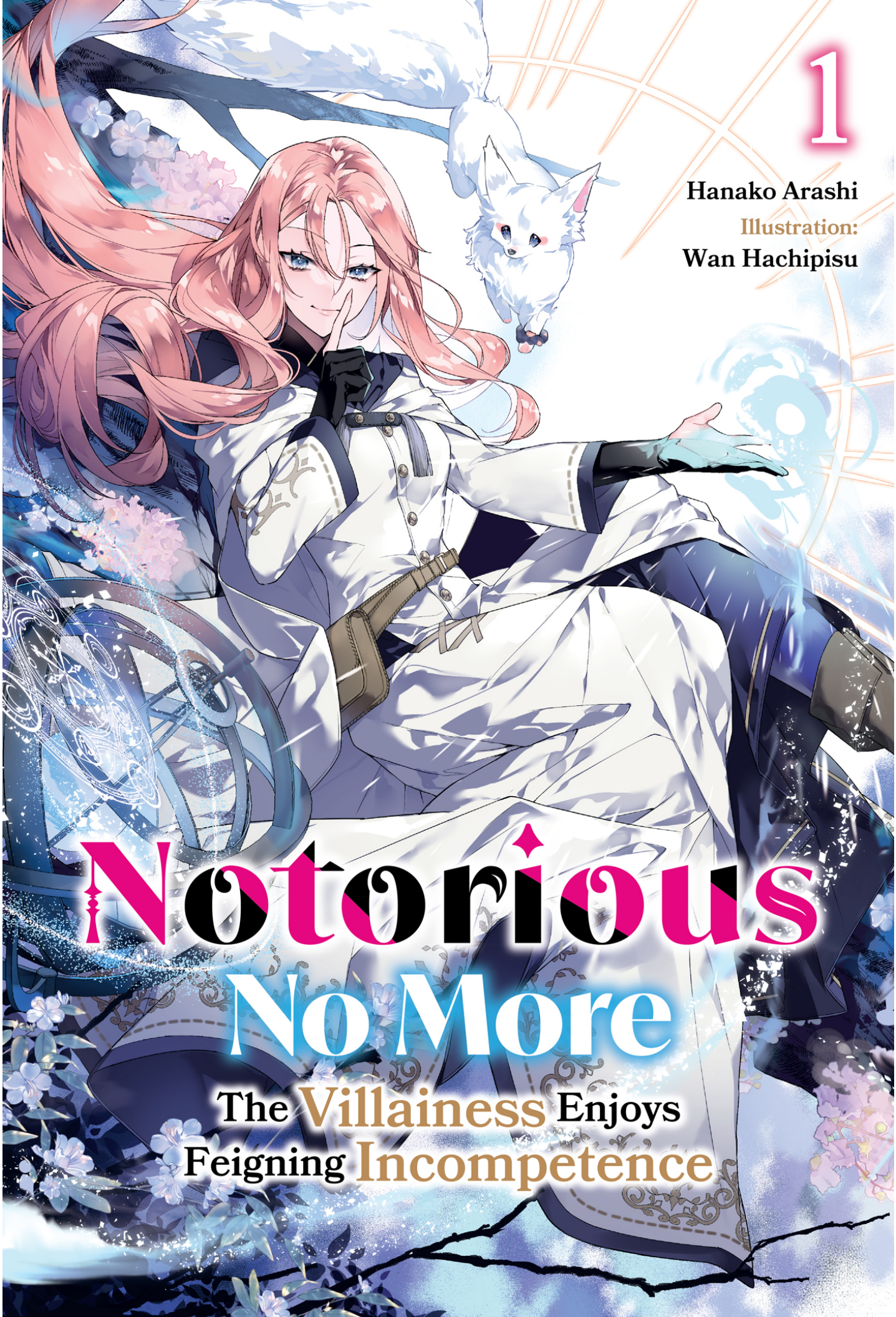

1
Hanako Arashi
Illustration:
Wan Hachipisu
Notorious
No More
The Villainess Enjoys
Feigning Incompetence

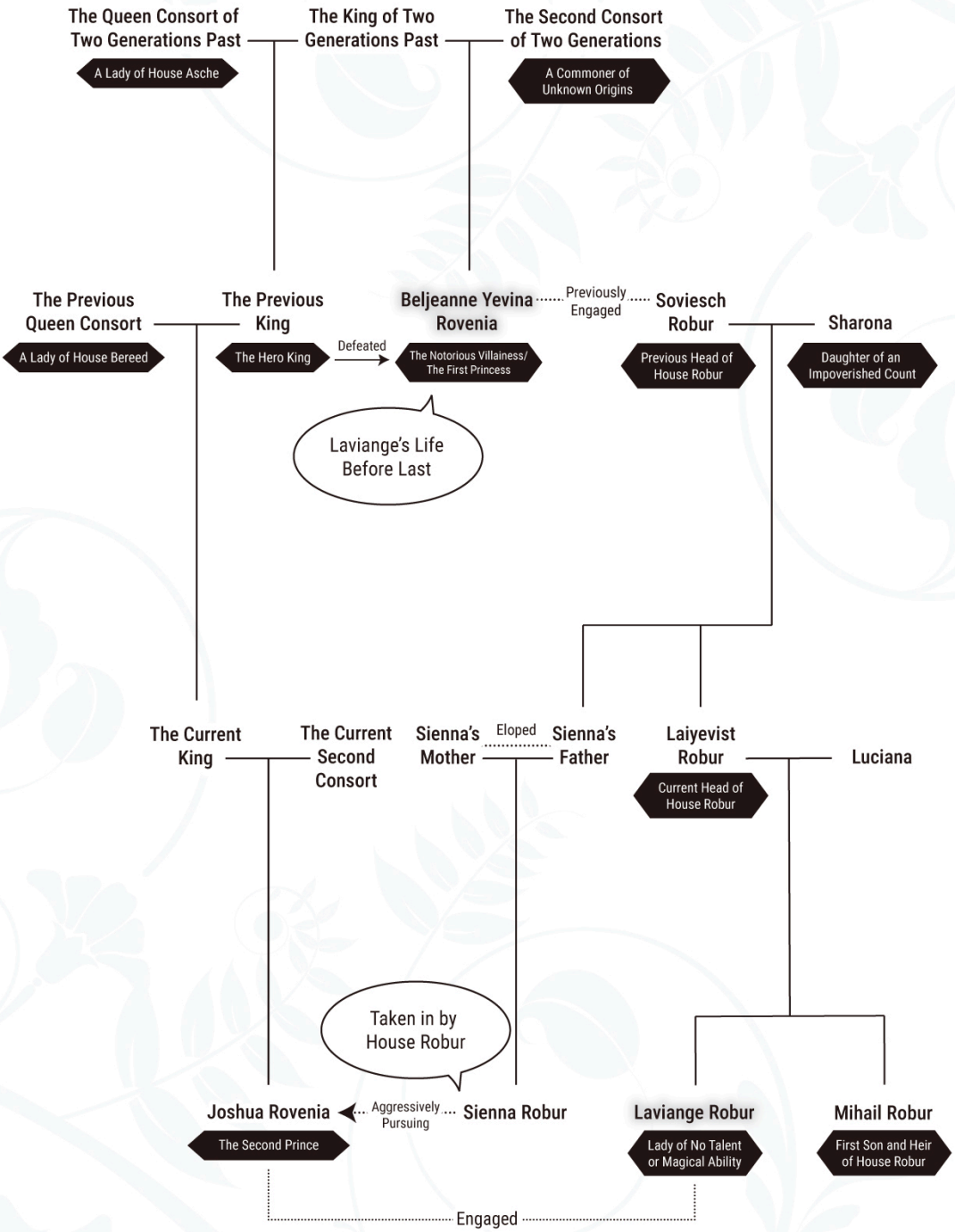

1
Hanako Arashi
Illustration:
Wan Hachipisu
Notorious
No More
The Villainess Enjoys
Feigning Incompetence




“Oh dear. You’re trembling. You quake in fear before a—what was it?
A brat with pathetic magic and no talent?
Do you still not understand?
You and your lord are both so very small, like children.”
She’s a mighty sorcerer with the power to overwhelm any living beings who oppose her.
Notorious No More
The Villainess Enjoys Feigning Incompetence


"Your post-writing high is so annoying, Lavi!
And from up here, you look like something out of one of those zombie films from the other world.
Tone it down!"
But she's also...a bestselling romance
with the power to turn her wildest fantasies into
reality and steal the hearts of her readers?!
"Cas?! Let me revel in the moment a little longer!
This burning moe-fueled passion just wouldn't let me rest!
It smacked my backside and chained me to the desk, yelling,
'Write, woman, write!'"

Family Tree 1



Family Tree 2

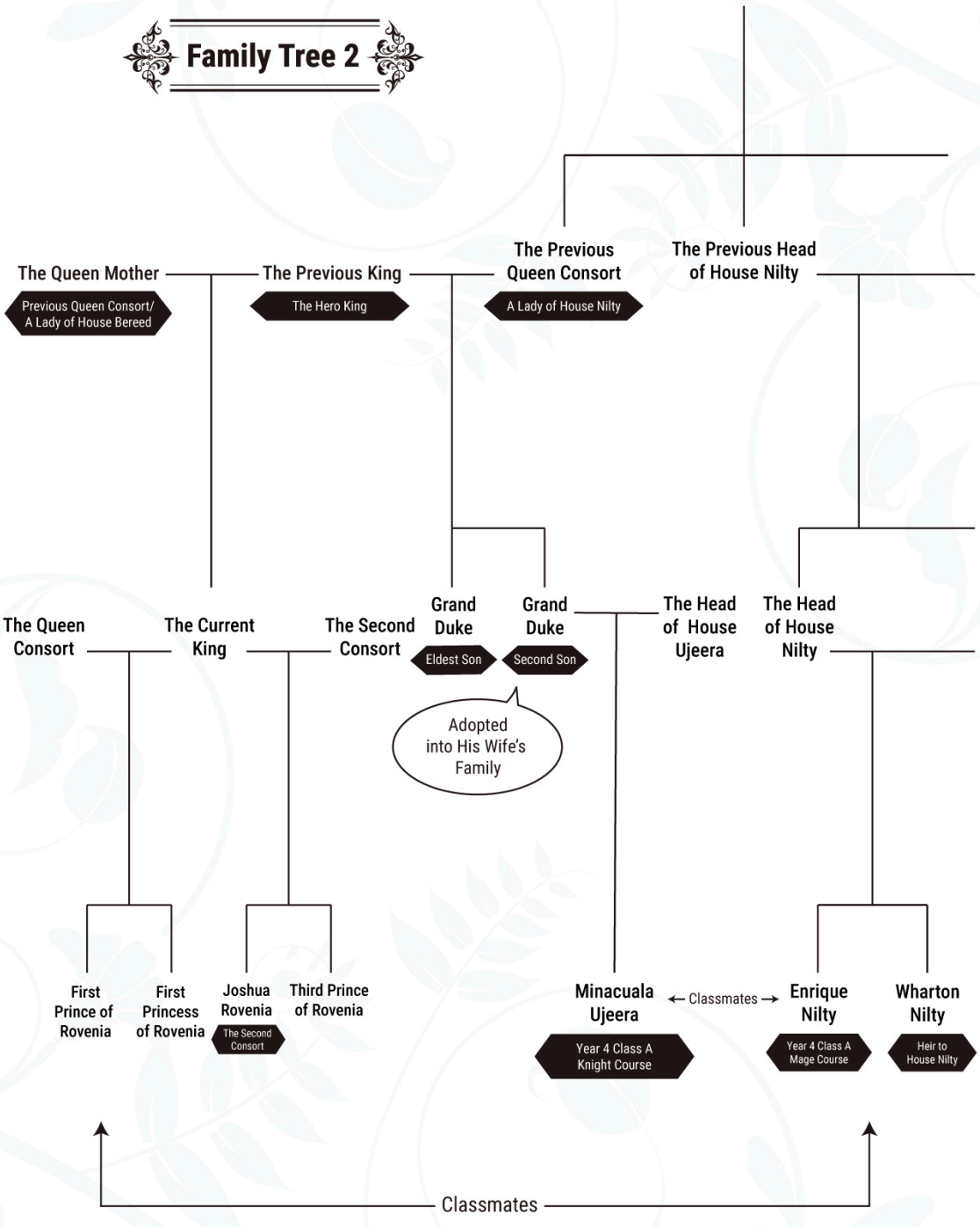


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Prologue: Give Thanks to the Life That Sustains Us!

"Team AD9."

Our instructors stood at equal intervals around a teleportation magic circle that glowed faintly with white light. When they called out the name of our team, the eight of us stepped into the center.

"Are you ready?" one of the instructors asked.

The team leaders of our second-year team and the accompanying fourth-year team nodded. The magic circle flared around us, and in the blink of an eye, we were teleported away.

We took in our new surroundings.

"A forest this time?" said the leader of the fourth-year team. "It's awfully dim."

His second-in-command nodded. "Looks like it. They change the monster extermination exercise every few years. We might've lucked out."

The two stood shoulder to shoulder, scanning the area like they had done this a hundred times before. Behind them stood a boy and a girl, who both had blond hair and blue eyes.

Ralf, a rugged-looking boy with short gray hair—the leader of our second-year team—put his hand on the small, finger-length decorative sword hooked onto the side of his belt. He called out the name of our second-in-command, a mild-mannered boy with wavy, light-brown hair. "Lauren."

"Yes," Lauren answered. He understood what needed to be done without further instruction.

Lauren and Ralf moved to stand back-to-back, positioning me and Kartika, a bespectacled girl with braided black hair, in between them. Ralf's sharp dark-green eyes and Lauren's gentle deep-brown eyes scanned in opposite directions as the two of them cast a detection

spell. A faint web of magic spread across the ground, so faint that it would only be noticed by exceptionally timid and sensitive magical beasts.

This was the formation our team used for gathering food. My and Kartika's job was to keep our eyes on the flank positions.

The fourth-year leader scoffed. "This is just a joint extermination exercise for a bunch of inexperienced students who've barely been here a year. Yet, here you are treating it like a life-or-death situation. How idiotic. But I suppose that's to be expected from the talentless noblewoman and her little band of commoner wannabes from Class D. As a fellow scion of one of the Four Great Ducal Houses, I can't help but pity your brother and stepsister for being related to someone so disgraceful."

The fourth-year leader—let's call him Mr. Pedigree—had been like this from the start. Ever since the teams were assigned by lottery, he found every excuse to bring up lineage and status, sulking all the while. It made me wonder...putting aside his terrible word choice, was his perpetual irritation just a symptom of puberty?

"But...doesn't something feel amiss?" the blonde girl said warily. She seemed on edge. She and the blond boy subtly adjusted their stances, ready to cast a defensive spell at a moment's notice. In a way, that was the right move.

And look at that—their second-in-command, a girl from the knight course, began to subtly cast detection magic. Impressive! I'd taken to calling her granddaughter.

"Milord!" Just as I was inwardly applauding her, granddaughter suddenly shouted and kicked Mr. Pedigree out of the way. The next moment, the ground beneath her caved in with a thud, and she disappeared.

Before we had time to react, the sound of metal scraping against something echoed from below, and something massive shot upward out of the hole. The blond pair, standing nearby, were caught off guard and stumbled backward onto the ground next to Mr. Pedigree. And... Oh dear. They managed to cast defensive spells...but only around themselves. How disappointing.

Their response was understandable, though. Rising from the pit

was a giant centipede, its grotesque, writhing legs on full display. Viewed from below, the sight was particularly repulsive.

I heard a grunt from overhead and looked up to see granddaughter with her leg wrapped around one of the centipede's segmented joints. As I watched, she drew her sword and sliced through its venomous left maxilliped.

Meanwhile, Ralf had silently timed his leap with the centipede's rise; he was already beginning to attack the centipede's right maxilliped with a greatsword identical in shape to the small sword he had been wearing on his belt. That miniature sword was now nowhere to be found.

He was already an experienced adventurer, and his control over his well-trained muscles was wonderful to behold.

"Milady!" Ralf called out to me.

As the team's cook, who occasionally acted as support, I understood his unasked question. "It's quite delicious when roasted!" I called back.

"Huh?!" The fourth-years let out a collective shout of confusion. I ignored them.

"How do we prepare it?" Ralf yelled.

"Sever the segment below the maxillipeds!" I replied. "The venom is concentrated there, so make sure it doesn't fall into the pit! Lauren, throw a fireball into the pit! Kartika, let's split up and cast *Enhanced Monster Repellent*!"

"Understood!"

"Huhhhh?!"

The fourth-years had enough of their wits about them to yell in surprise, but none of them moved to help. Except for granddaughter, that is.

"Give thanks to the life that sustains us!"

At the familiar prompt from our leader, our team yelled out our response. "We'll enjoy this delicious meal!"

Then we launched into action.

In this life I was Laviange Robur, daughter of a great ducal house, and right now I was simply enjoying the moment as the beginning of a delightful outdoor adventure. Little did I know, this

joint extermination exercise would go down in Academy history as an unprecedented disaster; the upperclassmen would go through hell, and casualties would follow.

1: (Before Disaster Strikes) It All Begins at the Monthly Dinner Party

"You are a disgrace to House Robur! As if it weren't enough that you're barely scraping by at school, you can't even wield magic properly! Do you know how many times I've wished you had never been born?"

My mother, Luciana, slammed her knife and fork against the table with a bang, unleashing her fury. She was my mother in this life, at least. Her features were sharp, but beautiful nonetheless. Her violet eyes and black hair reminded me of the world of my previous life. As I watched her, I was struck by the thought that the expression of fury she wore was such a waste of her beauty.

I swallowed a perfectly cut bite of steak, maintaining my ladylike smile. The rich aroma of meat and spices filled my senses, and I let out a sigh of bliss. Perfection. The steak was cooked just right: Today's chef must have been the one who liked me.

"Mother, we are in the middle of dinner," scolded my brother, Mihail, who sat to my left, across from our mother. Then he turned to me and muttered, "That said, it is true that you neglect your studies and rank among the lowest in your class. You bring shame not just to yourself and your family, but to your fiancé. A low capacity for magical energy may be forgivable, but willful ignorance is not. That someone so devoid of shame is my sister is a burden I find most regrettable."

Mihail's rebuke wasn't loud; it remained within the bounds of etiquette. His voice, though cold, was smooth and pleasant—so much so that I hardly paid attention to his words.

He had inherited our father's golden hair and our mother's eyes, and his face was the type that would have fit right into an otome game from my previous life. He was the archetypal cool, aloof,

almond-eyed love interest. He was nearly nineteen, two years my senior, and was set to graduate next spring from the Royal Academy, a prestigious four-year institution attended by nobles and families from the highest tax brackets.

For commoners, there existed another academy where children could enroll from the age of ten. There, they learned not only basic literacy but also technical skills. They were something like the vocational schools I knew so well from my past life.

A sigh escaped from the head of the table, where a man set down his knife and fork. My father in this life, Laiyevist, was a man with golden hair and deep blue eyes. His features left no doubt that Mihail was his son; the only major difference between them was the beauty mark beneath our father's left eye, which lent him an undeniable allure. I didn't know whether he wore a frown because he was tired or simply in a bad mood, but I gave him my most refined smile.

It did nothing to soothe his poor mood. A pity.

As head of House Robur and captain of the Royal Mage Corps in our Kingdom of Rovenia, father was not only a formidable mage but also a hopeless magic fanatic. He was the type who put all of his skill points into his Magic stat, even the points that were supposed to go into Family. Whether it was because of his devotion to his craft or simply by its very nature as a political marriage, his relationship with mother was frosty. Without grandfather's decree enforcing these monthly family dinner parties, I doubted I'd ever see him at all.

It was then that a trembling voice spoke up from across the table to try to protect me. "Father, please stop mother and brother."

It was my cousin, who was also my adopted sister, Sienna. She had pinkish brown hair, a blend of her parents' hues, and her mother's green eyes, which glistened with unshed tears.

My late uncle, her father, had inherited his mother's gentle features, with pink-blond hair and deep blue eyes. I'd been told that I took after my grandmother, and truth be told, from the portraits I had seen of him, I could more easily pass for being his daughter than Sienna did.

One year my junior, Sienna had only recently entered the Royal Academy. She was as brimming with energy as a lively fish leaping from the water, and her catlike eyes gave her a charmingly mischievous appearance. I guessed that she inherited that from her mother too.

"Even if it is true," Sienna added, "I am sure that sister is doing her best. To belittle her so...it is too cruel." I could tell that, even as she said "sister," she was vehemently adding "foster" in front of it in her mind.

Her backstory was a tragic one. My uncle had eloped with a commoner, and she had lived her early life as a commoner in town. Then, when she was eleven, a terrible accident took the lives of her parents, leaving her orphaned. Since she possessed cufflinks engraved with our family crest, though, as well as already possessing a strong magical aptitude, she was taken in as a foster daughter of House Robur.

When we first met, her arm had still been wrapped in bandages, and she had winced in pain at the slightest movement. It was most curious. Magic was still circulating through her arm, so it should have been fully healed. When someone was injured or ill, the flow of magic through their body would be disrupted. A magical diagnosis would reveal that immediately.

But analyzing a body without touching it was extremely difficult. Though father and Mihail could do so with ease, my brother had yet to master the skill at the time.

I had been very worried about my new foster sister.

She had lost both parents so suddenly and then been thrust into the aristocracy. Thinking to reassure her, I had smiled and told her, *"Things are going to be quite painful."* Only for her to burst into tears and call me *terrifying*.

Ah, I suppose sensibilities do vary, don't they?

Ever since, she had been directing her twisted feelings toward me in all kinds of different ways. But I knew her type. She was just a tsundere. I'm sure this was just her prickly way of showing affection in her rebellious teenage years.

"Now, now, thank you, dear," I said, smiling. "But if you don't tilt

your face three degrees to the right, that expression of yours will be visible to everyone else as well."

"Sister?!"

With a loud exclamation, she bolted to her feet, knocking her chair over in the process. A sharp crease deepened between father's brows. My, my, how careless.

"How cruel..." she said with a sniffle.

The way she could summon tears on command—now that was a talent. If only she could have kept that smug little grin hidden at the perfect angle, so that it was visible to me alone, it would have been even more impressive. But alas, she still slipped up on occasion, and as her elder sister, it was my duty to correct her. Practice makes perfect, after all.

Even now, I offered her an encouraging smile. Still, from my vantage point, she still wore the expression of a devil. What a shame, it seemed that my feelings couldn't get through to her. Her catlike eyes were drawn so sharply upward that her usual cuteness had all but disappeared. Such a waste.

Father sighed, and then gave a curt order. "Enough. Leave."

Mother nodded in agreement. "Yes, that's right."

Sienna gasped in exaggerated shock, though her lips still curled into a smirk. And, now, she had overcorrected herself. She had tilted her head three degrees *too* far to the right. It looked unnatural. But I did find it rather adorable that, for all her rebellion, she still heeded my advice.

Mihail shot me a brief glare, but did not add his voice to their chorus. How unusual.

"But we've barely begun eating," I said.

Mother's little tirade had erupted just as we had started on the main course, meaning hardly anyone had eaten anything. It was such a shame. Tonight's menu was the work of my favorite chef.

More importantly, why were they so invested in my academic performance all of a sudden? Indifference suited them much better. Did they have any idea how difficult it was to make sure I *barely* passed every term without actually failing?

"You're being too noisy for dinner," father said.

"Exactly!" mother agreed. "Someone as useless as you has no right to eat!"

"Oh, poor sister!" Sienna sighed. "At least take some bread with you!"

"I won't deny that things have been rather noisy," said Mihail quietly. "Father, my apologies."

While mother and Sienna misunderstood father's words entirely, Mihail at least had the sense to take responsibility.

"I meant you two," father said coldly. Perhaps my mother and sister couldn't immediately process his words, as the two of them stared blankly at him. "You two are the ones who will leave."

"What?!" they cried.

And just like that, the view across the table suddenly cleared.

From beyond the closed doors, I could still sense their presence, though no sound reached us. It seemed father had instantly cast a teleportation spell, a silencing spell, and a lock spell all at once.

"If you wish to continue eating, do as you please."

With that, he let out a sigh and resumed his meal. I merely nodded in response and followed suit.

For the first time, we leisurely enjoyed our meal in complete peace. All of us ate in silence, savoring each bite.

Yet I could still sense their presence outside the door. Hadn't they listened to what father had said when the same thing happened last month?

"Now that the children have all entered the Academy and are coming of age, I expect peaceful meals. The next time someone disrupts dinner, they will be removed. No exceptions."

Then, *he* had been the one to leave. I had been rather surprised at his sense of fairness. Though really, it was absurd that we had never once managed to have a quiet meal together before then.

Following his declaration, I had quickly assembled a small sandwich, tucking a piece of hamburger steak and some vegetables into a roll and then following after him. Mother and Sienna shot me looks of utter disdain, but Mihail's face had lit up in surprise.

Later, I heard that my favorite chef had prepared a hamburger for my brother's late-night meal, and I knew I had won. I wasn't sure

what, exactly, but it was a victory nonetheless. It might have violated manners in the world of the nobility, but hamburgers were both delicious and convenient.

The buns, made using my own homemade yeast that I'd shared with the chef, were delicious and paired exquisitely with the meat. This burger had been cooked to golden perfection, left no unpleasant smells when reheated in my room, and was made with one hundred percent high-quality meat. The very same chef later snuck a portion to me as well.

This was in stark contrast to the burger I took to my room when I left the table to follow father. That meat had been one hundred percent wild game and mostly left raw. But with a dash of my homemade herb salt and a quick sear in my room, it had been *delicious*. It had been easy to season, given how raw it was, but they didn't need to know that. It would have been too cruel if they knew I actually *appreciated* their malice.

As I reminisced about last month's debacle—the one with the chef favored by my mother—I realized I had already finished the luxuriously smooth, rich pudding that had been served for dessert. When had that happened?

With a wistful sigh, I silently wished that I could have a second helping that I could take to my room for later.

And with that, tonight's dinner came to a close.

※※※※

With a loud bang, the single door to my quarters was flung open.

"Sister, you're horrible!"

Naturally, this loud outburst had come from my dear foster sister. This was a routine occurrence and came as no surprise.

Fortunately, my room was set apart from the main estate, housed in what was little more than a sturdy old log house. Since I was the only *human* who lived here, at least I didn't have to worry about Sienna disturbing the neighbors with her yelling. Still, given the building's age, I'd have appreciated it if she handled it a little more gently. If she broke something, I had no doubt the other "residents"

would be quite displeased.

"Now, now, what's the matter? Won't you sit?" Seated at a small table near the entrance, I gestured to the chair across from me with a smile.

"Don't play dumb! You ruined my dinner with father!"

Ah, a complete reversal from the prim-and-proper act she put on in public. The moment we were alone, her voice took on the sharp, shrieking quality of a desperate villainess who had been backed into a corner. It was positively ear-piercing. Was she refusing to sit just so she could project her voice more forcefully from her diaphragm?

She sounded a lot like mother had when she lost her temper at the dining table. Could it be that she was actually mother's real daughter, not me?

I let out a quiet chuckle, finding the resemblance amusing, only for her to take a step back with a look of disgust.

"What are you laughing about? It's creepy."

"I just noticed something and had an absurd thought, that's all. So, what was that about father?"

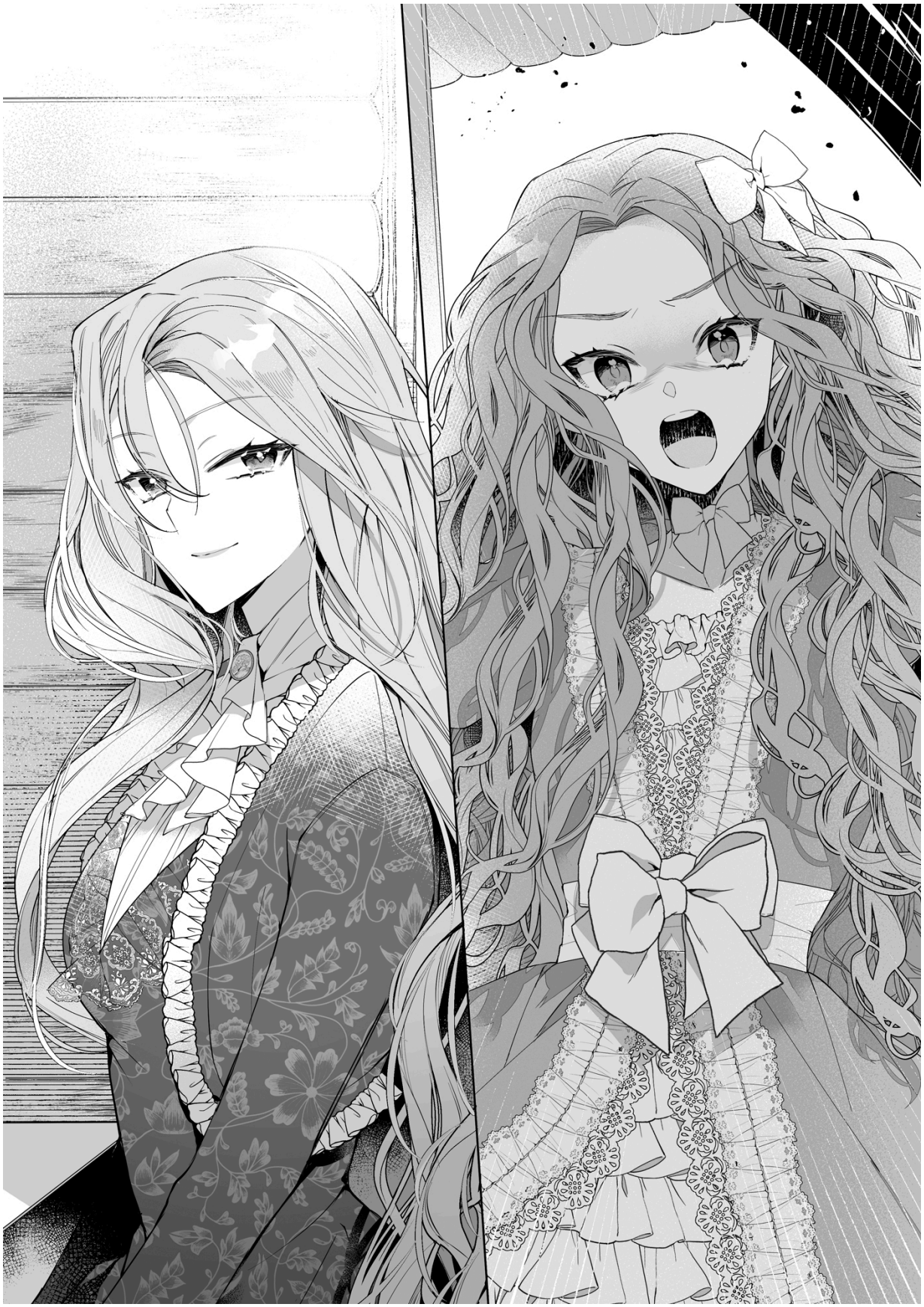
"That's right! Because of you, he kicked us out at dinner! And now mother is *furious*!"

"Oh, is that right? Was that how it happened?" I tilted my head in confusion. All I remembered was *them* being loud and getting thrown out because of it.

"Don't play dumb! Tomorrow at the Academy, I'll tell Shua all about this!"

"Oh my, how wonderful. So His Highness the Second Prince will explain it to me?" I nodded in understanding and offered her a serene, ladylike smile, only to watch her face flush bright red. A fever, perhaps?

"What do you know?!" she snapped. "You're his fiancée, and yet he won't even let you call him by his nickname! You're nothing but an uneducated, talentless fraud—far from a true lady! Stop clinging to His Highness like some lowly parasite! You're no better than the infamous villainess herself! You're a talentless, magicless wretch! A Beljeanne standing in the way of His Highness's true love!"





Oh my, now she was steaming like a boiling teapot, words tumbling from her lips at a breakneck speed. Then, with a dramatic whirl, she turned on her heel and, *bam*! She slammed the door shut behind her. Loud footsteps echoed as she stomped away.

I couldn't help but marvel. How did she manage not to bite her tongue speaking so quickly? I felt pride as her sister.

Creeeak.

The door swung open on its own.

Ah. It had broken.

"Is that how a lady should act?" I marveled.

I found myself momentarily stunned before realizing that perhaps she and I simply had very different definitions of the term *lady*.

"My fiancé, hmm?" I chuckled to myself, my thoughts drifting to the engagements of my previous lives and this one.

In this life, I, Laviange Robur, was the second-born and eldest daughter of House Robur, one of the Four Great Ducal Houses of the Kingdom of Rovenia. I would be turning seventeen this year.

The aforementioned second prince, Joshua Rovenia—Shua, as my dear foster sister so fondly called him—was the same age as my brother. Our engagement had been arranged when he was twelve, and I was ten.

And the *villainess* my stepsister had just invoked—Beljeanne Yevina Rovenia—had been the infamous first princess of this kingdom. In general, only members of the royal family were granted a blessed name as a middle name. But, as a fool had once attempted to use it for a curse, these were no longer publicly revealed due to superstition.

Beljeanne had been the illegitimate half sister of the previous king, born to a commoner who had only been elevated to concubinage after she conceived the princess. She was infamous in this kingdom as a talentless, magicless, insufferable wretch.

I felt a certain kinship with that description.

Her fiancé had been none other than Soviesch Robur, my grandfather in this life. And yet, the two had never wed.

During his time as a student at the Royal Academy, Soviesch had fallen in love with Sharona, the daughter of an impoverished count.

When she learned of this, the princess was consumed by jealousy. She tried to sacrifice her romantic rival to summon a demon, nearly dooming the entire kingdom in the process.

The one who had put a stop to the villainess had been none other than her own half brother, the crown prince. Unlike her, his lineage was impeccable. His mother hailed from House Asche, one of the Four Great Ducal Houses, and his noble blood was beyond reproach. They said he stood against her with unwavering justice, sacrificing both his own heart and his immense magical power to cast the greatest spell of the century and vanquish the demon-possessed princess in a decisive blow.

A righteous hero slaying the wicked villainess. It was still a tale beloved by playwrights and minstrels alike. But from here the story took a turn that was not told in the grand theater performances, though the truth was well-known by all in this kingdom.

The shining prince who had once vanquished both the infamous villainess and her demon was left a shadow of his former self. His spirit was weakened, his heart broken. He lost his ability to wield magic, reduced to nothing more than simple household spells. The king, father to both the princess and the crown prince, had hastily abdicated the throne to his son under the guise of taking responsibility, retreating into a life of seclusion—though in truth, it was in name only.

With only one heir remaining and the crown prince revered as the kingdom's self-sacrificing savior, tarnishing his name was out of the question. Even if he had lost all his power and was unfit to rule, the only option was to place him on the throne in name, if nothing else. To ensure stability, he was swiftly wed to brides from House Bereed and House Nilty, the final two of the Four Great Ducal Houses. They wasted no time in producing several heirs.

Meanwhile, House Robur acknowledged Soviesch's love, allowing him to marry Sharona, the noblewoman who had nearly been sacrificed in the villainess's madness. Their marriage was swiftly followed by his succession to the title of duke.

The fated lovers, having found true love and wed, repaid their debt to the crown prince by standing alongside the noble houses of

his two consorts in supporting the royal house, ensuring the smooth succession of the crown prince to the throne. These two noble houses also underwent a transition of leadership once the younger generation had matured after the princess's passing.

Out of respect for the prince's noble sacrifice, both the nobility and the common folk accepted his decline in silence. And in exchange, they made certain that the villainess was remembered as the true villain of the tale. The lower a person's standing in society, the more viciously they clung to this narrative.

"Ah, yes, House Asche," I murmured.

Because the crown prince's mother was a member of House Asche, no further ties had been formed between them and the royal family, due to concerns over consanguinity. Furthermore, the head of that noble house had been swiftly replaced following the princess's death.

Although the princess had been born to a concubine, the queen felt herself responsible, being one of the people who had raised her, and between that and with the anguish of witnessing the ruin of her only heir, the crown prince, she chose to withdraw from public life early. Seeing herself as a sinner, she spent the remainder of her life secluded in the remote palace within the castle grounds where the princess and her mother, the concubine, had once lived.

And so, a new generation of nobility—my grandparents' generation—rose to power. For years, they'd supported the Crown with unwavering loyalty, waiting for the day when the next king, the one who currently sat on the throne, would come of age.

At the tender age of nineteen, the new king ascended, and both his father and grandfather withdrew into seclusion. A few years later, almost as if they had been waiting to see if their roles had truly been fulfilled, they passed away.

"What a splendid tale," I said, letting out a refined laugh. "Truly, reality is stranger than fiction."

But the truth? The truth had been entirely different. And I could prove it. The *villainess*—the infamous wretch whose name was still reviled to this day—had been none other than me. Beljeanne Yevina Rovenia had been my own name in a past life.

It no longer mattered, however. Because in the life that followed, I had found peace.

Yes, between my life as Beljeanne and my current life as Laviange, I had lived yet another life: a life that had lasted eighty-six years.

At the end of that first life, after enduring countless betrayals and a tragic fate, my final wish had been simple—to be reborn into a quiet, gentle world. And so, just before death claimed me, I entrusted my soul to one of the sacred beasts I had once contracted, putting my soul at the mercy of the Wheel and allowing myself to be reincarnated.

Then I had been reborn in a different world. It was something I could never have predicted. A country known as Japan on the planet called Earth.

I came to remember my past life around the time I had my first memories. In that world, science and technology had advanced so far that, rather than feeling inconvenienced by the lack of magic, I was stunned by how effortlessly convenient everything was.

Now, that sense of shock felt like a distant, nostalgic memory.

My parents gave me a normal amount of love, and I grew up carefree, smoothly moving through life as a JS, JC, JK, and JD, fully enjoying my student years. Of course, those are abbreviations for joshi shougakusei (elementary school girl), joshi chuugakusei (middle school girl), joshi koukousei (high school girl), and joshi daigakusei (university girl). I just felt like using them again after so long!

When I graduated, I entered the workforce as most did. I reveled in the freedom of life, a noble of my own making, until, at thirty-two, I simply picked out a guy who seemed compatible through a matchmaking app and got married. Maybe because I had spent my past life in a world where political marriages had been the norm, I never really looked for a sweep-me-off-my-feet type of love. Instead, I focused purely on compatibility and arranged my own strategic marriage. A self-orchestrated political union, if you will.

A touch dull, perhaps? But my choice had not been a poor one. My married life passed without any great drama, and by the time I

reached thirty-seven, I had given birth to a daughter and twin sons. A quiet, ordinary life, yet not without its own joys.

Life went on, as life tends to do. There were ups and downs, but looking back, it was surprisingly peaceful. In the end, I outlived my husband by a few years and passed away at eighty-six, surrounded by children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. A perfectly ordinary life, right in line with the average lifespan.

Thinking about it now, that whole existence felt almost like an intermission between my past and my present. A chance to heal. A chance to know what it was like to be loved; to give love freely, without fear. A simple life, unremarkable but happy. After enduring countless wounds in that short life as a broken and embittered princess, my soul had completely healed.

"But, you know, the old lady in me has some thoughts," I mused. "Of all the ways to return, did I really have to be reborn here? It's bad enough coming back to this world that calls my past self a notorious villainess in the first place, but did I have to be born here right in the middle of the families of the ones who shoved all the blame onto me? And as the granddaughter of my ex-fiancé, no less...? Oh dear, I'm talking to myself."

Ah, the troubles of age. The older you got, the looser your tongue became. Though, of course, in this world, I was only sixteen.

So, after all that, I found myself reborn as a duke's daughter, and ended up betrothed to none other than the grandson of my past life's half brother? Just my luck. And, might I add, this is the same half brother who I once beat the—ahem—thoroughly trounced as retribution for all his past transgressions.

To make matters worse, the prince I was betrothed to loathed me. He had little magic, even less wit, and no talent to speak of. He shirked from the slightest hardship, and, as the crowning insult, had been convinced that I took delight in tormenting my foster sister.

But let's put aside the whole *evil stepsister* thing for now. Everything else? Well, given his position, it was hardly surprising.

My stepsister was originally an illegitimate child, but perhaps because she carried my uncle's blood, she had managed to make something of herself. Her looks and grades were impressive, her

magic and spellcasting were decent, and she had the personality of a classic tragic heroine. If you averaged it all out, she fell somewhere below what was expected of a daughter of one of the Four Great Ducal Houses but above the average young lady of the aristocracy. It was no wonder they were pushing to trade my engagement for hers.

That said, from both a political standpoint and considering past history, I could see why the royal family wanted to bring the direct bloodline of House Robur into the fold. From that perspective, if they were going to replace me, my foster sister was the most fitting choice.

And yet, for reasons beyond my comprehension, the young nobles at the Academy seemed to be under the impression that I was desperately clinging to my engagement. I had never once interfered in matters concerning my betrothal, nor had I hoped that anything would come of it. Not before the engagement, not after. Not in this life as a duke's daughter, nor in my past life as a princess.

That said, the engagement hadn't been formally annulled yet, and the prince had already taken to keeping my foster sister at his side—it was as if he had no sense of propriety. And to make matters worse, the two of them were practically making a sport of mocking me, launching direct attacks on *his actual fiancée* as if it were some kind of game. It was disgraceful. Especially considering that in this world, noble society had far stricter views on chastity than in the Japan of my past life. Regardless of the truth, the mere implication that he had already laid hands on her was scandalous.

But, well...I suppose I was partly to blame. My philosophy had always been that discretion was the better part of valor. The thing is, I was actually quite capable. I had abundant magic, and could use spells however I pleased. If I was being honest, I was probably more powerful than my father, who was widely known as the Great Mage. On top of that, I completed my royal education early in my past life, and I also possessed knowledge from another world. How could someone like me ever be considered talentless or incompetent?

Ah, but let's not call me exceptional. That wouldn't be very

Japanese of me. Let's just say I had a certain amount of experience. Royal education, working life, childbirth, and child-rearing, even old age: I'd lived through it all. Quite the extensive résumé, wouldn't you say?

And in this world, I also happened to be on rather good terms with sacred beasts and their kin. If that ever got out, they'd no doubt try to exploit me all over again. I'd already endured that once as a princess, and I wouldn't let it happen again.

Honestly, I was grateful my previous life had lasted a full eighty-six years. Being surrounded by malice now, just as I had been in my life as a princess, didn't bother me in the slightest. I knew that some people would get along with me, while others wouldn't; blood ties had nothing to do with it. Other people's ill will was nothing more than background music to me. An old woman's ears had a way of selectively tuning things out.

Besides, circumstances could change over time. There are friendships that grow stronger with distance and those that crumble when the glue holding them together is gone. It was like those mom friends who are inseparable while their kids are growing up, but once the children leave the nest, they realize they don't even have each other's phone numbers. Happens all the time.

I had no need for relationships that would require me to scramble and force myself to maintain appearances. After all, I could not forget the peaceful life I lived in my previous existence. Just recalling it filled me with such happiness that it brought tears to my eyes.

So, forgive me, but this time, I intended to live solely for myself. As I had in my past life, I intended to assume the role of one without talent or ability. And I would flee from my obligations as a duke's daughter with every ounce of strength I had.

"Want me to kill her?"

Oh my. I had just thought I heard something rather unsettling when something suddenly hopped right onto my head.

Of course, I didn't act surprised. After all, I knew this little one well. He was my dear companion, the sacred beast Casquette. He was a fox with pure white fur and nine elegant tails. His signature look included a navy blue scrunchie adorned with pink fabric and

lace, wrapped snugly around his left forepaw. Seeing him wearing it, I was glad I had taken the time to make it. He could change his size at will, anywhere from fitting in the palm of my hand to as large as a boulder—although I'd never actually seen him in his largest form.

"Oh my, Cas. What's this about killing someone?"

"She keeps picking on my precious girl. And don't get me started on that idiot prince and his flock of fools too! He's always strutting around with his mistress and making a mess, and now they're back to bothering you! I can't stand them!"

Cas was cute, grumpy or otherwise, and he was particularly cute today! The soft sensation of his belly pressing against my head only made the moment more dreamy.

Wait. Did I just sense killing intent? Did you really mean to go through with his threat?!

"No, no," I insisted. "You mustn't. Even if he *is* a complete fool, he's still royalty."

"That's exactly what you said last time, and look where it got you."

Ah, he was talking about my life as a princess. His nine fluffy tails swished back and forth against my head in clear discontent. Like a cat, almost. But weren't foxes supposed to be more canine?

"You're not thinking something rude, are you?" he asked, suspicious. Cas-chan hopped onto the table, then sat down and stared up at me. The angle! His adorably puffed-up cheeks practically *begged* to be poked!

Alas, I had to restrain myself. He had a habit of scolding me when provoked. His cuteness was sometimes too much for me and I was constantly fighting for my self-control.

"Perish the thought," I said. "More importantly, I'm so glad you always wear that scrunchie." Changing the subject was my best bet at defusing his bloodlust. "I sewed it with care, one stitch at a time, and wove in powerful protective magic just for you. It would mean a lot if you kept it close."

"Hee hee, of course I will!" Ah, his sweet laugh. Was he an angel? Well, he was quite literally a sacred beast. Overcome with adoration, I reached out and gently patted his head as he sat primly

on the table. Ohhh, such a dear, dear thing! His soft, snowy fur was a tactile paradise!

"Lavi, you're making a face like a pervy old man..."

Oh. No, no, no, no, no. It seems I had let my excitement slip, and my inner thoughts had begun sounding a little too much like a certain *corrupt magistrate* from my past life.

"Heh heh heh heh. It's just because you're so adorable, Cas."

"Lavi, if you don't wipe that weird grin off your face right now, we're sleeping in separate rooms tonight." His nine tails puffed up to an even fluffier state. "Get rid of those wiggly fingers and *that* expression, *right now*. My sense of propriety is in peril, and my tails won't settle down."

"Oh, but that fluff is simply irresistible—ah, no, no! I'm joking, I swear! I'll stop at once, so please don't exile me from our room!" Seeing him tense up as if to flee, I quickly reached out to placate him. "I got a little carried away. Forgive me."

He sighed. "Fine. I'll be heading to bed first, so don't keep me waiting too long."

"Of course, I'll be right there."

Tomorrow, without a doubt, that... Oh dear, what *would* I call that adulterous prince, given my former life as the princess?

Ah. My grandson, I suppose.

Yes, my "grandson" would surely come nipping at my heels again.

I laughed. Thinking of him that way made him seem almost...adorable.

I did always have a soft spot for my grandchildren in my past life. *I wonder...are they doing well? I pray that they are living peaceful, fulfilling lives.*

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Contrary to my expectation that the prince would come nipping at my heels, the day ended up passing in peace. Even my dear foster sister didn't come to bother me in the morning. When lessons concluded, I rose to take my leave.

The journey home took thirty minutes at a brisk walk, but I was

more than capable. My pampered elder brother and stepsister, meanwhile, traveled by carriage. Privately, the old woman within me fretted over their future. If they didn't get enough exercise now, wouldn't they struggle in their old age?

I was just stepping out of the classroom, feeling grateful for such an uneventful day, when a voice called out to me.

"Laviange Robur!"

A silver-haired and blue-eyed figure stood blocking my path, the very image of a prince. Ah, no, wait. He *was* a prince. Behind him trailed his ever-loyal red-haired attendant, whose eyes were full of hostility. And further still, peeking out just past them, I glimpsed some familiar locks of pinkish brown hair.

Raising one's voice in the hallway after lessons...didn't that grow tiresome? Ah, but such was youth. This descendant of mine was simply brimming with energy. Alas, grandma just couldn't keep up.

But more importantly...

"Oh dear, what a *tragic* expression you wear," I mused.

"What did you say?!" the prince exploded. "A talentless, incompetent fool like you dares to insult *me*, a member of the royal family?!"

Ah, it appeared that I'd unintentionally thrown oil onto the fire. That said, my hearing was no different from that of any other sixteen-year-old, so there was really no need to shout. Of course, though, a mere ringing in the ears was hardly enough to shake a lady's composure.





“Oh? I meant no insult. I was simply questioning whether it was befitting of a member of the royal family to scowl so fiercely while shouting in the corridors. Especially while accompanied by an attendant from the knight course, who has such a menacing glare, and a woman other than his fiancée. Surely, one must consider the image they present to those around them, no?”

The young man faltered, unable to respond.

“Sister! You insulted mother last night at dinner, and now you speak that way even to His Highness?!”

Ah, there she was, peeking out from behind the prince’s attendant. As always, her sharp voice rang through the air, and she flopped about like a lively fish just pulled from the water. Her youthful energy was...admirable, I supposed. As was her talent for embellishing the truth.

“You’re right, it’s terribly rude to His Highness’s esteemed visage, is it not?” I lamented.

She looked at me in confusion. “What are you—”

“But truly, is it not a tragedy?” I continued. “A face so noble and blessed by beauty, marred so terribly by anger. It is only natural for a lady to lament such a sight. I’m glad we share the same sentiment. A loss for the world, is it not? But tell me, dear sister, what part of my words, spoken out of admiration for His Highness, could possibly be considered an insult? Surely, a lady as kind and well-mannered as yourself could explain it to me?”

I deepened my smile, attempting to ease the tension in the conversation. Yet, rather than relaxing, my dear foster sister grew stiff. How curious.

“I—I mean...even when he’s angry, His Highness’s face is still—”

“My, my. This is quite unacceptable, is it not?” I interrupted gently. “His Highness is royalty, yet here he stands, raising his voice in the halls of the Royal Academy, which serves as an informal social arena for the future leaders of this kingdom. Some might frown upon such conduct. And to display his temper so openly? In front of none other than Class D, the lowest-ranked by academic standing? Regardless of our year difference, if word were to spread that you, the top students of Class A, did more than merely raise your voices

at a student of Class D like myself, what might that do to your reputations?"

Having said my piece, I attempted to walk past the prince, only to have my arm seized.

"What a pity," I sighed. "This situation lacks any semblance of romance."

"What nonsense are you spewing?" the prince growled. "You truly are not only untalented and incompetent, but vile as well. Do you take pleasure in tormenting your sister? I'll not let you slip away so easily today."

His voice was restrained, but his fury was not. My wrist ached beneath his grip. Ah, the strength of youth. I wondered, though, would he kindly *stop* applying more pressure? How terribly rough of him. Even in adolescence, one should treat their elders with kindness.

Then again...in this life, I was still only sixteen.

"You dare to disregard my words entirely, all while excusing your own shortcomings and continuing to torment me?" he demanded. "Just who do you think you are, you incompetent fool?"

"Who do I think I am? I *am* your betrothed, am I not? And really, your accusations seem rather misguided, don't they?"

"What?! You dare mock me, you talentless disgrace?!"

Despite my warnings, he was now speaking so loudly that he had begun to draw the wary glances of nearby students. Was this truly the impression he wished to leave? And, oh my, he'd begun to twist my wrist. Was I now permitted to get angry?

"You are bending my wrist quite unnaturally," I noted, maintaining my smile. "Any more, and it may well be considered violence."

"You wretched little—!"

His grip tightened further—enough that his attendant finally noticed how much force he was applying.

"Hey, Shua, surely that's too..."

Just then, a voice rang out from the classroom. "Just what do you think you're doing?!"

