Magic again, thanks to Raphael's kind words, I felt I could keep trying to make it work, simple though I was.

After I received a few more pats on the head from Raphael, we had our usual Dark Magic lesson. By the time the lesson was over, my fears and worries, which were so great at the beginning, were much smaller.

Having reached the end of my morning at work, I parted ways with Raphael—who said he had another job after this one—and headed to the cafeteria, only to bump into Mr. Hart as I rounded a corner.

"Ah, Miss Claes. Have you finished your training for today?"

"Yes, I've just finished and I'm on my way to the cafeteria. Are you on your way to lunch as well?"

"No, I thought I'd go and submit some documents to the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department," said Mr. Hart, his voice sounding a little nervous to me.

Our department had decided that he basically *never* needed to go and submit documents himself. As for why, it was because he'd unfailingly get lost. Still, for some reason the man himself apparently thought he could find his own way, and occasionally tried to deliver files to other departments, like he was now.

But...

"Mr. Hart, the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department is in the opposite direction to where you're headed."

After I said this, Mr. Hart became visibly disheartened. He looked like a little kid who'd failed an errand and I started to feel sorry for him.

"I'll go there with you," I said.

"No, I couldn't possibly impose on one of my junior colleagues like that. I'll just go back to our department and ask someone else, maybe Guy," he said. He was about to head off in the wrong direction *again*.

"I wouldn't want you to get lost again," I said, grabbing his arm.

Mr. Hart looked shocked for a moment.

"Sorry," he said after regaining his usual expression. "Please lead the way."

I guess he really had deluded himself into thinking he could find his own way.

As I advanced down the corridor with a firm grip on Mr. Hart's arm, it occurred to me that I wanted to report what I'd just discussed with Raphael.

Since Raphael had spoken about what he'd read in forbidden records, I couldn't tell Mr. Hart exactly what he'd said. But I just had to tell him—the person who had given me a new perspective on Dark Magic by suggesting that it wasn't completely evil, and might have been created in order to protect someone or something precious to its creator—that Dark Magic really may not be entirely evil.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hart. Do you remember once talking to me about Dark Magic, and telling me that the person who created it may have just wanted to protect someone precious to them?" I asked.

Hart smiled.

"Now that you mention it, I do remember. I said that to suggest another way of thinking to you when you were having trouble finding the motivation to carry on with your Dark Magic training, but you took it so seriously that I was actually surprised."

"Eh, really?! Thanks to what you said, I really expanded my way of thinking. Thank you so much."

When I said this, Mr. Hart stiffened for some reason. Though I wondered why, since he still wasn't saying anything, I carried on with the next thing I'd wanted to say.

"So now, after doing a lot of my own investigations into Dark Magic, I'm starting to feel like it was actually created to help people."

As soon as I'd explained that far, Hart whirled around to face me.

"Did you discover something?" he asked in a serious tone of voice.

This wasn't how he usually behaved. I reflexively took a step backward. He seemed to realize that he'd startled me.

"Sorry, I was just a little curious," he said, and bowed his head apologetically. He was back to his usual self.

"Mr. Hart, are you interested in Dark Magic?" I asked, his enthusiasm just moments earlier having reminded me strongly of Larna.

"Well, let me see. I have a kind of personality that means I get

interested in all sorts of things all too easily. When I learn about something new, especially something that really catches my attention, I have a tendency to get a little too caught up in its details. I guess I got a bit overexcited about Dark Magic. I'm sorry if I startled you," he responded.

I see, so that's what his reaction just now meant.

"Oh, no. I was a little startled, but you weren't as intense as Miss Larna, so don't worry." *After all, Larna gets abnormally obsessed when she takes an interest in something. She's dragged me around more than once when I've told her there was something on my mind that I wanted to look into.*

"If I were as obsessed as Miss Larna, that *would* be a problem," agreed Mr. Hart with a somewhat strained expression, perhaps having had an experience similar to my own. "So, when you say that Dark Magic may have been created to help people, what do you mean?"

As I answered Mr. Hart's question, I thought about how to word things so he wouldn't know that Raphael had been reading forbidden records.

"Well, there was a story written in this old book that said that Dark Magic was devised to soothe people's hearts. Of course, I can't say for certain that's what actually happened."

After pondering this for a moment, Hart nodded.

"I see. So Dark Magic was created to soothe people's hearts. That seems plausible." Then he smiled and said, "I guess that means it really isn't all evil."

I nodded enthusiastically.

"That's right." *Exactly. Dark Magic isn't all evil. I'm glad I know that now.*

The next thing I knew, we had arrived at the door to the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department.

"Thank you very much, Miss Claes," said Mr. Hart.

After watching him knock on the door, then enter the office, I thought I would finally head to the cafeteria, but I suddenly realized that I could feel someone staring at me from nearby. When I turned to look in the direction of the gaze, I saw someone I'd only just met

yesterday standing there.

"Eh? Is that you, Haru?" I called out in surprise.

She looked back at me, also looking surprised.

"Katarina?"

It was in fact Haru, Cyrus's childhood friend, whom I'd met at the party the previous day.

"Um, Haru, what are you doing here at the Magical Ministry?" I asked. *Like, seriously, what on* earth *are you doing here?*

After fidgeting for a moment, Haru replied.

"Yes, well, first I would like to apologize for that sudden display in front of everyone yesterday. I was so delighted to see Cyrus again that I got carried away and ended up confessing my feelings for him. Today I have come to apologize for causing a scene, and to reaffirm my confession of love. After investigating where he works, and in what department, I found my way here. Right now, I'm waiting for him to leave his office to take his lunch break, which is when I'll grab him."

She said all this with an air of embarrassment, but some of her word choices—"reaffirm my confession of love" and "grab him"—made it abundantly clear that she was a very assertive and bold young lady.

Based only on how she looked as she stood there in front of me, I would have assumed she was the epitome of a refined woman—like the Yamato nadeshiko, as I'd remarked to myself before—but there seemed to be a lot of difference between her appearance and what was on the inside.

Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure she said that she's always running around her family's property while wearing pants. If a woman as gorgeous and assertive as this comes at him head-on, will Cyrus—with his tolerance of young women being on par with that of an elementary school boy—be able to cope?

As I observed Haru with all this on my mind, the door opened with a clatter and the man Haru had been waiting for came through it with his usual cool disposition.

Haru seized on this opportunity immediately, rushing toward Cyrus with incredible speed. Somewhat reflexively, I went after her.

“Cyrus,” called out Haru as she came to stand next to him. Cyrus opened his eyes wide and stood rooted to the spot in shock.

Haru paid this no mind, however.

“Excuse me, Cyrus,” she inquired, “but are you going to take your lunch break now?”

Cyrus—likely still not having quite apprehended the situation—nodded, clearly bewildered.

“Yeah...”

Without missing a beat, Haru stepped closer to Cyrus and said, “In that case, how would you like to have lunch with me? I made us both these packed lunches.”

Cyrus, swept up by the momentum of these events, simply nodded.

“Yeah, sure...”

Haru smiled.

“Hooray!”

This was a lovely scene—like something out of a shojo manga—and I couldn’t help but smile, but since I knew how Cyrus felt about Maria, I also felt conflicted. *Hmm... Cyrus, are you really going to give up on Maria and marry Haru instead?* I thought as I stared at Cyrus.

He apparently noticed my gaze, and looked startled at first, but then he seemed to regain the use of his faculties.

“Um, sorry. I know I said yes, but I got caught up in the moment. The thing is, I’ve actually already promised one of my subordinates that I’ll have lunch with her.”

No sooner had Cyrus finished saying this than Maria walked out of the same door.

“Mr. Cyrus, see you in the cafeteria for—” Maria started to say, but then she noticed Haru. “Did we not meet yesterday?”

“Yes, my name is Haru Kaburagi. Were you the subordinate who made plans to have lunch with Cyrus today?”

“My name is Maria Campbell. Yes, he did say we could have lunch together...”

Maria probably thought that, now that Haru had arrived, she ought to excuse herself.

"I made some packed lunches, and to be honest I got carried away and made too much. Would you like to join us, Miss Campbell?" said Haru cheerfully, inviting her along.

Maria looked to Cyrus as if to ask, *What should I do?* but Cyrus was wearing much the same expression. With Haru in love with Cyrus and Cyrus in love with Maria, this was shaping up to be a pretty awkward lunch table.

I don't know whether Haru noticed some subtle indication to that effect, but she spun around to face me, and what do you think she said?

"Katarina, would you like to join us as well? I've prepared a number of traditional dishes from Xiarmah, including rice balls."

The words "rice ball" provoked a knee-jerk reaction from me.

"Absolutely, I'd love to try some," I answered, butting in on their gathering without thinking about it.

And that was how this peculiar lineup—Maria, Cyrus, Haru, and me—ended up having lunch together.

"Let's sit here," said Maria, indicating a spot out on the spacious terrace—more like a room unto itself—that faced the garden, where a number of tables and chairs had been placed. "Employees who bring packed lunches often use this space, but it is never too crowded and is quite pleasant," she added, leading us to her recommended lunch spot.

Now, on the largest table on the terrace, were the contents of the lunch Haru had packed, having been laid out by one of her attendants. When I saw what was inside the lunch boxes, I was so delighted that I thought I might start drooling.

It was quite literally a more extravagant version of the bento boxes I used to eat during my past life in Japan. There were generous helpings of all kinds of Japanese foodstuffs, like rice balls, pickles, omelets, stewed vegetables, a salad made from mustard greens, and some grilled fish fillets. On top of that, there were some Japanese-style sweets laid out on the side, as if to say, *Enjoy these sweets after your meal*.

This was the most excited I'd been in a while. The potential love

triangle between Cyrus, Maria, and Haru vanished into the farthest reaches of my mind with a *poof*.

"What is this, a stew?"

"Yes, this is a dish eaten often in our land. Simmered chicken and root vegetables."

"Simmered chicken and root vegetables! It's delicious!"

Not only could I remember hearing about that dish in my past life, I could remember having eaten it. *How nostalgic! How yummy!*

"And what is this dish called?"

"This is a fish called salmon, grilled after being flavored with an ingredient called miso."

"Ooh, grilled miso salmon! Wait, you have miso?! Do you have miso soup too?"

"You are aware of miso? I'm delighted to hear that. I have prepared some miso soup as well. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please!"

I can't believe it—they even have miso. No matter where I looked in Sorcié, I could never find it, and now it's right here in front of me!

"Here you go."

The miso soup, poured from what looked like a thermos into a bowl, was lovely and warm.

"Now to taste it." As I sipped the first miso soup I'd tasted since my past life, a most nostalgic flavor seemed to permeate my body. I was so moved that I actually trembled. "It's really, really delicious," I said, speaking from the bottom of my heart as I gulped down the miso soup.

"As Xiarmah cuisine is quite different from what is eaten in Sorcié, I was worried that it might not be to your liking. I'm glad that you like it," said Haru, smiling delightedly.

"Yes, I like it *so* much!" I declared, leaning across the table and asking for two more bowls of miso soup, along with four rice balls.

"*Sigh...* That was delicious," I declared at the end of my meal, having followed up the soup and rice balls with some sweets filled with red bean paste for dessert. I rubbed my now very full belly.

"Seeing how much you enjoyed eating this lunch," Haru said with

a grin, “it was worth going to the trouble of making it.”

“When you invited us, you did mention having made it. Did you really make all this yourself, Haru?”

“Yes, I did. Or rather, I would like to be able to say that, but I actually only helped a bit, and my cook did most of the work.”

“That’s still amazing. I can’t cook at all, and once when I tried I even caused a pot to explode. So now our house’s kitchen is off-limits to me.”

“An explosion?! Now that is something.”

“It really surprised me.”

As I was sharing some more stories of my past failures, my lunch break unfortunately came to an end.

“Hmm, time’s up,” said Cyrus. When this comment reached my ears, I was startled.

Oh, yeah, this was supposed to be a setting for Haru to speak with Cyrus.

I’d completely forgotten about that while I was chowing down on Japanese-style food, and ended up monopolizing Haru with all of my questions and remarks.

“Um, Haru. Because of me, you missed your chance to talk to Mr. Cyrus, didn’t you? I’m sorry,” I apologized in a hushed voice.

“No, don’t be. Now that we’re reacquainted, I’ll have plenty more opportunities to talk to him, so don’t worry. I’m just happy that you enjoyed eating Xiarmah cuisine so much,” she said graciously.

Haru is such a good girl. If Cyrus weren’t already head over heels for Maria, I’d feel like rooting for her.

Then it was time to get back to work, so we said goodbye to Haru. Cyrus went back to his department, and Maria and I headed to the separate room we used while deciphering our covenants.

Maria’s deciphering of the Light Covenant—and my deciphering of the Dark Covenant—had filled our afternoons at work for some time now. While we were getting ready by taking out dictionaries and such, I inquired about something that had been nagging me since my lunch break.

“Um, Maria, what did you think of that girl Haru?”

I had to admit, this was a clumsy way of asking how she felt.

Maria stared back at me blankly. Cyrus had feelings for Maria (though Maria was still unaware of that fact) and Haru had feelings for Cyrus. I wondered what Maria thought about Haru, considering that she was a love rival, at least potentially (I still didn't know how Maria felt about Cyrus).

"I mean, well, I was talking the whole time, and it was like you didn't get a chance to talk to her at all." I couldn't just take it upon myself to reveal how Cyrus felt, which is why I ended up asking Maria in this odd, roundabout way.

"Let me see," Maria said after pondering my question for a while. "I suppose I thought that she reminded me a bit of you, Lady Katarina."

"Reminded you of me?"

No way. Anyone who saw her would say how prim and proper she looks—like the Yamato nadeshiko. I don't see how anyone could say she looks quite like me, with my villainess face.

When I tilted my head in confusion, Maria giggled.

"Not in terms of appearance. Rather, it was her fun, cheerful personality that reminded me of you."

So not her appearance, but her personality, huh? I don't really know about that, but thinking back now we did act pretty similarly at the buffet table, and our brothers got mad at us in the same way too. Looking at it that way, maybe we are similar.

I suppose the biggest difference between us was that Haru was in love with Cyrus, and pursuing him actively. That was one part of her personality I couldn't understand, since I still didn't really know what it was like for men and women to like each other romantically.

Hold on, I guess that means that Cyrus—with his level of romantic experience being about that of an elementary school boy, but at least being in love with Maria—is still ahead of me in the romance rankings. I got annoyed when he called me a child who didn't understand romance, but considering that, I guess he is my superior in love affairs. Oof... That's pretty galling, though.

No, let's forget about me. That's not what I want to ask Maria about right now. What I wanted to ask her about was how she felt about Haru confessing her love for Cyrus. *But what's the best way to*

go about it? Best to ask in a way that seems natural. I took a deep breath.

"However, I was surprised that Haru confessed her love for Mr. Cyrus at the party. Her efforts today also displayed courage and initiative," said Maria, before I could open my mouth, while I was still thinking of all the ways I might go about asking my question. To my surprise, she'd shared exactly the opinion I was trying to ask her about!

"I guess so. That confession surprised me too. It sounded like she meant to approach Cyrus again today as well. Amazing, right?"

Though, in the end I got in her way, and our lunch ended without those two having much of a chance to talk to each other.

"Oh, I see. She really is quite assertive," said Maria, seeming impressed, though I wasn't able to detect any jealousy or complicated feelings in her voice.

Hm... From the look of things, Cyrus doesn't have a chance.

"I wonder if Mr. Cyrus will let himself get pushed into an engagement with Haru."

Looking at what happened today and yesterday, I just feel like Cyrus might be overwhelmed.

Maria thought about this for a moment.

"But Mr. Cyrus seems to have quite a strong aversion to young women. It may not be as easy as that," she remarked.

I guess so. Cyrus sure does have an aversion to young women. Nowadays, he's just barely able to talk to Maria and me in private, but he still can't have a proper conversation with any other young women without going into professional mode. That hasn't changed.

Back when Cyrus thought Haru was a boy, he'd had no trouble talking to her, but now that he knew she was a woman, I doubted they'd really be able to have a proper conversation. Considering that, even if Haru continued to actively pursue him, it seemed unlikely Cyrus would give way—that is, to give in to pressure and get engaged.

But a thought had occurred to me, Detective Katarina Claes, when I first encountered Haru.

Could it be that Haru was supposed to be a rival character on

Cyrus's route in Fortune Lover II*?*

Based on the information I possessed right now, the villainess Katarina Claes was supposed to be the one standing between the protagonist and the new romanceable characters in *Fortune Lover II*, having returned from exile for the sequel. Each of those routes was supposed to see a romance develop between the protagonist and a love interest after they had defeated Katarina together. But the way things were going with Cyrus, it didn't look like taking down Katarina would be enough to produce any results.

At this rate, there's no way Cyrus could ever romance the protagonist (though, to be fair, in the game, it's supposed to be the protagonist who does the romancing).

That thought had been on my mind when Haru, that beauty from a foreign land, suddenly appeared before me. Not only was she Cyrus's childhood friend—a wonderful position to be in—but in addition to that, she was already in love with him.

There's no question, this has got to be a rival character who shows up to stop Cyrus from growing closer to the protagonist. Of that much I was certain. And that might well mean that an event from Cyrus's route was about to begin. This meant that I, the original villainess in the story, would have to take great care to avoid triggering any doom flags.

After I pondered that for a while, it was time to return to work, so Maria and I set about deciphering our respective covenants. These tomes—which were written in an ancient script that was really difficult to understand—could each only be read by the person who formed the covenant with them. They were truly troublesome artifacts.

In contrast to the brilliant Maria, who had already learned new spells from her covenant and put them into practice, I struggled to get past the warnings at the start of my covenant. Although, since the Dark Covenant was filled with peril, someone had felt obligated to include *a lot* of warnings. Until recently, while reading these *long* warnings, I'd thought, *I know it's dangerous, I get it, now hurry up and tell me some spells already.* But after my recent experience of losing control of my Dark Magic, I had a deeper understanding of

why the warnings were there.

Though Dark Magic itself was dangerous in the hands of an enemy, it was also very dangerous even for the user. That's why the covenant kept saying stuff like, "Don't use it without a good reason," and "Make sure you have a solid grip on yourself before you use it." *Maybe the person who wrote the Dark Covenant ended up in danger once too.*

However, the part filled with those long warnings finally ended, and I'd started to decipher some text about Dark Magic itself. Only, so far, it was only concerned with spells that I'd already learned in my lessons with Raphael. *I already know that*, I thought as I read it. *If I manage to read a little further, I bet there'll be some new spells I've never seen before. But will those end up being good spells to know about...?*

The wizard who originally created Dark Magic made it to soothe people's hearts. But, counter to his wishes, Dark Magic became something terrible and had to be forbidden. I felt like, if it was that first wizard who wrote this covenant, it would have good magic in it. But since the black orb who gave me the covenant had said nasty things like, "I will cover this world in darkness," it felt like that wizard probably wasn't the covenant's author, but rather some wicked person who studied this forbidden art in secret. Even the tome itself gave me a kind of ominous feeling.

While I was pondering these matters, a knock came at the door.

We were occasionally visited by Larna—who was fascinated by the covenants—so I thought it was probably her.

"Come in," I called out.

"Excuse me," said someone in a stiff voice as he entered. It was Cyrus.

Oh? We just said goodbye to him, what's he doing here?

"I'm sorry to bother you two while you're deciphering the covenants, but there's something I want you to hear," said Cyrus with a serious look on his face.

He probably wants to talk about Haru, I thought, not taking him too seriously, but what he said next shocked me.

"Actually, I've received a report that many animals have

descended upon a village on the outskirts of my family's territory, and have started to damage the crops."

"Animals damaging the crops...? Ah, is that like what happened after we started work at the Ministry, where we took our exams?" I asked, having just remembered.

"That's right," said Cyrus with a slow nod. "Though this is a matter that would usually be dealt with by anyone who happened to be free, and it wouldn't be brought to the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, this case so strongly resembles that situation you encountered that you've been specifically asked to participate."

After being hired by the Ministry, and during the exams we took to decide what department we'd be placed in, we were given a task that was supposed to be easy: go and help some farmers out in the country whose crops are being wrecked by animals. Though normally this would have been an easy case to deal with, even for rookies, it developed into an incident where we ended up fighting a dragon—which seemed to be a Dark Familiar—in a cave.

"If this situation is anything like the one you encountered then, it will be extremely dangerous, so the higher-ups have requested that you head to the scene immediately," said Cyrus, furrowing his brow. "To be honest, it pains me to send you two somewhere that might be so dangerous. But the fact is that, if a Dark Familiar really does show up, we won't be able to handle it without you. I'm sorry." Cyrus bowed his head.

It was Pochi in his gigantic form who defeated the last Dark Familiar dragon, and Light Magic is supposed to be the only magic that can fend off Dark Magic. If that really was the case, then the Ministry really had no choice but to call on Maria and me.

"Mister Cyrus, please raise your head. We understand the circumstances perfectly well," I said.

"Yes, we do," said Maria with a nod.

When Cyrus heard this, he slowly raised his head, then looked straight at us.

"Naturally, I'll be coming with you, and will do everything in my power to make sure that no harm comes to you."

That's right, he threw a rare badass line at us, as expected of a

romanceable character. If I were the protagonist, my heart might have skipped a beat. I glanced to one side at Maria. She wore a serious expression, but didn't look smitten. *Yep, looks like he still has a ways to go.*

Next, we were told that, per instructions from the higher-ups, we would depart for Cyrus's old stomping grounds the following morning. We were also told that, since we'd surely have preparations to make, we could leave work early today. With that, we were sent home.

Maria kept me company while I was waiting for my carriage to pick me up. I had hesitated to accept this offer from her, since she probably had to get ready for tomorrow too, but she said that she didn't have to do much to prepare and kept me company anyway. We sat down next to one another on a nearby bench.

"Maria, you were already put in danger just the other day. Aren't you afraid to go somewhere that might be dangerous again?" I inquired.

"Well... I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared at all, but if you are with me, Lady Katarina, that changes things," said Maria.

I'm pleased to hear that you trust me so much, but... "Hm, well, I do have Pochi, but I'm not all that strong myself. Will I really be able to protect you?" *Maybe I ought to have something more like a proper weapon, in case push comes to shove*, I thought.

But Maria dismissed this with a wave.

"No, no. I would not expect *you* to protect *me*, Lady Katarina. In fact, since you have saved me so many times before, this time *I* shall protect *you*," declared Maria.

Did she really just say that?

"Maria..."

"Lady Katarina, when I am with you, I feel really courageous. Just having you by my side makes me stronger. So, this time, please let me protect you, Lady Katarina."

Is there anyone who wouldn't feel lightheaded with such a beauty saying these things to them, her eyes sparkling? No, there isn't. I was no exception, and was starting to feel dizzy.

"Thank you, Maria. But I'll be protecting you too."

"Lady Katarina."

We held each other's hands and looked into each other's eyes. If this had been a manga, we'd have had a sparkly background behind us. But at that moment...

"Ahem... Ladies, I'm terribly sorry to rain on your parade, but Mr. Cyrus told me that I—along with Miss Laura and Deputy Chief Raphael—will be accompanying you for protection. Are you still sure that you wish to be so daring in the face of danger?" said Sora, with a look of exasperation.

"Eh? Sora, you, Laura, and Raphael are all coming with us?"

Cyrus did say that he was coming, but he hadn't said anything about the rest of our colleagues coming. I'd just assumed it would be me, Maria, and Cyrus going.

"Yeah, well, there's no way they'd send along a couple of young ladies who were in peril just the other day without protection, right? So the Magical Ministry selected Miss Laura—our best fighter and someone who's tagged along before—me, someone with a little Dark Magic of my own, and Deputy Chief Raphael—who knows about Dark Magic and has pretty strong magic himself—to come with you."

Since Dark Magic is still a secret, and we can't have too many people knowing about it, I guess they just chose people who already know about it and happen to be strong for this lineup? But in that case...

"Isn't Miss Larna going to be part of our team?"

If they're looking for people who know about Dark Magic and are strong, then it would seem like a good idea to have her on our team. In fact, when she heard about the dragon last time, Larna had even said, "I wish I'd seen it," and gotten very excited. *I would have thought that, when she heard about this, she would have volunteered.*

"Well, Miss Larna was the first person to volunteer, but apparently the higher-ups decided that, since she tends to get a bit *too* excited when she encounters magic that interests her and loses her head, she wasn't suitable for bodyguard duties; they turned her down. They said that, in light of Miss Larna's temperament, Deputy Chief Raphael would be more suitable."

When I heard Sora's reply, an image of Larna, eyes shining at the sight of Dark Magic, rose up in the back of my mind. *Yeah, when she gets like that, she isn't really a good fit for bodyguard work. The higher-ups actually know what they're talking about.*

"So, as you can see, you'll be very well protected. Please try not to do anything reckless," said Sora, delivering this entreaty with an expression befitting a big brother.

"All right," Maria and I said in unison. We had no choice but to agree.

Sora proceeded to issue us a number of other warnings, including the order that we were under no circumstances to run off on our own. To my surprise, he added that Raphael had told him to tell us all that before we left. In other words, just when I thought that Sora was acting like a big brother (though, in the first place, he really was older than me), it turned out that someone who really fit that role was behind it all. Raphael really did understand us all so well.

While we were listening to all these warnings, my carriage arrived to pick me up.

"Okay, see you tomorrow, then," I said as I left Maria and Sora behind and set off on my way home.

Once I got back to my family's manor, I told them that I'd be going away for work starting tomorrow. But, since I didn't want them to worry, I didn't mention that Dark Magic may be involved.

