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Story By
Rhythm Aida
Art By
nauribon
Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!

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“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: A Sincere Declaration!

When I woke, I had memories of a previous life.

I leapt down from the bed and rushed towards the mirror in the corner of the bedroom. Gradually, from within the dark, misty depths of reflective glass, a silhouette came into view. “Yikes,” I muttered. Reflected back was a figure beyond all imagination: a seemingly privileged, obese young man with shiny, messy black hair.

This wasn’t just an obese man staring back at me—it was one big, revolting pig.

Still half asleep and not fully conscious, I studied the bipedal pig in the mirror. My hair stuck to my forehead, slick and sticky with sweat. It was simply awful. My face twisted into a haughty, taunting expression. To be blunt, I really looked like I had no friends, period. This was the look of someone who would abuse his wealth and influence to get his grubby hands on a girl, snorting like a pig.

I’d definitely recognize this face anywhere.

“Oh, you’ve *got* to be kidding me... I’ve reincarnated into the world of *Shuya Marionette*?!”

After all, this was the face of the scorned character from *that* super popular, extremely famous anime, *Shuya Marionette*, which had trended everywhere immediately after it had aired. The fantasy anime was about the brilliant school lives of the students at the Kirsch Mage Institute, complete with cute girls. It featured the classics—swords and magical combat—as well as an assorted cast of monsters, including orcs and dragons.

The plot went something like this: A young nobleman blessed with talents in fire magic enrolls in the Mage Institute, befriending girls of the school along the way even as he’s looked down on for his eccentricity. From there, he proceeds to tackle the girls’ personal troubles and goes on to resolve a war between his country and hostile nations. Basically, it’s a hot-blooded, action-packed anime.

As for why I was reminiscing about the details of the anime, well...I was a dedicated fan of *Shuya Marionette* in my previous life, having followed it

religiously.

But still, why? Just...why? I didn't want to believe this was real. I wanted to deny that this was my reality. After all...

"Why did I have to be the Piggy Duke? The cast is filled with way better options! Someone like the protagonist, for instance..."

Born to one of the great noble families of the country of Daryth, the Piggy Duke Slowe Denning in the anime was the third son of House Denning, the Family of Wind.

The guy ticked every box for a person to frown upon: he was arrogant, conceited about his noble upbringing, extremely obese, and the closest a human being could get to being an orc. In the end, even his own family drove him out and disowned him. To compound on that bleak future, his secret crush joined the ranks of the protagonist's harem. His own father even told the poor kid that he was originally picked up from a dungeon.

"Jeez. So my crush is doomed to wilt away, forever unrequited, huh..."

Though only despair awaited me in my future as the scorned Piggy Duke, my face looked as if I didn't have a care in the world. I stood there nonchalantly in contrast to my inner turmoil.

I lightly slapped my flushed plump cheeks, which were extremely soft and pliant to the touch. Honestly, I never thought I'd see the day when I would find my face so ugly. It'd been my best friend for sixteen years.

"Now that I'm getting a proper look at myself, I really am an absolute mess." The pig in the mirror twisted his face into a look of torment. "...Wait a second, all of this means that..." I spoke aloud to myself as my memories and experiences laid the current situation out crystal clear. "I basically know the future of this world?"

That's right. I had information of the future from the anime, and from theories thrown around on forums. I knew exactly how everything went up until the so-called protagonist saved the world. In other words, the world was my oyster. I could do anything. The situation was perfect. Except...

I sighed deeply as I eyed my flabby stomach and pinched it on reflex.

“With this kind of body, calling it an absolute mess doesn’t even begin to cut it,” I muttered, staring at my unquestionably unacceptable figure. “My life has to start out difficult, doesn’t it...? The god who planned this is so mean. If you had to reincarnate me as someone, you could have given me an easier time by choosing a better character... Like *that* guy, the protagonist of the anime and all...”

No matter what I planned on doing from now on, going on a diet and thinning down would be my absolute top priority. Even if my pajamas had cute little piggies sewn on them. They did nothing to hide my terrible figure, round as a barrel.

Not only that, but I couldn’t even lead my normal, day-to-day life properly if I remained so hated, considering Slowe was dubbed the biggest problem student in the entire history of the institute. I’d acted the part of the self-centered, blackhearted Piggy Duke in my life up until now. It hadn’t been without reason, and I’d been convinced that the act was absolutely necessary.

But now, with knowledge of the anime, I could become anyone I wanted to be. Up until this point, I’d been the scheming, blackhearted, most infamous problem student of Kirsch Mage Institute. But from now on...I could protect her—the girl who was so precious to me—and return to my glory days back when they heralded me as the Prodigy of Wind.

I was grinning to myself at the thought of such a bright future when suddenly a knock sounded from the door.

Who could that be, this early in the morning? I thought as I moved into the living room from the bedroom. I snorted as I heard another knock.

“Master Slowe, are you awake? I’ve brought breakfast.” A clear voice, pleasant and familiar, reached my ears. It was *her*.

“I’m up. Please come in, Charlotte.”

“Okaaay,” my retainer chimed back, dragging out her last syllable as she entered the room. My heart thumped in my chest. I inhaled sharply at the sight of her. *She’s so lovable and adorable*.

“G-Good morning, Ch-Charlotte,” I stammered. *Don’t look at me like I’m some*

sort of weird, die-hard otaku! I can't help it; you're just too darn cute! All the girls in Shuya Marionette *are really cute!*

"Good morning, Master Slowe!"

There stood the personification of a goddess of snow—no, the fairy of snow herself. Her waist-length silver hair glimmered under the light. She wasn't wearing the cute Kirsch Mage Institute uniform, nor did she wear a frilly maid dress. Instead, she wore a slightly less fashionable uniform fit for a retainer, which emphasized her earnestness. She was well-proportioned and her posture oozed elegance. She adorably kept herself busy, preparing breakfast with utmost concentration, but you could tell that the natural noble aura around her clashed with her retainer status.

That couldn't be helped, though. Charlotte tried to keep it under wraps, but she was actually a member of the royal family from a destroyed kingdom. In other words, she was a princess!

"Master Slowe, you managed to wake up on your own today, I see."

"Oink!" I snorted in agreement.

Charlotte was also the secret crush that the protagonist stole away from me in the anime.

I plopped down into a chair next to the expensive-looking table. There, I watched Charlotte ready breakfast with practiced efficiency. It was a little strange, though. I experienced this every single day. Why did it feel so fresh and new all of a sudden?

"Please wait a moment. I'll prepare breakfast now," Charlotte said as she placed a water pitcher and food onto the table with ease. "It appears stew is on the menu for today."

"Stew first thing in the morning?" I replied. "I'd get fat."

"What are you saying, Master Slowe? It's a little too late for that, isn't it?" Charlotte quipped back.

"...True."

As I watched my retainer carry out her daily routine, I thought about our first

meeting nearly ten years ago.

Charlotte had nearly been sold off as a slave in an auction held deep in the forest which covered half of my father's territory when I, the Piggy Duke, had saved her. When she was young, Charlotte had been extremely grateful and felt indebted to me. As she spent more time with the anime protagonist and got caught up in the war against the Dustour Empire, however, she slowly grew distant.

All of these events came to a climax one winter's day near the end of our third and final year at Kirsch Mage Institute. The anime protagonist rescued Charlotte from her plight at the last second, after which she joined his harem.

In the anime, I'd realized that Charlotte was slowly but steadily falling for the protagonist. In response, I had poured blood, sweat, and tears into winning her back. It was all in vain, however. I ended up being a laughingstock as one effort after another came to naught.

Based on all of that, I, the Piggy Duke, was the absolute worst character. Despite all that, I stood at the top of all character popularity rankings for *Shuya Marionette*, unbeaten by a mile.

It sounds like a bad April Fool's Day joke. I am unbelievably obese, a piggy, and a lazy bum leading a self-indulgent lifestyle that anyone would compare to an orc's.

There were three reasons for the anime Piggy Duke's dramatic popularity.

First and foremost, nobody liked the anime protagonist. Nobody felt like this guy deserved his harem. All the girls in *Shuya Marionette* were gorgeous, after all. It was only natural that the viewers would be jealous of him.

"Master Slowe, breakfast is ready," Charlotte called out to me. "The stew might be a little hot, so please make sure to blow on it a few times before eating."

Without thinking, I gave a snort of affirmation. *That sound came out of my mouth!* Sometimes, this weird pig-like snorting sound would just burst out of me. I couldn't control it. That was a minor detail, though. Nothing to worry about.

As I was saying, the second reason why the anime Piggy Duke was popular was all his hard work behind the scenes. Charlotte's identity was a well-kept secret until the end of the story. *Too* well-kept. This was all thanks to the anime Piggy Duke, who fought tooth and nail to protect her.

In the anime, Charlotte's identity as a princess made her a target when it came to the hostile empire. The anime Piggy Duke fended off many assassins night and day behind the scenes. Nobody knew of his efforts since he kept his lips zipped, resulting in the anime protagonist stealing the poor Piggy Duke's limelight without lifting a finger.

In the end, I never told her how I felt in the anime. It was only later that the creators revealed that only I had known of Charlotte's identity as a princess. My anime self had been scorned and despised, but fought selflessly all on his own. His tragic nature really appealed to the viewers, and they loved me for it.

To be honest, though, even orcs would probably discriminate against me based on my piggy appearance. If I ever did confess to Charlotte, it'd probably go as well as pouring gasoline on a house fire. That is to say, horribly.

As for the last reason that the anime Piggy Duke was so popular...

"Charlotte. I can't thank you enough for everything, oink."

"Huh?" Charlotte widened her eyes, dumbstruck by my words. In her shock, she dropped the tea tray she held with a loud, metallic clang. "I—I am so sorry, Master Slowe!" Charlotte hurriedly began to gather the broken shards when I cut in.

"Please don't worry about it," I said. "*O wind, play a little trick for me. Little Wind Dance*."

Charlotte looked at me in surprise as the shattered pieces on the red carpet gently floated in the air, dancing as they gracefully twirled.

There was also a secret backstory that the creators had revealed: I, the Piggy Duke, was the mage most beloved by the spirits in history.

The season was spring. The brisk, pleasant weather had just welcomed fresh students with open arms. The blackhearted Piggy Duke—no—*I* was now sixteen. One year had passed since I'd entered Kirsch Mage Institute. In this

short span of time, my infamy had spread throughout the entire school and beyond to the other nations.

None of that mattered to me, though.

“It’s a little late, but...” I began. “Morning, Charlotte.”

My retainer, Charlotte. No. Charlotte Lily Huzak, a princess of a ruined kingdom.

“G-Good morning, Master Slowe,” Charlotte replied, bowing her head in greeting.

Watching her, I swore a solemn oath to myself.

This I swear to you. Even though I wasn’t able to accomplish this in the anime...I will become a man deserving of you.

Chapter 1: The Problem Student of Kirsch Mage Institute It was roughly before the storyline of the anime, *Shuya Marionette*. I found myself in a period I had little information on. Before me stood Kirsch Mage Institute, the stage for the anime. There, trees lavish with fresh green leaves surrounded the venerable school buildings built of stone. Only one thought was on my mind as I felt the cool early morning breeze brush up against my skin.

You pig! You pig*! You utterly hopeless pig!*

All I felt was anger and exasperation towards my past self, the blackhearted Piggy Duke. The cause of my anger? Figuring out exactly why I'd become so obese. Why had I acted in a way completely unbefitting of a nobleman, inviting the scorn of those around me?

This had all been intentional. All according to plan for that blackhearted Piggy Duke!

"Oink, *huff*, o-oink." My snorting came out irregular, my breathing erratic.

Daryth was often referred to as the Country of Knights by its neighbors. Within Daryth, House Denning was one of its most powerful noble families, having been bestowed control over the country's military force by the royal family itself. A person born to House Denning would never be allowed to marry a common retainer. And so my past self plotted to make everyone hate him and to sully the dignity of the House, which would lead to his family disowning him. I was appalled at my past self's outrageous plan.

The whole point of this scheme was to run away with Charlotte after being

disowned and live happily ever after. Of course, my past self's dream would never come to fruition. I now knew very well that my beloved would be stolen away by *that protagonist*.

"O-Oink oink, *huff*, ugh. O-o-oink!" Sweat poured down my face in buckets as I jogged in the sports grounds, which were otherwise deserted in the early morning.

Ugh, my clothes are so sweaty, and I'm probably gonna trip over my feet at some point. This is pure torture! How little did the blackhearted Piggy Duk—I mean, me. Just how little did I exercise?! How did I even think I had a chance at Charlotte's heart in such horrible shape?!

"Hey, look over there. The Piggy Duke's jogging first thing in the morning..."

"The Piggy Duke? Jogging? In the morning? I haven't seen him run a single time this past ye— Oh wow, you weren't kidding, huh... He looks like an orc being roasted alive with how red he is..."

"Shush. What are you gonna do if he hears us? Don't forget, even with that getup, he's still from House Denning..."

Jeers and mockery filled the air as students heading from the dorms to the dining hall spotted me. But I kept on running, swinging my arms for all they were worth. This had been the goal of the blackhearted Piggy Duke's persistent self-fattening, even among all the ridicule. I needed to be made fun of and looked down upon by my own countrymen.