My class's homeroom teacher strode toward us. At the sound of her voice, two male teachers arrived quickly and separated His

Highness from me. I idly noted that all three teachers had varying shades of brown hair. It gave me a satisfying sense of unity. Meanwhile, my wrist was already swelling, mottled in hues of red and blue.

The prince blanched. "I... I didn't mean—"

How unfortunate. Now that he had returned to his senses, his first instinct was to glance at those around him. Did he seek sympathy? Forgiveness? Even a grandmother's patience had its limits.

I flexed my fingers with a quiet sigh. "My, my. That *does* look rather swollen, doesn't it?"

The two young men flinched. Meanwhile, my foster sister took a discreet step back, sidling up to a girl who appeared to be her friend —evidence of her finely tuned sense of self-preservation.

"Professor, may I go to the infirmary?" I asked. "It is my dominant arm, after all, and I would hate for this to interfere with tomorrow's joint training."

"Wait, I'll—"

Ah, His Highness was capable of using healing magic. But I had no intention of allowing that.

"I would rather not have anyone assume I may be treated as one pleases simply because my incompetence calls to mind that of the so-called 'legendary villainess,' or that a simple healing spell would make everything right, or that, as royalty, such things ought to be overlooked."

"Wh— I never meant—" He appeared to be shaken at hearing the term "notorious villainess," and by my outright refusal. But I had indulged him long enough, and only because I had tried to view him as family.

No longer. I was angry now.

My usual ladylike smile was now replaced with a glacial smile befitting the *original* notorious villainess, and I delivered my words with absolute finality.

"Second Prince Joshua Rovenia. Do not mistake it. I feel this way *because of you* and *your actions*. And for one in power to act the victim in order to absolve himself is the very height of cowardice."

Even if, at my core, I was practically his grandmother, and he was merely a hot-blooded teenage boy, I would not tolerate domestic violence.

This was probably the first time anyone had aimed such malice at him; his breath hitched. His lips parted as if to speak, but no words came. I had once been a princess who endured an era of turmoil, after all. A naive child should not assume he could best a woman who was armed with a lifetime of experience.

Ah, but my words had been quite thorny, hadn't they? Perhaps that was why even the surrounding teachers had fallen silent, the entire atmosphere frozen as if the very air had been chilled.

"What is it that you want?" he murmured after a moment, seeming to have finally sensed the growing tension around him.

"A change of venue, perhaps?" his red-haired companion suggested carefully.

How absurd. I brushed the suggestion aside. "That will not be necessary. Let us keep this simple. His Highness has inflicted harm upon me, his betrothed. That is a fact. Therefore, he shall compensate me accordingly, from his personal funds. And that will be the end of this incident."

A settlement, clear and final. The matter would end here, and I would pursue it no further.

"Sister?! You would demand money from His Highness?"

"Hey, don't get ahead of yourself—"

Ah, they were fools. Fools, the both of them.

"Sienna, *silence*," I said to my foolish foster sister. I then turned to look at the other fool. "Heinz Asche, third son of House Asche..."

His shoulders stiffened. Behind him, Sienna, who had stepped forward moments before, trembled—for the first time, not out of pretense, but *genuine* fear. Her pride couldn't bear it—her face twisted in humiliation.

"Do you not know who I am?" I asked coolly.

The prince's red-haired attendant hesitated, his brow furrowing. "What...are you trying to say?"

"I am Laviange Robur. Eldest daughter of House Robur and one of *only two* rightful heirs to that ducal house." A ripple of tension

spread through the gathered students. Sienna clenched her fists, her lips twisting. "Furthermore, I am—as of this moment—the fiancée of the second prince of this kingdom. And despite the involved parties seeking to annul the engagement, it still remains in effect by royal decree." I paused for a moment, to let my words sink in. "Tell me, Sir Heinz. You dream of knighthood, do you not? If so, I suggest you reflect—deeply—on *whom* it is you truly serve. Engrave in your heart what it truly means to be a knight, set aside personal feelings, and do not involve others as sacrifices for trivial, misplaced affections. Whether as a knight apprentice or as a candidate for a close retainer, at the very least, strive to guide the one who may one day become your lord so that they may uphold true righteousness with dignity."

"You—" He faltered.

But I had nothing more to say to him. I turned to my betrothed. "Now then, Your Highness, I trust you will handle this matter with all due haste. As for the rest of you, let us consider this incident concluded. I bid you all good day."

His complexion was ashen. Without sparing him a second glance, I performed a flawless curtsy while being careful to maintain perfect posture despite my injured arm.

Naturally, as I turned back, my usual, ever-present smile remained firmly in place.

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"This is your first visit," the resident physician said to me the moment I entered the Academy's infirmary. "What brings you here?"

He was right: Since my enrollment, I had never once been here.

I had crossed paths with the physician before, usually at the bend of a corridor when I was on my way to lunch. Each time, I felt some sort of unease. There was something about him—it wasn't that he was necessarily arrogant, but there was something subtly off-putting. With his long black bangs and thick, intricately crafted glasses, his face and eye color seemed to be intentionally obscured.

"I believe I've sprained my wrist," I said, offering my arm toward

him with my usual smile.

He frowned, casting an appraisal spell to assess the injury. "This...is not a sprain. What exactly happened?"

"A most unfortunate casualty of tangled affections, I suppose."

"What an absurdly *trivial* reason. I'll apply healing magic immediately—"

"Before that, may I trouble you for a written medical report?" I interjected. "A thoughtful acquaintance mentioned that it would be quite beneficial...as a precautionary measure."

I had to ensure the report took priority. After all, my opponent was of royal blood—without proper evidence, such matters had the tendency to disappear.

"Very well. For someone rumored to be incompetent, you're surprisingly meticulous."

I did not respond, merely maintaining a pleasant smile.

With practiced efficiency, he completed the report—only to seize my arm the moment he set his pen down, leaving me no chance to resist. "Being called incompetent doesn't bother you?"

"Not in the slightest," I replied. "If someone chooses to treat me poorly on that basis, I simply distance myself. It's as simple as that."

"That would make you quite the solitary figure."

"I find solitude far more peaceful than the company of those I cannot trust."

"I see." With his long bangs and thick glasses, his expression was difficult to make out, but I could sense something akin to pity in his gaze.

A warmth spread through my arm, easing away the pain and numbness. Good. Even the swelling subsided.

"The injury will heal," he told me, "but avoid sudden movements or heavy lifting for the rest of the day. Overstrain it, and the pain may return."

I gave a genuine laugh. "Thank you." I was relieved that he'd treated me properly. At the very least, he did not allow prejudice to dictate his actions simply because I bore the label of *incompetent*. For once, my smile was natural as I rose from my seat. I turned to leave.

“So you can smile like that too...” A quiet murmur, almost to himself, as I stepped out of the infirmary.

I did not stop. Nor did I acknowledge it. I simply continued on my way home.

※※Aside: Sienna’s Plea (Mihail)※※

“Brother! Please, you must stop our sister! She had the audacity to demand compensation from His Highness in public, all because he merely touched her arm!”

As I was returning a student council file to its place, a knock came—followed almost immediately by my foster sister, Sienna, bursting into the room.

“Calm yourself,” I said, frowning. “A lady does not run about so carelessly. Now, explain yourself. Were you even present when this happened?”

“Yes! I was! And I was terrified. It was horrid, the way she spoke to him. She wishes to remain Shua’s betrothed, so she deliberately exaggerated the matter to draw his attention! I can only imagine how offended he must have felt!”

Her voice trembled with agitation, though I suspected it was more from excitement than fear. Perhaps it was due to her many years spent as a commoner, but Sienna forgot herself at times, slipping into behavior unbefitting a lady. Furthermore, ever since she had grown closer to the second prince, she had developed an unfortunate habit of embellishing tales—particularly when they concerned my sister.

“Is this true?” This question was not directed at Sienna, but at the young lady who had followed her into the room. A fellow member of the student council, she was a frequent companion to Sienna, and I had entrusted her with keeping an eye on her.

However, I was beginning to question whether she was truly suited for the task. Too often had I seen her blindly echo Sienna’s words, readily slandering my sister without hesitation. Hardly appropriate for someone I’d entrusted with giving me unbiased

observations.

But today...today, something was different. Her gaze wavered. A flicker of hesitation.

"Yes... But that's not quite—"

Before she could finish, Sienna cut in, gripping my arm and *pushing* insistently at my back.

"Brother! She's already returned home! She's in the annex! You must go to her immediately and demand that she take back her words and apologize!"

She spoke urgently—perhaps even desperately.

"H-Hey! I still have work to do..." I said. In the end, though, I relented with a sigh. "Very well. I will speak with Laviange. But, Sienna, do not think I will pretend to be oblivious forever. I am well aware of what transpired in the courtyard before your entrance to the Academy. There are matters in *your* conduct that require correction as well."

She stared at me, stunned. It might have been the first time I had ever reprimanded her so directly.

"Regardless, I will hear Laviange's side of the story," I told her.

"B-Brother?!"

Ignoring my now visibly flustered foster sister, I took my leave.

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Back in my log house, I busied myself with preparations for tomorrow while indulging in idle musings about how best to make use of the compensation I would soon collect from my "grandson."

Then I heard a knock at the door. A rare occurrence. For courtesy's sake, I asked who it was.

"It's me."

Hm. That sounded suspiciously like one of those scams from my past life—you know, the ones where an unscrupulous individual would call unsuspecting victims, claiming to be a relative in distress.

"And which 'me' might you be?"

I heard a click of the tongue. "Your brother, Mihail Robur."

My, my, how impatient. He always told me not to refer to him as

brother, yet here he was saying it himself. How busy he must have been, going back and forth like that.

"The door is open," I said.

The door swung open to reveal my brother, who looked distinctly displeased. "Why is it unlocked?" he asked.

"It was broken, I'm afraid. Please, take a seat," I said, gesturing toward the only table in the log house. However, he remained standing, his almond eyes widening ever so slightly.

"Broken? By whom? Surely, you aren't telling me that a thief managed to infiltrate the Robur estate."

I let out a soft chuckle. "Oh, nothing so dramatic. Someone happened to violently throw the door open—and then violently slam it shut. And, well...it simply couldn't withstand such treatment."

A shame, truly. But hardly a pressing concern. I stored most of my valuables safely in a pocket dimension, after all. I also used magic to secure my bath and dressing areas, and given that no one usually approached this place, I had little reason to worry about leaving the door unlocked.

Besides, as a precaution, most of the items here were enchanted—either with a spell to return them to me should they be taken, or with a mending spell should they break—with the exception of the door and a few dishes. The only things I'd left unenchanted were those tied to a certain *someone*—because dealing with the aftermath would be far too troublesome.

Still, I had noticed that my enchantments had been activating less frequently as of late. I wondered why.

"Are you telling me Sienna broke it?"

Now, now. The servants wouldn't dare behave so boorishly in a noble lady's quarters, and our parents had never once set foot here. If he was already saying her name, then surely he already knew the answer.

"Perhaps it was simple wear and tear," I said. "The poor thing has endured a lot of rough treatment, after all. It merely broke a little sooner than expected. But I have already informed the manor staff, so I imagine mother will hear of it soon enough."

Not that I expected her to do anything about it.

"Fine, I won't ask any more about it," he sighed. "More importantly, why are you here in the first place?"

"Oh my, have you forgotten? Was it not you and mother, dear brother, who declared that I was to live separately as punishment for tormenting Sienna? That was right after she arrived, wasn't it?"

"Wait. You mean you've been living here ever since?!"

Oh dear. Why was he surprised at me doing something he told to me to do?

"Why, yes. I was told to remain here until the two of you saw fit to permit me otherwise," I reminded him. "Not long after that, I believe Sienna was given permission by mother to take my former room. I hear she now uses it for storage."

He clicked his tongue again. "Why didn't you bring this up at a dinner party? If you had simply set aside your stubbornness and refused—"

"My goodness, are you implying this is my fault?"

"Are you suggesting it's *mine*?" he shot back.

What a bother. I hadn't paid my brother much thought, yet somehow, he assumed I'd been blaming him all this time. And here he was getting agitated.

"I don't recall saying anything of the sort," I said.

"You always do this..."

I offered him my usual ladylike smile. He glared in return, clearly irritated. Ah. He must have been in his rebellious teenage years.

"Brother, you're not to blame for this," I told him. "It's simply a matter of hormonal balance and instinct."

"What nonsense are you spouting?! What is this 'hormonal'?!"

Oh, right. That concept didn't exist in this world, did it? A pity. To be precise, it referred to the biological substances secreted during puberty that could lead to increased aggression. Or, more notably, the instinct that compelled one to avoid viewing blood relatives as romantic prospects upon reaching sexual maturity. Of course, I was unsure how accurate that theory truly was. But explaining all of that would be far too troublesome.

I chuckled. "Think nothing of it." I waved my uninjured hand. "I am merely delighted to see that you are growing into a fine, healthy

young man."

"Why are you looking at me like some indulgent grandmother doting on her grandchild?"

Oh, dear. Had I let something slip? It wouldn't do for him to suspect anything.

"I assure you, brother, it wounds me to be regarded with such distaste," I said. I attempted to change topics. "But rather than discussing my expression, shouldn't we address the reason for your visit?"

"You're the one making strange expressions," he muttered. But he thankfully took my invitation to switch back to the reason for his visit. He scowled. "Now, is it true that you demanded compensation from the second prince?"

Such defiance. So very typical of someone in their rebellious phase.

"Stop looking at me like that," he snapped.

"Ah, my apologies. A mere slip."

But how could I help it? It reminded me of my sons' teenage years. Oh, the trauma of hearing "stupid old hag" for the first time. And since they were identical twins, their rebellious phases had been perfectly in sync. I had nearly cried. No, I *had* cried. My husband and daughter had to console me while I endured it. A fond memory now, of course.

Now, what had he said about "compensation"?

"Yes, I did," I confirmed.

"Why?"

Huh? *Why?* I blinked at him, momentarily taken aback. What a peculiar question. Shouldn't I have been the one asking that? And he hadn't even let me finish my sentence. "Because he twisted my arm, of course."

"That's all?" His expression darkened. "And what will you do if this finally leads to your engagement being annulled?"

"Nothing in particular."

His scowl deepened further. Ah. Could it be? Was he what the kids called *salty*? Source: My granddaughter had been really into Gen Z slang in middle school.

"Enough of this foolishness! Why can't you be more mindful of your position?!"

Oh dear. It seemed he had reached the final stage of his anger evolution.

I smiled calmly at him. "There's no problem at all, brother."

"What? That is not for *you* to decide!" How troublesome. He was so heated now that even my most pleasant smile did nothing to quell his fury. "If you have grievances, bring them to me instead of confronting the prince directly!" he said, stepping toward me. "Do you never think before you act? If this continues, your engagement will be annulled!"

"Indeed, you may be right. But we are hardly close enough to discuss such matters, are we?"

He was quiet for a moment. His jaw clenched. "Damn it."

My, my. Such language. Hardly becoming of a noble.

Ever since our childhood, we had been pushed to embrace the expectations of nobility. At some point, education stopped being encouraged and started being enforced. That was when the distance between us naturally grew. And then, our dear foster sister arrived, and that distance had become insurmountable. He became more irritable whenever he saw me, and I accepted it because that was simply what it meant to be a noble.

I suppressed a sigh, schooling my expression into a ladylike smile, yet for some reason, that only made his expression darken further.

As if the continuation of my engagement were anything new to be concerned about. If someone deliberately injured me, I had every right to demand compensation. More importantly, if I *hadn't* taken a firm stance then and there, the issue would have escalated into something far worse. In my mind, this issue had already been resolved.

And yet—why had my brother come here? His understanding of the situation seemed woefully incomplete. And for this, of all things, to be the reason he visited my log house for the very first time? How odd. Oh my, could it be...?

"Did someone bring this to your attention, and now you believe

House Robur's dignity has been tarnished?"

Oh dear. A sharp glare. How unpleasant.

"I was told by Sienna," he admitted. "She said you demanded compensation from the prince in public—all over something as trivial as him touching your arm."

"Ah, you heard from Sienna. That explains quite a lot."

Of course. That was why the story reeked of bias. My dear foster sister had inserted herself into the matter. Typical.

"I verified the truth with others who were present as well. Why did you act rashly without consulting anyone first?" he asked. His voice had lowered into an accusatory tone, but the more he kept talking, the louder he became. "If something displeased you, you should have spoken to father as the head of the house, or to me as his successor. I've told you time and again to conduct yourself with the dignity befitting a duke's daughter. Yet after years of shirking your education, you misjudge situations like this and invite scorn and so you're mocked as talentless and incompetent by those around you!"

By this point, he was nearly shouting. I had begun to question why we were still having such a heated debate in such a cramped room.

I laughed. "Indeed, but more importantly—"

"Why are you laughing?! Are you mocking me?!"

"My, my. That's a bit paranoid, isn't it?" I asked, taken aback.

"What did you just say?!"

I ignored his outburst. "Besides," I said, "isn't your throat parched from all that shouting?"

He seethed at that. Oh, my. His rage had gone quite beyond *salty* now. "Enough of this foolishness!" he shouted as he raised his arm.

Smack!

Before I could even process it, my cheek flared with pain. The impact knocked me off-balance, sending me to the floor.

My brother stared at his own hand, eyes wide with shock, as if it had moved on its own. A dazed murmur slipped from his lips. "Ah..."

Ah, it seemed he'd regained his senses. That was good.

If only I could say the same for my arm, which I had stuck out to

catch my fall. A sharp pain pulsed through it, and the swelling spread all the way down to my fingers. Was it broken?

I let out a slow breath, the tension easing from my shoulders. He flinched. The way he stood there, frozen in shock, reminded me all too well of how my sons in my past life had acted right after their very first *stupid old hag* outburst.

The memory brought an involuntary chuckle to my lips.

"Why... Why are you laughing?" Oh dear. He looked as though he might cry at any moment. Foolish boy.

Strangely, I didn't feel the same anger I had earlier with the prince and his attendants. I was exasperated, of course, but that stubbornness of his, and the way he could never quite decide whether to care or not, was endearing. He had struck me, but even in his anger, he had softened the blow at the last second, ensuring it caused as little pain as possible. For a grown man lashing out in anger, it had hardly hurt at all.

I had also deliberately fallen back to avoid the strike to my face, and, because of that, my arm was in a disastrous state. Really, I should have just taken the slap.

The thought made me laugh. This time it wasn't the polished smile of a lady, of course. No, I'm sure it must have looked more like a bitter laugh, given the searing pain still radiating from my arm.

My brother remained frozen, seeming unsure how to proceed. So, I took the initiative.

"Would you help me up?"

"What, ah— Your arm—?! I— I'm so sorry! Laviange, I'm so sorry!"

At last he noticed the swelling, his expression contorting in horror. Even as the realization set in, he crouched down and swiftly scooped me into his arms...only to freeze again.

Ah. Right. There wasn't a single sofa or even chairs for guests in this cabin. After a quick glance around, he strode toward the back and carefully lowered me onto my bed.

"Forgive me for entering your bedroom. Please, show me your arm."

Before I could even grant him permission, he knelt before me,

reaching for my swollen limb. The moment he touched it, pain flared through my body. I stiffened.

"As I suspected...it's broken. I'm sorry." His voice was tight. Yet another apology. Carefully, he began channeling healing magic. Of course—if he tried to heal it too quickly, it might set incorrectly. "I'm sorry. If it hurts, you don't have to hold your voice in."

He made sure the fracture was properly aligned as he healed it.

"Nngh—"

"It hurts, doesn't it? I'm sorry."

Of course it hurt. Realigning a broken bone before healing it properly was never painless. And yet his touch, which I had felt for the first time in so long, was warm, firm, and reassuring. He didn't tell me to just bear the pain. He didn't dismiss it either. Instead, he simply accepted it. For some reason, the thought created a peculiar warmth in my chest.

After some time, the pain and numbness finally subsided. A quiet breath escaped me as my body relaxed.

"Does your cheek hurt? I'm sorry," he said quietly, his hands still glowing with healing magic. As I watched him, I realized the difference between him and the prince.

With my uninjured hand, I gently reached up and touched his cheek. I half expected him to flinch away. But he didn't. "Brother, please don't make that face."

"What kind of face am I making?"

At that, a quiet chuckle escaped me. Oh dear. How dense could he be? "Like you're about to cry."

"I see..." He tried to compose himself, but in the process, his expression warped into something of a teary smile. And now he'd gone and made me laugh again. "So this is how you look when you really smile," he murmured.

"I'm always smiling."

"Why is that?"

"What a strange question. Wasn't it you and mother who always told me to act like a proper lady?"

"That's true... Everyone's always said your smile is the only thing that's ever been truly ladylike about you."

To the public, I was Laviange, an incompetent noblewoman, hounded by countless unflattering rumors and scorn. And yet, regardless of whether it was said in praise or mockery, there was one thing everyone agreed on—my smile was *perfectly* befitting a lady.

"Why do you never take your studies seriously? Why do you allow yourself to be called incompetent?"

"Perhaps it's because I *am* incompetent?"

"That's not true." His voice was firm. "You may not realize it, but your manners and etiquette are flawless. You mastered them without instruction. And tell me—have *I* ever called you incompetent?"

Now that I thought about it...he often urged me to improve my education and warned me that others scorned me as talentless, but had he himself ever uttered those words?

Perhaps not.

"You're wrong, you know. I did have tutors in etiquette," I said. "But...I suppose you never did call me incompetent yourself."

"You never listened to those tutors," he pointed out. "More often than not, you either ignored the lessons or fled altogether. That, I would argue, is an issue even before we discuss talent. But I have never believed you to be without ability. Your magical capacity, however... Well, the examination results were what they were. That much I will concede."

Ah. So he'd decided to sidestep that topic. How diplomatic of him.

In this kingdom, having your magic evaluated was compulsory. For commoners, evaluations were conducted upon admission to their schools, typically by the age of ten. For the nobility, they were conducted no later than the entrance examinations for the Royal Academy. Naturally, my own results—falsified in collusion with my dear sacred beasts—had been nothing short of disastrous. As far as the records showed, I possessed only the most meager magical ability—barely enough to use the simplest household spells. Truly disgraceful for the daughter of a duke.

I laughed. "There's no reason to spare my feelings, you know."

"There's no reason for that smile right now." Without another

word, he reached up to press his fingers lightly against the cheek that he had struck. The faint glow of healing magic followed. There had been no lingering pain, but perhaps a mark had remained?

Once he'd finished, he reached up and took my hand, the one that was still resting on his cheek, and enclosed it within his own. Then, with the same tenderness, he took my other hand as well, cradling them both within his grasp.

What was this? The uncharacteristic behavior left me momentarily speechless.

"I want to speak with the real you," he said.

A composed, handsome man knelt before me, grasping both my hands in quiet entreaty—it was a scene plucked straight from the image of an otome game in my previous world. Had the dere phase of this tsundere finally arrived?





Still, I refused. “My, my... That would be rather difficult, I’m afraid. The ties between me and you, and between me and this household, have been long frayed.” Even if his striking features darkened because of it, my answer would remain the same.

“Could they not be restored?” he pressed.

“I have no interest in that anymore. It’s far too late. But at least I’ve not run away, hm?”

He looked at me. “Do you believe a young lady raised as a duke’s daughter would be able to run away?” He had clearly been wounded by my words, yet he refused to relent. But alas, that was a foolish question.

“You’ve seen this room, Mihail. Do you *truly* think I have ever been treated as a duke’s daughter?”

He took in a sharp breath. I took that moment of hesitation to strike.

“Do you even know how I travel to the Academy each morning? Can you even imagine what I do throughout the day? How I return home? How I spend my evenings until I sleep?”

A heavy silence. He lowered his head. Then—

“I’m sorry.”

But truly, what else could he have expected? He asked for the *real* me? And if he were to learn how I truly felt, yet still refused to act upon it, then tell me, who would be left to bear the wound?

Perhaps he’d ask if I would not trust him. And what could I possibly say to that? Would I say that he has never once *tried* to make himself trustworthy? How could I say these things? I couldn’t. So, instead, I hid everything under the practiced smile of a lady as I always did.

“As the future head of this house, it is only natural that you would disdain someone like me who distances myself from unpleasant realities,” I told him. “Had we spoken like this before our foster sister arrived, perhaps things would have been different. But now it is far too late. You know this too. Time and again, you’ve chosen to hear her words before mine. You listened, and you believed. And all the while, I bore the weight of that injustice. This is how things have been *for years*.” I sighed. “It’s only recently that anything has begun

to shift. Perhaps her admission to the Academy has given you more chances to observe her and to compare her words with reality. I suspect that is when the unease set in. Perhaps you have even been searching for a justification to reassess the truth. Yet for all of that, your treatment of me remained unchanged."

"I'm sorry."

"You asked earlier if my ties to this family could be restored. Restoration is only possible when there is something upon which to rebuild."

My brother did not deny my words. He simply remained silent, burdened by the weight of his own conscience. It was painful to watch. Unlike the prince, I could sense his sincerity, which made it all the more difficult. His hands, still clasping mine, bore the hardened calluses of a swordsman, silent proof of his hard work. They were larger than I expected. Warmer than I anticipated. And *comforting*, in a way I had never imagined. Which, of course, only made it worse.

"And yet, even so, I knew that you cared," I went on. "You, who are clumsy, yet sincere, in your own way, never once asked for my forgiveness but only offered your apologies. That is why I have remained. I have accepted my duty as a duke's daughter to go through with my engagement to the prince without protest. Even when he wielded his self-righteous ideals, his flawed sense of justice, to justify his tyranny, I did not oppose him. That is, until today, when he hurt me."

I reached for the medical report, tucked away in the bedside drawer, and placed it before him. The moment his eyes scanned the contents, his expression hardened.

"This was *deliberate*," he breathed. His grip on the paper tightened. His jaw clenched. He had known I was injured, but he had not known how badly. "I'm sorry. *Truly*," he said. He looked at me once again. "Being betrothed to marry into royalty is something many noble ladies would envy. And yet, do you truly not desire it? Do you wish to have your engagement annulled?" His violet eyes lifted ever so slightly, searching my expression, as if attempting to discern the truth behind my words.

This was the first time I'd felt sadness at how different our physical appearances were, despite being born from the same parents. Our mother and I, too, shared little resemblance. Instead, I took after our grandmother. The same hair, the same eyes, the same delicate shape of my face. Perhaps that was why it was so easy for my mother to resent me.

Not that I felt anything for her. For her, I felt nothing close to the sentiment I felt for my brother kneeling before me in this moment. I didn't even feel hatred. When she spoke to me, she was nothing more than a voice in the distance.

Even in the womb, I had sensed it—that wrongness in her. They called it fetal memory. Perhaps it was because I had already lived a full life as a mother before that I understood, instinctively, what she lacked. She had never been capable of being a mother. And so I had never once yearned for her warmth. In this life, with the hand I had been dealt, I supposed that had been something of a mercy.

"Laviange?"

Ah. I had been so lost in the memories of my time in the womb that I had fallen silent. How careless of me. "No," I told him, "I do not wish for an annulment. Although I'm not so self-destructive as to find anything in my betrothed worthy of admiration, it's just that, as a lady of House Robur, I have no reason to actively seek an annulment. Anyone with a grasp of the current political climate, the balance of power among noble houses and foreign states, should understand why."

My words seem to startle him. Did he truly think so poorly of me? Did he think I did not care? I suppose I had done little to discourage that impression.

"I see. I misjudged you. No, perhaps your education..." He shook his head. "Never mind. That said, if the decision affected no one else but you...then what would you choose for yourself?"

Ah. I was becoming quite uncomfortable with how his estimation of me seemed to be rising in this conversation. And wouldn't he ever let go of his fixation on my education?

"If I had my way, I'd see my dear fiancé disappear into the abyss this very instant and be done with the engagement entirely," I

replied.

Ah. I had been lost in thought and accidentally voiced my actual feelings.

There was a beat of silence.

"Well, that's rather extreme."

Mm, well. I supposed it had been a rather bold statement, hadn't it? My fiancé was royalty, after all.

But Mihail didn't reprimand me. A faint, wry smile tugged at his lips; of course, he understood.

"That man is nothing but an obstacle in my life," I explained. "He isn't worth even the slightest sliver of my affection. I see no clear reason I, as the heir to House Robur, must be the one to wed him. He and his mistress—our dear foster sister—are wholly suited to one another, in nature and in sentiment. A most fitting pair. They both desire it and she shares my blood. She is as much a duke's daughter as I am. And yet, despite my supposed incompetence, my disgraceful reputation, and my meager magic, there has been no movement to dissolve my engagement."

A heavy pause.

"That is true," he admitted.

Though perhaps it had taken my arm being broken, the subject of my engagement had finally been seriously addressed. As for my brother's outburst...well, I would chalk it up to the recklessness of a rebellious youth. He seemed genuinely remorseful, after all. As a onetime special courtesy, I would forgive him. Of course, there would be no second chances.

"That is why, even on a personal level, I have no intention of seeking an annulment," I added. "After all, even a so-called incompetent noblewoman like me—one with no talent, no magic—still possesses useful blood and status. And until I know exactly how I would be treated after an annulment, the wisest course of action is to leave things as they are."

At my words, my brother hesitated. Oh my, he looked rather striking, even when he was so troubled.

"Laviange," he murmured at last, violet eyes narrowing slightly. "Are you pretending to be incompetent?"

Oh dear. I nearly laughed aloud. “To begin with, I do not care in the slightest who considers me talentless or incompetent. Tell me, have I ever once proclaimed myself gifted? Have I ever denied my own shortcomings? I have merely lived as I pleased, while others have leaped to their own conclusions, seeing only what they wish to perceive. If they insist upon viewing me through tinted lenses, why, pray, should it fall upon me to remove them? It serves me far too well to allow them to persist in their illusions.”

“Ha... I see. I suppose so,” he said with a self-effacing laugh. “I will speak with father once more regarding your engagement.” It seemed he had finally calmed down; he was back to his usual introspective self again. He really was an endearing person.

“That would be most appreciated,” I said.

He gave a small nod, rising to his feet. From this angle, with him standing tall and me still seated, the difference in our heights was all the more pronounced.

After a moment of silence, he began to speak. “I owe you an apology,” he said. “For misjudging you. And for treating you so harshly. Had I taken the time to truly listen, I might have understood you before now—even without you having to spell out your feelings for me. But even when I realized something was wrong, my own pride kept me from correcting my mistakes. And in the end...I let my emotions control me. I struck you.”

His hands clenched tightly—so tightly that his nails dug into his skin—and his face once more twisted with regret. Ah, what a troublesome man my brother was... And, still, how endearing.

※※Aside: A Brother's Regret and the Annex (Mihail)※※

"You're apologizing so much that it's starting to sound insincere, dear brother."

Even though it was my sister, this was the first time I had ever raised a hand against a woman. And though it had already been hurt by her fiancé, I had gone so far as to break her arm. The weight of that fact sat heavy in my chest. And so, without thinking, I had apologized, and then taken to repeating it over and over again.

"Ah...I see. My apol— No, wait..." I barely managed to stop myself midway. Laviange watched me with deep blue eyes full of exasperation.

"Then let's do this," she said. "Brother, I'll accept compensation from you as well."

My brow furrowed. "Oh, I see. You can have as much as you'd like..." A chance at redemption. Of course, I seized it immediately.

"However, *your* compensation will come in the form of goods." Her ladylike smile was back, but there was a mischievous glint in her eyes, as if she were plotting some playful scheme.

"Goods? And what exactly do you want?"

"Repairs for this annex."

"Repairs?" I frowned. "No, if that's the issue, then wouldn't it be easier for you to return to the main estate?"

"I refuse. It's far too late for that, and besides, I find this place much more peaceful."

Then, something clicked...

"You know," I muttered, "grandmother once said the same thing." I had spoken to her about it last year, when I had visited my grandfather to study estate management. "It was grandfather and grandmother's idea to build this annex," I said slowly, recalling her

words. “Apparently, it was designed to resemble a place dear to both of them—a hidden retreat where they occasionally met a person to whom they owed a great debt. Grandfather would spend a day here each year. That’s how much of a sanctuary it was to him.”

As I spoke, my mind drifted back to my grandmother’s face as she had recounted the story. Her once-dark hair had grown noticeably whiter—an unmistakable sign of the years we had been apart. Yet, she smiled at me with the same eyes I remembered from his childhood, the same deep blue as my sister’s, filled with warmth and affection.

My grandmother’s family had once been a struggling noble house on the verge of ruin. It wasn’t hard to imagine how hard her life must have been. She had nearly been sacrificed as an offering to that infamous villainess, only to later become the duchess of one of the Four Great Houses, a position far above her original station.

She had never revealed the identity of the person to whom she and grandfather owed so much, but from the way she spoke, it was clear that her feelings toward this person were ones of deep affection.

“That only makes me all the more unwilling to give up this place,” my sister declared, her smile blooming like a flower. “Be sure to have it properly repaired.”

The sight of that radiant expression was so charming that for a moment, my thoughts nearly ground to a halt. “Y-Yes,” I said, attempting to regain my composure. “Of course. If there’s any furniture you’d like, just let me know.”

A soft chuckle escaped her lips. “Well then, since you insist—I’d like a three-seater, upholstered in pure white fabric. And while you’re at it, could you also place protection and anti-theft wards on them? I’d appreciate it if you’d make those wards known to everyone at the main estate, as well.”

Protection and anti-theft wards. If she was requesting such measures, it meant there had already been incidents to warrant that kind of thing. And asking me to spread the word—was it meant as an admonishment to those who had already crossed the line, or a warning to those who might try again in the future?

"You may not realize it, but my personal funds are more than sufficient," I told her. "And the enchantments—I'll cast them myself, so you don't need to include them in the compensation. If there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to ask."

She tilted her head slightly, her usual composed smile in place. "Oh, my. Aside from the leaky roof and the broken door lock, I'm not particularly troubled."

"Your roof is leaking?" A sharp pang of self-reproach twisted in my gut. How had I allowed my own sister to live in such conditions, cast aside and left to endure—? I felt utterly disgusted with myself.

"Yes," she continued, unbothered. "The royal family's spy, Galfi, has been handling the repairs for some time now. A new leak appeared recently, but since his next inspection isn't due for a little while yet, I suppose it'll just have to wait."

I froze. "The royal family's spy...?" I had the sinking feeling I'd just heard something I wasn't supposed to.

"Oh, yes." She nodded serenely, as if discussing the weather. "The royal spy who used to frequently peer down at me from the ceiling. He keeps his family name a secret, but he claims to be Galfi, age thirty-one. He's a somewhat effeminate man who is currently enjoying the life of a carefree bachelor."

She chuckled as she reminisced. "Oh, and he has an exceptional eye for paintings and can expertly distinguish between edible and nonedible grasses and mushrooms. Curiously enough, he's rather hopeless at hiding. While he was peeking in on me, he noticed the dilapidated state of my ceiling and began to repair it. Eventually I just asked him for help directly, and now his skills have improved to near-professional levels. Every so often, he stops by for a routine inspection, and then again."

It took a moment for me to compose myself.

"I see," I managed at last.

Was it really okay for a royal agent to be giving out his personal information to the person he was supposed to be secretly watching?! And what had she meant by effeminate? No, I wouldn't fall down that rabbit hole. I refused to. And his expertise seemed to be painting, botany, and home repair?! When had a spy become a

handyman?! And how, exactly, could a spy be bad at hiding?! More importantly, why was she so friendly with the man assigned to keep an eye on her?!

And from the way she spoke, this Galfi character sounded like nothing more than a common Peeping Tom! She was a young woman—shouldn't she be more concerned about that?! Well...she *was* the prince's fiancée, so perhaps she'd long since gotten used to being watched. But still—wasn't she taking this a little *too* well?!

"Well...in any case, the manor's management has been entrusted to me as of this year," I said. "I'll have your room in the main house restored."

"There's no need for that. Besides, mother and Sienna would no doubt be anno—troubled by that."

Ah. She was using that ladylike smile of hers to gloss over that slip. She had almost said *annoying*, hadn't she?

"Laviange, just because you say it's unnecessary doesn't mean mother and Sienna should be allowed to do as they please with the Robur estate," I said firmly. "You are the eldest daughter of House Robur. Of course, you may use this annex however you like. But...let me think. Since I won't always be here to keep an eye on things..."

Memories flashed through my mind. Memories of mother's violence, which had once threatened the life of Laviange when she was still a child. And of Sienna's increasingly cruel treatment toward her as the years went by.

"There's an empty room on the same floor as mine," I said at last. "From now on, I want you to use it."

Her head tilted slightly. "Oh, my." Her surprise was understandable. After all, the wing where my chambers were located had always been reserved for the heir of the family.

"My quarters are in a different wing from mother's and Sienna's. The servants there are all personally assigned to me and therefore outside mother's influence. They've been properly trained."

"I see," she said, tone unreadable. "I can't say whether I'll actually use it, but...if that arrangement is acceptable to you, I'll keep it in mind."

"Good." I gave a small nod. "I'll place protective enchantments

and security wards on that room as well."

And just like that, we had had their first real conversation in what felt like an eternity. Well—*I* had done most of the talking while she had mostly nodded along.

"It's gotten late, hasn't it?" she murmured. "I still need to prepare for tomorrow, so I should start soon."

I blinked. Somehow, I hadn't even noticed that the sun had already set. "You're right," I said, clearing my throat. "Tomorrow is the joint training exercise between our years. What's your assigned role?"

"I'll be in charge of setting up camp and cooking. And you, brother—you're on subjugation and healing duty, I assume?"

"Yeah. The beasts we're dealing with this year are stronger than last time. If things get dangerous, head straight for the upperclassmen."

"I will do so," she said lightly.

I had no idea which second-year students she would be paired with. The teams were drawn by lots on the day of the training to ensure balanced combat potential and experience-appropriate challenges. First-years were paired with third-years, while second-years were with fourth-years. Within each grade, the highest-ranking Class A students were paired with the lowest-ranking Class D students, while Class B and Class C students were grouped together. Last year, when we had been in first and third year, we had been placed in the same grouping, but not the same team.

"This year's training is an overnight camp, unlike last time. You'll have a lot to carry. Ride with me in my carriage tomorrow."

There was a slight pause. Then her lips curved into her usual ladylike smile. "Very well."

But although she'd accepted my offer, I couldn't shake the feeling that she was still drifting further and further away. I knew I had waited far too long. The rift between us was of my own making, and as much as I wanted to bridge it, the gulf remained deep.

2: (The Day Disaster Strikes) It All Began with Morning Chaos

"Good morning...?"

It came out more like a question than a greeting.

How long had it been since the last time we'd exchanged morning pleasantries like this? The only visits I was used to having in the mornings were unwanted ones from my dear foster sister; my brother's appearance at this hour left me momentarily off-kilter.

"Yes, good morning," he replied, swiftly stepping inside. "How's your arm? Did you sleep well?"

"Yes." I was still holding the door and watching him. "My arm is fine, and I slept without issue. And you, brother?"

He gave a short nod. "I'm glad to hear that. I slept well too. Ah—were you in the middle of breakfast? I didn't mean to intrude."

Wait... Had he somehow realized I had been planning to slip ahead and leave before him?! I quickly masked my thoughts with a polite smile.

"You're not intruding at all," I insisted. I gestured to the breakfast spread on the table. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Not yet..." He trailed off, glancing at the table. His eyes widened slightly. "You cooked this yourself?"

Ah. Could this be an opportunity? He had promised to restore this annex, after all. Perhaps a little culinary persuasion wouldn't hurt.

"Indeed, I did. It's simple fare—a soup of mung beans and eggs, and sandwiches with spiced meat made with some of the seasonings I'm bringing for today's training. Would you care to join me?"

"Spiced sandwiches..." His violet eyes flickered with interest. "Are you sure?"

"Of course—"

Bang!

“Brother, wait!” came a voice from the doorway.

It was none other than Sienna, storming in full of early morning energy. Her hair bounced in perfect curls, and she was practically vibrating with enthusiasm. It was rare to see her so mindful of her appearance.

“Sienna,” my brother said, his expression cooling, “do you *always* burst in like this?”

“That’s not important!” she huffed. “Brother, you’ve only been listening to *her*! You should hear me out too—”

“Sienna.”

Oh? That lovely voice of his was growing lower by the second. But throwing a tantrum first thing in the morning would be bad for it. I decided to make him a nice, smooth chamomile tea. Good for the throat, you see.

I set about steeping the tea. I’d had a lot of practice in my previous life, and inhaling the soothing fragrance as the steam curled into the air brought a small smile to my lips.

Sienna let out a shriek. “Sister! You are so cruel!”

“Now, now. It’s not like I have a choice,” I said.

“So you *are* admitting it was your fault?!”

I could understand why she was upset—after all, I had only prepared two cups. But in this case, the accusation was entirely unfounded.

“My fault?” I said. “The one who broke the other guest cup was you, Sienna, was it not? And so there is only one guest cup left. Surely, you aren’t suggesting that you wish to use my personal cup, are you?”

“What are you talking about?!” she snapped.

“What else? The fact that I can’t serve you tea. It’s not intentional, really. I would like to offer you some, but you broke the other guest cup not too long ago, didn’t you?” I asked as I poured hot water into the teapot, savoring the aroma before filling the last remaining guest cup and setting it before my brother. “Still, if you’d like some tea, I’d be happy to make you some—just go fetch a cup from the main house.”

There had been no wards placed on these cups, as someone had

been breaking them one by one for quite some time now. Just like with the broken door, constantly restoring them would be a hassle.

"What did you just say?!" Sienna hissed.

But before she could continue, my brother's sharp voice cut through the air. "Sienna!"

Well, well. It was nice to see them both so full of energy first thing in the morning.

As for my own cup, the one I was sipping from, it was a handmade white mug with a simple design of blue lines forming a cheerful cloud and a beaming full moon. It was one of a set of mugs and teacups that had been made to match the number of sacred beasts I cared for. Unlike the guest cups, these *were* properly warded. Only the mugs had designs on them. The teacups, on the other hand, were plain. Because, for some inexplicable reason, my dear sacred beasts had found *all* of my hand-drawn designs utterly unacceptable. They somehow mistook clouds and moons for food or insects and the like. And so the teacups they used were left as plain as the day they were bought. Ridiculous. I had long since given up trying to understand what went on in their minds.

As I mused over the absurdity, I turned my attention back to preparing extra soup and sandwiches. My siblings were still behind me, and I could feel Sienna's resentful gaze boring into the back of my head. Of course, I didn't turn around. We needed to leave early today, so there was no time to waste.

"Sienna," my brother said at last, his voice clipped, "we will talk *after* the joint training exercise. Leave."

"Brother," she mumbled. Then, after a long pause, "I understand."

Click.

The door shut *quietly*. I nearly dropped the ladle into the soup! I had never heard her close a door so softly before!

"She must have followed me from the manor," my brother muttered. "Apologies."

"No matter," I said, placing the final sandwich on the plate. "I'm quite used to it."

A beat of silence.

"Used to it," he echoed, voice heavy. "I see." After a pause, he

exhaled and straightened. “I’ll bring over a tea set with protective wards next time.”

I chuckled. “Oh, no need to trouble yourself.”

“No, I insist. That said, I don’t think there will be any designs featuring insects. Would floral patterns be acceptable?”

I paused. “Brother,” I said slowly, “this design is a cloud and full moon.”

There was a pause followed by deep, contemplative silence.

“I’ll find something with a sky or star motif.”

I blinked. And then, despite myself—a quiet, amused laugh escaped me. “Thank you?” I said, smiling.

I wonder why? I felt a sharp stare drilling into my back. But, if I turned around now...somehow, it felt like *losing*.

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“We will now have you draw lots. Team leaders, please gather here.”

After we’d finished breakfast, I ended up taking the carriage to school with Mihail. We parted ways upon arrival and I joined the students assembled in the schoolyard for that day’s joint training exercise. Everyone stood clustered in their assigned teams, and each was dressed according to the roles they had been assigned and were carrying the necessary supplies.

I, too, was dressed appropriately. A dark brown cloak, both practical and sturdy, was draped over my shoulders, and I wore gloves on my hands, though my thumb and forefinger were left bare to make it easier for me to perform my role. A pouch hung at my waist, and a large bag was slung over my shoulder.

At first glance, my cloak seemed plain, but, with a touch of magic, I could change its colors as needed. Its cut and stitching allowed for ease of movement, and there were hidden pockets stitched throughout. A few well-placed enchantments made sure its interior maintained a consistently comfortable temperature and humidity. It was a custom-made Lavi original, and you wouldn’t find it for sale anywhere.

I stood among the rest of the students in my high-spec attire, quietly watching as the leaders gathered.

My team's leader was Ralf, the second son of a petty noble family who was a member of the adventurer course. He had a rugged face, gray hair, and dark green eyes. To my left stood our second-in-command, Lauren. He was a mild-mannered boy with wavy, light-brown hair. The eldest son of a merchant family, and a commoner, he was in the mage course.

These two were our primary frontline fighters, responsible for subduing any magical beasts we found, and also for helping to gather what resources and meat we could retrieve from the beasts' remains.

On my right stood Kartika, a bespectacled young woman with black hair braided into pigtails. She was the third daughter of a petty noble family and worked part-time as a seamstress. Her glasses had a slight tint to them, which made her eyes appear green. She was also in the mage course. Her role was backline support, and she was in charge of healing.

I was a member of the unpopular magic tool course, and I helped to set up camp and provided occasional backline support. However, my main role was preparing meals.

"One!"

The instructors began calling out the lots. The second-year and fourth-year team leaders who had drawn that number paired up.

"Two!"

Ah. My dear grandson (the prince, that is) had been paired with the strongest team in Class D. His team included his ever-loyal attendant, along with two noble ladies from ducal and marquis families. Class A truly was full of high-ranking nobility.

"Five!"

My brother stepped up along with the leader of a solid mid-tier team from Class D.

"Nine!"

Oh, was that fourth-year leader...

"Lady Robur, let's go," Kartika said.

I followed her and Lauren to where Ralf was standing with the

fourth-year team we had been paired with. My eyes scanned the faces of the fourth-year team.

Their team leader smirked at me, dripping with malice. As I suspected, this was someone I knew: He was one of the prince's lackeys. Unmistakably dressed in the attire of a mage, he was none other than the second son of House Nilty—one of the Four Great Ducal Houses. His hair the color of milk tea, common in his family, was a shade that had been shared by one of the queen consorts of the previous king.

His second-in-command was a striking young woman who was enrolled in the knight course. She was the second daughter of a marquis family from the borderlands, into which the youngest brother of the current king had married.

The other two members were a young man and a young lady, both of the marquis rank. Healing and backline support, perhaps?

Ralf began to introduce our team, but Young Master Nilty ignored him entirely, his eyes fixed only on me.

"Well, well, if it isn't Lady Robur," he said, still smirking.

"Good day, Lord Nilty," I answered him with a ladylike smile, before trying to redirect him back to the matter at hand. "Since today's joint training exercise carries an element of real danger, perhaps it would be best if we began with an introduction from our team leader and an overview of our team composition, no?"

I would have preferred to ignore him entirely, but I was the only one on my team of equal rank.

"Still as talentless and incompetent as ever, I see," he scoffed. "You were placed into Class D and you still weren't able to make team leader? As the fiancée of the second prince, don't you find that shameful?"

"Oh, my. No, not at all. I don't feel any particular way about it," I said, with the very same smile, before repeating word for word what I had said earlier. "Since today's joint training exercise carries an element of real danger, perhaps it would be best if we began with an introduction from our team leader and an overview of our team composition, no?"

His sneer vanished, replaced by a cold stare. "Someone as

worthless as you dares to mock a Nilty?”

Oh, my. His thin veneer of politeness had disappeared.

“I do not have the slightest interest in you,” I said, still smiling. Then I repeated myself for a third time. “Since today’s joint training exercise carries an element of real danger, perhaps it would be best if we began with an introduction from our team leader and an overview of our team composition, no?”

Ah. Now he looked angry. I wondered why.

He glared as he took a step toward me. Before he could close the distance, though, Ralf wordlessly moved to position himself between us. Despite his rough features, which befitted a man who aimed to be an adventurer, Ralf had always been a gentle soul and a lover of plants of all kinds. As a grandmother at heart, I was very fond of young men like him. I decided then that I would give him an extra helping of meat at lunch.

“Lord Nilty, we’re on a schedule,” the knightly young lady who appeared to be his second-in-command cut in. “As Lady Robur said, training or not, fighting these beasts will be real combat. Unnecessary conflict is detrimental to the team.”

Oh! What a delightful young lady. She had silky, straight honey-brown hair that had been styled into a bob and dark-blue almond eyes that radiated intelligence.

She was far more appealing than her pedigree-obsessed team leader, who had answered her with a cluck of the tongue. She had striking, androgynous features—surely she must have had a fan club! And the sword strapped to her waist? Absolutely magnificent. On top of that, she was the current king’s niece! Which meant she was also related to the infamous villainess! I decided that, in my heart, I would view her as a grandchild, just like a certain cousin of hers. I would call her *granddaughter*. Only to myself, of course.

Even Lord Nilty, arrogant as he was, hesitated to go against a close relative of the king. I decided to name him *Mr. Pedigree*.

“My apologies,” granddaughter said as she turned to our team.

Ralf nodded. “We also offer you our apologies. May I proceed with introductions and a brief overview of our team’s strengths?” Ralf was always so well-spoken, I thought with a chuckle. He had an

older brother and had spent time doing research with last year's graduates, so he knew how to handle people like this.

"Yes. Please proceed," said granddaughter. She clearly had actual combat experience and knew enough that she didn't underestimate us in the slightest. As to be expected of a marquis's daughter from a family that had been entrusted with the defense of the borderlands.

Ralf gave a concise summary of our team's members, their specialties, and overall capabilities.

Mr. Pedigree scoffed. "Useless, just as expected. The daughter of a ducal house relegated to mere camp setup and cooking? How utterly pathetic."

It was a familiar reaction. In fact, I had heard the same one a year ago from the third-year leader who our team had been paired with. For shame, Mr. Pedigree. Plagiarism would never be in vogue.

"Lord Enrique," said granddaughter sharply. I sighed in admiration. Our young lady knight really was lovely. She took the opportunity to introduce her team. "This is our leader, Lord Enrique Nilty—the second son of House Nilty, one of the Four Great Ducal Houses. He is a member of the mage course."

"Hmph, don't even think about addressing me by name, you Class D peasants."

My, my. It wasn't as if any petty nobles or commoners would dare address a noble who acted as high and mighty as Mr. Pedigree by name. Wait. Could it be? Was he secretly upset that no one ever called him by name? So he preemptively forbade it to cover up his own loneliness? How adorable of him.

I nodded along with the rest of my team.

"I'm Minacuala Ujeera. I hail from a frontier marquis family, but we're teammates now—just call me Mina."

Oh, absolutely*, with pleasure!* Of course, I used my usual smile as a poker face and kept my Lady Mina fever to myself.

"The two behind me are also from marquisate families. He is Lord Pechulim Lunach and she is Lady Mightycarna Twyla. To make things simple, they've agreed to let you call them Lim and Mighty for the duration of this training exercise."