With Anne's help, I got ready for my trip. I'd already been on three journeys as part of my work at the Ministry so far, so I was starting to get used to packing. Because she was worried about me going so far away so recently after an incident, I explained to her that since Maria was always with me on these excursions, I felt plenty safe.

I had to have the same discussion with Keith, when he came home from work later.

"I can't believe you're going so far away so soon after getting caught up in that incident," he fretted.

Just like Anne, he was terribly worried, but I explained that I was confident that our bodyguards would keep us safe.

When he heard who made up our team of bodyguards, Keith also

seemed reassured. Even so...

"Under no circumstances are you to run off on your own," he admonished me. It was exactly the same warning Sora had given me just before I went home.

Looks like everyone has pretty much the same opinion of me.

Incidentally, mother's entirely predictable response was the same as ever.

"Don't do anything silly," she commanded.

When I went to report the news to father—who I knew loved his daughter madly—it turned out that he'd already heard all about it directly from the Ministry.

"In the first place, the Ministry sent word to me that they couldn't settle this matter without you and that, though it might be dangerous, they promised to bring you back safely. They even got the palace's endorsement before bringing it to my attention," said father.

But, though he said this in his normal tone of voice, he seemed to goggle at me, and I thought he must be a bit angry.

"Ah, um, father?"

"Honestly, what on earth is wrong with the Magical Ministry, sending my darling daughter into one dangerous situation after another, and even getting the palace involved so I can't refuse? They're a bunch of incompetents."

Hm? His voice was too low, so I didn't quite catch whatever he just said. Was he talking to himself?

"Father..."

"Ah, Katarina. Sorry about that. I just let out a little of the frustration I've been storing up."

"Ah, well you are always busy, father. You must get tired."

"That's right. You really are so sweet and honest, Katarina..." Here his voice dropped to a low mumble. "Okay. I'll send some of our own guards with you on this mission too."

Father loved his daughter as madly as ever. I didn't quite catch the last thing he said. *Was he talking to himself again? Perhaps father is more fatigued than I thought.*

"Father, you seem tired and I still have preparations to make, so

please excuse me," I said, not wanting to detain my busy father for any longer.

"Katarina, really, be careful," said father with a serious look in his eyes.

I stood up straight and replied, "Yes, father."

And so, having received similar warnings from my whole family, I finished getting ready for the journey. Then, to ensure I was really ready for the next day, I went to bed early.

★★★★★★

"Haru, why must you always run headlong into trouble without thinking?" said my brother Ryou, glaring angrily at me.

I let my shoulders slump dejectedly.

"I know. I'm sorry."

He was entirely correct, so I owned up and apologized.

"After I told you to wait, and went to all that effort to set up a proper meeting. Yesterday, you agreed. What on earth happened?"

I could say nothing to defend myself, so I kept quiet. Yesterday, I had attended a party that commemorated the founding of the Kingdom of Sorcié.

Actually, I had attended most big parties held in Sorcié for the past few years. This was because there was someone I hoped to see there. I was born and raised in a country called Xiarmah, which bordered Sorcié, where I was presently staying in rented lodgings.

I was the fourth child born to a family entrusted with a march bordering Sorcié. Ever since I was little, I had run around that land, right behind my three older brothers.

After finally having a daughter, my mother wanted to dress me up in pretty girls' clothes, but I found these too hard to move around in when chasing after my older brothers, so I always wore boys' clothes while I was playing with them. In particular, I clung to Ryou, who was the closest to me in age. We also did things like training in sword fighting together, so quite a lot of people saw us as a pair of boys.

It was back in those days that my father first took me and my

brother Ryou to visit a territory in the neighboring country of Sorcié. At that time, we were obsessed with swords and martial arts, so my father said he would take us to this territory that was known for having many people trained in those skills. And it was there that I met Cyrus.

Cyrus, who was about the same age as my brother Ryou, was just as obsessed with swords and martial arts as we were, so we immediately became friends. He ran around the fields with us, and we learned sword fighting and martial arts with him in his family's training grounds.

Cyrus became such good friends with my brothers and me that we would often go there to play with him after that, whenever my father had business across the border. Each time we saw him, Cyrus had grown steadily stronger. He was so strong that he could beat adults many times his own size.

When I saw how strong Cyrus was, I sincerely thought he was so cool. And I felt a flutter in my heart that I had never felt before. However, since up until that point I'd only ever played with my older brothers, or boys like them, I passed my days without ever understanding what that feeling meant.

One day, Cyrus turned fifteen and went to study at the Academy of Magic, which all citizens of Sorcié with magical powers were required to attend.

Studies at the academy lasted two years and all students were required to live there in dormitories, so I went to see Cyrus off when he left his home territory. After that, it occurred to me to give some attention to things besides swords and martial arts. I even decided to participate in social activities with girls, like my mother was always telling me I should.

Only, as I had kind of neglected my training in the manners expected of a lady till then—to be blunt, I'd always run away—this was effectively the start of my training. Just under a year after that, my mother and teachers announced that I had passed their tests.

Once I was finally able to attend social gatherings for young women, I came to realize that the feelings I had for Cyrus were in fact called love. *I see. So when I felt like Cyrus was the coolest*

person I'd ever known, that was love. When I realized that, for some reason I became anxious, but I also looked forward to approaching Cyrus the next time he came back.

Now that I had received my education as a young lady, I felt like I was somewhat more feminine. I considered the possibility that Cyrus hadn't really seen me as a girl back then, but now that I was a proper young lady, I could show him another side of myself, so there was at least a glimmer of hope.

That's what I thought about as I waited for Cyrus to come back home, but something happened that I wasn't expecting. To my disbelief, Cyrus didn't come back to his family's territory after graduating from the academy, but went on to work at Sorcié's Magical Ministry. I was severely shocked by this. I was struck by an impulse to give up waiting and walk right into his workplace.

However, there was a chance that he'd never even realized I was a girl all along. Not only that, but we had fallen out of touch after he went to the academy. I realized that it would be pointless to go and meet him all of a sudden. Still, when I asked my brother, who had exchanged the occasional letter with Cyrus, he told me that Cyrus wasn't always working in Sorcié's interior, but was occasionally deployed to the borderlands. I thought that perhaps Cyrus might still choose to come back, and tried waiting again... But a few more years passed with no sign of that happening.

Having run out of patience, I decided to be proactive and attended a large party in Sorcié. I thought that, if I went there, I might be able to meet Cyrus. When I did, I would ask him, "Do you remember me?" and let him look at my new, ladylike appearance! That was the idea, anyway, as I walked around, but I never got to meet him. Even when I searched every corner of a venue, I never even spotted him.

Despite that, I was still approached by a lot of other men, which irritated me. But I knew that if I couldn't meet Cyrus, I wouldn't get anywhere, so I spent a few years searching for him at parties.

And finally, at yesterday's party, we were reunited at last. Since my longing to meet him had built up over the years, when I finally saw him I exploded with joy, suddenly confessed my love for him,

and told him I wanted him to make me his bride. This left my brother dumbfounded, before he escorted me right back to our lodgings.

After coming back, I'd cooled down a little and was able to reflect that I had in fact gone overboard. When Ryou had promised that he'd contact Cyrus to set up a meeting, but warned me to behave myself until then, I'd nodded obediently.

Yes, yesterday I did indeed agree to wait, but when I awoke this morning the joy of being reunited with Cyrus came pouring out of me again. When I remembered how happy I was to hear Cyrus say my name, and he finally recognized me, my body moved all by itself. The next thing I knew, I'd made packed lunches and had forced my way into Cyrus's workplace. My brother's words from yesterday had sailed far from my mind.

Though I knew that I had my head in the clouds, and had done something unacceptable, thanks to that lady named Katarina—who I'd met at the party—at the end of the day, I still had a fun time. I hardly got to speak to Cyrus at all, but it was fun telling Katarina all about the food of Xiarmah, and I was so happy to see Cyrus and his colleagues enjoy the food as well.

I got home in high spirits, only to discover that my brother knew all about my excursion. Apparently a servant had reported me. And so my brother hit the roof and started lecturing me. Though I knew what he was saying was completely right and I made an admirable attempt to listen, halfway through his lecture I remembered how cool Cyrus was that day and started smiling in spite of myself, which made my brother even angrier.

I may need to exercise some restraint, I thought to myself, but the feeling that I couldn't wait to see Cyrus again wouldn't go away.

Chapter 3: Departing for Cyrus's Homeland

Today, we were going to set off on our journey to Cyrus's family's territory on the border. The weather was fine, making it a perfect day for travel. Though this journey was normally supposed to take four days—even with a carriage driven at full speed—we were told that, because we were in such a hurry, the Magical Ministry had lent us some very special horses. When I arrived at the agreed-upon meeting place and first saw these horses, I did get the impression that they were a little more muscular than normal.

"Aren't these horses kind of brawny?" I asked Raphael.

"They're a very valuable breed found only in a small part of the continent. They're reputed to be three times stronger than normal horses, they can run three times faster, and they have plenty of stamina. I've heard that, in this kingdom, only the royal family and the Magical Ministry own them, and they are used in times of great haste," explained Raphael. He added that these horses would get us to Cyrus's homeland in less than half the usual time.

"Wow."

"They were also lent to us in consideration of the worst-case scenario—so we can swiftly flee the enemy if they show up," added Raphael.

The bigwigs at the Ministry thought of everything, huh?

"But, if these horses are so strong, why do we need two carriages?"

"Ah, well apparently, even these horses will get seriously fatigued if they have to pull a carriage carrying six adults for an extended period of time. Taking two carriages means we will need more horses, but if we just took one big carriage that would reduce our speed anyway, which would defeat the purpose of using them. So

they lent us a lot of them," said Raphael with something of a wry smile.

"Aren't the bigwigs generous?" I said.

"Since this journey has come right on the heels of the incident with Miss Maria, there were apparently a number of complaints, so they had to be more thoughtful."

"Makes sense. My whole family was so worried about me."

"Yes, indeed." Raphael nodded earnestly, then gestured to the carriages. "The carriages, too, are not regular carriages, but were specially made by our own Magical Tool Laboratory, using magical tools."

"Oh, really?! They look like regular carriages to me."

"The base of each carriage is fitted with a tool enchanted with Wind Magic, making them considerably lighter than regular carriages."

"That's amazing."

Raphael then told me that, with the strongest horses around and these wonderful carriages, a trip that would have usually taken four days would be finished in about a day and a half.

Wow, Magical Ministry, you guys really are amazing.

It was decided that each carriage would seat three people, and I climbed into one of them. Cyrus and Sora joined me.

"Hey, wait, why are we grouped together? I mean, I don't mind, but Mr. Cyrus, do you think it makes sense to ride in a different carriage after going on about protecting Maria? Generally speaking?" The moment we were all in the carriage, the feelings I'd been bottling up came pouring out all at once.

Cyrus looked sad and Sora burst out laughing.

Well, Cyrus, I mean, you really are something. When we all gathered here, you stood right in front of Maria, and what did you blurt out?

"I swear that I'll protect you."

That was a line worthy of a romanceable character, you know? He had wowed me, but Maria, her denseness in full swing, showed no signs of swooning.

"Thank you very much," she'd said without missing a beat.

When I'd looked at Cyrus in that moment, I'd been utterly convinced that he was about to get into the same carriage as Maria, even sit next to her, and protect her from whatever dangers might come their way. In spite of this, when the time came to decide which carriage to ride in, and which of the two people needing protection (in this case, me and Maria) to ride with—

"In that case, I'll take the same carriage as Miss Katarina," Cyrus had immediately said.

Everyone had been stunned. I'm sure they all chided him emphatically inside their heads, thinking things to the effect of, *After making a declaration like that, you aren't going to ride in the same carriage as Maria?!*

But everyone seemed to be quick on the uptake. Laura, the strongest person in the Magical Ministry, had spoken up first.

"Well then, I'll ride with Maria," Laura had said, all while giving Cyrus an inscrutable look. Cyrus averted his eyes.

It had then been decided that Raphael—whose magic was second strongest, after Laura's—should also accompany Maria—who had fewer means of self-defense than I did—to bolster her protection, and so he had climbed into the same carriage. Since I had Pochi, I could look after myself.

That had left Sora to come along with me and Cyrus. I had somehow ended up in a carriage with two romanceable characters introduced in *Fortune Lover II*.

Following this development, I couldn't help but give Cyrus a piece of my mind as soon as we were inside the carriage. Cyrus replied with a sad expression, speaking in a soft voice.

"I'm just not ready to share a carriage with her yet..."

You've worked with her for half a year and you're still not ready to share a carriage with her? Then when will *you be ready?!*

That's what I wanted to say to him, but Cyrus already looked so sad that I couldn't bring myself to do so. Sora, for his part, managed not to laugh again. He restrained himself so that his lips merely twitched. That was how our journey began.

At the start, because of Cyrus, the atmosphere inside the carriage

was melancholic, but once the horses started galloping, we were so impressed with their speed that we all cried out in excitement. Not only were we actually going way faster than I expected, but the carriage shook less than usual, so it was very comfortable. This was peculiar, considering we were going faster than usual. Perhaps this was thanks to the Wind Magic. With these precious horses pulling our carriage, we made rapid progress. The scenery outside rolled by so much faster than usual, we had fun just looking out the window.

"To think there are horses that can gallop this fast. I guess there are still a lot of things in the world I don't know about," I remarked earnestly as I watched the scenery roll by the window.

"Indeed. It would seem that this is a much wider world than we thought," agreed Sora. Because Cyrus was with us, he was being polite, rather than speaking to me as he usually did. But from the way his eyes sparkled, I could tell that he meant what he said.

"You're right," Cyrus said as he watched us. "Back when I first moved from the country to the royal capital, I often thought the same thing."



Cyrus's family lived right on Sorcié's border, where the head of the family ruled the territory as its margrave. Although, according to Cyrus, despite bearing that impressive title, their territory was still pretty rustic, with more livestock than people.

With nothing there to keep them entertained, all the young people ended up moving to the city, so there were only elderly people there, and almost no young women. This was supposedly why Cyrus had such a hard time dealing with young women. These were all details I'd heard from Cyrus while working with him on the vegetable patch he'd established on Ministry grounds.

By the way, Cyrus had also told me that, since I reminded him so much of the older ladies he used to do farmwork with back home, he didn't feel so anxious around me. As a young woman of marriageable age, I wasn't quite sure whether to celebrate this or lament it.

Notwithstanding the way Cyrus had described his family's territory, I was secretly excited to be going there. I knew that, if anyone found out how I felt about the trip, they were liable to tell me, "This is a dangerous mission that may involve Dark Magic. It's nothing to be getting excited about." Certainly my overly anxious adopted brother would. But I still couldn't help being excited. This was because of the food I expected to find there.

Thanks to the influence of Xiarmah—a Japanesque country that was just over the border from Cyrus's family's territory—their diet mostly consisted of Japanese-style food. Ever since getting to know Cyrus and learning of that fact, I'd been thinking about how much I'd like to go and try it.

It was only yesterday that I finally had the chance to try that very cuisine, thanks to Cyrus's childhood friend Haru, who was from Xiarmah. It was the first time I was able to enjoy Japanese food since my previous life, and I'd been moved beyond words.

However, we humans are greedy. Now that I'd had a taste of those nostalgic flavors, my desire to taste them again was eating away at me. With all of that on my mind, when I heard I'd be going to Cyrus's family's territory, I got a little overexcited at the thought of getting to eat Japanese-style food again, though I tried not to

make it too obvious to everyone around me.

"So, where roughly does the region where people eat rice and stuff begin?" I inquired of Cyrus as I peered out the carriage window.

"Miss Katarina, I know you're looking forward to eating Xiarmah cuisine, but we're embarking on a mission that might be dangerous. You need to brace yourself for that. I'll make sure you get to eat once we're in the right setting for it," replied Cyrus, giving me an exasperated look.

"Eh? How did you know I was looking forward to eating Xiarmah cuisine?!"

I thought I was doing my best to hide it. Just now, I made sure to phrase my question so it sounded like I was only asking roughly where the region where people eat rice starts!

Next it was Sora, not Cyrus, who chimed in with an air of disbelief.

"Well, you *were* just muttering the names of different Xiarmah dishes to yourself, weren't you? Oh, wait, don't tell me you weren't aware of it?"

No, I wasn't aware of it. Looks like I just blurted that out while I was thinking about Xiarmah cuisine. Now my attempt to pretend I wasn't interested in it feels even more embarrassing.

As my cheeks started to burn of their own accord, Sora looked at me and once again laughed with great amusement, while Cyrus chuckled quietly to himself.

In that way the time passed peacefully enough—I guess?—and our carriage arrived at our first rest stop.

No matter how much more stamina they have than regular horses, it's not like these special horses can keep going without any rest.

Our carriage ended up stopping on the outskirts of a small town, but it was there that we became aware of something that beggared belief.

"What are *you* doing here?!"

When the normally calm Cyrus screamed this at Haru, she

trembled and looked as if she were trying not to cry.

The rest of us looked on from a short distance away.

Now, let me rewind a bit. When we arrived at the town and were about to disembark from the carriage to get something to eat, our driver informed us that a stowaway had been riding on the back of the carriage. When he brought that person in front of us, it turned out to be Haru.

Cyrus had then delivered those words of disbelief, but Haru just continued to frown and said nothing.

Seeing how troubled Haru was, Maria offered a thoughtful suggestion.

"Excuse me, but might there not be a very good reason for this?"

Haru frowned even more deeply at this.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't have a good reason at all. I just wanted to see Cyrus one more time. I sneaked away to visit the Magical Ministry, but when I arrived, I saw him stepping into the carriage. I so wanted to see him again that I just jumped aboard the carriage myself, which took off so fast that I couldn't get off again. It was warm, and the carriage swayed pleasantly, so I got sleepy and ended up dozing off. And the next thing I knew, we were here."

When Haru said this, everyone, including me, goggled at her. *Is wanting to see someone any reason to jump on the back of a carriage?! And to get stuck and end up falling asleep too? Talk about audacity. And she looked so sensitive, just like the Yamato nadeshiko.*

"I am only glad to hear that you were not in some sort of trouble."

The lovely Maria was the first to come to her senses, but despite this gracious sentiment, Haru still hung her head remorsefully.

Her actions were so at odds with her appearance—I mean, jumping on a carriage and falling asleep, all while looking like the stereotypical Japanese beauty—that I couldn't hold in my amusement any longer and burst out laughing. *Sorry, Haru.*

"Now that we've brought her this far, we can hardly turn back. As luck would have it, she happens to be the daughter of a family living in the territory right next to ours. She can accompany us until we

reach my family's territory, then go straight home to her family. I'll write a letter to her brother to that effect," said Cyrus, bringing the entire discussion to an end.

And so Haru ended up accompanying us on our journey to Cyrus's family's territory.

Despite the manner in which she came to join us, she was so naturally personable that she immediately hit it off with everyone.

Well, we're basically all friendly people here. Still, I was surprised by how quickly she adapted to Laura's striking appearance.

We took a break and had a simple lunch in the little town where we had stopped.

"My name is Haru Kaburagi. I am the daughter of a margrave of Xiarmah. I hope we can all get along," said Haru, introducing herself once we were seated.

By the way, after her explanation of why she had climbed aboard the carriage, now everyone present knew how Haru felt about Cyrus —not just Maria, Cyrus, and me, who had witnessed her previous confession.

After we'd finished our light lunch (which was still Western-style Sorcié cuisine) and the horses were done resting, we climbed back into our carriage and set off once more for our destination.

Haru got into our carriage. After all, she had already been riding on the back of the carriage, and she was Cyrus's childhood friend. Although Sora and I didn't mind at all, Cyrus himself looked a little nervous. Though Haru was his childhood friend, back then Cyrus thought she was a boy, and she was such a beautiful woman now. Sharing such a cramped space with a woman like that, it seemed he couldn't help but feel nervous. Even so, he wasn't trembling the way he did in front of Maria.

So, partly to help out Cyrus, who was a bit too anxious, I struck up a cheerful conversation with Haru. Food was the main subject.

"Um, Haru. May I ask you some questions about the food in Xiarmah?"

"Of course you may. Um, I'd like to ask you about the food of Sorcié as well, if that's all right."

"Yes, of course. Please, let me tell you about my favorite dishes

and restaurants."

"Katarina, I just know I can count on you."

We continued in that fashion, enthusiastically telling each other what dishes and restaurants we recommended. By the way, though Sora put in a word now and then during our culinary conference, Cyrus remained silent throughout.

While we were enjoying our journey, the next thing we knew the sun had set, and our carriage arrived outside our lodgings for the night.

Tonight we were starting at an inn that looked to be the most expensive location in a fairly small town. Perhaps it just wasn't the right season for travel, but the inn wasn't very crowded. Therefore we were able to get enough rooms to keep three women, three men, and one Laura happy.

Laura took a single room.

"If I have to share a room, people might see me without my makeup on," she offered by way of explanation.

"Didn't we all share a room when we took our exams?" I pointed out.

"I would have preferred to have a room to myself that time too, but I couldn't get one. So I had to resort to all sorts of measures, like putting up partitions and wearing an eye mask. It was a lot of work."

If she's willing to go to those lengths to prevent anyone seeing her without makeup, then Laura truly is a maiden. Thoroughly so.

Since we'd arrived so late, after wolfing down a light meal (still Western-style Sorcié cuisine) we all went to our respective rooms to sleep.

Maria, Haru, and I stepped into the room that had been prepared for us.

"Um, please let me know if you need anything. I shall lend you whatever I am able to," said Maria to Haru.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized that Haru had come this far with practically nothing more than the clothes on her back. *I suppose that's only to be expected, since she jumped on our carriage without a second thought. Of course she wasn't ready for*

such a journey. That's why Maria asked if she needed anything. Maria really is sharp, and so thoughtful.

"I brought lots of extra outfits too, and other things as well. Would you like to borrow any of them?" I offered.

In my case, Anne had been sure to send a lot of extra changes of clothes with me, on the grounds that "I just thought you might get food or mud on them."

But Haru just smiled.

"Thank you for your consideration. But ever since I was little, I've been running around fields with my older brothers. I've even fallen asleep on top of a thatched roof cottage before. So you needn't worry too much about my comfort."

Even I've never fallen asleep on top of a cottage before (though it sounds like a lot of fun). Haru really is an incredible woman.

"How many brothers do you have?" asked Maria.

"Oh, just three," answered Haru.

"*Three* of them?" I cried out in surprise. *I had two older brothers in my past life, and they were both so noisy and rough that they were hard to live with.*

"That's right. With three brothers under one roof, they were always making noise and getting into fights," said Haru with a wry smile.

This sounded so much like my family in my past life that it made me nostalgic.

"Which of your brothers was with you at the party?"

"He was the youngest of my three older brothers. Since his age is closest to mine, we went everywhere together when we were little. Even now, he's the brother I feel closest to."

So he's the brother whose age is closest to hers, and they used to go everywhere together when they were little. This is sounding more and more like my situation in my past life. The face of my brother from my past life appeared in my mind's eye. *If I hadn't lost my life in that accident, I'm sure we would be grown up now, like Haru and her brother, and still the best of friends.* When I thought about that, it made me feel a little melancholic.

With the passage of time, the pangs of sadness I felt whenever I

recalled memories from my past life had started to become more faint. I had thought that, at this point, I hardly felt them anymore, but from time to time, like now, I still felt that heartache. *I wonder if a day will ever come when this pain vanishes completely.*

"Lady Katarina, is something the matter?" While I had been spacing out, Maria had been looking at me with an expression of concern.

I smiled and shook my head.

"I'm fine, I was just spacing out a little. But don't worry about that. Haru, when did you realize that you were in love with Mr. Cyrus?" To snap myself out of my sadness, and because I was extremely curious, I changed the subject to romance.

"Eh?!" cried Haru, freezing up at this sudden demand to discuss her feelings.

Huh? After seeing how you confessed your feelings in front of everyone, I thought you wouldn't mind talking about it. Is this really such a taboo subject?!

"U-Umm, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," I said hurriedly.

"No no, it's not that," said Haru, also hurriedly. As she fidgeted, she added, "You see, up till now I've never talked about this with anyone outside my family, so, well, I was just a little flustered."

Eh? You talked about romance with *your family?! I would have thought that would be harder than talking to your friends about it*, I thought, but apparently my feelings were written on my face.

"Our home was in the country, so there weren't many young people around and I never had any friends my age," Haru confessed sheepishly.

I see. I'd heard that Cyrus lived in the country, but I guess the neighboring region where Haru lives is rural as well. I guess the few kids who do live there would have to socialize with each other.

"Well, um, if you really don't mind, I'd love to hear your story," I said. Why? Well, despite having friends, I had never had a proper chat about romance.

My friends were all incredibly beautiful women, but none of them even had a boy they liked, and they seemed to have no interest in

romance. This was despite the fact that, in my past life, every girl started talking about romance as soon as she went to high school (though my best friend and I had our hands full pursuing two-dimensional men, so that didn't apply to us). So, since this was going to be my first proper girl talk ever (in my past life or this life) I was just a bit excited.

Haru continued to fidget, then started to speak.

"It all started one day when I was little. I met Cyrus when I visited Sorcié with my brother Ryou. We were both obsessed with our training in swordplay and martial arts back then, and we became friends with him thanks to that common interest."

"You became friends because of swordplay and martial arts?"

Sounds more like two friends meeting in a shonen manga. Not quite what I was expecting.

"Yes. We helped each other hone our skills. Cyrus was stronger every time I saw him until, one day, he was strong enough to beat a much larger adult man. I thought he was so cool."