Within the prestigious House Denning, I was heavily doted on by my father, the current Duke Denning. Not to brag, but my talents were indeed extraordinary. No one else within my long family history could measure up to me. Due to that, I received special tutelage for as long as I could remember, all in order to whip me into shape as the duke's successor.

"Hey, is that you-know-who...?"

"I'd heard the rumors, but...I've never seen someone that fat..."

"Are you first-years? That student over there is the most infamous problem student in the history of Kirsch Mage Institute, Slowe Denning. If you want to live out your life here in peace, you should stay away from him..."

However, this all changed when I turned six.

I'd found an illegal slave market held in the woods on House Denning's territory. There, mischievous wind spirits told me the sad truth of a young girl lined up on the altar. I learned that the malnourished girl before me was the princess of a destroyed kingdom. I found out about the tragic life that had reduced her to slavery. I saved that girl, Charlotte, whom I appointed as my personal retainer.

A few years later, I made a choice that I knew would change my life forever: become the blackhearted Piggy Duke.

"Ugh... That's the Piggy Duke over there..."

I'd set it upon myself to transform from the brilliant Denning heir into a spoiled brat, leading an unhealthy lifestyle and demanding preposterous things. Boy, was I successful. I'd evolved into a vile piggy without a hitch. More like devolved, rather. For my past self, the Piggy Duke, life at the Mage Institute was the last linchpin in my plan.

"Oink, *huff*, oink, oi-oi-oink!" I panted as I ran on.

In the anime, everything had gone according to my former plans. My father claimed that I was an orphan picked up from the dungeon like a stray cat found on the side of the street and proceeded to kick me out of the family. Mission accomplished.

"Oink, oink, *huff*, oi-oi-oink!"

But did I want that for *my* future? Not a chance! I recalled the words of the anime's main director at an event once.

The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette *can be interpreted as his tragedy. The Piggy Duke had the power to accomplish everything by himself... And because of that, the protagonist took Charlotte away from him.*

The greatest miscalculation the Piggy Duke made was the war with the North and the South. Charlotte was heavily involved in the war due to her association with the protagonist, and trying to conceal Charlotte's identity amidst all of that

was no easy feat. However, the Piggy Duke persisted, protecting his retainer from harm behind the scenes.

The absolute dunderhead in the anime had kept his feelings for Charlotte secret, trusting that secret to nobody. He stoically carried out every task all on his lonesome and intended to confess to her after the storm had passed. That piglet, who asked for no help and acted faithfully on his feelings for a single girl...was me.

"Oi-oink, *huff*, oi—*huff*—nk, o-oink."

But I didn't want to make those same mistakes twice. I didn't want to live my life being misunderstood by everyone, only to be cast aside and left utterly alone.

Therefore, I had to thin down and become a proper reasonable human being.

My life was a disaster. Even though I was in the prime of my youth, living out my schooling days, I had no friends at the institute. The only one I could speak with was my retainer. I knew I was reaping the seeds I'd sown, but my pitiful state still practically brought tears to my eyes.

To start out, I wanted to improve my relationship with the other students of the institute and earn an enjoyable school life with Charlotte. I wanted to live with her as my true self, not as the blackhearted Piggy Duke weighed down by lies and deceit.

Earning back my place as the successor of Duke Denning, though, was a whole other mountain of work I didn't want to face. I only wanted a humble life with Charlotte, which was more than enough for me. I pushed myself hard for the sake of realizing that wish, but...from all directions, I felt the sharp gazes of young noble girls drill into my skull. Their eyes conveyed their skepticism. I could hear them in my mind, mocking me. *"Look, that piggy is still running!" "Him, thinning down? Impossible."*

Damn it! They're driving me mad!

The anime Piggy Duke started out by making himself look the part of a completely hopeless person. They say to not judge a book by its cover, but looking like an orc certainly sold the spoiled-brat story better.

“Oooink! *Huff*, oink—aah!!!” Since I was in such deep thought as I ran, I failed to notice a rock buried on the track. I slipped and lost my balance, falling over in a heap onto the floor.

Ow... I think I cut my face. I must look so pathetic right now... Nobody would think I’m beloved by spirits, seeing me like this.

“Look there, y’all! That’s the legendary Denning piggy dance!”

“Hey, be quiet. He might hear you.”

“From this distance? I doubt it.”

Brushing off dirt and dust from my body, I stood up and glared at the chatty onlookers who’d been annoying me for a while now.

Are you trying to pick a fight with me? I can hear every single word! I have way more important things to do than to rise to the bait, though, so I’m purposefully choosing to let it go in one ear and out the other! That aside, though... I think that’s enough for today.

I finished swiping off the muck from all over my body, took out a black wand etched with the Denning crest, and gave it a light wave. A refreshing wind enveloped my body as all the grime disappeared, leaving me squeaky clean.

“The Piggy Duke only has his great skill in magic going for him, as usual... Wait, that direction he’s heading in, could he be...?”

“This is a rare sight. Who would have expected the spoiled, pampered Slowe Denning to head to the dining hall on his own two feet?”

A crowd of onlookers scrutinized me with morbid curiosity as I walked across the sports grounds. I just ignored their questioning gazes and marched towards the dining hall.

Slamming the dining hall doors open, I took a brief moment to survey my surroundings. Many students sat enjoying their breakfast at numerous rows of long dining tables. The clinking of cutlery rang out over the room as maids dressed in frilly pinafores bustled around with trays of breakfast in both hands, moving between the tightly packed rows of long tables.

Now where do I sit? I’m pretty big, so I want to avoid being in between two

people... All right then, seems like the corner of a table near the exit would be a good spot. Grunting as I plopped down on the seat, I promptly realized a very dire problem. *Oh no... I'm too big for the seat. I'm way too fat...* I nearly laughed out loud at just how ridiculously plump I looked. *I really am the Piggy Duke, huh. I really need to cut down my weight! I really hope this seat doesn't give out under me... Can this thing really hang on?*

As soon as I took a seat, a cute maid came over carrying breakfast. She was clearly tense and nervous, and her trembling hands dripped with sweat. She probably couldn't believe that I was in the dining hall. Usually my meals were delivered straight to my room.

"G-G-Good morning! M-M-May I leave your food over here?"

"Please leave it here," I said with a vague gesture. "Yes, right there. Thanks."

"Huh...? U-Uh... O-Okay!" Her face was red as a tomato as she scurried off. Other maids ran over to her one after another, whispering to her. They were probably asking whether she was okay or if I'd bullied her. I sighed heavily.

Another day of life-shattering revelations, huh. Revelation of the day: the maids fear me too...

I stuffed my face at lightning speed. Eating among my peers wasn't a bad experience at all. Hearing the many conversations going on around me made me feel like I was one of them, like I also had someone to chat with.

Of course, I didn't actually have any friends.

"Hm?" I paused, staring down at my plate. "My plate's empty. Wait, what?" *Huh? Hold on a minute, isn't this way too little?*

I'd cleaned my plate in the blink of an eye. Did someone do this out of spite? It didn't even taste that great. Could this even satisfy anyone? I looked around, gauging everyone's reactions. But the moment their eyes met mine they either averted their gazes or halted their conversations, walking off with friends to put away their plates.

Wh-What? Why are they acting like this? I felt a pang in my heart at their reactions. *Is this what they call bullying? Am I being bullied?*

“Lord Slowe, if it would be to your liking, please have this.” A tray of breakfast appeared before me.

Hm? What’s this? I looked up in question.

Before me stood a young man with beautiful blond hair. His light blue eyes shone under the light like a pair of sapphires. He smiled gently, almost like a maiden. Great, a pretty boy. I didn’t like pretty boys very much. Who was he again? I tried to put a name to his face. He was in the same cohort as me...

Ah, I know. The eldest son of Earl Greatlorde, if I remember right! He was a minor character who never appeared in the anime.

“My name is Valjean Greatlorde. I am the heir of Earl Greatlorde, who governs the northeast region of Daryth,” the young man began politely. “Though our territory may not be as vast as Duke Denning’s, I believe my family holds quite the reputation within this institute. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Slowe.”

Having someone greet me so politely in the morning wasn’t bad at all. However, just as Valjean finished speaking, I heard someone click their tongue as conversations died across the hall. Everyone in the room stared intensely at the two of us, exchanging hushed whispers between themselves. I could understand their reactions. Nobody had had the gall to speak to me in a public space before. Which raised some questions... *Why did this guy start talking to me all of a sudden? What does he want from me?*

“So, uh...” I trailed off in thought. “You’re offering to give me your breakfast?”

“Yes,” Valjean said with a nod. “I spotted you jogging this morning before heading this way. I was concerned that a single serving might not be enough for you, and that concern led me here. Please enjoy it in my stead.”

“Oh, really...? That’s quite considerate of you. I guess you earls know your manners, huh, er...” I paused. “What was your name again?”

“My name is Valjean Greatlorde,” the young man repeated.

“I appreciate your considerate gesture. It’s quite touching.”

“A-Are you saying that you will accept this offering, Lord Slowe?” Valjean did not hide the joy in his voice.

“ ”
…



A single portion definitely wouldn't be enough to satisfy my stomach.

I'm really, really tempted! If this were a boxing match between me and my hunger, those words would be an instant KO to me! But no, I have to resist! I swore that I would cut down on food and slim down! Don't forget that!

I looked up, channeling the sternness of a Duke's son. In a serious tone, I rejected the pretty boy who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

"Sorry, Valjean," I began. "My portion is enough for me. If I accepted yours, you'd have nothing to eat, right? So I can't accept— Uh— Wha—!"

Something felt off beneath my buttocks. In fact, I didn't feel anything there at all.

"Uwaaa! Wha—!"

The chair had tried its best, but my weight had been too much for it. The chair legs folded and snapped loudly in surrender, and I plummeted towards the cold floor. A hushed silence fell over the dining hall. Then, just as quickly as it went silent, the room echoed with roaring laughter.

"Ha ha! Did you see that? That's Denning for you! The Piggy Duke of House Denning! I'm so glad I woke up early for breakfast today!"

"Hey, don't laugh at him! Pfft! If he turns on you, you're in for a lot of trouble... Ahaha!"

Damn it! Don't laugh at me! It wasn't my fault! That chair was not up to standard!

My breathing quickened. I slowly clambered back to my feet and glared daggers at the spectators. Silence engulfed the dining hall, the other students no doubt sensing the threat of a painful spell aimed at the next person who dared to laugh.

"U-Um..." Valjean spoke up. "Lord Slowe, are you certain you do not need this breakfast?"

"Shut up. Can't you tell by looking at me? I am quite full, thank you very much," I snapped. "Don't ever offer me something ridiculous like your breakfast again. You hear me, pretty boy?"

“‘P-Pretty boy’?”

“Yes, you, pretty boy! Take it away already! I want it out of my sight right this instant. It’s such an eyesore!”

“Are you sure? Please do not force yourself. Are you not hungry?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? Me, forcing myself? Hmph. Listen here, buddy. People often assume that I eat a lot because of my looks, but surprise! I have a small appetite,” I ranted. “Do I make myself clear? Repeat after me.”

“Y-You have a small appetite!”

“Exactly,” I replied. “Drill that fact into your skull. I’ll see you around.”

Unfortunately, Murphy’s Law decided to kick in just then. Just as I left the dining hall, my stomach shamelessly protested with a loud rumble. I could hear the sudden laughing fits from students through the door.

With my face flushed red like an orc in heat, I sprinted towards my dorm.

“...As all of you know, the love of the spirits is the most vital aspect of practicing magic,” Professor Arle lectured in a soothing voice from the teacher’s podium. “If you read through the latest research papers published by the Magic Academy in recent years, you’d know of an interesting theory. This theory states that fire spirits are partial to passionate blood, water spirits to kind blood, earth spirits to earnest blood, and wind spirits to intelligent blood.”

Professor Arle’s voice was so soothing, in fact, that she was famous among the students for putting her class to sleep. Case in point, half of the students in the classroom dozed in their seats.

“They say that spirits take a liking to sophisticated noble blood, which has been passed down through generations. Those of you of common birth need not worry, though. Many commoners graduate from Kirsch Mage Institute having managed to manifest and grasp the use of their magic during schooling days.”

If I’d heard these statements about “magic” and “spirits” in my previous life, I would have questioned what fantasy world the speaker was talking about and moved on.

I listened to Professor Arle from the top row of the lecture hall. The row was completely empty except for me, as if I'd booked all the seats. I wasn't against people sitting next to me, but nobody was willing to approach my row or even my general vicinity. *They really don't have to be so cautious of me. I had a complete change of heart, after all.*

"An effective method of strengthening your magic output is to embed items that appeal to the spirits into your wand. A good example is Duke Denning, who is highly regarded as a mage. He is said to have crushed an entire ether fruit, embedding it into his staff to appeal to the wind spirits." From her spot at the podium, Professor Arle occasionally glanced over at me, like some other students did. She probably perceived me as a dangerous, feral piggy dungeon boss or something.

"Kirsch Mage Institute has produced many notable individuals in its long history. All of you students here should follow their example and study hard. That concludes the lecture for Magic Studies today."

Nodding at Professor Arle's words, I watched students shuffle out of the room.