The two golden-haired, blue-eyed nobles stepped forward. The

color of their hair differed slightly, but this type of coloring was common among the upper aristocracy.

"For this exercise, you may call me Lim," the young man said. "But after it ends, you will no longer be allowed to use that name."

Next, the young lady spoke up. "Right now, you may call me Mighty. It's a pleasure. Since our status and academic standings differ, I also expect you to no longer use my name after training ends."

It seemed that I, someone who outranked them both, was getting the same treatment as the rest of my team. Lady Mina looked slightly apologetic. But there was no need. I'd already experienced this sort of treatment in my first year, and last year's graduates had given me *plenty* of lessons to learn from.

"Lim is in the management course and Mighty is in the etiquette course," Lady Mina added, "but for this training exercise, they'll be handling healing and backline support. While their magical capacity exceeds yours, they lack real-world combat experience outside of Academy lessons. I expect this to be a mutually beneficial experience." She gave us a pleasant smile as she finished.

Oh. How I longed to return home. To lock myself away and pour this overwhelming inspiration onto paper. For what, you might ask? My own original novel, of course! The sacred beasts were always nagging me for the next installment, and now, I had finally encountered my ideal knight! And she was *a woman*! I was overflowing with inspiration!

In the distance, I heard the instructors—our homeroom teacher and the two who had pulled the prince away from me the day before—begin to give out further instructions.

"Once you've finished introducing yourselves, grab your things and move to the teleportation circle! When your number is called, please enter the circle!"

I snapped back to reality, and prepared to move. But just then, a voice called from behind me. It was Lady Mina.

I turned to her.

"My lady, I apologize for our leader's behavior," she began, before stepping toward me and whispering into my ear. "However, if I may

say something out of line, I do think you should carry yourself with more awareness of your status."

Oh... Oh my. She'd caught me off guard when she leaned in like that. I turned slightly, just enough to glance up. The conflicted, guilt-ridden expression on her beautiful, androgynous face was stunning. That face was absolutely *sinful*. It was a face that wouldn't be out of place in any fantasy, male or female, yuri or BL!

This was the face of a *protagonist*! She would be perfect as the lead in a mystery novel. How tragic that I was *terrible* at writing mysteries! I'd never regretted anything as much!

"M-My lady...? I-I apologize. It was out of place for me to say that when we've only just met."

Oh dear. I'd perhaps let my imagination run too wild. Still, the look of panic on her face was adorable. If I had tried to view my erstwhile fiancé as a grandchild, then surely it was okay to view this young lady the same way. Yes, I decided that I would. Grandma would have to spoil her!

I chuckled. "My apologies, but there's no need for you to worry. I understand the point you make," I said. "Especially when that point is being made by a member of House Ujeera, which has long been tasked with protecting the borderlands—you would naturally find my conduct lacking. As for Mr. Pedi—" Ah, I had let myself become so worked up that I'd almost slipped up. Thankfully, I could just cover it with my ladylike smile. "As for Lord Nilty's remarks, they haven't bothered me in the slightest. Rather than putting our team in danger during the exercise by posturing, I believe it's far better to report the current situation truthfully, even if it invites ridicule."

"That is quite the mature perspective," she remarked. "I must confess I'm impressed."





I heard someone cluck their tongue behind us—it was Mr. Pedigree himself.

"I merely called someone incompetent who *is incompetent*," he spat out, and stormed past us.

Oh my, did he want my attention that badly?

Unfortunately for him, I was preoccupied with far more important matters: I was frantically trying to engrave into my mind all the scenarios that my overactive imagination had created. I had no attention to spare for the likes of him!

We arrived at the teleportation circle while I was still lost in thought.

Before us, a five-meter-wide magic circle had been etched into the ground, pulsing with a white light. Runes of an ancient script and symbols belonging to this world were woven into its design. It wouldn't have looked out of place in a fantasy anime from my past life.

"Team AD8!"

That simply meant the team of combined students from Classes A and D who had drawn the number eight in the earlier drawing of lots. We watched as that team stepped into the glowing circle and vanished from sight. Now, it was our turn.

I glanced at the circle as we waited for our number to be called. The rumors, I realized, had been true: This year's joint training exercises were going to be significantly more difficult. I knew as much because I could tell where our destination was by looking at the teleportation circle. Ordinarily, though, such a feat would be impossible without channeling magic directly into the circle...so I decided it would be best to keep this little secret to myself.

More intriguing still, though, was the particular enchantment woven into this magic circle—one designed specifically for our team. How delightfully curious.

I caught Ralf's gaze and gave him a subtle double nod. A signal that meant: *Stay on your guard.*

At once, our two male companions adjusted their positions to shield both myself and Kartika. Ralf touched the small blade fastened to his belt.

“Team AD9.”

At last, our turn had come.

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No sooner had we teleported to the location of the joint exercise than we found ourselves face-to-face with a monstrous centipede. We gave thanks for the life that sustained us, as was our team’s custom. Then we sprang into action, each team member doing their duty.

From my bag, I swiftly procured two pegs, each measuring approximately fifty centimeters in length, along with a hammer.

“Kartika, my dear!” I called to her as I tossed her the tools.

She caught them and gave me a nod. “Got it!” she said, and ran off.

I reached back into my bag and took a matching set for myself, before dashing forward. These pegs were the kind designed for securing tents, but we were going to use them for a different purpose.

Clang!

I poured magic into the first peg and then drove it into the ground with my hammer. Kartika did the same with hers, timing her strikes to hit simultaneously with mine. The moment our hammers struck the pegs, a surge of magic flowed through them, connecting them to each other. A clear ringing sound reverberated from them—they had been successfully activated.

“When we cut off its head, we’ll need to kick it that way,” Ralf shouted.

“G-Got it!”

Above us, Ralf and a hesitant Mina, bless her heart, were helping each other climb from the centipede’s front to its back. A bug of its kind wouldn’t be able to reach round to attack them.

Both of them wielded swords enhanced with magic—Ralf’s infused with wind magic, Mina’s with water. The two drove their blades into the space between two of the centipede’s thick segments and then sliced outward in opposite directions.

A shrill, ear-piercing scream echoed through the air as the beast flailed, attempting to wriggle free from its burrow. But Kartika and I were faster. We had already driven all four pegs into the ground around the hole. As magic flowed through each of the four pegs, they synchronized with each other and resonated. With a ringing sound, the pegs released a pulse of magic that spread across the hole that lay between them. It created a type of containment barrier, preventing the centipede from escaping its hole. Unable to break through the invisible barrier, it began thrashing around in the increasingly confined space where it found itself trapped.

The ordinary use of monster-repellent pegs like these was to form a protective barrier that emitted waves outward to repel any magical beasts. They were used to protect humans from attacks. We, however, used them for the reverse, emitting the waves inward to keep a creature trapped. By driving each peg into the ground at a slight upward angle, the waves could be made to resonate and echo off one another, extending their effect into the air. And thanks to the way I had modified the pegs, the waves they emitted were stronger than your standard monster repellent.

But there was a downside to this method. The pegs wouldn't last very long like this, and required frequent maintenance during and after use. But that was *no problemo* with me around. I was a member of the magical tools course, after all. I made sure that our tools were used efficiently with minimal expenditure of magic and cost.

"Haaah!" Lauren yelled as he launched a barrage of fireballs into the hole. He was right on cue, almost as if he had been waiting for the *Monster Repellent v2* barrier to be set up. The beauty of this method was that not only was the beast confined, but we were able to attack freely from beyond the barrier.

"We need to kick the head outside the hole!"

"Leave it to me!"

Ralf and Mina's attack had severed the centipede's head from its body, and the creature had stopped moving. The two of them kicked its head away in the agreed direction.

Since both of them were making use of body-enhancement

magic, the head landed all the way at Mr. Pedigree's feet, where it bounced up with great force. Fluids from the severed head splattered across his very expensive boots.

"Uwaah!" He recoiled with a startled cry. Ah, poor thing. Perhaps next time he wouldn't just stand there idly watching in the midst of a battle.

It was a good thing I had given the order to cut one joint lower. Had they severed it a segment higher, the venom within would have sprayed out like acid, dissolving anything it touched.

The head continued to twitch—a grotesque sight indeed. But it was all worth it for the reward of a delicious meal!

"Ralf, could you use wind magic to push the body into the pit?" I asked.

"Consider it done," he said, walking toward its unmoving carcass.

Mina followed him. "I shall assist as well."

Oh? She had an affinity for wind magic too? Magical affinities for different elements varied from person to person, usually with one affinity dominating over others. What a delight this Lady Mina was. I was proud to think of her as a granddaughter!

The two of them each climbed onto one of the centipede's many legs. Then, with a powerful kick, they jumped off, kicking at the beast's rigid back and propelling themselves into the air. As the carcass swayed back and forth, they both summoned a powerful gust of wind magic to send it teetering over into the still-burning pit.

I stood back and admired Lauren's skill with fire magic. The flames were the perfect temperature to cook it through without overdoing it.

Ralf and Mina landed safely outside of the hole. I noted with relief that neither was injured. Ralf's greatsword shimmered before vanishing into thin air, and the small blade hooked onto his belt reappeared.

I reached into my pouch to retrieve a handful of combustible magic stones, tossing them one after another into the pit. With a whoosh, the flames roared even higher. These stones were an invaluable tool, capable of sustaining combustion even in the absence of oxygen—perfect for slow-roasting the beast.

"Kartika, dear, would you be so kind as to seal the pit with your earth magic?" I asked.

"Are we steam-roasting it this time? With pleasure. How long until it's ready?" Oh my, how her eyes gleamed behind the faintly green-tinted lenses of her spectacles.

"Let's see." I smiled. "If we leave it for the better part of an hour, that should suffice."

"An hour? I can hardly wait," she said with a ravenous smile.

"To think we get to eat Lady Robur's cooking so quickly into the exercise!" Lauren said as he walked up to us, a big smile on his face.

How adorable—young people who showed their feelings with such sincerity always warmed my heart.

Next, Ralf came over holding the four pegs we had used earlier. "Lady Robur, I've retrieved the monster-repellent pegs. Work on their maintenance as soon as you are able."

"Thank you," I said.

I retrieved the pegs and put them back into my pack for later maintenance. I retrieved six new pegs from my pack. They were shaped the same as the pegs I had just used, but the magic stones embedded inside these were already filled with magical energy.

"Here," I said, handing two to each of my teammates. "These are unmodified magic repellent pegs, only slightly boosted. Centipedes often move in pairs, so could you set them up before we eat? Set them up in our standard pattern."

"Understood," they answered.

Their expressions had hardened, and there was a slight hesitation in their response. Their reaction was understandable. I normally had them use four pegs when setting up a defensive perimeter, but in our current situation I felt it prudent to use six, even though they were boosted. That they understood this without my prompting spoke well of their perceptiveness.

The three of them—no, four, as Mina had come and joined them—immediately began using detection magic, sweeping the ground and surrounding terrain, before they drove the pegs into place.

I followed our leader's instructions and began the maintenance process. I took a cloth from my bag, spread it on the ground, and

sat down. After lining up my toolbox and the pegs I had received, I crossed my legs to get comfortable for the work. Do pardon the lack of decorum—it was only for practicality.

"Hmph. I suppose you do have some use. However, I find it hard to forgive that you soiled my boots."

Ah. That arrogant voice could only belong to Mr. Pedigree himself. I noticed that his boots were now looking pristine. He must have used a cleaning spell. Was he truly that concerned about getting dirty during a monster subjugation exercise?

I looked up at him, my usual ladylike smile in place. "My, my. Perhaps you've come to offer your assistance?"

"Just who do you take me for? This is hardly a task suited to a mage of noble standing. Such menial work should be left to one of lesser magic and feeble ability—like *you*, my lady," he sneered. "But more importantly, my boots were dirtied. I expect an apology."

Ah, so that was what he was after. He was picking a fight with me. Ah, to be young and stupid again.

I carried on with my maintenance work...only to be interrupted once more, this time by the young blond marquis's son. "Forget those silly tools for a moment. What was with that battle just now? Your team seemed remarkably well coordinated, yet you were the one issuing the commands? I find that curious, given you are not the leader."

"Is that so?" I said, mildly affronted. *Forget those silly tools?* He had just seen firsthand how useful they were in battle, had he not? Did these two seriously have no sense of urgency?

"Even as a lady of the standing that you are, it would be prudent to seek guidance from upperclassmen or your leader. Especially during a joint subjugation exercise," he chastised me. "This time, things happened to go well, but if something had gone wrong, it would've been too late. You would do well to refrain from such reckless behavior."

"Indeed?"

Was it really all right to just move past Mr. Pedigree's grievances over his boots, blond boy?

Besides, I *had* acted under the guidance of my leader. Could it be

that the blond boy's eyes and ears were so feeble that he had failed to grasp the situation? Until now, I had assumed his inaction—which amounted to an unceremonious tumble onto his rear, followed by the casting of a barrier only around himself—had been a matter of strategy to carefully study the battlefield.

But if that wasn't the case, then... Oh dear, this was a disaster!

The realization struck me as I was opening my toolbox. My hands froze. Putting aside the blond boy's physical ability, if this team truly reflected the average skill level of the fourth-year Class A students, then wasn't it an exceedingly poor idea for them to remain in this forest?! After all, this forest was...

I opened my mouth, prepared to voice my concerns, only to reconsider.

No, best to keep such thoughts to myself. This was a training exercise, after all. Unexpected challenges were part of the experience. Ah, this old lady almost trampled their budding potential. Too close, too close.

Just as I settled my thoughts, the blonde-haired girl stepped before me, hands on her hips, chest puffed out with unmistakable self-assurance.

"Lim, it's not surprising that their team is more experienced than we are. Unlike us, the Class D rabble know nothing but fighting monsters and foraging for food. But, Lady Robur, surely *you* understand that this does not mean we are inferior?"

It was true. I didn't think them inferior—just lacking in ability. I offered her a warm smile and nod to acknowledge her point.

"Both Lim and Lord Nilty know it too, right? In the end, it was Lady Mina who dealt the decisive blow to the beast," she said. "Surely, my lady, you must understand that someone like you—who can barely cast anything beyond basic magic for everyday use and relies on magical tools—couldn't possibly survive in this forest long without our assistance. The same goes for your fellow second-years. No matter what impression you may have, your so-called success belongs to *us*. That is the reality of the matter, is it not?"

Oh, dear. Her desperation to sound menacing reminded me of a harmless baby viper, desperately attempting to strike with its

toothless little fangs. And, to make matters worse, she was trying to manipulate my mind using a dark-affinity spell at the same time.

It was a form of mental manipulation magic, intended to press upon another's psyche and erode their resistance. If left unchecked, it could evolve into a subjugation spell. However, unlike charm magic, which induced affection and encouraged the target to willingly obey, this magic forcefully imposed the will of its caster.

With this type of spell, a larger mana pool gave the caster an advantage, but when used on multiple targets, the efficiency dropped. A skilled caster could compensate for these weaknesses, but her technique was so sloppy that I couldn't even tell who she was trying to affect. And that self-satisfied smirk—she genuinely thought she was being clever, didn't she? To make matters worse, the entire premise of her argument was nonsensical. Why was she so fixated on credit? Right now, our priority needed to be minimizing injuries and leaving the forest safely.

Hmm...was this the generational gap I'd heard so much about? I couldn't understand her thinking in the slightest.

"Indeed," Mr. Pedigree said. "We're simply humoring the underclassmen by accompanying them during this training exercise. It's troubling to see the talentless and incompetent trying to stand out with meaningless bravado, and it's even more annoying when they start mistaking their floundering for actual success." He smirked. "Do you understand your position better now, Lady Robur, you spiteful girl, whose sole amusement lies in tormenting her own younger sister?"

Oh, dear. And to which Lady Robur were you referring, dear Mr. Pedigree? Surely it wasn't my dear cousin-*cum*-foster-sister, for she had no younger sister. And it certainly couldn't be me. I didn't have the time or the inclination for such petty hobbies. A case of mistaken identity, perhaps? A slip of the tongue, surely? Well, he had delivered his petty jab, which meant I could at last return my attention to my work.

I placed one of the pegs on my crossed legs and pulled two needles from my toolbox. The peg consisted of two interlocking parts; I slid one needle into the gap near the clasp that held them

together and another into the gap on the opposite side, and, when I applied a little upward leverage, the peg popped open with a satisfying click. A small pulse of magic into the embedded magic circuit confirmed my suspicion—one section had shorted.

Mr. Pedigree seemed to be talking to me, but I ignored him.

"Could it be that she has so little magic that it worked too well?" the blond boy asked.

"Oh, Lim, don't say such things," said his fellow blonde. "She *is* a high-ranking lady, after all—theoretically, at least."

"Ha! How utterly disgraceful."

The blond duo chuckled as Mr. Pedigree let out a derisive snort. Something must have amused them. Well, laughter was a good thing—young people should be allowed their fun. Meanwhile, this old woman had her work to attend to. Magical circuits bore a resemblance to electrical circuits from my previous world—how fortuitous that my past self had once obtained a license as an electrician. I should give my past self a pat on the back for wanting to install extra power outlets back when my husband and I got into DIY home improvement. We even got certified together and divided up the work to expand our home's electrical system—ah, such fond memories.

Of course, magical circuits required an understanding of arcane principles, which made them unique to this world. In some ways, they somewhat resembled magic circles.

I retrieved a small engraving tool from my kit. It looked rather like the electric erasers from my past life, save that the erasing tip consisted of a rough magic stone. Rather than batteries or external charging, it operated by drawing upon minute amounts of magical energy.

A quiet whir filled the air as I activated the device. A delicate touch was required—one misstep, and the circuit would be irreparably damaged.

"Hey! Lady Robur?" Mr. Pedigree cut in. "Are you even listening?"

"I wasn't listening," I said with a little laugh. "I'm a little preoccupied here, so I can't entertain you right now. But by all means, keep enjoying yourselves."

With that polite brush-off, I kept whittling away, letting his irritated voice drift right past me.

"What did you say, you villainess?!"

"Oh my, and what do you mean by that?"

And why, my dear Mr. Pedigree, do my words irritate you so?

And why was it that the blonde girl looked vaguely puzzled?

The blond boy, on the hand... Oh, there was no doubt about it, he was interested in my magical tools. He hovered behind the other two in silence, completely absorbed in watching my hands at work. Honestly, if he was that interested, he should just start studying magic tools.

But truly—did they have nothing better to do? This was supposed to be a joint exercise, was it not?

I continued to carry out my maintenance, utterly bewildered by their behavior. Then a clear, elegant voice rang out from behind them.

"Enough of this nonsense!" Mina stormed up to them, shoving the blond boy aside without hesitation before stepping up to the girl and delivering a sharp command. "Mighty! Dispel your enchantment at once!"

"Y-Yes!"

Oh dear, why was she so angry? Ah, that reminded me. I couldn't wait to return home and to write down all those scenes I had imagined about her in my journal...

A quick glance at the other fourth-years showed their faces had gone completely pale. Mina sighed deeply and pressed a hand to her forehead as though warding off an encroaching headache. A migraine, perhaps?

"What are you playing at?" Lady Mina asked. Though the edge had left her voice, I could still hear her irritation. "Have you failed to grasp the situation we're in right now?"

Mr. Pedigree bristled at her reprimand. "The situation? This is just another training exercise."

"Something has clearly gone wrong. Can you seriously not see that?" Mina demanded, her frustration clearly growing. She pointed at me. "Their team are valuable assets for the coming exercise. And

yet you three have...”

The blond duo stood awkwardly between their leader and his second-in-command, their eyes shifting anxiously between them. But even as a fight seemed to be brewing between the upperclassmen, I remained diligently in maintenance mode. One by one, I pried open the remaining three pegs with my needles, channeled magic into the circuits to check for shorts, and—after confirming only the one had an issue—clicked them all shut again and put them away. Work should be done quickly and precisely. That was my policy.

Our group had now fully evolved into a dysfunctional mess, but I chose to leave them be. Sometimes, a good argument strengthened bonds. Ah, *youth*.

“Tch...why is she looking at us with those eyes?” said the blond boy when he noticed I had looked up from my task.

“It’s the same look my mother—no, my *grandmother*—used to give me when I was a child,” the blonde girl said.

Then they looked at each other and said in unison, “If she’s going to do something, she should be stopping those two instead.”

I had no notion of what they meant by “if she’s going to do something,” but their logic was sound. As a lady of noble standing, I had the ability to step in between two team leaders if need be. However, that would not do. *You are both the children of marquises, are you not? There is no need to cower—face your teammates head-on and embrace the trials of youth! Fight bravely!*

“You two,” Mina said coldly. “Do not seek Lady Robur’s aid while conveniently refusing to take responsibility for your own actions. Have some shame.”

“W-We’re terribly sorry!”

Mr. Pedigree clicked his tongue. “You presume too much, as a second-in-command. These two only followed my command as their leader and as a noble of proper standing.”

Well, even if I didn’t much like the way he used his words, I had to give him credit for trying to cover for his teammates. Unfortunately, his defiance seemed only to fan the flames of Mina’s ire.

“Lord Nilty!”

As their argument raged in the background, I continued to focus on my work, treating the commotion as mere *ambient noise*.

I reached for my writing pen. Visually, it resembled a mechanical pencil from my past world. But, when I pressed the top with a click, instead of graphite lead, a magic needle emerged from the tip.

The material and thickness of the needle varied depending on the situation, so sometimes I would need to change the pen body for something more specialized. But this time, I was using a standard-sized needle—similar in thickness to a sewing needle—so I only need a basic pen body. Channeling magic through the tip, I engraved a delicate magical circuit into the material, infusing it with the necessary magic and elemental properties.

As I focused on my work, suddenly, a pair of sturdy, muscular legs—clearly the legs of an adventurer—entered my downward-tilted field of vision. It was Ralf.

"My lady, does anything feel off?" he asked.

Had he used body-enhancement magic to augment his speed? Why? We were outside of combat, but he seemed to be flustered.

"Not at all. Why?"

When I lifted my head slightly, I was greeted by a worried expression. Ah. Perhaps the clear disparity between this forest's level of danger and the fourth-year team's skill level and mental preparation was making him uneasy. In the distance, the other two members of my team were also rushing toward me. Why the urgency?

"Even if you're the daughter of a grand duke, your family is still only that of a marquis!" Mr. Pedigree was complaining. "I will not have you issuing commands to *me*, the son of one of the great ducal houses!"

"Enough! Can you not grasp the gravity of our situation?!" Mina shot back.

But, then again, I suppose upperclassmen—and high-ranking nobles at that—engaged in such a heated argument was not something you got to see every day. No doubt hunger was making them all the more agitated.

I chuckled. "Well, I suppose there's no helping it," I said.

I could ignore the other team arguing between themselves, but if it was causing my team anxiety, then that was a different matter entirely. I still had several pegs that were usable; I could finish the repairs later.

"Lady Robur," Ralf said as I rose to my feet, bag in hand. Uncharacteristically, he reached out and grabbed my upper arm, as if to stop me.

"I assure you, all is well," I said with a smile, patting his hand gently. I was sure that it had finished by now.

He reluctantly released me, though he still looked worried. Ever the cautious one, he trailed closely behind as I moved forward.

"And what's this? Has the magicless, talentless failure decided to give her opinion? Or shall you attack me with some petty trinket from that bag of yours? After all, your feeble magic could never best me."

"Lord Nilty!" exclaimed Mina, exasperated.

My, my. He seemed to be raring to go, didn't he? I began circulating my internal magic, readying myself should the need arise. He had no need to worry—my magic tools were far too expensive for such trivial matters. If I had to deal with him, I'd just use my magic. It'd be an instant kill. And cheaper.

Unlike the blond duo, who merely gasped and watched with wide eyes, Mina called out a warning and gripped the hilt of her sword. This had suddenly turned into an explosive situation. What a shame—it was a waste for a once-close team enjoying their youth to be reduced to this.

Oh! Come to think of it, dear Lady Mina and Mr. Pedigree were the same age as my brother, weren't they? Which meant...

Ah, of course!

They must be in their rebellious phase!

"Now, now, I see what's happening." I gave them a calming smile. "Don't fret, it's not your fault. It is simply the work of hormones, nothing more."

"What nonsense are you spouting now? And why do you look at me with that pitying gaze?" asked Mr. Pedigree, who for some reason looked utterly bewildered.

"L-Lady Robur?" said Mina, equally perplexed.

Their verbal sparring ceased and the tension deflated in an instant. Such things as hormones were difficult to perceive in yourself, especially when you were in the throes of youth. How fortunate for them that I could shed some light upon the matter.

Mina's entire demeanor shifted in an instant, and she let go of the sword's hilt. With her sternness softening, her cuteness levels shot up! Ah...I wished to return home. No! I desperately *needed* to return home at once! At the very least, I needed some time alone—just enough time to pour my fevered imaginings onto the waiting pages of my notebook! Should I gather everyone and just teleport us home?!

No, no. That wouldn't do. Tonight, for the first time in nearly a century, I was going to properly experience an overnight school camping trip!

Camping was youth!

So, with Ralf and the others trailing behind, I strode toward the fourth-years. Their tension visibly mounted as I approached, but I passed by them without a glance.

Oh, was that the look people referred to as *like a deer in headlights*? That they could all look so shocked in perfect unison, even when they had just been fighting—what a lovely display of teamwork!

But I was less concerned with their synchronized expressions than I was with the members of my team, who still looked worried.

Hold on just a little longer! A full stomach was the ultimate remedy for teenage angst!

And so we ignored the fourth-years who were able to create a charged atmosphere between them even while standing silently. A high-level technique, no doubt. Instead, we gathered around the pit to work together as a team.

"Kartika, dear, would you carve an opening in the center of the lid?"

Her eyes seemed to flash behind her glasses. "Oh! Are we shortening the cooking time?!"

I chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Let's enhance the aroma. Ralf,

Lauren...”

“Ah, a final sear? Leave it to me,” said Lauren, eyes sparkling.

“And I’ll use my wind magic to regulate the flames,” Ralf said gruffly, though I could see a small smile playing at his lips.

They were adorable.

Kartika used earth magic to open a roughly person-sized hole in the center of the hardened dirt lid. At once, a rich, savory fragrance unfurled into the air, reminiscent of shellfish grilled over an open flame.

“Ralf, keep the image in your mind of the flames spreading evenly throughout the pit with your wind. Lauren, hit it with high heat—don’t hold back.”

They both answered with a loud “Yes!” and set about their tasks.

It was reassuring to be working with my usual team members again. They were always able to immediately grasp my intentions.

Kneeling on opposite sides of the pit, the boys extended their hands in unison, directing their magic toward the opening. As their magic concentrated in their hands, I was sure that inside the pit, their fire and wind magic were working together to roast the centipede’s shell.

That carapace was thick and tough. Had we attempted to roast it from the beginning at such a high heat, the exterior would have charred while the interior remained woefully undercooked.

“Shall we smoke it?” Ralf asked me.

“Yes, let’s. Whatever we can’t eat, we’ll preserve so we can donate it.”

All students of Class D, regardless of year, contributed food and other necessities to orphanages—or, on occasion, to the Church—usually as part of their efforts to receive tuition reductions or exemptions.

“I’ll make a drying rack using my earth magic,” Kartika said.

“Then once it’s ready, I’ll store the leftovers in the pocket dimension of my magic bag,” Lauren suggested.

As always, we divided the tasks between us efficiently. If it were just us, we could enjoy this forest without a worry.

“Wait, who gave underclassmen—from Class D no less—

permission to act on their own?" asked Mr. Pedigree, evidently still at the mercy of his rampant hormones.

"It's not an issue," Ralf said.

Honestly, if Mr. Pedigree could just stay quiet, we would have been able to manage even with the underskilled fourth-years around.

"It *is* an issue," he insisted. "If your reckless behavior puts you in danger, it's *us* who'll be troubled. After all, we're the upperclassmen—and high-ranking nobles—responsible for looking after you."

"I see," said Ralf. "Then how about you leave our barrier."

Mr. Pedigree ground his teeth audibly, clearly unprepared for the suggestion that he might be cast out. "You watch your tongue."

But the reality was that the magical tools that were maintaining the barrier belonged to us second-years. If our leader decided so, we could just hand them some insect repellent and send them off on their way, couldn't we? How effective insect repellent might be against the magical beasts of this forest was uncertain. Still, it was better than nothing. Then again, if these upperclassmen had the *luxury* to concern themselves with others, maybe they had no need for it anyway.

(Of course, Lady Mina was an exception! I'd protect her from the shadows!)

Ralf stood up from where he had been crouching beside the pit and faced Mr. Pedigree directly. "I'm already angry at the way you have mocked my teammates," he said. "On top of that, I have heard much from those who graduated last year from Class D."

The blond duo's complexions paled. Their eyes began to dart about, almost as if they were desperately avoiding looking at us.

"But that's not all," Ralf went on. "Despite being in a dangerous place like this, you gave orders for your teammate to cast a spell on mine that would dull her judgment, which could have led to the death of my entire team. And your teammates are fools who neither questioned your order nor tried to stop it. As leader of my team, I've come to the decision that we don't need any of you."

The blond duo glanced over at me. I smiled. They blanched, faces full of fear.

Why?

And when had Ralf dropped his polite speech? Had he grown close to Mr. Pedigree while I wasn't looking?

Mina shot me a look of genuine remorse and bowed her head. Meanwhile, my own dear teammates shot a glare toward the other fourth-years. Perhaps the oppressive, overgrown gloom of this forest was worsening everyone's mood?

"A dangerous place like this?" Mr. Pedigree snorted. "Ha! And *this* is why training alongside the inexperienced, dim-witted Class D is unbearable! *You* are the fool. Do you truly believe the Academy would send students to a place where their lives would be at risk? There is no—"

"The Poison Box Garden."

Ralf cut him off by simply stating the name of the forest. Mr. Pedigree and the blond duo froze and stared at him, dumbfounded. Their faces had gone through as many expressions as there were stages of grief.

Meanwhile, the rest of my team and Lady Mina wore solemn expressions. They'd already understood the situation they were in. Such capable children... Grandmother was proud!

"We are in the Poison Box Garden," Ralf repeated. "It's the first time I've stepped foot here, but I am certain."

"What nonsense is this? This is an Academy training exercise! To begin with, there is no way we could have entered—" Mr. Pedigree began, but he faltered mid-sentence. As to be expected of someone studying to be a mage, he'd finally realized it—just how it might have been possible for them to end up inside this forest.

"If you use a detection spell, you'll find that even in this immediate vicinity, there are multiple insect-type magical beasts of the same danger rank as that centipede," Ralf continued. "The only place in this kingdom where creatures like that are tumbling around every corner is the Poison Box Garden—a place that has been officially designated with a danger rank of A."

Oh my, Ralf—insects don't tumble around, they crawl or skitter. But of course I didn't point that out. I just kept smiling. It wouldn't do to contradict our leader in front of another team.

"I'm sure you're aware, but insects tend to swarm," Ralf added. "And this forest is home to other magical beasts that have at least a danger rank of B, most of which are venomous. In a place like this, things like social standing, whether it be pedigree or school related, are utterly useless. Worse than useless, actually. They get in the way. If someone starts spouting such worthless nonsense and ends up putting our lives at risk because of it, I have every right to decide they're unnecessary."

The blond duo turned pale and began to tremble. Their eyes darted to their second-in-command as if pleading for reassurance; however, their hopes were dashed.

She nodded. "It's not a lie."

They looked devastated. The blonde girl collapsed onto the ground and burst into tears. She really ought to be more careful, since this was where the centipede had been burrowing. The soil was damp. That mud would never come out of her trousers properly. Meanwhile, the blond boy hung his head in despair and began to tremble.

This forest was close to the royal capital, but also near the border of a neighboring kingdom. Judging by the amount of magical energy that had been woven into the teleportation circle that brought us here, it should have just about been able to send us to the Poison Box Garden.

The reason it was called a "box garden" was because, here, colossal insects roamed freely as if it were their own garden, and also partly because, though it was a forest, it was relatively small in scale, like a garden in a small terrarium box.

Every two years, the kingdoms on either side of this forest jointly hired adventurers to help reinforce the barrier magic around it. Naturally, this was to prevent the insects from spilling out of the forest into the surrounding areas. The next time this was scheduled to happen was—ah, yes—half a year from now, if memory served.

Those hired to maintain the barrier were always individual A-rank adventurers or full A-rank parties. When parties were hired, several would be brought in; when instead it was individuals, they were employed en masse. Yet no one was ever permitted to enter the

forest itself. After all, what dwelled within the forest weren't just mere insects; they were full-fledged magical beasts. The insects here nearly always traveled in swarms of more than two, and on top of that, the insects in this forest operated under a brutal regime of survival of the fittest. The dominant devoured the weak, and those that survived grew stronger with every cycle.

It reminded me of a legend from my past life in Japan called kodoku: A pot or box would be filled with insects, amphibians, or other creepy crawlies, sealed, and then left alone until only one remained. That final, solitary survivor became the vessel for a powerful curse. It was a theme I saw often in the manga and novels I used to read.

Quite the dangerous place, wouldn't you say?

Under normal circumstances, I would assume that, like the insects that were trapped here, we wouldn't be able to just leave. That's how strong the barrier was that surrounded this place. Yet the fact that we had simply been teleported directly inside meant that it had been surprisingly easy for us to slip past it.

"Wait...surely you don't mean to insinuate that there is an S-rank beast in here, do you?"

Poor Mr. Pedigree. His face had gone quite pale, and I could hardly blame him for his concern. Though it was hard for me to understand how he still managed to act so high and mighty when he didn't even know where we were.

"At the very least, there weren't any in the immediate area," Ralf stated readily. That meant he had already considered the possibility and used his detection magic with that in mind.

As a reminder—both adventurer rankings and the danger ranks of magical beasts were determined on a scale from F to A. The danger ranks of magical beasts started from the nearly harmless F-rank. The centipede we had defeated earlier had been B-rank. Or, at least, it was on its own, but factoring in the likelihood of a mate nearby, its danger rank would be officially A-rank. Other predatory insect-like beasts, such as spiders and ants, received the same A-rank ranking.

But wasps? Wasps were A-rank even alone. Extremely dangerous.

However, although they didn't exist here in this forest, there were

rare cases where a magical beast would exceed even that rank. Those beasts were known as walking natural disasters and designated danger rank of S. These were beasts so overwhelmingly powerful that not even a swarm of A-rank beasts could bring them down. They were creatures on a whole different level.

According to legend, one such creature used to dwell here in this forest. So Mr. Pedigree's fear wasn't entirely unfounded. The tale was still passed down even after all these years.

And yes, there was an S-rank for adventurers too. They were also considered walking calamities in terms of power, although of the man-made type. However, their identities were a closely guarded secret. After all, an individual with that much power could easily become a weapon of war—and it would be a serious problem if nations started to use them as such. These individuals were watched closely by the Adventurers' Guild, which maintained a strict policy of neutrality among all nations. If a person was found to possess S-rank power, the Guild would immediately move to secure them. Whether the person actually wanted that or not was another matter entirely—it was ultimately up to the individual's own will.

The only exception was if the person were already affiliated with a formal institution: a knight or a cleric, for example. The Guild would not attempt to claim those already sworn to another allegiance, as doing so would violate their neutrality.

Though adventuring parties were also ranked by the same system, A was the highest they could be ranked.

"So—what are you going to do?" Ralf asked the fourth-years once again.

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Kartika removed the earthen lid from the pit. Ralf and Mina walked to the edge of the hole, where they each raised a hand and pointed it into the pit, lowering its internal temperature with wind magic. Once satisfied, they both hopped in.

Seeing the young folks working in harmony brought joy to this old lady's heart.

Unity was vital to this type of experience. It was a delightfully nostalgic return to youth; I hadn't felt like this in about a century. I enjoyed stepping back and watching the way my team's individual culinary efforts came together to create a greater whole. Or as my granddaughter from my past life would've said: "Let them cook."

"Are they serious?" said the blond boy. Alas, the blond brigade was really bringing down the mood, even though their responsibility working outside the pit was much less physically demanding. Even worse was Mr. Pedigree, who was pouting in silence. Hardly a team player.

Still, it didn't matter too much in the end. Despite their grumbling, they had agreed to cooperate when Ralf had asked them. And that, in itself, was a victory—a testament to the *power of camping*.

And what was the task we were all occupied with? The butchering and preparation of the centipede, of course.

Just beyond the pit, I caught sight of the creature's twitching head as it finally went still. Even after Ralf and Mina had severed it and punted it away, the thing had kept squirming. Its vitality was genuinely impressive. Thankfully, the poison seemed to have seeped harmlessly into the earth.

"Ahhh, what a delicious smell, Lady Robur!"

Oh dear. At some point, Kartika had come up beside me without me noticing. *I understand how you feel, dear, but do wipe away that drool.* Then again, I couldn't blame her. Even though we were in the middle of the forest, there was a scent of crustacean and sea brine wafting through the air—it smelled unmistakably like crab, a luxury ingredient even in the other world.

Yes, this world's giant centipede-type magical beasts tasted exactly like crab. A bit undersalted, for sure. But still—crab.

But I hadn't randomly come upon the idea of cooking the centipede. I had first gotten the idea from Galfi, the flamboyant royal spy. Once, back when he still frequented the roof of my annex, he had pointed out a regular centipede and muttered something about how the magical ones were delicious.

Delicious, yes, but it had also apparently given him a nasty

stomachache. It had happened while he was training—he had gotten lost and hunted one down in desperation. In a way, it had been a series of unfortunate events.

The problem was that he hadn't removed the venom sac first, you see. These centipedes had a magic stone near the forcipule, which was usually discarded after it was harvested. I guess it hadn't occurred to him at the time.

I had still been a child when I heard about it, but the way he described the roasted, briny aroma sparked my culinary curiosity. While he was away, I tried hunting and eating one myself. I hadn't been too averse to the idea to begin with—it helped that in my past life, centipedes had been used in traditional medicine—and sure enough, it tasted just like crab! When I brought some home and served it to the sacred beasts, they loved it. Since then, it'd been a staple ingredient in the annex.

A squarish segment of the centipede—with legs still attached—flew out of the pit, bounced on the grass, and rolled to a stop.

"Lauren, Lord Nilty, would you kindly carry that?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," came the crisp response from the ever-polite Lauren. This grandma had high hopes for this young gentleman's future.

Mr. Pedigree, still deep in the throes of his rebellious phase, responded with a scornful snort. Not his fault, of course—it was the hormones.

The two of them had been tasked with moving the segments tossed out of the pit to a nearby thatch of grass and using magic to cut off the legs. The centipede had about twenty segments, so the boys had their work cut out for them.

"Let's keep the legs," I said. "Lauren, would you pack them in your bag?"

"Of course," he answered with a pleasant nod.

He was the only member of our team who carried a magic bag. It looked like an ordinary duffel bag—roomy enough for a week's worth of travel gear—but could actually hold a whole centipede, shell and all. It was made so that it would even preserve anything stored inside. This, I suppose, was to be expected of a merchant's son—

these bags didn't come cheap. Unlike, say, a pocket dimension, its use required neither immense magical energy nor finesse, which made it incredibly convenient. Naturally, I still preferred using my pocket dimension when no one was watching.

"Then I leave it to you," I said, giving the lethargic Mr. Pedigree a smile of encouragement. I turned to Kartika. "Come now, let us begin our own task."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Ah! What a lovely, sweet young lady she was!

I pulled out the short blade I had been keeping strapped to my waist. Then, using it to pierce the joint between meat and shell, I began separating them. The shell was thick—about the width of an adult man's forearm—and parts of the underside were inedible. After we'd removed all of that, the meat we'd end up with would be about half as thick.

To demonstrate how to make the cuts, I slid my blade along the shell's back and peeled off the top layer. Kartika mimicked me on the underside.

"You've become quite skilled at butchering," I told her.

"O-Oh, thank you."

A shy girl blushing... Irresistible.

Ah...no good! I had almost given in to my middle-aged auntie instincts from my past life! Composing myself, I finished peeling the segment. Then, standing it upright, I gripped the dorsal shell, while Kartika held the ventral.

This was the best part of butchering a centipede.

"One, two, heave!"

In perfect sync, we pulled our respective halves outward—like splitting open a crab's belly—and with a satisfying crack, the ventral shell came cleanly away, leaving the meat neatly packed against the dorsal side.

The underside had bits of charred something or other and some stray flesh stuck to it. Unlike crab tomalley, this kind of stuff from magical beasts was harmful to humans. It went straight to the trash.

Behind her glasses, Kartika's eyes visibly sparkled with awe. And understandably so—the back of the shell was packed full of dense,

white, crab-leglike meat.

"All right, Kartika, dear, go ahead!" I encouraged her.

"With pleasure!" she said. She stepped a short distance away, crouched down, and, with a cheerful little grunt, pressed both hands to the ground. "Hup!"

In moments, she had conjured a sturdy earthen shelf about as tall as I was. Absolutely charming.

In a forest rich with soil, Kartika's affinity for earth magic truly shone. The shelf didn't crumble or shed a single grain of dirt—it was perfectly formed and rock solid.

"Let's spread this thatch evenly on top, then start placing the meat on top," I said, holding up some broad banana-leaflike leaves.

After that, everyone continued their tasks in silence. We second-years took the opportunity to toss discarded bits of shell and other waste into the pit as we went. We were used to this, after all. By the time all the butchering was done, the area we had used to butcher the beast was spotless.

We set aside a portion for tonight's dinner, then placed the rest of the crab-like centipede meat on the earthen shelf. Once it was arranged to our liking, we covered half of it with the leaves, and then, over the whole thing, we spread a fine-mesh anti-insect net.

A flawless display of teamwork! I had indeed "let them cook."

"Lady Robur, why is it that some of the meat upon that shelf is covered with grass, while some is not?"

Oh, heavens! That charming voice behind me—could there be any sweeter music? My darling Mina was truly wonderful!

I turned, having just been checking on the pit. And—oh no—I could feel my imagination galloping away again!

I wasn't sure why she was looking at me like that, but her shining eyes, brimming with innocent wonder, were simply too precious. I wanted nothing more than to teleport us back to the log cabin this instant! *Cas, bring my notebook at once!*

No—no, I had to behave. Using the sacred beasts for something like this would definitely get me in hot water. Especially with Cas, who—despite the adorable palm-sized fox appearance—was a grumpy elder at heart, and when he started lecturing, he really went

on and on.

"Well, you see," I began with all the poise I could muster, "the leaves possess antibacterial properties, so we line everything with it. The ones that are covered on top, that's to infuse them with the leaves' fresh scent. When they're cooked together, that scent is drawn into the meat, giving it a different layer of flavor."

I then gestured to the meat on the earthen shelf.

"As for that batch, we'll leave it there to dry overnight. Like with dried fish, drying it will concentrate the flavor and blend the aromas. The uncovered meat, on the other hand, is for smoking. So they'll need to dry out more. If there's too much moisture, the meat will become sour when it is smoked. We're also going to add a smokier aroma to those."

I smiled proudly at Mina. "Also, if you trim around the edges where the shell meets the meat, it helps release moisture. The flesh shrinks slightly and pulls inward. That makes it easier to remove the meat cleanly from the shell later."

She paused, hesitated, then opened her mouth, only to close it again. She did this twice. Was my explanation still lacking? She looked unsure, maybe even troubled. But that hesitant expression was lovely in its own way. Dangerous, even. If she kept looking at me like that, I felt something within me might...awaken.

"I see...but, Lady Robur, why do you know all this? I've never heard of anyone eating centipedes. And your butchery technique was...expert. Plus, you recognized edible herbs and gathered them so quickly..." She paused for a moment before continuing, a bit sheepish. "Forgive me for saying so, but it seems unlikely that a noble lady—one rumored to be talentless and prideful, and to have shirked both your duty and education as a bride and noble—would possess such knowledge."

How gently spoken, and yet so direct! She looked uncertain, even anxious. But I bore her no ill will, and certainly wasn't upset about what she'd said. There was no need for her to look so worried.

Still, we weren't at a stage in our relationship where I could divulge everything. Thankfully, I had a well-practiced answer for occasions like this:

"Class D is just so much fun, you see. Any knowledge that helps me enjoy it more is welcome. As for bridal training and noble etiquette—well, I find them dreadfully dull."

In a past-past life, I wasn't just raised a princess—I had also received a full crown prince's education. It was outdated, perhaps, but still comprehensive. So why, in this life, should I be interested in lessons to behave like a prince's bride or a noble lady?

"I see..."

Ah, there it was—that troubled look once more. Had I disappointed her? Was I losing her favor?

"I'd prefer," came Ralf's gruff voice from behind her, "that while we're working together, you refrain from projecting strange expectations or personal values onto the lady."

"I didn't mean it as such... But yes. You're right. I was far too blunt. My apologies."

A sincere, straightforward apology. How admirable! Was she literally made of pure grace?! Ack, no—I was slipping again. My past-life self had come dangerously close to fangirling!

"It's quite true that I've abandoned my duties and am only doing as I please," I said with a smile. "You are welcome to judge me however you see fit." I stepped closer to my darling Mina and leaned up toward her ear—she was a bit taller, after all. "This knowledge came from a royal spy, you know. So I'd prefer if you didn't pry too much," I whispered.

She blinked, startled, then gave a small, solemn nod. The way I'd worded my explanation made it easy for her to assume there were special circumstances. I wasn't exactly lying—everything I said was true. But...forgive me, dear. In the end, that dark little whisper was a calculated deception, born from the cowardice of an old woman's heart.

I just don't want you to hate me.

Don't judge me too harshly. In my first life, I was a princess. In the one after that, an old woman who lived eighty-six long years. Of course there were shadows in my heart.

Mina nodded again, seemingly coming to her own conclusion, and walked off.

"Lady Robur, you're wearing a wicked expression," said Ralf. He must have been waiting for her to leave.

"Oh dear, a mere slip."

Ever perceptive, he must have caught the faint hint of grandmotherly scheming beneath my usually pleasant smile. Impressive.

"We'll be camping here for the night," he informed me. "Lauren and Kartika say they're absolutely starving."

"Oh dear, we'd better hurry, then. Same role for me as always?"

"Yeah. Lauren's already preparing the fire for cooking. I'd like you to handle the preparation."

"Of course," I said. "Would you ask Kartika to collect the soil around the wriggler's corpse? It should be useful for repelling low-grade magical beasts—it could also be used to attract the centipede's mate."

"The wrig—?" he began to ask, before thinking better of it. "Got it. The other team has requested the magic stone and some other materials. Are you okay with me handing them over?"

"Certainly. If giving them face and spoils keeps them quiet, it's less hassle for us."

Ralf nodded. "Once we've eaten, we'll discuss what's to come next. At the very least, we second-years need to act under the assumption that rescue isn't coming anytime soon, given where we are."

"Will we be relocating?"

"If possible, I'd like to get closer to the part of the barrier that borders Rovenia. Best-case scenario, we slip out. Worst case, we wait for the next time they reinforce the barrier—in six months. Lord Nilty seems to think rescue will arrive any moment and intends to wait here."

"Oh dear," I said with a sigh, "what a hopeless case. Regardless of what their decision will be, do you think the fourth-years can make it through?"

"Hard to say. We'll be fine so long as we've good food, but as for them—I don't know. If they can't cope, they'll simply die. Whether by magical beast, by their own hand, or by turning on one another—

who can say?”

“How grim.”

Let’s pray that at least they wouldn’t come to such a bleak end as turning against one another.

“This place is unforgiving,” said Ralf. “A short stay is one thing, but prolonged hardship drives people to desperation. Make no mistake, though, I’ve no intention of protecting those who would harm one of my own.”

Oh my, so he had been angry after all. I didn’t blame him. I’d be just as furious if someone touched one of our teammates.

“You’re right,” I said. “The seniors from last year’s Class D warned us to be extra cautious when training with Class A. But who did they target? Were there any injuries? If you’d like, I could whisper ‘Give thanks to life’ into the ears of whoever acted up while they slept. Maybe that would awaken their sense of culinary appreciation and bring us all closer.”

“No, that sort of thing would only drive them mad with paranoia. You’d only make matters worse. Besides, no one was hurt, and if you didn’t notice anything, then it’s best left alone. Don’t worry about it.”

I nodded, just to be polite, but...how strange. He’d clearly been angry earlier, yet now he just seemed distant. Coming from someone as kindhearted—though rough around the edges—as him, that cold expression actually stung a little. Grandma had better hurry up and give him some extra meat at lunch to win back some points.

“The more important question,” he continued, “is why did we end up transported here in the first place?”

“Yes, it’s quite the puzzle, isn’t it?”

Who could have tampered with the teleportation circle? And that wasn’t the only suspicious event to ponder—the team assignments themselves struck me as very strange. Still...I chose to let it go for now. Planting suspicion unnecessarily was rarely helpful.

Of course, with me around, the survival of all the second-years—and dear Mina, of course—was already a given. But no magic could protect the heart from trauma. And if, by some chance, a teammate was being targeted by another from within...well, then perhaps it

would be better if we never found out exactly what happened.

"Lady Robur," Ralf said, "whether we were sent to this forest by chance or by someone's design, I've made my decision: The four of us are getting out alive. But that doesn't necessarily include Lady Mina."

"That's your judgment as leader, is it not?" I replied with a smile. "Of course, I understand. I'll follow your lead. I'm sure she considers herself part of a different team anyway. That's why I won't ask her directly to come with us. This is a place where lives are at stake, after all. If someone joins a group because of pressure or obligation, then at some point they'll try to escape—and that could lead to their own death, or someone else's."

I gave Ralf a quiet smile—not as a noblewoman, but as someone with the memories of over a century of life. And as expected from a perceptive boy like him, the tension in his face began to ease.

"But, Ralf," I added, "you don't need to carry everything on your own just because you're the leader. At this point, we're each responsible for our own survival. We can divide that responsibility evenly. Besides, have you forgotten? I'm Laviange Robur—daughter of one of the Four Great Ducal Houses. I might shirk responsibilities I don't like, but that doesn't mean that I won't see through those I consider worthy."

Members of the royal family and the four ducal houses carried a fundamental obligation. Whether the younger generation understood that or not, it was through fulfilling that obligation that we earned respect from those beneath us—and our own dignity. Only then was such power granted legitimacy.

Ralf's eyes wavered as he absorbed my words. Of course. He was only sixteen. To be thrown into this hellhole, teeming with venomous beasts and near-certain death, and then to be named "leader"... The weight had to feel like it was crushing him. Especially for someone like him, who had real-world experience already as an adventurer and knew exactly how bad things could get.

I smiled. "Now, now. Let's leave the hard thinking for after we've eaten. We'll be able to think better with a full belly."

"Yeah... You're right."

It seemed a little of that weight had lifted from his shoulders. Good boy.

With that, we made our way over to the other two members of our team, who had been chatting quietly near the campfire.

Ralf called out to them with instructions. “Lady Robur will handle the cooking. Lauren, you assist her. Kartika, collect the soil around the beast’s head and set up the tent. Lauren, help with the tent when you’re free.”

“Understood,” we answered.

At Ralf’s command, we shuffled pairings and began moving. Boy-girl teams, practical and efficient. Still...I wondered what Mr. Pedigree and the blond duo were doing? Free time?

They showed up just as Ralf stepped away to take care of his duties, trailing behind us like ducklings following their mother. I suddenly felt like a mallard.