Yeah, yeah, this is starting to sound a little more romantic.

"I thought how much I wanted to be as strong as Cyrus."

"I see... Um..." *That still sounds like a plotline in a shonen manga. When are we going to get to the girl talk?* I was starting to worry.

"The next thing I knew, my heart would thump in my chest whenever I saw him."

"Ooh!" *This is* finally *getting romantic! Yep, yep. That's what people mean when they talk about the heart skipping a beat.*

"So I thought I must have come down with some sort of illness."

"Hwuuh?!" Haru had just said something so peculiar that I involuntarily made a slightly weird noise.

"Um, when you felt your heart pounding, wasn't that because of your feelings for Mr. Cyrus?" I inquired, giving Haru a look of skepticism.

She looked sheepish again.

"Now I understand that was what was going on, but at the time I didn't. When I felt that sudden tightness in my chest, I thought I must have some kind of illness in that part of my body."

Haru, you're beautiful, but you're hopeless. Mistaking the pounding of your heart for an illness in your chest, you're just like a dense heroine in a shojo manga.

Gasp! Come to think of it, there's another dense heroine in this very room. When I looked over at the heroine in question, I saw she was nodding as she listened to Haru.

Oh? I guess that means she really is just like Haru. Good grief. It looks like everyone in this room but me is a dense heroine. Uh-oh, if I don't get my head in the game, these two won't get anywhere with their girl talk. They're too dense.

"So, when did you realize how you actually felt?" I asked once I'd pulled myself together.

"It's embarrassing to admit this, but I only finally realized how I felt when Cyrus went away to attend the Academy of Magic, and I had a tea party with some women in my neighborhood," said Haru, her cheeks turning slightly red.

"Then it took quite a while... Wait, so Mr. Cyrus wasn't even around when you realized?"

"That's right. He wasn't around, but I'd heard that he would graduate from the academy after two years, and I meant to wait for him. But then I heard that he went straight to the Magical Ministry to work there, and wouldn't be coming home, so I would no longer have any chance to see him."

Now that she mentioned it, I had heard that Cyrus hardly ever went home to his family, since they lived too far from the capital.

If it takes four days each way by carriage, that's an eight-day round trip.

Considering how hard Cyrus worked, I couldn't imagine him taking that much time away from his work in the first place. And even if he did visit his family, I could imagine that he would only be there very briefly.

If Haru had lived in the same territory as Cyrus, he might have paid her a visit while staying with his family, but since she lived in a neighboring territory, it was that much less likely that he'd be able to find the time.

"So, after being unable to see him for several years, I finally

decided to take action, and started attending large gatherings in Sorcié."

"Eh? You're his childhood friend. Didn't you think about going to see him directly?"

"No, I felt it would be strange for someone who hadn't seen him in so many years to go and see him directly, all of a sudden."

"I see..." *The heart of a maiden sure is complicated.*

"I dreamed of the day when I would coincidentally be reunited with Cyrus at a party. For a few years now, I've carried on attending parties like that, but I never managed to meet him."

Oh yeah. Since Cyrus didn't want to be approached by young women, he's always avoided parties, claiming that he was too busy with work.

"Recently, I'd started to think about giving up, but at the party the other day I finally got to see him... I lost control of my emotions and ended up confessing my feelings in that way..." said Haru mournfully, averting her eyes as her face turned red.

Ah, so she's aware that she lost control. Well, that confession was something else. Still, I feel like this girl chat ended up being short on heart-pounding anecdotes. Is this how these chats normally go?

There was just one thing I could say for certain.

"It's amazing how passionate you are, Haru. I think it's wonderful how you took the initiative like that," I said, praising her.

"Oh no, really?" she replied, scratching the back of her head bashfully.

Upon finally getting to meet her beloved, after attending so many parties in the hopes of a chance reunion, she had instantly confessed her love for him and took a packed lunch to his workplace the very next day. And the day after that, she jumped on the back of his carriage when she saw him about to depart. There couldn't be too many women who would go so far for their beloved. I had to applaud her passion, as well as her spirit.

Despite often being accused of taking action without a second thought myself, I wasn't sure whether I could ever match Haru's admirable initiative.

After blushing a bit, Haru soon straightened herself again.

"So," she asked us point-blank, "would you two happen to know the type of woman Cyrus likes? At the party, I was able to learn that he doesn't have a fiancée. Nor does he have feelings for anyone. But at that tea party I told you about, I learned that all men have a type, so I just wanted to check if you know Cyrus's type."

I struggled to find the right answer to this question.

Cyrus's type... That would be someone gentle, adorable, and kind, as well as being smart and good at her job, as well as being good at baking sweets. In other words, Maria Campbell, and no one else... But I can't say that. In fact, maybe Cyrus should have just admitted that he had feelings for someone at the party, even if he wasn't prepared to give her name.

Since he had said he had no fiancée, and denied that he had feelings for anyone, Haru certainly wasn't at fault. I thought it was only natural for a maiden who had loved someone for many years to pursue her beloved, provided he wasn't interested in someone else.

Aaargh, what am I supposed to do in this situation? If only I had more experience in romance myself. If only Laura, who's girlier than any of us, were staying in this room. One "if only" after another raced through my mind as I tried to put together a response.

But then Maria, a dense heroine herself, spoke up.

"I have never heard anything about the type of woman Mr. Cyrus prefers. My senior colleagues in my department of the Ministry have speculated on that question, but have also said that Mr. Cyrus was never willing to discuss it with them."

Ah, well, Cyrus does take great pains around the office not to let anyone know. He's conscientious about treating Maria the same as all his other subordinates, which is why his coworkers in his department were left with the impression that he's not interested in anyone. Take him out of the office for a minute and he'll be wearing his heart on his sleeve, but it looks like his coworkers haven't caught on just yet.

"Is that so? Many years ago, my brother told me that Cyrus would never discuss those matters with him either. I guess that hasn't changed." Haru frowned and groaned as she pondered this.

From what I had seen at the party, Haru's brother, Ryou, seemed

to know that Cyrus had trouble dealing with women. But, perhaps because he didn't think it was appropriate to spill this secret to his younger sister, Haru seemed to know nothing about it.

Maria knew that Cyrus had an aversion to young women, and that he had so far avoided discussing his type, so she might have avoided the subject herself.

"In that case, shall we ask him directly?" said Haru, her face lighting up as she looked right at us again.

She's not kidding. She's thinking of walking right up to Cyrus tomorrow morning and asking him point-blank. I might not be very sharp, but even I can tell. In the worst-case scenario, Cyrus would end up admitting what kind of woman he liked right in front of Maria, the woman he loved. There was a high chance of him ending up in an awkward situation. *I'd sure feel sorry for him if that happened.*

"Um, Haru, I think that might be just a little too... It would be hard for Mr. Cyrus to describe someone different from you, now that you've confessed your feelings for him, so he might not be entirely honest," I said in order to stop her, just barely managing to come up with a plausible reason.

She gasped and looked crestfallen.

"You're absolutely right. I was on the verge of acting without thinking again."

The sight of a stereotypical Japanese beauty sadly hanging her head made me feel so sorry for her. But, since I knew too much, I could hardly give her my wholehearted support in her quest for love.

"Um, though it might be impossible to get an honest answer by asking directly, I shall see if I can find an opportunity to get him to talk about the type of woman he likes. You are a lovely woman, Haru, and Mr. Cyrus is a fine man, so I will do what I can to help, so that things go well between the two of you." While I was still fretting, Maria, that dense heroine, came out with that offer. She must have felt sorry for Haru too, when she saw her hanging her head in sorrow. It was a kind offer, just what I would have expected from her.

But Maria, you're the one Cyrus loves. He loves you, and wants to

make his feelings known somehow, but seeing as he has less romantic experience than most elementary school boys, he's struggling. So for you to try and help Haru is just a little...

"Really? Thank you so much!"

Aah, Haru has such a nice smile.

"Yes, I shall do whatever I can to help," said Maria, with a lovely smile of her own.

And with that, Maria ended up agreeing to help Haru pursue her love for Cyrus, and there was nothing I could do about it now. *Cyrus, I'm so sorry. This is all because I wanted to have a girl chat about romance.* I apologized profusely to Cyrus inside my head.

"I wonder what I can do to get him to talk about his type," mused Maria.

"Um, it sounds like we have an early start tomorrow, so how about we get some sleep?" I interjected hurriedly to cut off that line of conversation.

At first, I worried that this interruption might come off as slightly unnatural, since I was the one who had brought up romance as a subject, but both Haru and Maria simply nodded.

"I suppose you are right. We will have an early start tomorrow," agreed Maria.

"We had better get some rest," said Haru.

Both of them were soon tucked snugly into their beds. *What good girls they are.*

They may be love rivals(?) or perhaps in a love triangle(?) but I still want them both to be happy, I found myself thinking.

"Good night," I said, and went to sleep, still wrestling with complicated feelings.

★★★★★★

"Hey, Sarah, good day to you," said the man with gray eyes.

I didn't respond, just averted my gaze and continued getting ready.

"Oh my, a little cold, aren't we? And after I rescued you from that jam," said the man with a grin.

Again, I didn't react, and carried on getting ready. *I don't like this flippant man.*

When I first met him, I did find something pleasantly familiar about his appearance, but after having spent a little more time with him, I'd realized he was flippant and irresponsible. And I came to despise him for the hint of darkness I saw in his eyes. Just like with that man who'd seen me as nothing more than a lab animal, I wanted nothing to do with this man.

"Oh, getting ready to go out somewhere, are we? Have you been asked to go on another mission?"

Despite my refusal to interact with him, the man stepped closer to me and looked down to see what I was working on.

With him suddenly standing so close to me, I trembled for a moment, but tried to feign disinterest and carry on getting ready.

"I thought this last time as well, but it's funny to see you getting sent on a mission again, Sarah, considering how many times you've failed."

When I heard this, I couldn't stop myself from looking up and glaring at the man.

"Touched a nerve, did I? Angry, are you? Well, you are still so young." The man laughed in amusement.

Argh. I cursed myself for giving him the reaction he'd wanted.

It was true that I had failed to do a good job of late, and experienced more mishaps than usual. I had noticed that myself. I felt like, ever since I'd first crossed paths with that woman—*Katarina Claes*—I'd become confused, and had started to make more mistakes.

If things keep going like this, I might not be sent on any more missions, and I might even be driven out of this place... The thought made me shudder. *This time, I can't afford to fail.*

I shook my head to drive those thoughts from my mind, and resumed my preparations. My next destination lay inside the forest. I was going to need many things for this mission.

That woman took my first creation from me, and then she broke the next one. One won't be enough. She might take it, or break it again. So this time, I'll make lots *of them. I'll gather a lot of*

materials, and turn them into many powerful creations.

When I looked up all of a sudden, I saw that the man had apparently grown tired of taunting me, and was looking off into the distance with a cold stare.

★★★★★★

The morning after Haru joined us and we all stayed at the inn, we set off again right on schedule, just after sunrise. Still drowsy, I looked up at the carriage with sleepy eyes to find everyone else was already there and ready to go. In particular, Laura already had her makeup done perfectly. She was so impeccably put together that, as a woman, I wanted to learn from her.

After all the same members of our group from yesterday had boarded the carriage again, we set off. Haru was now completely unreserved with us, maybe owing to our girl talk the previous night.

And, just like yesterday, we got excited when it came to the topic of food. The cuisine of Xiarmah that Haru described to me really was exactly like the food of Japan in my past life. Talking about various dishes brought back so many memories, and I really wanted to eat them. *Aaah, can we hurry up and get to the region where people eat Japanese food already?*

Haru also seemed deeply curious about Sorcié's cuisine.

"I simply must try that too," she said of one dish after another, her eyes sparkling.

Before long, around noon, we arrived at the territory belonging to Cyrus's family, still right on schedule.

"This is the land managed by my family—the territory of Victoire," said Cyrus as he gazed outside the window. I turned to look out the window as well.

Out the window I saw grassy plains that seemed to go on forever. *Yep, just like the terrain we've been traveling through this whole time.*

Hmm? So where does Cyrus's family's territory start? Honestly, it's been the same scenery—of a tranquil countryside—for the past few hours. The only time it changed was when we were looking at

grassy plains instead of farms. And here, all I see is nature, all around us. When Cyrus said his family's territory was pretty rural, I guess he wasn't just being modest. It's so *rural, the region we visited for our Ministry entrance exam was like the middle of the city by comparison.*

In my past life, my grandmother had a saying: "City folks think that if a place has only one bus come by per hour, it's in the countryside, but the *real* countryside doesn't have buses at all. If you want to ride the bus, you need to drive your car to the bus stop first." In other words, in the real countryside, there's nothing whatsoever.

I'm glad that we seem to have made it to Cyrus's homeland, but...

"Where do we go now?" I asked.

The country roads weren't well paved, but thanks to our precious horses and high-tech carriage, we were still proceeding smoothly. Still, no matter where we went, there was nothing around, so I was starting to feel uneasy.

"We're heading to the largest town in this territory. That's where the local branch of the Magical Ministry is," explained Cyrus.

Wow, so there's a big town around here? I'd thought we were way out in the middle of nowhere, but after hearing there was a town I felt slightly relieved.

After our carriage made some more progress, the grassy plains gave way to fields. Here and there, I even saw people out in the fields. On nearly every farm, I saw elderly people with scarves around their heads out in the fields, staring back at our carriage.

"Is it just me, or are they looking really intently at us?" As I gazed out the window, my eyes met those of every grandpa and grandma we passed. It was a little awkward.

"Well, they've never seen this carriage before, so they're probably curious. They're familiar with most of the carriages that pass through here," explained Cyrus. This made sense to me. In the countryside I knew in my past life, everyone pretty much knew everyone else, so anyone unfamiliar became the center of attention.

After we traveled a little further—and I continued to exchange

looks with grandpas and grandmas now and then—we finally started to see what looked like buildings.

"So that's the biggest town in these parts?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right," said Cyrus, smiling slightly and half closing his eyes. He must have been happy to visit his hometown for the first time in a while.

I looked out the window at the street. *Hmm, so this is the region's largest settlement, huh? This might sound rude, but for someone brought up in the city, this is way smaller than what I was imagining.*

Also, even after we entered the town proper, everyone we saw walking around was elderly, with barely a glimpse of anyone younger. *So, even in this world, young people are leaving the countryside.*

While I was mulling these matters over, our carriage stopped, apparently having reached our destination. Maria's group—who had been traveling ahead of us and arrived a little sooner—had already disembarked and started filing into the local Ministry branch. We all stepped out of our own carriage. The building in front of us looked quite a bit bigger than the branch where we'd gone to get rid of raccoon dogs.

"It's bigger than the last branch we visited, isn't it?" I said to Sora.

Cyrus must have heard me, since he responded.

"This serves as the headquarters for a number of even smaller branches in the region, so they had to make it a little bigger."

So that branch we were sent to get rid of raccoon dogs was that sort of smaller regional office? That explains why there were old men and ladies there having tea, just like the town halls I remember from my past life. I guess they do things the same way in this region.

As we stepped into the building after Maria's group, I noticed an old lady with a cane staring right at us. *What could she want?* I wondered.

She spoke up almost instantly, blinking in surprise.

"Oh my, don't tell me you're Lord Lanchester's youngest son?"

Hmm? Lord Lanchester's youngest son? Does she mean Cyrus? When I turned to look at him, his face showed that he felt he'd slipped up. But he soon snapped back to attention and addressed the old lady with his usual smart expression.

"That's right. It has certainly been a while."

The old lady then approached us so quickly that I wondered whether she really needed that cane after all.

"My, my," she said in admiration. "What a fine young man you've grown up to be. And I hear you've been doing a fine job at the Ministry's offices in the capital."

Old ladies talk a lot. I'm sure this one was just happy to see someone she knew when he was as a little boy return after growing up into a respectable young man, but the fact remains that old ladies like this one always talk *a lot* when they get going.

The old lady who lived next door to us in my past life was just like that. Once she got her hands on you, she wouldn't let you go for at least thirty minutes. I could already tell this was just such a case. With a strained smile on his face, Cyrus searched for a way of escape, but there was no stopping this old lady once she started talking.

I was anxious to follow Maria's group into the branch office, but I couldn't just abandon Cyrus there. *What should I do?*

"Ah, Cyrus, good to see you made it here safely. Now ma'am, Cyrus has some urgent business to attend to, so let me just borrow him..." A young man with a big smile suddenly appeared, grabbed Cyrus by the arm, and smoothly escorted him inside the building.

The rest of us hurried after them. Inside, the building wasn't much different than the Ministry branch office we'd visited before, but it was much bigger, with more people working there. Of course, there weren't any old men or ladies having tea. *I guess the regional headquarters isn't exactly like the smaller branch offices.*

"Hmm..." I intoned to myself as I looked at my surroundings.

Then, Cyrus spoke up beside me.

"Thanks. You saved me," he said to the smiling young man.

"No, no," the young man replied without letting his smile falter. "I know you couldn't have gotten away from that old granny. Every

time I've seen her catch you before, you ended up stuck for a long time. I've never seen you get away."

"Do you two know each other?" I inquired.

Cyrus nodded.

"This is Tyler. He was one of my friends around here when I was a kid, and now works at this branch of the Ministry."

"I'm Tyler Wise. Nice to meet you all," said Tyler with a big smile.

We all introduced ourselves as well.

"I'm Katarina Claes. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Sora Smith. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Haru Kaburagi. Nice to meet you."

Though Tyler's smile never faltered when Sora and I introduced ourselves, when he heard Haru's name he looked puzzled.

"From the sound of your name, may I take it that you hail from Xiarmah? In that case, you must not be an employee of the Magical Ministry. Am I right?"

"Yes," Haru responded, "I am from Xiarmah. And no, I am not an employee of the Magical Ministry. You see, well, I acted without really thinking and found myself unable to make my way back home. So my friends ended up bringing me here with them." She then indicated that she would like to send word to her home in Xiarmah.

Tyler accepted this request graciously. Then, after leaving Haru in the care of another employee, Tyler showed us to a door far back in the left wing of the building.

"Your colleagues who arrived earlier are waiting inside. Please, go on in," he said, and we all stepped inside.

Inside was a large table with a number of tables arranged around it, making the room look like a meeting room. Maria, Laura, and Raphael were all seated, awaiting our arrival.

"Why, you're all a bit late. Your carriage was right behind us when we arrived, wasn't it? Did you run into some kind of trouble?" asked Laura, looking at us with a quizzical expression.

"After we got out of the carriage, I ran into a lady who knew me when I was a boy," said Cyrus with a weary expression.

The ever-perceptive Laura seemed to grasp the series of events from that explanation alone.

"Ahh, well, when someone like that strikes up a conversation with you, it can end up being quite long," she said with a pitying glance at Cyrus.

"What happened to Haru?" Maria asked.

"She's just arranging to have someone contact her family. Besides, we can't have someone from outside the Ministry hearing the details of the work we're here to do," Cyrus answered. And he was completely right.

This is Ministry business—and it might involve Dark Magic, the very existence of which is top secret. We can't let Haru hear what kind of work we're doing.

Everyone else seemed to feel the same.

"I suppose not," agreed Maria, and everyone else nodded.

"It looks like the local officer in charge of the case will be coming to explain it to us very soon," said Raphael. Apparently we might be waiting in this meeting room for a while.

"But you know, this place really is just as rural as Mr. Cyrus said it would be. When I saw nothing around us besides farms and fields, no matter how far our carriage traveled, I was shocked. And I ended up catching the eye of a lot of the old men and ladies working in the fields, which was awkward," said Laura, echoing my impression of the region almost exactly.

Just as Cyrus was explaining the reason for all the stares we got —like he'd explained to me earlier—there was a knock at the door and Tyler, the young man we'd met earlier, came into the room.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I am Tyler Wise, the manager of this branch. I look forward to working with you," he said with the same smile he'd been sporting earlier.

Wow, so Tyler is the manager of this branch? In other words, the most important person here. I'm surprised.

Sora looked just as shocked as me, but Cyrus just murmured, "Mhmm," like he'd known all along.

A plump, elderly woman appeared from behind Tyler carrying a tray, then she began to speedily hand out cups of tea.

While I was marveling at the efficiency with which she performed this task, she smiled.

"Please take one of these to accompany your tea." She then placed a wooden box full of snacks—like one I remembered my grandma in my past life having in her house—near the center of the table, but slightly nearer to me than anyone else.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"Just let me know if you'd like another helping," she said with a smile before exiting the room.

I immediately turned my attention to the contents of that box of snacks. The first thing that caught my eye were the rice crackers—nostalgic, tasty-looking crackers that were faintly brown in color. It was my first time seeing them in this life.

The next item I noticed were some sort of white blobs, shaped like flowers. *Could it be? Are these those sweets made of hardened sugar or something?! Just like those sweets my grandma in my past life used to eat often? The extremely sweet ones?! F-Finally, I've arrived in the region where people eat Japanese cuisine! Here I'll get to eat Japanese dishes, Japanese food!*

When he saw how excited I was getting, Sora tapped me on the shoulder.

"I know you're excited about the snacks," he said in a soft voice, "but calm down a little."

I gasped and looked around to find that everyone seemed to be giving me the same look my grandma used to give me in my past life.

They were watching me get entranced by the snacks. How embarrassing.

"I-I'm sorry. I'll try the snacks later," I said, bowing my head apologetically.

Tyler chuckled.

"Well, then, let me outline the case we'll be dealing with. First of all, it appears that a number of animals have come out of the forest and have started damaging crops in the region. However, this sort of thing happens naturally from time to time, so the farmers did not regard it as particularly unusual at first and employed their usual pest control methods to keep out the animals. But eventually, once it became clear that the number of animals was out of the ordinary,

some farmers came to the Ministry in a panic to report the matter."

"I see," said Cyrus, nodding along. "This reminds me of something that the Ministry circulated to me previously."

"Something the Ministry told you?" I blurted out.

"After that incident you encountered during your exam," he explained, "a memo was circulated instructing the staff at every branch to contact the Ministry's head office if similar events occurred in their region, since the situation could become dangerous."

Has that incident we were involved in really become that famous?

"Our circumstances resembled those described by the head office quite strongly, so I contacted your managers immediately," said Tyler.

So after they got Tyler's report, our managers called us?

"Still, I didn't imagine you'd get here so quickly. I'm very grateful," said Tyler.

"The Ministry lent us special horses and a special carriage," said Cyrus.

"Aha. I didn't think those horses belonged to any normal breed," Tyler replied with a twinkle in his eye. "I've never seen horses like them. And the carriage is of a special make too, is it?"

"Yeah, it was specially made by the Magical Tool Laboratory."

"That's incredible." Tyler suddenly gasped and said, "Excuse me. Cyrus and I were childhood friends, so we started chatting just like old times."

This explanation of his relationship with Cyrus was for the benefit of Laura, Raphael, and Maria. Unlike Sora and I, they hadn't already been made aware of those circumstances, so they were shocked at first by the ease with which the two men had been chatting. Now their expressions turned to ones of comprehension.

"I was just a little older than Cyrus, but there weren't many kids around these parts, so we played together all the time," said Tyler.

"And so," Cyrus added, "after Tyler went to work at the Ministry first, I decided to walk the same path. Tyler used to work in the central offices too, but then he decided that his hometown suited him better and arranged a transfer back here."

"That's right. Personally, the relaxed way of life in the country

suits me better than glamorous city life, so I came back," said Tyler with a smile. "But we're way off topic. Getting back to the matter of the disturbance, having hurried to get in contact with the Ministry's head office, I went to the scene to confirm the situation myself. Just as I had been told, an unprecedented number of animals had come down into the fields."

"You've said that the animals came from the forest, but what species did you observe? Were most of them small mammals?" asked Cyrus.

"Raccoon dogs and foxes often come down from the forest, but this time there were larger mammals like boars and bears. I was so struck by their numbers that a chill went down my spine. Then, when I went to look at the forest, I was horrified to see how few animals were left there. That's when I judged the situation to be deadly serious and told the head office to hurry."

"Our higher-ups did hurry us along, saying there was no time to lose," noted Cyrus.

"Still, I didn't think you'd get here *this* fast. As a rule, the higher-ups aren't very quick to act, but I knew we'd be in trouble if we ended up waiting several weeks," said Tyler, frowning slightly.

"So, you mean to say the situation is ongoing? In that case, we'd better get there on the double," said Cyrus, leaning forward so energetically that he really seemed to intend to get to the scene right away.

"No, as I just said, I never thought you'd get here *this* quickly, so there's no need to be in such a hurry. After I contacted the head office, I anticipated that it would take at least four days for help to arrive, so I've already taken many measures myself to keep the damage to a minimum. The situation is still pretty much as I first reported it. Though we can't exactly put our feet up, there's at least enough time for you to set down your luggage and have lunch first," said Tyler, calming Cyrus down as he was about to stand up.

At that very moment, my stomach started to rumble.

Tyler blinked in surprise, then laughed.

"Seems like you really *do* need lunch."

"Seems that way," agreed Cyrus.

Since we departed from the inn early that morning, we had also eaten an early breakfast, and now my stomach had clearly reached its limit. It was always so honest.

"In that case, we'll go to our lodgings to put our bags down and get something to eat there. Tyler, which inn have you prepared for us?" inquired Cyrus.

Tyler looked puzzled.

"What? I haven't prepared any inn for you. Since you're back in your hometown, I assumed you'd just stay with your family. Besides, they have plenty of spare rooms. I already contacted your mother to let her know you were coming here with your colleagues, and asked her to let you all stay there."