I concluded from my findings today that I had no friends. Well, it didn't take much detective work to notice that everyone avoided me. I could understand them, honestly. A normal person wouldn't want to be friends with a Piggy Duke like me. But I wanted to shout to the world that I had changed. That I was a different man now. But if I did such a thing, everyone would think I'd gone mad. Though I had not been behaving badly as of late, people would not soon forget my notorious reputation.

After all the students had left the room, I stood up.

"Mister Denning," Professor Arle addressed me from her podium as she prepared for the next lecture. "You were brilliant out there today. I never thought you would be so knowledgeable about the Ancient Demon Lord, who is generally agreed to be the creator of our magic."

Professor Arle's smooth brown hair extended to her waist, and she wore a black robe that didn't show much of her figure. Before taking up the post of Magic Studies professor at this institute, she had worked as a researcher in the

Magic Academy for a few years. Her round glasses gave her a scholarly feel that belied her youthful face. Students criticized her classes as boring since she followed the textbook to a T. In my eyes, she merely focused on the fundamentals.

"The Ancient Demon Lord is a legend in Minerva, the Country of Sorcery," I recited. "Which is one nation among the Great Four of the South. Those countries formed the Great Southern Alliance to fend off the Dustour Empire, ruler of the northern part of the continent. Not only was the Demon Lord a legend in such an important country, they were also the founder of our magic. It's only natural that I know about that period of history."

"Oh? I was surprised to find you awake throughout the whole lecture, and now this... Mister Denning, you seem to have your wits about you today. It is most unlike you." Having said that, Professor Arle changed the subject. "Ah, speaking of which, I hear that you started working on losing weight."

"I realized that I was a little too heavy for my own good... Oh." I paused before walking up to Professor Arle with heavy footsteps. "Please hold still for a moment, Professor."

Professor Arle shrunk into herself as I approached her, frozen like a deer caught in the glare of a wild boar.

Sorry, Professor. The Piggy Duke standing right in front of you must be terrifying, but...I can't ignore what I see.

"Don't play tricks on the professor. That's no good," I said. A prankster wind spirit flew away from the professor and sped out the window. Had I left it to its own devices, it definitely would have stirred up trouble. Sending out a strong gust of wind as the professor carried a stack of papers down the hallway, blowing the hem of her robe around to see her panic... The possibilities were endless. Wind spirits were the most mischievous of the Six Great Spirits, after all.

"Wh-What?"

"That's all, Professor. I'll be going now," I said. I nodded slightly to Professor Arle, who had confusion written all over her face, and proceeded to head out of the classroom.

Spirits were mystical beings that normal humans could not see. If I told someone that I could see them, I'd never hear the end of it. They'd probably call me the next big legend or something. The Magic Academy might even force me to become a test subject for unsavory magic research. A shiver of dread went down my spine at the thought. *I don't want that! Must avoid that future at all costs!*

I instead turned my thoughts towards my next class, Melee Combat, which I dreaded.

I'm the Piggy Duke, though. I could try asking for permission to run around the sports grounds. Professor Arle doesn't seem like one to gossip, but even she had heard about me trying to cut down my weight. Surely the Melee Combat professor would give me permission without too much hassle.

I came from House Denning, and I intended to make full use of that fact. If borrowing the power of my family name would help quicken my weight loss, I would use it with no qualms whatsoever.

Melee Combat was a fancy way of saying one-on-one brawls. In the past, I spent these lessons being a nuisance and getting in the way of everyone. Surely the professor would cry tears of joy if I asked to run around in the sports grounds instead.

All righty! I gotta thin down as soon as possible and turn into a lean, muscular guy!

●

"I still can't believe my eyes... Master Slowe answered the professor's questions so easily...!"

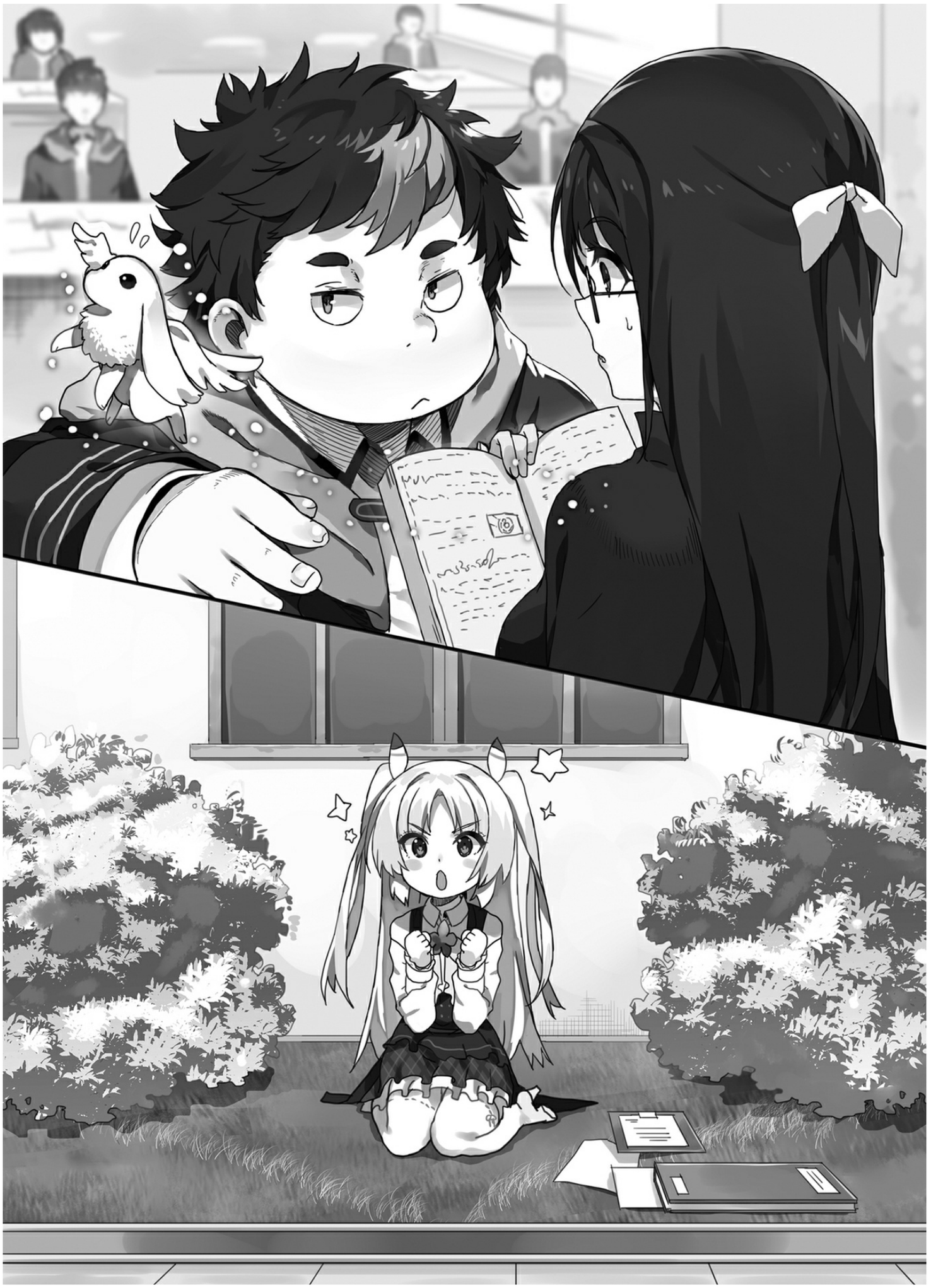
A girl with silver waist-length hair, which glowed under the light, sat down on the ground in shock. Her mouth hung agape in surprise.

"Not only that, but he didn't nod off in class at all! Everyone falls asleep at some point in Magic Studies class, yet Master Slowe was the only one who stayed up the whole time... Am I dreaming?" Charlotte pinched her cheeks. "Ow... That hurts."

Charlotte had spied on the classroom from outside the glass windows during

the entire Magic Studies class period. Her mission was to observe the social patterns of the orc— Ahem. Her mission was to observe her master's attitude in class.

"He even said that he'd start jogging every morning from now on to slim down... What on earth happened to Master Slowe? Did he eat something weird? I mean, I wouldn't be surprised, since Master Slowe seems to eat everything, but..."



It was a well-known fact that Slowe was a problem student in the institute. He scored well in tests but had a terrible attitude in class. He was so problematic, in fact, that his teachers even stated they preferred him asleep than awake. Professor Arle was a pretty calm teacher, but even she had trouble with him. Whenever she asked Slowe to answer a question, he would reply with one nonsensical phrase after the next. Some of his classics were “The sky is nice” or “Tart apple.”

However, this wasn’t the case today. He answered questions that all other students could not without batting an eye, causing everyone to stare at him in disbelief. Charlotte, who was secretly spying on the classroom from outside, was no exception. “This is a big ‘if,’ but... If Master Slowe really wants to turn things around, then I have to help him. Plus, if he slimmed down, my reputation as his retainer might improve, and my pay might too...”

Coming to a decision, the lovely maiden balled her hands into fists with conviction and quickly left the area.

●

A few days had passed since I started working on losing weight.

Every single day was hell, to put it mildly. I had to persevere if I wanted to turn this fat body into a lean, muscular one. No matter how much people mocked me along the way, I kept pushing myself to my limits to lose weight. Though as they say, every cloud has a silver lining. Even during these tortuous days, I could still find joy.

Remember that pretty boy Valjean Greatlorde? It can’t be helped if you forgot about him, since he didn’t even appear in the anime. The guy who tried to offer me his breakfast? Yeah, that guy.

Ever since the day I woke up with full knowledge of the anime, I stopped having breakfast delivered to my room and started going to the dining hall every morning. But that didn’t mean I was all alone in the crowd. The rascal who offered me his breakfast as charity that one time started talking to me every morning! He even kept offering me his food!

Our conversations spanned a bunch of different topics, from mundane things

like classwork and gossip from the school's rumor mill to him showering me with flattery and praise. I was a little suspicious about why he sucked up to me so much, but since I had no friends, it was a fun, new experience for me anyway.

I could go as far as saying that we might be friends already. It's probably pretty obvious that I've turned over a new leaf!

And then the day I had been waiting for finally came: the day I'd get to go to Practical Magic. It was a hands-on course rather than a theory-based class spent sitting at desks all day. There was no class better to make some friends in. I tramped towards the training field set up for spell practice.

"The Piggy Duke is always so noisy when he runs..."

"Oh, it's just the Piggy Duke, phew... For a second there, I thought an orc king had come to attack the institute."

The wide, manicured lawn was a disaster. The grass was singed in many places, and puddles of water and deep craters littered the field. Situated away from the school's central campus where the classroom buildings and dorms were, the Practical Magic training field was meant to keep the damage caused by errant spells to a minimum. The spells of the average student weren't too much to worry about, but sometimes the magic would go berserk and trigger a bizarre reaction.

"Heh heh heh, my stomach's rumbling with—I mean, my hands are trembling in excitement."

I loved Practical Magic class, truth be told.

Nobody in this school is better at magic than me, not even the third-year upperclassmen. I am unmatched in Practical Magic, he he. Oink.

"Awright kiddos, get over here," the teacher called, his gruff voice stretching out in a drawl. "C'mon, hustle right on over here. Put some effort into it!"

I headed over to where the teacher in charge of Practical Magic stood. He wore a neatly pressed black shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his insanely muscular biceps. His muscular physique showed even through his clothes. Even among his unusual appearance for a teacher, there was one aspect that stood

out. That is to say...

What's with that wild, untamed mane of black hair? Are you kidding me?!

Professor Loco Moco seemed to be enjoying himself more than the students despite the fact that he was the teacher.

"Class is startin' now. Over here, kiddos. Better get here by the count of three!"

His looks are a bit deceiving, though.

Students from noble upbringing carelessly shot off spells to relieve stress in this class. Because of this, the teacher needed to be highly skilled and able to react quickly in the event of an accident. Fortunately, Professor Loco Moco fit that job description to a tee. But Professor Loco Moco was originally an elite knight in the Order, so his skills came as no surprise. The headmaster himself approached the professor directly to convince him to teach at the school.

The Order of Royal Knights was founded to protect the royal family of Daryth. All of the members of the Order were extraordinary mages in their own right. Nobles envied the signature white cape which signified their station, permitted only to those Knights in the Order.

"Awright, kiddos, everyone is present an' accounted for, yeah?"

"Professor, not everyone is present an' accounted for," a student echoed back, mimicking his drawl.

"The ones still missin' are probably playin' hooky, so I'm gonna start without 'em."

Usually in Practical Magic class, Professor Loco Moco would have the students cast various spells, and then make suggestions for improvement. It wasn't unusual for a student or two to end up with some minor injuries by the end of the class.

"Today, I want y'all to pair up an' critique your partner's spellcastin'. After that, y'all need to write a report about the pointers you get from your partner, han' it in, an' work on improvin' those points by next week. Got it?"

Is he doing this on purpose?!