I handed Lauren my pouch of spices with a meaningful glance, then turned and fixed my eyes squarely on Mr. Pedigree.

“Tell me, Lord Nilty. Surely one as capable as yourself is aware of how bad it would be if we don’t keep this going, right?”

“Of how bad what would be, exactly?” he snapped.

I didn’t mind his raised voice—but I did wish to cook in peace.

Lauren, glancing back at us, fished out a jar of my homemade herb salt—specially mixed for this trip—and began seasoning the meat.

“Oh, how bad letting the fire die out would be while we’re here. It would be very unwise.”

“What are you suggesting?” he said, lowering his voice and giving me a glare.

Ah, so that’s what this was. A test. A fourth-year gauging whether a lowly second-year like me understood even the basics.

Behind him, the blond squad stiffened and went pale. I gave them a reassuring smile to let them know that of course I had that level of knowledge and that they had no need to worry about me. When they made eye contact with me, though, their faces shifted from pale to ghostly white. The blonde girl even started visibly trembling. Was she cold?

"The magical beast-repellent pegs alone won't suffice," I continued. "We're grilling the centipede meat to keep the fire going and keep the other beasts away. It'll get dark quickly here, so we should probably finish this before the beasts grow active."

"What?"

Oh, good. Their faces slackened with surprise—confirmation that I'd answered correctly.

"This forest is a containment zone for Class B or higher magical beasts," I responded. "The repellent pegs are designed to emit a deterrent pulse to discourage beasts from approaching towns. But such tools cannot continuously deter aggressive, high-ranking creatures. Surely that much is common knowledge?"

"Wh-What do you mean?" Oh dear, was the blond boy feigning ignorance now? Despite his obvious interest in magical tools? His confusion was delivered with such urgency that it had to be an act. And what an excellent performance it was. I was grateful for his care—surely this was him fulfilling his upperclassman duties.

"If all you do is set the repellent and walk away, eventually something will break through."

So? Fourth-years? That was a clear, simple explanation, wasn't it? Believing I had passed their test with flying colors, I puffed out my chest in pride.

But to my disappointment, they didn't give me a single reaction. What was going on? More than that... How should I put it—the expressions on their faces were...concerning. It was like something straight out of a horror manga—almost as if someone had hit pause in the middle of a jump scare. They were trembling, but not moving at all. How did that even work?

I realized that the generation gap between me and these children was frighteningly wide.

Well—if they weren't going to move, I supposed it was best to leave them be. Yes, I would do just that. I quickly made my way over to Lauren, who had already finished seasoning three of the slabs of meat with my herb salt. Only one remained. How splendid it was to have such an efficient young man as a helper.

He watched me as I approached, but when I was close enough,

he turned to look at the Class A students.

"I'm glad that nothing happened, but what's with them? It's creepy."

I quickly grabbed his shoulder and brought a finger to my lips. "*Shh!* And don't look at them. Let's just wait until they start moving like normal again."

As I was saying that, I sprinkled the last slab of meat with the herb salt and began scoring it with a grid pattern. Then I carried it over to the fire.

"Ah! Kartika truly is thoughtful. She already prepared the stones for cooking," I observed. She'd arranged a circle of large stones a safe distance from the fire—probably using earth magic to pull them from the ground.

I set myself up between the fire and the ring of stones and quietly got back to work, skewering the meat. With the way it had been cut and the smell wafting through the air, it was starting to resemble grilled eel.

Oh, how I longed for some proper unajuu right about now...

With thoughts of eel still lingering, I glanced over at Lauren as I skewered the meat, curious to see how his work was coming along. He had finished with the seasoning and was now imitating my motions, carefully scoring the meat. Very good. That meant I could focus solely on skewering and on prepping the grill. That was the beauty of this team's teamwork—we could switch roles on the fly as naturally as breathing.

I checked the fire, then pulled a fan and a leather pouch of charcoal from my bag. I tossed in a few briquettes and began fanning the flames.

The pouch, I should note, was made from fire lizard hide. Fire lizards produced fire internally and breathed it out, so their skin didn't conduct heat. Even when holding live embers, the pouch stayed cool to the touch. It could also be sealed tightly to snuff out the flames, letting you reuse the charcoal later. It reminded me of the charcoal-extinguishing pots I'd used in my other life—only lighter, since this one was made of leather. An absolute blessing, really, considering how heavy my cooking bag already was.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ralf and Kartika using some nearby trees to set up our tents, with Mina's help. The fourth-years had set up their own tents at the opposite end of our camp. I was impressed that they had got that done before coming to bother me.

I was still worried, but I comforted myself with the knowledge that Mina would surely know the best course of action to take. I returned my attention to the task at hand.

Once the charcoal was fully lit, I pulled out a set of tongs and my usual pair of wire racks. Using the tongs, I arranged the coals within the stone ring and set the grill racks on top. They fit snugly with no wobble. Perfect.

Now, I *could* have cooked everything quickly using magic if I wished. Everyone here knew I could perform household spells. But if we were going to do something as grim as monster hunting, then we should at least eat something delicious.

This was especially important for those of us in Class D, who were under constant pressure to contribute food and magical beast materials to cover tuition, supplement grades, and further our graduation projects. That was why we got more monster-hunting assignments than the other classes. And taking lives, even those of beasts, could numb young hearts all too easily.

The best and simplest cure for that was food. A meal with even a touch more flavor than something hastily conjured with magic could remind you to not ever take a creature's life lightly. That feeling only deepened when we donated the food to orphanages. The gratitude on those pure, innocent faces healed us and emboldened our hearts. And knowing the meat we hunted would be eaten changed the way we hunted—we began choosing methods that preserved flavor. A quiet form of gratitude toward life itself. Though lately...I did suspect we were hunting more out of appetite than anything else. Still, as long as it gave our hunts meaning, I had no complaints.

Ah. When I looked up, I noticed Lauren sneaking glances my way. He was about halfway through cutting his meat. He was probably debating whether to come over and help me, especially now that the fourth-years were finally starting to stir again.

I shook my head slightly and looked toward where Ralf and Mina

were. *Let the other fourth-years take care of it.*

Lauren nodded in understanding. See? We'd come a long way this past year, hadn't we? Our coordination and communication had improved immensely. I couldn't help but smile.

It had already been a full year since we enrolled and formed this team. Through countless joint missions—securing supplies, earning credits, and making donations—they'd learned to trust me. Despite my high rank, my bad reputation, and the rumors that I was "difficult" to deal with, they believed in me now. And that, simply put, made me happy.

During our first joint subjugation exercise last year with the then-third-year Class A team, Ralf hadn't trusted a soul. He'd rushed at the magical beast on his own, ignoring the plan entirely. The upperclassman leading the team had been livid. Meanwhile, Lauren, in his panic, nearly hit their knight-course second-in-command with his attack and promptly got slugged in the face for his trouble. And Kartika, bless her heart, crumpled to the ground sobbing, her legs having given out. The support-course upperclassman beside her had looked positively disgusted.

I'd been standing next to their healer, who, after watching us make those mistakes, had scoffed, "Heal yourselves," and turned away without another word.

Even now, thinking back, it'd been absolute chaos—in the middle of a bright open meadow, no less. And in the end, our two frontliners were used as monster bait by the upperclassman leader. It happened so fast that we hadn't even had time to set up camp.

Ralf had had his dominant hand slashed open and bled heavily. Lauren had passed out from broken ribs. And then—for reasons I still didn't fully understand—the upperclassmen had never launched any of their emergency flares, even though it was part of the standard magical equipment. They hadn't fought back either.

They hadn't provided so much as minimal first aid to us—the unconscious and injured underclassmen they were duty bound to protect. Instead, they had abandoned us in the middle of a thirty-strong herd of one-horned jackalopes. They must have assumed that even in a group, D-rank danger class monsters remained D-ranked.

They likely thought they were giving us another opportunity to learn the basics.

In truth, the situation had been deadly—a C-rank threat.

Ralf soon passed out from blood loss. Kartika collapsed, overcome by fear. Lauren was already unconscious, leaving me, fortunately, as the only one left conscious.

And so, this time, I acted.

I intimidated the jackalopes to create an opening, and used a Command Creature spell to stop their movement. Once the adorably dangerous rabbitlike creatures were motionless, I used detection magic to precisely locate the upperclassmen as they retreated. Then I split the herd: I sent half hopping on their way after the upperclassmen, while the other half I teleported ahead of their route using bunny-sized teleportation circles. That way, the upperclassmen could enjoy their maximum cuteness from both sides.

They say nothing brings unity like shared experiences, do they not? And this was the very first joint training exercise of my new life. So grandma gave it her all.

Oh, you should've seen them. Their white fur, their little round tails twitching, and their charming horns—hopping away in an orderly line, or boinging through those tiny teleportation circles. It was *adorable*.

When I heard the upperclassmen's delighted screams from afar, I knew they had enjoyed my little surprise. I gave myself a quiet little fist pump. Totally worth it.

After that, I administered healing magic to the boys—quick and tidy—then cleaned all three of them, washing away blood, sweat, and dirt. To keep the bunnies from getting hurt, I also quietly nullified the upperclassmen's spells. A little interference with the flow of magic through their bodies was all it took to shut down their casting temporarily.

Naturally, I also placed a gentle suggestion on the bunnies not to kill anyone. Thorough work, wouldn't you say?

Once everything was taken care of, I lay down with my unconscious teammates. There's nothing like a shared nap to strengthen team bonds.

As for those upperclassmen from that fateful day, they were later given a one-week suspension for unspecified misconduct. Some kind of disciplinary issue, apparently. You see, after the jackalope incident, they couldn't seem to participate properly in training anymore; their bodies would tremble, and they'd freeze up. I suppose those darling white one-horned jackalopes were simply *too* adorable, and now, every time they saw a magical beast, they suffered from intense bouts of infatuation. Poor souls. Perhaps that was why, though they managed to advance to their final year, they were placed in Class B.

"Lady Robur, I've finished cutting the meat." Lauren's calm voice brought me out of my memories. "And I washed these leaves as well."

He had finished prepping the meat and successfully guided the upperclassman over. He held a large shell in each hand, using them like serving trays. He must have used body-enhancement magic to have the strength to carry them like that. The shells, now repurposed as platters, were piled high with grid-scored meat covered in leafy wraps. It seemed he'd also consolidated the three chunks of meat into two evenly divided stacks, placing them neatly on the two shells—and at some point, he'd quietly discarded the now-unneeded third shell.

"Excellent, thank you. I'll take care of the rest from here, so please help with the tent setup as planned," I said.

"Understood."

Lauren gave a crisp nod and headed off. His steps still seemed a bit hesitant—maybe he was still a little intimidated by the upperclassmen. But Ralf and Mina were both there, so I was sure he'd be fine.

Grandma will make sure you get an extra helping of meat, I called out after him in my heart. *You can do it!*

I quickly resumed skewering the meat and placing them upright around the fire to grill. How good of him to reuse the banana-leaflike leaves. It was charmingly *sustainable*, as we'd say in the other world. I'd no idea if I was using the term correctly, but who would know? There was no internet here.

Well, that aside, to think our team—once a disastrous mess—had grown so much in just one year that we could remain calm and hunt a magical beast even after being dropped into this cursed, poison-infested hell-forest.

After that initial joint training exercise, we began collaborating with the previous year's Class D graduates on a research project. The theme was the ecological recovery of salt-damaged lands after a hurricane. The storm had devastated a wide area, including the homelands of several students—Ralf among them. There were no casualties, thankfully, but plenty of displaced people and magical beast incursions.

During that time, we received direct training in combat-based subjugation techniques from the graduating class. After all, most of the students in Class D would likely go on to become adventurers or otherwise work closely with magical beasts.

Among the seniors was Ralf's older brother. He was now exercising his authority as heir to his family's domain, but back then, he had been a part of an adventuring party. That very party continued to operate today, and Ralf and Lauren still trained with them from time to time—both to hone their skills and gather donations.

Our other classmates all walked similar paths. A year ago, we were a mess. Now? We could hardly be recognized as that same team that had failed so disastrously.

As a sidenote, I had also improved my cooking tools and spices since then. I'd even cooked for that flamboyant shadow of the royal family, who'd been absolutely *delighted*.

Like these leaves, for example. I'd learned to cut them into neat strips and weave them into makeshift plates. With their antibacterial properties and bamboo-like aroma, they made excellent natural dishware. We had plenty of leaves, too, so I could make as many as we needed.

The charcoal crackled softly. The grill had to be good and hot by now. From the fire drifted the refreshing aroma of my herb blend mingling with the crab-like scent of the centipede meat. The smell alone could fill your belly. The fat was dripping away in just the right

amount.

The creature we butchered wasn't really a crab, of course, but let's not dwell on such details, shall we?

Now then! It was time to begin the grand charcoal-grilling festival! Roast, roast, and roast some more!

I fell into a steady rhythm: skewer, roast by the fire, lay on the grill, rotate.

I didn't know how much time had passed when I felt a presence nearby.

"Lady Robur! Let's eat already! I'm starving!"

Oh my, someone had reached their limit. Dear Kartika came over, innocent as a child; wrapped her arms around my left arm; and plopped down beside me in one fluid motion, cute as a button. Quick on her feet, wasn't she? I was impressed. To answer her rumbling stomach, I began placing fresh skewers onto the hot grate with my other hand.

"Have you finished with the tents?" I asked.

"Lady Mina asked to be taught from scratch, so Ralf and Lauren are walking her through it."

"I see," I said with a chuckle.

Our boys were such responsible caretakers. And charming young men, which grandma absolutely adored. That cinched it—they were getting extra meat for lunch.

I was happy to see that Mina had clearly assessed the situation well, realizing that she could learn from our setup. The fourth-years had originally set up their tent directly on the ground—not good. If something happened, it'd be hard to react. There was a decent chance they'd end up inside some monster's belly before they even realized it.

Relieved, I flipped one of the skewers. Ahh—that sizzling sound, and those beautifully seared grid marks. It all looked delicious.

"The other upperclassmen—well, mainly Lord Nilty—kept interrupting and slowing things down, so I was told to come help you instead," Kartika added.

"Is that so? Well, everything's been prepped, so all that's left is to grill. Just skewer the meat like the ones by the fire, and roast them.

You can keep the heat as is."

"Got it!"

Such a cheerful, honest reply—how could I help but smile? She really was a sweet girl. Though I suspected much of her current enthusiasm came from her hunger. Normally, she was a tad more reserved, which had its charm, but the way her eyes sparkled now as she stabbed the meat with skewers in rapid succession was delightful in its own way. And was it just me, or did her eyes behind those glasses seem to suddenly resemble those of a bird of prey?

As I returned my focus to the task at hand, I felt a pleasant sense of unity with Kartika, and before I knew it, the last of the raw meat had been set over the fire.

The shells, which Kartika had placed some warming enchantments on, were now stacked with roasted, juicy meat—an impressive sight to behold.

"Well then, shall I call—"

"Just who do you think you *are*?!"

Goodness gracious. Just as Kartika had begun to speak, Mr. Pedigree's voice rang out across the clearing, startling Kartika into silence.

"All right then. Let's just eat," I told her.

"R-Really?!"

Her eyes gleamed behind her glasses once more.

"The rule is that as soon as it's ready, those with free hands may eat. Besides, if anyone steps in now, Lord Nilty's pride will keep him ranting forever."

He was terribly prideful, after all. Most likely, he thought our team had criticized the way his had set up their tents.

"You're right! Thank you for the food!" Before the words had even fully left her mouth, Kartika had grabbed one of the skewers we'd stuck into the earth and taken a big bite. Her face lit up with joy as she blew on it—she was just too adorable. "Mmm! It's *delicious*!"

"Here, Kartika dear—would you like some of the light dipping sauce to go with it?"

I pulled out a thermos and bowl from my bag, poured some tentsuyu dipping sauce into the bowl, and placed a freshly grilled

piece of meat in it, along with a fork. It was a shame I hadn't brought enough oil to fry up a whole batch of tempura, but this would do.

And of course, I didn't forget to return the charcoal to the fire-lizard-hide pouch afterward.

"Oh! It's that sauce you give us when we eat seafood!" She quickly tossed her empty skewer into the fire, snatched up the bowl, and immediately took a bite. "Mmm! This sauce is amazing! The surface of the meat is all crispy from the charcoal, and the inside is fluffy! It's a totally different texture than when we just roast it over the flame!"

Ahh... For a grandma, there's no greater reward than seeing someone this happy eating your homemade food.

But even as she ate, her eyes flicked now and then toward the direction of the shouting. It was still bothering her. Of course it was.

I cleared my throat before raising my voice to say, "Oh no! I'm afraid the *Lav's special sauce* is nearly all gooone!"

Perhaps it was a bit unladylike to raise my voice like that, mind you. But anything for my dear Kartika.

"Lady Robur!"

Ah, there they were. The two boys of our team raced over to us, using body-enhancement magic to enhance their speed, no doubt. They must have really been looking forward to the sauce.

Perhaps it was the lingering instinct from my past life, when I so loved preparing meals for grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But it warmed my heart to have my food be looked upon with such anticipation by boys of that age again.

"Ah, good work, you two. Don't worry, there's plenty of sauce left. Sorry for the little fib," I said with a smile. "Now, come and eat up."

"We humbly accept this delicious meal!"

Gathering around the fire, everyone on our team took a seat. The boys each picked out the skewers they liked and began eating.

Now, now, Kartika darling—there's no need to rush. There's plenty to go around. Don't go stuffing your mouth so full that you can't even chew properly.

I poured tentsuyu into two more bowls, dipped several slices of

grilled meat into it, and passed them to the boys along with forks. They inhaled it so fast it would have put a vacuum cleaner to shame.





"Where did they go?!" shouted a distant voice, echoing faintly across the clearing.

Let's ignore that, shall we?

I piled the grilled skewers and charcoal-roasted meat onto six leaf plates—heaping portions for our hungry boys, and generous mounds for the hungry girls as well.

Using the experience I'd gained working part-time at a family restaurant in my previous life, I balanced all six plates on my arms and carried them over in one trip.

My dear team accepted them wordlessly, without fuss.

But as for the very last piece I had left on the grill...I ate that one myself. I'd been looking forward to it. That was the cook's privilege, after all.

Just in case, I set up a slightly emptied shell nearby for the upperclassmen: forks, leaf plates, bowls, and water flasks. Then, I took my seat close to the fire, happily watching the young ones munch away while enjoying my own meal.

It brought back fond memories of the days in my previous life, when my grandchildren and great-grandchildren would often visit, eating everything I made with such joy.

"Hey!" came a familiar voice. "Why are all of *you* eating before us?!"

"Lord Nilty, will you not cease this behavior?!"

My, my. What a spirited entrance, as always. The blond contingent ran after their erstwhile leaders, calling, "Please, calm down!"

They came right as I finished my own meal—such considerate timing. I'd been able to hear their bickering across the clearing the whole time we ate, so they must have been launching verbal assaults at each other the entire way here.

Ah, youth. The blond duo's failure to defuse their verbal sparring was almost endearing.

"At long last, you've arrived. Come now, take a seat—quickly, quickly!" I said, motioning to them.

"We need to talk—"

"No, we do *not*. Sit, sit!"

"W-Wait—!"

I grabbed the arm of Mr. Pedigree, the most annoyi—*ahem*—the most spirited of the group, and led him firmly to take a seat by the fire. The rest of the upperclassmen, perhaps encouraged by his submission, obediently sat together as a group. Naturally, I sat them a polite distance away from our team.

The children of high-ranking nobles were surprisingly vulnerable to grandmotherly fussing, and since my team was still finishing their meal, it fell to me to handle the guests. I was the designated cook, after all.

"Well now, you'll eat, won't you? We girls poured our hearts into making this meal taste delicious, surely you wouldn't let it go to waste?" I said to Mr. Pedigree, putting on my most sorrowful expression. No magic was necessary to see the guilt ripple through him. His gray-blue eyes darted between me and Kartika in a panic—it was almost endearing.

Speaking of dear Kartika, my bespectacled cooking assistant—well, she just kept eating, unfazed. Good girl.

"I—I didn't mean—"

Oho, he's hesitating. Naturally, such an opening would *never* escape the vigilant Laviange! I swiftly began plating up two types of meat on four leaf dishes. Thanks to Kartika's warming enchantment, the food was still piping hot.

One dish per noble, I thought, though perhaps an extra helping or two for my favorite little Mina. That was a grandmother's privilege. I carried them over in a single trip, waitress style.

"You'll eat?" I said. "That's wonderful! It makes all the effort worth it, you know. Now, eat up, and grow big and strong!"

"What are you, our mother?!" Mr. Pedigree exclaimed. "No—at this point, you're acting like a grandmother, for goodness' sake!"

Oh dear. Had he caught on? Perhaps the century I'd been alive was showing more than I thought. I pressed the plate into his hands before he could protest. He took it, still grumbling.

"Well, if you insist, I'll eat it, but—hey, *listen*!" he shouted as I moved to serve the other three.

Ah, back to his old one-man stand-up routine, I see. But I had no

time to stop and indulge him. I handed the others their plates. Mina and the blond brigade gave polite thanks. I did appreciate well-mannered children. I resisted the urge to pat dear Mina on her bobbed head, instead offering her a ladylike smile.

"So this is that centipede... Are you sure it's edible?" said Mr. Pedigree, still muttering to himself. He hesitantly brought his fork to his mouth. "Huh... Tastes good."

I was pleasantly surprised that he had eaten it. He would receive no head pats, but I was pleased that he liked it.

"It's delicious!" the other three exclaimed as they began to eat.

Well, well! It seemed they liked it! And look at dear Mina! Her expression had softened into a contented smile appropriate for someone her age. Absolutely precious! It made this grandma melt inside. And as expected of someone in the knight course, she paired a healthy appetite with refined manners!

"You see the meat with the grill marks? Dip it into this sauce, like so," I said, handing over the bowls I'd fetched earlier and pouring into each a generous helping of tentsuyu. Ah, and there went the last of the thermos.

"They go well together." From the mouth of the ever-defiant Mr. Pedigree came, at last, rare and genuine words of praise. The power of a good meal truly was miraculous.

"You really do have a talent for cooking, Lady Robur," Mina said between bites.

"I'm glad it pleased you," I said. The response came naturally, and I smiled without thinking. A regular, unguarded smile.

All four of them suddenly froze mid-bite, staring at me in blank, silent wonder.

Hm? What was this? Surely it couldn't be...? Could it be a reappearance of the frozen curse?

"Lady Robur, is there still some sauce left?"

Perfect timing, Ralf! I was starting to feel a little fearful—tactical withdrawal initiated.

I chuckled. "Of course, keep eating while I retrieve it."

I slipped over to my bag, nestled near the shell serving as a tray, and swapped out the now-empty thermos for a fresh one. I had the

foresight to bring *two*, I'll have you know. I deserve praise, don't you think?

Catching a glance of Ralf's plate, I quickly plated up a modest portion of meat onto a new leaf dish. The once-overflowing shell of grilled meat was now looking rather barren.

"Here you are."

"Thank you."

We spoke at the same time, trading plate for bowl. I refilled it with more sauce. Our team leader really was a delight—always so polite. The other two members of the team, who'd been ravenous, were now wearing satisfied, contented expressions.

Now then—time for after-meal tea. I pulled a small pot and a pouch of my homemade blended tea leaves from my bag and used magic to speed up the brewing. For this kind of task, a bit of magical convenience was perfectly acceptable.

"All right, it's ready," I said.

As everyone cleaned their bowls with a touch of magic, I began pouring tea, starting with my team. As the one in charge of meals and magical tools, my bag was always heavier than the others', so I tried to keep things light wherever possible, using multipurpose dishes whenever I could.

"Hmph," Mr. Pedigree scoffed. "The noble Lady Robur, playing the role of a servant?"

"My, my. If you enjoyed the meal, you could simply say so, you know."

"Hmph. It merely wasn't *as bad* as I expected," he said, looking away with a flush. He offered his empty bowl silently on a clean leaf dish, though, and he'd washed it, readying it for the tea. For all his prickly pride, it seemed one thing about him was honest: his appetite.

"That was delicious, Lady Robur. I would never have expected food like this during a subjugation exercise. Thank you."

Ahhh, my darling Mina—how wonderfully honest and sweet she was! That softened expression, followed by a bashful smile... I could just die from the sheer adorableness!

"Thank you, Lady Robur." And look at that...even the blond

brigade had become quite agreeable, hadn't they?

Mina thanked me and cooled her tea with magic, then drank it in one swift motion. And her smile afterward—ah, it was too much! I could swoon!

"I've never had this tea before, but it really clears the palate," she said. "And there's a subtle sweetness in the aftertaste... Did you blend it yourself? It's very refined. Um...may I have another cup?"

"Of course," I replied, refilling her bowl. "I blended in a dried herb that sweetens it as it steeps. But I merely mixed it with some store-bought tea, nothing extravagant."

It was actually the cheapest store-bought tea I could find, which I had then mixed with herbs I'd foraged from the mountains. But that, of course, was my little secret.

"Thank you," said Mina. "You truly know a great deal about food."

"I simply believe that good things should be enjoy—"

"Ha! What an unnecessary skill for a noble lady." Oh, Mr. Pedigree...must you *always* interrupt our grandmother-granddaughter bonding?

But I felt it was time we finally got to the real discussion. I glanced toward Ralf, who gave a subtle nod.

"I suppose you're right," I said.

"Wait—Lady Robur, please remain—"

"My bowl is over *there*, thank you."

What was he flustered about? I'd already poured the tea. I had nothing left to do at his side. I offered him a ladylike smile and slipped away. When I turned, I saw that my team had already gathered around Ralf.

"Here's your bowl, Lady Robur," Lauren said, offering me my bowl, cleaned and ready. A considerate boy like that—oh, he *did* make my old heart flutter. Girls were weak to that kind of quiet kindness. Mr. Pedigree could learn a thing or two—he could perhaps benefit from leveling his charisma a bit more.

"Thank you, dear."

"N-Not at all..." Lauren looked away, flustered. Adorable.

Once the tea bags had steeped enough, I tossed them into the fire. I had mixed in a few medicinal herbs—nothing fancy, but it

might repel a bug or two. *Not* the kind of bugs we were worried about, of course.

I took a sip, let out a quiet sigh, and gazed into the fire. That moment—sharing warmth and silence with everyone after a meal—felt oddly precious. The sky had grown dark without us noticing. There had been no rowdy campfire laughter like one might expect on a student camping trip, but...a night like this had its own charm.

"We're moving out tomorrow. What about your team?" So much for the peace—Ralf brought down the hammer of reality.

"What? Don't go and make decisions on your own. We should stay put and await rescue," said Mr. Pedigree with a frown, as if he thought the matter had already been settled.

Mina's face darkened, and the blond brigade looked around in anxious confusion.

"Staying in one place, waiting for a rescue that might never come... Eventually, we'll just end up as food for the bugs," Ralf said.

"Are you an idiot? Don't lump us in with commoners and lesser nobles like yourselves. *We* are high nobility. I am a scion of House Nilty, and—well, the lady of House Robur is here too. Rescue will come swiftly, *obviously*."

I *was* technically the second prince's fiancée, but I still got the "and her too, I suppose" treatment.

"Let me make this clear," Ralf said. "No one is going to break the barrier around the Poison Box Garden—especially not for some disposable noble child who isn't even an heir. Who's going to risk getting stuck in a zone swarming with high-danger insects? Even if someone does come, it won't be soon. Assembling a team strong enough to reach us will take time. These repellent pegs won't last until then."

"You dare insult House Nilty?" Mr. Pedigree growled the words low, not shouting for once, though his anger still simmered beneath them. But Ralf wasn't wrong.

"Think rationally," said Ralf. "This barrier is maintained jointly with a neighboring country. If this place held royalty, or heirs trained as future heads of the Four Great Houses, maybe there'd be a chance. But second-borns like us? There's little hope. And if the barrier itself

fails and causes harm to the public, it would become an international issue. Do you really think the heads of the Four Houses would ignore that danger and prioritize rescuing their own children?"

"But...that..." Mr. Pedigree tried to argue, but at last he fell silent, bringing a hand to his mouth as the truth dawned on him.

The royal family and the Four Houses existed to serve the people. Their purpose was to wield sword and shield in defense of the weak—standing at the forefront as a vanguard until the day they drew their last breath. That was the vow they made to the sacred beasts.

At the very least, he now seemed to understand that pedigree alone wasn't reason enough for his family to act.

"But we're students of the Royal Academy!"

"Why is *this* happening to *us*?!"

Ah, and now the blond brigade took to the stage again. Their lamentations echoed like they were actors in a third-rate melodrama. The girl began crying, and the boy wrapped an arm around her shoulders in comfort.

"What good does it do to search for causes when there are no answers?!" Mr. Pedigree snapped. "Wailing and sobbing won't help anyone!"

Now, that was the first time I'd actually agreed with him. But of course, he was conveniently ignoring the fact that *he* had been the one yelling nonstop since the beginning. The blonde girl shot him a glare sharp enough to wound.

"How cruel, Lord Nilty!" She stormed up to him, fury in every step. "You've done nothing but shout this entire time, while doing absolutely *nothing*! Had I known it would be like this, I'd have refused to cooperate with you altogether!"

Cooperate? I wondered what she meant by that.

"Silence! Do you understand who you're speaking to?! I am a son of House Nilty!"

"Then instead of waiting around for a rescue, why don't *you* get us out of here?!" the blond boy yelled. "If we run into any beasts, *you'll* handle everything on your own, then, won't you?!"

"Pechulim, *you* would defy *me*?!"

"And what power or authority do you actually have right now?!

You've done nothing this whole time! Frankly, these second-years have been far more useful—"

"*Enough!*"

The one who cut through the ugly argument was none other than my sweet Mina. Oh, how gallant she was! If only I had packed a fan and megaphone like the sort you'd use to cheer on idols.

"What you say is true," she went on. "Lord Nilty, you've been entirely useless, and your pride has done nothing but drag everyone down." She turned to the blond brigade. "But you two have been no better." The two of them sighed, and she turned back to Mr. Pedigree. "Moreover, I don't know what you might have instructed them to do, but they demeaned a member of our group—an underclassman, no less. And worse, they used magic to influence that underclassman's mind. And you made no move to stop it."

"I never instructed them—"

"We're truly sorry!" the blond pair shouted in unison.

Oh dear. So what Ralf said earlier *had* been true. Using mental manipulation magic in a place like this was no better than telling someone to walk off a cliff. I didn't know who they had tried to manipulate—but if they had caused that person any harm, grandma would have to teach them a lesson in manners.

Still, it was odd...why were the blond duo apologizing to me? Shouldn't they have apologized to the one they'd harmed—or, at the very least, to our team leader Ralf? Were they simply concerned about my status?

"Now, is that truly an apology meant for me?" I asked.

"B-But...since I was the one who acted, I felt I should apologize directly..." The blonde girl tried to hedge her words, eyes flitting anxiously to gauge my reaction. Her companion looked equally uncertain. But choosing whom to apologize to based on social rank? Absolutely not.

"You're responsible, of course—but Ralf is our leader," I told her. "He's the one who's looked after the team from the start. If you intend to show sincerity or to apologize properly, shouldn't you begin with *him*? This is a subjugation exercise, after all. Prioritizing apologies based on status is not only foolish—it's dangerous."

Oho...I almost sounded like a competent noblewoman, didn't I?

"It's a miracle, really," Lauren whispered. "She probably doesn't even realize any magic was used on her, but somehow the conversation still makes sense."

"As expected of Lady Robur," Kartika agreed.

Hmm? What did they mean by that?

Whatever it was, I chose to believe they were complimenting me.

Both Ralf and Mina stared at me in silence, as if they wanted to say something—but they held their tongues. Curious.

"Hmph," scoffed Mr. Pedigree. "As worthless as I expected. Your only talent lies in cooking, a skill unfit for a noblewoman—it's pitiful. No, pathetic—especially for someone born of the Four Great Houses."

"That's enough, Lord Nilty," Mina reprimanded him.

"Silence, Lady Ujeera. *You* are the one who should hold your tongue. You are the daughter of a marquis's house. Outside of this forest, everything is dictated by status. Do you not understand that? I will no longer allow you to disrespect *me*, Enrique Nilty."

Awww, Mr. Pedigree. We had just had such a lovely meal too. What a waste. It seemed that he had completely graduated from his rebellious phase into a full-blown tyrant. But I didn't blame him—it was the hormones, I was sure.

The blond pair had gone completely silent. Mina let out a long sigh. The atmosphere within the fourth-year group had turned utterly sour. My team, meanwhile, seemed completely disinterested. That made sense—this past year, the boys in my team had trained alongside real adventurers. They'd been taught not to let themselves be pulled into other people's drama.

It was an essential lesson for adventurers, especially when multiple parties were operating together. If you let the mood of another team affect your own, it could spread like a virus. Though it was a strange concept, negative feelings were contagious, especially in survival scenarios. That was why, in any adventuring party, this was the very first lesson drilled into you. Adventurers hated two things above all else—needless hostility, and being dragged into someone else's mess.

Though Kartika wasn't a professional adventurer, she trusted Ralf and Lauren. Not because she had been forced into obedience like Mr. Pedigree's team, but because she'd come to know them, and chose to follow. That was true leadership.

Still, had no one else noticed...? Mr. Pedigree had just said something *very* important.

"Lady Robur," Mina said, turning to me. "As second-in-command of our team, allow me to offer our apology."

"We're truly sorry," said the blond pair in unison, as the three members of the fourth-year team, not including their leader, bowed to me.

"Well now, how polite of you. But wasn't Lord Nilty trying to compliment me just now?" I gave them a ladylike smile, and every single one of them looked dumbfounded. Even my own team.

Lord Nilty himself looked confused. The fact that *he himself* hadn't realized he'd done it only made me feel all the more impressive.

I laughed. "He said I was talented at cooking, you see."

"Ha!" Mr. Pedigree scoffed. "You're as dull-witted as ever. I wasn't *praising* you."

Ah, so now he was outright denying it. But it seemed I didn't need to indulge him any longer—Ralf had given me the signal.

"Is that so?" I said. "In that case, we'll make sure our parting gifts go to everyone *but* you. If you don't like it, you're welcome to secure your own provisions. I'm sure someone with absolute confidence in surviving in this cursed forest won't have any trouble with that."

"Parting gifts, Lady Robur...?"

Aside from Mina, the other three fourth-years suddenly looked panicked. The blond boy in particular flinched at the word *parting*.

"But of course. We're leaving this place tomorrow, isn't that right?" I said, turning to Ralf.

Ordinarily, I'd leave such declarations to the team leader. But as the one with the highest social standing, I could at least try to give the other team a little push in the right direction. Time was limited, especially in a forest like this, where the daylight hours were short.

We'd likely depart at first light tomorrow. It would be best to start preparing now.

"Indeed," Ralf answered. "We've wasted enough time watching another team fall apart. Much appreciated, Lady Robur."

"Yes, we really do need to focus on getting ready to leave," I said. Ahh, praise from the young always lifted a grandmother's spirits.

Perhaps it was because things weren't going his way, but Mr. Pedigree finally flew off the handle. "Don't be ridiculous! Who said you could make that decision on your—"

"The one being ridiculous is *you*," Ralf interjected, seeing that any more debate was pointless. "I've already explained how dangerous it is to stay here. If you're that desperate for monster repellent and food—we'll leave that behind for you. I'm the leader of the second-year team, *not* yours. I have no further obligations."

"Do you understand what will happen to you *after* we leave this forest, you lowborn wretch?" His voice dropped into a threatening growl. But his threat was entirely off the mark.

"You needn't worry about me," Ralf said calmly. "And don't underestimate a second son of a low-ranking noble house. I intend to live as an adventurer. I've no interest in the constraints of noble life—they don't apply to me."

"Do you not care about the land your family governs?"

"That's an empty threat, and a meaningless one at that." Ralf let out a sigh and began to explain, "The territory my father governs is one of the salt-damaged lands that have become the subject of a joint research initiative between our class and last year's graduating Class D. It's attracted the attention of many across the kingdom. Major trading companies are involved, as well as designers popular with nobles and commoners alike, and adventurers, and even other territories. His Majesty the King himself is watching the outcome with interest. You might be a son of one of the Four Great Houses, but you're still just a replaceable second son. You don't have the authority to do anything to that land."

"What did you just say?!" Mr. Pedigree shouted, but Ralf didn't care.

"Calm yourself," he said. "I bear you no goodwill, but no ill will

either. I've only stated facts. Yes, the Four Great Houses hold great sway among the nobility—but what happens when commoners and lesser nobles begin to move in unison? Could you truly stop that tide?"

"Don't be absurd! You make it sound as though one insignificant territory could influence the whole realm!"

Oh dear—was that a flicker of anxiety on the heir's face?

"Oh, but it can," Ralf said. "That region was once abandoned by both the Church and the neighboring territories. When the kingdom failed to intervene, many began to lose faith. The devastation was enormous. And from the perspective of other territories, it could just as easily happen to them next. Any adventurer who's traveled the country has seen it. It's not just those directly affected. Even in the royal capital, there's a growing ripple of unease."

"That kind of thing always fades with time," Mr. Pedigree sneered.

That was true, in part. If it were only discontent, it might fade. Perhaps it would die out quietly—if no one fanned the flames, that is.

"Do you have any idea how many poor commoners and struggling lesser nobles live in this country?" Ralf asked him. "Many years ago, a merchant company led by a commoner sued a noble. Do you know how that case ended?"

Ah, yes. That case. I was the one who'd advised the head of the company on how to properly provoke the noble. We went way back.

"Can't say I do," Mr. Pedigree scoffed. "But if it was a commoner, and it was a noble they went up against, obviously the noble would have won—"

"Public opinion shifted. Other nobles began to support the company, and in the end, the noble paid an enormous settlement and disappeared from the capital," Ralf told him.

At the time, the head of the company hadn't yet come to understand how to properly fight the nobility. That particular noble had been involved in wide-reaching business ventures. Taking him on head-to-head would've been a losing game. If you didn't play by the nobility's rules, the courts wouldn't even hear your case—you'd be turned away at the gate. Especially back then, when the

company was still small.

Winning without fighting directly was very important.

The heir's eyes had gone wide—and so had the blond duo's. Clearly, none of the three had known any of this. Mina, on the other hand, looked on solemnly—she clearly already knew about the case, and understood why Ralf was bringing it to their attention.

Ah, my darling Mina! As expected! Grandmother couldn't be prouder!

"That trading company is directly involved in the research," Ralf added. "And to the public, the Four Great Houses aren't just nobles—they're practically synonymous with the nation itself. If you, driven by personal feelings, attempted to interfere with that territory now, the backlash would be far worse than it was during that court case. It would stir up unrest across the country—and there's more than enough risk that the people might turn their fangs on the royal family and the Four Houses." Ralf delivered the warning calmly, watching as the noble boy flinched. "What's more," he continued in the same even tone, "if someone like me—a low-ranking noble—can understand this risk, there's no way His Majesty the King or the head of House Nilty wouldn't be aware. Surely you can grasp what action they'll take before any real trouble starts."

Mr. Pedigree's rage had completely cooled. I was pleased by how Ralf had handled the situation.

The chairman of that trading company had told us in advance: If any noble tried to obstruct the research, we had full permission to invoke the company's name. Honestly, we could have pushed harder.

The current heads of the Four Great Houses would nip any budding threat in the bud. Unlike their predecessors, they understood their role. As heads of houses that managed state projects and oversaw vast territories, they wouldn't let personal feelings endanger the people under their care.

Not like in the days of Beljeanne.

"In any case," said Ralf, "I'm not concerned right now with what might happen after we leave this forest. All I care about is how to get *my* team out alive. I couldn't care less how skilled you all are as individuals."

They had nothing to say to that. Not even Mina. Her expression had gone pale—she knew what was coming next.

"Even an A-rank adventurer might not survive this place. That's how deadly this accursed forest is. Yet you sneer at my team, you bicker among yourselves, show no unity, and act only for your own benefit. In a place like this, that makes you nothing but a liability. If you can still afford pride, then you clearly don't understand the danger you're in right now."

Those words finally broke the blonde girl. Her tears fell freely now. Mina, at least, seemed to be taking the words to heart. The two boys stood slack-jawed, utterly stunned.

The top Class A students seemed to think that they deserved to be admired by everyone else—and to be fair, aside from our Class D, most students did admire them. This was probably the first time anyone had said something like this to their faces before.

"You don't need to worry about us," Ralf said flatly. "We don't want to clean up your messes, and we simply don't have the leeway, anyway, when this forest is so dangerous."

"You're exaggerating the danger. We're still alive, aren't we?"

Ah, there it was. The heir continued to demonstrate just how poorly he understood the reality around him. Attacking others to shield one's own pride was a losing hand in a place like this.

"Only because of Lady Robur," Ralf replied.

"So now you're just playing to her ego because she's on your team? This fool didn't even fight any of the beasts!"

Oh? "This fool," was it? Wasn't that a little rude? It was true, of course—I hadn't taken part in the combat, just like him. Technically he wasn't wrong.

As I was silently agreeing with him in my heart, though, Ralf let out an exasperated sigh. "You really don't understand, do you? It's her knowledge that's kept us safe. Do you honestly think the beasts have stayed away by coincidence?"

Ah! Did I just get praised? Oh dear, I might blush!

"This useless girl's knowledge? Don't be ridiculous! At most, she's contributed to the cooking!" Mr. Pedigree seethed as he pointed at me. "She's a talentless failure who envies her adopted sister Sienna,

bullies her without shame, and clings to a fake engagement with Shua, who can't stand her! And *still* she has the nerve to cling to her status as the prince's fiancée while doing nothing to— Guh... Geh!"

Thud! Crack! Slam!

If I had to describe the sounds that were made, it'd be something like that.

Mina had grabbed him by the front of his uniform and slammed her fist into his left cheek. The follow-up punch struck him square in the solar plexus. As the grip on his collar was released, he crumpled face-first to the forest floor.

Ah, splendid! As expected of a young lady who had studied in the knight course into her fourth year. And even though he'd just eaten, Mr. Pedigree hadn't vomited at all—she must have held back just the right amount! Wasn't she simply wonderful?

Well, now that he was no longer moving, maybe things would finally quiet down.

Ralf observed everything quietly. Mina stood seething, fists trembling, looking like she very much wanted to hit him again. And I —well, I watched it all with a proper ladylike smile.

Everyone else had gone completely still. The blond duo really should have thought about closing their mouths—they might catch a fly.

Come to think of it, Mr. Pedigree really hadn't moved at all. Surely he hadn't died of shock? Mages, after all, trained their minds more than their bodies—and he looked rather frail. Even if he had been in the most rebellious phase of youth, watching someone that age die would leave a bitter taste in the mouth.

"That was unbearable to listen to," Mina muttered, with a sharp glare at the crumpled noble, then turned back toward me. "Lady Robur, I once again apologize on behalf of my team." She made a deep bow.

The blond pair scrambled to follow her lead. When they lifted their heads, their eyes had a desperate, almost pleading look. I wondered why.

"Yet," Mina went on, "I can't just abandon them. I'm their teammate. I understand you don't trust them, but I ask you this: At

the very least, please allow these two to travel with you starting tomorrow." She gestured to the blond duo.

"W-Would...that really be okay?" the blonde girl asked hesitantly.

"And what about you, Lady Mina...?" the blond boy added, voice uncertain.

It was a reasonable judgment from a second-in-command, but did the blond duo really think this meant our team would accept them?

"Don't misunderstand," Mina said coldly. "Were you not listening at all to what has been said tonight? I must take the blame too, for not noticing sooner. But apparently, they were *explicitly warned* by last year's graduates to be wary of our team." Both blond students flinched. And no wonder—Mina's killing intent was practically a blade pressed to their throats. "You used a mental manipulation spell on a teammate you were meant to fight beside—*the moment* I stepped away. Between that and the warning, I'm forced to assume that you've done this before."

"Th-That was because Lord Nilty told us—" Ah, and there it was. In trying to shift the blame to Mr. Pedigree, she had dug her own grave in the process.

"Mighty!" shouted the blond boy, desperate to shut her up, but it was too late. She might as well have confessed.

"So it *was* true, then. And tell me—do you think that just because I've asked, they will accept you?" Mina said pointedly.

"Wha—?"

Ah, and there it was again—the curse of the frozen faces.

"I have no intention of accepting them," Ralf said immediately.

"What?!"

A clean, decisive rejection. Their faces instantly twisted into despair—the curse must have been lifted, then. What a relief.

"I *did* say, didn't I?" Ralf went on. "That I care less about what happens *after* we leave this forest, and more about getting my team out of it alive."

"Then let us help!" the blonde girl cried. "We can support you!"

"Of course I'll cooperate too!" the boy added hastily.

Mina frowned at their protest.

"I already told you," Ralf said with another long-suffering sigh. "Even those with the strength of A-rank adventurers might not survive in the Poison Box Garden if they lack teamwork. This isn't a place where brute strength alone can save you. *Help us? Cooperate?*" He sounded exasperated. "Who exactly do you think you are? Let me repeat this one more time—if you're still clinging to whatever scraps of pride you have, and if *that's* the attitude you bring to survival, then you haven't understood a thing."

His words were carefully chosen, broken down for even the most stubborn fools to grasp. And yet, they just couldn't get it. The two of them pressed toward Ralf, flustered and fumbling.

"B-But...we have more magic power than that so-called noblewoman over there!" the girl said, pointing in my direction. "We're much more useful!"

"Exactly! That's why we should be allowed to join you—"

"That won't be necessary," Ralf cut in flatly.

Ah, poor things. That kind of obvious flex didn't make for a very convincing performance. And of course, they were ignorant of my *true* magic capacity.

"There's no need to listen to any more of your unpleasant nonsense," Ralf said coldly. "Lady Ujeera, you understand."

"I do. I apologize for asking too much," she said, bowing one last time.

"Wait just a minute! You don't get to decide this on your own!"

"Yeah! You're a marquis's daughter too! You've always acted like you were better than us, and I've *never* liked it!"

"I see. Then go your own way," Mina said, without hesitation. It seemed she had anticipated them turning on her. Their team was finally imploding.

"Then I'll follow them whether they like it or not!" the blond boy snapped.

"Me too!" the girl chimed in.

Oh my. Trying to force their way into our team? They must have had a death wish.

"If you trail us carelessly, you'll only make things worse for yourselves," Ralf said firmly. "Understand this: No matter what

happens, we will not extend a helping hand to you. Don't think tagging along will somehow let you sneak your way into our team."

"What did you say?! You're just a lowborn noble!"

"That's right! If you plan on becoming an adventurer, then isn't it *your duty* to help people like us?!"

"Are you *fools*?" Ralf snapped, his voice cold and sharp. "An adventurer's first priority is their own life—and the lives of their comrades. If we abandon you in this forest, no one on this team will say a word. It's disgraceful to abandon the weak, yes—but we have no obligation to risk our lives protecting people who threaten the safety of our team. And let me remind you—you two are hardly weak. High-ranking noble heirs and heiresses, gifted with far more magic than us, and considered exemplary students at the Academy. That hardly qualifies you as *weak*."

A perfect argument. The blond pair was struck silent.

"Furthermore," said Ralf, "we already told you—we'll leave behind monster repellent and plenty of supplies. We've explained clearly *why* we can't take you with us. That's full justification for separating from you. And if both teams make it out of this forest alive and you try to accuse us later, rest assured—we have all the evidence we need to prove our innocence."

"What do you mean by that?"

Oh dear, was the blond boy really that dense? Did he truly believe that, even after a specific warning from our graduates, Class D—mostly composed of lower nobles and commoners—would have come unprepared?

Several of our students carried magical recording tools. Most of the students in the unpopular magical tool course—that is, those with the know-how to use such things—were already from Class D. Surely even they should know that.

And most importantly, *I* was part of this team.

Regardless of what students whispered behind closed doors, my position was clear: the fiancée of the second prince and a daughter of House Robur, one of the Four Great Houses. In public testimony, my words would hold considerable weight.

The blonde girl had already realized it. She turned pale and

began to tremble, her eyes fixed on me.

"We've no reason to explain everything to those who caused us harm. Here's my final warning: If you really want to survive, you'd be better off figuring out how to manage it among yourselves," Ralf told them. He turned to us. "Let's go."

Ralf didn't so much as glance back at the pair. With that, he ended the conversation with the upperclassmen and turned on his heel toward our camp.

"Please wait, Lady Laviange!"

But just as I moved to follow Ralf, the blonde girl latched onto my arm—firmly. *Very* firmly. It felt less like a noble lady asking for aid and more like someone wrestling a live tuna with their bare hands. *Really now, my arms aren't going to thrash around if you don't hold on so desperately, you know?*

"You're a daughter of House Robur, aren't you?! You *must* help those beneath you by virtue of your station! Once we're out of here, I'll change my ways! I'll even let you call me by my name! So please—put in a word for us! Let us join your group!"

"Oh dear. What a predicament this is."

What a string of incoherent reasoning...or, no, in this case it might be better to call it self-serving delusion. The logic was appalling, and the so-called incentives she offered even worse.

I caught sight of someone approaching slowly from the edge of my vision. Likely someone who was going to try and pull her off of me. I gave a slight shake of my head to both Ralf and Mina, signaling them to stop. It was unwise to approach someone in a panic; better to let them calm down first.

"You seem to be under several misapprehensions," I said gently. "Precisely because I am a duke's daughter, I don't assist just anyone. The higher one's status, the more selective one must be in offering aid. Surely, you were taught that as a marquis's daughter?"

"That only applies to *commoners*!" she protested. "*I* am a noble!"

"Which makes your position even less worthy of thoughtless assistance, does it not? And from the perspective of House Robur, your house stands *quite* low indeed."

"How dare you mock me! *You*, of all people!"

I chuckled. “Besides, weren’t you the one repeatedly saying I’m unworthy of my title?”

“Well, because it’s true! Which is exactly why you should *start* acting like a proper noblewoman now! Unlike you, *I* am an upperclassman in Class A!”

Oh my. How frightening. Her hair had come undone, her eyes were bloodshot, and she no longer sounded like a lady in the least.

“And you think that’s enough reason?” I asked. “In a place where our lives are on the line? You want me to prove my nobility by risking everything for people who’d probably get us killed?”

“Exactly!” the blond boy jumped in, his tone indignant. “You’re talentless, useless, low on magic, hated by your fiancé and the prince—even your own house looks down on you! You should be grateful for the chance to curry favor with our families!”

Well, he had finally joined the conversation—only to run headfirst in the wrong direction, full speed. For the record, the only ones who disliked me in House Robur were my birth mother and my darling foster sister. The head of the house was so disinterested in family affairs that he didn’t even *care* enough to dislike me.

“How strange that you would believe such things,” I mused. “For one, I’ve never *needed* support. Not from House Robur, not from the prince, and certainly not from being his fiancée. I’ve never *wanted* any of it.”

“Liar!” said the blonde girl. “I’ve heard everything from Sienna! You’re jealous! You’re always bullying her!” Oh, how triumphant she looked—so certain she had uncovered my great secret. Her face twisted with such delight that it resembled something monstrous. Honestly, noble or not, what woman allowed herself to look like *that*?