"Wh-What were you thinkin'?! This ain't my homecoming! I'm here for work," said Cyrus in quite a forceful tone, his eyes wide. He was so shaken that his country accent even showed through.

"I just told you, I made it clear that you were coming here for work."

"That's not what I mean. I'm askin' why I should stay with my family at all when I'm here for work. Ain't that a little strange, taking my subordinates home with me?!"

"For a normal family, maybe it would be true, but your family's house is huge, right? So it's fine. When the bigwigs from the head office visit here—which admittedly is quite rare—*they* stay with your family. And besides, there are no inns out here in the sticks where glitzy city folk like your group could stay for days on end. Just stay with your family; there's a good lad," said Tyler.

Cyrus seemed to give in. Though he still wore an expression of displeasure, he nodded reluctantly.

"All right..."

And so it was that we ended up going to Cyrus's family home, which was the manor of the lord of the territory.

By the way, I got them to wrap up that box of snacks for me first. *How thoughtful of them*, I marveled to myself.

Sora gave me an exasperated look.

"After seeing how hungrily you were staring at them, I think anyone would have given you a share."

I hadn’t meant to look at them so hungrily, but having received some rice crackers and sugar candies I was very satisfied. I wanted to eat them right away, but...

“Eat them later, you’ll spoil your lunch,” said Sora.

I struggled to restrain myself.

By the time we had finished talking to Tyler, Haru had managed to contact her family. For the time being, she would accompany us to Cyrus’s family home. Since she was already acquainted with his family, it was decided that she would wait for her transport home there. The letter Cyrus sent to Haru’s older brother the previous day had apparently arrived. Judging from his response, Ryou was angry, and Haru came back in a sulk.

“The thought of seeing my brother makes me feel gloomy,” she muttered.

As our group climbed back into our carriage and headed straight to the lord’s manor, Cyrus’s face was also gloomy.

Is it really so terrible for him to have to stay with his family? I can’t imagine the lord’s manor is all that shabby. Or is his family just too quirky? Maybe they’re all too affectionate, like my father, and he’s just embarrassed?

“Mr. Cyrus, what is your family like?” I inquired while Cyrus was still looking downcast.

He pondered my question for a moment.

“My older brother has already taken over the duties of the household head from my father, who’s retired. I hear my father still assists him, though. My brother is married with two sons.”

Ooh, if his brother is married, I guess that means he doesn’t have trouble handling women. And if his brother has two sons, that means...

“So you have two nephews, Mr. Cyrus? Are they still little?”

“No, my brother’s quite a lot older than me, so in a few more years, my nephews will be old enough to attend the Academy of Magic.”

So they’re pretty much all grown up. I see, so his brother’s a lot older than him. Then does that mean his brother’s wife isn’t that young either? If so, does that mean she wouldn’t trigger his

complex? Actually, I should ask...

"You told me before that there aren't many young women around these parts. So where is your brother's wife from?"

He did say there were hardly any young women in the country, so there wouldn't have been enough brides to go around.

"My brother met his wife at the academy, and got engaged to her before coming home. She was a slender young noblewoman when she arrived, but now she's a hard worker and spends most of her days in the field with my brother." Cyrus had a slightly wistful look in his eye.

I guess even a delicate young noblewoman has to toughen up after moving to the countryside. Now, if Cyrus's brother snagged himself a wife while he was still at the academy, he must be a lot more assertive than Cyrus. I wonder...

"Mr. Cyrus, did your mother come to marry your father in much the same way?"

When I asked him this question, Cyrus clammed up at first. *He answered everything else smoothly enough... Was that an odd question?*

As Cyrus remained silent, Haru, sitting with us, spoke up in his place.

"Cyrus's mother fell for his father while they were at the academy together. She made quite a bold approach, came back to the country with him, and they married. She often spoke about it herself." Haru was smiling, but Cyrus's expression seemed more conflicted.

Though the stuffy nobles in the kingdom's interior may speak ill of a woman who chases after the man she loves, I thought it was wonderful and Haru seemed to agree with me. *But perhaps Mrs. Lanchester's son feels more conflicted about it...*

"Just like Haru says, my mother was very pushy, assertive, and impulsive. She's something of a busybody and very quirky, so prepare yourselves," said Cyrus with a troubled expression.

It sounds like he's more concerned with his mother's quirks than the fact that she approached his father so aggressively. So she's pushy, assertive, and impulsive. I found myself looking sideways at Haru. *I guess that means his mother is like Haru.*

As I was wondering about that, our swift carriage soon arrived at its destination. After we passed through the gates, then through a courtyard, we found a large manor standing up ahead.

So this is the margrave's manor? For this leg of the journey, our carriage had taken the lead. We arrived in front of the manor first and disembarked.

No sooner had we done so than a woman of small stature ran over to greet us.

She looks younger than my mother, so maybe she's his brother's wife? Just as I was thinking that...

"Welcome home, Cyrus."

To my surprise, the woman ran straight into Cyrus's arms and embraced him. We all goggled at them.

Eh? Is that really any way for his brother's wife to greet him? Or maybe it's okay, since they're family?

"You may be all grown up, but since you never come back to visit, I've worried about you. Have you been eating properly? You haven't gotten hurt, have you? Are you doing a good job at work?"

As the woman bombarded him with questions, Cyrus frowned.

"Mom, I'm not a kid anymore. Cut it out," he said sharply.

Huh? Huh? Huuuh?! This woman, who looks younger than my mother...

"You're his mom?!" I cried out suddenly.

Cyrus's mother smiled and bowed.

"Yes, I'm his mother. Thank you for taking care of my son."

"Ah, um, no, he's always taking care of me," I replied hurriedly.

"My, aren't you adorable."

Her smile is a good bit more adorable than mine. As far as I can see, she's not nearly old enough to have a child Cyrus's age.

Ah! Wait, he has an older brother too. Then just how old is *she? She's still so gorgeous, in my past life everyone would have been asking what her secret was.*

"Oh, if it isn't Haru. It's been a while," called out Cyrus's mysteriously gorgeous mother once she noticed Haru.

"Eh?" Cyrus cried out, clearly shocked. "Mom, how did you know it was Haru?!"

"How did I know? She used to come and play with you all the time when you were little, so of course I recognize her. What, didn't *you* recognize her?" said Cyrus's mother, staring at him with a puzzled look on her face. Then, with a look of disbelief she added, "Ah, but you are so very dense. You don't get that from *me*."

That's right. Cyrus always mistook Haru for a boy, so when she appeared in front of him dressed like a woman he had no idea who she was. Looks like his mother saw right through him.

"I'm sorry that my son is such a blockhead. But Haru, what brings you here today?" asked Cyrus's mother.

Haru gave her much the same explanation she had just given at the Ministry branch office.

"I acted without really thinking and found myself unable to make my way back home. So my friends ended up bringing me here with them. I have sent word to my family, and I think someone will come to pick me up tomorrow, but would it be all right if I stayed here until then?"

At first Cyrus's mother looked a little confused, probably wondering what it was that Haru had done so thoughtlessly as to end up in this situation, but after considering Haru's explanation, she responded.

"Yes, of course you can. Come in and make yourself at home. The more the merrier, right? Oh, now I'm getting excited." And she did sound excited.

Yep, looks like she's just as forceful as Cyrus said.

Once Maria's group arrived a short while later, it was their turn to meet Cyrus's mother and look just as shocked as we did. *I get it. I was surprised too.*

However, hardly anyone seemed to pay particular attention to Laura's eye-catching outfit, nor did they seem shocked. I remembered having the same impression the last time we visited the country. *Perhaps people here just think everyone from the city is a little eccentric.*

Rather, I felt like their attention was focused on Maria, Haru, and me, probably since young women were so rare in these parts.

"Well then, let me show you to your rooms," said Cyrus's mother

before guiding us into the manor.

Inside, the layout of the manor seemed quite similar to Claes Manor. Only, there weren't as many decorations, and what items there were all appeared to have a practical purpose, rather than being purely ornamental. I did see some servants in the halls, and they all seemed friendly. In this respect, they were unlike the servants in the royal capital, who acted serious and always snapped to attention the moment they sensed you looking their way.

"I'll have the servants carry your luggage to your rooms, so please just make sure they aren't mixed up. After that, we've been making preparations to have lunch in the dining hall, so please join us once it's ready. The lord of the manor will greet you there," said Cyrus's mother.

After the servants picked up our luggage, she showed each of us to our rooms. Since we would be staying in a lord's manor, there were a lot of spare rooms, so tonight we'd each have a room to ourselves. Though my room wasn't quite as large as the one I'd have in the palace or at home in Claes Manor, it was still comfortable and looked lovely.

After I confirmed that I still had all the luggage that Anne and I had packed, one of the servants showed me to the dining hall. I was starving by that point. And I just couldn't wait to eat more Japanese food.

Suppressing the urge to skip on my way there, I walked to the dining hall in a ladylike manner. When I got there, I realized I'd arrived first, probably because my excitement had propelled me forward.

Only, though I was the first member of my party to arrive, there were a couple of people who looked like they might be members of Cyrus's family. As I walked cheerfully into the room, those people rose out of their chairs.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am ———, Cyrus's brother and the Margrave of Victoire," Cyrus's brother said by way of greeting. His face was similar to Cyrus's, but he seemed more mild-mannered.

The woman next to him also introduced herself. She was Cyrus's sister-in-law. Though Cyrus had described her as originally being a

slender young noblewoman, her skin was deeply tanned and she seemed quite plump. She really looked like a mom.

"My name is Katarina Claes. I work for the Magical Ministry. Mr. Cyrus takes very good care of us," I said, introducing myself.

But apparently, Cyrus's brother had already heard of me.

"Ah, so you're Duke Claes's daughter," he said with a smile.

"Eh? You know who I am?" I asked, accidentally making a noise that was unbecoming of a noblewoman.

"Indeed. When the daughter of a duke—and a prince's fiancée—went to work at the Ministry, it became the topic of a great deal of conversation," he answered.

Though I knew that a lot of people had talked about my decision to join the Ministry, I hadn't imagined that news of it would have reached the borderlands.

"What's your work at the Ministry like?" he asked.

"It's enjoyable and fulfilling," I answered.

During our exchange, the rest of our party of travelers filed into the dining hall, each of them introducing themselves to Cyrus's brother and his wife. Cyrus's brother greeted everyone with a smile.

But then Cyrus himself finally entered the room with his mother, a weary expression on his face.

"I'm sure you're busy with your work, so I'm not about to ask you to come and visit often, but could you at least write a letter once in a while?" said Cyrus's brother. These were truly brotherly words of admonishment.

"Sorry," said Cyrus, looking dejected. I felt like I had gotten to see something rare.

We were told that Cyrus's father and his nephews had gone out.

"Now that he's retired, my husband seems to enjoy taking his grandsons out to play. Whenever he has some time off, he's always taking them somewhere," said Cyrus's mother with delight.

Then, finally, my long-awaited Japanese meal was brought to the table. It would be my first time eating Japanese-style food since Haru brought that packed lunch to the office. My excitement was maxed out. Every plate set down in front of me had a familiar dish on it. There was tempura, grilled fish, and savory steamed custard.

One dish after another that just screamed Japanese was beautifully plated up in front of me.

It strongly resembled a meal I could remember being served once in my past life, when I was taken to a high-end hot spring inn. There were some ingredients I didn't quite recognize, but they were all presented beautifully. They looked really tasty. Just seeing them was making me start to drool.

"In our region, we typically eat food similar to what they eat in the neighboring country of Xiarmah. I expect that many of these dishes will be unfamiliar to those of you from the royal capital, but please, help yourselves," said Cyrus's brother.

This was all the encouragement I needed to reach for some food.

Though they had knives, forks, and spoons—which were what we usually used in Sorcié—they had also laid out chopsticks, and those were what I reached for. I'd heard from Cyrus that chopsticks existed in this world, but this was my first time holding them. I was so happy. Since it was my first time using them since my past life, at first I was worried that I might not be able to use them properly. But, to my surprise, they fit in my hand naturally and I had no trouble using them.

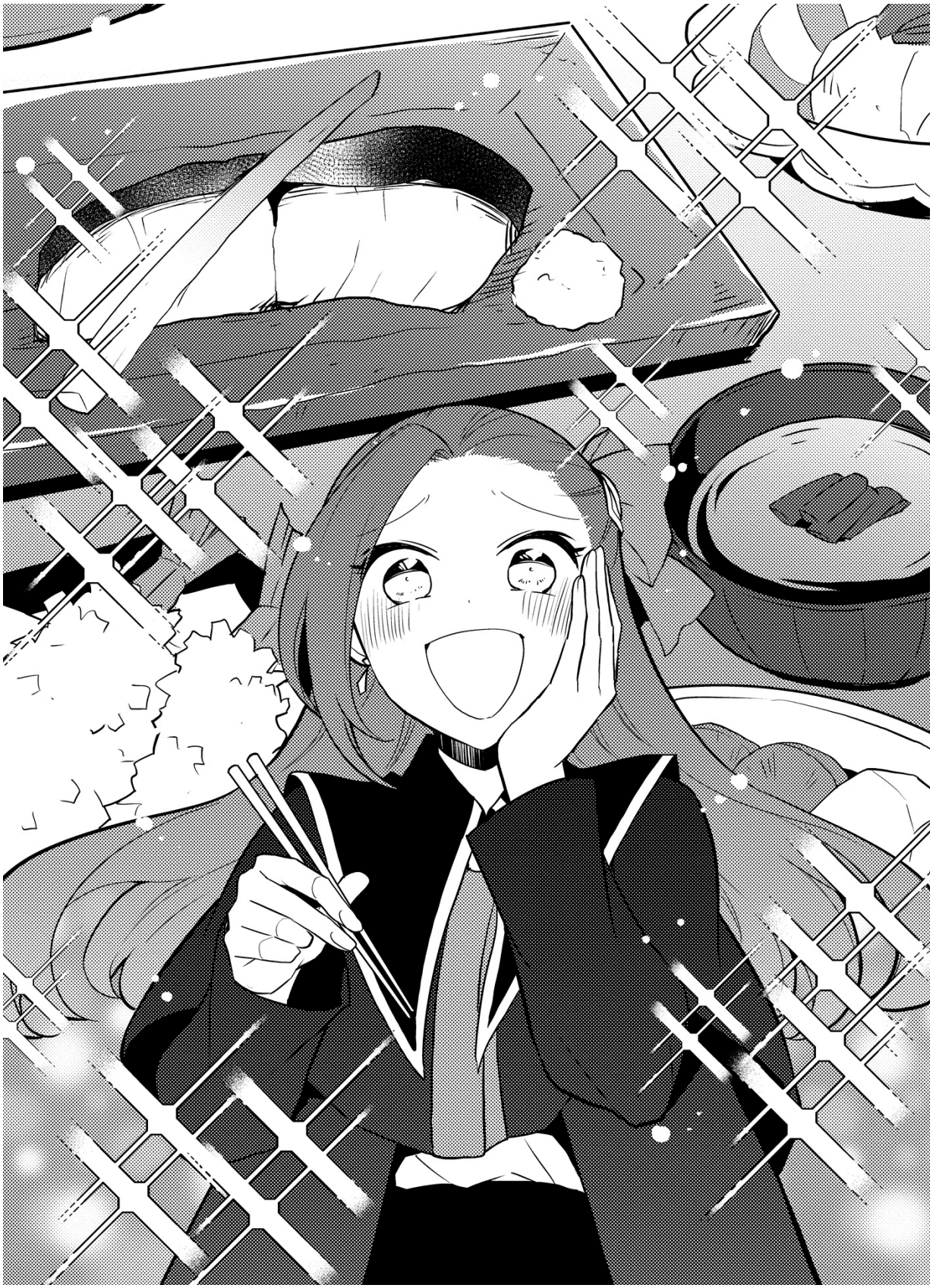
First of all, I used my chopsticks to grab some of what looked like a stew from a black dish right in front of me and shoved it in my mouth. *That's a steaming chunk of tuber. From the texture, I'm guessing it's taro. Stewed taro root.* The flavor from the stew had really soaked into the vegetable. It was delicious.

After that, I grabbed a piece of vegetable cut into the shape of a flower. *Ah! From the flavor, this must be a yam. So, they cut yams into flowers.* This had been seasoned with sweet and salty flavors, and was also delicious.

Next was the tempura. *What should I try first? Okay, let's go with this one that looks like lotus root. Ooh, the coating and the inside is so crispy. It's really yummy. Next I'll try some of this grilled fish. Hm? Could it be? Miso grilled fish? What a nostalgic flavor. Yum.*

And so I went from dish to dish, enjoying each of the foods on offer. I was so overcome by the nostalgia, as well as how tasty it all was, that I ended up with a very full stomach.

“Thank you for the meal,” I said after wolfing down the fruit salad they’d brought for dessert. Everyone seemed to look at me with warmth in their eyes.



"I couldn't be happier to see you enjoying our food so much. And you handled your chopsticks perfectly. Could it be that you have eaten Xiarmah cuisine before?" asked Cyrus's brother with a smile.

Ah. Right, people living in the royal capital don't tend to eat Xiarmah cuisine, and they can't use chopsticks very well either. After I recalled how I used to eat back in Japan in my past life, I used them like it was no big deal. But, no matter how much of a screwup I am, I'm still the daughter of a duke. I'm a woman of high standing.

"Well, I have been served it a number of times in the past," I responded. He seemed to take my response in stride, probably thinking that the daughters of wealthy men must get to try foreign cuisines from time to time. I hadn't told Cyrus or Haru that I'd never eaten it before, so I was safe for now.

"Still, this really is more delicious than anything I've eaten before," I added. *It was totally on par with that high-end hot spring inn.*

After I praised the food, Cyrus's brother and his wife were all smiles.

"I'm so glad to hear that," said Cyrus's brother.

Now, after enjoying that food, it was finally time for us to head to the scene of the disturbance, where the animals had all gathered. Since this was Ministry business, and might be dangerous, Haru waited back at the margrave's manor while the rest of us headed to the scene by carriage. Haru had a lonesome look as she waved goodbye to us, but we didn't have much choice.

Although we were only going to be away for a short while, Cyrus's mother handed me some snacks.

"Eat this if you get hungry at work," she said.

I accepted them gratefully, but her son looked conflicted.

"That woman thinks we're here to have fun," he muttered.

The snacks were, of course, Japanese in style, and even though I'd just had so much to eat, I wanted to eat them right away.

But while I was eyeing the snacks, Sora stopped me.

"You already ate a lot at lunch. If you eat any more, you'll have an upset stomach again. Give it a rest for now."

I felt like Sora was steadily becoming more like Mother Keith.

Since our special carriages were so fast, we soon arrived at our destination.

We had come to a large field right next to the forest. It was a splendid field, but just like we'd been told, it had been thoroughly disturbed by animal tracks.

This is just like the ruined field we found on our exam mission. No, it's even worse. I bet it'll be impossible to harvest any crops with the field in this condition.

There was even a raccoon dog peeking out at us from behind the fence. It ran away as soon as it saw us, but I was sure it would be back.

When Tyler said he'd taken some measures, maybe he was talking about this fence. There was a tall fence separating the field from the forest.

A few people were standing in the field. We learned that they were local farmers and Ministry staff.

"The branch manager will be here soon," said one of the staff members. And, just as he said, Tyler arrived a short while later.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," said Tyler.

It looked like our carriages really were too fast. We learned that Tyler had gotten in a carriage right behind us and tried to catch up, but kept falling further and further behind.

After two days of travel, we thought we'd finally gotten used to our specially made carriages, but this reminded us that they boasted twice the speed of a normal carriage.

Once he'd arrived, Tyler explained the situation in more detail, including the countermeasures taken by the farmers since the disturbance began, a rough estimate of the number of animals, and what species were present.

Now that's what I'd expect from the branch manager of the regional headquarters. He was quite different from the more casual branch manager I'd met on that previous mission.

Just like I'd thought, the tall fence was one of the recent countermeasures. Tyler said they were still putting up more fences around the perimeter of the forest.

As a result, the number of animals coming out of the forest had

been reduced a little, but there were many still crowded along the other side of the fence. Something still needed to be done about them.

In the spots where there were a lot of birds, there were nets around the trees, and to deal with burrowing animals they had driven the fence posts deep into the ground, which meant they couldn't get past easily. I sensed how serious the farmers were about these measures.

Then, after following Tyler's lead and taking a look around the field, next it was time for us to check the adjacent forest. Although it was right next to the field, it was totally shut off by the fence.

"How do we get in?" I asked.

"There's a gate just a short walk away," said Tyler, before leading us there.

At a glance, the gate didn't look any different than the rest of the fence, but it did open when you pulled on it. They'd apparently designed it that way to keep the animals from finding it. It sounded like the animals were cleverer than I'd thought.

After passing through the gate, I looked ahead to see nothing but forest. It was big enough that I couldn't tell how far it stretched, not that I could see very far anyway.

Some forests were so densely wooded that an eerie air seemed to hang over them...but this was nothing like that. It was refreshing. The dappled light on the forest floor was very pretty and I thought it would be great for a therapeutic walk.

"The farmers from the surrounding fields patrol the forest, so even children can come here alone without much risk of getting lost or injured," explained Tyler.

"To stop children getting lost...?" I murmured, remembering the last mission where I had to enter a forest. While we were all searching that forest, there was one person who had gotten lost.

"You thought about Mr. Hart just now, didn't you?" said Sora in a low voice, seeing the far-off look in my eyes.

"Well, how could I not under the circumstances? That was a real pickle."

"Yeah. If we didn't have that teddy bear, I don't know how we

would have found him."

The teddy bear Sora was referring to was a special one, a magical tool made to search for missing people, which could also move of its own volition. The bear in question always behaved himself when Maria was around, but he was actually a jerk. He was always treating me like an idiot, and I considered him my nemesis. Though, he really had saved our necks on that mission. By the way, on this trip, I'd already checked with Maria three times to make sure he hadn't come along.

"Are you talking about my darling Alexander?" asked Maria, clearly having overheard our conversation.

Alexander was that teddy bear's name. Larna, his creator, had given him that name, but since it didn't really suit him, hardly anyone besides Maria used it.

"Yeah. We were just talking about how he saved us during the mission we were given for our exams," I explained.

This seemed to remind Maria of that time Mr. Hart had gotten lost.

"Ah, yes. It was thanks to him that we managed to find Mr. Hart when he got lost. We were just lucky that Mr. Hart treasured that towel Miss Larna gave him, and took it with him on that trip."

"Right. If Mr. Hart hadn't treasured that towel Miss Larna gave him and taken it with him on that trip... Wait, what are you talking about?" At first, I just went with the flow and agreed with what Maria had said, but in the middle I realized I didn't know what she was talking about and was taken aback. Maria also looked surprised.

"Well, that time when we rescued Fray, she was carrying a specially embroidered handkerchief that Miss Larna had given her; it reminded me that Mr. Hart was carrying that towel with him on that mission," said Maria.

Ah! Come to think of it, during our mission to rescue Fray, Maria did say something about coming to a realization after seeing the handkerchief. I had a lot on my mind then, and I wasn't really listening. Sorry, Maria.

"Sorry, Maria. I wasn't really listening at the time," I apologized.

"Oh, no problem at all," said Maria, before continuing to explain.

Apparently, Maria had an opportunity to speak to Larna after we rescued Fray. When she asked her about the embroidery, she explained that she was always losing things, so this was embroidered with a special thread that meant it would come back to her more easily. But Larna wasn't that attached to her possessions, so she would quite often give them away to other people. There were now quite a few people in the department who had some small embroidered item of Larna's.

Our senior colleagues were always saying how grateful they were to Larna for dragging them into her department.

"Since he kept that treasured item close to him, and as Mr. Hart's magic is so strong, we were lucky enough to be able to find him. Thank goodness," said Maria with a smile.

That's right. Thank goodness that Mr. Hart had that treasured item with him, and since his magic was so strong, we managed to find him... Huh? Wait a minute. I still feel like I'm forgetting something...

"Lady Katarina!" cried Maria suddenly, grabbing me by the arm. Her tone was harsh, even though she had been smiling the whole time we were talking.

When I turned to look at her, I saw her face was pale. *That means...*

"Can you sense Dark Magic?" I inquired in a low voice, so as not to give our secret away to anyone from the Ministry who hadn't been briefed. Maria nodded silently.

Sora, who had been standing by my side, stepped in front of us to protect us, and surveyed our surroundings.

Since Maria was also staring intently into the forest, I took it upon myself to call out to Cyrus, who was walking up ahead.

"Mr. Cyrus!"

Once I had his attention, I reported that Maria had detected the presence of Dark Magic.

"Maria, what kind of presence was it?" asked Cyrus.

"I can sense a trail leading deeper into the forest."

"I see."

After this exchange, Cyrus went to tell the other Ministry staff—

excluding those of us who'd come from head office—that they would have to return to the field. He added that there could be danger lying ahead.

Only Tyler objected.

"You're not familiar with the forest. What if something happened to you? As the one responsible for this mission, at least let me come with you," said Tyler.

But Cyrus rejected his offer.

"I know the forest well; I've been playing here since I was a kid. Don't worry, I promise I'll be back before sunset."

"If you're not back before sunset, I'll come to look for you," said Tyler, nodding reluctantly.

And so we followed the trail of Dark Magic Maria had detected deep into the forest.

Once again, Sora and I couldn't detect the traces of Dark Magic that Maria could sense. Whether this was because we were both Dark Magic users and Maria was a Light Magic user, or because Maria's magic was just that much stronger, we didn't know.