Stunned by this turn of events, I turned to watch as everyone else paired up. Some couples took this chance to get together within the crowd and started acting all gross and lovey-dovey with each other. I could only stand there trembling, rooted to the spot. Of course I was the odd one out. *Are you trying to single me out? There's no way anyone would pair with me! I'm the most hated person in this school! I'm almost impressed at how cruel you're being, Professor Loco Moco!*

"Wait. Actually..." I muttered. Pairs... Casting spells with each other... Partners... *Isn't this the chance I've been waiting for to make some friends? I'm an expert on magic. I can help them every step of the way, no sweat. Let's see who still needs a partner.*

But no one needed a partner.

Huh? Everyone's already paired up? Wow. Okay, I guess I'll just...go cast magic by myself then... Is there really nobody who will group up with me? I mean...yeah, can't forget that I have no friends and that I'm the school's number one problem child...

Disheartened, I aimlessly wandered around the training field until I noticed an odd group. They stood around waving their wands and doing not much else, even though it was Practical Magic class.

"Ah... They're probably commoners," I muttered aloud. That is, they were probably students of common blood and couldn't use magic, which is why they were all huddled together at the corner of the field. I didn't recognize them, so they were most likely first-years. They were probably trying desperately to force a spell, but they might as well have been waving toys around for all the good it did. They all looked so miserable that dark clouds basically hung over them.

"That's—" I recognized a familiar face among them.

There had been a commoner who wedged her way into the protagonist's harem in the anime. She took every chance she could to woo the protagonist, and she stirred up all sorts of chaos in the harem. There was a mastermind pulling her strings, one who taught her all kinds of lewd things and different ways into a man's heart.

The name of that mastermind was...

“—Tina.”

Tina was a popular side character in the anime. There had even been a significant number of viewers who declared, *“Enough of the protagonist’s harem, give more screen time to Her Majesty, the Demon Queen of Porn Mags!”* I personally liked her a lot too, enough to give her my rapt attention whenever she was on screen.

She was a slim, healthy-looking girl, and she kept her long, silky black hair tied back. People called her the “Demon Queen of Porn Mags” because she didn’t bother hiding her assets. Even through her clothing, you could tell she had a well-endowed chest. I could attest to that, seeing her large breasts strain against her uniform with my own two eyes.

“Um, excuse me. You’re Lord Denning, right?” Tina spoke up. “What do you want with us?”

It might have been inappropriate to think it, but she just oozed sex appeal—something Charlotte did not have. On the surface she looked like an earnest student, but in reality she had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the birds and the bees.

In the anime, Tina had been a very shrewd girl who earned a fortune by popularizing porn mags in the school, which she claimed were the pinnacle of commoner culture. A large majority of noble students led a sheltered life with little in the way of entertainment. She had seized the chance to earn some big bucks. All it took was one look at the cover of an adult magazine and those chumps would fork over their money, she’d claimed. The viewers had been floored by this fearless girl’s bold scheme.

Two-Faced Tina had put away her wand and now stared at me.

“Could it be that you don’t have a partner?” she asked. “None of us are very good at magic, though. Sorry...”

“...That’s not it. I mean, uh, like you said, I have nobody to pair up with,” I admitted.

“Oh, so you’re not denying it?”

“You’re not wrong...” I replied. “That aside, you guys are first-years, right?

Would you like some advice? You seemed to be struggling a little bit."

They were commoners, so advice itself wasn't enough to make them use magic with ease just like that, so I offered more on a whim. I wanted to speak to the popular anime side character, so it wasn't like I didn't have an ulterior motive.

"Oh really?! Yes, please! Honestly, we were all a bit lost!" Tina replied gratefully.

"Tina!" one of her classmates hissed. "The P-Piggy... Ah, I mean, this gentleman is from House Denning! He is way too far above our station for us to ask for advice..." All the other first-years went rigid. Tina, on the other hand, bowed in gratitude. As she leaned forward, she distracted me for a brief moment with the soft, supple curves of her cleavage.

I froze. *Th-The Demon Queen of Porn Mags is no joke. I never thought I'd accidentally run into th-this kind of fan service here. H-Her Majesty is terrifying, oink!*

Unlike Tina, however, the other commoners were scared stiff and quiet. I could almost see the figurative wall between nobles and commoners, looking at them. *I suppose it's only natural. House Denning is the most powerful noble house in Daryth.*

Despite all that, Tina stepped towards me and looked me in the eyes.

"It's totally fine," I insisted. "I might be a Denning, but I've turned over a new leaf."

"Huh?" Tina asked, confused. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. Now, about that advice. It's very simple. You just need to have a good visualization, that's all." I answered. "The clearer you can visualize the spell in your head, the higher your chances of success."

"Visualization?" Tina echoed. "That's no different from what Professor Loco Moco said, though."

"No, it's very different." I began. "Imagine the heat of flames. The chill of ice. The gentleness of wind. The roughness of the earth. From what I can tell, none

of you here are able to visualize these things clearly in your head. How many of you here attend Professor Arle's Magic Studies class?"

Everyone in the group raised their hands.

"Spirits aren't interested in commoner blood. Remember this from the first lesson you attended? Because of that, it's very difficult for commoners to use magic."

"That's really unfair..." Tina mumbled after a moment, glaring over my shoulder at the eager noble students in the training field. "Just because you're a noble, you can easily use magic. Just because we're commoners, we can't. It's so unfair, especially unfair in your case, milord. You were born into House Denning..."

One student fired a ball of flames across the sky, while another summoned a sphere of water at their fingertips. None of the noble students struggled using their magic.

"About that," I said. "You should stop focusing on the nobles so much. If you really can't ignore them, it might be best just to let it all out. Don't bottle up your emotions. You need to convey your feelings to the spirits in your own unique way. They'd be more interested in you if you did. I'll just put this out there too, but House Denning is probably the most prestigious in terms of magic skill."

"The most prestigious... That's right, the Dennings are powerful nobles..." Tina groaned in frustration. The commoners took a few steps back silently. If they'd forgotten about my status before, they definitely remembered it now. Tina, however, kept staring me straight in the eye.

Okay, who do I wanna talk to next?

Scanning for my next target, I glanced around a handful of times when a voice behind me grabbed my attention. It was a loud voice. A voice I disliked, one dripping with disdain. It sounded like a fight had broken out among some of the nobles, not an unusual sight during Practical Magic.

Magic was a measurement of power among the nobility of Daryth. Between hot-blooded youngsters, even the tiniest difference in magic skill was bound to

escalate into conflict.

"Well, well, well. You must have super thick skin to suck up to the Piggy Duke every day, considering how much you roasted him behind his back! Are you listening, Valjean?! Have you got nothing to say?!"

That bombshell hit me right in the gut.

Th-That bastard! So all those times you ate breakfast with me... All those times you helped me up when I broke a chair... It was all just to suck up to me?!

I narrowed my eyes, trying to read Valjean's expression. *If you have any response to that, say it! I'm listening!* But Valjean only lowered his head, his face burning red as he gripped his wand with a trembling hand. *I'm the one hurt by your actions here! I trusted you, and yet...! You're causing more hurt than hearing this guy badmouth me!*

"I hear you've been tight on money lately. I bet you planned on sucking up to Denning and asking him to lend you money, didn't you?" the boy jeered. "Now that I get a better look, your wand looks like the cheap one commoners use!"

"How dare you!" Valjean snapped back, casting his gaze between the boys surrounding him. "If this wand is so cheap, then what's your excuse for being so much worse at magic than me even with me using it?"

"What did you just say?! You wanna fight, you penniless brat?!"

Everyone watched the fight unfold with bated breath.

"Don't you think you picked the wrong person to suck up to, Valjean? Talking about the Piggy Duke is taboo even within House Denning. I hear that his own family cast him aside! Sucking up to him just makes you two pitiful losers trying to comfort each other!"

Ah. Yeah. That's very true. It wasn't just my family who gave up on me; the two knights who had served me since childhood left my side too. Even the people of my family's territory talked about me in hushed whispers when I was brought up.

Valjean looked my way, his eyes wide and pleading. It was painful to watch him squirm like that, but I decided to be honest with him anyway. "They're

right. You shouldn't have picked me to suck up to."

"Ha ha ha! Looks like you've been cast aside by Denning too, Valjean!"

"Shut up! This has nothing to do with you!" Valjean shouted at the bully. "You want to call my wand cheap?! I'll show you cheap! I'm way better at magic with a cheaply made wand than any of you with your expensive custom ones!" Valjean waved his wand in a wide arc. Wind spirits responded to Valjean's anger first, and it wasn't long before various other spirits began to follow suit.

"*O spirits of wind and fire! Answer my call!*"

Color drained from my face as I realized what Valjean was doing. Amused by his desperation, water spirits, earth spirits, even darkness spirits had answered his summons and gathered around him. *Wait a minute!* I thought desperately. *Don't lend your powers to Valjean in the state he's in!*

Seeing that they'd all but turned Valjean into a ticking time bomb, the boys tormenting him began to edge away slowly.

"Cool it, Valjean! It was just a joke!"

"Professor, over there! Valjean's lost it!"

From across the field, Professor Loco Moco waved his wand towards Valjean, raising his voice in an attempt to cancel out Valjean's spell with his own earth magic.

It's no good, I realized*. He's not going to make it from all the way over there.*

"Hey, now! Chill out, you penniless brat!"

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up*! Don't call me penniless! My family is a generations-old, prestigious earl household! Your family standing doesn't even come close to mine!"

The spirits crowded around Valjean, gleefully preparing to unleash their magic. *Seriously, spirits are so troublesome!* I thought, panicking. *With enough of them, even Valjean can cast a powerful spell! He's too worked up to have any sort of control over his magic right now!*

"*Blood of Greatlorde, blessed with the fertility of the earth, weave a scalding wind that roars to the heavens!"* Valjean chanted with bloodlust in his eyes*. "O*

tameless wind, writhe with flames searing from your very core! Blazing Tornado!" Valjean was deaf to the pleading voices of the students around him.

This is bad. He's really going to lose it! Ugh, the professor's spell won't make it, darn it! I guess it can't be helped! I acted quickly, hoping I wasn't too late.

"Awright, spirits, listen up!" I could hear the professor's chanting as I moved to intervene. "*Sand and earth, rise and form a wall of stone. Stonewall!*"

Before all of our eyes, the earth rose in response to the professor's call and solidified into an imposing wall. The wall was bigger and thicker the closer it got to Valjean, creating a barrier between his uncontrollable magic and the rest of the shocked students.

But then nothing happened. The myriad spirits once gathered around Valjean scattered to the wind. No tornado, blazing or otherwise, appeared from behind the professor's wall.

After a long moment of silence, Professor Loco Moco relaxed his stance. "Musta been a dud, then. Don't be scared, kiddos. Everythin' is fine." He cast his voice out over the class, booming like a megaphone as he amplified it with magic. "Class is over. That's it for today, so skedaddle on outta here. No homework either." With another wave of his wand, the wall of earth crumbled to dust and returned to the ground.

Just then, I heard the thud of something—or someone—hitting the ground. I looked over and saw Valjean had collapsed to the ground. The spirits must not have returned the mana he had given them. He was probably suffering from mana exhaustion. He'd be miserable for a while, if that was the case.

"I guess we should have expected that," one of the bullies muttered. "Even if Valjean's good at magic, there's no way he'd be able to cast an advanced spell like that."

The people who had mocked Valjean started muttering amongst themselves again, now that the threat had passed. "Hey, look," one of the students called. "The Piggy Duke's heading over to Valjean. What's he doing?"

They're so annoying. It's not like I'm going to do anything. I'm just worried about him, so I'm going to check on him, that's all. I'm not bothered by what I

heard earlier. Not at all, I swear.

And then I slipped. It wasn't on purpose, really. It resulted in an accidental body slam as my body fell flat on top of Valjean's. "O-Oink!" I cried in surprise.

Valjean let loose an inhuman wail and twitched like a fish out of water.

"The Piggy Duke finished Valjean off..." said one student.

"Valjean will probably be the next target of his bullying..." chimed another. "Remember that guy who went berserk in class before? The Piggy Duke picked on him relentlessly after that. We should probably stop associating with Valjean... I don't want the Piggy Duke to set his sights on me next."

Seeing their fearful gazes lingering on me, I put on the most menacing glare I could muster, daring anyone to say anything against me. Just like that time in the cafeteria.

Just you wait, Valjean, I thought bitterly*. If you pretend we're strangers tomorrow and start playing dumb, I...I...I'll cry! Hmm, should I body slam him again just to drive that point home?* As I debated whether or not I should tackle Valjean a second time, Professor Loco Moco's voice rang out once again.

"Listen up, y'all. Make sure you learn somethin' from this. Nothin' good will come of it if you let your emotions do your thinkin' for you."

I didn't want to get in trouble since I wasn't directly involved, so it was time to hightail it out of there. I definitely learned a valuable lesson today, at the very least. Making friends now wouldn't be all sunshine and rainbows.

•

"He's a freaking noble, how could he have lost it like that?!" a girl shouted to herself. "Class ended early thanks to that idiot! Idiots, the lot of them! We commoners don't matter to them at all, huh?! That idiot noble! Able to use magic since childhood and he *still* lost control!"

Hidden away by the overgrown weeds, the girl had made herself a secret training spot behind a deserted research building. That was where Tina found herself now. "Ugh! What do I even do?!" she groaned. "I'm not getting any better, darn it all!"