“Your families—House Twyla and House Lunach—both have ties to House Nilty, yes?” I said smoothly. “Then surely your fathers, as marquises themselves, would *not* want to provoke House Nilty by openly supporting someone from another of the Four Houses.”

“That’s not—”

“Oh, but it *is*. Think about it. If two houses with ties to House Nilty were to act as patrons to a daughter of House Robur, wouldn’t

that risk tipping the balance of power? Do you think they want to provoke House Nilty? Especially when they aren't even engaged in any joint projects with us—with no promise of reward? You honestly believe they'd offer formal backing just because their children joined my team for a short while?"

The blond boy was finally starting to cool down. His face had gone noticeably pale.

"It's unthinkable," I went on. "At most, your parents would dismiss the whole affair as your youthful folly and forget it ever happened. Honestly, considering they're not involved with us at all, it's more than likely that they would never have a chance to return any favor, even if they wanted to."

"You believe that just because *you* don't understand how things work!" He was still protesting? How exhausting. It was becoming increasingly clear that a rational discussion with him was a waste of time.

"Then that's perfectly fine. I find no value in engaging in further debate with either of you," I said, before turning once again to the girl who still held my arm. "Oh, and as for giving me the privilege to call you by your name? What worth could that possibly hold? You may have permitted others to use your name for the duration of this expedition, but did you ever notice that not once did I actually use that privilege? In fact, as a proper lady of a ducal house, I never permitted you to call me by my given name at all. So why, I wonder, did you think it acceptable to do so?"

"Th-That can't be..."

Oh dear. Had she only just now realized it? What a clumsy child she was.

In fact, from the moment we entered this forest—when they first cast their defensive spells solely around themselves—I had stopped even thinking of them by name at all. Of course, I had no intention of saying that aloud. There was no reason to be needlessly cruel to the young.

Still, I felt the tremble in her grip grow stronger, her shock no doubt magnified by hearing such things from someone she had looked down on.

"You seem to have misunderstood quite a lot," I said kindly. "I've often found that students at the Academy blur the lines between school status and real noble hierarchy. Now do you understand who I am? I am a legitimate daughter of House Robur. My family holds enough power that, even if the prince wished to break our engagement, the royal family would not allow it. Still, you needn't worry. So long as I do not wish it, there will be no formal repercussions. After all, we are still students."

"R-Repercussions... Still...students..."

Oh dear? Rather than being comforted, she had begun to tremble in earnest. How unfortunate that my comforting words had the opposite effect. Still, how long did she plan to keep holding my arm like I was some freshly caught fish? Even Mina was staring, clearly startled. Honestly, it was time for her to let go.

"Really, there's no need to worry," I tried to reassure her again. "I certainly won't hold this against you. After all, why should I concern myself with those whom I have no interest in? You've had a peaceful, uneventful student life thus far, haven't you? And I'm sure that will continue...so long as you don't do anything to change that."

I gave her a ladylike smile. Her grip on my arms slackened at once, and she crumpled to the ground, completely silent.

Still, this was a good sign. She bowed her head so low I couldn't see her face, but surely her knees had given out from relief. Just a bit too overwhelmed by my generosity, perhaps. The blond boy sank down right beside her, also bowing his head.

"Lady Robur."

"Yes, let's go."

Ralf's quiet prompt signaled that it was time to move on. He had that expression again, the one that suggested he had something to say—but true to his nature, he kept quiet. Well, that was fine. Grandmothers are known for their patience, after all.

"Lady Robur, you're incredible," Kartika murmured.

"Am I? I only tried to comfort them and help them feel at ease, but...thank you."

"Comforted...?"

For some reason, my team—and even Mina—were looking at me

like they were witnessing something truly pitiful. I didn’t understand it at all.

※※Aside: Team Peckish: The Team Who Might Overturn the Ecosystem (Joshua)※※

"What do you mean their whereabouts still haven't been confirmed?!"

Mihail rose to his feet, slamming both palms onto the table.

We were in the guidance room, though it wasn't as if any of us had done anything wrong. After all, it had not been one of our teams who had disappeared. That honor belonged to Team AD9, who—my fiancée among them—had entered the teleportation circle and subsequently vanished without a trace.

The problem only came to light once the other teams had finished teleporting. Of all the teams, AD9 alone had failed to arrive at their designated location.

This unprecedented incident forced an immediate suspension of the joint subjugation exercise. Apart from Mihail and myself, no students were given a proper explanation. All the other students were sent home without delay.

Mihail had been called here as acting head of House Robur. I, on the other hand, stood here under several titles: as the fiancé of Lady Robur, as student council president, and as standin for His Majesty the King. The Royal Academy operated under the Rovenian Crown, and I happened to be the eldest royal enrolled.

"Compose yourself, Lord Robur. Where's that famous calm of yours?" This was Wharton Nilty. The elder brother of the missing Enrique Nilty, he was about the same age as my older half brother, and, like Mihail, an heir to one of the Four Great Houses.

Perhaps due to his anxiety over his younger brother's disappearance, there was barely any sign of Wharton's usual

nonchalance. He stood with his arms crossed and a grave expression on his face. He bore a striking resemblance to one of the previous king's queens consort: hair the color of milk tea and greenish gray eyes.

In our kingdom, the queen consort who was mother of the reigning monarch was styled the queen mother. A queen consort of the previous king who had not borne an heir to the throne retained the title of queen emerita. Wharton's mother had been the latter—and a daughter of House Nilty before her marriage.

I, on the other hand, traced my bloodline to House Bereed, through the current queen mother. I bore no close familial ties to House Nilty.

Those of us who were descendants of the legitimate male line were allowed to call any of the queens consort "mother" or "grandmother," depending on which generation they were from, whether they were actually related to us by blood or not. However, members of the royal family who became members of cadet branches, or were adopted into other houses, could only call them that if they were blood-related.

Of the two princes who were sons of the current queen emerita, one was married into a low-ranking frontier noble family, House Ujeera. Enrique Nilty and Minacuala Ujeera were closely related by blood. Pechulim Lunach and Mightycarna Twyla were likewise connected to the Nilty bloodline, which likely explained why Wharton, acting head of Nilty, had assumed the role of representative for all of the families of the fourth-year team.

Only Mihail was present on behalf of the second-years. Save for Lady Robur, the rest of the second-year team were all minor nobles or commoners, none of whose families resided in the capital. Simply put, they hadn't the means to rush over. And, as the actual heads of the two great houses that were involved in this incident were bound to key posts at court and unable to leave their stations, each had appointed a standin to represent them.

"We expect the analysis of the teleportation circle to be completed shortly," said the aging headmaster, bowing as he spoke. "I must ask for just a little more patience."

Mihail dropped into his chair with a thud, his fists still clenched. It was an uncharacteristically graceless motion from him—but it spoke volumes of his concern for his younger sister. Even the fourth-year head instructor seated beside the headmaster seemed taken aback by the display.

It was what Wharton Nilty had said that had caught my attention, however. He had spoken as if he were intimately familiar with Mihail's behavior. Did they know each other that well?

To my knowledge, Mihail had never gone out of his way to associate with Enrique, despite being in the same class as him. Nor had he shown much inclination to deal with me, despite my attempts to bring him into my circle.

I could hardly blame him. His aloofness was quite a natural result of my own conduct toward his sister—my fiancée.

Yesterday, after I injured her, she had confronted me directly for the first time. Even the instructors had scolded me. And so, when I returned home afterward, for the first time since our engagement, I read the reports compiled by the spy who'd been assigned to her.

She only enters the family estate once a month, for a shared dinner. Ordinarily resides in the manor's annex, cooks her own meals, and dresses herself. Occasionally receives food from favored chefs or servants, but mostly forages in the hills for wild greens and mushrooms. She has learned how to hunt and set traps from passing adventurers. Appears to enjoy her self-sufficient lifestyle.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Was this the daughter of one of this kingdom's highest-ranking families or a wandering tribeswoman?

Occasionally asks me, her shadow, whether a plant is edible. If I ignore her, she often assumes it is and tries to eat it. I've had to physically intervene more than once. Recently, she's started observing my reactions to deduce which plants are safe. She's been spreading that knowledge to others. Honestly, it's a nuisance. I'd rather remain inconspicuous.

Was her stomach made of cast iron?! And the information she was spreading was wildly inaccurate! *Also, stop using your report to complain!*

Her clothes are all hand-me-downs from servants. Somewhat

worn. Left a few of mine for her—decent quality—and she was pleased.

She now ventures into the city alone. Initially knew only people introduced via servants, but seems to have expanded her network considerably. Trades wild ingredients or takes care of shops in exchange for new clothes. Signs of growth.

At that point, I nearly gave up. What was this—a reconnaissance report or a parenting journal?

She might not have fulfilled the conventional obligations of a duchess, but then again, it seemed she was not afforded many of the privileges either. Her day-to-day was effectively that of a survivalist. She had also neither rejected our nominal engagement nor voiced complaints about it. If anything, she'd been fulfilling her end of the unspoken contract.

In fact, I was starting to wonder—had she received *any* of the privileges of a noblewoman?

Even at those once-a-month dinners, it seemed that half the time the dishes she was served were either spoiled or so poorly prepared they scarcely deserved to be called food. She apparently took great joy in recooking them from scratch...

And worse, before Sienna had even been adopted into the family—before the royal house assigned a shadow to watch over her—she'd been gravely injured by an offensive spell from her own mother. According to the report, had Mihail not just begun training in healing magic and used it then, she would have died. That line alone was enough to send a chill down my spine.

The report also contained numerous entries describing how Mihail, frantic with worry, would scour the estate searching for his sister after she escaped yet another lesson. He truly cared for her, that much was plain.

As I read through the reports, I came to a realization. Neither the Robur family head nor its heir—her own father and brother—had ever openly scorned her. Her father, if anything, was simply indifferent to the concept of family. Her brother had merely been overzealous about her education. Which, frankly, was bizarre.

Shirking one's duties was hardly something to be applauded, of

course. Yet I found myself begrudgingly impressed by her ability to elude even Mihail, of all people, in his obsession with her academic pursuits.

In the end, though, despite all this, the report only served to confirm what I had already known: She was entirely unsuited to be the fiancée of a prince.

And yet, I realized it was precisely because she was so thoroughly unremarkable that she had managed to go all this time without becoming embroiled in any political intrigue. To the first prince's faction, she was the perfect harmless fool—an ideal candidate for a rival's consort. To my faction, she was a useful puppet with good blood ties and no spine. Coupled with her family's apathy, she had somehow found herself in a position where no one found her a threat. That was also bizarre.

I had suspected that Mihail had no clue about how she was being treated at home, and seeing his panicked state now only served to confirm that. After I handed the report over to Heinz, who read it after me, we both found ourselves too stunned to comment.

Yet it wasn't her behavior that had stunned me to my core. What had left me speechless was Sienna's behavior.

Misled by Sienna's lies, I had exposed myself—no, the royal family—to an intolerable degree of disgrace. I couldn't begin to count how many had witnessed me behaving in a manner wholly unbecoming of royalty.

And just as the instructors who had reprimanded me had said, when my own words had grown so sharp that even outsiders began to comment, it had been *her*, of all people, who had tried to shield me. Granted, most of the time that meant deflecting my insults with baffling non sequiturs...

Knock knock.

The door to the room opened suddenly. In came the homeroom instructors of each of the involved classes, along with the second-year head instructor. All bore expressions of dread, and at once I felt a deep sense of foreboding.

"We've identified where they were sent," said the second-year head instructor at last, his voice heavy. "It's...the Poison Box

Garden."

For a moment, the name didn't register.

"And?" Mihail was the first to speak, suppressing all emotion. "What will be the Academy's response?"

"We were about to explain why—"

"That can come later," he cut in, voice clipped. "Time is critical. I'm asking what action the Academy plans to take."

It was shocking to see Mihail interrupt an instructor, even more so his own homeroom teacher. Of course, everyone understood that there was good reason for his behavior.

Of all places...why did it have to be *there*? A forest beyond this kingdom's jurisdiction, bound up in old treaties with a neighboring realm...

"I agree," said Wharton Nilty, folding his arms. "As the representative for all the fourth-year families involved, I'd like to hear how the Academy intends to proceed given they've been sent there of all places."

"We shall move as quickly as possible to mount a rescue," said the headmaster carefully, stroking his beard. "However, I'm afraid the timing of such an operation must be coordinated with the royal house."

Mihail exhaled, long and slow, as if trying to douse the raging fire of anger in his chest. His voice, when he next spoke, was quiet.

"As her brother, I have one question for her instructor. Do you think my sister's still alive? Just your honest opinion will do."

After a pause, the only female member of the faculty in the room answered. "If we're speaking strictly of the second-year team, then yes. I believe they're alive. Even in the Poison Box Garden, their survival odds are high. As individuals, they're about B-rank by adventurer standards. Your sister herself...perhaps lower. But as a *team*, they're comparable to an A-rank adventuring party."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the Class A instructor, frowning.

"Lady Robur is an important part of the team," she explained. "Her knowledge of edible magical beasts, her ability to modify tools for hunting, and her talent for splitting tasks are all remarkable. And

to them, magical beasts aren't enemies—they're food. These students are as driven by hunger as any hunter-gatherer tribe I've seen. They'll chase any beast, kill it, and cook it without hesitation."

Everyone looked baffled by the turn the conversation had taken, apart from the second-year head instructor. What was she talking about? How had a matter of life and death morphed into a discussion about appetite?

"In my class," the Class D homeroom teacher said, "they are referred to—reverently, mind you—as *Team Peckish*. Ever since I heard they'd been sent to the Poison Box Garden, I've been far more concerned about the ecosystem than about their safety."

Aside from the second-year head instructor, who nodded solemnly, no one else seemed quite able to parse this.

"If that's the case," began the Class A instructor cautiously, "then the upperclassmen should also—"

"No."

"Highly unlikely."

The moment the Class A instructor tentatively raised the question, the two second-year staff members shook their heads at once. The female instructor, in particular, was particularly vehement.

"My class is made up of high-ranking nobles. Their swordsmanship, magical aptitude, and academic ability rank among the finest in the Academy. Are you suggesting, then, that they're inferior to Class D?" His displeasure was clear. He had always taken great pride in his role as Class A homeroom instructor—and not-so-subtly belittled Class D whenever possible. As someone who had once been mortified by the fact that his fiancée had been placed in Class D, perhaps I wasn't in a position to judge. But for an educator, the bias was...less than ideal.

"The Poison Box Garden is a dangerous place where even A-rank adventurers can perish. The fact that Team Peckish may survive does *not* mean we can say the same for the upperclassmen."

"What did you say?!"

A sharp tension crackled between the two teachers, but oddly enough, the absurdity of the name "Team Peckish" seemed to dampen the atmosphere. Or perhaps that was only me, quietly

losing composure every time the title was uttered.

"This wasn't something I originally intended to share..." the young, brown-haired head instructor of the second-years interrupted, stepping between the teachers. He withdrew a packet of papers from a larger file and handed it to the fourth-year head instructor, an older man with a similar hair color.

The moment the Class A teacher caught a glimpse, his expression changed.

"You knew about this and said nothing?!" The head teacher's voice rose as he flipped quickly through the pages.

"These are testimonial statements compiled by a former Class D student who graduated last year," the younger man explained. "There is no concrete evidence beyond this. This morning, before the joint subjugation exercise, she attempted to hand it to him"—he gestured toward the Class A teacher—"asking him to keep a closer eye on his students during the exercise. However, he dismissed it, saying that since most of Class D consists of lower-ranking nobles and commoners, it would be meaningless even if he did look. I happened to witness the exchange and took custody of the documents."

"And now you bring it up *here*? What the hell are you playing at?!"

The younger man remained composed in the face of the older teacher's outburst. I didn't know what the document contained, but judging by their reactions, I gleaned that the event described had happened. Even the headmaster grimaced when he read it.

"Why reveal this now?"

"Because we need to look at the situation realistically. Surviving alone will be difficult for the fourth-years. But if they cooperate with Team Peckish, their chances will improve—assuming, of course, none of them attempt what's described in that report."

"And if they *do*?"

I listened to the exchange between the year heads, silently wishing—however petty it sounded—that they wouldn't keep saying "Team Peckish." The phrase completely undermined the gravity of the situation.

"If that happens, Team Peckish will break ties with them, naturally. Doing such a thing in that forest is tantamount to suicide. And without Team Peckish, the fourth-years will be wiped out."

"And in such an outcome," the Class A teacher pressed, "are you meaning to pretend that this—ridiculously named—team will bear no responsibility?"

As much as I agreed with his distaste for the name, the way he addressed the younger female teacher—who had done nothing but answer a direct question—felt needlessly aggressive.

But she met his threat with a chilly stare. "In an environment like the Poison Box Garden, their judgment would be correct. Their survival doesn't depend on individual strength—it comes from functioning as a unit."

"Headmaster, what is this report?" Wharton, the Nilty heir, spoke up at last. "Its contents sound disturbing. And do you mean to say that my brother is involved?"

With a glance, the headmaster signaled to the female instructor to explain.

"That report was prepared by a Class D graduate," she began. "It was intended as a parting gift to their juniors who were continuing their graduation research. Each team leader was given a copy. I only found out about it this morning, when I happened to see one of my team leaders reviewing it."

As she spoke, the headmaster passed the document to Wharton. The moment he scanned it, a deep crease appeared between his brows.

Clearly, whatever it said...it wasn't good.

"I've heard that previous years of Class D experienced similar incidents," the female teacher continued. "Of course, there's no hard proof. If one dismisses it all as speculation or paranoia, there's little to be done. But I wouldn't be surprised if other Class D students across different years have suffered similarly. That said, it seems my second-year Class D took precautions of some sort, and all of them entered this joint subjugation exercise prepared."

"Are you saying they laid a trap for my students?!" The blond middle-aged man could hardly keep his temper in check. Frankly, it

was becoming embarrassing.

As I recoiled from my own instructor's theatrics, a memory surfaced—one of the second-years in my own lottery-assigned team had looked tense throughout the entire exercise. Had they been wary of us? I'd never once done anything during an exercise to intimidate anyone, nor would any of those in my team have done so... Or, at least, so I believed.

"A trap? What a wildly off-base interpretation," she scoffed, with evident contempt. "There's a word for it—self-defense. Nothing happens if nothing is done to them."

"That's semantics!" He stepped toward her, visibly enraged, but the young second-year head instructor moved quickly to block him.

"It was *your* students," the younger man said sharply, "who used Team Peckish as bait last year, must I remind you? They left them behind to be swarmed by a herd of one-horned jackalopes classified at a danger rank of C."

"Wait. What happened?" Mihail broke in, frowning. He had participated in last year's training exercise as well. Clearly, he hadn't known his own sister had been in that kind of danger.

"At the time, he and I both witnessed the third-years abandoning Team Peckish," the woman explained. "Yet, strangely, when we instructors compared notes afterward, there were discrepancies in our accounts."

"In the end, those students were suspended, weren't they?!" the older man barked. "And Lady Robur said she didn't want to press the matter further!" He jabbed a finger toward the Class D teacher, clearly rattled. She didn't flinch. The older teacher tried to push past the younger man standing between them, but, being the weaker of the two, he was easily held back.

"No," the woman answered coolly, "she said it would be pointless. That no one would take the word of a team made up of commoners and minor nobles, anyway. And that, I quote, 'If nothing else, it was just as well the upperclassmen got to enjoy some time with the adorable bunnies too.'" She tilted her head, mildly amused. "They were surrounded and attacked by the jackalopes themselves shortly afterward. I suppose that was enough to satisfy her."

That's a very *strange way to find satisfaction.* Even Mihail couldn't hide his surprise.

I remembered the official report from that incident—it claimed the team had been caught off guard by a herd of one-horned jackalopes due to the carelessness of the upperclassmen, but that no one had been injured. Clearly, what happened behind the scenes had been kept quiet.

"As their homeroom teacher," the Class D instructor continued, "a one-week suspension struck me as laughably lenient. And it only escalated to that point because the students in question were later involved in another assault case. At first, the decision was a few days' detention. I imagine every teacher here remembers that."

"Yes, of course I do," said the fourth-year head instructor quietly.

The headmaster gave a small nod as well. Evidently, the matter had gone all the way up the chain.

I remembered now—it was those students who had been relegated to Class B this year. I never could've imagined they had done something so cruel—and to a team that included an heir of one of the Great Houses, no less. My *fiancée*, the second prince's intended. Or...perhaps it was *because* of that?

The realization sent chills up my spine.

My treatment of her, up until yesterday, had certainly made her an easy target—public enough to give others permission to scorn her. I'd gone to Class D more than once solely to hurl insults.

And now, a creeping possibility sent cold sweat trickling down my back. Even if my name wasn't in that report, my own conduct might have been the root cause of the underclassmen's unease.

"As I said back then, I firmly believed the upper-year students *intended* to place Team Peckish in danger," the Class D instructor continued. "What I witnessed made that clear. And had those underclassmen all been high nobility, say, from Class A? Then I doubt their assailants would've walked away with just a week's suspension."

I glanced at Mihail. At some point, he had taken the report and was now flipping through it with a grim look. When he raised his head, he gave a dark stare to the instructor who had been his

teacher for four years.

"But at the time," she went on, "there was no clear evidence. No other teachers besides the two of us witnessed the event. And you brushed it off, insisting *your* students were the victims. Yes, the underclassmen panicked during their first magical beast encounter. Yes, they slowed the team down. But that was within our expectations as instructors."

"That's—" The Class A instructor started to argue but faltered.

"In the end," the Class D instructor said, "another instructor came forward and testified to having witnessed an earlier assault on Team Peckish. There were also reports and proof submitted of violence toward other students—Class C and below. Even then, you argued that as they were still students, multiple punishments were forbidden under the rules. So the official reason became negligence—failing in their duty to ensure underclassmen's safety. And that was spun as harsh enough. They were never punished for purposely endangering the lives of students who had *just entered* the Academy. Given that was how this academy chose to handle it, how can you possibly claim they aren't justified for preparing for their own self-defense?"

Finally, her next words pushed all those affiliated with the Academy into silence. "This is the Royal Academy. And we all know what Class D means here—for better or worse. So do the students. All they've done is protect themselves. If no one attacks them, nothing happens. There's no rule against that."

At her words, my eyes were drawn curiously to the report still in Mihail's hands. Seeing that, he extended it toward me. I took it and began to read...

My body began to shake.

It was laid out like a research dossier: names, magical affinities, preferred weaponry, physical aptitude—and, most chillingly, a detailed account of how each had inflicted harm. I found the names of three of the upperclassmen from Team AD9, excluding only Minacuala Ujeera.

Roughly thirty percent of the fourth-year Class A were listed. I was relieved to see neither Mihail's name nor mine, but I was forced

to face a difficult truth: The second-years' caution today hadn't come from nowhere. And it had been my own behavior toward my betrothed that had brought it on.

And with that realization...I sank into a quiet despair.

"It is the natural right of any noble—or well-off commoner, for that matter—to defend themselves," said the heir to House Nilty at last. "That right does not vanish simply because one is in Class D, nor should anyone be condemned for exercising it. I understand the situation. And I also duly note that this report contains nothing but one-sided testimonies, with no definitive evidence to speak of." He spoke calmly. One could not read from his face whether he felt any concern for his younger brother. "The standing and treatment of Class D within this academy is a matter for the school—or rather, for the royal house overseeing it—to resolve."

The words felt like a blade to my chest—but he paid no mind and continued. "I recall it well from my student days. As the Class D homeroom teacher rightly pointed out, this academy is a royal institution—class divisions are an unavoidable reality. Given the circumstances at the time, I support the disciplinary action imposed on that upperclassman team—I believe it was appropriate. As for the fact that only the Class D homeroom instructor and the second-year head instructor were aware of the report, that was likely unavoidable due to time constraints. They *did* attempt to inform the Class A instructor, after all. I'd say they handled the matter fairly."

The teacher in question flinched as those pale green-gray eyes turned to him.

"And so," Wharton said, turning to the second-year homeroom teacher. "In your opinion, what do you believe will happen between this so-called Team Peckish and the fourth-year team...which includes my brother?"

It was likely the young lord of House Nilty was taking the opportunity to steer the conversation back on track, while quietly brushing aside whatever offenses his brother might have committed. A clever move. I could see now why he had once been able to move in the same circles as my half brother. He was not to be underestimated.

"If the fourth-years refrain from endangering the underclassmen," the second-year homeroom teacher replied, "and if they do not interfere with Team Peckish's survival strategies—whether due to noble pedigree or classroom status—then I believe their chances of survival remain high. The leader and sub-leader of Team Peckish are both registered adventurers. So long as the fourth-years cooperate, they won't be abandoned. As a teacher, I sincerely hope they choose wisely."

"Then it's hopeless," Wharton said with a faint, self-deprecating laugh.

His despair was understandable.

If the three upperclassmen named in that report kept on acting as described, their first move would almost certainly be to target my fiancée, an easy target given her lack of magic. Enrique would lead the charge. He, too, had always been fond of Sienna...and like me, had long desired to see the engagement annulled.

Even if I had been misled by Sienna's lies, in the end it was me who had decided, without so much as verifying the facts, that Lady Robur was talentless, base, and cruel. Who had slandered her in public time and time again. Even if I deemed her unworthy of becoming a prince's bride, I had no right, as royalty, to use my rank and power to shame her as I did. If Enrique and the others chose to target her, it would be the fruit of seeds I myself had sown.

I tightened my grip on the report. The crumple of the paper echoed faintly in the room. I hadn't even begun to sort through my feelings—yet already events had moved beyond my control. And even if I *had* come to terms with this, could I have brought myself to immediately inform the rest of my potential aides, outside of Heinz? No, probably not.

I *should* have warned Enrique and the others to change their behavior toward her. But I had never imagined they'd go this far—No, that was just another excuse.

Perhaps my last hope lay with Lady Minacuala. She would never condone a personal assault on an underclassman. In fact, she had even rebuked me once for how I spoke to my fiancée. The report even included a note advising second-years to stay within her line of

sight.

And she wasn't the sort to abandon her peers. If Team Peckish wanted to take her but to leave the others behind, she'd stay with her team. That was the kind of loyalty that House Ujeera, a family that dedicated themselves to defending the borderlands, was known for, and she carried that spirit proudly.

I truly wanted to save them all. But would father...would His Majesty...

"I understand the Academy's stance," Mihail said, releasing a long breath. "There's nothing more to be achieved by focusing on that topic. I can guess at the root cause behind this incident, but have you determined the chain of events?"

He was talking about the transportation circle's malfunction. But more importantly—whether it had been accidental, or deliberate. And if deliberate, then *who*, and *why*.

"I'm afraid not," the head instructor replied, his face tightening with discomfort. The Class D homeroom teacher bowed her head in apology.

"I see. Then I ask that a direct report be made to His Majesty immediately, and that a rescue effort for the students be requested on the spot. Even if they've survived this long in that hellish forest, who's to say how long they'll last? If even one of Team Peckish becomes incapacitated, then what awaits is not rescue, but an end we'd rather not contemplate."

The Class D instructor flinched as though struck. Everyone knew what Mihail was implying. Having been teleported to that cursed forest, the only way out for them was to escape using their own strength, and everyone understood how unlikely that was.

Mihail knew that too. His fist was clenched so hard, as he sat beside me, that his knuckles had turned white.

Still, as a brother, it seemed that he refused to give up hope for his sister's return. That's why he had urged them to contact the king immediately.

"If even one of Team Peckish becomes incapacitated..."

That choice of words...he was acknowledging the possibility that Enrique and the others might harm his sister. As he said it, Mihail

had glanced sidelong at the heir of House Nilty—reminding him that any harm done to his sister would not be quietly overlooked. Not this time.

"Then let us consider this meeting concluded, with the understanding that His Majesty will be informed and an investigation into the cause pursued," Wharton said. "Under normal circumstances, an audience with the king would require prior petition, but given the urgency, I will coordinate with my house and that of Lord Robur so the headmaster is granted access without delay. Your Highness, as student council president and as Lady Robur's fiancé, your support would be appreciated."

"Of course," I agreed quickly. Mihail, too, gave a silent nod. And with that, the unspoken exchange between the heirs of the Four Houses concluded.

"The Academy will be held accountable," Mihail said, rising to his feet. "We will issue notice to the appropriate parties. I expect you to move quickly as well."

"Of course—"

With that final statement, Mihail closed the matter. The two young heirs rose in silence and departed before the headmaster had even finished replying.

Afterward, we sent word ahead using a magical tool, and then the headmaster and I departed for the palace with all due haste.

Just before stepping into the carriage, I caught sight of pale blue eyes watching from the shadows—Heinz, one of my aide candidates. He hadn't been permitted to enter the guidance room and had apparently waited for me here the entire time. He, too, seemed weighed down by guilt and shame for his silence in the face of my conduct toward my betrothed.

I met his gaze deliberately, signaling that if I failed to persuade His Majesty, I might yet call upon him. Whether he understood the meaning behind that look, I could not say. Still, I boarded the carriage.

Upon our arrival, we were shown to one of the palace's smaller meeting rooms. It wasn't long before His Majesty entered, accompanied by his chancellor.

“Of all places, the Poison Box Garden,” the king muttered. “And the Robur girl, no less.”

The headmaster offered a swift summary of events. The king’s scarlet eyes—so often impassive, cold—now held a shade of troubled weariness. His silver hair, faintly tinged with blue, lacked the deep luster mine had, but its hue still marked him as a direct scion of the royal bloodline. It was a color we shared.

“The conclusion is this: The kingdom cannot send a rescue mission,” came the chancellor’s predictable response, his slicked-back light-brown hair gleaming under the lamplight.

The words, thinly veiled though they were, left no room for doubt: They would be abandoned. My heart thudded in my chest. I could not loosen my clenched fists. My voice escaped, barely more than a whisper:

“Why?”

“Due to the nature of the barrier,” the chancellor said simply. “That is all I can say. The barrier involves a foreign nation, so I trust you understand why we cannot speak freely. The students’ families must be informed that no aid will come from the Crown. As for the heads of the two ducal houses, I will explain matters to them directly. They are familiar with the nature of the barrier, so they will understand.”

With that, the chancellor seemed to consider the matter settled. Without waiting for our response, His Majesty moved to rise from his seat.

No—this was all wrong. The students were being abandoned.

“Please wait, Your Majesty—no, father!” I rose as well, unable to contain myself. “What will happen to the students? They attend the *Royal* Academy! And one of them is my own betrothed! The Crown cannot simply turn its back on them!”

The chancellor stepped silently between us, blocking my advance. His Majesty regarded me with a small, weary sigh.

“And what would you have me do?” he asked. “As you said, these are students of the Royal Academy. You recall, do you not, the words I speak at every entrance ceremony—words the headmaster repeats. That before they are students, they are nobles. And if you are a

commoner admitted to this school, then you are someone deemed to bear some portion of the nation's responsibility. Do not take refuge in your student status. Do not forget your duty."

I bit my lip. I remembered those words well...and the ones that followed them, about the responsibilities of royalty.

"Even if we set aside the matter of the barrier," he continued, "do you mean for me to send knights and mages, loyal to crown and country, into that forest—a place straddling the border with another nation—for the sake of a few nobles' children? Use your head. That cursed forest is the reason we and our neighbor have maintained our peace. It is because of its presence that we have chosen cooperation over meaningless conflict. They teach this at the Academy, though you should have learned it long before, during your education as a prince.

"And suppose something happens to that barrier? Suppose the swarm is released. What then? It would not be a tragedy confined to our land alone. The neighboring kingdom's people would suffer as well. And if it were taken as an act of aggression, we might face war. Even if we were to win such a war, the cost would be grave. Our strength would be diminished, and what then? Would other nations not see their chance? Would they not strike? In the end, the ones who would suffer most, as always, would be the people.

"Those words I spoke at the entrance ceremony were meant for nobles and the wealthy alone. I have told you, many times, what the royal house and the Four Houses exist to uphold, and yet that arrogance is still rooted deep within you."

I felt the blood drain from my face under his sharp gaze.

"That is why we will not intervene—and for that decision, we bear no shame. Nor will any objection change the outcome. This incident occurred due to the Academy's failings. At best, when the students return—*if* they return—the Crown may offer compensation as the patron of the Academy. But unless their deaths are confirmed, even that would be difficult."

In other words, nothing would be done. Not for the students, nor their families. Without the intervention of the two ducal houses involved, none of the other families would be able to do anything.

And that was why the chancellor would speak to the ducal heads himself.

Even as a prince, there was nothing I could do.

"Headmaster," said His Majesty. "Do you know why I permitted you entry to the palace? Why I met with you in person?"

"I am here as well," I said, unable to stop myself from asserting my presence, clinging to pride that had no place here.

Father sighed once more.

"You merely happened to tag along. It's time you learned your place. Why do you think that I have never granted you any authority over lives, or matters of state? Even if I have said nothing, know that I am well informed of your conduct at the Academy."

I flinched.

"Hmph. So at least you know some shame. Then you know how I currently judge you. Accordingly, I have given you only the barest minimum of authority befitting a prince. You accepted, without question, the report on last year's joint subjugation exercise and the resulting punishment of your classmates. You never thought to inquire deeper. That alone speaks volumes. Your presence here is, frankly, immaterial. And you, Headmaster—do you understand why you were summoned?"

My thoughts reeled: my conduct at the Academy...the minimal authority I had been given...the reports I never read. I had never even opened the spy's reports that had been available to me all this time—I had dismissed them outright. I had even injured my own betrothed based on assumptions that could have easily been dispelled if I had read them. And, as royalty, I had deferred to the Academy's decisions without scrutiny.

He was telling me, without saying it outright, that it wasn't because I had done nothing wrong that he had never reprimanded me—but because I wasn't even worth the trouble.

The implications crushed me. My mind went blank. My body trembled.

"You summoned me to ensure the Academy takes no steps toward a rescue," the headmaster said plainly.

"Indeed," said His Majesty. "While this incident is, ultimately, the

Academy's failing, it would become a problem if the faculty attempts to remedy that failure by dispatching aid and losing lives in the process. You understood that, I trust?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. But, is there *truly* no path by which they may survive? I understand that no state rescue can be authorized, yet both you and the chancellor have seemed to indicate that there is a possibility they might be saved."

At that, His Majesty's expression shifted ever so slightly.

"So, you noticed," he murmured. "It is no brilliant solution, mind you, and it will depend entirely upon those inside. That is why we did not voice it. Chancellor?" He nodded to the chancellor.

"Yes, Your Majesty. And the prince?"

"Let him listen."

And so I listened in silence as the chancellor spoke. By the time he had finished, a small flame of hope flickered within me.

But father snuffed it out at once.

"Now then," he said. "I hear there exists a report that was passed down to Class D from last year's graduating class."

"Yes," I answered.

"Do you believe the acts described within that document will be repeated? Do you believe that what befell others might now be inflicted upon your betrothed, the daughter of House Robur, of proper blood and bearing, and your fiancée as decreed by the Crown?"

"Well...that is...yes."

To admit it was to confess that my own behavior had helped create an environment in which such acts could occur. That my influence had been toxic. For a moment, I was tempted to dodge the question, but saw the futility in it.

"And why is that?" father pressed. "If anything, the presence of a son from one of the Four Great Houses should ensure the royal fiancée's protection. Is that not so? Have you not considered making him your aide before? If the prince himself treats his betrothed with disdain, it falls to the vassal to correct him, is that not so? And yet, every report we receive speaks only of complicity. Is it not the same for Heinz Asche?"

His eyes narrowed. The moment I'd feared most had arrived.

"I accept full responsibility. Heinz has already repented. Enrique, however..."

"I see," father said flatly. "It has been four years since you entered the Academy. Two for the Robur girl. And still these are the only companions you've gathered to your side. Then mark this well: If the Nilty boy chooses to mistreat her, if he harms her in accordance with that report—then that, too, shall be your responsibility. And if others from his team follow suit, the blame still lies with you. In fact, perhaps it would be more convenient—for you, and for House Asche—if none of them return at all."

"Wh-What...?"

I looked up instinctively. A chill coursed through me.

The man who should have been my father stared back not with fury, but with the dispassionate gaze of a man appraising a failed investment.

"Reflect on that well. We are finished here. Chancellor."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The chancellor offered a brief nod and signaled us to leave.

I had no choice but to exit the chamber alongside the headmaster.

※※Aside: A Deal in the Infirmary (Mihail)※※

"Ah, there you are—do wait a moment."

I had just stepped out of the chamber where the magical communication tool was kept, having contacted father's secretary to arrange an audience for the headmaster with His Majesty, when he appeared.

"Wharton Nilty. I thought you had already left."

Gone was the air of authority he'd wielded as the next head of House Nilty. In its place stood the man I knew far too well: flippant, insufferable, and three years my senior. He'd been pestering me since before I'd even enrolled at the Academy.

Not that he had been the only one—royals and heirs from the Four Great Houses had a way of inserting themselves into my life. But Wharton's brand of harassment was on an entirely different level. So much so that I'd long since abandoned formality and any pretense of respectful address when we spoke in private.

That said, he always kept a respectable distance whenever I was with members of the second prince's faction. And since his graduation, we rarely met except outside school grounds. Few at the Academy even knew the extent of our acquaintance.

"You don't look well," he said. "Come, let's rest in the infirmary."

"I'll pass."

What nonsense was he spouting now? Annoyance pricked at me—briefly—before I remembered: This man, for all his casual airs, was as calculating as they came. There would be a reason he was stopping me, especially at a time like this.

"Ha ha ha! Come now, don't look at me like that. But if you insist on rushing home, Mihail, my boy... Hmm. Then I may collapse—right here and now."

"And why would you do that?" Ordinarily, I could tolerate him, but with my sister's safety hanging in the balance, I found his levity completely distasteful.

"Surely the heir to House Robur would never leave a collapsed heir of House Nilty sprawled in a corridor unattended." So saying, he stepped to my side and promptly threw an arm around my neck, bringing his face far too close. I nearly struck him on reflex. Only years of familiarity allowed me to rein in the impulse. Then his voice, quiet and serious beneath the laughter, caught me off guard.

"You want to rescue your sister, don't you? And depending on certain revelations, I may have to pay my *dear* younger brother a visit myself."

"To finish him off?"

His values were different from mine. Always had been. I had learned much about his outlook on things over our long acquaintance—unwillingly, of course. The two of them might have *looked* like a close-knit pair of brothers in public—but what he truly felt about his sibling? Who could say.

"Depends on the situation," he replied. "Now then, I'm about to collapse. To the infirmary, if you please."

This time, he really did look ready to drop, and I barely managed to catch him before he made good on his threat.

"Walk. I'll go with you, all right? But I am *not* carrying you. I have no interest in hauling around the dead weight of a perfectly conscious man. No one needs to see two grown men clinging to each other in a sweaty heap."

Despite appearances, the man was fit. He excelled at not only magic, but swordplay and martial arts as well. Just steadying him for a moment was enough for me to feel the muscle beneath his uniform. He'd clearly kept up his training after graduation.

"Oh, pishposh. You know, fans of that novelist that everyone's been raving about lately would love to see it."

"What fans of what novelist? Stop talking nonsense."

"Nonsense? You wound me. That novelist—surely you know the one—is adored by all! From commoners to nobles, fresh-faced maidens to refined older ladies. Their works span every genre: the

classic tales of love between men and women, yes, but also dalliances between gentlemen and tender love between ladies. From lighthearted fluff to heavy emotional depths—they offer it all. Even some gentlemen count themselves among the faithful. They have a diverse and devoted readership."

I scoffed. "That's not just risqué—it's outright obscene." *Every genre* didn't begin to cover it. This man was talking about genres from shudou to yuri, wasn't he?

"I'll have you know their readership is steadily growing."

"Tch. Then the author and their fans are equally incomprehensible."

"Ah, but once you read it, you'll understand. The world-building is excellent. The plotlines never stray. I myself am entirely and hopelessly hooked."

And this man was heir to one of the Four Houses!

"You've read these books?"

"Read them? I'm the first in line for every new release. Have been for years. They're published irregularly, and you never know if the next one will be a sequel or something entirely new—that uncertainty is part of the thrill, you see. I've even mobilized Nilty's shadows to uncover the next release date or title, but the trail's maddeningly elusive. The tales of love between ladies... Ah! The atmosphere and the aesthetic are wonderful," he said, closing his eyes and holding a hand to his chest. Then, suddenly, he opened his eyes and looked at me with interest. "You seem intrigued. I'll lend you one of my favorites."

What was this man doing with his time? Clearly he was a devoted fan. But for a grown man to extol this literature's virtues so passionately...and all while sporting hair and eyes that made him the very image of the late queen herself... She must have been rolling in her grave.

"No, I don't want it. And I pity your agents. You're abusing your authority."

"Ha! I've only assigned those who are already thoroughly addicted themselves. They carry out their orders with joy and overflowing—no, *gushing*—enthusiasm."

"'Overflowing' is bad enough. 'Gushing' is most certainly worse."

Between the flamboyant royal spy who occasionally came to check on my sister and the Nilty agents who had fallen prey to salacious fiction, I couldn't help but question what a spy was meant to be anymore. Was this truly acceptable?

Surely the shadows of House Robur weren't... No, surely not. I shook the thought away.

We were still in the middle of this absurd exchange when I caught sight of the infirmary sign ahead and abruptly came back to reality.

"We've arrived."

I quickened my pace to put distance between myself and the living embodiment of impropriety, swung the door open without knocking, and forcibly ended the conversation. Any longer on that topic and I was going to lose something. I wasn't sure what, but it felt important.

"Oh, you're finally here... What's the matter?" said the school doctor, seated as usual. He was a bespectacled man with little patience and no sense of deference, demonstrated in how he addressed me.

"It's nothing. I'm just tired."

"I know you've been worrying over your sister. I imagine you're struggling."

"Yeah."

Perhaps because I knew all of the people here, I let myself relax. I was even a little grateful for his concern—unusual though it was. Though honestly, my mind had been preoccupied by things other than my sister. To think that I'd allowed myself to get swept up in a perverse literary tangent. Some brother I was.

Forgive me, Laviange. You're likely in danger as we speak—perhaps terrified, even now. You may already be—

No. That teacher had said Team Peckish would survive. *Team Peckish.* Why in the world was *her* team named that? When I brought her home, we'd be having a serious discussion about it.

But for that to happen, I had to get my head on straight.

"Have you two been fully briefed on the situation?" the doctor

asked Wharton as he locked the door behind us.

"Yes. And as we suspected," Wharton said, "it seems this entire fiasco began with my idiot brother and his two sycophants. The teleportation mishap likely started with them."

"And you believe they wished to be teleported to the Poison Box Garden?" the doctor asked.

"That much I can't say. He's very much like your half brother, you know—no real grasp of his own limitations, and pride as tall as a mountain. He may very well have thought he could stroll into the damned forest and walk out without a scratch."

That certainly sounded like Enrique. But something about this didn't sit right. *As we suspected?* Had they discussed this ahead of time?

"Explain yourselves," I demanded. "There wasn't much time between the incident being discovered and our summons, yet the two of you seem to have shared quite a bit of information already. Do you both believe this was no accident? If so, then Enrique must have had a target in mind. And if he used the joint training as cover, then that would mean he was after someone in the second-year team. The most likely candidate is..."

Even though I knew the answer, I couldn't bring myself to say her name.

"Judging from the circumstances, I'm afraid the target was your sister," said the doctor.

"I'm sorry," Wharton said. "Truly. For what my brother has done. I swear I'll make it right."

His open admission that malice might have played a hand in it sent rage rushing through me. I wanted to grab him by the collar and shake him, and demand to know what good his apology would do if my sister never came back. The only reason I restrained myself was because I knew who the school physician *really* was.

"Well, if a magic circle has been tampered with or incorrectly designed," the doctor began, "any attempt to scan it with an appraisal spell could lead to magical overflow or even an explosion. After we realized that something had gone wrong, I stayed behind to secure the area. During that time, I made a sketch of the circle and

brought it here. It took some time to decipher, but I've identified both the destination and why Team AD9 alone was sent elsewhere. I had Wharton try to bring you in before the assembly."

"You did?" I said, raising an eyebrow. Aside from an interruption by my foster sister, I hadn't spoken to anyone. I shot Wharton a glare. He shrugged with his usual flippant air.

"Oh? Jealous, are we? I was looking forward to our reunion, you know. But you were having such a loud squabble with your dear little sister, I thought it rude to intrude upon such a tender family moment."

So it had been during my fight with Sienna. I nearly cursed.

My foster sister should have been sent home along with the rest of the first-years. But just as I was preparing to leave—having been stopped by the fourth-year head teacher and informed I was to represent the family as arranged by father—she appeared from nowhere and insisted on coming along.

Yet, something about it gnawed at me. How had she *known* about Laviange's disappearance?

The incident had been kept under wraps, and team assignments were determined by lottery. Even knowing a team number wouldn't tell her who was missing. The report had gone directly to father at the royal palace. No one at the estate—including my mother—would have known, and there was no chance that father would have gone out of his way to tell her.

Had a teacher let it slip? But the school had issued a gag order. Unlike the foolish students, most faculty had treated my sister with due respect as a noblewoman.

Then I recalled the way I had seen Enrique look at Sienna in the past. Suggestive, intimate looks. No...it couldn't be...

"Hey. Mihail." The doctor gave my shoulder a shake, snapping me out of it.

"My, my, what's this? What got you so lost in thought?" Wharton asked.

"It's nothing," I said with a sigh. "Let's hear the rest, then. You didn't drag me in here just to tell me that and apologize, did you?"

Whatever connection might exist between Enrique and my foster

sister, it wouldn't be unraveled today. Especially not with these two. Given their positions, the last thing I ought to do right now was speak carelessly.

"Right, back to business," said the doctor. "Let's start with the teleportation circle. I'm sure you've realized by now that it wasn't a coincidence that only Team AD9 was sent to a different location. From the start, a hidden circle had been skillfully layered into the main sigil that would be triggered on exactly the *ninth* activation. It also required exactly eight participants to activate."

"Eight... I see..." The number and trick clicked into place. I muttered the words aloud before I could stop myself.

"I see you understand," the doctor said with a small nod. "The instructors use the same circle as the students to teleport to their assigned locations, but due to the way they are assigned, they never travel in groups of eight. Student teams, on the other hand, are always arranged in groups of eight to ensure balance in combat capabilities. If a team cannot meet that number due to absences, they're reassigned or placed in support."

"In other words," I said slowly, "the team that drew the number nine was always destined to be sent to the Poison Box Garden. Any other evidence it was deliberate?"

"Here," said the doctor, laying out slips of paper on the table. "These are the lots."

After the drawing each year, the lottery box was emptied and its contents discarded. He'd gone digging through the trash, then.

"The handwriting's off," I said.

Every numeral was written in a soft, rounded hand. Only the "9" was different.

"If I'm not mistaken, lots are usually prepared by the student council the day before the exercise. Do you recognize the handwriting?"

"Yes. All the numbers other than nine are in the handwriting of a second-year council member. On the morning of, the slips were checked by a different member and then passed out to the homeroom instructors."

"When we asked the instructors who handed them the slips, the

name given was *Pechulim Lunach*."

Of course it was. I should have expected this year's student council problem child to surface in this situation.

The way the student council was chosen at the Academy was as follows: Every year, the next year's council president and vice president were chosen from among the third-year council members by a vote of students and teachers. For other council positions, it was customary for the current members to confer at year's end and select the most suitable candidates from a pool of candidates selected through nomination or self-recommendation. The exception was the incoming first-year candidates: They were nominated by the instructors based on their exam scores, and then the final decision was made by the next year's president.

Every year, Wharton's brother would nominate himself for a position, only to be rejected due to his temperament. Each year, the Twyla girl and Lunach did the same, each rejected for the same reason.

But last year, there had been a sharp decline in students willing to serve. Most new council officers were usually drawn from the incoming second-years, but many of them distanced themselves—likely due to rumors surrounding the next student council president's treatment of his fiancée. In fact, two first-year council members had discreetly approached me and asked to withdraw from next year's officer selection altogether. They had apparently witnessed the second prince's faction, including my foster sister, confronting my sister en masse with thinly veiled hostility. It was that moment, they said, that the doubts they had about the incoming president turned into distrust.

That said, I was told by an instructor that my sister had brushed it off with a burst of laughter more fitting for an actor in a farce than a noble lady. Supposedly, they'd been able to hear her laughter from across the courtyard.

And so this year's council had ended up disproportionately filled with third-and fourth-years. And Lunach had made the cut—not because he was a good candidate, but because he was disposable. As a fourth-year, he wouldn't be around next term.

"But how'd they pull it off?" I asked.

"You know how the order of drawing lots is determined, yes?" Wharton said, throwing me a wink I neither needed nor wanted.

"Yes. Team leaders draw in order, alphabetically by given name... Wait. Of course."

"Ah." Wharton grinned. "You see it now, do you?"

I ignored his smug grin and picked up the two slips marked "9." Examining them closely, I spotted a faint trace of adhesive on one—nearly gone, but just visible. I guessed that, if I cast a magical energy detection spell, I would find that the residue would only remain for a few more minutes.

"They must've stuck this one to the inside wall of the box," I murmured, "then masked it with a light veil of magic. Once the second-to-last person drew their slip, they could quietly release the spell and reveal the hidden '9.' The adhesive wouldn't obstruct the number, and if it was only a bit of magical energy in a spot no one would look for, then no one would notice. Even the leftover residue would vanish before a day passed."

Both men nodded.

"It's a simple trick—but one with a risk of failure. A crude scheme that is very much in character for my fool of a brother," Wharton said, shaking his head. "What was the plan if the second-to-last team leader noticed there weren't enough slips?"

"Truly. The leader for Team Peckish is Ralf, isn't it? When they learned he would be drawing last, they must have felt certain in their plan," mused the doctor, "but draw order has shifted in the past due to absences or tardiness."

"If my brother had drawn the lot himself, that wouldn't have even been an issue—he was among the first to draw. Having Lunach quietly remove the '9' slip from the box ahead of time, and then pretending to draw a slip they had concealed—it would have been a simple trick, really."

Hm? Wait a moment. Had the doctor just casually referenced the name *Team Peckish*? And with a straight face? I had almost let that slip right past me as I had listened to them explain Enrique's crude trick.

"That said," Wharton added, with a slightly perplexed expression, "my brother doesn't have the skill to tamper with a teleportation circle like that."

So they still hadn't figured out that mystery.

"First of all," I said, "the teleportation circle itself is the sort of thing that normally requires multiple seasoned instructors with high magic reserves to construct. And yet someone managed to embed a hidden sub-array—one that activates only under specific conditions—*without* the supervising instructors even noticing. Not only that, it was seamlessly integrated so as not to interfere with the primary array's function. That's not something just *anyone* could pull off. And the array in question was installed *after* classes ended yesterday and had to be ready by early this morning... If anyone in this academy had the skill to do it in that short amount of time, it would be either the headmaster...or *you*."

I stared directly at the doctor, but he remained unfazed and only nodded in agreement. Given his true identity, there was no way he could be the culprit. And he knew I knew that.