Following the trail of Dark Magic, we proceeded deeper into the forest. This part of the forest was not as well maintained as the perimeter, and it started to get a little gloomy.

Also, though we had noticed this as soon as we entered the forest, we couldn't hear any animals. The same thing was true on our last mission of this sort; we couldn't hear any of the sounds one would usually hear, like birds chirping. This made the steadily deepening darkness in the heart of the forest that much creepier.

All we could hear in the gloomy forest was the howling of the wind. We didn't know how far we had walked, but we eventually spotted something that looked like a tiny hill, about the size of a small shed.

Huh, what's that? A shed? No, some kind of hill? I thought to myself. When I got closer and realized what *it* actually was, I was left at a loss for words.

"Whoa," I heard Sora cry next to me. Someone else gasped. I probably gasped myself, without even realizing it.

What had left everyone speechless turned out to be a pile of

motionless animals left in a heap, looking like a small hill.

At first, I thought they might just be unconscious, but when I got a little closer I saw their wide open, empty eyes, and realized they were no longer living. None of the animals appeared to have been wounded, and there wasn't any blood. They just lay there, having expired with their eyes wide open. It was so creepy that I felt a chill go down my spine.

"There are strong traces of Dark Magic on these poor things," said Maria, grimacing as she looked at the animal corpses.

"They must have been killed by Dark Magic. There's no sign of any external injuries," said Laura, stepping closer to the dead animals.

Raphael followed and took a look himself. I felt like I should take a closer look myself, and was about to follow suit, but my legs wouldn't move.

"They really don't have any injuries," said Sora, inspecting a dead rabbit.

Raphael peered at a dead raccoon dog and agreed.

"This one doesn't have any either. I guess they really were killed using Dark Magic. But are there any Dark Magic spells that can be used to kill animals?"

"There have been cases where people were killed by having their life force drained. Perhaps this was something like that? Department Chief Lanchester, what do you think?" Laura asked Cyrus. But Cyrus just stood rooted to the spot.

Oh? Now that I really look at him, Cyrus doesn't look so good.

"Mr. Cyrus, are you all right?" I asked.

He gasped with surprise.

"I-I'm fine. Sorry, I was just a little shaken. Now then, what's happened?" He acted as if he had regained his composure, but after taking a step forward he tripped on a small stone and nearly fell down.

When I saw Cyrus's lack of composure, I remembered what he had once told me when we were working on his field. Ever since his beloved pet dog had died in front of his eyes when he was a boy, he was afraid of having anything to do with animals.

That's right, Cyrus had trouble dealing with animals. No, wait, maybe it's dead animals that he really has trouble with. Still, even if he has an aversion to them, I thought he would still be fine as long as he stayed in professional mode, like when he's talking to young women. I didn't think they would upset him so much that he'd go pale and forget how to walk.

"Excuse me, Department Chief Lanchester, but are you sure you're all right? I can give you a piggyback ride if you'd like," said Laura, offering her muscular back to him.

"No, I'm fine," Cyrus insisted, then joined the others to help confirm the situation. However, he still looked pale.

"You're right. There's a high chance that Dark Magic was used here. Now, Maria, besides the fact that the presence of Dark Magic is strong here, is there anything else you can tell?" asked Cyrus, with at least his demeanor and tone of voice back to normal.

"Yes, though I was too shaken to notice it at first, after concentrating on the presence again I can tell that the trail continues deeper into the forest. If we follow it, we might be able to determine the cause of all this. Shall we go?" said Maria, sounding like she might charge off in pursuit of the trail any moment.

I realized her expression was sterner than usual. Maria was angry. She was a kind and peaceful girl, but at times, like back when I was falsely accused of wrongdoing back at the academy, she could get genuinely angry. She had that same look now. I thought she had to be angry on behalf of the animals, whose lives had been stolen. And so she would stop at nothing to catch the person responsible.

However, just as she was ready to go sprinting off in pursuit, Cyrus stopped her.

"There's nothing I'd like to do more, but the sun will set any minute now. It'd be too dangerous to go any deeper into the forest at night."

"But by tomorrow, any traces of Dark Magic may have disappeared!" said Maria vehemently.

However, Cyrus remained firm.

"We have to prioritize our own safety. I can't afford to put everyone here at risk."

Maria looked surprised, glanced back at the rest of us, then bit down on her lower lip. She wanted to go after the culprit, but knew she couldn't put her friends in danger. It must have been frustrating for her.

"Yes, sir," Maria said, hanging her head, and we all left the forest for that day.

Just like Cyrus had said, the sun was drawing steadily closer to the horizon. When we saw the sun setting, we realized we needed to hurry and picked up our pace.

As we headed out of the increasingly gloomy forest, we saw other dead animals. It was getting even creepier, and I just wanted to get out.

As the sunlight started to turn orange, we safely found our way out of the forest. Just like Cyrus had told Tyler, he still remembered the way out, and we arrived back at the part of the fence where we could exit through the gate.

When Tyler, waiting nearby, saw us, he looked so relieved.

I guess we really made him worry. Though now that I think about it, anyone asked to wait behind because it was too dangerous in the forest would be beside themselves. Especially if they were waiting for a close friend.

"Thank goodness you made it back safely," said Tyler in a relieved tone of voice.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for making you worry," apologized Cyrus. In the light of the setting sun, I couldn't tell whether his face was still pale.

As it was thought to be dangerous for us to remain outside after sunset, we climbed back into our carriages and returned to the local Ministry branch.

By the time we got there, I could see it starting to get dark outside the window. We were escorted back to the meeting room we'd used earlier. Lit by magic, the room was much brighter than the dusky sky outside, and I could see that Cyrus's face was still pale after all.

So he's still not feeling better. This looks like a much more serious aversion than the one he has toward young women.

Tyler finally seemed to notice how pale Cyrus was as well.

"You okay?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"I'm fine," Cyrus once again replied simply. His tone of voice was firmer than before, as if he meant to discourage anyone else from asking.

"Now, about what happened in the forest. We came across a large number of dead animals, piled up in a large heap," explained Cyrus.

"A heap of dead animals..." murmured Tyler.

"Yeah. All sorts of animals, big and small, lying dead with their eyes wide open. We couldn't find external injuries on any of them."

"But... What does this mean?" asked Tyler, with a look of disbelief.

"We believe this is connected with a matter that I can only divulge to a select group of people, so I can't give you any more details. I'm sorry," apologized Cyrus. It was very like him to be honest when it would have been so easy to just come up with an excuse.

"I work at the Ministry too, so I know there are some matters that can't be discussed with a wider audience. But Cyrus, just answer one question. Is that matter a dangerous one?" asked Tyler, clearly concerned.

"I think it will become dangerous. But we formed our team for this mission with that possibility in mind. Of course, I don't mean to put their lives at risk," said Cyrus, turning to look at the rest of us.

"Okay. But just promise me you'll make it back safe," said Tyler.

"Sure," said Cyrus, nodding firmly.

Once we had finished giving Tyler our report, we were to head straight back to Cyrus's family home to stay there for the night.

By the time we came back outside, the sun had set and it was completely dark. With magical lights set on our carriages, we headed to Cyrus's family home, the margrave's manor. It was gloomy inside our carriage, so I couldn't see how Cyrus's complexion was. But I couldn't help worrying that he was pushing himself too hard.

Just like they had that afternoon, our specially made carriages cleared the distance in no time, and soon arrived at the manor.

"Welcome back," said Cyrus's mother, rushing out to greet us. She

was accompanied by the rest of his family, who all greeted us warmly.

After they had already given us lunch, they'd said they would serve dinner as well, and I was glad to take them up on that.

Though, after the shocking events in the forest, I was worried that my appetite would only permit me to eat a little bit of food. But once I saw a familiar array of Japanese dishes arranged in front of me, those worries were immediately swept away. I could have licked my plate clean. In fact, I ended up having a second helping of miso soup. *Looks like I have stronger nerves than I thought.*

Only, I did worry about Cyrus when I saw that he'd hardly touched his food. He didn't seem to have recovered yet.

Looks like his aversion to animals is nothing like his aversion to young women; it's really serious. But he didn't react this strongly when I brought Pochi out back at his field. I wonder why.

"That dog died in an accident. Right in front of me." I recalled this line from Cyrus clearly. *Ahh, right. Perhaps it's the bodies of dead animals that bother Cyrus, rather than animals in general. If the dog died right in front of him, then he must have seen its dead body.*

Though even after realizing that, there was nothing I could do. Cyrus's family and Haru worried too, but even when they asked if he was all right, Cyrus continued to cover up his feelings.

"I'm just a little tired," he would say.

Once dinner was finished, we all headed back to the rooms we were borrowing for the duration of our stay.

After returning to my own room, I was about to try thinking about what I should do next, when I realized I really needed to go to the bathroom. *Maybe this is because I had three bowls of miso soup.*

As I stepped out into the hallway and started walking in the direction of the bathroom, I noticed Cyrus and Haru standing near the door that led out onto the terrace.

Still concerned about how Cyrus was feeling, I walked toward them and was about to call out to him when I saw how serious they both looked. While I was still trying to decide whether or not I should leave them alone, they started talking, having failed to notice

me.

"Cyrus, um, I heard the others talking about the pile of dead animals you found in the forest. Is that why you're not feeling so well at the moment? Did it remind you of what happened to your pet all those years ago?" asked Haru nervously.

There was a brief silence.

"Well, since you already know about that, I might as well tell you," Cyrus answered. "Yeah, that's right. But right now, that's my problem to deal with. Just leave me alone."

Having declared this, Cyrus stepped out onto the terrace alone.

Having received this firm rejection, Haru looked crestfallen.

This sure looks like a serious development, but it's nothing to do with me. I decided to pretend I'd seen nothing, and headed to the bathroom, but...

"Katarina..."

Though Haru had been sulking, now she looked up and our eyes met. *Well, I can hardly just walk away now.*

"H-Hi there," I said with a foolish grin.

"How much did you hear?" asked Haru. Of course, I knew she meant her exchange with Cyrus.

"I'm sorry. I heard the whole thing," I apologized immediately.

Haru shook her head.

"No, it was my fault for having that conversation here."

"Um, by Mr. Cyrus's pet, did you mean the dog he kept when he was a boy?" I asked.

Haru blinked.

"Ah, so you knew about that too, Lady Katarina?"

"Ah, yes. I heard a bit about it while we were working together on his field—I mean, at the Magical Ministry. I heard that he lost his beloved dog in an accident, and it died right in front of him," I said.

Haru pondered this, then, with a hint of hesitation, spoke up again.

"He was a big dog, named Leo. I played with him a few times. I heard that he died in an accident when they visited the royal capital."

"So it was an accident in the royal capital? I didn't know that. Did

he get run over by a carriage?”

“No, well... Though Cyrus said it was an accident, once—by chance, when I was playing hide-and-seek—I overheard the truth from his father, the lord at the time. Apparently Leo didn’t die in an accident... Someone killed him.”

My eyes widened when Haru said this.

“Eh? He was killed?! By who?”

“That I do not know. But I was so frightened by the lord’s voice when he mentioned it that I couldn’t tell anyone else about it. And when I was older, I realized that if a margrave couldn’t complain about his son’s beloved dog being killed in public, then someone of very high standing must have been involved.”

“I see...”

As the defender of our kingdom’s border, the margrave held a very high position. If he had to hold his tongue when his darling son’s dog was killed, and claim it was just an accident, that didn’t leave many potential culprits.

Then I suddenly recalled something Jeord once told me. It was about the conflict over the succession to the throne, which had led to deaths within the palace and caused the secret of Dark Magic to escape into the world. This had all happened earlier than my memories went back, but I’d been told that these events had left the palace in severe disarray.

Since Cyrus was a few years older than me, I asked myself, what if he walked into the middle of that conflict without knowing about it? His dog might have been killed there. And, of course, the margrave wouldn’t have been able to say a word against the royal family. Though this was only a guess on my part, if that was where Cyrus had developed his strong aversion to animals and their dead bodies, then there was nothing I could do about that.

If anyone can help soothe Cyrus at a time like this, it would have to be...

“And so, after that happened, Cyrus began to avoid not only other dogs, but other animals, without exception. There was one time when we were playing together and found a dead dog. He went as white as a sheet and fainted.”

"He fainted?! Was it really as bad as that?!"

"Yes, as bad as that."

This is no mere aversion, this is trauma. What on earth happened to Cyrus in the royal capital?

"That's why I was so worried when I heard what happened today. Since I knew what had happened when he was little, I thought I might be able to help him, at least a little..." said Haru, her expression turning very forlorn.

That was a pretty firm rejection she just received. But...

"Mr. Cyrus is always like that. He hates to depend on other people," I said to try and cheer her up.

But her expression remained the same.

"Is that so...?" she said, then fell silent for a while.

"I'm sorry, Katarina. I got carried away when I saw you and ended up saying too much. Please, can we keep this conversation a secret between us? In particular, what I told you about what Cyrus's father said." She then bowed her head, as if to announce the end of our conversation.

"Ah, yes, of course," I replied.

"I'll just be going to bed, then. Please get some rest as well, Katarina," she said, and left.

Even from behind, she looked forlorn. Perhaps that was because I'd heard what Haru said just after Cyrus stepped out onto the terrace: *"I guess I'm not good enough for him..."* That quiet murmur quickly vanished in the darkness outside, but it stayed with me, reverberating in my chest.

That was because it reminded me of a line that Mary, a rival character in the game, uttered in *Fortune Lover*. She muttered that line to herself when she decided that she couldn't support the man she loved. Haru's place in this rivalry, her present circumstances, resembled that scenario, and it was heartbreaking.

I stood there in a daze for a little while, but when the wind blowing in through the open door made me shiver, I remembered that I was about to go to the bathroom and hurried to get there.

On my way back from the bathroom, I thought to myself that, if Cyrus was still on the terrace, maybe I should talk to him. I didn't

think I could do anything to heal his trauma. *But can I really just leave him alone, with his face looking like that?*

I had a lot on my mind as I walked back to my room, but then I noticed Maria and Cyrus were out on the terrace together. Despite his expression being so strained before, Cyrus seemed to be at peace now.

Ah. Looks like I won't be needed after all. I was relieved, but when the memory of how Haru had looked crossed my mind, I felt a pain in my chest.

This time, I made my way back to my room in silence, hoping no one would notice me.

I had learned that Cyrus had some terrible trauma in his past, but having also seen his most recent interaction with Maria, I decided that there was nothing I needed to do about it for the time being.

So now I need to figure out what I should *be doing right now.* In order to determine that, I decided to go over everything I knew about the ongoing disturbance and my team's plans for the following day.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

"All right, everyone, let's go over everything we know about this ongoing case."

"After venturing into the forest and seeing what happened to the animals, I think there's an extremely high chance that this is just like that previous case!"

"So, do you think another dragon is going to show up?"

Gasp!

"That's right! The last time we investigated the depths of a forest, a Dark Familiar dragon appeared and we had to fight it."

"Indeed we did. That's when Pochi turned gigantic and fought for us."

"Yep, Pochi was cool, wasn't he?"

"I know, right? Most of the time, he's just a cute, free-spirited puppy, but when the situation calls for it, he's so strong. Isn't our

Pochi wonderful?”

“He really is! Our little guy is the greatest!”

“*Ahem*. We’re getting off track, so let’s return to the topic at hand. Now that we know there’s a chance we might have to face a dragon in the depths of the forest, we’ll need to come up with a plan to fight it. This time, there might be more of them, or the dragon might be bigger.”

“Eh? Why do you think there might be more of them, or a bigger dragon?”

“Because of the animal carcasses we saw today. If they were able to claim the lives of that many living beings, then I think our enemy must have leveled up.”

“Wow, Katarina, you’re so clever. You’re absolutely right.”

“What a genius.”

“Hmph. There are some advantages to being a villainess for so many years, you know.”

“No, I don’t think that has anything to do with being a villainess.”

“I guess not...”

“*Ahem*... Well, we can just have Pochi take care of any threats again. It’s not like I’d be able to defeat any dragons with my Dirt Bump.”

“Agreed.”

“Although, can Pochi really defeat them all by himself? What if Pochi loses? What if we lose Pochi...?”

“I may just be nervous after hearing what happened to Cyrus’s beloved dog, but what if Pochi were killed... I don’t want to think about that.”

“But Pochi is strong...”

“And we won’t let him lose. I’ll fight too. Pochi is a precious member of my family. I’ve gotta protect him.”

“I suppose you’re right. Though I may not be able to fight with my Dirt Bump, I may be able to put up a fight with my Dark Magic.”

“Though, when it comes to Dark Magic, I don’t know how to do anything besides summon Pochi and absorb darkness.”

“Hmm? If the dragon is a Dark Familiar, can’t we suck it up by absorbing darkness? We were able to suck up that black snake.”

"You're right! I'm sure we can absorb anything as long as it's made of Dark Magic! If we do have to face another dragon, let's try sucking it up!"

"Great. I'll just slurp that dragon up. That'll take care of everything."

"Well then, does everyone agree? If we see a dragon, are we happy with the plan of taking it out by using the skull wand as a vacuum?"

"No objections here."

And with that, I settled on my strategy for the next day: I resolved to fight as well this time, rather than leaving it all up to Pochi.

Then I decided to lay down in my bed and go to sleep, with my resolution to protect Pochi—to protect *everyone*—still fresh in my mind.

★★★★★★

By the time I, Cyrus Lanchester, returned from the forest, I still hadn't fully recovered. This irritated me. I was annoyed at myself for getting so shaken up by something so small, even though I wasn't physically sick.

And now I've made everyone worry. Everyone at the Ministry—none of whom know about my situation—and all my family, longtime servants of our household, and childhood friends, who do know. They've all had to walk on eggshells around me. I couldn't feel more ashamed.

Not only do I have trouble dealing with young women, but I'm not great around animals either. In particular, just the sight of a dead animal makes me feel deeply distressed. As a department head of the Magical Ministry, that's just pathetic.

I know the cause of it all. But I've always kept a tight lid on that experience*, and have tried to avert my eyes from it. So usually, it doesn't bother me. But whenever I see a dead animal—and an animal that died in abnormal circumstances, no less—the lid is*

suddenly pried open, and I end up in this condition.

To top it all off, now that I've dredged those memories up, they won't go away for a while. It'll take time for the lid to close again. Well, I am a grown man; I can't go on pretending not to notice this problem. I have to face what happened back then *and overcome it.*

It all happened when I was still very young. My father decided to take me with him on one of his trips to the royal capital for work.

This was my first visit to the royal capital that I can remember, and I still recall being really excited leading up to the trip.

Back then I had a dog named Leo at my side. He was a big dog with bright white fur who grew up alongside me. At the time of that fateful trip, he was pretty much the same size as me. I would cling to him every chance I got.

My parents had taken Leo in soon after I was born, hoping that he would help keep me from getting lonely, since my brothers were so much older than me. He was brought up much like a brother and was a valued member of our family. He always came along when I played with my friends, and slept alongside me at night. We never spent a single day apart.

So when I was told we would be apart when my father took me to the city, I threw a tantrum. My parents tended to spoil their youngest child, and ended up giving me permission to take Leo as long as he wore a collar.

That was a mistake. I never should have taken Leo there.

When I arrived at the royal capital, I had a lot of fun sightseeing. I was so impressed with the spectacle of the giant palace that I clung to my father as he headed there for business. Of course, Leo came along too.

But it probably goes without saying that animals were not allowed inside the palace. So Leo and I waited for my father in the palace garden. Of course, I was still impressed with the palace, never having seen a building so big before, and I was also excited to see such a big garden.

It was then that I heard an incredibly loud bang. Young as I was, I was extremely curious, so I walked toward the source of the noise,

pulling Leo behind me.

Although my father had told me to stay put, I was just too curious back then. All I wanted was a peek at what had happened, so I shook off the servant who was watching me and ran to see what happened.

The scene that greeted me was like nothing I had seen before. A woman was kicking a child who looked around the same age as me. She kicked him again and again, and stepped on him until he screamed.

When I heard that plaintive cry, I ran to his side.

"You're really hurting him. Please stop," I pleaded.

The woman who'd been kicking the boy whirled around and glared at me. Her eyes were bloodshot. I felt a shiver go down my spine.

"What are a brat and a beast doing back here?!" she shrieked. She stalked over to me, then raised her foot as if to kick me.

Just when I thought she was about to strike, a white blur appeared between us. It was Leo. He'd run in front of me to protect me. I could see his body trembling. He must have been kicked really hard.

"You filthy beast. Now my shoes are dirty!" screeched the woman, stepping away from us.

I breathed a sigh of relief and cradled Leo in my arms.

"Thank you Leo. I'm so sorry."

It was at that moment, when I said this to Leo, that I saw something plunge down toward us. At first, I didn't know what it was. But suddenly, bright red blood started pouring from Leo's body.

"Leo, Leo!" When I raised my head and looked carefully at Leo, I realized that he'd just been stabbed with a sword.

As I stared at the wound, dumbfounded, I heard that shrill voice ring in my ears.

"How dare you stand up to me, you filthy beast," she said as she pulled the sword out of Leo's body. Fresh blood spurted from the wound, staining my field of view red.

Through that field of red, I could just see the young woman's ruby red lips curling into a twisted, fearsome smile.

From that point on, my memory went blank. When I came to, I was in bed in a townhouse in the royal capital.

On the verge of tears, my father apologized again and again.

"I never should have taken you there."

For some reason, I had a high fever, and my head was so hazy that I didn't know what he was talking about. But when I heard that Leo was dead, I wailed until my tears dried up.

Once my fever had subsided, I went back to my home territory. I remember my mother and older brothers embracing me, while looking like they were about to cry too.

Ever since that day, I've had a terrible aversion to young women, and I've been afraid of getting too close to animals.

As far as our servants and my friends were concerned, Leo died in an accident. I couldn't bring myself to tell them that it was my fault he was killed. Since they could see how distressed I was, they all avoided bringing it up.

After that, there were some emotional episodes, like when I found a dead dog while playing with Ryou and Haru and fainted. But I didn't run a fever, like I had right after the incident, and my symptoms slowly eased over time.

Eventually, once enough time had passed, I was able to put a lid on *that memory*, and no longer recalled it during my everyday life. I realized that would make my life easier. But my aversion to young women and the fear I'd developed around animals remained.

When I turned fifteen and it was time for me to attend the Academy of Magic, my parents were concerned, and asked if I'd be all right. Since I'd already put a lid on my memories, I told them I'd be fine and left my home behind. But when I got to the royal capital and saw women in fancy clothes, with makeup that included red lipstick, I started to feel unwell again.

The lid I'd placed on my memories opened just a crack. But I was already teased because of my accent, which made people take me for a bumpkin, and I was able to convince myself that was the reason for my difficulty with women, thereby avoiding facing the true cause.

Then one day I came to work at the Magical Ministry, and when I

happened to see a dead animal in the course of my work, the lid on my memories came off. That was when I finally decided to investigate what happened that day. The truth was that I had felt for a long time that I couldn't just leave things the way they were.

Through my investigation, I learned that the palace had been in a horrific state of disarray because of the conflict over the succession to the throne, and that people had died in the struggle.

At the time, these facts were concealed and they largely remain so to this day. My father, living as he did in the borderlands, had known very little about what was going on in the capital back then. So he took me with him to the palace, and I was unlucky enough to cross paths with a wicked member of the royal family. That's how that tragedy ended up happening.

Since then, thanks to the reforms introduced by the current king, all the more pernicious members of the royal family were duly punished. None of them were left in the kingdom. It was all over.

Ahh... When I found out that fearsome woman—whose face had floated up in the back of my mind so many times over the years—was no longer around, I felt relieved. But my phobias still failed to improve.

After beginning a new year at work, partly thanks to Katarina and Maria, my aversion to women had largely improved.

That brings us to the present. Just as I'd begun to think I might soon be completely cured, I saw a dead animal for the first time in a long while—many dead animals, and ones that had died under disturbingly abnormal circumstances to boot—and I completely lost my composure. I felt so pathetic.

Maybe it's time to stop running from my problems, stop averting my eyes, and instead face them, and overcome them. At least, that's what I thought, but without knowing where to begin, I found myself gazing out into the garden.

"Mr. Cyrus," called out a voice.

Startled, I turned around to find Maria standing there. I was so lost in thought that I hadn't even noticed her approach me.

"Are you all right?" asked Maria with an air of apprehension.

"No, I'm not, but right now, that's my problem to deal with. Just leave me alone," I said, the same words I'd spoken to Haru only moments earlier.

I expected Maria would leave me alone as well, but...

"I cannot do that," she responded firmly.

I opened my eyes wide and stared at her.

"As far as I can tell, you are overthinking things, and going around in circles. Seeing you like this, I could not possibly leave you alone," she declared, looking straight back at me. I felt my shoulders relax.

"You're right... My thoughts have just been leading me in circles while I've been standing here, and I don't know what I should do," I admitted with a wry smile.

Maria looked back at me sharply.

"First of all, if you speak to someone else, rather than going in circles by yourself, things might change for the better. If you have something to say, please go ahead." She gestured invitingly to encourage me to talk.

There was something about the unreserved way she spoke that caused the dark feelings that had been swirling inside me to be whisked away, and I started talking like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"The last time we were working on my vegetable patch at the Ministry, I told you that a beloved dog of mine once died before my eyes, didn't I?"

"Yes. You said that, since then, you have been a little bit afraid of getting close to animals."

"Yeah, that's right. But that wasn't the whole story... The truth is that Leo, my dog, was killed, and it was my fault."