As the daughter of an innkeeper, Tina helped out the family business however she could. She saved up money to pay the enrollment fee, and studied hard as she balanced it with her busy work life. All of her hard work paid off, and she managed to safely pass the entry exam for Kirsch Mage Institute. Once there, she persevered in that school which catered to noble students, despite being a commoner. She had one reason and one reason alone for all of this struggle, and that was to use magic.

"Come on, magic spell! Work for me already! Work, work, *work*!"

She was in for a rude awakening once she entered the school. Most of the upperclassmen of common birth had given up on learning magic. Tina realized the bitter truth, watching as one commoner after the other dropped most of their magic classes by their second year. Magic belonged to the nobility, and spirits did not obey commoners.

"What a load of crap!" she snapped aloud, thinking of all the times she'd been told that same thing over and over again. "I know that already! Do they think us stupid just because we're commoners?!"

Her jealousy of the nobles always lurked in a corner of her heart. It wasn't just her, either; all of the commoners in the school envied them for their ability to use magic. *But now, I'm going to let it all out. He told me that embracing my envy instead of keeping it bottled up is the first step.*

The noble who gave her this advice was from House Denning. Even if he was ridiculed as a deadweight pig, Tina knew that he was basically a magic prodigy.

"They don't realize just how hard I've worked!" Tina kicked repeatedly at the grass. "Waking up early every morning, waving my wand meaninglessly a million times!"

She'd let her mask of an earnest, responsible student slip, but nobody was around to see it. Normally, this was a side of her that she would never show to anyone, much less the nobles or the guys at the school.



“Screw them! They better not mess with me! Just how hard do they think I’m trying?! Just once, I’d like to succeed! Let my hard work bear fruit! ‘Just marry a rich man,’ they said. Don’t make me laugh! I worked hard to get into this school because I want to use magic, not to become a gold digger to one of those nitwit nobles!”

Her parents had told her before to use her assets to seduce a noble man. It wasn’t unheard of for a noble student to fall in love with a commoner attending the school. Her parents had hoped she would be one of those cases.

“I devoured every book on magic that I could get my hands on so that I could use it. But I can understand why my predecessors stopped taking magic classes! It’s because they’re nothing but scams that teach you nothing besides the fact that privileged blood and ancestry equal good magic! That guy told me that comparing myself to the nobles too much is bad for me, but I just can’t help it! They can all use magic!”

After Practical Magic class had ended, her friends and upperclassmen told her to take the Piggy Duke’s words with a grain of salt. He was the good-for-nothing failure who had fallen from grace, after all.

But she took his words to heart, for they really did seem genuine to her.

“He didn’t have to tell me that! I’ve heard it all so many times that I can recite every word in my sleep!” She ranted on in frustration. “‘Spirits don’t lend their powers to commoners.’ I *know* that already! These so-called ‘spirits’ are the same as the girls who only go after handsome men or the ‘great’ nobles! These spirits are such a sham too! They’re not that different from us. They’re all so dang shallow!”

Many commoners enrolled in the Kirsch Mage Institute with dreams of using magic. Such miracles only happened once in a blue moon, and over time the number of commoners attending magic classes dwindled.

“Yeah, I have nothing but envy towards them! So what? Just because they’re of noble birth, they can do magic? That’s so unfair! ‘Spirits like sophisticated blood.’ Screw that! Don’t look down on my commoner blood!”

That had been the first time she spoke with a noble student since she came to

Kirsch Mage Institute. It couldn't have been a coincidence. Even if those words came from that good-for-nothing upperclassman, Tina decided to take them at face value.

"Don't bottle up your emotions. You need to convey your feelings to the spirits in your own unique way."

Thinking back on his words, Tina spoke her truth aloud. "I admit it. I am an envious person... But that's the real me. Only idiots come to this school aiming to marry into riches. Are you listening, spirits? Here I am. I'm a terrible person, aren't I? But this is who I really am."

Tina continued to kick at the overgrown grass as she brandished her wand. In her mind, she envisioned dirt rising from the ground to form a doll of mud. "Just work already! I came to this school because I want to use magic! I didn't come here to flirt with stupid nobles!" She beat at the air over and over again with the wand she had so diligently saved for until it was torn and tattered. It didn't matter to her. Nothing mattered except getting this spell to work.

"Come on, magic! Magic, now! *Create Golem*! Create a golem, I said!"

Then, a miracle happened before Tina's eyes. A fist-sized clump of dirt floated up from the ground, hovered for a moment, then fell. Nothing more. "Did that just happen...?" Tina gaped.

It wasn't anything close to a proper Create Golem spell. It was an utter failure compared to what she'd been going for. To her, however, it was the best result she could possibly hope for. She felt like a stranded traveler stumbling upon an oasis in the desert.

"I-I did it... No way. I really did it...!"

The earth spirits knew. They could see how diligent she was and how passionately she swung her wand. It was true that commoners came to Kirsch for magic, but very few had as strong of a will as Tina did. Calling her a closeted pervert was a considerable understatement, but that only added to her charm. Even if she put on an act in front of others, it didn't change the earnestness at her core.

Watching her like this, the earth spirits just might have started taking a liking

to this girl.

“I-It really worked... Amazing... Wow.” Tina’s shaking knees gave out under her and she sank down to the ground. “That means... I’m a genius. I’m a super genius...”

She couldn’t help but react that way. It was extraordinarily rare for commoners to have any results from spells *at all*, let alone in such a short span of time.

Before she could fully process her achievement, a voice burst out from behind her...

“...Oink!”

Dreading what she might possibly see, Tina turned around towards the noise, not moving from her spot on the ground.

Please be a trick of the wind. Please let there be no one there.

“Ah, oops. You saw me... But, uh, I, um... I didn’t see anything, so... I totally didn’t realize you put on an act in front of other people. Or that you actually have a pretty smart mouth, for that matter.” Tina had no response for that. The boy continued. “Yeah, so...never mind.” The boy dashed off, his snorts receding as he went. Tina could only stare as the silhouette of the Piggy Duke gradually shrunk, until he disappeared from view as he rounded the corner of the research building.

Was that a trick of the light, or had he been smiling?

“It definitely wasn’t a trick of the light! Wait, was he watching me the entire time?! No way! Oh no! Is my life over now? It had to be a stupid ‘great’ noble who saw me, of all people!”

Under the light of the warm spring sun, her face flushed red in embarrassment.

●

The next morning.

I was scarfing down breakfast on the big chair I had asked the maids to prepare, when a shadow fell over me. *Who could possibly want to bother me*

right now? I thought.

"Good morning."

"Hm?" I paused in my eating to look up, and saw a familiar face. "...Oh. It's you."

Before me was the pretty boy who'd gone off the deep end with his magic. His blond hair didn't have its usual shine to it, and his pretty face was sunken and haggard. Valjean sighed as he sank into the chair across from me.

Hey, I'm the one who wants to sigh, you jerk. "You look terrible, Valjean," I said to him, breaking the silence that hung between us. "You didn't get any sleep, did you?"

"Good catch... I spent all night moving my stuff to the first floor."

"The first floor?" I echoed.

"The first floor of the dorms, yes," he repeated. "The headmaster said that it would be considerably cheaper for me, so I moved from the third floor."

I was stunned. "Wait, really?"

"Really. The commoner rooms on the first floor turned out to be slums, just like the rumors said. I didn't think they would actually be *true*. That aside, the bunk bed is a revolutionary invention. I guess that's what commoners came up with to save space, huh? I couldn't get a wink of sleep because the commoners snored so loudly..." He sighed heavily.

I looked up and stared at the brown-nosing pretty boy.

I've never heard of a noble moving to the commoner rooms on the first floor. It's true that it's way cheaper, but wouldn't that wound his pride? His especially. He sounded really obsessed with his family standing yesterday.

"The headmaster told me off after the incident... It was horrible. Usually, being summoned to the headmaster's office is an honor. I really wanted my first visit there to be under different circumstances...like a recommendation to the Order of Royal Knights or something."

"You? A Royal Knight? Forget it," I quipped. "You couldn't even control a single spell in class. Think about it—if you ended up hurting the royal family

instead by mistake, it'd be a disaster."

"You're absolutely right." Valjean sighed after a moment's pause and smiled self-deprecatingly. "I guess I'll be the laughingstock of the school for the foreseeable future, then." It was very rare for second-years to go berserk with their magic. We were still students, but we were also nobles representing our respective families. The reputation of the Greatlorde household would be tarnished because of this incident, as well. That was just something he had to accept.

Speaking of which...

"You played me for a fool, Lord Pauper. What was it you said? 'I am so moved by your diligence; please have this breakfast as an offering'?" I might have been paraphrasing, but my point still stood. "In the end, you were just gunning for my clout. Hmph, you're no better than those snobbish, greedy nobles."

"...Now hold on just a second. Did you call me 'Lord Pauper'? That nickname is incredibly insulting to my reputation."

"You're penniless and hotheaded," I pointed out, "and you caused trouble for everyone in class. It's a perfect name for you."

"Fine. Call me whatever you want." Valjean seemed eager to change the topic. "That said, it seems that you haven't finished your breakfast yet. Were you possibly waiting for me?"

"Hmph. Look, I'm gonna keep eating. A feast is the only cure when you're down. That's how I've survived up to now. So shut up and eat."

We both ate our breakfasts in silence, broken only by the sound of chewing and swallowing. Of course, being two problem students sitting together, we were bound to receive judging looks. I was used to it, but he probably wasn't.

"Please keep this between you and me," Valjean said at length. "There's something I want to tell you."

"Go ahead," I said.

"I was being sincere when I praised you. It is true that I had a bit of an ulterior motive at first, but I talked to you because I wanted to witness your change

with my own two eyes.”

“Are you planning to butter me up so you can steal my breakfast?” I raised a skeptical eyebrow. “I won’t fall for your tricks.”

“What on earth are you saying? You never accepted any of the breakfast I offered, anyway. Not even once.”

“Of course I didn’t,” I replied. “I’m trying to thin down.”

“That’s true. Limiting how much you eat is the first step towards losing weight... All right. I’ll stop offering you my meals from now on.” Valjean finished his food. “Thanks for the meal.”

“Hm? You finished eating faster than me. You should be proud.”

“A noble can’t take pride in something silly like that,” he rebutted.

“Tsk, spoilsport. Oh, are you leaving already?” I called out to him. “I’m nearly done with my food. Wait for me.”

“You really have changed,” said Valjean, as though he could hardly believe it himself. “Jogging in the morning, eating only one portion for breakfast...” He ticked off the words on his hands. “More than anything, though... The wind magic that saved me yesterday felt just as kind as the magic back then. That was the second time you’ve saved me.”

“Huh?” I paused, not saying anything for a long moment. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s no use feigning ignorance. I know it was you who knocked me out in class yesterday. You’ve done it to me once before. That’s what I mean by ‘second time.’ You probably don’t remember, though. I don’t mind.” A gust of wind blew in from the open hall doors, and I sat dumbfounded as he continued.

“I feel like I’m finally seeing the real you. It’s a little unfortunate for you, though... It seems that I’m the only one who realizes you’re serious about losing weight. So please, let me ask you for a special privilege.”

My mind refocused and my vision cleared. Lord Pauper held a silver tray with empty plates. He looked at me with a smile so bright it could steal the limelight at a ball in the royal palace. He was no longer the pitiful sight he was moments

ago, dejected about the headmaster's reprimand.

"I ask this of you, Lord Slowe, since you've turned a new leaf... Please allow me to be the first to call you a friend."

The penniless noble, this minor character who didn't even appear in the anime, beamed as though he didn't have a care in the world. And he directed that smile at *me.*

Besides losing weight, making friends was my second most important goal. *Who would have thought I would accomplish that goal so soon? I honestly still can't believe this is real.* Wanting to share that fact with my personal retainer, I sprinted through the corridors after morning classes were over, squealing like a madman.

"The Piggy Duke's stampeding down the stairs! Get out of the way if you don't want to get mowed down!"

Retainers generally had two jobs. The first was to care for privileged noble students living in the school. Carrying their textbooks for them, reading books to them to pass the time, taking a horse into the city of Yoram to buy things on their behalf... They were errand gophers, basically.

The second was to keep in contact with noble households. This involved writing detailed letters on how the student spent their days, passing on secret messages from the House to the student, and so on. A messenger, if you really want to get down to brass tacks. I heard that some retainers had to cover for their self-indulgent masters, reporting back with lies of diligence and responsibility.

"Oiiink!"

"First-years, run for it! If you get in his way, he won't let you hear the end of it!"

My retainer Charlotte was mostly free to do as she pleased. She was finally able to leave the extremely strict House Denning, and I wanted her to live out her life with little restrictions. The only thing I asked of Charlotte was to prepare my custom-made uniform. Oh, and I used to ask her to deliver breakfast to me every morning until recently too.

“The Piggy Duke hit my shoulder, aaah! Someone call a doctor! My shouldeeer!”

Don’t be silly. I barely touched you. Wait, are you trying to swindle me into paying you compensation? I won’t fall for that. It’s not like I have any money in the first place. Not only am I a problem student here at school, my own family treats me as if I don’t exist. I can barely rub two pennies together with the allowance they give me.