"The courtyard, where the circle was set up, is exposed to public view," he said. "The only time the act could've been carried out was in the dark between nightfall and the early hours of the morning. By dawn, instructors were already arriving to prepare for the day's exercise. A basic perimeter ward had been cast around the site as a precaution, which would have made casual entry difficult. And when the faculty inspected the array this morning, they reported nothing out of place. If it wasn't the headmaster or me, then it must have been someone from *outside* the Academy. But we don't yet know how they tampered with it—or why. As for your brother, Wharton, I suspect he was manipulated. But by whom—and to what end—that remains unclear."

At his words, my thoughts once more returned to my foster sister.

"If the motive of this mysterious entity involved your sister, I cannot say," Wharton said. "But regrettably, and with no small personal discomfort, I do suspect she's at least tied to *my brother's* reasons for acting. So, here is a proposal."

With theatrical flair, the scheming heir of House Nilty clapped his

hands together once, palms flat before his chest. “I, as heir to House Nilty, find it necessary to meet with my brother. You, Mihail, wish to rescue your sister. And His Highness, wearing the guise of a humble physician, seeks to expose the true mastermind behind this plot. Fortunate, then, that all three of us possess combat skills equivalent to those of A-rank adventurers. Why, back in the day, we hunted down A-rank monsters together, did we not?” He gave a too-proud nod, then pressed on with infuriating cheer. “Our packs are ready. Our goals align. If we can hammer out the remaining details, I daresay we may well carve a path into the box garden itself—what say you?”

Of course, I agreed.

But did he *have* to run a hand through his hair and wink at me like that while he said it?

3: (The Day After Disaster Strikes) It All Began with a Midnight Chat Between Me and My Dear Sacred Beasts

I awoke in the middle of the night, certain I'd heard someone calling me. The world around me was pitch black, but of course, one couldn't risk a light—the bugs adored the sight of it.

"Mmm... Lady Robur... It's delicious..."

I giggled. It seemed that even in her dreams, I was plying our team's bespectacled beauty with treats. And as a special treat for me, she slept without her glasses on, so I had the privilege to admire her charming little face to my heart's content. Perks of the job.

I quietly poked my head out of the tent.

The ground was a long way down. Definitely not a distance to stumble down while half asleep. So, as always, I reinforced my body with magic before descending. We had set up a rope ladder for emergencies, but using it now would risk waking the others.

Looking up, I looked at our two pitch-black tents suspended some five meters above the forest floor, spaced just far enough apart. They seemed to be floating in the dark.

The actual setup was a bit of clever trickery. A sheet of cloth, wide enough for three to sleep on, stretched flat between trees. Around each, we placed some mesh made from enchanted beast-silk, strung out like a mosquito net. Bamboo rods connected this to the tent base, the poles magically hardened and reinforced. The mesh carried enchantments: water resistance and camouflage. Simple spellwork, but effective.

The look of it? Well, it resembled something from the dinner

tables of my past life—those old-timey mesh food covers. Or what were they called... Kitchen parasols? Something twee like that.

If anything tried to crawl up from below, the tent would shake to alert us. If something attacked from above, the poles would bend to absorb the shock, again setting the tent to tremble. Even a sudden flood from a surprise downpour wouldn't reach us. Forests and mountains have treacherous weather, after all.

Between the two tents, a fresh fire had been set, burning an officially certified Lavi-grade insect repellent. Good enough to ward off anything up to B-rank danger class, quite the handy thing.

The fire used magic stones for fuel, so there was no need for us to watch it. Every few hours, we simply tossed another stone from the tent into the flames.

Oh dear—two of the stones had missed and rolled off to the side. And one of those was definitely mine. *I'll just toss that in and pretend it never happened.*

With a whoomph, the fire flared up, then settled again with a merry crackle. Perfect.

The other stray must've been Lauren's work. Ralf and Kartika never missed. I scooped up that one as well.

"Lavi." A young male voice sprang directly into my mind. So I *had* been called. I cast a sound-muffling spell around myself. *"Shall I kill them?"*

Hmm?! What's this? My darling sacred beast was being uncharacteristically murderous?

"Oh my, Lag dear... There's no need to be so ominous, is there?"

"They dared to harm my beloved child."

Good heavens. His presence was distant, but I could *feel* the bloodlust. Come to think of it, didn't I just have a similar chat with Cas? Was this some new sacred beast trend?

Unfortunately, the wards surrounding the forest made it difficult for me to respond mentally, so I had spoken aloud. Sacred beasts could pick up spoken words from anywhere, though, so distance didn't matter much with them.

I cast a detection spell in all directions. It wove itself outward from me in a cube like a web of magic strands finer than spider silk.

No beast, no matter how timid or sensitive, would notice them, and airborne targets were as easy to spot as ground-bound ones.

I quickly found him, floating directly above the forest, gently bobbing in place.

And I detected something else. Something that shouldn't have been here.

I laughed gently.

"No, that just won't do," I told him. "Useless as they are, they *are* our upperclassmen."

"You've shown this type of mercy before, and it has allowed the current generation to grow arrogant."

"That was different. A demon was involved that time."

"And yet the good woman who saved me and protected her kingdom was branded as a notorious villainess."

"And since then, the royal family has paid your kind no heed. That is enough for me."

"The royal family and the Four Houses have learned nothing from your generation."

"Which is why you've only ever supported a single descendant from among them. That is punishment enough."

"Even reincarnated, you are a good woman."

"You're the only ones who say that, you know."

"There are others in the forest. Intruders."

"So it seems." I let out a sigh. "What could they possibly want?"

"Leave them." Lag's voice was cold and final. And while I would have loved nothing more than to agree with him, I'd just picked up five new magical signatures within the forest.

And three of them were quite familiar.

They were moving in two separate groups—three in one, two in another. Curious. I couldn't imagine what those two were doing here. The pair of them were clearly out of their league. Why were they moving alone?

The other group of interest were the upperclassmen.

One of them hadn't moved from their tent, but the other three had scattered near the perimeter stakes—the ones meant to ward off magical beasts. The swarms of bugs I detected, one circling

beyond the stakes, and those drifting toward the newcomers, were acting more or less as expected.

But, oh? All of a sudden, the barrier that surrounded us began to wane. The atmosphere in the forest began to change. It was as if I could feel the stirring of the insects in the air itself.

And just like that, I could feel Lag's bloodlust return. *"Fools. Perhaps I shall kill them after all."*

"There's no need to dirty your claws," I told him. "Just leave them be. You, of all creatures, should know what happens to those who test the forest. Isn't that more your style anyway? Let the end come to them naturally."

"You make a fair point."

Even as we spoke, something foul began to drift from the direction of the fourth-years' tents. It felt like something was coming. Of course, this was merely a hunch... But hunches born of strong magic weren't to be taken lightly.

Fortunately, Lag's bloodlust seemed to scare off whatever was creeping this way. That was a relief.

I tossed the magic stone I'd just recovered into the fire. With two stones fed in quick succession, the flames roared and flared, sending a thick plume of smoke curling into the sky.

That ought to keep the bugs at bay for at least an hour. Between Lag's bloodlust, the camouflage enchantment on our tent, and my own magical presence—which I allowed to show through a bit, just for the occasion—they wouldn't dare approach. Bugs, after all, were more intuitive than your average beast. They tended to give me a wide berth.

Casting my detection spell once more, this time limited to our immediate surroundings, I caught one of the fourth-years running toward us. The other three had begun moving elsewhere together. Most of the insects were following them, but still stayed far away—except for one. That one crept along behind at a steady distance, as if it were observing them.

It appeared as though they had taken out that which we had buried into the earth.

"Fools," I muttered. "Now, they will suffer the consequences of

their own actions."

We'd planted six monster-repelling stakes in total. The bare minimum needed was four—only then would the barrier take effect. The extra two were a redundancy used to prevent the unlikely scenario of two of them suddenly breaking, causing the barrier to collapse, and allowing the bugs to swarm us.

That said, it was incredibly unlikely for three or more stakes to suddenly stop working at once. Given Lag's reaction and the way those three had been skulking about, the most likely explanation was that they had stolen a number of the stakes. Judging from the current situation, I'd guess they had stolen four.

Even so, I wondered: How long could they keep the bugs at bay?

"Well, either way," I said aloud, "when we get back, I fully intend to rub my face all over your smooth fur and properly pamper your sleek, silky mane."

"Very well," Lag said.

Hmm... What was that pause? Surely there was no need for him to imitate Cas so closely...

"Lady Robur!" yelled Mina as she ran toward me.

Ah, there ended my little telepathic chat with my darling sacred beast.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"They took four of the monster-repelling stakes while we were asleep! All of them—gone! The bugs are coming!"

"My, my. How dreadfully inconsiderate of them. Still, this place will remain safe for a little while yet."

Poor thing—face pale, still in bedclothes. But there was no need for such panic. I had, after all, cast a quiet little protection spell on her before bed. If a bug had happened to bite or spray her, she would have made it through without a scratch.

So, please, calm your little head and rest a little bit longer.

※※Aside: The Death Blossom (Heinz)※※

After taking his first real blow from that talentless, useless noblewoman, Shua had to endure the scathing rebukes of our instructors. This led him to reinvestigate his fiancée. I had also read the report from the royal family's agent. It turned out the rumors that she was a cruel villainess who bullied her foster sister were...greatly exaggerated.

During the morning's gathering for the joint training expedition, Shua and I had both been keeping an eye on Lady Robur, but couldn't find a good moment to speak with her. Honestly, we hadn't the faintest idea what to say, anyway. We figured there'd be another chance, and let it go.

And after that, she vanished.

What the hell?

I tried to tag along with Shua to the faculty meeting as his aide—well, as a candidate for the position—but was turned away at the door. A while ago, I probably would've raised hell, insisting I belonged at his side. But, after being humiliated in front of a crowd by that very girl I'd always looked down on, I just couldn't. Not anymore. It was hard to believe I used to speak so freely above my class.

Hoping to catch Shua after the meeting, I headed for the school's carriage stop—and that's when I heard raised voices in the hallway. Footsteps approached, and I instinctively ducked into an empty classroom.

"I'm worried about our sister too! Please, let me come with you!" a voice pleaded.

"That's not your decision. As acting head of the family, I'm attending on father's orders."

It seemed Sienna had stopped Mihail on his way to attend the meeting. Hadn't the first-years been sent home?

"Let go of me," Mihail said. "Even if you are worried, what difference do you think it'll make if you attend the meeting?"

"That's not fair! I may not be as strong as you, but unlike our sister, I do have magical talent—the instructors and even everyone in the student council have acknowledged it! I can help—I know I can! Please, brother!"

If I'd heard that a few days ago, I probably would've thought she was just a sweet girl, bravely worrying about her mean old foster sister. I probably would've stood here thinking that Sienna would make a better fiancée than Lady Robur. But hearing it now that I'd let go of my preconceptions and taken a step back from the situation...

"Sienna, even at a time like this, you speak down to Laviange..."

There was a sharp swish, like a sleeve being yanked away.

Sienna let out a small yelp. "B-Brother?!"

"If you want to keep calling me your brother, do not follow me. Go home." Even from where I was hiding, I felt a chill shoot down my spine. There was real rage in Mihail's voice.

"No...but..." Her voice faltered. She stood, frozen in place, as his footsteps faded down the hall.

Mihail had been raised by his father—a man who was known as the Great Mage—and was expected to take his place as family head. He'd also served in the Royal Mage Corps and seen real combat. For a delicate lady to be faced with his rage... No wonder she was rooted to the spot.

I almost ran to her on reflex—same as always. But then I heard something that made me stop cold.

"Even missing, she's still a thorn in my side. But things are playing out just as I'd hoped. No—better than I imagined. Now, if she'd just d—"

I didn't catch the end. She must've walked off.

What the hell was that?

Even after reading that report, I'd still believed Sienna was pure, kind, and just misunderstood.

Raised as a commoner, she'd excelled in studies and magic despite the gap in upbringing. Maybe because of her roots, she lacked the airs typical to noble daughters. That bluntness led to some social missteps, sure—but she was always kind to everyone, and was always smiling. People warmed to her. She'd gotten the manners down eventually. No one looked down on her as an adopted daughter anymore.

At some point, I'd started to feel a budding flower of affection for her, although for Shua's sake, I kept it to myself.

But that affection had just been ripped out of the ground by her own hands.

I sank to the floor.

"All this time...and I..."

What filled my chest wasn't guilt over Sienna, but regret for the scorn I'd shown Lady Robur.

I knew magical aptitude wasn't something one could control, so I never blamed her for that. But what I couldn't excuse was her refusal to learn, her lack of academic or social grace, and her complete disinterest in her own status as a noblewoman. All of which the report just served to reinforce.

What *did* surprise me, honestly, was the part about her completely outmaneuvering her older brother's attempts to force proper education on her. She had an unbelievable talent for evasion. If Mihail ever tried to chase me down like that, I doubt I'd be able to escape.

But everything else in that report had completely shattered my assumptions.

Lady Robur hadn't bullied Sienna. She didn't care about being a prince's fiancée or even a noble. In her own home, she'd been abused—and nearly killed—by her own birth mother, and the servants looked down on her. On top of that, Sienna was the one who had been doing the bullying.

And yet I'd believed Sienna's every word, and taken everything at face value. I had judged Lady Robur by what I saw and declared her unworthy of Shua.

Though truth be told, even after reading that report, I still didn't

think she was a good match for him.

I hadn't just failed to stop my master from mocking her. I'd joined in. It was disgraceful behavior, unworthy not only of a knight, but of a man. And now, all I could do was feel ashamed of myself. I forced myself to my feet. "I have to make this right."

Later, as I waited in the shadows and kept an eye on the carriage stop, I saw Shua. He gave me a look of desperation that was difficult to interpret.

Could it be?

I snuck to our usual escape route for sneaking out of the castle and waited, just in case. And sure enough, from the dark of the old drainage tunnel, Shua emerged, leading two swift steeds. I couldn't lie. A part of me was thrilled that he'd come to rely on me.

"The forest is surrounded by two layers of barrier spells," he explained. "These undergo maintenance in six months. When that happens, they always begin with the one designed to seal high-level magical energy. During that process, the secondary barrier—the one tuned to block low-level magic—briefly destabilizes. That is what we will aim for. Also, I heard this during the audience: While within the Poison Box Garden, if you use your magic until your reserves are nearly depleted, there's a chance you can slip out through the barrier."

As he explained all this, there was an expression of hope and relief on his face.

When we arrived at the forest, Shua released our horses. They were well trained; they could surely make their way back to the castle.

And so we stepped into the Poison Box Garden. At first, there was no resistance at all. As a test, though, we attempted to step back out. As expected, we were stopped by the invisible wall of the barrier. We didn't attempt to bypass it with either magic or weapons, of course. If something happened and the barrier broke, the magic beasts within would be freed.

Our big plan was to establish a safe zone using monster repellents and wait out the six months until the barrier repair.

That lasted for about thirty minutes.

We had set up the stakes with care and slowly moved forward with them, heading deeper into the forest. But the barrier was soon broken by a snake-type beast. I'd assumed there would only be insects in here, but there were snakes too. Back in the days of that so-called notorious villainess, there'd been stories of a serpent emerging from this very forest to attack the populace. I'd always dismissed them.

Not anymore.

They said that the snake had grown by eating other reptiles and amphibians in the forest until it had evolved into an S-rank danger class beast. Once there was nothing left to eat inside the forest, it broke out in search of prey.

They'd said the barrier magic hadn't been cast at the time, and that beasts like that weren't supposed to be in the garden anymore. Just the thought that there might be others—monsters we'd never even imagined—was enough to give me chills.

That said, snakes didn't take kindly to fire magic. We formed up, with me standing in front of Shua—he had a knack for spells—and somehow managed to drive it off. No doubt about it, that one was A-rank danger class. Lucky thing it decided to slither off when it did.

After that, we muffled our footsteps with silence spells and moved carefully, keeping a low profile. The run-ins with bugs and snakes dropped off, and even when we passed near them, they didn't bother attacking.

Not even an hour later, we spotted smoke rising in the distance. I used wind magic to pick up the sounds—sure enough, there was fighting. Shua yelled, "Let's go!" and bolted off before I could say a word.

Always the same with him. Didn't matter that he was a prince and ought to be the one being protected—he was always the first to run straight toward danger if someone might be in trouble. He had a strong sense of justice, that one, and I reckoned guilt'd been gnawing at him too, for the way he'd treated his fiancée. That fire in his gut wasn't just about doing the right thing—it was personal.

Then again...maybe it wasn't just guilt. Lately, he'd looked more like a man chasing something. To be honest, I wouldn't have lost too

much sleep if that undutiful noblewoman were left behind. I'd tried more than once to talk him down on the way to the forest, even told him I'd go alone. But he wouldn't have it.

In the end, he swore he'd go on his own if I tried to stop him, so I gave up. And so we entered the forest still half equipped, with gear thrown together by someone else.

Not long after we'd started moving again, a pair of screams—young, one male and one female—tore through the air. We ran toward the sound. The closer we got, the louder it became, but with the path dark and full of treacherous footing—if you could even call it a path—it took time to reach them. Still, the dull thuds of something heavy hitting flesh and the stink of something burning spurred us on.

"Heinz, this way!"

"Wait, Shua! How many times do I have to tell you that I go first!"

I grabbed him by the shoulder just as he tried to charge past, yanked him back, then sprinted ahead myself—and what I saw when I broke through the trees would be burned into my memory for life.

There was Lim, dangling high in the air, caught between the mandibles of a giant centipede beast. Down below, Lady Mighty was curled up in front of an ant-like monster, writhing on the ground.

Shua wasted no time, launching a fireball to scorch the ground beneath the centipede and force it back. While he had it distracted, I rushed in front of the lady and sliced it clean in two.

That was a mistake.

A jet of burning, toxic fluid sprayed out from its sundered body, and I caught a face full. I conjured water on reflex, dumped it over my head to stop the blistering, then reinforced my body with magic and leaped at the centipede, aiming for its forcipules.

But its shell was like a steel plate. And with my sword arm busted up from earlier, I didn't even leave a scratch.

While I was still tangling with the centipede, Shua had rushed over to Lady Mighty, only to be met with a scream full of rage and pain.

"Where are the others?!" he yelled.

"I-It hurts! Aaaagh! It's burning!"

"Hey! Pull yourself together!"

"Enrique—! Ah! It's h-his—fault!"

"Enrique?! What about him?!"

"He— He used us as bait...and ran... Aaaaagh, it burns!"

Even as he listened, Shua launched another fireball to back me up. I followed it with a blast of wind magic, fanning the flames hotter. That seemed to shake the centipede—it flinched from the blaze, then flung Lim away and scuttled off into the trees.

I lunged forward, hand outstretched, but I was too slow. His body hit the ground with a sick thud.

That wasn't a sound you'd soon forget.

I ran over and flipped him onto his back, fast as I could, and stopped cold.

Looked like the creature's forcipules had pumped him full of venom. His whole body had gone a mottled bluish purple, and there was foam at the corners of his mouth. He was gasping for air, fighting for every breath, but his chest was seizing up, and all he could do was claw at it while his back arched in agony.

"Uuh... M-My f-face..." Off to the side, Lady Mighty writhed in the dirt, hands covering her face, her voice growing thinner by the second. The right side of her face looked just like my right side—raw and red with burns, swollen up with angry blisters. She must've touched the poison on her face, because her hands were starting to blister too, same as her cheek.

Her hair—which had been well-kept and glossy—was half gone. The poison had eaten through the right side, left it scorched and shriveled like scorched thread. Blisters covered the scalp underneath.

BZZZZZ!

Too focused on the sorry state of our classmates, we didn't notice the buzzing until it was too late. A wasp-type beast came diving in from behind—straight at Shua. He was still lifting Lady Mighty up, and he moved just a beat too slow.

He let out a grunt—he had been stung right in the side.

"Shua!" I yelled.

"I-I'm so...rry..."

I ran toward him, switching my sword to my left hand since my right was still useless, and parried the next sting from that damn wasp.

"Damn it!" I cursed.

Was this the end of the line?

All three of them were down, barely breathing. Just me still standing.

I sent a gust of wind slamming down on the wasp's wings, slowing it just enough to cut it down. But even as it dropped, I caught the sound—more buzzing, caught by a surveillance spell I had been using. The noise was distant, but closing in. Fast.

Sweat trickled down my back.

Bug-types always attacked in swarms. One or two we could handle. Ten? Twenty? It'd be the end of us.

We'd put too much faith in our own strength and those damn monster-repelling tools. Never imagined we'd end up in this deep, this fast. There was no choice left—we had to teleport out of here using the tool we brought.

Every knight on royal guard duty got issued one emergency-use teleportation tool—meant for getting your charge out when everything went to hell. It bypassed barriers, wards, all of it. Guaranteed escape. Only catch? It only worked on one person. And the magic cost to activate it was enough to drain a man dry. Once it was used, you were out of magical energy, lying there like bait for whatever came next. The caster always died ugly.

I reached into the pouch at my waist and pulled out a short rod with a magic stone at the tip. I pressed the switch, and with a metallic shlak, it extended to the length of a wand. Fighting back the sting of my burns, I turned Shua onto his back, dropped to one knee, and held the rod upright with both hands, right over his chest.

"Shua... You've got to make it out, at least. Serving you has been the greatest honor of my life. I'm grateful you ever said that you'd make me your aide someday."

Still watching the perimeter, I straightened my collar—one last bit of formality for what was likely going to be our final farewell.

All that was left was to pour everything I had into the magic stone at the top of the stick. Once charged, the circuitry inside would activate the teleportation array and send him away. The other two were barely alive. I felt sorry for them, but they weren't the ones I was sworn to protect.

The buzzing grew louder. No more time. I braced myself, ready to flood the tool with magic—

"My oh my."

The voice came from behind. It was completely out of place, yet something about it struck a chord of recognition. I flinched despite myself.

"Well now," the speaker continued, "what have we here? Whatever possessed you to wander into so perilous a place, when you are so clearly unequal to the task?"

It wasn't my imagination.

I suddenly noticed that the buzzing in the distance had begun to fade.

That made no damn sense.

Still ready to activate the teleportation at a moment's notice, I turned my head just enough to glance over my shoulder. There, not far off, stood exactly the person I expected: Lady Robur. Not as I'd seen her last, back in the schoolyard before training, but instead wearing a white robe.

"Shua knew the risk," I said, "but he came anyway—to rescue you __"

"Dear oh dear. Could it be that you're even more of a fool than I thought?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The immediate threat had passed, which only made the sting of her words sharper. She said them without even a shred of sympathy —my anger flared up like a torch. I knew the pain was making me short-tempered, but this woman... Even without that, she had a real gift for pissing me off.

Forget "incompetent." She had not a trace of grace or wit, let alone the kind of decency you'd expect from a prince's betrothed. She didn't belong anywhere near the throne.

She laughed.

"Really now, isn't it high time you set that thing aside?" she said, gesturing toward the rod in my hand. "And I assure you, I meant every word I said—each and every one of you is a fool, in every conceivable way."

She wasn't just mocking me now—she'd dragged Shua into it. That set me off.

"You talentless fool! Who the hell do you think—!"

"Silence, you imbecile."

A sudden wave of pressure slammed into me from behind—so heavy I shut my mouth on instinct. My body moved on its own. I turned, rising to shield Shua, heart hammering like a drum. My instincts screamed: *danger*.

Her tone stayed gentle. Her smile, soft, almost delicate—like any well-bred noblewoman's should be. But what I felt was terror. The kind that tells you the thing standing in front of you isn't what you think it is. What *was* this woman?!

"Why is it so hard for you to understand something so simple? Truly, it baffles me." While I stood there trembling with tension, *she*—whatever *she* was—tilted her head lazily, one hand resting against her cheek. Her words had taken on a more casual tone. "What's his station? Royalty, yes? And yours? His subordinate, correct? Surely you're not one of those fools who think your duty as a knight is just to blindly obey your lord's every whim?"

She stepped forward, and I stepped back on pure instinct. Seeing that, she shifted her hand from her cheek to her lips, and let out a soft chuckle—just refined enough to stay within the bounds of ladylike conduct.

"No need to be so on guard," she said. "I won't bite. But you do understand, don't you? If you were truly his bodyguard, then it wouldn't have mattered if you had to tie him up or knock him out with a punch to the gut—even if it ruined your relationship later, your job was to stop him." She kept on smiling gently at me, even as her words about the prince became increasingly harsh.

Damn it. Why? Why wouldn't this shaking stop? Why the cold sweat running down my back?

"You've been training with the palace knights for years now, haven't you? Then surely you've heard that even A-rank adventurers struggle to survive in this forest. Don't tell me you thought you were S-rank material? Be honest with yourself. You and your master are B-rank at best. And yet you waltzed in here so convinced of your skill it's almost laughable. Not only did you fail to protect your master, you couldn't even manage the basic duty of keeping him away from danger. You didn't stop him. Worse, you followed him. And now you're both lying here on death's doorstep. A bodyguard who charges into death with his master. Tell me, isn't that laughable?"

"Fine. That's fair. You're not wrong about me. But Shua came here to save you—his fiancée!" My mouth was dry. The words caught in my throat, but I forced them out anyway. Still, it was pointless. Whatever *she* was, she wouldn't listen. Sure enough, she gave me a quiet, pitying little laugh.

"Oh dear, you really are a fool. He is my fiancé in name only."

"In name only?"

"Whatever my foster sister twisted to suit her narrative, that is the true nature of our arrangement."

I remembered now—the report had said as much. She had no interest in the arrangement. I shut my mouth.

"And yet you still claim he came all this way out of love for his fiancée? Really? You've seen how he acts and heard what he has said. And still, that's what you think? Your thought process is truly something else. Up until two days ago, you still thought you were going to be officially named his aide, and you still can't grasp that our engagement is purely political."

Her voice never rose. She just smiled—that same damn smile—and every word cut like a blade. "And honestly, this whole situation is unbecoming. You still can't accept that both of you are nothing more than dead weight. Accurately assessing a situation is an essential skill for any knight, wouldn't you agree? This outcome was entirely predictable. This wasn't bad luck, it was your own doing."

I couldn't take it anymore. I wasn't about to let this talentless fool tear Shua down like that. "Then what? You want Shua to just abandon his fiancée like some selfish bastard?!"

At my defiant words, Lady Robur looked momentarily puzzled—then burst into laughter. Not a ladylike giggle, but a full-bodied laugh, the kind that came from somewhere deep, like she truly couldn't help herself.

"Aha ha... Oh, really now... Tell me, who was it that spent all this time mocking that poor fiancée in public? Belittling her, sneering at her, treating her like a joke?"

There was nothing I could say to that. When the person you've been treating like dirt calls you out to your face, there's not much to do but eat it.

She kept going, eyes tearing up with amusement, like she could barely stand how funny this all was. "You know, the two lying there and the Nilty boy waited until we underclassmen were asleep, then stole the monster-repellent stakes we'd set up, and snuck off. I imagine he used them as bait and made his escape. Who do you think it was that emboldened them in the first place?"

"Th-That's..."

My voice caught in my throat. Because the truth was obvious. It had been us who emboldened them. And Enrique... If what she was saying was true—then he was more rotten than I'd ever imagined.

"If the two of you hadn't done what you'd done," she said, "then those two wouldn't be lying there in that pitiful state. And that Nilty boy wouldn't be missing right now. Even if, by some miracle, the two of them make it out of here alive...do you really think magic will be able to heal them without leaving scars? No. They'll pay a heavy price for this. Whether they brought it on themselves or not. And you and your ilk, royals and high nobility with influence, you mocked those beneath you in status and ability and made a show of it. And now you'd claim you bear no blame at all?"

She'd stopped laughing. But the words she said, with that eerie smile, dug all the deeper.

"Sh-Shut up!" I shouted. "This isn't Shua's fault!" I wanted to protect him. Because I wanted to respect him. And maybe because I couldn't face what her words really meant.

Healing magic only sped up what the body could already do. It couldn't undo what'd already been done. Deep burns like those—if

they survived them—would scar. Badly. Even if they pulled through, no noble could walk into a ballroom with a face like that.

And if it all came back to us—if we were the reason for it... It was terrifying.

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"Of course I am!"

The moment the words left my mouth, her deep blue eyes narrowed. She let out a quiet sigh, and in the next instant, all expression vanished from her face.

"I see. In that case, you shouldn't even dream of being a knight. Or an aide. Not in this life, not even in your sleep," she said, words dripping with contempt. "House Asche... Ever since the days of that queen, you've all been the same. No matter how many years pass, your bloodline never fails to show its true nature—vulgar and vile to the core."

My heart clenched tight, beating harder—like it wanted to break free from my chest. I couldn't move. That same terror of the unknown sank its claws into me. And a cold sweat poured down my face.

I bit down hard, felt the sting of my burns blaze anew as I grabbed my injured shoulder and dug my nails into the raw flesh. Pain kept my mind from slipping. Blood welled up beneath my fingers, the taste of iron rising in my mouth. But it did little to quell the terror.

"Oh dear, hurting yourself like that is rather foolish, don't you think?" she said, returning to her usual gentle speech pattern. "I suppose what happened is you both finally figured it out, didn't you? That the idea of me you clung to was just a self-serving little fantasy. And then, faced with the shame of how you treated me, and the way your actions helped fuel everyone else's hatred, you suddenly felt too guilty to leave me to die. That's when the panic set in, especially when you and your prince realized that your actions had put me in even more danger. Yes...you panicked, in all sorts of ways. Or maybe you just got drunk on that hero act. I'd guess one of those reasons is why he decided you should come here. Or, more likely, all of them."

The tension in the air had lessened, but only slightly—and now, she laid bare every selfish thought Shua had never dared admit, though the two of them barely knew each other. It made my blood boil—what right did this selfish, cowardly brat have to speak like that?

"You know," she continued, "the personality you form in adolescence will stay with you your entire life. That prince of yours? He'll always be selfish, arrogant, and desperate to appear greater than he is. Honestly, you'd all have been better off if I never came back alive from this forest." She laughed softly, mocking her own prince—my prince—as if the words were nothing. And that was it. Something in me snapped.

"What did you say?! How much mockery will satisfy you? Your words are treasonous! Do you want to be cut down where you stand?!" I roared, the words flying from my mouth just to keep myself together. My breath came heavy and hot, but somewhere in the haze of fury, I felt a strange sense of relief—finally, I'd pushed past the fear.

But of course, she didn't flinch. That same elegant smile stayed on her face, unfazed. Like she hadn't even heard me. "Meaningless self-preservation and excuses will only get you hurt. And such a narrow view of the world—honestly, is that really fitting for a knight?"

"You—! You just won't stop, will you?!"

"Evidently not. Especially when none of you seem to grasp the simplest fact: that whether you live or die here might well depend on my mood."

"The hell are you talking about?! What difference could the whims of a talentless, low-magic brat like you possibly make?! Don't delude yourself!"

"Oh? And tell me—who's the one deluding himself here?"

That was when it hit me. It was like a blade, invisible and merciless, slashing through the air. Bloodlust. An intent to kill. My body locked up, seized by something primal. I started shaking again—full-body tremors, not even trying to hide it. Couldn't stop it.

She looked down at me, smiling ever so gently. "Oh dear. You're

trembling. And yet, even as you quake in fear before—what was it? A brat with pathetic magic and no talent? Do you still not understand? You and your lord are both so very small, like children."

She was terrifying. She was terrifying. What was she? What the hell was she?!

My breathing turned ragged. One knee hit the dirt. My mind spiraled, stuck in a pathetic loop of meaningless words.

"Among all living things currently surviving in this forest," she said, smiling faintly, "I stand at the very top. Even the insects understand that on an instinctual level. And yet you, apparently, are beneath even them."

The way she laughed softly, effortlessly radiating dominance—it was like watching a queen survey her dominion. But then, quite suddenly, she let out a long, theatrical sigh.

"I could leave right now if I wanted to," she said, as if weighing an inconvenience. "But I haven't even had a proper camping experience yet. And I've been craving grilled eel over rice."

The whiplash of the subject change—and the absurdity of the words—cut sharply against the suffocating fear from before. The tension in my shoulders loosened.

"Wha... Camping? Eel?"

"Yes. Camping and grilled eel. Thanks to a certain group of fourth-years, I haven't had the chance to enjoy those things properly with my dear children."

The pressure in the air lightened just enough that I at least started understanding her words—though their nonsensical nature made me frown in confusion. Still, the fear that had wrapped itself around my spine was beginning to unravel.

"Those two blonds bleeding out over there," she continued casually, "and that talentless Mr. Pedigree who had nothing but pride—oh, but he *was* terribly talented at being disruptive. My classmates were injured when paired with them back in first year. And if I recall, he caused trouble for every Class D team he was paired with, right?"

"That's...that's ridiculous. He'd never do something so petty."

"Come now. He's one of your little prince's sycophants, just like you. A few months ago, wasn't he one of those who helped stage

that little courtyard ambush? Just to harass me? That charming little comedy skit you all put on?"

"That... *Tch.*"

She wasn't wrong.

It'd happened right before Sienna enrolled. One afternoon, when Lady Robur was alone, Shua, Sienna, Enrique, and the rest of us had circled around her like jackals. Anyone watching would've seen it for what it was: bullying. We'd convinced ourselves it was righteous, but it was obviously petty, and now...now I couldn't even meet her eyes.

As I looked away, she grabbed me by the collar with one hand and yanked me upright. Then, before I could react, she shoved me back down. Hard. I hit the ground, landing on my backside with a dull thud.

Was that body-enhancement magic?!

"You've done nothing but invite scorn," she said coldly. "It's about time you accepted that."

Blades of air, layered and jagged, sliced deep into my skin.

Before I could even gasp, my body combusted into a pillar of fire. In the next moment a waterspout engulfed me, breaking my bones, causing me to crumple to the ground.

I couldn't even scream. The agony—every kind of it—hit all at once.

"Oh, do get up," she drawled. "You're not injured anymore, are you?"

It was only when she said it that I realized—there was no pain.

Healing magic? And in an instant?

My clothes were still torn and streaked with blood, but the skin beneath, even where the poison had burned me, was smooth and unblemished. The memory of the pain lingered, vivid and raw, but my body had been released from it. And somehow that made it worse. It pushed the terror right back to the surface. I couldn't comprehend what had occurred.

Slowly, I pushed myself upright. Raised my head.

"Huh?" The dumb noise escaped me before I could stop it. Because *she* was supposed to be there. But what I saw was someone—something—else entirely.

“Who...are you?”

Somehow, without my noticing, dawn had come. And bathed in the soft light of morning, stood a cold, beautiful woman. Her wavy silver hair was tinged with a pale pink so faint it could be mistaken for white. Her pupils were a deep blue, and her irises were gold.





“Uncover the truth,” she said quietly. “Learn the sins of the royal family—and of the House of Asche.”

“Wha—? A magic circle?!”

As she raised one hand, a white glow bloomed beneath the four of us. A spell array had appeared out of nowhere.

“I’ve carved an oath mark into you, so that if you attempt to speak of me, your words will stick in your throat. You’d best keep that mouth of yours shut. If you want to try to break the oath, your magic better exceed mine.”

Then, in a blink, the world changed as we teleported.

We all lay on the ground. Shua lay nearby, his complexion no longer deathly pale. The other two were still unconscious, but their labored gasps had softened into something more alive than dying.

“Ggh...”

A searing pain lit up my shoulder. I couldn’t help but groan as I clutched at it.

When I looked down, I saw that the right-hand half of my shirt had been burned away. The exposed skin still smoked faintly—and there, on my shoulder, the mark of a pale white flower surfaced, and then vanished again.

“The death blossom,” I whispered.

That’s what we called the red spider lily in this kingdom.

Every member of the royal family chose a flower for their seal. It was common knowledge that the notorious Princess Beljeanne, villainess of legend, had chosen the red spider lily.

It was a poisonous flower that was often planted beside graves. A blossom that suited the villainess well. And so it became popular in certain types of stage production. It was called the *higanbana* in a faraway country, and thought to be a flower of ill fortune.

Now that I thought about it... That girl. She had silver hair—the color of the royal family. She had deep blue pupils and golden irises—the same as the ancient line of kings.

And the same as the notorious villainess, Beljeanne.

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"Well, well. I suppose those three are next, then."

I dispelled the illusion, casually swept back my pink-blonde hair, and dulled the color of my clothing. No need to keep on drawing attention from men or bugs.

"You should've just let them be. You gave that boy far too many hints."

Even though he was speaking to me through telepathy, I could practically see Lag puffing up like a sulky little gremlin in my mind's eye.

"But the boy was simply adorable," I protested.

"Have you gone blind?"

Odd. For some reason, I suddenly had the feeling that something was examining me from above with the kind of expression usually reserved for lunatics.

"What an unkind thing to say. What else was I supposed to do when confronted with such a burly boy trying to put on a brave face but shaking with fear? I just *had* to break him," I said. "But I suppose that's a maiden's heart for you."

"And I suppose you believe that's what the typical maiden would do?" came Lag's exasperated voice.

"W-Well, of course!"

Oh dear. That little crack in my voice rather gave the game away, didn't it? Well, it was unfair of him to ask a lady who'd lived just over a century what qualified as *typical*. I hadn't the faintest. But no matter. Typical or not, my heart was still maidenly!

"*Ahem.* Anyway," I continued, "whatever the case, the prince's aide had all the mental complexity of a single-celled organism. And thanks to this latest incident, his cushy shortcut route to becoming His Highness's glorified bodyguard is now quite thoroughly shut."

The boy likely hadn't realized the gravity of what he'd done. But let there be no mistake—what he did was a violation so egregious that no knight in this kingdom, not even a squire, could be excused for it. Even if the young prince had insisted on coming to the forest, it made no difference.

Had the boy managed to protect the prince without so much as a scratch and get them both out unscathed, it might've been a

different story. But, instead, the evidence of his failure was now carved into his lord's body. I had healed the prince, yes, but only enough to blunt the venom's effects and stop the bleeding. Just enough so that he would wake up again. But I was under no obligation to heal his self-inflicted wounds.

The same went for the blond brigade.

I would not forget, nor would I forgive. They had drugged my precious little Mina and left her at the mercy of the forest's beasts. I had, of course, already placed protective magic on her at that point, so the drugs hadn't worked. But that was beside the point. The three culprits would have had no way of knowing that. When they had removed the monster-repelling stakes afterward, they were quite deliberately trying to kill both her and my team.

Their motive? I couldn't care less. I had no use for their excuses or apologies. It's not as if I were angry. And I had over a century of life experience that told me it had likely been foolishness born of their youth.

But that didn't matter. The moment they'd tried to kill the children on my team, they'd lost any chance at forgiveness. So that was that.

Still, I had let the blond brigade keep their lives. When I'd used an appraisal spell to scan their bags, I confirmed that there were healing potions in the prince's bag. The prince and his knight had rushed in here thoroughly ill-prepared, but that much I could commend. If he gave them the potions when he woke up, then the blond duo would survive. If they did live, mind you, they would suffer... But enough of that. Whether they were to be saved, or if they even wanted to be saved, was no longer my problem.

Funnily enough, it was the prince's tagalong who was now in the worst position. He was coming out of this without so much as a scar. By healing him so thoroughly, had I destroyed his prospects as a knight?

Well, that wasn't my problem either. If he was truly determined to become a knight, there were many other paths available to him—provided that single-celled brain of his could somehow sprout some wisdom and patience, and perhaps learn the true meaning of strength.

"Hmph. That brat might manage as some menial knight in the palace," Lag scoffed, *"but he had no business dreaming of being a royal guard. Now that he's lost his shortcut to the position, he'll never make it."*

Uh, Lag, darling? I happen to agree with you, but surely you shouldn't sound so pleased about it.

"I agree that he has a long way to go if he intends to rise from a common soldier to royal guard on merit alone... It would take him many years, perhaps more years than he has," I mused. "For all his talent, he is greatly lacking in both ability and judgment. Thus far, he has had the safety net of being a student and a member of one of the Four Houses to fall back on during his training. There were those who thought he had real talent, so I had high hopes for him, but in the end, he only stands out in the safe little world of his fellow students. If he truly means to become a royal guard, the road ahead will be long and unforgiving."

I couldn't help but let out a wry chuckle.

"His environment has allowed him to grow into someone shallow in thought and quick to make assumptions. It's why he hasn't understood what it is to be a royal guard, no matter how many hints he is given. And he won't understand until he's earned the right to walk freely through the palace halls as one of them."

"The ignorance of those with rank and title is the gravest sin of all," Lag agreed. *"A fool like him is not even fit to be called a noble, let alone a knight."* Oh dear, that was a bit unkind. Lag sounded fully hostile now, with no sign of the amusement from earlier. *"It was fools like him that got Bel killed. And yet the royal family and the Four Houses keep breeding more of them. The way things are going, you will be the last to earn a pact from us sacred beasts."*

My, my, he had gone straight past the anger stage of grief to depression. It truly hurt me to see him like this. I wished that the sacred beasts were able to enjoy life more freely, but I supposed that the way my past life as Beljeanne ended still cast a deep shadow over them.

"Stop, you're making me blush," I deflected with a chuckle. I sighed. "Well, that knight—no, he's more like a make-believe knight,

isn't he?—is hardly going to expose Class A's little tradition of tormenting Class D during joint exercises. And if he tries to investigate the truth behind the royal family and House Asche, someone who doesn't want the truth about the notorious villainess revealed will stop him. Especially given that he's from House Ashe himself. I'm quite looking forward to seeing how his little circle responds. I wonder if he'll make it out of this in one piece?"

My tone was as bright as always, even though the words I was saying were dark. If things unfolded as I expected, the tagalong boy wouldn't come out of this unscathed.

But it was the actions of the little prince that I was more interested in. Would he notice that something was amiss with his soon-to-be-former aide? Frankly, I wouldn't bet on it.

"Hmph. He's spent long enough tormenting you. I wouldn't mind if he disappeared entirely."

"My, how callous. But really, it's fine even if the boy never uncovers the truth. I don't expect him to. The only consequence is that he will be in frequent pain for the rest of his life."

"And if he does expose what Class A's been doing in secret and learns the sins of his own house, will that truly break the curse?"

"Of course. I made the conditions robust—it may even react to just the phrase 'notorious villainess.' One of the conditions of the pact is tied to me, after all. I wouldn't be surprised if he's already begun to put some of it together subconsciously—the red spider lily would be a big clue, and I did let him see me like *that*... Being notorious does have its drawbacks, doesn't it? If he does manage to piece it together, I wonder what kind of looks they'll all have on their faces."

"Feckless ones, I'm sure."

I couldn't help but let out a *pfft* of laughter. "I'm sure you're right," I said. "I begin to think that I may have been a bit cruel to the boy."

"Worry not. In the end, he's one of House Asche's whelps. A family so reviled that all of us sacred beasts but one refuse to grant them any blessings."

"And they have my condolences for that." Receiving that one's

blessing was hardly worth being called a blessing at all.

"If he learns the truth," Lag murmured, *"the royal family might decide to silence him for good."*

I chuckled. "My, my. Beljeanne is still quite the sordid secret, hm?"

"The way Bel died is a stain upon the Crown and the Four Houses. Even in death, to have recast her as a villainess... It is the royal family's greatest sin."

There was an uneasy tension in the air.

"Lag, dear, your bloodlust is showing. It's frightening the little snakes."

"Ugh... Apologies, little ones. So, what do we do about the other three?"

That was a concern, wasn't it?

"Hmm... If we leave them alone, I suppose they'd be able to survive the full six months. Unlike the idiot prince and his tagalong, all three of them are competent, and they came properly equipped. Even so, leaving them like that just wouldn't do. I'd prefer they exit the forest soon, if possible. Lag, dear, would you take care of that?"

A long pause.

"Is that an order?" he asked reluctantly.

Oh dear.

"Oh, there's no need to bother with Mr. Pedigree," I said, thinking that must have been why he was hesitating.

I had been using intermittent detection spells to keep an eye on things in the forest as we talked, and knew that Mr. Pedigree was tied up at the moment—quite literally. He was dangling in a cocoon of spider web after a fateful battle with a centipede and a spider. It reminded me of some B-movie horror film from the other world I'd lived in.

"Even if he's alive, there's no saving him," I added. I hoped I hadn't given him the impression that I wanted him to be hauled out of the forest too.

"No, that fool is beyond saving. I know you wouldn't ask that of me."

"Exactly. But perhaps it would be good for the other three to run

across him. We'll need them to confirm his death, or he will never answer for his crimes," I said. "Besides, the timing works out quite well. I'd like to have my team and dear Mina removed from the forest as well."

They were happily asleep in the camp right now. As much as I had been looking forward to it, we'd have to save the group camping trip for another time.

"I care nothing for the royal family or the Four Houses, only for you. Your team, I'll tolerate. The rest? If it's not an order, I don't give a damn. Let them find their own way out, or become bug food for all I care."

"Oh, Lag, darling, you know how much I detest giving orders, don't you?" He was going to force me to sulk. But then an idea struck me. "But, on the other hand, I do enjoy negotiations. Perhaps I could entice you with some delectable treats."

Now, how would he respond?

After a moment of silence, he mumbled, *"What kind of treats...?"*

"How about fried frog beast? There's plenty around here, isn't there? I'll even whip up some of my homemade tartar sauce—or mayonnaise, if you prefer. And perhaps a bit of snake—"

Suddenly a heavy feeling filled the air, so palpable I could almost cut through it. It was easy to feel his emotion through the telepathic connection.

"All right, all right, how about this instead? How about I get one of the catfish beasts from the river nearby and I grill it up into a lovely imitation eel rice bowl?"

"Are you trying to torment me?"

His voice was quivering now. He was absolutely precious, my darling Lag. Ah, but I shouldn't tease him too much. I remembered that splendid white-silver mane of his... If I upset him again, the poor dear's cuticles would suffer terribly, and then we'd have a whole new crisis on our hands.

I chuckled softly. "That was just a slip of the tongue. Forgive me. I noticed that the snakes here aren't attacking intruders. Even the snakes that attacked the idiot prince backed down... I assume we have you to thank for that. I won't go out of my way to hunt them,

and if they don't strike first, I've no reason to lift a hand against them. Of course, if they *do* attack..." I paused, pondering briefly. "Well, in that case, I'll simply have to savor them with gratitude for the life they gave..."

"They will not attack you. Don't you dare eat my little ones."

Goodness, he'd cut in before I'd even finished. It wasn't like I ever intended to eat the poor darlings in the first place. Well, at least not the ones in this forest.

"Of course not. The snakes here are your precious children, after all."

"They are the descendants of me and my wife. They survived thanks to Bel. They are my precious children. Don't eat them," he insisted.

Aww, he must have truly cared about them.

"Yes, of course," I said. "We couldn't save all of them, but I'm glad I managed to throw up a barrier in time and carve out a place for them."

"I will forever be ashamed that I fell for that vulgar prince's schemes and lost myself. I caused so much trouble for you, Bel."

"Don't say that. That half brother of mine was a monster. And, even if it was a close call, we managed to complete your accession to your mate's former position as sacred beast and kept the demon at bay."

Originally, Lag had been a serpent beast. Through life here with his wife, he'd gained what was needed to ascend into sacred beasthood. However, the process had been fraught with danger, including intercession by demonic powers. In the end, he managed to inherit the position from his wife.

"Yet your achievements were wiped away from history," he growled. *"Worse, you suffered unjust punishment at the hands of the crown prince and his mother."*

This time, a distinct anger fanned out in all directions. The bugs nearby began to stir in response.

I smiled. "Calm yourself. It'll be a mess if you agitate the spiders."

I swept the area with a detection spell, checking on the whereabouts of the roving party of three in relation to Mr. Pedigree.

"Well then, it's about time. Be a dear and handle it, would you? And while you're at it, feel free to *accidentally* let slip a few of those details we discussed."

Lag let out a great, heaving sigh. *"Fine. But you owe me fried frog and catfish unagi. And don't eat my little ones."*

"There's no need to worry about that."

He sure was hammering that point home, wasn't he...? Wait. Did he actually think I would eat them?

I began to protest my innocence, but before I could say anything, I realized he had already gone.

Sniffle.

※※Aside: Team Brothers' Forced Retreat (Mihail)※※

"Well, no doubt about it, this forest is crawling with bugs," Wharton remarked. His voice was light, almost cheerful.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than he stepped left, moving with a grace that belied his gaunt frame and lazy air.

Slash!

In his hands, a broadsword, sharpened to an unnaturally keen edge with wind magic, swung through the foreleg of a mantis-like beast that stood three times his height, slicing neatly along the joint. Without hesitation, he vaulted onto the falling body, summoning another gust of wind that hurled him high into the air.

Slash!

Mid-flight, he cleaved a monstrous mosquito, easily twice his size, clean in two. He hit the ground rolling, narrowly slipping past a rain of poisoned barbs. In the same motion, he hurled his broadsword like a spear, before taking a nimble step back to dodge another volley of venomous barbs with an ease that was almost insulting.

Thud!

The sword struck true, driving itself between the segments of a caterpillar beast's body with a satisfying thud.

"Wharton," the young man standing beside me called to him, his silver-black hair stirring in the night breeze. He didn't wait for Wharton's response before he cast a barrier spell. It unfolded at once from where we stood, forming a perfect three-meter by three-meter cube.

Wharton jogged into the barrier as it closed and shut behind him, sealing us off. "Well, well," he said. "A close shave, but I must say, a rather fine entrance on my part."

Was that something someone who had jogged in without the

least bit of urgency should be saying?

I took aim just past him and threw a dagger. With the first light of dawn creeping in, the shot was easy enough to line up. The blade sank cleanly into the head of the mantis beast that had been chasing after him, despite having lost a limb.

That was odd. I had honestly expected the blade to bounce cleanly off its hardened exoskeleton.

Boom!

Suddenly, its head exploded. Its hulking, winged body stiffened and toppled over. I stared at it in shock as my two companions joined me in stunned silence.

"What the hell?" I muttered.

"Uh... Mihail, my friend, why are you so shocked by the weapon you yourself threw?" Wharton asked, regaining his composure far faster than I had.

A minor point, but during missions, Wharton had always insisted we address each other by name. He had some foolish notion about it building team cohesion, or some such nonsense.

"It's a dagger that detonates when drawn from its sheath," I said calmly, having finally regained my composure. "It's also quite sharp."

"Why would such a dangerous weapon exist?" said the silvery-black-haired man with us, narrowing his crimson eyes. He had inherited his eyes from his father.

He no longer wore the thick glasses that obscured his eye color, and had swept his long bangs neatly to one side. Without them, he was instantly recognizable. He had inherited his looks from both of his parents, two people anyone in the kingdom would recognize. The silver that wove through his hair, which he always kept dyed black at the Academy, shone through in the morning light. Gone was the guise of the school doctor, and in its place was the aristocratic beauty of the kingdom's first prince.

"Laviange gave them to me for self-defense," I said. "The magic circuits etched inside make the blade exceptionally sharp. I was told it would stay stable for about ten seconds once drawn and was meant to be thrown like a knife."

I had tossed it half expecting it to bounce harmlessly off the

beast. Instead, it had pierced its exoskeleton cleanly, which had been a welcome, if unsettling, surprise. But it really had exploded! She'd warned me to have healing magic ready just in case, but I thought she had been joking! Were the safety standards for magical circuits really this sloppy?!

"Didn't even seem like five seconds had passed, did it?" Wharton muttered. "Your little sister's truly a menace..."