"Killed...?"

"Yeah. Once, when I was little, and my dad took me with him to visit the royal capital, I took Leo with me to the palace. I was curious, and I ran around the garden there with Leo trailing behind me. Then I came upon a really awful scene."

"An awful scene, sir?"

"I encountered a boy about my age, lying on the ground and

being kicked viciously by a young woman. The child was screaming, and without thinking, I ran between the woman and the child to save him. Out of a reckless, childish sense of justice I begged the woman to stop. But this made her even angrier, so she got ready to kick me as well."

Maria was silent.

"Leo always seemed to think of me as his little brother, so he always used to try and protect me when I was in danger. This time was no exception, and he ran between us to protect me. Leo ended up getting kicked instead of me."

"Is that how he died...?"

"No, Leo was a big dog, too big for a woman to kill him just by kicking him."

"Then how did he die?"

"When Leo came to my aid, it seemed to touch a nerve for that woman. She snatched a sword from a nearby knight and stabbed Leo with it."

"What?!"

"Blood went flying everywhere, and Leo died in my arms. I must have lost consciousness then, because the next thing I knew I was lying in bed in a townhouse in the city."

"Who was that woman?"

"At that time, the palace was in a terrible state of conflict over the succession to the throne. I believe now that both the woman and the child were caught up in that dispute. So considering our own standing, there was nothing we could say about it."

At that time, there had been no way a lower noble could object to the actions of the royal family, even if one of them killed a pet dog.

"When I woke up in the townhouse, my father kept apologizing, saying, 'I never should have taken you there; this is all my fault,' but he was wrong. It was all *my* fault! I was the one who whined until my parents let me take Leo with me, I was the one who said I wanted to visit the palace, and I was the one who went wandering off on my own when my father told me to wait for him. And I was the one who charged at that woman, out of a childish sense of justice! It was all my fault. It was all..." Once I started this rant, I

carried on without taking a breath, and I was almost shouting by the end.

"Mr. Cyrus..."

"If I hadn't done those things, then Leo wouldn't have been killed so cruelly. I was thoughtless and stupid, and Leo was only trying to protect me, so it's my fault he was killed... How could I let that happen to such a precious member of our family, who grew up alongside me...?"

"Mr. Cyrus, are you so afraid to get close to other animals because you're afraid you might let something bad happen to them as well?" asked Maria.

My eyes widened and I echoed Maria's words.

"Yes, I'm afraid I might let something bad happen to them." Those words slotted perfectly into a place in my mind that had been blank for all this time. "Now I see... I've been afraid of getting another animal killed. Like I got Leo killed..."

I stood there in a daze, rooted to the spot. Part of my problem had been the fact that I'd tried not to think about it, and had kept a lid on my memories this whole time. I had never recognized anything more than the *fact* that fear had taken root inside me. But at this moment, Maria had just shown me *what* I was truly afraid of.

"One more thing, Mr. Cyrus."

"Yeah?" Still in a daze, I blurted out this half-hearted reply, and then Maria suddenly stepped closer to me.

"About the story you just told me: It was not your fault that Leo died, Mr. Cyrus."

"Wait, what are you talking about? However you look at it, it was my fault..."

"However *I* look at it, it was not your fault. Of course, it was not your father's fault either. It was all that madwoman's fault!"

"M-Madwoman...?"

When I heard those words come out of Maria's mouth, I clammed up again.

"Well, I mean, who else would kick a small child, threaten another child who came to rescue him, then use a sword to stab a poor dog who tried to protect *him*? She was clearly insane. I

guarantee you that anyone who heard that story would blame the woman. The only thing to blame on your part, Mr. Cyrus, was your luck. It was bad luck that you came across someone so deranged. Apart from that, you were not at fault in any way whatsoever!" said Maria angrily, her eyebrows raised. I'd never seen her like that before.

"It was only my luck that was bad...?"

"That's right. It was just bad luck!"

"But if I hadn't taken Leo there..."

"Mr. Cyrus, after that incident, were you injured in any way?" asked Maria.

"No, not at all," I answered. I found this apparent change of subject to be quite puzzling.

"In that case, I am sure Leo felt glad he was able to protect his dear family member. After all, you were always together, so you must have been very dear to him. Since he managed to protect you, Mr. Cyrus, I am sure Leo had no regrets."

When Maria said this, I could see Leo in the back of my mind. He was about the same size I was back then, and had seemed to think of me as a little brother. He'd always come to my aid. That time, too, he had immediately protected me.

I felt my shoulders relax, and the dark thoughts that had been swirling around inside me began to clear up. Now that I clearly understood the reason for my fears, that deep-seated terror I felt around animals began to ease.

It was just as Maria said. Since it was that woman's fault that Leo was killed, and since she was no longer around, there was no reason to fear that animals would be killed because of me if I got close to them.

"Thanks, Maria. I feel like your words have saved me. Only, I still can't forgive myself entirely." The feelings I had carried with me for so long couldn't be dispensed with so easily, just because someone had told me I did nothing wrong, that it wasn't my fault.

"I suppose not. I don't think fears and anxiety that have been with you for so long will vanish right away. But even if you have to do it little by little, please forgive yourself. If you were to keep on

blaming yourself, I am sure Leo would be sad too, since he only wanted to protect you."

"Yeah... I guess you're right," I admitted, and Maria responded with a gentle smile.

That smile caused quite the commotion in my heart. It was Maria Campbell who had told me that I looked just as lovely working out in my field—my rural background on full display—as I did putting on airs around the office.

The closer I got to her, the more I felt attracted to her inner strength and her beauty. My heart always started racing and my mind went blank when I was around her, but I figured that, though she was wonderful, this was because I'd had so little to do with women in the past.

But now I felt certain. I was in love with this woman, with Maria Campbell. She had given me a feeling that I'd never felt in my life up to that point. I wanted her. I wanted to spend my life with her. That was a feeling that I'd never known before.

As I started to smile along with Maria, the corners of my mouth slowly turning up, I suddenly became aware of another pair of eyes trained on me. I looked in the direction of that gaze and saw a woman with black hair standing there.

When she noticed me looking at her, she immediately left. *Soon, I'm going to have to admit the truth to her. That I do have feelings for someone else.* It would be disingenuous to allow myself to get engaged to someone else just because she felt affection for me, considering how I felt about Maria.

The next thing I knew, the moon had moved across the night sky. Our plan was to head to the forest early the next morning. I needed to get some rest, and so did Maria, who had been kind enough to keep me company. However, I wanted to savor that time alone with her, if only for a short while, so I took one last look up at the night sky.

Chapter 4: Set Forth into the Forest

No sooner had the sun risen than we all set off for the forest once again. And when it came time to pick our carriages again, something incredible happened. Cyrus said he would ride in the same carriage as Maria today.

Since he'd said he was too nervous to share a carriage with her only yesterday, I wondered what could have changed. But then I remembered seeing them standing together peacefully and, sharp as I am, I figured out that something must have taken place. I deliberately made no comment. I can be *very* good at reading the room in situations like this.

Cyrus was so cheerful that I could hardly believe how disconcerted he'd been the previous day, and he took Maria by the arm to escort her to the carriage.

Cyrus's family—as well as Haru—came to see us off, but it seemed to me that Haru had a sad look in her eyes as she watched Cyrus and Maria walk away together.

This time, Cyrus was in the other carriage, so Laura ended up joining Sora and me in our carriage. Since we would be journeying deep into the forest, she was wearing an outfit that was a little lighter on frills.

Once we'd all sorted ourselves out, and we had a carriage occupied exclusively by members of the Magical Tool Laboratory, Laura cut right to the chase.

"Did something happen between Mr. Cyrus and Miss Maria?"

"They *are* acting quite differently compared to yesterday. And now Cyrus is able to share a carriage with Maria, despite insisting it was out of the question before," said Sora earnestly, having been called on to ride in this carriage *because* Cyrus said he couldn't

share one with Maria.

"Perhaps they've made some progress. But this is Mr. Cyrus we're talking about... Miss Katarina, do you know anything about this?" asked Laura, facing me now, but I shook my head. I didn't know what had happened between them. All I saw was the two of them talking with peaceful smiles on their faces. But something must have happened to produce that result.

So, has Cyrus finally made his move to claim Maria? That means he might have to face Dewey in a duel. Wait, Sora might also be in the mix. And what about Cezar, or the other secret character?

Come to think of it, I still don't know who the other secret character is. It's scary not knowing what romanceable characters there are; I can't predict what'll happen next.

Considering that Raphael, the student council president, was the hidden character in the last game, I don't think it's likely to be someone I haven't even met yet. So, for instance... I glanced at Laura, who was sitting across from me. *When I saw her wearing different makeup the other day, she looked more like a handsome man. But I don't think they'd have a macho character in women's clothing as one of the romanceable options in an otome game.*

"Hey, Sora. I just saw Miss Katarina pull a lot of different faces while she was looking at me, what do you suppose that was about?" wondered Laura.

"I'm sure she's thinking of something completely pointless. Worrying about it would be a waste of time," replied Sora.

"You're right... I had the same feeling."

While they were talking, we arrived at the field next to the forest that we'd visited yesterday. After getting out of our carriages, we entered the forest through the same fence gate that we'd used before.

Tyler would be waiting for us by the entrance again today as well.

"If anything goes wrong, please let me know using this. It's a magical tool, and I should be able to hear it from here unless you're really deep in the forest," he said, handing me something that looked like a flute. I was a little surprised to see that the use of magical tools had spread as far as this regional branch of the

Ministry, and as a member of the Magical Tool Laboratory, I felt proud.

Despite the mood having been pretty relaxed during the carriage ride, we immediately tensed up now that we were back at the forest.

We followed the same path through the forest that we had taken the previous day. Maria walked together with Cyrus at the head of our group, peering intently into the forest.

"I'm sorry. I can no longer see the traces of Dark Magic that I could see yesterday," said Maria, frowning dejectedly. Traces of Dark Magic did not remain visible forever. Rather, they faded away with the passage of time, and enough time had passed that Maria could no longer see what remained of the magic cast here.

"Well, that can't be helped. Don't let it bother you. For now, let's go back to the spot where we found the animal carcasses yesterday," said Cyrus, and we made our way back to the place where we had seen that pile of dead animals.

The forest ought not to have changed since yesterday, but perhaps because I was remembering that pile of carcasses we'd seen, it seemed a lot creepier today.

Following Cyrus's lead, we came back to the place where we'd found all those animal carcasses piled up the previous day, but...

"Huh? Is this the right place?" I suddenly blurted out.

"Yeah, this is it," answered Cyrus.

But there was nothing there. Despite such a huge pile of carcasses having been there the previous day, now there was nothing at all.

We could see the grass was flattened around the area where the mound had been, so we could tell there used to be *something* there, but there wasn't a single dead animal to be seen.

Did someone tidy this place up last night? Is it even possible to get rid of so many animal carcasses in one night, in the middle of a dark forest?

"They may all be gone, but now that we are here, I can see traces of Dark Magic," said Maria firmly. There seemed to be no doubt in her mind. After peering intently at her surroundings, she exclaimed, "Found it! Though it is fainter than it was yesterday, I can

still see the trail of Dark Magic. That means we can follow it." Her voice was filled with resolve.

"I see. Well done; thank you, Maria. In that case, let us follow the trail. Just stay by my side," said Cyrus, stepping closer to Maria.

"Yes, sir," she said, nodding firmly.

Though this was hardly the time or place, at that moment the following carefree thought crossed my mind: *Aren't those two getting along nicely?* But since this really wasn't the time, I shook my head to put myself back in the right frame of mind. Then Laura, Sora, Raphael, and I all followed Maria and Cyrus.

As they followed the trail of Dark Magic, Maria and Cyrus walked deeper and deeper into the forest. The deeper we went, the darker and quieter it became, and creepier too.

Then, after we'd been walking for some time...

"Oh no, not *another* cave," I blurted out. When I looked at Sora and Laura standing next to me, I knew from the expressions on their faces that they were thinking the same thing.

Yes, by following the trail of Dark Magic, Maria had led us to another cave. Once again, this development was just like the previous incident we were involved in. The only difference this time was that, while the entrance of the cave we found last time was at the end of a narrow, secluded path, this one was pretty easy to find. That said, the entrance to this cave was quite a bit narrower.

"I played here once as a child. The entrance may be narrow, but it's pretty spacious inside," explained Cyrus, a local.

"I sense a very strong presence of Dark Magic inside," said Maria.

Now I'm sure of it. There's totally a Dark Familiar dragon in there. There's gotta be!

Of course the other members of my group from our exam mission knew this, but even Cyrus and Rapahel, who weren't there, knew the particulars of that mission from our report. Everyone wore a stony expression, yet we all knew we had no choice but to go inside. Cyrus stepped in front of Maria and placed his hand on the hilt of the sword he wore at his waist.

I called out to my shadow.

"Pochi, come on out."

"Woof," said Pochi as he emerged from my shadow the same way he always did. Oddly, he didn't wag his tail happily and sit the way he always did. Instead, he faced the cave and growled softly.

Ah, you know what's in there too, don't you, Pochi? I patted his head for just a moment. *Don't worry, if anything happens we'll fight together*, was the message I tried to convey. I wasn't sure whether or not Pochi got the message, but he looked happy while I was petting him.

The entrance to the cave was narrow, just as Cyrus had said, with a cramped tunnel continuing for some distance after that. We all walked through the tunnel in silence. Eventually, we saw the end of the tunnel up ahead.

Cyrus, at the head of our group, motioned for us all to stop. After carefully checking the end of the tunnel himself, he turned back to us.

"Looks like there's something out there," he announced, then continued, "But it doesn't seem to have noticed us yet. Past this tunnel, the cave gets a lot wider, but there are a lot of boulders we can hide behind. From this point on, hide behind the rocks and try not to be seen."

We nodded, and once he saw that we'd understood, Cyrus emerged from the tunnel first, then we cautiously followed him. We found ourselves in our wide open space, just like we'd heard about from Cyrus. There were plenty of boulders big enough for an adult to hide behind.

Then we spotted something that looked like a murky black haze, which extended deeper into the cavern. This was the trail of Dark Magic. I guessed it was finally strong enough for me to see it. When I glanced over my shoulder, my eyes met those of Sora standing behind me.

"I can see the trail of Dark Magic," I announced quietly.

"Me too—a black mist trailing off into the distance," he answered quietly. It looked like our Dark Magic detection abilities were of roughly the same level.

Just like Cyrus said, there's something in there. Though Cyrus can't see traces of Dark Magic, so how did he know? I guess martial

artists are surprisingly good at sensing things.

While making sure to hide behind boulders as we went, we all walked deeper into the cave with Cyrus at the head of our group. But, of all the rotten luck, my foot hit a pebble. It went rolling and made what felt like quite a lot of noise.

"S-Sorry," I apologized, turning pale.

"It wasn't on purpose, so there's no point in feeling bad about it. Let's stop here and wait to see what happens," said Cyrus, motioning for us to stay concealed behind a boulder.

As I watched and waited, my heart pounding all the while, I saw a tall, thin man emerge from the shadows and walk toward us. Since we were hiding behind a boulder, he couldn't have found us right away, but I still had chills as I saw him glance around—clearly looking for us. *It's only a matter of time until he finds us. We can't let him find us.*

"We can't let him find us."

I thought I'd just spoken my mind at first, but that was Cyrus's voice, not mine.

After murmuring this in hushed tones, in the very next moment, he stepped out from behind the boulder, approached the man from behind without making a sound, and took him down with a karate chop to the back of the neck; the stranger never even got the chance to cry out.

Th-That was amazing, Cyrus. I thought the same thing when I nearly got in a fight in the city and Cyrus saved me, but he really is strong. While I was marveling at Cyrus's strength, he left the man's unconscious body where it lay and rejoined the rest of us with a stern expression on his face.

"That man seemed strange somehow. I feel like something dreadful is coming. Everyone, make sure you're hidden behind a boulder," said Cyrus hurriedly.

Ah! So I guess Cyrus really can sense some kind of presence. A moment later, a violent wind blew past us with an enormous roar. *This is just like last time! A wind so powerful it feels like a typhoon, or maybe even a tornado.* I hid behind a boulder and ducked down.

Even after I crouched, the wind was so intense that it nearly

carried me away. I stretched my arms out and felt around for a handhold, but I couldn't find any. *Oh no, I really might go flying*, I thought as I started to panic, but then I felt strong hands grab me by my shoulders. Since the wind was so strong that I couldn't keep my eyes open, I couldn't tell who it was.

Once I was sure that the wind had finally died down, I opened my eyes to find it was Laura who'd grabbed a hold of my shoulders with her brawny arms.

By the way, right next to me Cyrus had protected Maria in much the same way. A short distance away were Sora and Raphael. Raphael must have used his magic, since they seemed to be covered in something like a curtain made of wind. *I'm just glad that everyone's okay.*

"Thank you so much, Miss Laura," I said.

"Something else is coming," she whispered, a stern look on her face.

I was too startled to react at first, but a moment later I heard another deafening roar, accompanied by another strong gust of wind. *What's going on?!*

With Laura still holding me down by my shoulders, I waited for the wind to pass. Just as I was thinking, *Thank goodness, the wind's finally died down*, there was one more enormous roar, followed by yet another powerful gust of wind. *Really, what's going on?!*

Once the third gust of wind had finally subsided, we stood by for a while to see if anything else was coming, but there was no fourth gust of wind. For a moment I was relieved, thinking that the worst was past.

"It's all over. Thank goodness," I murmured.

Laura popped her head up over the boulder to survey the scene.

"No, it's only just begun," she said, a grim expression on her face.

"Listen, everyone, the situation is extremely dire now," Cyrus said after taking a peek of his own.

When I popped my head out like they just had, what I saw was familiar, and also the last thing I wanted to see.

"Dragons... Again... And this time there are *three* of them..." I murmured this in a daze, and the last of the wind carried my words

away.

Okay, well, I pretty much saw this coming, but now we have to face dragons again. And though each one is about the same size as the last one we faced, this time there are three of them. This is bad. This is a really *bad situation. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd pretend I never saw them and leave this cave right now.*

"Miss Laura, can we pretend we never saw these dragons and just go home?" I asked Laura, who was standing next to me, in a quiet voice.

"If only we could, I'd like to do that too. But as members of the Magical Ministry, whose job it is to ensure everyone's safety, I guess we can't," said Laura with a far-off look in her eyes.

The job of a Ministry employee is to ensure everyone's safety? That's the first I've heard of it.

"But don't worry. We'll make sure to protect you and Miss Maria, and give you a chance to escape if it comes to that," she said with a smile.

What a strong, lovely colleague she is.

"No, I couldn't possibly leave my dear colleague behind. Miss Laura, I'll fight to the very end!"

"Miss Katarina!" cried Laura as we clasped our hands together.

"We don't have time for that right now. We need to decide our roles for this battle," said Cyrus dispassionately, though his eyes were sharp as he looked at us.

Hey, Laura and I weren't messing around. We were just psyching ourselves up for the grueling battle ahead, I thought. But I felt like this would only sound like an excuse, so I didn't say it out loud. Instead, I listened quietly to Cyrus as he explained what our roles would be in the battle. *Right, since the dragons haven't noticed us yet, we'd better figure out our plan of attack while we still have the time.*

"For starters, let's split up into pairs to deal with each dragon," said Cyrus. *Well, there are six of us, so that does make sense.*

"As for how to decide the pairs, first of all, Miss Katarina. Your Dark Familiar proved itself in the last encounter, so you go first. And Wolt, you go with her to protect her. Make sure nothing happens to

her."

"Yes, sir," Raphael and I said in unison.

"Woof," said Pochi happily.

"Now, next we'll send..."

"Mr. Cyrus, I can attack them with Light Magic," said Maria, volunteering. "Since the last encounter, the number of spells I can use has grown thanks to the covenant. If these dragons are made of Dark Magic, I am sure my Light Magic will be effective against them. Please, let me go." Maria said all this with a valiant expression.

Cyrus looked slightly enthralled by her expression and took a while to respond.

"All right. I'll make sure to cover you, so just focus on your magic and do what you can."

"I guess that just leaves Sora and me. I don't know if it'll work or not, but I'll try giving them a taste of my magic. You try attacking them physically, okay, Sora?" said Laura.

"Understood," Sora replied with a nod.

And so we all divided up into teams.

"All right, everybody, good luck in battle," said Cyrus. Then we all headed off in our pairs, each facing a single dragon.

Raphael and I went to face what I think was probably the first dragon to appear (the one that appeared near Cyrus and the man he took out).

By the way, the other two dragons were accompanied by men who looked like they were members of the same gang as the tall, thin man Cyrus had taken out. But, in mere seconds, they were also knocked out by Cyrus and Laura. *Cyrus and Laura are both so strong.*

As I watched this out of the corner of my eye, Raphael, Pochi, and I all faced off against our dragon (since there are two other dragons, I'll just call this one Dragon 1). Though I am calling it Dragon 1 for the sake of convenience, it looked almost exactly like the other two. Actually...I couldn't discern a single difference. This dragon was the spitting image of every dragon I'd seen in storybook illustrations or video games in my past life. In other words, it was just like the last dragon I'd encountered in battle.

As we stood in front of Dragon 1, it stared back at us with its black eyes.

Hrmm, I have no idea what it's feeling right now. All I could tell was that it didn't look like it was about to attack us right away. Rather, it seemed to be observing us. *If this were a battle manga, would this be a scene where we all take turns loudly announcing our own names? Or is there in fact no reason to be so aggressive yet? I really can't tell how much of a threat it is, but there's no point in just sitting and waiting for the dragon to attack us. In situations like these, whoever strikes first is bound to win.*

"Pochi," I said, calling my Dark Familiar to attention.

Pochi's shape seemed to warp for a moment, then he turned huge all at once. He had taken the form of a giant wolf, just like I'd seen him do before. His appearance was really ferocious now, but when he turned to look at me his eyes seemed to say, *Just leave it to me*. That was Pochi through and through.

His transformation seemed to put Dragon 1 on its guard and it started to growl softly.

I guess I could just let Wolf Pochi take care of this, but...

"To start with, shall I try Absorb Darkness on it?" *If that works, not only Pochi will be able to fight, but I will too.*

In response to my question, Pochi looked a little dejected, as if to say, *What, don't I get a turn?*

"All right," Raphael answered. "If it makes a move, I should be able to hold it off somehow, so please try whatever you think might work, Katarina."

"Thank you, Raphael," I said, expressing my gratitude, before concentrating on visualizing my skull topped staff so it could take form.

As it finished coalescing in my hands, the staff looked venomous and totally villainous. *But I can fight with this. To protect the people I care about. I think if I just picture sucking up the darkness, like always, it should work. If I just think of the dragon as nothing more than a bigger lump of darkness, I'm sure it'll work.* I raised my staff to absorb Dragon 1. *Just imagine a vacuum cleaner sucking it up...*

"It moved!" cried Raphael.

Since I was so focused on picturing my spell at work, I didn't notice at first, but Raphael's voice made me jump back to attention. When I looked up at Dragon 1, I could see its tail was, without a doubt, starting to move toward us. Almost like it was being sucked up.

"It's working!"

This'll work. I can absorb the whole thing. I tried picturing the darkness being absorbed even more strongly. When I did that, Dragon 1's tail started to look like smoke and my staff steadily slurped it up. *Next, I just need to suck up the rest of it...*

Or, so I thought, but Dragon 1 wasn't as obedient as the snake I'd recently absorbed and it refused to go all the way in. When it realized its tail was being sucked into my staff, it turned back with a look of alarm, then started crawling away in the opposite direction!

"Huh?!" I cried out suddenly when I saw Dragon 1 fleeing.

I mean, I had my guard up in case it tried to fight back, but I never would have expected it to run away. Dragons may look ferocious, but maybe they're actually sensitive creatures. Wait, this is no time to be thinking about that. I can't let it get away.

"Stop right there!" I said as I ran after Dragon 1.

"Hold on, Katarina, don't do anything too reckless," said Raphael, and I just barely heard him, but I didn't have the mental leeway to respond to him.

"I said stop! Why, you!" I cried, thrusting out my skull-topped staff. When I did so, I was relieved to see the dragon's tail start to be sucked into the end of the staff again. *If I keep absorbing it while running after it, that'll work.* Luckily, probably because it was being absorbed, Dragon 1 slowed down.

Thus a tableau formed with me on one side of the frame, holding out my staff to suck the dragon up, and the dragon on the other, trying to escape its fate by running away. Though this was hardly the time or place, I was reminded of a ghost hunting video game I once played in my past life, which featured the younger of two very famous brothers. This situation was a lot like that game.

No, no, this isn't the time. I've got to hurry up and suck up that ghost—I mean, dragon—with my vacuum cleaner—I mean, staff!

With a slurping sound, Dragon 1's torso turned into smoke and went into the staff, but it didn't know when to quit and kept fleeing. I went after it, still brandishing my staff.

While I was chasing Dragon 1, I passed by Laura and Dragon 2, who were also engaged in combat. I saw that Laura was giving Dragon 2 quite a pummeling with her magic, while Sora slashed at it with his sword, yet it remained unscathed.

I knew it. Against these Dark Familiar dragons, normal magic and physical attacks won't work. At this rate, Laura and Sora will wear themselves out, I thought.

"Pochi, go help Laura and Sora. I can take care of myself." Pochi seemed to hesitate, but when I added, "Please?" he ran to help the others.

Once Pochi had charged at Dragon 2 and sunk his teeth into it, it let out a strangled cry and staggered back. *Looks like Pochi's attacks are working. Thank goodness. Thanks, Pochi*, I said internally, before returning my attention to my own opponent.