I was surprisingly nimble today. It had been a while since I could move my body like I wanted to. It wasn’t just because of my diet, however. My elation at making my first friend probably had something to do with it. *Huh. Maybe I could even try taking two steps at a time like this.*

“Hey, you! First-year, over there! Don’t just stand there! The Piggy Duke’s coming! Actually, he’s falling down! Move!”

Hm? Who’s that? Someone looked up at me from the middle landing of the stairs I was heading down.

“Lord Denning!” she called out to me. It was Tina.

Her Majesty, the Demon Queen of Porn Mags herself, stood there clutching her textbooks to her chest.

Wha—that’s dangerous! Get out of the way!

As I was flying down the stairs two steps at a time, I had too much momentum to stop myself. What I wouldn’t give for a set of emergency brakes! I focused everything I had to avoid directly colliding into her. The world went by in slow motion, even as I heard her shout.

“Were you watching me the whole time yesterday, Lord Denning? Answer me!” she demanded, anger radiating from her entire being.

I was momentarily distracted by her luscious curves, but I managed to reply, “Your spell was a little lacking in elegance.”

“You really were watching me! Ah, darn it, my life is ruined! This is the worst!”

“Uh, Tina, your true colors are showing!” I grunted, still trying to avoid running into her.

“Oops... Jeez!”

Contorting my body, I managed to swerve past Tina and spun completely around, letting my momentum carry me past to start hopping down to the next floor. Her face flushed bright red, but she didn’t look too put off by me. That wasn’t just my imagination, right?

“Did everyone see that?! This is not a drill! A girl talked to the Piggy Duke! I repeat, this is not a drill!!!”

Shut up! That was nothing out of the ordinary! I talk to girls sometimes too. Whatever, I’ve got to find Charlotte! There’s something I’ve got to tell her!

“Chaaarlotte!” I yelled.

Everyone would probably remember this moment as yet another oddity of the Piggy Duke, but... *Who cares about that?! I’ve achieved a lifetime milestone!*

Leaving the lecture building, I ran around the entire campus in search of Charlotte. Finally, I found her at the only tailor’s shop on campus. She came here to order a new uniform for me, like as not, anticipating the day I wouldn’t fit in my old clothes.

“Wh-Wh-What, Master Slowe?!” she stammered. “Why are you shouting? Please stop that; it’s embarrassing!”

“I made a friend!!!” Charlotte stared blankly at me, confusion written all over her face. “A friend!” I insisted excitedly. “I made a friend! And a girl talked to me just now!”

“F-Friend?!” I might as well have told her the apocalypse was happening, based on her dumbfounded expression. Then realization dawned on her face, and she gestured with her hands in conclusion. “Master Slowe, you have a fever, don’t you?! Let’s get you to the infirmary!”

“Huh? I don’t have a fever!” I protested.

“There’s no way a girl would talk to you of her own volition either, Master Slowe! Even if she really did, she definitely only did it out of desire for your family’s wealth!”

“Wha— That’s going too far!” I wailed.

“No, she absolutely must be a gold digger! I’m your retainer, Master Slowe. I can tell! I know you best! Come on, let’s go to the infirmary!”

“O-Oiiink! Let me go, Charlotte!”

Whenever Charlotte met me on campus after that, she would put a hand to my forehead to check whether I had a fever or not.



Chapter 2: The Protagonist and the Heroine

The fourth floor of the boys' dormitory was the second-highest floor in the building. Even among the nobles this floor was notoriously elite, with only those students from the most powerful families being permitted to live there. With spacious layouts and grand views of the entire campus, the rooms on the fourth floor far outclassed those occupied by the other students. The average nobles lived on the third floor, and minor nobility on the second, while commoners were relegated to the slums on the first floor.

In this space for the privileged, the two of us sat across from each other at a table in my living room.

"Like I said, Charlotte, you don't have to do anything. You can just sit there!" I insisted.

"...But Master Slowe, it states here that only students who can use magic are eligible to join," Charlotte protested. "I'm not even a student. You may be a student of the institute, but I'm just a retainer. I wouldn't be permitted to join this contest."

We were discussing the Magic Speed-Eating Contest, which would be held tomorrow. The goatskin parchment application form sat on the desk between us. Charlotte peered over at it, still adamant that I was wrong.

"Charlotte, I tried! I really tried!" I banged a fist on the table, and Charlotte jerked a little before she froze. She cowered like a small animal and looked up at me with wide eyes. "But it didn't work! Just think about it. No girl would go with me! You know what the students at this school think of me, Charlotte! I'm a pig! I'm still just a blackhearted pig to them! My appearance is holding me back, darn it!"

I'd made a friend and was able to lose a little bit of weight. *I don't know how long it's going to take to actually thin down at this rate, though... I want to lose weight way faster!* I thought back on my efforts to find a partner over the past few days.

"Darn, I'd really like to join the Magic Speed-Eating Contest..." I'd said, casting

meaningful glances at the girls around me. “You need a boy and girl to enter together as a pair, though. What do I do...? Won’t anyone join the contest with me?” Despite my hopeful tone, one by one, they’d all screamed and run away.

It must have been my extremely obese appearance that scared everyone away, I’d concluded.

“I mean...” Charlotte trailed off. “I think your bad reputation is more because of the way you’ve treated people up ’til now rather than your appearance, Master Slowe. I’d be more surprised if a girl showed up saying that she wanted to pair up with you.”

I was at a loss for words. It was the truth, and I had nothing I could say to that.

“I think you need to work on improving your reputation, Master Slowe,” Charlotte said. “We need to convince people that you’re not like the rumors say you are, and that you’re actually a good person.”

“Hmm... But how do I do that?”

“Well, you could use your gift for magic to help people, for one.” Charlotte paused, thinking. “Oh, you could help out a commoner girl. Maybe helping one of the maids would be a good idea. The maids love gossip. It would spread around the school overnight.”

“I see. The maids, huh...?” Charlotte had a point. The days I spent as the tyrant blackhearted Piggy Duke really stuck with me. It seemed that I’d have to work harder to shed my infamous reputation. *I guess I should have expected that. My infamy is known near and far.*

“But Charlotte! That’s all the more reason why this would work!”

“Wh-Wha—” Charlotte was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Please enter the Magic Speed-Eating Contest with me!” I pleaded. “I know you’re worried about not being a student, but it’s totally fine! Nobody in this school would dare say a thing about it since I bear the Denning name!”

“Master Slowe... If you did that, you’d be no better than you were before,” Charlotte chided.

“Ah...” My words stuck in my throat.

“You’ll never become the person you want to be if you keep falling back on your old bad habits. Using your family name like that is just what the blackhearted Piggy Duke would have done! Not only that, you’d be in a lot of trouble if your family found out that you broke the rules again!” Charlotte argued. “Plus, if they think I had a hand in it, they might decrease my salary too! I’m not in a position where I can extort people like you can, Master Slowe, so I can’t afford to risk having any further cuts to my pay. I’d starve to death!”

“E-Extort?! Charlotte, what in the world are you talking about?! I would never extort anyone!”

“I’ve heard rumors, though,” Charlotte insisted. “One time, when I was helping out the maids, they told me that they saw another student giving you money.”

“I didn’t ask them to! They just came up and gave it to me!”

Many students in this school tried to butter me up and toy with my feelings like Valjean did. It was obvious that they wanted my favor as the direct descendent of the Denning family, but...I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. *Well, I mean, they went through all that trouble. It’d be rude of me to turn them down...* See, my family slashed my allowance whenever they heard of me causing trouble at school, and now they barely gave me anything. Charlotte wasn’t the only one who was tight on money.

“I can’t be the one who gets in your way if you want to turn things around, Master Slowe. If you can manage it, they might see more value in me and give me a raise too.” Charlotte really was adamant about me doing this the proper way, huh? “You should follow the contest rules.”

“Ugh...” Once again, I struggled to find my words. “You’ve gotten really bold lately, Charlotte.”

“It’s because I want to see you succeed. I’ll encourage you every step of the way. I had given up hope before, but if you’ve decided that you really want to change, I’m here for you!” Charlotte exclaimed. “For the sake of my salary, too! I’m sick of helping out with the dishes! At this rate, my hands are going to end up all shriveled.”

“Look, you’ve just gotta help me out, Charlotte!” I argued. “For the sake of

your allowance, too!”

“It’s not an allowance! It’s my salary!”

“Same thing!”

“No, it’s not!” Charlotte rebutted. “They’re two completely different things!”

Our voices grew louder and louder the more we argued. *I’m so glad we’re on the fourth floor with few other residents*, I thought*. If this were any other floor, someone would probably bang on the wall and shout at us to pipe down.*

“Charlotte, *please*, listen to me!” I begged.

“Wh-What is it, Master Slowe?” She looked taken aback by my desperation. “What’s with this solemn face all of a sudden?”

“I...I really...” I just couldn’t hold myself back any longer. “I really, *really* want to lose weight! One of the prizes in the contest is a weight-loss potion! I’ve just gotta have it! I want to change, I really do, but to do that I’ve got to start with my appearance first!”

“But you managed to thin down a teeny bit on your own,” Charlotte pointed out. “Just a teeny, tiny bit.”

“A teeny, tiny bit isn’t enough! I want to lose a ton more weight! I’m way too fat!” I stood up from my seat and moved to stand in front of the mirror I’d moved from my bedroom. “Look at me, Charlotte! I’m a pig! I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve tripped over my own feet on my morning jogs! Lord Pauper told me that a weight-loss potion was on the prize list, and I can’t let this chance go! I *have* to win that potion at the Magic Speed-Eating Contest!”

“You have no idea what could be in something like that. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!” Charlotte was skeptical, and probably rightfully so, but...

This had all started because of Valjean. When Lord Pauper heard that I wanted to lose weight, he told me about an event at the school scheduled for this weekend. See, every weekend, merchants would come to campus from outside the forest, opening up shops and planning various festivities for entertainment. Festivities like the Magic Speed-Eating Contest, for instance.

According to Valjean, he'd snagged a gig as an announcer for this event, as he sometimes did part-time work on the side. I couldn't help but wonder how he was able to land the job in the first place. It wasn't exactly work fit for a noble like him, even if he did live on the first floor.

"Jeez... I thought you'd changed, but you're still as pushy as always..." Charlotte sighed heavily. "I'll do it, Master Slowe."

"Thank you, Charlotte! You just have to sit there, that's all! I'll eat everything down to the last bite, I swear it!"

Charlotte cut me off before I could say anything further, holding a finger up to silence me. "But only on one condition."

"Huh? Condition?" I echoed.

Charlotte cleared her throat and gave me a pointed look. *Is it just me, or is Charlotte way too excited for whatever it is she's about to ask me?*

"Yes, one condition," she confirmed. "Since you're breaking the rules of the contest, I might get punished."

"Punished?" I thought about it. "I honestly don't think you have anything to worry about. It's just for fun. I'm pretty sure they'll be okay with anything as long as it's entertaining."

"I could still get in trouble."

"You really think so...?" I was skeptical.

"Master Slowe!" Charlotte scolded sharply. "I might get in trouble if we get caught, and if that happens, my salary might get cut!"

"Okay, all right. I'm listening," I relented. "You could get in trouble, and your pay might get docked."

"That's right! So if you want me to take that risk, I have one request."

I have a bad feeling about this...

Charlotte was a very skilled retainer, but there was a reason that she was assigned to me of all people.

"The condition I have is that...during the Magic Speed-Eating Contest, I want

you to let me—”

Hearing Charlotte’s demand, I went stock-still. “...What? Uh, I don’t know about that. Isn’t that a bit dangerous...?”

With her beautiful, silky silver hair, Charlotte’s charm was well-known even among the nobles and the rich commoners who’d worked for their wealth. If it weren’t for my bad reputation ruining things for her by association, she would be the subject of attention from countless nobles trying to court her.

I knew my cute retainer’s personality better than anyone. We’d been together for nearly a decade, after all.

“Master Slowe?” she prompted, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Fine,” I said reluctantly. “It can’t be helped. You *are* risking your salary for me... I agree to your condition.”

“Exactly!”

I also knew that despite her adorable appearance...she was a complete klutz.

“Wow, there are so many people around! Vendors here, vendors there... There are so many of them!” Charlotte couldn’t help but gawk in amazement as we drew closer to the festivities. “Look at all of the cute accessories they’re selling! Aw, but I’ve used up my salary for this month... I could afford them if only I got paid more...” Charlotte pouted at me.

Kirsch Mage Institute sat at the heart of a forest, encompassed by a wall that surrounded the entire campus. Tents lining the manicured lawns were jam-packed with just about every type of ware imaginable, from steaming cuisines to mysterious trinkets. Students perused the goods for sale, glaring intensely at their purses as though that would make more money appear. Maids chattered excitedly amongst themselves, enjoying the brief reprieve from their work.

There wasn’t a cloud in the sky; it really was shaping up to be a perfect day. I beckoned to Charlotte, who was busy gawking at the spectacle. “Charlotte, over here. The Magic Speed-Eating Contest is going to be held at the back of the cathedral.”

“Ah, please slow down, Master Slowe.”

I couldn't help it—I oinked.

"Master Slowe...you really need to work on that," Charlotte chided. "You are a direct descendant of House Denning. It's unbecoming of you to snort like that out in public."