Say no more. Now that I'd had a moment to think about it, the real terror was the fact I'd brought along several more of those blasted daggers she gave me. Was this actually the most danger I had been in since coming to this accursed forest?

No...better not to dwell on that.

After our discussion in the infirmary, I had received a briefing about the Poison Box Garden from none other than Regulus Rovenia, the first prince.

He had explained that the forest was sealed off by a dual-layered barrier spell, which was meant to be inescapable. However, every six months, the spell needed to be recast. Depending on how things were handled at that time, escape might, theoretically, be possible.

Though Regulus had ordered me to stay behind, it seemed he had no real choice but to let me come along. He feared that not acting would allow the true mastermind to slip away, and believed things could escalate into something far more serious down the line.

Apparently Regulus had uncovered something amiss during his years at the Academy—some hidden threat he continued to investigate even after graduation. He had been granted permission by His Majesty to linger under the convenient cover of a school doctor, and he had royal sanction for his mission and authority to investigate freely.

As for what, precisely, he was investigating, he refused to say to anyone other than those in his inner circle. These questions had lingered in my mind as we entered the forest.

The three of us, myself included, kept detection spells running at all times.

When we'd first crossed the threshold of the barrier, all of the human magic we detected was clustered in one location. While

detection magic couldn't pick out individuals, it could distinguish, roughly, between human and beast. Yet almost as soon as we entered the forest, a mass of insect-like magic slammed into the gathered human group, splitting it in two.

One of the groups immediately began to move. Choosing which to pursue was easy enough—the group that stayed behind quickly dispersed the bugs that were near them. Most likely, that had been Team Peckish mounting some kind of defense.

I wanted to rush to my sister straightaway. But before we entered the forest, I'd made a deal with these two that I couldn't afford to break.

Our skills might be on par with those of an A-rank adventurer party, and we had teamed up many times before, but we weren't S-rank. There was no room for carelessness. One of us charging off alone could get us all killed.

In any case, I was painfully aware of our situation. Even if we had chosen to enter this nightmare willingly, the fact remained that one of us was a royal prince and the others were heirs to two of the Four Houses. We were too important to let ourselves die here. It wasn't arrogance; it was reality. The education we had received and the lavish lives we lived had been paid for by the taxes of the kingdom and our territories.

And we hadn't even begun to pay back that debt. Especially me, who was still a student of the Academy. With my sister missing, I was now the sole legitimate heir to House Robur. Sienna might have been adopted into the family, but she would never be heir to the house.

I would not carelessly diminish the value of my family's bloodline. If I wanted to rescue my sister and return alive, then I had no choice but to follow the terms of our team's agreement.

The terms were threefold:

First, we had to prioritize making contact with Enrique Nilty.

Second, I was to follow the judgment of the other two, no matter what we discovered, or if my sister lived or died.

Third, we were to prioritize each other's lives over any other life in the forest.

With that in mind, we moved to pursue the splintered group...only for that group to split once again.

"My, my. And now it seems we've picked up a few more human signatures. I wonder—could it be your dear little brother, Regulus?" Wharton mused.

"A jest in poor taste," Regulus replied at once, his tone clipped. "The bugs are already closing in on them. We must move."

Even I, reluctant as I was to believe it, couldn't fully refute Wharton's suggestion. I fell into step with Regulus as he dispelled his barrier.

We were close to the new group when, without any prior warning, we sensed an overwhelming surge of magic that seemed to have a will of its own. An instant later, the cluster of human signatures we had been tracking vanished.

The magic we had detected had almost certainly been human, but it had been impossibly vast. Could it have been some kind of beast? And what of the group we had been tracking? If their signatures had disappeared, death was the likeliest explanation.

"Let's go," Regulus said eventually.

We turned toward the lone remaining trace of human magic. There were monsters nearby it too, their foul presence brushing against the edges of our detection spells. We quickened our pace.

Something flashed in the distance, catching the morning sun. A heavy feeling of dread coiled in my chest as we moved toward it.

A spider beast sprang from the shadows to intercept us, but the three of us made quick work of it. Regulus seared it with a burst of fire magic, and as its carapace cracked and softened, I crushed it with a burst of water magic. I didn't even need to use those accursed daggers.

A hoarse voice croaked ahead of us.

"Help... Help me... Brother..."

We found him strung up in the shape of a cross, tangled in the massive, translucent threads of a spider's web.

Enrique.

Each breath he took was a raspy wheeze, and the hair that should have matched his brother's was so matted with filth and

blood it was scarcely recognizable. Sweat and tears clung to his face as he struggled against his bonds. Even I was moved to pity. His abdomen, from sternum to hips, was grotesquely swollen—and still growing.

We were too late.

Across the web, the remains of what looked like a centipede beast lay scattered and half eaten. It seemed the creatures had fought over the rare prize of human prey, and the spider had won.

"Where are the others?" Wharton asked quietly.

Regulus and I remained silent, witnesses to the final exchange between brothers.

"All...dea...dead..."

"Did you confirm it?"

"Ah... Uh... B-But..."

He choked on the words.

No... I was wrong. This was not a conversation between brothers. This was a conversation between a future duke and his subject.

Wharton spoke with the same formal tone he had used when talking to the instructors as a representative of his house. He paid no heed to Enrique's desperate gasps or the wretched state he was in.

"Tell me the truth," Wharton said coldly. "If all of the others are dead, then why does my detection spell still register a handful of human signatures? And why are you, the leader of the upperclassmen team, here without them?"

The sun had risen fully now, and Enrique's expression, plainly visible, was that of a boy awaiting judgment. He already knew the words that would come next.

"You used your teammates as bait to escape," Wharton said. His words cut like a knife. "After your magic signature split off from the splinter group, the signatures of those you left behind persisted for a while before vanishing. That would not have been the case if they had been dead when you left them. They persisted because they were still alive when you abandoned them."

Detection spells could tell you little more than whether a magical signature was human, beast, or animal. To distinguish individuals

required extraordinary magical sensitivity. But by tracking the signatures closely enough, you could glean some information.

Wharton continued. "When you first split from the main group, you did so with two other students. I assume that was you abandoning the underclassmen as decoys and leaving with the two students connected to our house. Later, though, you even abandoned them."

"I... I was...sca... *Ghhk! Ackk—!*"

Enrique choked, a harsh, strangled sound, as something surged upward inside him. His shirt, rucked up at some point in his struggles, exposed his grotesquely swollen stomach, stretched near to bursting. Something writhed just beneath the skin, though he, mercifully, seemed unaware.

"Mihail," Regulus said.

I knew what he was asking, cruel though it was. Suppressing a grimace, I cast not a healing spell, but a recovery spell, to help him recover some energy.

"Why," Wharton asked calmly, "did you teleport your team into this place?"

"I... I didn't," Enrique croaked, the words clearer now as the recovery spell soothed his ragged breathing.

Wharton nodded. "That's right. You didn't."

For a brief moment, relief flickered across Enrique's grime-streaked face—only to vanish when Wharton continued.

"You lack the power to do so."

"B-Brother... I..."

From where we stood, I couldn't see Wharton's face. But it was easy enough to imagine the expression Enrique was looking at now.

"Who put you up to it?" Wharton pressed. "What was your aim?"

Enrique hesitated.

"Speak now, or I leave you here. You have five seconds. Five...four...three..." Pressed for time, Wharton counted quickly.

"Wait—!" Enrique gasped out, stumbling over the words. "That...useless woman...made Sienna...c-cry again. I-I wanted...her gone...so that...I c-could...make Sienna...a true noblewoman... Shua's fiancée..."

The moment the words left his mouth, fury flooded through me so violently I took a step forward, ready to strike him where he hung.

Regulus caught my shoulder before I could act.

One glance at that bloated, writhing belly was enough to remind me that time was running out for him. Even the little strength Enrique had regained from the recovery spell was already beginning to fail.

So that was the reason. After I left the student council room yesterday, my foster sister had gone crying to him, and he had chosen to do this. In a way, he had been manipulated into this by Sienna... But I would not pity him after hearing him slander my sister.

All I wanted now was to finish this, reach my sister's side, and tell her she was safe.

I eyed Enrique's grotesquely distended stomach and readied one of the knives Laviange had given me. Though, of course, I kept it sheathed.

"But...I was tricked. That monster-repelling venom...was a lure!"

"Oh?" Wharton said, sounding intrigued. "Go on."

"It was the centipede, brother! The centipede's venom...they said it could drive the beasts away! B-But...when we...we s-sprayed the venom...into the air...it lured s-stronger...beasts! A-And the...the monster-repelling stakes...they said...had been improved...d-didn't work." Enrique gasped, breathing heavily. "They tricked us into carrying lures on purpose, so we'd have to betray the others!"

He drew a ragged breath, desperate to spit out that last bit. Perhaps he thought he saw some softening in his brother's expression. He was blind to reality; his desperate excuse was almost laughable.

"Hnngh..." He lurched forward as if something were rising inside him.

"I see," said Wharton evenly. "So you're saying you, under your own will, both stole the monster-repelling stakes you still believed were functional, and absconded with the centipede venom you still thought you could use?"

"Hngh...y-yes! I... I'm the victim here! I was...deceived... Hngh!"

Whether it was nausea or something else, it was clear he was no longer capable of rational thought.

"And?" Sensing how little time Enrique had left, Wharton pushed him to continue. "Who modified the teleportation circle? Who deceived you, you poor 'victim'?"

"A woman...in a hood..." Enrique gasped. And then, mid-sentence, he convulsed and vomited something solid. It hit the ground with a wet splatter, and then...it moved, extending thin, segmented legs. "Huh...?" Enrique choked out a small strangled sound as he looked at the thing—at first in confusion, and then in growing horror.

He let out a bloodcurdling scream.

From his screaming mouth, spiders began to crawl out, writhing and pilling across the ground. His scream turned into a gurgle.

His belly twisted violently, swelling grotesquely, and as his eyes went wide with terror, his gurgling noises became louder. Then, his stomach ruptured. A writhing mass of spiders burst forth, bigger than the ones that came out of his mouth.

I threw my dagger into the writhing mass, and it embedded itself deep into a spider, and then...

Nothing.

So the first explosion had been a misfire after all.

Even as the spider impaled by my blade twitched and stilled, countless more continued to pour out from underneath it.

"Wharton," Regulus said sharply.

Wharton spun on his heel at once and walked toward us. In the next instant, Regulus's barrier flared to life, sealing us in.

I hurled the last of the accursed daggers at a spider that tried to leap through.

Boom!

Oh! This one did explode!

"Well then," Wharton said lightly, "shall we finally go and find your dear little sister and her team?"

Behind him, the spiders were already descending, swarming over their former host and beginning to feast.

"Are you sure we should just leave him like that?" I asked.

"Of course. We've confirmed both his crimes and his death. I've already had his name retroactively stricken from our family records."

"You came prepared," I said, glancing at him.

He had never planned on bringing his brother home.

"Of course. Even if he ends up taking full blame for this incident, no one will try to prosecute his crimes if he's dead. I'm mildly concerned about the whereabouts of his two accomplices and the two people who mysteriously appeared and joined them...but, oh well, that can be managed," he said with a shrug. "Seeing as the first prince here got some good information out of him, I believe he will be willing to lend his aid in resolving the question of culpability."

The first prince in question nodded.

"Right," Regulus said. "He said it was 'a woman in a hood,' so it can be assumed that the mastermind had no personal connection to Enrique. But at least we have a clue. It would make things difficult if House Nilty got involved in the investigation, but I suppose they gave up any right to interfere when it comes to someone they've already cast out of the family. Right?"

It was painfully cleared that the two had already come to an agreement beforehand.

"Naturally. Provided no scandal touches the Nilty name."

"Of course. Why would it? He's no longer a member of that family."

The two of them exchanged a nod, smiling like a pair of foxes.

"And," Wharton added smoothly, "the next heir to the House of Robur just so happened to agree from the outset not to meddle. And surely he'll back me up when I say I only helped with the search because I felt responsible for that ex-brother of mine, right?"

"Yeah," I said quietly.

It had been a part of our deal, after all. I would uphold it.

So, please, stop winking at me.

"If Team Peckish and Lady Ujeera all make it back without a scratch, then I will be satisfied, even if I, tragically, couldn't return with my former brother. Now, come, gentlemen, let us make haste."

At those words, I finally allowed myself to breathe easy. We could

go to retrieve my sister at last.

Or so I thought.

Without warning, the air itself trembled, and a monstrous surge of energy revealed its presence. Instinctively, everyone snapped their gazes upward and gasped.

Suspended above us was a colossal form, staring down at us with dark blue eyes flecked with gold.

The creature's long, sinuous body shimmered in the morning light, cloaked in gleaming scales of silvered blue. A silver and white mane ran from its neck down its spine, even trailing along its tail, its every movement radiating a solemn and breathtaking beauty.

"A sacred beast," I whispered.

Long ago, when that notorious villainess had attempted to forge a pact with the demons, the sacred beasts had broken their pacts with all those of this land. Since then, not a single royal heir nor any of the Four Houses' heads had been graced with their blessing. They showed themselves now only at whim, and only to those blessed.

We had heard their likeness described in scripture and song, but none of us had ever before laid eyes upon one.

And yet, the moment I saw it, I knew exactly what it was. It was not knowledge alone that told me... No, it was the purity of its magic —so radiant, so untainted, that my knees nearly gave way of their own accord.

For a fleeting instant, I wondered whether the immense power we had sensed earlier had belonged to this creature. But I quickly dismissed the idea. The aura before me now was entirely different.

"So much noise from my old nest," the sacred beast said. "And now you bring your petty wars here as well, dragging the stench of demonkind in your wake."

I could not tear my eyes from it, yet at the beast's final words, I could hear Regulus take a sharp breath.

"You are an eyesore," the sacred beast went on. "Begone, pitiful scions of folly."

The holy beast's deep blue eyes—so strangely like my sister's—flashed wide, and in the next instant, our bodies were wrenched skyward as though seized by invisible hands, stopping only once we

reached the beast's lofty eye level.

Before I could even comprehend what was happening, a group of figures came hurtling through the air, before gathering around us.

I recognized them as the sleeping forms of Team Peckish.

But—

"Wait! Please!" I cried. "My sister, Laviange, isn't here!"

"Silence. Those who yet bear a shred of magic are all accounted for. The rest, I care not!"

No sooner were the words spoken than we were hurled bodily through the air once more. A crushing force pressed down upon us; I could neither speak nor open my eyes, helpless against the torrent.

Somewhere amid it all, I thought I caught the sharp click of Regulus's tongue.

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"Little fish, middle fish, big fish too. Hmm, hmm, hmmm..." I hummed my self-composed fish ditty while quickly packing up the tent and the leftover monster-repellent pegs into my magic bag with a flick or two of magic. I didn't forget the centipede meat, of course.

I needed to return the bag to Lauren, after all.

Now, all that was left was for Lag to gather the others... And there he went, zipping over to where they lay sleeping. Rather enthusiastic of him! I did hope they wouldn't hurt their necks, sleeping like that.

I cast a detection spell and teleported to the riverbank. My target was catfish.

I'd confirmed that my brother and his tagalongs had been taken safely out of the forest—or so I thought at first. One of them seemed to be missing. Had he fallen somewhere? How careless.

As an aside, in my past life, I had set things up so that Lag could come and go from the forest as he pleased. I was free to do the same, of course. It was my first time visiting in this life, but I could handle my past life's magic just fine.

Suddenly, I noticed the telltale magical signature of a teleportation spell.

"Lavi, one's missing."

"Thank you for the quick report. They're right at the place I just was. And with quite the reckless bit of teleportation too."

When used in a panic and without proper training, teleportation spells had a nasty habit of snagging the caster in the cracks of space-time. Worst case? Your body could end up torn apart and scattered to the winds.

"He's a nuisance. Shall I kill him? I won't be listening to any more of your favors, before you ask."

I chuckled. "Thank you, Lag. You've been a great help. But the sun's already high, and I've got more pressing duties that involve fried food and some eel rice, so I'll leave him be. With my presence still lingering, the bugs should leave him alone for the most part. Besides, he seemed decently equipped, and he's clearly no novice when it comes to magic. He should be able to defend himself until dusk."

Either way, it would be better not to ask any more of Lag today. He had been oddly bloodthirsty. Did he want to be the Abarenbou Shogun, perhaps?

Still, who was it who'd attempted such a dangerous stunt? I was sure my brother would eventually be able to master teleportation, but the magic I sensed wasn't his.

"Hm?"

I'd sensed a faint detection spell coming from up ahead. I tapped my toe against the ground and diffused my own magic into the surrounding nature. Cutting it off entirely would create an unnatural absence.

Whoever it was had considerable magical energy. The search radius was wide. In fact, I'd wager this was the most impressive mage that I'd come across in this lifetime, other than father.

Who could it be? Royalty, perhaps? It certainly wasn't my idiot fiancé. If there was anyone in any of the Four Houses with magic of this caliber, the sacred beasts would've mentioned it, but I'd heard nothing of the sort. And it certainly wasn't any of the queens consort, as they weren't royalty or direct heirs of any of the Four Houses.

That left the royals I'd never met, but who I knew had considerable power: the king, the crown prince, and the princess.

If a royal had wandered out here with my brother of all people, then...perhaps it was the crown prince? I had no idea how they would know each other, though.

Just in case, I reached into my bag and pulled out a slightly loose-fitting robe, something suitable for both catfish hunting and possibly dealing with a prince. Draping it over my cloak, I tossed both bags to the side. If a prince was lurking around, it probably wasn't a good idea to put them into my pocket dimension.

But, more importantly, this robe. It would fetch a hefty price, not that it was for sale. And for good reason! It came equipped with three premium features—magic suppression, concealment, and camouflage. A priceless Lavi original, handcrafted by yours truly! I had even gone out of my way to create a sleek, stylish design, with pockets both inside and out, and cut to allow full mobility in combat.

"Is that the robe you made from those butterflies?"

"Yes. I managed to stock up on quite a few, thanks to you."

I'd made it last summer. Lag had told me that one of his favorite human-free forests had been overrun by butterfly-type magic beasts.

I'd lured them in at night using magical lights. Being magic beasts, they had an impressive wingspan. Some were drab, others dazzlingly colorful, and a few even scattered glowing scales as they flew. It was a breathtaking, almost fairy-tale sight. I'd harvested their wings and used them to craft this robe, one of my proudest creations.

I made a few colorful ones because I wanted something girlish. I'd quietly brought along a particularly lovely one for Kartika, just in case I got the chance to give it to her. The outside was black with a striking emerald green; the lining, a vivid magenta pink. The camouflage function was weaker, but the magic suppression and concealment worked just fine.

Still, the occasion had never come, so it had stayed in my bag. A shame, really. I'd been looking forward to it.

My own robe was a modest scorched-brown design that prioritized camouflage. But the lining was a soft cobalt blue, in

pursuit of just a touch of girlish charm. I was still a young maiden, after all.

"It's about time for me to leave," Lag said.

"All right. Do look forward to the eel rice, won't you?"

"I will. But don't use the little ones for ingredients. Don't eat any of them," he reminded me.

"My appetite is perfectly well disciplined, I'll have you know," I said, slightly offended at this point. I puffed out my chest and told him, with all the dignity I could muster, "There is no need to worry."

He stared at me. *"Fine,"* he said at last.

Hm? Why the long pause? Ah, his presence had disappeared.

From my bag, I pulled out a fishing rod, a lure, and a small vial of faintly glowing powder. I dusted the lure lightly with the powder before hooking it in place. The powder was made from butterfly beast scales, which could be quite useful. Some types could cause paralysis or poisoning, while others, like this batch, simply glowed. I used different blends depending on the situation.

Their main use, however, was as water repellent. I'd treated the surface of the lure to be tacky, and with the added waterproofing effect of the powder, it wouldn't wash off underwater.

"Let's go fishing!"

Plop!

Bit of a silly sound, really. I let the line trail into the water and sat myself down at the river's edge to wait.

Tug, tug.

Ah, there we go. But not yet. It was just nudging the bait, not biting. I gave the rod a slight twitch.

Yank!

"There it is!"

I sprang to my feet, grinning, and immediately braced myself with a body-enhancement spell so I wouldn't get dragged in.

Twitch, twitch.

It was almost time. The rod shuddered like it was gripped by a seizure. Then, just like that, the line went still.

Ploop!

A giant catfish, about the size of an orca, floated to the surface,

convulsing.

"I win," I declared, reeling in the line. With my strength-enhancing magic still active, I seized the beast by the mouth and hauled it out in one smooth motion. I quickly removed the lure.

If I'd taken the lure out underwater, my homemade scale powder might have leaked into the river—though it only had a glow and slight paralysis effect, so nothing too bad.

Flop, flop, flop!

Ah, the paralysis wore off. Well, that was to be expected. A lure dusted with butterfly-scale powder wasn't exactly enough for a creature this size. Even if some of the powder had washed into the river, it wouldn't have much effect. The current would take care of it.

I snapped my fingers, dropping a bolt of lightning onto its head.

Some catfish-type beasts carried toxins in their livers, and cutting into the organs could make the meat reek. I had to keep a steady stream of water magic flowing as I used water blades to slice it into fillets.

I wouldn't need to do anything too special to clean it. That was why I'd chosen to fish in the river rather than a swamp. Still, back in the other world, about one in ten catfish retained a strong, fishy smell. Just in case, I floated the meat cuts into the air and gave them a sniff.

Yep, smelled fine.

I had once fished catfish with my husband. We grilled them for the Day of the Ox in midsummer. The first time we tried it was after all the children had grown up and left home. I still remembered looking up how to clean and prepare them, and then how we caught and cooked them together. It was a memory I held dear.

It was delicious, and free to boot. I'd tried all different sorts of techniques before arriving at my eventual fishing spots and cooking methods. And wouldn't you know it, the same methods worked in this world as well. A whole different world, with magical beasts and everything, and yet, funnily enough, fishing was the same.

Now, with the fish neatly filleted into thirds, I cast another detection spell just to be safe. No signs of movement. Whoever it was must have set up a barrier spell and hunkered down. Taking a

break, perhaps?

With no interruptions to worry about for the time being, I opened up a gate to my pocket dimension a bit above me and dropped out a rather large box with a thud. I used magic to fill it with water, and then pulled out some alcohol and spices from the pocket dimension and mixed them in.

I halved each of the three fillets, and dropped them in with a plop. They fit in perfectly.

With the prep taken care of, I resumed fishing. After all, I wanted to make a proper eel rice dish big enough to satisfy Lag's original body. Yes, he could shrink down to body-pillow size if he wanted, but this was a special occasion. I wanted to show him omotenashi, some hospitality from the old world, and show him that my culinary pursuits were properly restrained.

As I was thinking, I caught another one. This time I lined up the next cast as I prepped it. In the end, I caught and cleaned five in total. Somewhere in there I also snagged something that looked like a carp, with jagged teeth, no less. That one got released right back into the river, of course. No overfishing. And I had standards.

As for the unusable bits of the catfish, I applied a mental mosaic over them to extract their magic stones, both big and small, and then incinerated them with a quick burst of fire magic.

"Next up, grilling."

I pulled out large stone slabs from the pocket dimension, arranged them into a circle, dropped in a heap of charcoal, and set a wide mesh grate over the top. Instant barbecue pit. I grilled the catfish just like a proper eel shop would, one after another, sending each finished piece off to storage the moment it was done.

While they grilled, I prepared a slightly oversized batch of rice in a field mess kit. I even conjured up some leaf plates for good measure.

Once enough meat had been cooked, I sliced a few portions into human-sized servings and laid them out neatly on the leaf plates. As for the tools? A quick spell for cleaning and another to stash them away, and the evidence was eliminated in seconds.

Why hide them? Well—

"So this is where you were."

The smell of catfish had lured someone in.

"My, my," I said, "are we acquainted?" Why did he look so familiar? I gave him my best ladylike smile, just in case.

"Yes... At least, in another form," he said, his crimson eyes narrowed, studying my response. "Do you not recognize me?"

He had silver hair and the eyes of House Bereed. Anyone with any sense would piece it together. But perhaps I ought to play the useless fool I was thought to be.

"Hmm... Let me think," I said, probing his magic.

Had I come across this signature before...? Ah! It was faint, but I recognized it. I *had* come across it, quite recently in fact... Yes, during a healing spell. Well, well, what had we here? This was the Academy's school physician.

So that had been the strangeness I had felt around him. He was royalty.

Hmm, if he had graduated and was now posing as a faculty member, then he was likely investigating something. I recalled that the corridors he frequented during lunch breaks were always curiously deserted.

The authority he had enjoyed as a member of royalty attending the Academy would have transferred to his younger brother when he graduated. There was no way he could go undercover, given his position, which meant he must have received the king's permission. So it had to be an official assignment.

A member of the royal family investigating the Academy in secret, and now the first prince was showing up here himself... And then there was the tampered teleportation array... No. I wouldn't dig any further. Just getting Lag to hint at demonic interference had been way more initiative than I usually showed. That was enough for me.

And just why had I suspected demons? Well, there were plenty of reasons, here and there, but it was mostly instinct. I had been killed by a demon in my past-past life, after all. But the main reason was the teleportation circle.

Still, the prince's presence—and, indeed, the royal family's secret involvement—gave me just enough to be sure.

And with that certainty, I knew exactly what to do:

Of the Thirty-Six Stratagems*, fleeing is best! The wise stay away from danger!*

Even if it came from another world, it was important to listen to the wisdom of those that came before you. I would stay out of it.

"Your Highness the First Prince, I presume," I said coyly.

"I am. We've met before... Do you truly not remember?"

His voice was much kinder than his brother's. It flitted through my mind that he, too, was a distant relative of my *past* past life.

"I'm afraid not. I only visited the castle once, for my engagement. As I entered the Academy just as Your Highness graduated, I believe we never had the chance to meet."

Not a word about him being the school's physician, of course. That little detail would never leave my lips, even if hell froze over.

He looked utterly deflated, before lifting his head and pressing his point again. "I see... Truly, you have no memory of us meeting at all?"

How odd. Why was he pressing this?

"Not at all," I said while giving him my absolute best ladylike smile. "More importantly, you're looking rather worse for wear. I've just lit a fire... There's no chair, I'm afraid, but feel free to sit wherever you like."

"Ah... I think I will."

He looked so defeated, I half expected to see a pair of drooping ears and tail to complete the picture. The mood had grown terribly heavy, so I steered the conversation elsewhere.

His clothes were torn in several places, with a fair amount of blood staining through. No wounds remained, so he must've used a healing potion from the magic bag at his hip. Judging by the state he was in, he'd panicked, tried a teleportation spell he wasn't prepared for, and nearly killed himself in the process. A bit careless, perhaps.

Or maybe I should've been impressed he managed to teleport at all, considering Lag had him floating midair at the time.

Still he was quite gloomy, so I decided to call him the ragged prince.

“That smells good. Did you make it?” he asked.

“But of course. I may have made a bit too much, truth be told. Would you care for some?”

“You don’t mind?” he said, perking up.

He’d been sneaking glances at the leaf plate for a while, but now he finally broke the silence. I didn’t mind playing the grandmother giving a youngster a home-cooked meal—it rather suited me, in fact.

I retrieved a fork from my bag, took some of the rice that had been steaming nearby, and arranged it on a leaf plate. I then placed a steaming slab of catfish on top and finished it off by drizzling it generously with sauce... And there it was, a not-quite-eel rice dish, ready to serve.

“What kind of meat is this?” he asked.

“Catfish.”

“I see...”

Did that put him off? Now that I thought about it, unlike rice, I couldn’t recall any stories of royalty eating catfish. Even back in my Beljeanne days, I don’t think it was ever on the menu.

Still, when I handed it over with the fork, His Royal Raggedness accepted it obediently and took a cautious bite.

His eyes widened. “It’s good.”





Oh my. His crimson eyes were practically sparkling. He began to dig in with the kind of eager abandon only young men could manage. Tall and well-built, he clearly kept himself in shape. I wondered if that portion would be enough.

Still, the smaller bowl I'd set aside was mine. My own little eel rice imitation, made with the last of the rice. I took a bite and let the nostalgic flavor wash over me. Utterly delightful.

There were still four more fillets left on the leaf plates. As the prince chewed away contentedly, I rummaged through my bag and pulled out a frying pan and a few other tools for the next dish. I poured in a generous amount of oil and started heating it. For hungry young men like him, what you needed was something rich and filling, with a bit of bulk to it.

"You're making something else?"

His Raggedness looked genuinely excited. I gave him a small smile in return and continued eating. While I chewed, I took out a hard loaf of bread and some cheese, then used a bit of magic to crush them over the remaining grilled catfish on the leaf plates. The crumbs soaked up the juice that clung to the fish. I slid three fillets into the frying pan with a satisfying sizzle and let them fry to a golden crisp.

Next, I popped open a small container. Inside was a white, cream-like mixture. I minced a few leftover marinated vegetables, added chopped boiled egg, and stirred it all together with a dollop of homemade mayonnaise. There it was. Tartar sauce.

Back in my previous life, when my husband and I had leftover grilled catfish, this was how we'd eaten it the next day. It was lovely with a dash of broth and a dab of wasabi too, of course, but the growing grandchildren and great-grandchildren preferred it piled high with tartar sauce. I remembered some of them showing up uninvited on the day after the Day of the Ox. Those were good days.

"What were you remembering just now?" he asked as I finished frying the three fillets and laid them neatly onto a leaf plate.

"Hm?"

"Your smile looked genuine, like someone remembering a fond memory."

Sharp-eyed, wasn't he? And I'd let my guard down a little. But, what could I do? "It was merely a happy dream," I said lightly. Because truly, the memories of my past life still warmed me from the inside, whenever they surfaced. Still, it was time to return to my usual smile.

"I see."

Hm? Was that disappointment I detected?

Well, never mind that. I needed to keep my hands moving. As always, the used leaf plates went straight into the fire after they were used. With the last fillet still sizzling in the pan, I used a freshly cleaned fork to fish a small magic stone out of the tartar container and spooned half the sauce onto the plate. The rest, I transferred to another dish.

The stone was imbued with a simple cooling enchantment. Recharge it with a little mana and you could reuse it several times. A handy little item, without which my ingredients would spoil quickly. It was an absolute essential for any outdoor cookout.

"Here you are."

As I offered the plate, he tossed his empty leaf into the fire and accepted the new one without hesitation, digging in at once.

"This is delicious too. You're quite skilled with cooking, Lady Robur."

He didn't seem like the type to shower people with compliments, so it was clear he was enjoying the meal. Which, in turn, pleased the grandmotherly part of me immensely.

But shouldn't he be more cautious as royalty? Not that it mattered at this point. If there had been poison, it'd be far too late by now.

The reason I was concerned, though, was that there had been a rumor circulating not too long ago about a tea party hosted for his younger sister that had supposedly ended with an attempted poisoning. With something like that happening only a few months prior, shouldn't he have been more careful?

Well regardless, I kept my hands moving. I gave the pan a brisk shake, flipping the last, smaller piece of fish with a neat turn. Then I cleaned the empty container and the cooling stone with a quick spell

and tucked everything neatly away.

"You're quite efficient. Do you cook often?" he asked.

"Oh yes. I'm in charge of my team's meals during training, after all."

I placed the last piece of fried fish on the plate, cleaned the pan until it gleamed, and tucked it away. Then, at last, I enjoyed a bite.

Mmm. The tang of the marinated vegetables paired beautifully with the richness of the egg. And between the crispy texture of the breadcrumb coating and the sweet-salty juices of the grilled fish, there was an addictive balance of flavors and textures.

We ate in silence. When the meal was over, we drank our tea, also in silence.

Then, at last, I brought us back to the matter at hand.

"So, then...what exactly are you doing here?"

"I came to help you and the others."

Ah, of course he did. Just like his brother. Trouble seemed to run in the family.

"Isn't that a bit reckless given your position as crown prince?" I asked with a smile, though inside I was quite exasperated.

"I came with Mihail and the Nilty heir," he said. "We are well equipped, and quite capable."

"Oh my, you came with my brother?"

Of course, I knew he had. But why...? In the prince's case, I doubted his goal was truly a rescue. I didn't know what his mission was at the Academy, but I supposed there might be a justifiable reason for him to come out here, depending on how things played out. But his recklessness was hardly praiseworthy.

The Nilty heir, on the other hand, had surely come here to eliminate his brother. And I was sure he would have done the same to the blond squad if he had come across them too.

As for my brother... Why had he come? I suspected that our dear foster sister might have had a hand in all of this somehow, so perhaps he wanted to cover it up? But surely all she had done was instigate Mr. Pedigree's actions?

Surely he hadn't come to save me?

"Yes, he steeled himself for any sacrifice, and came here to save

you.”

Well, that was a surprise. He had.

I was keenly aware that if even one of the three of them hadn’t come, none of them would’ve been able to enter the forest. Yet they had. I almost let out a sigh.

“We should get moving,” the prince added. “Best to travel while the sun’s still high. It’s not guaranteed, but there is a way out from here.”

“Is that so? Then I suppose we should get moving,” I said. I gave him a polite lady’s smile and rose to my feet with a graceful nod.

Ah, right. I needed to ask the little snakelings for a small favor, to have them lure out some frog-type magic beasts on our way back. After all, I still owed Lag, their dear papa, a helping of fried frog. If we timed it right, then I’m sure the Prince of Rags here would be happy to do the hunting for us.

※※Aside: The Making of a Violent Prince and an Introduction (Mihail)※※

Wharton and I grunted in unison as we hit the ground.

Team Peckish and Lady Ujeera were sprawled nearby, though unlike us, they appeared to have been handled with a touch more grace. Probably because they were unconscious.

That damned Poison Box Garden lay once again before us, glowing under the morning light. Evidently, that beautiful dragon had taken it upon himself to eject us from its confines.

I sprang up at once, heart tight, and searched among the collapsed bodies for my younger sister. Predictably, she was nowhere to be seen.

Wait... Where was Regulus?!

Thinking back on it, I thought I'd heard the sharp click of his tongue and then felt the swell of his magic... What in blazes had that idiot gone and done now?

"Mihail," Wharton said warily, "I can't decide whether to call it unexpected or entirely expected, but... I believe that fool..."

"He forced his way into staying behind in that wretched forest," I said.

Wharton sighed. "What a nuisance."

Hearing this slippery snake let out a heavy sigh made it clear just how serious this was. He'd called the crown prince a fool, but frankly, I hadn't the strength to object.

Just then, the figures in the corner of my eye began to stir. One by one, groggy mutters gave way to full awareness, until the entire lot had blinked themselves awake.

The first to spring upright was a broad-shouldered second-year

boy—the leader of Team Peckish, I presumed. He swept his gaze over his team, taking stock, and from the tension in his face I could tell he'd immediately noted my sister was not among them. He swept his gaze across his surroundings once again, this time his eyes met mine.

"Where is Lady Robur?!" he demanded.

That he cared so much for my sister was something I could respect. His voice drew the attention of the others, who followed his gaze and turned to face me.

"Lord Robur...and Lord Nilty too..." murmured Lady Ujeera. There was a spark of understanding in her eyes as she saw the two of us. As the daughter of a grand duke, who was brother of the king himself, she must have understood what it meant to find this slippery eel here. Her expression darkened at once.

"Well, well. A pleasure to see you again, Lady Ujeera. It's been some time. As for the rest of you, how do you do? I am the heir to House Nilty," he said smoothly. "I'm afraid Lady Robur is not with us. As for what transpired in that forest between my former brother and all of you, I believe I can hazard a fairly accurate guess."

His tone remained insufferably aloof, but I saw he was already referring to his brother as a former relation, no longer affiliated with House Nilty. That he withheld his own name was no oversight; these students were commoners or lowborn nobles, after all. Now that he had graduated and stepped fully into his role as heir to one of the Four Great Houses, it was only to be expected for him to maintain a certain distance between himself and people like them.

"When we entered the forest to rescue you, my sister was already nowhere to be found," I said. "I suspect that the rest of you had been put to sleep by some spell. Now, I'd like you to recount exactly what happened after you arrived in the forest."

"Yes, do be thorough," the heir to House Nilty added. "I'd like the full tale, especially concerning my fool of a former brother and his little entourage."

At that, the second-years visibly bristled, an instinctive wariness flashing across their faces. Of course. All of them were from Class D. It was only natural they'd been warned not to speak freely of what

they'd seen.

"Oh dear, was that a misstep?" said Wharton. Even he had to let out a sheepish laugh.

"Wait—please take those words at face value," I said. "We need to know exactly what happened. And you may be laboring under a few misconceptions, so let me clarify: Lord Nilty entered that forest with me to help me rescue my sister Laviange. In the end, we couldn't find her, but I believe that she's still alive. I was under the assumption that she would be traveling with you... Was I mistaken?"

I chose not to speak of the sacred beast or the first prince. There was no need to complicate matters, nor would it do to risk these students, who had no rank to protect them, by involving them with dangerous knowledge. They had teamed up with my sister, despite her limited magical ability and her regrettable reputation, and they now expressed genuine concern for her. I had no intention of putting them in further danger.

And so, we sat, and they recounted the events of the forest in full. By the time they had finished, the sun was already high in the sky.

Afterward, Wharton and I reached the same conclusion.

"You're to return with me to the Academy at once," I said to the tired underclassmen.

"Yes, do be good enough to oblige," Wharton agreed. "I must report to the palace and explain the situation. What a confounded mess this has become."

A rather considerable mess for House Nilty, no doubt. However, Wharton had already coordinated things with the first prince beforehand, so he would be able to explain things far more thoroughly than I could.

I turned over their earlier account again in my mind. As we thought, Enrique and his little band had used the others here as bait. The team leader had explained that they had only survived thanks to the insect repellent tools that my sister had prepared.

I was frankly astonished to learn that her homemade insect repellent tools, when used in the right concentration, could drive off not only B-rank threats, but occasionally even A-rank beasts.

Repellents effective up to C-rank were available commercially, but I had never heard of anything with that level of potency.

Then again, considering the explosive daggers, it was clear that the things my sister crafted had a tendency to exceed common expectations in rather dramatic fashion.

And if that was the case, then there was still a chance she was alive.

"Silence. Those who yet bear a shred of magic are all accounted for. The rest, I care not!"

The sacred beast's words echoed suddenly in my mind.

Apparently, my sister had used her magic for cooking before that incident, but perhaps her magical reserves were so low that she'd slipped under the creature's notice.

Hearing our decision, Lady Ujeera was quick to plead her case. "Wait, please. Lady Robur is still—"

The second-year leader cut off her objection. "What do you intend to do about Lady Robur?" His voice was calm and his face was unreadable, but there was no mistaking the steel in it.

Was this boy truly of the lower nobility? Most would shrink before two heirs of the Four Houses. Even Lady Ujeera, though her family rank was beneath ours, was an upperclassman from Class A, a marquis's daughter, and, by blood, the king's own niece. Yet he had interrupted her without any sign of intimidation.

The other two members of the team merely watched in tense silence, clearly uneasy, yet letting their leader speak. I could see their concern for my sister plainly upon their faces, and so I found no offense in their actions.

"We can't enter the forest again," I said. "Not now."

It was the truth. Even if the first prince himself were here, having already spent a portion of his magic, he wouldn't be in any condition to return.

"I see," the boy said, and then turned heel and began walking off —directly back toward the forest.

Miss Ujeera followed at once, and the two second-years scrambled after them in alarm.

"Wait! Entering that place means death!" Before I realized it, I'd

reached out and seized his shoulder, which was far more solid than one would expect for someone his age.

"Then we're to abandon Lady Robur? When she may still be alive?" he asked, turning only his face toward me. Something in his words made my chest tighten. He had nothing to back what he said, and something about that grated at me.

"There's no other choice," I said, managing to stay calm, though my voice came out lower than I intended.

He sighed. "I see you're cold as ever when it comes to the sister you actually share blood with."

The offhand remark sent a flush of heat straight to my head. "What did you just say?" I growled.

He reached up and seized the hand I'd put on his shoulder, clearly intending to pry it off. We might well have come to blows, had it not been for an absurdly cheerful voice chiming in.

"Oh my. Are we having a quarrel?"

"Of course not," I said, exasperated. "I'm simply trying to stop him—wait. What?"

There, standing calmly beside us as if she'd never been missing at all, was my sister, Laviange.

Strictly speaking, she was peeking out from behind someone else—namely, Regulus Rovenia, the first prince—who stood stiffly in front of her, draped in a robe clearly designed for a woman, both hands burdened with rather large bags.

Peering into the hood pulled low over his face, I caught an unmistakable look of mortification. Without a word, he set both bags gently on the ground, took a discreet step back, and tugged the hood further down over his eyes.

Well, yes. That was probably for the best.

Another robe, this one brownish in color, peeked out from beneath his neckline. Given his height and lean, well-built frame, the garment was stretched nearly to its limit, and the look was—generously speaking—far from regal. It was, in fact, a rather violent mismatch for a crown prince.

Had they teleported here? But I would have detected such a spell. Even now, though, his presence was strangely muted. Upon

closer inspection, the robe itself appeared to be enchanted with some kind of cloaking effect.

"Well, well, it's been a while," Wharton said to the prince with his usual nonchalance. He walked toward the two. "You startled me, showing up so suddenly. And this must be Mihail's little sister, I take it? A pleasure to meet you. I'm—"

"Keep away from my sister," I said, impulsively reaching out and pulling on her arm as I stepped in between the two. He had spoken to her without a hint of deference, and I didn't like it.

"Oh my, how cold. I was merely introducing myself, you know."

"That will be unnecessary." I brushed off the snake's words, but before I could say more, a commotion suddenly broke out behind us.

"Lady Robur!"

In distancing her from the prince and the schemer, I had inadvertently brought my sister closer to Team Peckish. Not that I intended to stop her teammates from approaching; familiar company was probably welcome, after all...yet...

Why, exactly, was the team leader hugging my sister?

I had turned to find her in the arms of her three teammates: The leader was holding her from the front, while the second-in-command and the bespectacled girl held her from behind, effectively sandwiching her in between them. Judging by the muffled squawk she made, rather reminiscent of a frog being stepped on, it seemed they had simply launched themselves at her in their enthusiasm.





And now, by the look of it, she was being rather thoroughly squeezed on both sides.

Lady Ujeera, though technically in the same group, looked as taken aback as I was by their behavior toward a noblewoman—a daughter of one of the Four Great Houses, no less.

"*Ahem...* There, there?"

Gone was Laviange's usual composed, ladylike expression; in its place was a rare look of confusion.

"Are you injured?" the leader asked, finally loosening his arms. The other two released her as well.

"I'm unhurt."

"Are you certain?"

This time, the leader placed a hand gently on her upper arm and began looking her over, scanning for any sign of injury. The calm demeanor he'd carried until moments ago had completely evaporated.

And frankly, as her brother, I found it thoroughly unpleasant.

But she, apparently, didn't seem bothered in the slightest. "Really, I'm fine. But are all of you all right? No sore necks or anything from the way you were sleeping?"

"Sore necks?" the bespectacled girl echoed, blinking in confusion.

Laviange merely gave a soft laugh. "Well then, if nothing's wrong, I'm glad."

She smiled a genuine smile, and I found myself quietly exhaling in relief. No serious injuries, no apparent trauma from any encounters with those dreadful insects.

"Well, well, I hate to intrude on such a touching reunion," Wharton interjected, "but might we ask how exactly you managed to appear here?"

"Oh my." With a perfectly polished smile, my sister gently ushered her teammates behind her and stepped forward. "And who might you be? It seems I've neglected to offer you a proper greeting."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Robur. I am Wharton Nilty—by blood, the elder brother of the fool Enrique, now formerly of House Nilty."

"I see. I am Laviange Robur. The sister of this gentleman here,

Mihail Robur, in all aspects.”

In replying thus, my sister acknowledged Wharton’s implied statement: Enrique had been cast out from House Nilty.

Epilogue: The Zombie High of Finishing a Novel

"Hee hee hee... Ha ha... Haa ha ha ha ha ha!"

At long last, it was done!

The early summer sun streamed gently through the window—or at least, it would have been gentle for anyone who hadn't spent the last several nights in a prolonged fight against sleep. To my bleary eyes, it was practically blinding.

I held up the freshly completed stack of pages in both hands, raising them high above my head like a war trophy. Now, for the rest of my villainous cackle!

"The author Laviange shall live on forever! Haa ha ha—"

"Yes, yes, that's quite enough of that."

With a soft thump, something fluffy thwacked into the back of my head. That "something" being the luxurious tail of the nine-tailed fox sacred beast, Cas.

Of course, his tail lacked any real destructive power, though it was devastatingly adorable. Perhaps even fatally adorable.

"Lavi, I know that maniacal laughter is part of your postnovel ritual, but honestly, your face is a horror this time. The bags under your eyes are criminal. Wash up and go to bed, will you?"

"Ah—!"

No sooner had Cas said it than he snatched the manuscript from my hands and floated it up to the ceiling, well out of reach, letting it bob there.

"Cas?! Let me revel in the moment a little longer!" I cried. "Things have been so busy since we returned from the forest, you know! And yet, this burning moe-fueled passion just wouldn't let me rest! It smacked my backside and chained me to the desk, yelling, 'Write, woman, write!' And now look! Three books! In one month!

Let me bask, you tyrant! Let me baaaaask!”

“Your postwriting high is *so* annoying*,* Lavi! And from up here, you look like something out of one of those zombie films from the other world. Tone it down! I’ll handle the proofreading! The other sacred beasts are all looking forward to reading it, so don’t ruin it for everyone! It’s your first proper day off in ages! Now *go to bed*!”

“Oh, how cruel...”

My resident sacred beast had no mercy...

“But I can be the first to read it, right?” Cas added, floating down to look up at me with his huge eyes. “Is it wrong to want to be my beloved’s first?”

“*Guh*—your cuteness is out of control! What is that head tilt?! Did you actually float down just so you could look *up* at me with those big watery eyes?! It’s divine! That’s not just cute, it’s *sacredly* cute! You’re going to kill me! Ugh, fine, if you’re that excited about it, how could I possibly say no?”

Was I really *that* easy...? Apparently so! But how could I *not* give in? He was a living snowball of fluff, pleading with those round little eyes! And those nine silky tails, swishing ever so gently behind him, you know?

The happiness of His Floofiness was the happiness of his humble servant! And that servant, of course, was me.

As I obediently shuffled off to wash my face, Cas sprawled himself across the new white sofa. I had, of course, chosen a white sofa intentionally. One day, I would sit beside him and pretend not to notice, then suddenly pounce and bury my face in that glorious belly fluff—

“Lavi, your face is *deeply unsettling* right now,” Cas said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Haa ha ha ha! Whatever do you mean?” Oops. A cackle slipped out. Perhaps the high from earlier hadn’t quite worn off after all.

Still, calling a delicate young maiden a “zombie” and “unsettling”—honestly, how rude could you get? Even if, deep down, said maiden had the soul of a grandma going on a century...

But wait. Those damp little eyes of his were *definitely* trying to lure me in. But no. No. I mustn’t give in. I couldn’t bear it if he said

he was going to stop living with me again.

I pulled myself together and made my way to the washroom. The newly renovated plumbing meant that, wonder of wonders, turning the faucet actually yielded water. No more leaks, no more doors falling off their hinges. Barely a month had passed since our return from the forest, but my brother's repairs had been both prompt and generous. Naturally, the whole log house was now protected by anti-theft and preservation magic.

As a delightful bonus, he'd even gone ahead and added a fence and gate around the house, enchanted so that no one could enter without my personal permission. At first, he tried to install an absurdly secure gate, but I'd put a stop to that. What we'd ended up with was a charming wrought-iron fence and gate, just like the ones from those quaint little gardens in the other world. Quite darling, don't you think?

Knock. Knock, knock, knock.

Oh my, that was a very particular knock. *I believe it is my brother at the door.*

※※※※

"Do help yourself," I said as I set down two guest cups with a clink. The cups bore a design of stars scattered across a night sky. My brother had given them to me to mark the completion of repairs to my annex.

I sat down across from my two guests and placed my own well-worn mug before me. The table we sat at had recently been replaced at my brother's insistence and was now, regrettably, wide enough to sit three people.

"Thank you," said the first prince after taking a sip. "Your tea is just as good as I remember."

"It is an honor," I replied, offering him my usual ladylike smile.

"Though today's tea tastes sweeter than what you served in the forest," he added. "Like honey, yet the tea isn't too thick."

"Indeed, Your Highness. I've steeped the leaves with edible dried flower petals soaked beforehand in honey. I thought it might suit the

both of you—you both look rather tired, if I may say so."

My brother smiled at that. "I see," he said.

I am sorry, brother, but that was a lie. I was the one who was tired. The moment I had heard his idiosyncratic knock, I had topped myself off with a minor recovery spell. It was working, for the moment, but my stamina bar was ticking down again, and I was sure my sleep counter was ticking up.

Still, I felt sure I'd just about managed to shake off the zombie face that Cas so kindly pointed out earlier.

(I could sense a faint presence from behind the curtains of the bedroom. Cas was probably stretched out on the bed, proofreading my novel.)

"I appreciate your kindness," the prince said. "May I speak of the reason I came today?"

"Of course," I said, although I felt something was off about the prince coming here with my brother.

"First, regarding the matter at hand: We still don't know who tampered with the teleportation array, nor what their ultimate aim might have been. We've looked into those linked to the incident—Enrique, formerly of House Nilty; Pechulim Lunach; and Mightycarna Twyla—but found no trace of the culprit. That said, it's clear that the reason those three acted so foolishly was *you*. Other witnesses who were with you in the forest have testified that the trio were targeting you specifically."

Hmm? They were targeting me? I tilted my head, genuinely puzzled.

"Were they? I don't seem to remember anything of the sort. Perhaps someone intervened before it got that far?" I mused. "Or maybe it was just blended in with the usual hostility, given they were involved with the second prince. In any case, there was no real harm done, so I hardly gave it much thought. It all felt terribly trivial at the time."

"I see," the prince said after a moment. He then fell into an odd silence.

On the other hand, my brother remained silent, but his expression screamed, *What in the world is she saying?* He looked at

me like I was some incomprehensible creature.

"Well, let's set that aside for now," the prince finally continued. "Of the three, only Enrique made direct contact with whoever tampered with the array. Unfortunately, the only clue we have is that it was a woman wearing a hood. With no other details to go on, the investigation has reached something of a dead end."

"Well then, there's nothing more to be done," I said.

"Now, regarding your fiancé—or rather, the second prince. He entered the forest after you, accompanied by one Heinz Asche, formerly one of the candidates for the position of his aide."

Ah yes, those two. If he was bringing *them* up, something must have happened.

"As a result," the prince continued, "Heinz Asche has lost both the Academy's recommendation for him to join a knightly order and a separate offer of direct recruitment from the knights themselves. The head of House Asche has informed the royal family that, following his graduation, the boy will not be permitted to claim his house name until he achieves some manner of personal distinction. This decision is to be made public."

Well, well. I'd expected something like that to happen. Between this and the way the heir of House Nilty discarded his brother without a second thought... Well, what a merciless little world we lived in.

I glanced toward my brother, who met my eyes.