It's already sucked into my staff up to its chest. Just a little more. But, even with its chest having been vacuumed up, Dragon 1 continued trying to escape. *It really doesn't know when to quit.*

As I continued chasing Dragon 1, I passed by Maria and Cyrus next. Maria pelted Dragon 3 with some kind of orbs of light. Dragon 3 gave a strangled cry and I could see it was starting to weaken. *Looks like they're doing fine, thank goodness.*

Still, Maria's attacks are so cool. With her Light Magic attacks and Giant Pochi's battle of tooth and claw, any onlooker would have seen two epic battles. In contrast, I was playing a ghost hunting game by myself. *No, this is fine, right? What's wrong with playing this like a ghost hunting game? Dragons are monsters too. I'll just make sure to suck up every last bit of this dragon with my vacuum cleaner—I mean, my staff!*

I tightened my grip on my staff and prepared myself for one last push. The next thing I knew, the dragon had been absorbed up to its neck. If I had to describe it, I'd say that it looked like Dragon 1's head was growing out of the end of my staff. *Okay! Now I just need to suck up the head, and it'll all be over*, I thought, letting my guard

down just a little.

It was at that moment that Dragon 1, after all that running away, made one last-ditch effort at a counterattack. In its last vain struggle, its head wheeled around to face me. Then it opened its huge mouth wide and spat some kind of black fog at me!

Eh? Huh? I'm guessing you really don't want that stuff to touch you! But since I was already busy absorbing the dragon itself, I wasn't able to absorb the black fog as well. *What should I do? Can I blow it back with my own breath? No, that won't work. What should I—*

At that moment, a gale of wind came from behind me, blasting the encroaching fog away before my eyes. I gasped and turned around.

"I'm glad I could be of some use," said Rapahel, standing there with a look of relief.

"Thank you," I said. At almost the same time, I heard a slurping sound and saw the rest of Dragon 1 disappear into the end of my skull-topped staff.

I was so relieved, I felt all the tension leave my body. *It's over.* But really, this only meant that my battle with Dragon 1 was over.

What about the others? I thought and looked around. First, I looked in the direction of Dragon 2 and the team of Laura, Sora, and Pochi. Pochi had his teeth buried deep in Dragon 2's throat and had brought it to the ground.



"Hooray!" I cried out without thinking, clenching my hands tightly into fists. I watched the defeated Dragon 2 let out a puff of smoke and start to fade away. This was the same thing that had happened last time. *Looks like these dragons really are the same kind we faced before.*

This left Dragon 3, which had been brought to its knees under a barrage of light from Maria. Soon, it started to fade away, just like Dragon 2.

"All right. We beat all of them." This time, I really thought it was all over. I felt a deep sense of relief.

"Yeah, looks like you got all of them. And after I went to the trouble of using so many *test subjects* to make these three behemoths." This voice came from the same direction the men had appeared from earlier. Without knowing it, I'd chased my dragon all the way to the entrance the men had used.

When I looked in the direction the voice had come from, I saw a woman with long, black hair who'd become very familiar to me. Her name was Sarah. I had seen her not too long ago, during the incident with Maria, but I was unfortunately in the middle of a Dark Magic rampage at the time and didn't get to talk to her. The last time we spoke was the time that I went to Randall Manor to rescue Fray. Sarah had been willing to look the other way when we left that time.

I couldn't help being concerned about Sarah. I knew that she had lived under horrible circumstances, and I'd been hoping for the chance to have a proper talk with her for a while now. Since I was already close enough to her to hear her voice, which wasn't very loud, it took me no time to walk right up to her.

"Um, Sarah," I called out after approaching her.

She had been staring off into space, but now turned to face me.

"Oh, it's you. Again. Tell me, why do you keep getting in my way? I've failed yet again because of you. What are you going to do about it?" Sarah asked, frowning as if she were angry with me.

"Failed? Um, Sarah, what were you trying to do?"

"Is there any reason I should tell you?"

"I've told you this before, but I really just want to talk to you. I

want to know more about you."

"Honestly, I never know what you're talking about—"

I saw Sarah freeze up suddenly. Her eyes were wide open, as was her mouth. I'd never seen that expression on her face before.

Oh? What's the matter with her? Hmm? She isn't looking at me. When I realized this and followed her gaze, I realized she was looking somewhere behind me. I turned around to see what she was looking at, and who should I see standing there but Raphael, who had just saved me from danger moments earlier.

Sarah was staring right at him, with her eyes wide open.

What's going on? Why is she so surprised to see Raphael? Just as I was wrestling with that question, I saw Raphael freeze just like Sarah. His eyes were also wide open.

It's almost like these two recognize each other. Have they met before?

"Um, aren't you—" Raphael started to say something, but before he could finish, Sarah widened her eyes even more, then did a one-eighty. In the very next moment, the inside of the cave was shrouded in darkness.

Aah, this is Sarah's Dark Magic. Having been on the receiving end of her magic many times before, I knew this immediately, but it looked like the others weren't so quick on the uptake.

"Maria, are you okay?" said Cyrus, sounding worried.

"Eh? What is this?" wondered Laura, sounding upset.

"Hang on, Miss Laura, that's my hand you're holding," said Sora, apparently affronted by something Laura had done.

Since they all seemed to be confused, I felt like things would only get worse if I didn't say something.

"Everyone, this is probably Dark Magic at work. Everything should go back to normal after a little while. If we just sit tight and wait a minute, we should be fine."

All three of them then responded in the same order as before.

"I see. Got it."

"My, is that right?"

"Ah, I see. So this is Dark Magic."

After we waited for a while, just as I expected, the darkness

vanished and our surroundings became visible again. But Sarah was nowhere to be seen.

"Yep, looks like everything really is back to normal," said Cyrus.

"That's how Sarah's Dark Magic works. She's used it on me a few times before, so I could tell."

"Sarah? I've heard reports about her. Was she here?"

Apparently Cyrus hadn't noticed Sarah. He had just defeated a dragon, so maybe his attention was focused on that.

"Ah, yes, sir. She came out of the far side of the cave a moment ago, and we spoke briefly, but then she used that spell to escape," I explained.

"I see," said Cyrus with a look of disappointment on his face.

Sarah's still much better at Dark Magic than me, so I can't keep up with her. I'm sorry. But the thing that's bothering me the most right now is...

"Raphael, are you okay?" I called out, seeing that Raphael still looked stunned.

His expression shifted; my voice must have snapped him out of his daze.

"Yes, I'm fine. Sorry, looks like I got a little flustered," he said, bowing apologetically.

Given how calm and collected Raphael usually was, it was extremely odd to see him so stunned that he needed me to get his attention like that.

"Um, Raphael, are you and Sarah acquainted with one another?"

In answer to my question, Raphael shook his head.

"No, *I'm* not acquainted with her."

Eh?! But they were looking at each other so intently! In fact, it looked to me like Sarah ran away after seeing Raphael, so what's going on?

Raphael must have guessed what I was thinking based on my expression.

"I'm sorry. I just need a little more time to collect my thoughts, then I'll explain. Can you wait for the time being?" he said with a wry smile.

"Okay," I said, nodding.

Our exchange was interrupted by Cyrus, who sounded anxious.

"Hey! Maria, are you okay?"

Startled, I turned to see Maria slumped over and looking like she was about to fall down. Cyrus held her up.

"Eh? Maria!" I hurried over to find that Maria was as white as a sheet. "Maria, what's wrong? Are you okay? Were you hurt during the fight?"

Pale though she was, Maria heard my question and weakly shook her head.

"No, I am fine. I am not injured. However, I do appear to have used a bit too much of my magic..."

I see, so she just used too much magic. She overused her Light Magic in order to defeat Dragon 3.

Maria had a lot of magical power, but it wasn't unlimited. If she used far too much of it, she could get exhausted. Unlike Dark Magic, normal magic could be replenished by resting. But given her condition, it looked like she would need a while to recover. However, Maria was always prepared to push herself too hard.

"Excuse me, but I am fine," she said, trying to persuade Cyrus he didn't need to support her.

"No, you aren't," I countered firmly. "Maria, if only you could see your face. If you keep this up, you'll collapse. In fact, you almost just did. Don't overdo it. Let Mr. Cyrus carry you for now and get some rest!"

"All right, Mr. Cyrus, pick her up," I instructed Cyrus. He did what he was told and picked her up.

"Excuse me, but I really cannot impose on you to this extent," said Maria anxiously.

I walked up to her, covered her eyes with my hand and said insistently, "Close your eyes and rest. If you don't, you'll collapse and we'll be in even more trouble."

Maria finally seemed to understand her situation and closed her eyes.

After I'd entrusted the magically depleted and weakened Maria to Cyrus's care, Raphael, Laura, Sora, and I began to survey the inside of the cave.

"There's nothing over here," I announced.

"Nothing in the back either," said Raphael.

"No problem on this side," reported Sora.

"This area looks okay too. Which means there's nothing left in the cave, right? Well, everyone, we don't want the sun setting on us, so let's head home shall we?" said Laura, before picking up two of the unconscious men we'd left behind during the battle (tied up with rope) and slinging them over her shoulders like sacks of potatoes.

"All right, then I'll take care of this one," said Sora, hefting the remaining man.

"Let me know if you get tired, and I'll carry him too," said Laura.

"I can hardly ask you to carry three men," Sora replied. "Besides, carrying one is no big deal for me."

"As there are three of them, I feel I should be carrying one of them," said Raphael, sounding somewhat discouraged.

"Now, you may be the real head of our department, but you aren't exactly brawny. Rather, you're the brainy type. Besides, in case things turn dicey again, it'd be better to leave someone with their hands free to protect Miss Katarina," said Laura. This seemed to convince Raphael.

But you know, it's rare to see Raphael looking so discouraged. And he's kind of cute like that.

By the way, Cyrus had taken it upon himself to give Maria a proper bridal carry.

When we came out of the cave through the same narrow tunnel we'd used to enter it, the forest somehow looked different than it had when we first arrived. I was wondering what exactly was different when I heard some chirping, then I realized what it was. When I looked up I saw some birds perched in the trees.

I see, so the animals are returning to the forest. This was also just like the last time we faced a dragon. When that Dark Familiar came to that other forest, the animals had all fled. *I'm sure this forest will soon be back to normal.*

After heading back the way we came, we arrived safely at the gate in the fence surrounding the forest and found Tyler and the rest of his staff waiting for us.

"Eh? Is Miss Campbell all right?" asked Tyler, after noticing that Cyrus was carrying Maria. He sounded worried.

"She used too much magic and wore herself out. I'd like to let her rest immediately, so let's return to the branch office for now and I'll tell you what happened in detail once we're there," said Cyrus, still carrying Maria carefully as he boarded his carriage.

Since Cyrus had already boarded the carriage, Raphael took over explaining the situation to Tyler in his place.

"In broad strokes, this was just the kind of disturbance you predicted, Tyler. It was very similar to the case you were notified about. And these men here are our prime suspects," said Raphael, indicating the men Laura and Sora were carrying.

"Ahh, thank you very much. Well, for now, we'll take these men into custody. Please take your own carriages back to the branch office," said Tyler as his staff took the men into custody.

We climbed into our own carriages and returned to the branch office. The carriages were occupied by the same people who had ridden in them on the way to the forest. Cyrus, Maria, and Raphael rode in one carriage, and Sora, Laura, and I were in the other one.

"Those men weren't all that heavy, but I'm still a little tired after carrying one all that way," said Sora as he rotated his shoulders.

"I could have kept going," boasted Laura, showing off her bristling biceps.

Just like on the way to the forest, our carriage made it back to the branch office in no time at all.

Maria was taken to a break room to get some rest, while the rest of us were shown to the same meeting room we'd used the previous day.

Our search in the forest and the battle with the dragons had taken a fair bit of time. It was late afternoon now, and the rumbling of my stomach sounded like a grand chorus. Thankfully, the same woman who had brought in the snacks yesterday came in with a new batch.

"You must be hungry. Please, help yourself to some snacks," she said, and I gratefully started wolfing them down on the spot.

These rice crackers are yummy. I also felt the energy from the

sugar candies seep into my tired body.

Perhaps spurred on by the enthusiasm with which I ate the snacks, or perhaps because they were also famished, everyone else started snacking too—though maybe not quite as much as me.

"Now then, let me recount what happened in the forest," said Cyrus, before starting to explain to Tyler what had happened (while glossing over any of the details about Dark Magic). Just as I would have expected from someone as clever as Cyrus, he did a perfect job of summarizing what had happened.

Now and then, Tyler turned to me to check that we were on the same page, and I somehow managed to sum up a few important details of my own. In particular, since Raphael and I were the only ones who encountered Sarah, we were asked a lot of questions about that. But we moved on after explaining that we had no idea why Sarah had fled so suddenly. This was at Raphael's insistence.

I wouldn't have minded asking him about it myself, but when I caught a glimpse of his face in profile I could tell he didn't want anyone asking about it, so I couldn't bring myself to go on talking about it.

Thanks to Cyrus, we smoothly moved through the rest of our report, and were finished without having taken too much time. Then it was time for us to head back to Cyrus's family's home, the manor of the marquess, to spend the evening.

When we returned to our carriages, Maria had recovered enough to stand up, but Cyrus was a little overprotective and insisted on giving her a bridal carry again. I could hardly believe this was the same man who had recently said that riding in the same carriage with Maria would be impossible.

When we arrived back at the lord's manor, the sky outside had turned orange.

Once we were inside, Cyrus gave Maria another bridal carry straight to her room, startling everyone in the manor quite a bit. Haru was the only one who didn't seem stunned, but rather looked sad when I saw her.

As I entered the manor, my stomach—always a slave to its own desires—started to rumble, demanding something for supper.

"Really? After you ate all those snacks?" said Sora before bursting out laughing.

I have a second stomach for snacks. I skipped lunch, so there's no way my tummy would be satisfied with those snacks alone.

One of the servants overheard my stomach's recital.

"We already have a meal ready for you."

Then we were served our supper. Skipping lunch may have had something to do with it, but the white rice and miso soup really hit the spot. Yesterday I'd had too many extra helpings of soup and ended up needing to run to the bathroom, so this time I thought I'd restrain myself...but with my longing for Japanese food finally having been answered, plus the fact that I'd been working on an empty stomach, my self-control failed and I had another helping.

Everyone was tired from the day's work, so we all retired to our rooms early.

Out of consideration for her condition, a light supper had been served to Maria in her bedroom. By the time we had returned to the manor, Maria's complexion was looking much healthier and I was glad to hear that she was able to eat as well.

I was tired, so I thought I'd go to bed right away, but after having too many bowls of miso soup, I needed to go to the bathroom again. I'd repeated the same mistake that I'd made yesterday. *But this is the* only *place I can eat miso soup*, I thought defiantly, convinced that the chance to enjoy that flavor was worth an extra trip or three to the bathroom.

On my way back from the bathroom I passed the same terrace from the previous night. Since Maria wasn't feeling well, I figured she couldn't be out there with Cyrus again. When I looked out through the open door, I saw someone else standing there.

"Raphael," I called out, seeing his red hair fluttering in the night air as he turned to face me.

"Katarina. I thought you were tired and would be going to bed early tonight. Couldn't you sleep?" he inquired.

"Well, you see, I had too many bowls of miso soup and ended up needing to go to the bathroom," I confessed honestly.

Raphael blinked in surprise, then chuckled in delight.

"That's just like you, Katarina."

"What about you, Raphael?"

"I just wanted to feel the wind on my face," said Raphael. His expression seemed slightly sad.

I wonder if he's thinking about Sarah. I was curious, but I thought he might still be collecting his thoughts on the subject. I decided not to pry. Instead, I stood beside him in silence and enjoyed the feeling of the wind on my face. It wasn't too cold, so it was quite pleasant. *Standing outside and enjoying the wind isn't so bad. And it was those extra helpings of miso soup that made this possible*, I realized, retroactively validating my eating choices.

As I stood there in a daze, Raphael started speaking softly.

"Can I tell you something about that woman with the black hair, the one called Sarah?"

I'd thought he wasn't ready to talk about her yet, so I was a little bit surprised that he broached the subject.

"Sure, if you don't mind talking about it. Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah, and I think I'm about ready to tell everyone else too. But I'd like you to be the first to hear this, Katarina. Would that be okay?"

"If that's what you want, go ahead."

"Yep, as the one who released me from that darkness, I want to tell you first."

Hm? I don't think I did anything special for Raphael... I thought to myself, but this wasn't the kind of atmosphere where I felt I could say something like that. Instead, I just nodded.

"As I told you back in the cave, that woman Sarah and *I* are not acquaintances. I'm sure that was *my* first time meeting her. But I have *seen* her once before—in Sirius Dieke's memories."

"Sirius Dieke? You mean the only son of Marquess Dieke, who died of an illness?"

"Yep, that's who I mean. His memories were transferred to me using Dark Magic. So I know everything he ever saw or experienced. Within those memories, I had a glimpse of a young girl who I think was Sarah."

At the hands of Marquess Dieke's wife, Raphael had been turned into a vessel for her son's memories, while Sirius himself was at death's door. But reality did not conform to her wishes. Raphael had remained Raphael even while carrying Sirius's memories.

I'd heard the story before, but this was the first time I'd heard Raphael speak about any of the people he had seen in Sirius's memories. I was certainly shocked to hear that Sarah was one of them.

"I've heard that Sarah was forced to take part in Dark Magic research. Are you saying that's how they met?" I inquired, comparing Raphael's account to what I'd heard from Larna about Sarah's upbringing.

Raphael shook his head.

"No, that doesn't seem to have been the case. It's more like they met by chance," he said, looking slightly wistful. "It seemed like Sirius was exhausted by his mother's dependence on him, and used to sneak out of his room from time to time to blow off some steam. As best I can tell, he met that girl with the black hair on one of these excursions. Since he wasn't allowed to spend time with other children, this girl was very special to him. The time he spent with her was the only time he seemed to truly enjoy himself—so much so that he wished they could be together forever. But then Sirius's illness worsened and he couldn't go and see her anymore."

I'd heard that Sirius Dieke's mother—the wife of Marquess Dieke—used to cling to her only son to make up for the absence of her husband, who paid little attention to her and indulged his desires outside the home instead.

I had also heard that, because of his mother's clinginess—as well as his own illness—Sirius had begun to think, "I'm tired; all I want is to be at peace." Upon hearing that he used to enjoy spending time with a young girl who might have been Sarah, I felt my chest grow tight and start to hurt.

Raphael looked like he felt much the same way.

"When I first recalled those memories of Sirius Dieke's, I felt sorry for him. But when I saw that woman today, it dredged up those memories of the time Sirius spent with that girl and it really shook

me up. I was reminded that Sirius really did have a life of his own. Sometimes I've thought of him more like a character in a storybook that I remember reading, so I hadn't really let myself be bothered by his memories before. Today, I felt truly sorry for him for the first time," muttered Rapahel. Then, with a self-deprecating chuckle, he added, "I'm heartless, aren't I?"

"You're definitely not heartless, Raphael. You're really kind. I mean, you're someone who can shed tears for a child he's hardly had anything to do with."

"Tears...?" It appeared that Rapahel hadn't even realized he was weeping. When he raised his hand and felt the tears streaming down his cheeks, he looked bewildered. "What are all these tears...?"

As Raphael stood there in a daze, the tears continuing to stream down his cheeks, I felt really sad all of a sudden. So I hugged him tightly and patted him on the back.

"When you feel like crying, it's better to let it all out. You'll feel better," I said.

Raphael chuckled at first, but then silently wept for a while. When the tears finally stopped, I patted him on the back again. Once he calmed down, Raphael looked embarrassed.

"Um, sorry about that. I feel like I can't help but relax around you, Katarina."

"Ah, I feel like I've heard that before, like from Mr. Cyrus. He said I'm like one of the older ladies who used to work on the farms around here, so he feels like he can relax around me." *Huh. Come to think of it, Cezar* also *said something similar the other day.*

"One of the older ladies who used to work on the farms...?" Raphael chuckled as if he found this amusing. I was just glad to see a smile on his face. After laughing for a while, Raphael said, "Yep, I do feel better now. Now I feel like I can make a proper report in front of everyone tomorrow. Though first, I'll make sure to apologize for dodging those questions today. That was selfish of me... I really am glad I talked to you first, Katarina. Thanks."

"Oh, no, I didn't do anything."

If Maria were here instead, I'm sure she could have come up with something lovely to say, but there's no way any pretty words would

come out of the mouth of a villainess like me.

"No, you really helped me out. Now, I'll need to check something first, but then I'd like to talk to you about another thing. When I'm ready, will you listen?" said Raphael.

I nodded energetically.

"Yes, though I really can't do anything besides listen to you."

"That's all I need," said Rapahel with a gentle smile.

Then we parted ways, and I returned to my room.

I don't think I'll need the bathroom again, I thought to myself, leaping into bed and immediately drifting away into my dreams.

★★★★★★

"Something was off with Sarah today, don't you think?" said the man standing in front of me, his eyes smiling behind his glasses as if he were enjoying himself. His gaze was trained on me with the same attention he always gave his research subjects.

I knew that if I let my ill humor show, he wouldn't take kindly to it. Even so, it was true that Sarah hadn't performed as we'd hoped.

"I guess so," I half-heartedly agreed, hardly paying him attention.

He must not have liked my attitude, since a note of irritation crept into his voice.

"Haven't we had a few too many hiccups lately? If things keep up like this, it may get in the way of my research."

Research was everything to this man. Things like the lives of others and ethics came second, or maybe even third, on his list of priorities. The thought that his research might not be going well made him extra annoyed, to the point that he lost interest in all else. He was truly an easy man to read.

"Of course this failure was extremely regrettable, but so was *your* failure to take care of Maria Campbell last time. We may be able to falsify other people's memories, but not hers. If things go on like this, they might learn that their memories don't line up with Maria Campbell's and figure out that we've been falsifying them all this time."

The man scratched his head in irritation.

"I've taken action to prevent that. Please don't worry," I said offhandedly.

The man frowned but said nothing more. He was probably thinking that no matter what he said to me, it wouldn't have any effect. He really was so easy to read.

"Now then, I have a report to give, so you'll have to excuse me," I said, striding past the man.

By failing to capture Maria Campbell before, and then failing to increase the ranks of our Dark Familiars on this occasion, things really hadn't been going well from the perspective of *our employer*. That man wasn't as easy to read as my present company, but I bet he was none too happy with us.

As far as I was concerned, though, things were getting pretty interesting. It was always more interesting when things went badly, compared to when they went well. I always welcomed a crisis. To me, they were fun.

Ah, I haven't felt this way in a while. And to think I didn't feel a thing when my wife was arrested for her crimes, and I lost my house because of her. If things keep progressing like this, maybe I'll get to see that child *again. I wonder what the look on their face will be when I show up. I can't wait to find out.*

Chapter 5: Time to Return to the Magical Ministry

Now then. The day after we defeated the dragons, Raphael reported the fact that he had recognized Sarah to Cyrus. He mentioned there was a possibility that she had only fled after realizing who he was; seeing him may have shaken her. At Raphael's request, I accompanied him at this discussion.

"I do grasp your background, Wolt, and as I understand you were also shaken, I don't mean to blame you. However, as an employee of the Magical Ministry, it wasn't right for you to conceal such vital information from us—you should have provided it right away. In future, try not to make the same error," said Cyrus with his boss face on.

"Yes, sir," replied Raphael firmly.

Then Cyrus, our levelheaded boss, devoted himself to writing a more detailed summary of the previous day's events, processing that information as part of his own job.

"After a good night's sleep I feel much better. Thank you so much for yesterday," said Maria with a cheerful smile.

Overprotective that he was, Cyrus kept worrying about her. Maria could only express her gratitude.

Cyrus has always been a bit of a busybody. He's always worrying about me too.

Since he had difficulty dealing with young women, and because Maria was his first love, he'd struggled to interact with her in the past. The events of yesterday, which had seen him carrying Maria in his arms the entire time after we left the cave, had worked as a kind of radical treatment for his aversion. *That must be why he can interact with her normally now.* Now his tendency to care too much about everyone had shone through, and he'd become far more

assertive in terms of showing attention to Maria. *At this rate, he might actually be able to compete with Dewey.*

Maria, who tended to work too hard and wasn't good at relying on others, seemed to find it a little easier to depend on Cyrus now that he'd changed. I saw her ask him to explain work matters to her more often, and they were starting to spend more time together.

From an onlooker's perspective, they seemed to be getting along very well. The residents of Cyrus's family manor watched them with warmth in their eyes. Only one person looked at them with an expression of sadness and heartbreak—that was Haru.

Originally, she was scheduled to return to Xiarmah immediately.

"After what happened, I feel like I want to stay and help repair the damage to the farmland. I want to repay the people here for their hospitality," said Haru, explaining why she would be staying a while longer.

Since Sora, Laura, and I weren't great at paperwork, we all helped Haru out on the farms.

Because the fields had been trampled by all the animals, they would need to be plowed again. We would also have to clean up the remains of vegetables that had been eaten and were now strewn across the ground. And once that was all done, there was still rice to be harvested. The farmers of the region of Victoire were so busy that they were more than willing to accept a helping hand.

Though I understood very well that the farmers' situation was difficult, my heart sang at the opportunity to work on a field for the first time in a while, and to help harvest rice for the first time since my past life.

"Wow, Katarina, you're good at this," said one of the old farmers, praising me for the deftness with which I reaped the stalks of rice. I couldn't help but smile.