"Yeah..." That happened to me sometimes, if I wasn't paying attention. The snorting, I mean. I could only hope that I wouldn't let this habit slip out at an important occasion or something like that.

"Like always, there's an incredible number of people here on the weekend," Charlotte commented in amazement. "It feels completely different from the rest of the week."

Today, Charlotte donned a much more casual outfit compared to the slightly less fashionable uniform she usually wore. It really suited her well-proportioned figure brilliantly.

"You think so?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. This crowd of people might have been huge to Charlotte, but to me, it was nothing. I didn't even have to do anything; the crowd just parted before me, clearing a path to my destination. Even if they *did* start muttering amongst themselves as they did so.

"Ah, it's the Piggy Duke."

"Make way, make way... Anything could set him off. You don't want him to pick on you..."

Hey, I'm not going to pick on anyone, I thought indignantly*. How rude.* The snide commentary continued on around me.

"What terrible plans is he cooking up this time? Wait, is he planning on joining the Magic Speed-Eating Contest?"

"Don't worry. The princess of Cirquista is joining the contest too. Even the Piggy Duke would know better than to forget his place around her."

"Is your head full of rocks? This is the Piggy Duke we're talking about! He's definitely up to no good!"

Scared of me as usual, this lot. They just can't get enough of talking about me as though I can't hear them. Well, I can. I do have ears, you know! Whatever. It

doesn't bother me. Sticks and stones and all that, but...if it were anybody else in my shoes, they'd be having a mental breakdown.

It only took a single glare from me to send them running for the hills.

"Eep! He's looking this way!"

"Hurry! Run! I don't want him to shake us down for our allowance again!"

That's not going to happen, I tell you! I've cleaned up my act. And I've never shaken anyone down for money! Charlotte's going to get the wrong idea! As we drew closer to the cathedral, the topic of the gossip on everyone's lips shifted from snide comments about me to wistful ones from rejected contest entrants.

"I didn't manage to snag a spot in the contest," said one student. "I really wanted to win that beauty potion... If I had, I would've given it to Lady Alicia and confessed to her."

"In your dreams, buddy," his friend replied. "Even if you had a hundred beauty potions, it wouldn't matter. She's the princess of Cirquista, remember? You're just a minor noble. There's no way she'd have taken you seriously with your family standing."

"Oh, shut up. A guy can dream!"

The cathedral, which was built to overlook the Langeron Square, was swarmed by people who'd gathered behind it to watch the contest. Thanks to a generous sponsor, the prize list was especially glamorous. At the top of the list was the grand prize that just about any of the girls at this school would kill for: the beauty potion. Vendors couldn't stock the thing fast enough, popular as it was due to its skin-smoothing properties. Commoners and noble girls alike went crazy for the stuff. I heard that it sold for astronomically high prices now.

Once we'd pushed our way through the onlookers, I was finally able to get a good look at the contest grounds. They were little more than a bit of the cathedral grounds sectioned off by a length of rope, inside which a handful of tables were arranged around the inner perimeter. *Looks like there are twelve teams competing,* I thought, counting the number of tables.

Beyond those tables was a giant table, situated at the very center of the cordoned-off area. A veritable feast was arranged upon it, mountains of food

just waiting to be devoured by the competitors.

“I think people are watching us... Master Slowe? Are you listening to me?” I didn’t hear a word she said. The moment my eyes landed on that food, they went wide as saucers, and my stomach let out a deafening gurgle.

“Did you hear that?!” someone cried out in alarm.

“It’s the Piggy Duke! Look out, everyone! Get out of the way!”

“Master Slowe, Master Slowe,” Charlotte prodded. “Here, lend me your wand. You didn’t forget your promise, did you?” When I didn’t respond, Charlotte’s gaze followed mine, landing on the banquet spread. “Ah...still entranced by the food. I guess you can’t help it. You skipped breakfast today in preparation for the contest...”

My stomach is ready. I pumped my right fist high into the air. *I am* so *ready. This is my moment!*

“Master Slowe, you might not have realized this, but...you look like a real orc when you breathe so heavily like that... Did you know that?”

“And here comes entry number ten, Team ‘Come Out, Princess Carina!’ Certainly a bold decision, naming themselves after the princess of Daryth, who rarely leaves the royal palace. According to our intrepid team, they plan to head to the royal palace and request an audience with the princess if they win the grand prize.” Valjean’s smooth voice echoed out over the crowd of onlookers. “This pair of first-years most likely wouldn’t make it past Cardinal Maldini even if they *did* come bearing a gift, but anyone can dream. Now, keep your eyes out for Redus Halken, who despite being a new student is quite adept at wielding fire magic. Surely his team’s spells will be of much interest as well.”

I watched Valjean from where I sat at the competitors’ tables. I could see why they’d chosen him to preside over the contest now. He really was quite adept at projecting his voice with wind magic. Another testament to his magical abilities.

The tables were still empty of food. From what I could gather, the first plates would be brought to us when they’d finished introducing all of the competing teams. Beside me, Charlotte held a wand gleefully, whispering aloud to herself. To be honest, it scared me a little bit.

“Now for entry number eleven! Team... ‘The Princess and the Crystal Ball Fanatic’! Hmm, that’s a bit long... We’ll just call them Team Princess. When asked for a word, they said, ‘That beauty potion is as good as mine!’ This is from the princess of Cirquista, the Metropolis of Water, a nation renowned for its patronage of the arts! The highly sought-after beauty potion would surely only further enhance Lady Cirquista’s radiance, adding to the splendor of our humble school.”

Looks like Lord Pauper is good at buttering people up, as usual, I thought with a roll of my eyes. Thunderous applause erupted for the pair sitting at the eleventh table. More specifically, the applause was meant for the girl sitting there.

“And so the main protagonists take the stage,” I muttered.

I couldn’t help but turn my attention towards the table beside mine. I had a bone to pick with “Team Princess” over there. In return, I felt an intense gaze from the team’s self-absorbed namesake, malicious and sharp as an arrow jabbing into me.

Valjean continued his effusive commentary, completely ignorant of the silent staring match happening between tables eleven and twelve. “Lady Cirquista, an overseas student from our allied nation, has quite the fan base here at Kirsch Mage Institute, and wouldn’t you know it? In the underground rankings for the girl most desired as a little sister...”

The princess of Cirquista was a slender girl with golden blonde hair tied into twin ponytails at either side of her head. She was dressed in the institute uniform. She possessed an energetic, childlike charm that drew countless smiles from those around her. That charm was distinctly absent at the moment. Her large, cat-like, almond-shaped eyes were fixed on me in a pointed glare, her lips thinned into a straight line of displeasure.

Her name was Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista. She was the main heroine of *Shuya Marionette*...and my former fiancée.

“...Lady Cirquista reigns supreme! There are probably many ‘big brothers’ out there who want her to win the beauty potion.”

Valjean wasn’t exaggerating. Alicia was very much one of the most popular

students at Kirsch Mage Institute. The biggest reason was very straightforward: her adorable appearance. Despite the fact that she wasn't being very adorable right now, what with the way she kept glaring at me.

Boys like cute girls. That's just a fact. Even an inhuman piglet like me would find my attention drawn to cute girls.

Slender, cheeky, and full of energy—and she was the picture of grace, too, thanks to her royal upbringing. If Charlotte was a single delicate flower blooming in the snowy mountains, Alicia was a sunflower standing proudly at the height of summer. She was noble, but also very approachable.

As if that weren't enough, she was more fashionable and eye-catching than any noble lady of Daryth.

"Huh! This just in, folks, hot off the press! More than half of the entries in this contest have declared that they will offer the grand prize to Lady Alicia! Their lady partners are probably a little iffy about that! As expected of the princess of Cirquista: her popularity is unparalleled!"

Cirquista was said to be the nation of trendsetters. Maybe it was because of that that no matter where she was, Alicia never had so much as a hair out of place, catching everyone's eyes with her splendor. She really did have everything going for her.

On the other hand, Daryth was a very traditional country. The noblewomen here used makeup, same as in the south, but they preferred a more natural look, opting to wear much less of it. They also weren't very open about their male friends in public; because of this, many girls at the school were shy about being seen with the other sex, despite it being a co-ed institution.

Alicia did not have such qualms. She was unique in that regard. Partly because of that, Alicia regularly received confessions from the student noble boys of Daryth. At least, that's what I heard from Valjean.

"On to entry number twelve! Team 'Earnest Piggy Duke,' with the notorious Slowe Denning himself! When asked about the 'Earnest' in their team name, he stated that it was because he's turned a new leaf! How wonderful! Very befitting of a son of the great noble house of Daryth, House Denning! Let's give it up for Lord Slowe!"

There was no clapping, unlike all the teams introduced before us. Instead, our team only got jeers and boos. *Hey, who's booing me? Ugh, don't get them started, Lord Pauper!*

Alicia turned to her partner, hitting him repeatedly in the shoulder. "Shuya! We must come in first; anything else is unacceptable! We must leave that pig in the dust! That is an order!"

"Okay, okay!" said the boy beside her. "I hear you, so stop hitting me already!" His eyes turned towards me. "Hey, wait a minute. The Piggy Duke's in this contest too?! There's no way! We can't win against him at speed-eating!"

"Shuya, peer into the future right now!" Alicia demanded. "Use that crystal ball of yours and you will see the same future as I do!"

The short-haired redhead sitting beside Alicia was a thorn in my side. He had an overpowering presence that commanded people's attention, and a mysterious charisma that drew people in. He was the favored child of Baron Newkern and as such lived on the second floor with the other minor nobles. His trademark was his crimson hair, often likened to wild, burning flames.



“I can see it, I see it...” said the boy, peering into his crystal ball. “I see us getting the beauty potion in the future aheaaad!” His voice rose to a bellowing shout as he went on.

“It’s just as I said, isn’t it, Shuya?! We’re going to win! Defeat is out of the question!”

The hot-blooded fortune-teller, who the viewers wanted to take a hike, was none other than the protagonist of *Shuya Marionette*!

“Yeah, we’re the ones who are going to get the beauty potion. Woo-hoo!” Shuya cheered. But then his expression suddenly shifted, turning sour. “But I can’t see a future where we win against the Piggy Duke at speed-eating! Aren’t there rumors of him eating more than his own weight in food?! It’s impossible!”

“Come on, Shuya! What are you saying?! We will win! We *will* defeat that pig, Slowe!”

Watching the pair continue bantering, I felt a hot fire well up deep inside me.

“Lady Alicia’s partner is the renowned Shuya Newkern! He’s a little odd, and is never seen without his trusty crystal ball! In fact, it’s rumored that Shuya’s soul actually resides within his crystal ball!”

Shuya dropped said crystal ball onto the table as Alicia began to throttle him. See, Shuya owed Alicia a very large debt, one that she lorded over him without mercy. Whenever he tried to go against Alicia’s will, even the slightest bit, she would treat him like a slave.

“Fine, fine! I’ll eat like my life depends on it, so stop strangling me, Alicia! You’re so violent. I’m not your retainer, you know! Knock it off!” Shuya struggled to work his way out of Alicia’s hold. “If you keep strangling me, it’s going to cause an international incident between Daryth and Cirquista! Everyone’s staring at us, and they’re all going to think that we’re weird if you don’t cut it out!”

“*You’re* the weirdo who carries a crystal ball everywhere!” Alicia retorted. “Who cares what other people think of you at this point?!”

The scene caused the crowd to burst into raucous laughter. As if he’d sensed

their fight coming to a close, Valjean took the chance to wrap things up. “With that, that ends the introduction for all the teams!” he declared. “Now then, let’s move on to the courses that will be served this round!”

“Master Slowe, it seems that Lady Alicia still holds a grudge against you...” Charlotte whispered, leaning into my side. “It is kind of your own fault, though. Rumors of you being a self-indulgent orc spread all the way to Cirquista, and Alicia had a hard time dealing with being associated with you because of that. Or so I hear, anyway...” Straightening back up, Charlotte grinned excitedly down at the wand in her hand. *My* wand. “Hehe... Anyway, I can’t wait...!”

She seemed to be lost in her own little world. I couldn’t help but feel uneasy, looking at her like that.

“It’s a white flag! Team Five has surrendered.”

The rules of the contest were pretty straightforward: whichever team cleared the most plates by the end of the second round would be declared the winner. There was a catch, though.

Teams that finished the food on their tables would shout out for seconds, and someone stationed at the central food table would throw them a red ball. In order to receive another plate, one of the two people on the team would have to catch that ball.

Therein lay the rub. Most of the time, other teams would intercept the ball with their spells, and the team requesting more food would have to try again.

“We’ve got a heated battle here, folks!” Valjean cried. “Some of the spells have reached the audience seats too! Noble students who are watching here, please take care to protect yourselves.”

After the contest started, the eleven other teams initially fought amongst themselves. I really should have expected it. Few teams would want to get in my way because of my status, and then there was the matter of my reputation as the blackhearted Piggy Duke. They probably avoided me out of fear of retribution, be it from my fearsome reputation or because of the weight my name carried.

Either way, I took advantage of their reluctance, wolfing down one plate after

another as they were brought to my table. All around me, spells shot off from all directions in a myriad of colors. I had a front-row seat for an impromptu spell exhibition.