"He failed to stop his charge, who, let's remember, is high in the line of succession, from marching straight into danger," my brother said. "Worse, he didn't even alert the castle. Instead, he went along with it, exposed the prince to harm, and let him come away with a wound significant enough to leave a scar. Yet he himself remained unscathed. No one could call that conduct befitting a bodyguard. The outcome was inevitable."

"Indeed it was," I said as I nodded along to my brother's remarks, though inwardly I let out a sigh. After all, the only reason not a trace of that nasty burn remained on his body was because *I* had healed it.

If I hadn't retained my memories from my past life, I, too, would

have thought this outcome was inevitable. But, in my past life, I had been blessed with an ordinary life, loved by my family and loving them in turn, before passing away at a respectable age for a Japanese woman, full of gratitude for a life well lived. Compared to the life before that, it had been a blessing. And perhaps it was because I'd known such warmth that I now felt guilt and pity toward the boy, who was the same age as my grandchildren had been.

"Of course, neither the path of knighthood nor other avenues are entirely closed to him," the prince went on. "I've spoken with him, and he hasn't given up on becoming a knight. He still has time to apply for the general entrance examination. And though he's been forbidden from using the Asche name, he hasn't been disowned. Should he prove his merit, there's every possibility he'll be allowed to claim it once more."

Oh my, had he picked up on my mood? The prince was making an effort to soften the blow, but surely he didn't believe the boy's path forward would be so simple with his present skills. That's why he'd delicately hinted at other options, wasn't it?

"And now, regarding the three main perpetrators. Enrique confessed to plotting harm against you, and to scheming to have Lady Sienna named as the second prince's bride. He died shortly thereafter. House Nilty had already deemed his conduct, both within the Academy and beyond, unbecoming of a noble son and beyond correction. He was struck from the family register prior to the incident. Our investigation found no evidence that House Nilty itself was involved, and thus no punishment will be levied against them."

"Quite so," I said.

I looked at my brother and saw a slight flicker in his violet eyes. I was sure that he had struck some deal with the prince and House Nilty to enter the forest and rescue me.

"Though Enrique gave the orders, Pechulim Lunach, who was central to causing the teleportation incident, and Mightycarna Twyla will receive severe punishment. They attempted harm against a noblewoman of one of the Four Great Houses, after all."

"Quite so," I said again.

There was no option but to agree. Those two had confused the

Academy's sheltered hierarchy with the real world outside its gates. But I wondered if the prince understood that it had been his own half brother's actions that had paved the path for them to do it.

"However, Lunach and Twyla were both attacked by insect beasts in the forest and severely injured. Though the second prince and the Asche boy managed to rescue them, by the time the knights arrived, Twyla had succumbed to her wounds. Lunach survived, but only just."

I see. So the blonde girl had chosen death, while the boy had clung to life. The prince granted their wish, and his tagalong followed in turn.

Fools, all of them.

"Pechulim Lunach has already been sent to a monastery. He won't be returning to public life. He now suffers from lasting physical disabilities, and the poison from the insects has left his appearance...considerably altered. Both his and Mightycarna Twyla's families submitted requests to have them formally expelled from their houses, but they were denied. One cannot simply disown them after the fact. Instead, the heads of their houses have been ordered to pay whatever reparations you see fit. Whether monetary or otherwise, they have been ordered to accommodate your wishes to the fullest extent possible."

I see. So this was House Nilty's version of the lizard cutting off its tail. I kept my usual smile in place, but I found myself speechless.

They were outright dumping all of the responsibility on me. *What reparations I see fit? Accommodate me to the fullest extent possible?* He made it sound like he was honoring my feelings, while slyly pushing me to center stage. Did he understand who I was? I held the patent on incompetence and had built a life on a fine tradition of shirking responsibility and fleeing at the first sign of trouble.

Honestly, was he quite well in the head?

I glanced between the two pretty gentlemen in front of me, trying to gauge what exactly they expected from my response.

One pair of eyes was crimson, trying to weigh something unseen.

The other, violet and...expectant, perhaps?

And suddenly I remembered. Goodness gracious, how could I have forgotten? I was the inept noble daughter. My brother, on the other hand, was the exceptionally capable heir to House Robur. They might have lobbed the responsibility at me, but all I needed to do was receive, toss, and let my brother spike it home! He was made for this.

I used to play community volleyball for mothers in my past life, thank you very much.

"Brother dear," I said sweetly, "what would you consider the wisest course of action?"

"Hmm, let me think..." he replied, visibly pleased to be asked, and began answering with no small enthusiasm.

The prince, on the other hand, looked faintly displeased. Oh, what a pity. I don't know what he expected from a dyed-in-the-wool incompetent like me, but I was making a glorious, full-throttle escape from all of it.

Now, to sum up my brother's suggestions, they were more or less everything I'd hoped for.

First: Compensation was to be paid not only to me, but to every one of my teammates and, of course, dear Mina. Regardless of whether they were common-born or low nobility, the amount must not be unfairly reduced. The thing that had bothered me most was that the compensation had been focused solely on me. I didn't like the omission.

Second: House Nilty had failed in its duty to notify the families affiliated with them of Enrique's expulsion. That omission directly led to the blond duo following his orders. Therefore, a portion of the compensation should come from House Nilty itself.

The families of the blond duo would likely seize the chance to shift the burden, and Nilty would have fewer excuses to withhold cooperation. And with this arrangement, House Robur could subtly remind House Nilty that it was aware of their connections and watching them closely.

Though truthfully, this had always been the predicted outcome. After all, my brother had conspired with the first prince and the Nilty heir to enter the forest together.

"As expected of you, dear brother," I said. "That all sounds quite reasonable. Ah, but do keep in mind that the compensation will be coming from multiple high-ranking noble houses, yes? I expect to remain in Class D going forward, so I'd be very glad if no one were to make the mistake of offering me an amount significantly different from the others, thereby souring future relations with my classmates."

"Understood. I'll have the royal family ensure it's handled accordingly."

"Thank you ever so much."

A modest request, surely well within expectations for a selfish, talentless noblewoman.

As I was mentally patting myself on the back for a job well done, my brother cast a rather stern look toward the prince.

"Your Highness, what of the Academy's responsibility in all this? Naturally, the oversight of the teleportation array must be reviewed. But the investigation also revealed that several students from Classes A and B, who are supposedly the top-ranked students in their years, deliberately assaulted members of Class D under the guise of training accidents. Regardless of how she views it, as a brother to one of the victims, I will not let the matter pass unpunished."

Oh dear, and here I was thinking I had left that to be uncovered by the Asche boy.

"Of course," the prince replied, "none of this would have happened had the teleportation array not been tampered with. While the inspection results don't quite justify calling it negligence, the management method will be revised going forward. Now, Lady Robur, have you seen this document before?"

He handed me a piece of paper: a copy of the list of high-risk individuals. A record of every currently enrolled student likely to endanger others during joint combat exercises. A graduation gift from the senior class back when we were first-years, offered in gratitude for our assistance during a joint research project, and so this year's new students weren't included.

"Ah yes, this was passed along to me. As you know, Class D is

composed primarily of commoners and lower-ranking nobles, and some students, due to both class and academic standing, do look down on us. It's always been that way. The Academy is a microcosm of noble society, after all. As long as the Academy is a royal institution and this kingdom upholds a hierarchical class system, I doubt it's something that can be eliminated entirely."

I had hesitated, not knowing how much I should divulge, but then I recalled the sorrowful expressions on the faces of the graduates when they had looked at me, a high-ranking noble and the second prince's fiancée.

Yes, I bore some responsibility in all this. Tedious, but the unfortunate truth.

"I suspect the reason these issues didn't surface more obviously in the past," I continued, "is because the royals enrolled at the time made a point of managing the student body to a certain extent."

For just a moment, the prince's eyes wavered. He must've realized what I was getting at.

"As I understand it, past royals made it quite clear through their own conduct that to scorn another openly, or worse, to harm them, on the grounds of inferior birth or lesser intellect was nothing less than shameful for those who presume to stand above others."

My brother looked at the ground. As well he should. As noble sons and daughters, we ought to follow that example.

"Yet it seems that after Your Highness graduated," I said to the prince, "many no longer saw such conduct as shameful. On the contrary, their behavior grew worse and incidents resulting in actual injury became more frequent. That's likely why the graduates compiled this list, out of concern that the situation in Class D would deteriorate even further. As you no doubt know, in joint extermination exercises, we fight magical beasts. Even minor incidents can have fatal consequences."

Oh my. Now both of these handsome young men looked utterly chastened. Good. My point got through, it seemed.

"Well, more importantly, what I'd like to ask is how the Academy plans to treat our absences following our return from the forest," I said, shifting the tone of the conversation. "We were instructed to

rest, yes, but what of our attendance records? I've been quietly aiming for perfect attendance, you know."

"Of all things... Perfect attendance..." my brother muttered, burying his face in his hands. Heavens, whatever for?

"Indeed," I said cheerfully. "It's not as if you need my opinion on the matter of the list. Seeing as it's in your possession, I assume that you've already been looking into it, correct? During a royal's enrollment, the management of student conduct is the responsibility of said royal. Surely it would be best if His Highness the Second Prince does something about it while he's still enrolled."

"Why is that?" my brother asked.

Oh my, he still didn't get it, did he, bless his heart. The prince, on the other hand, had gone pale.

"Well," I said, still smiling, "who do you suppose is responsible for such matters when there are no royals enrolled above first year?"

"The eldest enrolled member who belongs to one of the Four Houses..."

My brother's face blanched. Exactly. Come next year, there would be no members of the Four Houses in any higher year than myself.

"As for that list, I've no idea who holds the original anymore. Copies abound. And I daresay the compilers would be rather difficult to track down."

They wouldn't be able to pin the blame on the graduates. By the time the burden fell to me, most of them would be long gone. Half of them had already entered the dangerous world of adventurers and mercenaries.

"And surely," I added, "you don't think I am capable of handling such a thing? Even the royals before me couldn't fully contain it, and now it's grown worse." Putting on a face of mild distress, I gazed at the prince, one of the royals in question, and watched as he let out a long, weary sigh. My brother, too, was now visibly frowning.

"Perhaps," I said, ever so innocently, "it would be best to create a situation where someone else will be forced to deal with it. After all, we were lucky to come out unscathed this time, but the next incident might result in actual deaths. And fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, it's far too late to

eradicate the copies of that list. The only reason it hasn't spread further is because the Class D students in each year have kept their mouths shut and managed the information with surprising discipline."

"What? You mean it's not just the second-years that have it?" my brother asked, visibly shocked.

Why was he so surprised by that?

"Class D students tend to enter working-class professions after graduation," I explained. "Their sense of camaraderie is far stronger and more bound by obligation than what you'd find among royals or highborn nobles. It might not stand out under normal circumstances, but when something happens to one of their own...well, that solidarity becomes a force to reckon with. So before a serious accident occurs, or before someone like me, a talentless, irresponsible noblewoman with a knack for fleeing from any kind of hard work, gets handed the whole problem and throws it to the wind...wouldn't it be best if the royal family and the Four Houses stepped in and used their considerable influence to contain the issue while they still can?"

It was quite simple, really. The reason I'd never counted on that Asche boy to solve anything was because I'd already known the most likely outcome. When someone like me, who lacked the usual pride of a member of the Four Houses, became the eldest member of the high nobility enrolled, they could very well toss that entire document off the Academy rooftop.

And if the wind happened to carry it into town, well...that would be most unfortunate, wouldn't it?

The prince let out a long, weary sigh.

"As I thought, you keep your claws well hidden, don't you?" he said with a faintly bitter smile.

"Oh no, Your Highness. As a student in the magical tools course, I always keep my nails trimmed and blunted," I replied demurely. "So then, what about our absences? How were they officially recorded?"

"We're back to that, are we?" my brother asked.

"Oh, brother, don't be like that," I said, laughing lightly. "Surely you've heard? Those with perfect attendance are granted the

privilege of enjoying three servings of Miss Marie's Triple-S Special. She's known as the S-Rank Cafeteria Lady, you know. Quite a number of Class D students across the school are competing for it."

"What in the world is that?" they both said in unison. How charming.

"I had it once over spring break," I said, nodding. "It was delicious. The dining hall stays open for dorm students and those taking supplementary lessons, you see. That's the best time to savor it without interruption."

"You ate it?" Once again, the two of them spoke at once. They really got on well, didn't they?

"I'm biding my time, waiting for the right moment to claim the remaining two servings. At the moment, nothing else matters to me."

"Your absence due to medical recovery and questioning related to the incident has been recorded as present," the prince answered at last.

"Well, that's excellent news."

Why did he take so long to tell me? If he had the answer from the beginning, there was no reason for him to be so dreadfully dramatic about it.

"By the way," the prince said, "are you not wondering about your fiancé, the second prince?"

"Not in the slightest. Compared to the perfect attendance award, he's a trivial matter."

He paused. "I see."

What was that look for? He looked like he'd just remembered something profoundly unfortunate.

"We both understand ours is a nominal engagement at best," I added.

"I see... And here I was, wasting time fretting over it..." He let out a sigh. "No, never mind. Tell me—have you realized the real reason I came here today? For me, at least, it's the main point of this entire visit."

Oh dear. That sigh just now didn't bode well, and the prince's tone had taken a turn toward the ominous.

"And what reason might that be?" I asked.

The topics we'd discussed so far certainly didn't require for someone of the first prince's standing to come in person. The complete lack of discussion about the second prince had also been bothering me. Had he been trying to avoid the topic?

"First of all, the second prince bears serious responsibility in this whole matter. He repeatedly and publicly belittled you, without just cause. Well," he added with a pointed look, "his claims that you were avoiding your studies weren't entirely baseless."

Oh, come now. I'd been listening quietly and politely, hadn't I? Was it really necessary to clarify that point?

Not that I could argue with it.

"Even so, he carried on with that behavior for far too long. Perhaps even abnormally so. And as that behavior continued unchecked, some began to believe that your noble status meant nothing and that you were fair game. His conduct also served to encourage discriminatory remarks and prejudice toward Class D as a whole. There were even those who justified hurling insults at their own fiancées, under the guise of mimicking the second prince's treatment of you." He sighed and shook his head. "After my graduation, such arrogance became commonplace. And that change was influenced by the second prince's unacceptable behavior, as a figure who stands at the very peak of the social hierarchy. And in the end, he struck you in public, and caused you real injury. His decision to enter the Poison Box Garden to 'rescue' you was, in truth, born of self-preservation. An attempt to lighten the burden of his past actions by making a show of repentance."

Yes, well, that sounded about right. Our relationship had been distant—no, that was giving it too much credit. Nonexistent was more accurate. The idea that he would rush into that cursed forest to save me had always been a stretch.

Though it did seem like his foolish attendant had bought into that shallow excuse. Easily fooled, wasn't he?

"And following this incident," the prince continued, "Duke Robur submitted a formal demand for the annulment of your engagement."

Hm. He did? Now there was a surprise. What could've prompted

such a change of heart on my father's part? And a demand instead of a request?

"It was a demand, not a request?" my brother asked.

Great minds think alike.

"Yes. However, the prince's mother, the second consort, objected."

Of course she did. She had always been trying to force us together. Frankly, under normal circumstances, this engagement should have been canceled from their side long ago.

"There was...considerable dispute."

The prince's gaze turned distant. Judging from his expression, he'd been caught up in quite the political traffic accident. Poor thing.

"In the end, she decided to formally request the annulment from their side."

"I accept it with the utmost gratitude," I replied at once.

"That was quick..."

"Oh dear, does that disappoint you?" I asked.

"Please wait a moment," he said hesitantly. "There's something else."

Uh-oh. That response set off my internal escape alarm loud and clear. Every instinct in me screamed to flee now.

My brother, bless him, stepped in. "Wouldn't it be fine if we simply left it at that?"

"No," said the prince firmly. "I need you to hear it. If you won't, I will cry."

"Why?!" we exclaimed in unison.

My brother looked at me with a horrified expression, his eyes pleading with me. I had no idea what was happening, but I tried to signal to him that I was now in emergency mode.

"I've long held feelings for you."

The prince rose to his feet and stepped toward me. Come to think of it, he had hinted at meeting me long ago in the forest, hadn't he? Perhaps I should have made a bit more effort to dig up that memory...

That fleeting thought had barely passed when he gently took my hand—and then, dropped to one knee...

Wait...was he proposing...?

"I would like you to be my fiancée," he said solemnly. "And, in time, my wife."

Oh, my. When someone with a face like his did that, the whole scene really was rather picturesque. I could practically see sparkles in the air around him.

But no. I would not be swept away.

"Is this a command?" I asked. "Or a request?"

"The duke has stated that your will is to be respected," he replied. "And my father, His Majesty the King, has said he will follow suit."

My goodness! I'd never had the thought that father was a beautiful man until this moment. The rush of relief had me soaring, but who could blame me?

The answer was obvious! Let him sparkle, I would not be swayed!

"I, of course, refuse."

"An immediate answer... May I cry?"

"Do it somewhere else, if you must."

I gave him my most radiant smile. The prince, though not quite reduced to tears, drooped considerably as he returned to his seat.

Perhaps I should base the hero of my next novel on a dejected and thoroughly ragged prince...

"I see," he said. "Well, I'll simply propose again. The duke has granted me the right."

He'd already recovered?! That was unreasonably fast.

"What kind of right is that...?" my brother asked. I wondered the same...

My fleeting admiration for father had now plummeted spectacularly. The volatility of his stock price was frankly exhausting.

"Just to confirm," I said, "aside from preserving the royal bloodline, did you have any particular reason for doing this?"

"None whatsoever," he said. "I don't even care about bloodlines. Before we even consider your lack of any magical potential, your habit of fleeing from everything would normally outweigh your good pedigree. I'm only following my heart."

He really said something quite terrible with a straight face.

And what did he find appealing about someone with such terrible habits? His taste was clearly atrocious. Not that I could argue with it.

"Do you know why the second consort was so insistent on keeping the engagement intact?" my brother asked the prince.

"That, I don't know. When she heard of my intention to propose to you, she lost her composure. A rare thing for her."

He frowned. "Why?"

"No idea."

The two of them tilted their heads in confusion. I tilted mine along with them.

Hmm. The second consort, also known simply as Her Highness the Princess, was from a cadet branch of House Asche. The daughter of a count, if I remembered correctly. She was also the mother of the third prince, who was set to enroll in the Academy the coming year.

"More importantly, why are you so taken with my sister, Your Highness?" my brother asked. "Have you two met somewhere before?"

"Well..." Oh? He was staring straight at me. And just as suddenly, he looked away. "It's a secret. Now then, regarding your former fiancé, the second prince..."

"I'm not interested."

"At least hear me out."

I sighed.

"I suppose, if I must."

It was a royal request, after all.

"You look so thoroughly displeased... You really have no interest at all, do you? So what Sienna said was completely off the mark, then," my brother muttered.

Brother, you're letting your thoughts slip out.

"Ahem." The prince cleared his throat and carried valiantly on.

To summarize: The second prince would be taking a leave of absence for the foreseeable future to recover both physically and mentally. And it appeared that he did actually need to.

Physically, he'd been left with mild paralysis and pain from insect

venom, along with some scarring and discoloration of the skin. The ordeal with the blond duo and his brush with death had apparently left him in a state of shock and shaken his self-belief. Having seen the consequences firsthand, he finally grasped just how foolish and irresponsible his own behavior had been.

He had apparently accepted the annulment of engagement solemnly and without protest. He'd even agreed to begin searching for a new fiancée after his convalescence, though it seemed he'd specifically asked that my dear foster sister not be considered a candidate.

A pity. They made for a lovely match.

As for his former aide, he had apparently written a very earnest letter to both His Majesty the King and the head of House Asche, taking full responsibility and begging for leniency. Neither of them had bothered to respond.

Beyond that, he hadn't taken any meaningful action. If one were to be blunt, all he did was send a few letters of apology and call it a day. Predictable, really.

Finally, in a rather unexpected twist, the first prince had been granted a special appointment: He would act as supervisor across all year levels and serve openly as a royal envoy assigned to the Academy. Under direct royal authority, he'd be investigating those named in the list passed around Class D and begin issuing official judgments soon.

That meant one of the assignments I had given to the Asche boy was no longer to be his burden—there was only one task for him left. Good luck, dear tagalong!

"Since I'm now head supervisor for all year levels, we'll likely have more chances to speak," he told me. "If anything happens at the Academy, don't hesitate to rely on me."

"Yes, of course," I replied.

From school doctor to supervisor—it was an incredible promotion. There was no need for him to worry, though. I had every intention of staying far, far out of his way. Of course, I answered with my usual smile and a polite nod.

"Well then," my brother said, stepping in gracefully, "it seems

you've said what you needed to say to my sister. I believe it's time for you to take your leave. Laviange, you must be exhausted."

My brother had been unusually thoughtful today. It was lovely.

"Yes, quite. It's all been a bit much to process..."

I slipped easily into a troubled expression. Not entirely dishonest, as I did have work to get back to, and the effects of my magical self-doping had long since worn off. I only hoped the zombie face hadn't returned.

"I see," the prince said with a sigh. "My proposal was sincere, but I suppose making it right after your annulment must have caused confusion. And I apologize for watching from the sidelines all this time, and never stepping in to shield you from my brother's cruelty."

Oh my, both he and my brother were looking at the floor gloomily now. Could they kindly go ahead and take this sad little act elsewhere?

"It was I who asked the Academy to remain uninvolved," I said. "Even if Your Highness was there, you were still officially a member of the Academy."

"But, I could have..." my brother began.

"I already told you there was no need to bother you, brother," I said, cutting him off. "All you ever heard were inaccurate rumors about me being obsessed with my position as the prince's fiancée. Given the circumstances, it was hardly your fault. And in any case, I've already received compensation for all of that. There's no need to dredge it up again."

"But," they both began. I no longer found their synchronicity appealing. My drowsiness was peaking, and with it, my patience was wearing thin.

"You're being so insistent," I said, still smiling. "Especially you, brother. I've told you before that dragging out apologies only makes them feel insincere. And now, I'm tired. If you're quite finished, then I'd appreciate your leaving."

Still smiling, I swept forward, grasped them both by the wrist, yanked them to their feet, and gave their backs a firm push toward the door.

"Wait—hold on—!"

One last shove, and they were out. The door slammed shut behind them.

Noblemen were weak to that sort of tactic.

Their footsteps receded. Good. They wouldn't be coming back.

"Now then... Cas?" I called. "Is the proofreading done?"

With that last bit of drama neatly wrapped up, all that remained was to check the edited manuscript and deliver it to the publisher. Then, and only then, would I be free to collapse into a well-earned, glorious slumber.

Haa ha ha ha ha ha!

Ralf's Recollections

"Ralf, dear, here's the lunch I promised. A little something to tide you over until noon."

"Ah, right. Fried frog and grilled catfish, was it?"

"Hee hee, that's right. I think it turned out rather well."

The smile she gave me wasn't the prim-and-proper one she wore at the Academy. No, this was just a girl's smile, plain and simple.

She'd heard I was heading out on a quest for a few days, so she went out of her way to bring food all the way to the Adventurers' Guild. I knew she was only stopping by to drop something off for the leader of her team while she ran her errands. Still, I wasn't about to pretend it didn't make me happy.

The girl in question, Lady Laviange Robur, had, not too long ago, survived a stint in the Poison Box Garden, a forest which had boasted a proud track record of zero returnees—until now, that is. She'd returned without a scratch, too, thanks to her collection of magical tools and that encyclopedic brain of hers.

Instead of panicking, she'd spent her time in the forest fishing for catfish. Midway through, she somehow roped in the first prince with lunch bait, and had him hunt a frog beast, butcher it on the spot, and lug the meat back for her. When I first heard that, I couldn't believe it. That girl was as ruthless—pardon, resourceful—as ever when it came to delegating.

It had been almost a year since I started running in a team with her. Looking back on my own experiences, I couldn't help feeling a bit of sympathy for the prince.

A memory came to mind from just after we'd enrolled at the Academy. We'd had a disastrous first joint combat exercise, which was followed by a makeup training session off campus. Three teams were present, all sent to a salt-damaged area I knew all too well. The terrain had been wide enough that we weren't likely to run into

the other teams, which I figured was intentional.

No instructors had come along. Each team had been handed off to a newly minted adventurer, barely out of training, to serve as a chaperone.

It hadn't been some cushy, safety-first exercise. It had been more of a brutal, real-world prep course, meant for Class D students like us, the ones expected to take on dangerous work after graduation. The salt-blighted lands hadn't been chosen at random either; our mission had doubled as a cleanup effort for the magical beasts that had started breeding in the area and interfering with ongoing research.

The Guild had agreed to help, assigning greenhorn adventurers to lead us. Their goal? To give their own rookies some hands-on experience while providing a minimal safety net for us.

Naturally, the whole thing was about as close to real combat as you could get. And yes, people could get hurt. Badly.

The first joint training exercise with Lady Robur on our team had been a mess. A humiliating one. But what really stuck with me was the later field exercise. I imagined Lauren and Kartika would feel the same.

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Lauren had slipped between the trees, and was now peering into the fog.

"I've never...seen a magical beast like that before..." he whispered.

I peeked out from behind a tree. I, on the other hand, *had* seen the massive beast now lumbering calmly through the woods before—back when I was seven and a hurricane had hit the land where my family estate stood.

Hurricanes weren't rare in places like this. They came and went with the seasons. But for some reason, whenever one struck, magical beasts would start showing up in the aftermath. The parish priests said it was because the land was tainted by excess mana, but no one really knew the cause.

Usually, the Church sent someone to purify the land before anything serious happened. But when a region lacked income and couldn't afford the proper donations, they always found some excuse to delay their dispatch.

Hurricanes would, unfortunately, often hit multiple territories at once, making it difficult for the royal army to cover them all. The magical beasts took advantage of that to spread before anyone could stop them. In the end, it was the common folk who were the ones that paid the price—either with their livelihoods, or their lives.

This hurricane had been no different. Beasts had pushed deep into populated areas, and the nearby lords had to band together to protect the villages.

The beast in front of us now was a B-rank beast, the same kind I'd seen when I was young—that one had been dangerous enough that my father and several capable warriors needed to band together to take it down. There was no way our team could handle it. I hadn't expected something this strong to be this close to a village. Even with wards in place, it was only a matter of time before someone got attacked.

We'd already realized that something was off before this point. We'd been ordered to stay put as the rookie adventurer acting as our chaperone had gone to scout ahead.

We needed to bail and regroup fast.

Behind me, Kartika was crouched low and trembling, barely holding herself together. If it came to it, I'd grab both her and Lauren and run for it using body reinforcement magic.

Lady Robur had set her bag down at her feet and was peeking out from behind the tree. A little too far out, in fact. It was dangerous.

I sighed and slid my broken sword into its sheath. We'd gotten lucky and caught it off guard, otherwise none of us would have made it to cover in time. Still, a sword like this didn't come cheap.

As I shook my head to myself, Lady Robur spoke to me.

"Ralf! Do you see those C-rank fire lizards scattered in the brush over there? Let's lure them over and catch them alive!" she whispered excitedly. "Don't worry! There are only about twenty of

them. They're timid creatures, especially when something bigger's stomping around. If we work together and use the right tools, we can catch them with minimal injuries!"

"Why...?"

What the hell was she talking about?

This girl was notorious for having low magical aptitude, zero talent, and grades that made people question whether she was really a duke's daughter. Did she not grasp the situation we were in?

"Because that's a mythical ammonite—or, no, an amoi snail! And if we want to eat it properly, we've got to do this right!"

"Eat it...?"

Was I imagining things, or was she talking about eating that thing? Was it even possible to eat it?

She laughed.

"It's enormous, so even after we eat our share, we can donate the rest to the orphanage! The texture's got that perfect springy-chewy bite! Plus, if we roast the cuttlebone while it's still fresh, it'll make a blade sharper and more durable than the one you just broke! There's definitely a well-formed magic stone inside it too. Perfect for enchanting weapons!" She was practically buzzing with excitement. "And that snaillike shell? It's actually a giant seashell—roast it, splash it with water, and it becomes lime! Mix that into the soil, and you've got instant fertilizer! You can even make soap out of it, so it'll help the orphanage earn a little pocket money too! It's like killing...uh...like twenty birds with one stone. Anyways, it's an incredibly useful monster, that's the point!"

Lady Robur, her dark blue eyes sparkling with excitement, looked for all the world like a normal girl her age. Frankly, the effect had enough charm to knock a man flat.

It was no wonder Lauren, who'd been frozen stiff a moment ago, was slowly turning a bright red.

And speaking of that, Kartika, you need to get a grip. That face of yours is starting to look dangerously familiar. It's the same look you see on those Academy girls, and the occasional lad, who spend their lunch breaks nose-deep in the latest trashy romance, grinning like wolves over some steamy battle-meets-ballroom scene.

I should know. I was stopping myself from making the same face.

"Come now, Lauren! Let us go bait the fire lizards!"

"Wait—what? Bait?!"

"Yes, exactly! I've blended powdered butterfly scales and a few other delights just to a fire lizard's liking. Behold!"

And before he could protest, she darted in, completely ignoring any possible objections, and pressed her body against his. Then she uncorked a bottle—when the hell had she grabbed that?—and upended it over both their heads. A cloud of shimmering powder rained down, catching the light like fairy dust.

"W-Wait!" Lauren exclaimed. "You're covered in it too, Lady Robur!"

"Well of course. We're going to be bait together, aren't we?"

"Why do you sound so delighted about that?!"

It was a fair question. She was visibly elated.

"Because it's been ages since I've had a proper cut of that meat! Don't worry! The powder's been treated to repel fire to a reasonable degree! And you're supposed to be good with fire magic, aren't you, Lauren? That means you've got a decent resistance, relatively speaking! And look—I have specially made fire-resistant gloves!"

Lady Robur whipped out a pair of silvery gloves from a pocket strapped to her thigh. Not that this was the time to comment, but those were some surprisingly functional pants.

"There's only one pair, so let's each take a glove and wear it on our dominant hand, all right? I wove them myself from the shed hairs of a dragon's mane!"

"A— A dragon?!"

She really just casually name-dropped one of the rarest materials imaginable.

"The silky sheen and smooth texture is divine, isn't it? Took me a whole year to gather enough!"

"Only a year?!"

How in the world do you collect enough dragon hair for gloves that size in a single year?

"The lining's made from leftover scraps of butterfly-type beast wings! I patchworked them together. Super colorful, super cute!"

She held out the glove to display the inner lining, which was pink, sky blue, green, and red, every color bright and vibrant. For a fabric, most girls would probably love it. But where had she even found that many species of butterfly beasts? And what had she used the rest of the wings for?

"S-So needlessly pretty..." said Lauren begrudgingly.

"When the fire lizard starts to breathe fire, you'll need to punch it right in the mouth with your heat-resistant glove! The trick is to aim for the ones whose mouths are just the right size to fit your fist! The smaller ones tend to reflux and burn themselves on the inside and pass out almost instantly! Don't worry, it's their own fire, so they won't die from it. Totally safe!"

"Safe for who?!"

Lauren had been protesting nonstop this entire time, but now his eyes were darting wildly, clearly struggling to keep up with the sheer volume of madness being hurled his way.

"Kartika," Lady Robur called.

"Y-Yes?!" Kartika squeaked, clearly startled at suddenly becoming the target of Lady Robur's attention.

"My, what a darling little answer." The noblewoman gave her a look one would normally reserve for something especially cute. It reminded me, oddly enough, of my late grandmother. "Do you think you can make a sand mound with earth magic?"

"Uh... Yes, I think so..." Kartika said hesitantly.

"Good. Then while Lauren and I are dealing with the fire lizards, support us by throwing up some mounds to block the other lizards' line of sight. Just big enough for someone to hide behind will do. Ralf, you'll signal Kartika when it's time to raise them, and as soon as one of the lizards loses consciousness, use wind magic to help toss it into the gap between the shell and the limbs of that giant snail-thing over there. Their eyes are on the front, so come at them from the back at an angle, then dash forward at a diagonal and it should be slow to react."

Right after the lady finished speaking, a slithering sound came from somewhere in the distance. Lauren flinched, and before he could react, she turned to face him and took his hand.

“Look, here they come!” she said with a delighted laugh. “If this works, we might even be able to make a charcoal extinguisher from the materials! Come, Lauren, let’s go!”

“L-Lady Robur?! There’s no need to pull my hand! I’ll go, I’ll go!”

“Don’t be nervous! You’ll be fine! Dealing with beasts is all about practice!”

“Th-That’s not what I’m nervous about... Why is your grip so strong?!”

Still shouting, face bright red, Lauren was dragged away with her hand clasped tightly around his. Gone was the aloof, aristocratic smile she usually wore. In its place was a carefree grin.

So this was that “gap moe” thing I’d read about in those trashy novels. Lauren had been completely swept away...and with the way he was being physically dragged, that wasn’t just figurative.

“Kartika, get ready,” I said.

“Y-Yes... Um... Do you think Lady Robur will be all right? I mean...she is a daughter of one of the Four Houses... If something were to happen to her, wouldn’t we...”

She was worried—and not unreasonably—that if the lady was injured, the rest of us would be held accountable.

Back before that disastrous joint subjugation exercise, no one had wanted her on their team. This fear was exactly why. The only reason the four of us had ended up together was because none of us had any connections in our class. We were just the leftovers lumped into one group.

“She handed us a signed waiver at the start,” I replied. “Said her house wouldn’t get involved, no matter what happened. Honestly, I don’t think she’s the sort to hide behind her title anyway.”

She was aware of what her status meant. It was precisely why she had given us the waivers, with an apologetic look, in the first place.

I watched as she went and shoved her gloved fist right into the open mouth of the closest fire lizard without a shred of hesitation. The thing collapsed on the spot. I was genuinely surprised by how quick she moved. Lauren, who’d been jittery and all over the place at first, started copying her movements. Bit by bit, he matched her

timing. It turned out he was more capable than I'd given him credit for.

Kartika, for her part, seemed to calm down once she realized she wasn't in the direct line of fire. Her posture eased up, and the magic she'd struggled to use earlier began to flow. Maybe the forest's natural earth magic affinity helped, but her timing was perfect. Each sand mound popped up just when it was needed. She had more potential than I thought.

It seemed I'd misjudged my team. I'd been too convinced I had to carry everything myself.

Just like Lady Robur had explained, approaching from the right angle delayed the amoi snail's reaction. Following her instructions to the letter, I used wind magic to toss the stunned fire lizards into the gap between its shell and the squirming mass of limbs.

When I'd thrown in the tenth lizard, I heard Lauren shout, "Um, is it just me, or is it turning red?!"

We all turned to look. Sure enough, the creature's face and its swarm of tentacles, half spilled out from the shell, had flushed an ominous red and were thrashing about.

"It's about time! The fire lizards inside must be waking up! It's about to pop out—watch yourself!" Lady Robur called out.

Barely a few seconds after her cheerful warning—

Sproing!

The creature's main body shot from its shell, slammed into a tree, and brought the whole thing down before flopping to a halt. Then the coiled lump that passed for its head slowly unfurled. There it was. It looked like an absurdly massive squid. The only thing that set it apart from a normal squid was the semitransparent, cartilage-like bone running along its outer body. It was at least the length of three grown men stacked head to toe.

I heard a splash.

"That's cold!" Lauren yelled. "What is this?! Water?!"

Lady Robur laughed. "Just rinsing off the powder. We don't need the fire lizards anymore." Soaked from head to toe herself, she said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

She picked up the bag she'd left behind, drew a dagger, and

approached the steaming squid. It didn't so much as twitch as she gave it a few careful pokes with the blade, checking for signs of life.

"What a delicious-looking squid..." she murmured, almost reverently.

Still smiling dreamily, she sorted the translucent bones into large and small ones and then began cutting them into segments. She sharpened one end of each segment like a blade, then separated them cleanly from the flesh and set them aside on the ground. From her bag, she produced ten combustion stones and lined them up evenly between the bones.

"Kartika, enclose the whole thing in a clay pot. Lauren, give it some serious heat!"

With a whoosh, the stones lit up. The translucent bone turned milky white, visibly hardening.

"Now then, boys, use body enhancement and help me clean and butcher the squid, would you?"

"I'll give it a go," I said, walking to the squid.

"Will do," Lauren said as he came toward me.

We got to work, cleaning out the guts and ink like she'd instructed.

Kartika, now firmly in her element, conjured a flat stone platform from the earth. A charcoal firepit went in the center. Lauren lit it with a flick of his fingers, set up a grate, and laid the squid out to roast.

Lady Robur handled the cooking, as well as handling the tools and giving us instructions.

"Mmm, it smells amazing!" The two girls let out delighted sighs as the savory aroma filled the clearing.

We snacked to tide ourselves over while waiting for our assigned adventurer chaperone to return. In the end, it was the smell that brought him back.

We later learned that the mist covering the area had been the work of the beast—an illusionary mist meant to confuse prey.

If we'd fled instead of fighting, we'd likely have become food or, worse, led the creature straight down to the village. But instead, the scent of roasted high-rank monster flesh drove off most of the other creatures lurking nearby. They scattered into the mountains, away

from the village.

At the time, we'd chalked it up to dumb luck. We thought Lady Robur's instincts had just happened to play out in our favor. But as we continued to work with her, it became clear that luck had nothing to do with it.

Furthermore, having been utterly captivated by Lady Robur's cooking, we found ourselves beginning to treat even the life of magical beasts with newfound respect. We took it upon ourselves to study the art of monster subjugation in earnest and sought out real combat experience. Before long, we were shouting together: "Give thanks to the life that sustains us!" and "We humbly accept this delicious meal!"

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"I'm already looking forward to lunch. Are you heading to the orphanage after this?" I asked her absentmindedly as I touched the small blade hanging from my belt, the memory of that day suddenly coming back to me.

The bone we'd hardened then had been polished and reforged into the blade that now hung from my belt. The others had theirs reshaped into daggers or short swords, I recalled. Despite all the monsters this blade had faced since then, its sharpness hadn't dulled in the slightest.

Lady Robur had embedded the magic stone we found in the squid's eye into the hilt, and used its ink to inscribe magical circuits directly onto the grip. The result was a weapon that could change size and be summoned at will. It was technically a greatsword, but easy to carry. She'd even drawn a sigil on the palm of my hand with that same ink, allowing me to summon the blade at will without so much as channeling magic.

The supposedly incompetent Lady Robur had asked me to keep it and her abilities secret, but she needn't have asked. I'd intended to keep quiet regardless.

Incidentally, the fire lizards we'd tossed into the shell had all died there. Their fire-resistant hides hadn't even been scorched, but

packed into that sealed space, with more than ten of them having released their flames at once, they effectively roasted each other from the inside out. Upon discovering this, the Lady had clapped her hands cheerfully and said something about making a charcoal extinguisher.

Later, she gave each of us a pouch for holding warm charcoal made from their treated hides. I still used mine regularly.

"Yes," she said. "We can finally make a proper donation as a team. I borrowed Lauren's bag—we're bringing centipede meat and a few other things. Kartika went on ahead of me, so she should already be waiting there."

"I see." I sighed. "I wish I could've gone too..."

"It can't be helped. After all, the school forced you to stay home for a while after coming back from the forest. You couldn't work during that time, so now you've got to make up for it."

"True. I appreciate you doing this. Tell Kartika I said thanks."

"Of course."

With that, she left, her steps light. She loved children; she was probably looking forward to visiting the orphanage again.

Though she undoubtedly enjoyed her visits there regardless, there was a reason that we needed to regularly deliver things to the orphanage.

At the Academy, even though the students were broadly divided between commoners and nobles, the gap between rich and poor was perhaps even more significant. In some cases, a wealthy commoner might have more financial power than a lower-ranking noble.

Even so, over the four years that students were required to attend, even students from affluent backgrounds could find their family fortunes suddenly collapse. That was why the Academy had support systems in place: tuition reductions, waivers, and even living assistance, all offered in exchange for some form of contribution.

What counted as a contribution? Outstanding academic performance, useful research results, promising theses in magical theory, development of beneficial magical tools, or skills in the gathering of information. If a student could prove themselves

capable of contributing as a member of the elite social class, then no one would question the aid they received.

But for students in Class D, both ability and finances tended to fall short. We had no choice but to pursue the least glamorous option: community service, which was time-consuming and labor-intensive. And even then, if your contributions were judged insufficient, part of the aid you received became a debt you were expected to repay.

I knew that firsthand. I was the second son of a dirt-poor noble family from out in the sticks, where the land was so ruined by salt it was barely worth the name. Lauren and Kartika were in the same boat, both working part-time between classes just to get by, covering tuition or sending a little help back home.

Of course, it wasn't like we had much of a choice. Attending the Academy was mandatory for all nobles, as decreed by the Crown. And it was hard to say the system was unjust—the debt wasn't interest-bearing, and repayment wasn't always for the full amount.

While some students struggled to pay anything, there were also students who started their own businesses while still attending the Academy. More than half of them contributed donations to the Academy, which made it harder for the rest of us to complain. These students mostly came from the high nobility, born into privilege and armed with better access to education, capital, and influence. But try making that argument and see how far it'd get you with anyone at the school.

"Been a while since I saw little Lady Lavi. Heard she was caught up in some accident. Had me worried. But she looks lively enough. You're in the same class at the Academy, right? Same team too? Take care of her, will you?"

This would be the Lady's self-appointed number one guardian: an older A-rank adventurer. Apparently, he was the one who had taught her about monsters fit for children to hunt when she was young.

"Yeah," I grunted.

Ever since he found out she'd been assigned to my team, he'd taken it upon himself to "train" me. Which meant dumping me in front of increasingly dangerous magical creatures whenever he had

a spare moment. Sure, I'd gotten stronger, but I'd also developed a burning desire to return the favor someday.

"If you lay a hand on our girl, Ralf...well, you know what'll happen, don't you?" This threat came from an old wo—uh, a lady—who was in the same party as the guy and also an A-rank adventurer. She was guardian number two.

Most of the time, she was a genuinely kind and warm person, but she transformed into a bloodthirsty scavenger anytime she saw me eating one of the lady's specially prepared lunches. Then, she would reach out and snatch any food she could get her hands on.

Back in the early days, she could snatch up more than half my food. My reflexes were sharper now. Today, I swore I would defend every last bite with my life.

"Yeah," I answered.

As if I'd even consider making a move. After graduation, me and Lady Robur would go our separate ways; her title would see to that. I sighed inwardly.

And it wasn't just these two. Even the shopkeepers in the castle town would occasionally pull me aside for a quiet "talk." I remembered the first time I had accompanied the lady on a shopping trip in the castle town and received a warning about "our dear little Lavi." It was truly an unforgettable experience.

Everyone we ran into had some story to tell about her. I hadn't expected to hear that she'd been working day labor in various shops around the castle town since she was a child, all while hiding her identity. Even if she'd had help from former servants of her family's estate, it was still shocking. A daughter of one of the Four Great Houses, out there hauling crates and sweeping floors?

Apparently, the clothes she wore back then had been hand-me-downs, worn almost to rags. And she'd had strange scars on her body too.

Some of the adults who met her had realized who she really was. But rather than speak up, they'd looked the other way and quietly looked after her. It seemed Lady Robur herself still didn't know that.

If I hadn't seen firsthand how her brother, foster sister, and the second prince—her now former fiancé—behaved on a daily basis, I

might have doubted the whole tale. But having seen it, it was all too believable that she had gone hungry under her own roof, and had so little that the servants themselves had to smuggle her out for help.

Among those who had helped her was the president of the famous Lyonoble Trading Company. It had been that same man who had helped the previous year's Class D graduates finish their graduation project.

At first it had appeared that they wouldn't have the time or manpower to finish the project in time, but thanks to the intervention of the president, it had been reorganized into a joint project with us first-years and put back on track. We continued the research afterward, and it had been formally approved to be used as our own graduation project for our final year.

Officially, the reason for the collaboration was that several of us had siblings in that graduating class. On paper, it looked like a natural continuation. But I had no doubt that Lady Robur was maneuvering things behind the scenes. The president had pulled me aside as her team leader and asked me to look after her. It was one of the first clues I had that Lady Robur was using her influence.

Back when the graduates were working on the project alone, the focus had simply been restoring land damaged by salt. But once our year had joined, the scale quietly expanded into the full rehabilitation of an entire salt-blighted region. Honestly, at the start, none of us believed it was possible—and it wouldn't have been, without the help of a few key people. There was the president, but also several shopkeepers from the castle town and a handful of veteran adventurers who had also lent their support.

That, combined with each student's individual skills, and even some of their family trades, caused the pieces to fall into place in ways none of us had expected. Even our lowly volunteer work gained value, tied to the donation and reconstruction effort. The efficacy of the work rose alongside our contribution scores.

At the center of these coordinated efforts lay the quiet influence of Lady Robur.

More than a few of the graduates and even some of our own classmates had noticed, and all of them were grateful to her. But no

one spoke of it, because we knew that she wanted it that way.

Thanks to the efforts of a few members of royalty and high-ranking nobility, Lady Robur had earned a reputation as the second coming of the notorious villainess, Beljeanne. Yet, instead of despairing, she had leaned into it, using the rumors as cover and wearing the mask of the useless, talentless noblewoman so that she might remain ignored.

As long as Lady Robur remained my classmate, as long as she stayed within reach, and as long as she wished it so, I resolved to be one of those who would stand by her and protect a girl who was determined to live freely.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hanako Arashi. I want to thank you very much for picking up this book.

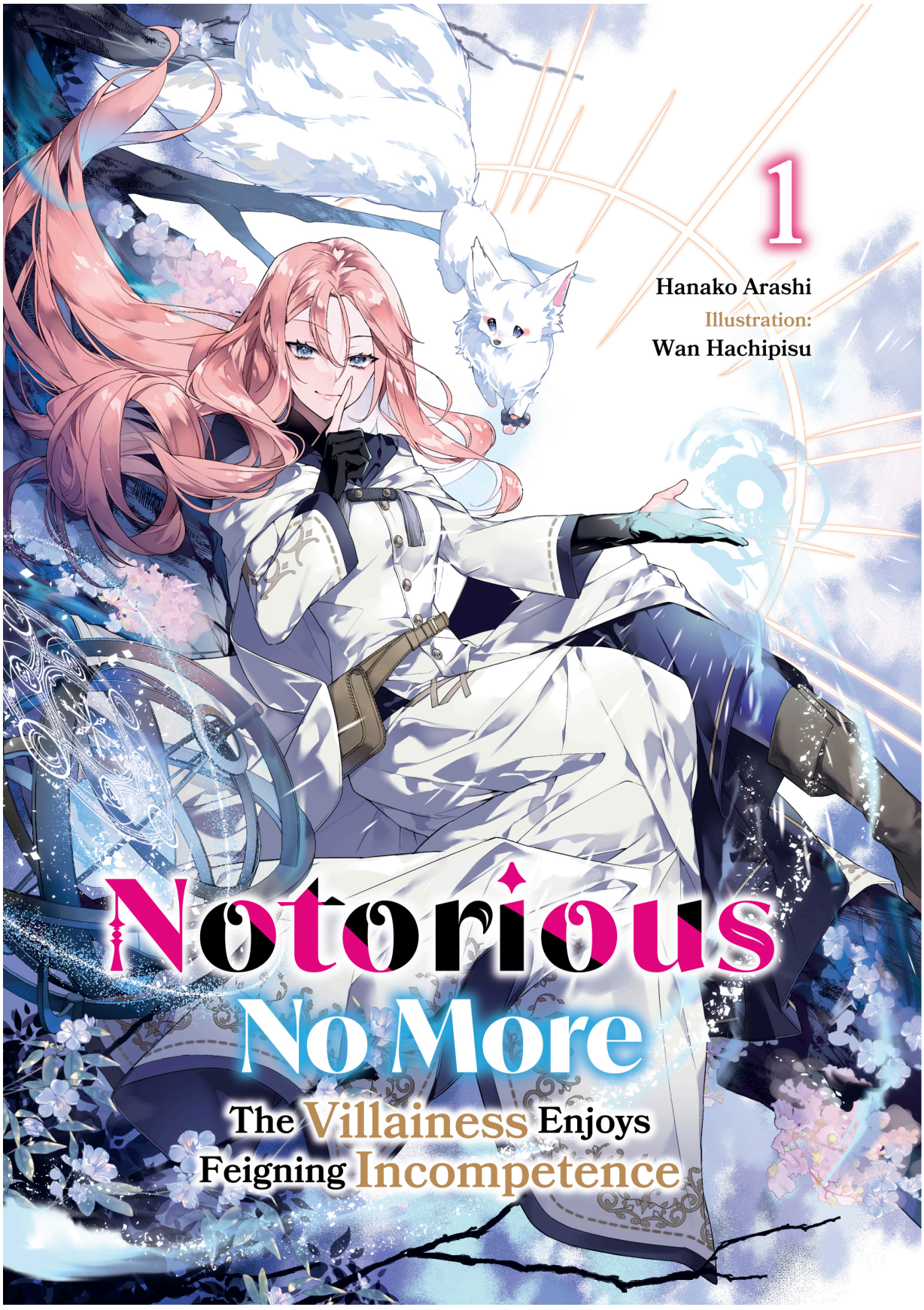
This work marks my debut as an author. How did you like it? If you found even a moment of enjoyment in these pages, then I couldn't be happier.

In a distant past life, the protagonist lived a short and harsh existence. In the next, she healed from those old wounds and grew a tougher spirit, only to then return to the world of her first life. She now lives happily surrounded by sacred beasts, but ends up causing a bit of chaos around her without even meaning to! And even though she doesn't intend it, her life becomes a bit of a comedy, and eventually turns into a bit of a comical story of revenge on something (or perhaps someone)! I hope this story continues to grow into something that gives you that kind of playful, emotional experience, and I would be truly grateful for your continued support.

To the illustrator, Wan Hachipisu: The mysterious Laviange on the cover is absolutely stunning! I couldn't stop grinning from the moment I first saw even the rough sketch. The divine quality of the illustrations throughout the book is simply unbelievable. Thank you so much!

To my editor, who patiently guided me despite my complete lack of experience: Thank you for putting up with so much. I truly apologize for all the trouble, and I'm deeply, deeply grateful.

And finally, to everyone involved in bringing this book to life, and to you, the reader who picked it up: Thank you so very much!


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Hanako Arashi
Illustration:
Wan Hachipisu
Notorious
No More
The Villainess Enjoys
Feigning Incompetence




“Oh dear. You’re trembling.
You quake in fear before a—
what was it?
A brat with pathetic magic
and no talent?
Do you still not understand?
You and your lord are both
so very small, like children.”
She’s a mighty sorcerer with the power to overwhelm any living beings who oppose her.
Notorious
No More
The Villainess Enjoys
Feigning Incompetence


"Your post-writing high is so annoying, Lavi!
And from up here, you look like something out of one of those zombie films from the other world.
Tone it down!"
But she's also...a bestselling romance
with the power to turn her wildest fantasies into
reality and steal the hearts of her readers?!
"Cas?! Let me revel in the moment a little longer!
This burning moe-fueled passion just wouldn't let me rest!
It smacked my backside and chained me to the desk, yelling,
'Write, woman, write!'"



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Notorious No More: The Villainess Enjoys Feigning Incompetence Volume 1
by Hanako Arashi

Translated by Jeremy Browning Edited by David Talk

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2025