"No, really?" I said. This was the first time that my experience harvesting rice in my past life had ever come in useful.

Haru, who was helping us, also sang my praises.

"I can't believe this is your first time. You really are good at this."

"Heh heh," I laughed, feeling awfully proud.

By the way, since Haru also had experience harvesting rice back

in Xiarmah, she was very good herself.

"We do hope you can come and help us again next month, when we plant the vegetables," said the old-timer from the farm, smiling.

"Heh heh heh, please, just leave it to me," I answered, holding my head even higher.

Then Sora butted in.

"Hey," he said sharply, "you know you can't stay here that long, right? You have to go back to work at the Ministry."

"Aah! That's right," I said in surprise.

The old-timer looked disappointed.

"Oh, that's right. You work at the Magical Ministry, don't you, Katarina? You were starting to fit in so well that I thought I was talking to a local kid."

"I'm sorry. I was getting so into the farmwork, I forgot that I have a job to go back to," I said.

The old man and Haru laughed, while Sora just looked exasperated.

"Oh, gramps! Do you mind if I carry these away as well?" said Laura, hefting a huge armful of rice stalks.

"Ah, yes please, Miss Laura," answered the old man. He seemed astonished when he saw how briskly Laura carried off the bundles of rice stalks.

"Gee whiz. It's such a great help to have you young people here with us. Y'see, now that all the young people have left and it's just us old-timers here, even our daily farmwork is getting to be tough," murmured the farmer.

The lack of young people staying in the country was a problem in my past life. Looks like the same is true here.

"What a pity. It's so green here, and the food is delicious."

"Oh, Katarina, it makes me so happy to hear you say that. I'm fond of this place too. When I was young, I used to think the country was boring, but after I went to the city, I missed the country and decided to come back. There's so much nature to enjoy here, and the people are so peaceful."

"That's so true. I'm sure people would see how nice it is here, if only they would come. If only there was some way of attracting

younger visitors."

Hmmm... At times like these, I always wish my knowledge from my past life would come in useful, but nothing springs to mind.

"I have an idea. To start with, why not try spreading awareness about the food here? I tried Xiarmah cuisine for the first time on this trip, but it was pretty tasty and now I'm totally obsessed with it. How about you start marketing the food of this region and get people interested that way?" suggested Laura as she carried away another bundle of rice.

"Oh, yeah. I totally agree. Try showing more people the appeal of your cuisine. If possible, I'd like for it to become popular in the royal capital!" I said, sneaking in my own personal wishes.

The old man blinked in surprise.

"I see. Since I'm used to eating our cuisine, I'd never really thought much about it, but you're right. I'll bring it up the next time our farmers' guild meets."

If this goes well, one day I might even be able to eat Japanese food in the royal capital. How exciting!

"Well, then, I think we've done enough for today. Thanks, everyone. Once we're finished milling the rice, we'll have some delivered to you."

"Rice?! Fresh rice?! I can't wait!" I shrieked. I was delighted at the thought of finally getting to eat some freshly harvested rice.

"Wait, the others are probably nearly done with the paperwork here, and the farms are pretty much back to normal. Don't you think we'll probably be ordered back to the Ministry tomorrow, or the day after?" said Sora.

I was mortified by this realization.

"Now, now. That isn't settled yet," said Laura, trying to cheer me up. But I had a bad feeling that Sora was right.

"I see, so you'll be going home soon. It was so much fun working on the fields and paddies with you all, I'm sad to see you go," said Haru, her eyes slightly downcast.

"Will you be staying in Victoire for a bit longer?" I asked.

"Hmmm, well... It won't be too long before I head home. My family is probably worried about me."

"This has ended up being quite a long trip for you, hasn't it?"

"Tee hee. It really has... But I've had so much fun."

"Haru, please feel free to visit the royal capital again some time. I'll treat you to some tasty food this time."

"Really?! I can't wait."

I then asked Haru what her address was and we agreed to write to each other.

After I finished chatting to Haru and returned to the lord's manor, sadly, Sora's prediction came true.

"We managed to complete all the paperwork today. I'm told that the work mending the damage to the fields is also pretty much done, so we'll be returning to the Ministry tomorrow," Cyrus announced cruelly.

In my heart, I burst out crying. *Fresh rice. What about my fresh rice...?*

Dinner that evening would be our last meal in the region. In the hopes of tiding myself over by filling up on Japanese food now, I had extra helpings of rice and miso soup.

After having run to the bathroom during the night two nights in a row, I knew I should show more restraint, but when I thought about the fact that this would be my last chance for a while, I just couldn't. I had more helpings that night than I'd had for any of the previous meals we'd eaten there. I kept eating until my dress was about to burst at the seams around my waist. As a result, I had to run to the bathroom during the night again.

After just barely making it to the bathroom without incident, on my way back to my room I happened upon Cyrus, who was furtively calling at Haru's door so they could meet and talk. They then went to the same balcony where they'd spoken two nights earlier.

I guess this is just a convenient spot? Still, why does someone always seem to be out here when I'm going to the bathroom? Wait, could it be that someone has a rendezvous here every day, and I only noticed because I've had to go to the bathroom?

While I pondered this chicken-and-egg problem, I worried that I might be discovered if I just walked past, so I stood still and eavesdropped.

"Miss Haru, although I said that night that there isn't anyone I have feelings for, the truth is that there is someone else. Though we aren't yet lovers, or even particularly close acquaintances, I can't see myself getting engaged to any other woman, let alone married," said Cyrus, looking Haru straight in the eye. This was a very Cyrus way of phrasing things.

"So it would seem..." Haru replied. "Having watched you during this trip, Cyrus, I realized who it is you have feelings for."

I knew it, I thought when I heard her say that. *When I saw that lonely look in her eyes, I could tell that she knew everything. Before we arrived here, Maria said she would support Haru and help her find out what kind of woman Cyrus likes, but since arriving here and getting caught up in our mission, it looks like Maria forgot. Haru didn't make too many attempts to get closer to Cyrus either. She just looked at Maria and Cyrus with that lonely look in her eyes.*

But what about Cyrus himself?

"You knew?!" he cried in shock, apparently not having thought that anyone could tell how he felt.

"Yes. That's when I realized I would never be the one for you. And so..." At that moment, I thought Haru might have something resentful to say to Cyrus, like complaining about the fact that Cyrus had lied about not having feelings for someone else when asked. However, all Haru actually said was, "Cyrus, I will pray that you two will be brought together and be happy."

Given the dignified tone of voice with which she said this, I felt like Haru was speaking from the heart, rather than just putting on a brave face. With her back straight, Haru gracefully walked away in the opposite direction from me.

My view of her departure was beautiful, but my heart still ached for her. *Haru must have been a rival character in* Fortune Lover II*.*

In the first game, Mary also had to watch her fiancé grow attracted to the protagonist in that route, and in the end expressed her wish for their happiness before departing. When I played the game, all I thought was how touching the scene was, and how cool Mary was.

But the Haru I'd met here was a real, living person. Her feelings

weren't make-believe. This realization made me feel sad, sorrowful even.

When I looked at Cyrus from behind as he stood on the balcony, I thought he looked somewhat sorrowful too.

I returned to my room with a fairly solemn feeling and went to sleep.

The next day, once we'd all made our preparations to return home, we stepped out into the manor's garden. Naturally, Cyrus's family came to see us off, but so did Tyler from the regional branch office. Only Haru was nowhere to be seen.

Cyrus's mother of unspecified age had prepared so many parting gifts for us that I could hardly keep track of it all. There were lots of Japanese-style ingredients and sweets, so I was extremely pleased, but there turned out to be so much that it wouldn't all fit in the carriage. So, with tears in my eyes, I left some behind.

By the way, the fresh rice didn't make it in time. But when she saw me about to cry again, Cyrus's mother promised that, if possible, she would make sure to send some to me in the royal capital.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Lanchester!" I cried, so pleased that I felt I might throw my arms around her.

"I'm honored to see you so pleased. From now on, I'll send a lot more care packages to Cyrus, so make sure to take your share," said Cyrus's mother with a wonderful smile. My delight soared to new heights, but Cyrus wore a more ambivalent expression.

Once everyone had a chance to say goodbye, our carriages set off again. The passengers in each carriage were different than when we had first arrived. Cyrus, Maria, and Raphael took one carriage, while Laura, Sora, and I took the other one.

After we had traveled for a little while, as I was gazing out the window, I spied a woman out in one of the fields, waving at us enthusiastically. It was Haru.

"Goodbye, Haru! See you again some time!" I shouted out the window, waving as hard as I could.

With the image of Haru's receding figure burned into my mind,

our mission in Victoire came to an end.

The day after we departed from Victoire, at high noon, we arrived safely back at the Magical Ministry.

Since we'd contacted them beforehand, all my familiar friends were waiting for us outside. They all often seemed to be willing to take time out of their days to greet me when I returned from a long work trip. When I considered how busy they must be, and that they took the time in spite of that, I felt so happy to have such good friends.

"Katarina."

"Lady Katarina."

"Big sis."

They were all delighted to see me make it home safely. I wanted to tell them all about my fight with the dragons, and everything else that had transpired, but...

"First, we have to report on our mission," said Cyrus as he escorted me back to Larna's office.

As they watched Cyrus lead me away like a lamb to the slaughter, my friends all chuckled wryly and said they'd see me later.

All right, now we're back, and it's time to report to Larna (the boss), I told myself, though it turned out that, with Cyrus on our team, all the important details had already been communicated to Larna ahead of time. So after Larna welcomed me back, we should have been basically done. Unfortunately, she was *very* interested to hear even more about our latest encounter with dragons.

"About how big were they? What color? And how did they move?" she asked, bombarding me with one question after another, her eyes gleaming. So the meeting somehow took even longer than I'd anticipated.

Finally, I'm about to be released from Larna's questioning... I thought to myself, but she showed no signs of running out of questions. In the end, Cyrus had to cut her off.

"Everyone's tired," he pointed out, "so let's continue this at a later date."

Larna looked a bit dejected, but after we exited the room, she came over to me.

"When things settle down a bit, I'll make some time for us to continue our discussion from the other day."

Larna was always too absorbed by her hobbies, but it looked like she had remembered the discussion we'd had before the trip. I nodded firmly and gave her my thanks.

Once Larna had really let me go, I returned to find that my friends really had waited for me. On top of that, they'd even booked a room for us to sit and have tea and snacks. They really spared no effort in welcoming us back. Since we had just returned from an extended mission, I'd been given the rest of the day off from work, and I took full advantage of this to enjoy having tea and snacks with all my friends.

"And then I pulled hard on my staff and slurped the rest of the dragon up," I regaled them, recounting my battle with the dragon.

All my friends knew about Dark Magic and Dark Familiars, so I didn't have to worry about saying too much. I was excited to tell them all about the battle. I told them all about the moment the dragons appeared in the cave, like how I started to absorb one of the dragons with my staff, then had to chase after it as it ran away. I took care to enliven my story in vivid details and energetic gestures every step of the way.

"Hold on, is that really true? How could you do something so dangerous?"

"Wait, really? You should think more carefully before you act, big sis."

"Hey, were you out of your mind? You never fail to amaze me."

"Wha— Lady Katarina, how could you do something so dangerous?"

"How amazing. Lady Katarina, you're almost like a knight in a fairy tale."

"I'm just glad you made it back safely..."

My friends were variously shocked, worried, or impressed—quite a wide variety of responses—as they listened to my account. But by the time I was done, they all looked strangely tired, or perhaps even disheartened.

After a very long sigh, it was Jeord who spoke up first.

"Did I not tell you before you went not to do anything dangerous or reckless?"

"Big sis's definition of reckless might be different from ours."

"Seriously. Maybe fighting a dragon one-on-one doesn't seem reckless to her. Somehow."

"Lady Katarina, I am so glad you made it back safe."

"Lady Katarina fighting a dragon... I wish I could have seen it myself."

"Sophia, don't say that. I feel like it'll only lead to more trouble."

With only one exception, they all sounded exhausted as they gave their final appraisal of my story. It looked like, by fighting a dragon head-on, I'd made them all worry about me.

"Well, you see, I didn't have a choice at the time. It felt like we'd all have to fight anyway. Oh, and Raphael lent me some support with his Wind Magic," I said, hurriedly justifying my conduct.

"Please, wait just one moment. What do you mean, he supported you with his magic? Does that mean you *were* in danger? You made no mention of that in your story a minute ago," said Jeord, butting in before I could finish pleading my case.

I felt like I had to tell them how the dragon had tried to fight back one last time by spewing a black fog at me. When I did, their expressions turned even more grave than before.

"What part of that sounds like a mission that went off without a hitch...? Just what is wrong with your head, big sis?"

"You claimed you weren't in any danger when *that* happened? I'm in awe of your optimism."

"Lady Katarina, I mean this: Please be more careful from now on. Why do you insist on taking so many risks?"

"So some dragons can breathe black fog? I wish I could have seen it... Uh, I mean, that *does* sound dangerous, Lady Katarina."

"When even Sophia is saying you should have been more careful, you really ought to think about what you've done."

Now that everyone had admonished me again, I had no choice but to apologize.

"I'm sorry for making you all worry."

With a dark smile on his face, Jeord spoke again.

"If it looks like you might do something reckless and put yourself in harm's way again, I shall imprison you in your room."

I felt a shiver go down my spine, but managed to maintain my posture and replied firmly.

"I'll be careful."

I got a lot more lectures after that, but the long and short of it was this: Though they all understood it was a Ministry mission and some danger was unavoidable, it was a really bad idea for me to talk about my exploits like I was a hero in some epic tale, excitedly describing dangerous events without even recognizing that they were dangerous. In other words, I should make sure to recognize danger from now on and act accordingly. *I'll be more careful from now on.*

Once everyone was done with their nagging, I remembered that there was one more thing I was supposed to say. I hurriedly straightened my posture, then bowed my head.

"I'm really glad to be back, everyone."

"Welcome home," everyone replied, smiling.

Yep, I'm back where I belong.

Finally, with about an hour having passed since we sat down, our teatime came to an end. *I guess everyone's busy; they do all have jobs.*

Keith and I would be heading home to Claes Manor together in our carriage, but...



“Why are Mary and Sophia sharing a carriage with Katarina?” asked Jeord, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“Why, we are going home as well, so we just thought we’d accompany her part of the way. You and the others still have work to do, don’t you, Prince Jeord? Please feel free to head back to work in your own carriages,” answered Mary with an elegant smile.

“In that case, perhaps I shall accompany you partway on *my* way to work.”

“Oh, but our carriage cannot carry that many people.”

“I understand. Keith, please get out of the carriage.”

“Huh? This carriage is headed to Claes Manor. Why should I have to get out?! I won’t!”

“Master Nicol, Prince Alan. Prince Jeord must find it too lonely to ride in his carriage by himself. Please go with him.”

“Eh? What are you talking about, Mary? That is not so.”

“I see. All right, Jeord, you can ride in my carriage.”

“H-Hold on, this is not what I want. Nicol—wait, Alan, you too?—why are you grabbing my arms?!”

“Prince Alan, please take him away.”

“Sure, will do.”

“Alan, just how badly whipped are you? Please, wait one moment. Katarina is my fiancée...” were the last words I heard from Jeord as he was taken away.

I got into my carriage with Keith, Mary, and Sophia, and we headed back to Claes Manor. Mary had a look of satisfaction on her face, as if she felt victorious for some reason. During the carriage ride, I talked to my friends some more about my trip. But, perhaps because I had relaxed after being reunited with my friends, the swaying of the carriage was enough to lull me to sleep.

As I nodded off, I heard Mary speaking in a gentle tone.

“Lady Katarina, you must be tired. Please feel free to rest your head on my shoulder.”

I took her up on her kind offer. With the carriage swaying, and me surrounded by my closest friends, I very quickly dozed off.

I saw a room with pale pink walls, a bed with a metal frame with

an azure cover on top, and a black table at its center.

This room belongs to Acchan, my best friend in my past life. It's that dream again. It was only a few days ago that I last had this dream, while I was at the party to commemorate Sorcié's founding. I'm so lucky. Okay, I'd better glean whatever information I can this time as well, I thought, straining my eyes.

Just like last time, I was presented with a game screen. Cyrus was displayed on that screen. *Ooh, how timely. I just got back from Cyrus's hometown.*

"I shall take it down with my Light Magic," said Maria.

"I'll protect you. I won't let it give you so much as a scratch," responded Cyrus, a line worthy of a romanceable character.

Looks like a fight scene. Reminds me of the one I saw with Cezar a couple of dreams ago, I thought. Then, to my shock...

"There won't even be a trace left of you once my Cerberus is done with you," said Katarina as she appeared on-screen, cackling.

I can't believe it! Katarina is the enemy again!

"Now, finish them, you two," said Katarina, dropping another villainous line, and a dragon appeared on-screen.

Eh? Can it be? Isn't that the dragon I defeated just the other day?! The only difference was that there was just one of them. Though the bad guys also had Cerberus (Pochi's name in the game), so I guess they still had pretty favorable numbers.

Cerberus and the dragon attacked Maria and Cyrus, and Maria struck back at them with her Light Magic. Just like I'd seen her do in real life, Maria struck down the dragon with her Light Magic, and then she defeated Cerberus (I still thought of him as Pochi).

To top it all off, Maria and Cyrus managed to capture the evil Katarina. My guess was that she went on to be thrown in jail—a Bad End. *Ahh, so this is what Cyrus's story event should have been, during the mission in Victoire. Since they caught Katarina, I guess it's technically a Good End for them.*

"That was close!" I shouted as I suddenly awoke.

Mary, Sophia, and Keith all stared at me with wide eyes.

"Big sis, what happened?"

"Lady Katarina, are you all right?"

"Lady Katarina, is something the matter?"

Everyone asked after me out of concern.

"Oh, uh, nothing, I'm just a sleepyhead," I said to smooth things over. *Though I guess that much is true.*

More importantly... If the dream I just had was accurate, then the mission I just returned from was meant to be a Bad End for Katarina. Now that I realized that, I shuddered. *That was bad. My attention was so caught up with the Dark Magic gang, I didn't even think to keep an eye out for doom flags. How could I have put myself in so much danger? Katarina Claes the villainess still has plenty of doom flags waiting for her. I'd better brace myself!*

"All right, I'll give it my all!" I said, clenching my fists.

When they saw this, my friends all seemed worried again.

"Big sis, I don't really get it, but I think you should just rest for what's left of today."

"Lady Katarina, you must be quite tired. Please get some proper rest."

"I also think you had better go to bed early."

Partway through our journey, Mary and Sophia got out of the carriage. When we got back to the manor, I was thinking of having a mental meeting to work out how to combat doom flags...but I ended up resting instead. *It's not like my tired brain could come up with any good ideas anyway. Let's have that meeting once my mind is refreshed.*

After I changed and climbed into bed, it turned out that everyone was right about how tired I was, and I lost consciousness within seconds.

★★★★★★

I heard screams ringing in the distance as I slowly regained consciousness in pitch darkness. I looked around to see that my surroundings had changed drastically. I could tell that a good deal of time had passed.

Just how long has it been since then? How long was I asleep?

And what happened while I was gone?

I gathered my bearings and wove together my body.

What happened there? What were those screams? I rose up above the ground to go and see for myself.

I had a promise to keep.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's been a while. My name is Satoru Yamaguchi.

My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! has finally reached its fourteenth volume. It is thanks to support from all of you that I have been able to continue this humble work of mine. Really, thank you all so much.

Now then, I ended up writing a whole lot this time around, which meant I had quite a lot of pages by the end. So I think this will be quite a thick book. I think it is close to the limit of what Ichijinsha is able to publish in their compact paperbacks, the Bunko Airis catalog, so if you were still able to read it all the way to the end, then I am pleased.

This installment begins with a party to commemorate the founding of Sorcié. Events unfold that seem to be part of a romanceable character's route.

Katarina manages to get through the party itself safe and sound.

However, the very next day, upon arriving to work at the Magical Ministry, she learns that some animals from a forest in the hinterlands have been ravaging the surrounding farmland. It sounds like a repeat of an incident she was previously involved in.

Thus Katarina, Maria, and some other employees from the Ministry go to Cyrus's homeland, which is where this incident has occurred.

And what should they encounter there, not for the first time?!

A beautiful woman who has feelings for Cyrus also appears!

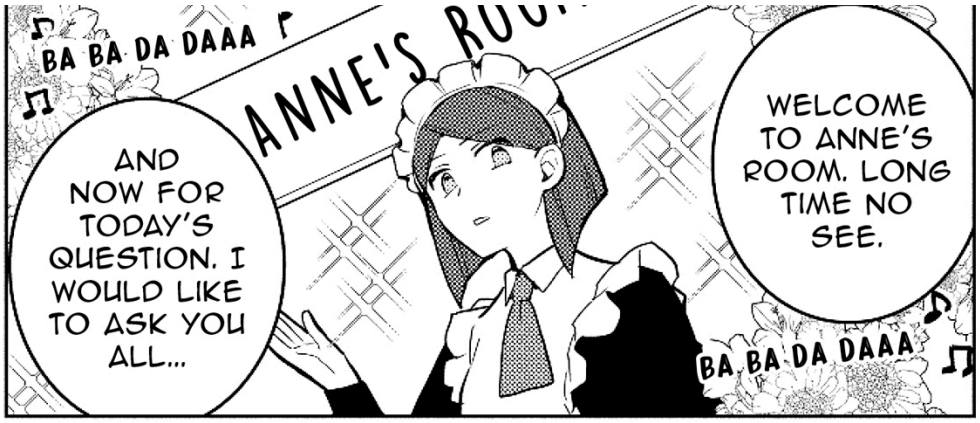
The thing Katarina has longed for the most is finally within her grasp... There's a lot going on in this volume. I hope you will enjoy it.

This book is supposed to come out in August. I bet it will be really hot around that time. Make sure to drink plenty of water, and keep an eye on your health throughout the summer!

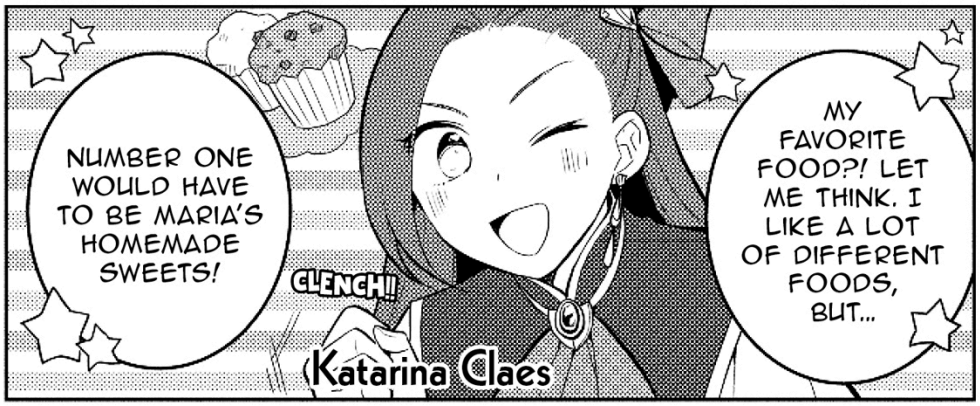
Finally, I would like to thank Nami Hidaka-sama—for always providing such wonderful illustrations—as well as the head editor and everyone else who lent their efforts to the publication of this book. You have my most heartfelt gratitude.

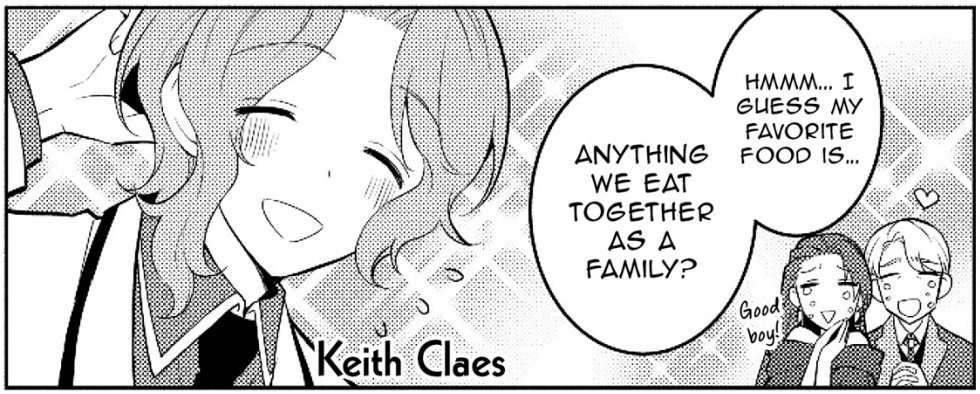
Everybody, really, thank you so much.

Satoru Yamaguchi



What is your favorite food?








Hmmm.
HMMM... FRUIT, I GUESS.
IT WAS ALWAYS ON THE TABLE WHEN I WAS A KID, SO I CAME TO LIKE IT.
Alan Stuart
MEAT.
IT GIVES ME STRENGTH.
Nicol Ascart
I LIKE TEA.
I BECAME OBSESSED WITH IT WHEN I USED TO GROW TEA LEAVES.
Mary Hunt
I LIKE REALLY SPICY FOOD.
I FIND IT SO STIMU-LATING!
Sophia Ascart



RAPHAEL WAS WAY TOO BUSY TO VISIT TODAY, BUT HE WOULD LIKE TO SAY THAT HE LIKES TEA (AS A DRINK) AND ANY SWEETS THAT GO WELL WITH TEA!





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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 14
by Satoru Yamaguchi

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Edited by Jonathan Engel

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