Balls thrown from the central table were shot down by water spells and blown out of the air by wind spells. Light spells blinded the catcher as they prepared to catch their ball too. Each team of students fought in their own unique way.

Just when I was sure I had this in the bag, the stalemate between the other teams was suddenly broken.

“Darn! Why isn’t anyone aiming for that pig?!” Alicia cried in outrage. “The nobles of Daryth are such cowards! Shuya, I’m going to sabotage the pig, so eat up!” She gestured to the central table. “Seconds! We want seconds over here! Hurry up!”

“Hey, don’t be ridiculous, Alicia!” Shuya protested over his plate of food. “I can only eat so fast! I haven’t finished this plate yet! Cancel the seconds for Team Princess, please! We’re not done!”

While I lived on the fourth floor of the boys’ dorm, Alicia lived on the fifth floor of the girls’ dorm. You know, the floor reserved only for royalty. And as befitting such royalty from a nation so intertwined with water, Alicia aimed to turn the tides in her favor.

“Charlotte! Protect our ball from Alicia’s magic!” I exclaimed.

“On it, Master Slowe! Here I go!”

Encouraged by Alicia’s vigor and the positive reaction from the crowd, other teams started taking aim at us too.

The crowd was going wild. Some whistled loudly, while others yelled for the other teams to cast straight at me. By this point, nearly half of the teams had given up, so it wasn’t like their sabotages would make much of a difference. But I was about to learn that the other teams weren’t my biggest obstacle.

“Charlotte! Why are you sabotaging me and not the other teams?!” I shouted.

“Huh? I *am* sabotaging the other teams! What are you talking about?!”

“You’re sabotaging *me*, Charlotte! Look! You just surprised the person who was carrying seconds to our table, and they tripped! That counts as a failed attempt too!”

“Master Slowe!” Charlotte gasped. “There’s sauce on your face! It’s all sticky!”

My biggest obstacle was the girl standing next to me.

“There’s sauce on my face because of *your* spell! Your spell splattered the sauce on the table all over the place!” I snapped.

“That wasn’t me! That was another team! It’s Team Four’s fault!”

“It is definitely because of your spell backfiring, because Team Four has already dropped out!”

“It didn’t backfire!” Charlotte protested. “I just haven’t held a wand in a long time. But I’m fine now! I’ve gotten the hang of it already!”

“You sure about that?” I asked skeptically.

“I’m positive! Please believe me, Master Slowe!”

I’ll be frank. It’s not good to be wishy-washy about this. Not for me, not for you. Charlotte might have been royalty once, coming from the destroyed kingdom of Huzak and all, but she was downright terrible at magic.

“Look at that! The retainer for the Piggy Duke is using magic!”

Out of all the retainers hired by the Dennings, she was the only one banned from using magic because of how much trouble it caused for those around her. Regardless of how good or bad she was with magic, it wasn’t like I could do anything about it now.

“She works for House Denning! Of course she can use magic! All retainers of House Denning are experts at magic. They say that their retainers can send strong monsters running off with their tails between their legs just by looking at them. Don’t be fooled by her looks, or you’ll be in a world of pain!”

Charlotte’s condition for joining the contest with me was loaning her my wand. Thus, Team Earnest Piggy Duke was born, with me in charge of eating and Charlotte in charge of casting.

“I thought retainers weren’t eligible for this contest, though...” someone commented, referencing the rules posted by the contest runners. “Let’s see here... According to this sheet, the requirements for entry are—”

“Stop right there! Even if she’s just a retainer, she’s that Piggy Duke’s... She’s from House Denning! If we make one wrong move around her, she might beat us up with magic!”

The onlooker groaned loudly. “Still, sweet Charlotte is so cute. It’s a crime for the Piggy Duke to have a cute retainer all to himself like that.”

Besides Charlotte’s inept spellcasting causing problems, I couldn’t interfere with the other teams *too* much. I had changed, after all, from the blackhearted Piggy Duke into the sincere, earnest Piggy Duke. If I went overboard, it’d only sully my reputation further. It could even turn the contest into a complete disaster.

“Shuya, you’re doing well! If you keep this up, we will definitely win and leave that guy in the dust! Aha ha, life is good!” Alicia cackled, despite the fact that she was drenched from a spell cast by another team.

Shuya stuffed food into his mouth. “G-Gib me more, pleath!” he shouted through a mouthful of food.

“Well, well!” said Valjean. “Team Princess is making a comeback! If they can keep up this pace, they might be able to catch up to Team Earnest Piggy Duke!”

Yikes! They’re closing the gap!

I turned to Charlotte, who had been waving her wand around fruitlessly for a good while. “Charlotte, drop the wand under the table!” I hissed.

“Huh?” She tilted her head, confused. “Why? If I drop it, I can’t sabotage them.”

“Just do it! I’ll give it back afterwards! Besides, all your spells are hitting me and not them!”

Charlotte dropped the wand in such an obvious way that it wouldn’t fool anyone. Resisting the urge to groan, I immediately slid under the table, picked it up, and pointed it over towards Alicia and Shuya’s table.

“*Alchemize,*” I murmured.

“Shuya! Quit messing around! Stop looking under the table and eat!”

“I swear I heard the sound of money falling! Just wait a second! ...Huh? Was I hearing things? I don’t see it anywhere...”

Clink!

It was unmistakably the sound of a coin.

“There it is again!”

“Shuya!” Alicia scoffed. “What are you doing?! That isn’t money you’re picking at, it’s just metal! I’ve suspected this for a while, but you really are an idiot!”

“Ah, do you hear that? Is it money this time?!” Shuya abandoned his plate, peering under the table in search of the noise.

“Now you’re just being silly! We’re in the middle of a speed-eating contest, for goodness’ sake! See, it’s metal again and not money! Stop it already!”

Bending down to pretend to retrieve the wand for Charlotte, I threw a small stone under their table and quickly cast a spell on it to transfigure the stone into metal. Before anyone had the chance to realize it was me casting the spell, I handed the wand back to Charlotte.

“I’m not being silly! You hear it too, right?! Ah, there it is again.”

“It’s just metal, not money! Have you got a few loose screws or what?!”

“But it might be money!” Shuya protested. “I need any cash I can get my hands on to pay you back as soon as possible! Even if it’s one shilling copper, I need to pick it up!”

Alicia flushed in embarrassment. “Don’t say something so scandalous in public!” she hissed. “This is all because you broke my precious vase! Do you even realize how valuable that vase was?!”

Huh, seems like they’ve started quarreling, I thought, snickering to myself*. It might be a cheap trick, but it works.*

After I’d had Charlotte drop the wand and repeated this process several more

times, I felt Charlotte's chilly gaze on me, and I looked up. It seemed she'd caught on to me.

Charlotte furrowed her eyebrows, groaning slightly to herself.

"Um, Charlotte, why are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

"Master Slowe, how many more times do I have to drop your wand?"

I paused to ponder it. "...Two more times. Three times, just to be safe."

"I must look so clumsy right now," she groaned.

"Not at all," I assured her. "There's no way anyone would see you as clumsy, Charlotte. Come on, please?"

Charlotte sighed. She probably realized that I was playing foul, but she only rarely ever had the chance to cast spells as she pleased. Hesitantly, Charlotte agreed, continuing her clumsy act.

"Oops, I dropped my wand again," she exclaimed.

"It's okay, Charlotte! I'll get it!" I said, playing it up. "...And down we go."

Alicia was at her wits' end and looked like she might throttle Shuya again. Seizing that chance, I began to crawl under the table when a voice rose up out of the crowd.

"Lord Denning!" the voice cheered. "Keep it up! You're almost there!"

"Oh? Oooh? That voice just now... If my ears don't deceive me, I'd say I just heard someone cheer for the Piggy Duke, Lord Slowe! What a shocking turn of events!"

Someone cheered for me. Someone cheered for *me*? I might have thought it was my imagination, but based on Valjean's commentary, it seemed that other people had heard it too. If not that, then the commotion from the crowd would've been more than enough proof that it was real.

"I understand this reaction from the crowd..." said Valjean. "Who would have thought that *anyone* would cheer for Lord Slowe?"

Oh, shut up, I thought bitterly. Valjean continued before I had too much time to dwell on that.

“Please remember this, though! Lord Slowe has been working hard on losing weight lately, and he eats with his fellow students in the dining hall every morning! According to him, he intends to maintain this change for the better. So give it up for him, like that anonymous supporter!”

Jeez, that idiot. Commentators are meant to be impartial. His bias didn’t escape the notice of my competition either. *See, Alicia’s glaring at you now. She’s a scary one. She wouldn’t hesitate to use her sharp tongue against the most fearsome foes. What do you plan to do if she turns that sharp tongue on you?*

Charlotte yawned. “I cast a lot of spells today. I’m tired. But that’s beside the point. That voice just now was a girl, right...?”

Doesn’t seem like Charlotte recognizes that person either. I wonder who it could have been. I popped up from under the table and peered around. But there were just too many people around to distinguish the mysterious cheerleader. *Oh well, I’ll leave that for later. Time is nearly up. I gotta get past the last stretch!*

“Come on, more food! Bring it on! I can still eat! Oink oiiink!”

“Our grand prize winner is Team Earnest Piggy Duke!” Valjean announced. “They were miles ahead of second place, Team Princess! In the end, nobody could even hold a candle to *him* in a speed-eating contest! Everyone probably expected this!”

My team won first place by a mile.

Alicia sat shell-shocked beside Shuya, who looked on the brink of death. The crowd stared in disgust at me, probably wondering how a human could possibly eat more than their own weight.

He he he he. Don’t underestimate how much I can eat! It’s hard work maintaining this body shape! There’s no one in the world who could beat me at speed-eating!

“The beauty potion is...well, it will be awarded to Team Piggy Duke. Team *Earnest* Piggy Duke, I mean. Is he planning on gifting it to his endearing retainer?” Despite my victory, Valjean wasn’t looking at me with a celebratory

gaze. In fact, he looked terribly confused.

“Wait a minute... Uh, Lord Slowe? Weren’t you going for the weight-loss potion that was the *second-place* prize? What in the world happened?”

I stood there dumbfounded holding the beauty potion after the awards ceremony. *I mean, I knew. I* knew *that the beauty potion was the first-place prize and the weight loss potion was the second-place prize.*

I’d realized that at the rate we were going we would outpace everyone, so I’d planned on slowing down my pace halfway through so that we would come in second. But I hadn’t thought the other teams would give up so easily.

I had estimated the amount everyone could eat based on my own standards. Surely, I thought, they can eat more than that. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that *Shuya* of all people would give up halfway through, since he was the kind of guy who tended to forge ahead through sheer willpower alone. I ended up winning first place by a landslide.

But I still had a chance to get the weight loss potion.

“Hey,” I called out, acknowledging the presence that had been lurking behind me. “How long do you plan on standing there, Alicia?”

I went out of my way to make it easy to approach me. There aren’t any students around. I figured she’d hate being seen with me, so I picked a place where no one would run into us.

Alicia didn’t deign to grace me with a response right away. “How shameless of you, wanting a potion to lose weight the easy way... You’ve had plenty of opportunities to go on a diet before now. It’s a little late for this, don’t you think?”

Below the fresh canopy of trees stood the person I’d been expecting: the main heroine of the highly popular anime *Shuya Marionette*, the princess from our allied Metropolis of Water, the one who came all the way to study at Kirsch Mage Institute instead of attending a school in her own country...Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista.

This prized and popular student glared at me with those huge eyes of hers. “You are the way you are now because you didn’t take the hands offered to

you, Piggy Slowe."

I knew Alicia's personality better than anyone else—I was her former fiancé, after all. Above all, she despised lies and deceit, and she didn't hesitate to give me a sharp tongue-lashing. *That's all the more reason why I must face her now as the honest Piggy Duke.*

"You're right," I agreed. "It might be too late."

"Let me correct that for you. It's not just too late, it's *impossible*. No matter what you try now, you'll only struggle in vain. Your reputation has spread well beyond this school and throughout the entirety of Daryth... No, not just Daryth, but throughout the whole world."

"The whole world, huh? I must be quite the celebrity, then."

"I'm not joking," she snapped. "Bring up the embarrassment of House Denning, the great nobles of Daryth, and everyone in Cirquista will picture your face. I've been through some awful, awful things because of you..." Hatred burned in Alicia's eyes as she recalled some terrible memories. Alicia never hid her distaste towards me. Out of everyone in this school, she probably hated and resented me the most.

"So what do you want with this resident celebrity, then?" I asked after a moment of awkward silence. "I think I can hazard a guess. I thought it was strange that you entered that kind of event, considering how you avoid things you find troublesome. But then again, even nobles in this country have a hard time getting a hold of this beauty potion they were handing out as the grand prize. I guess it *would* appeal to you, now that I think about it." I looked down at the box in my hands. "Is this what you want?"

"Of course it is. It's not like you'll have any use for it, anyway."

"So you're offering to...what, take it off my hands?" I asked. "You haven't changed. You're self-centered, as always."

Alicia harrumphed at me. "Am I wrong? I know you wanted the weight loss potion, not the beauty potion."

Silence fell, broken only by the breeze which blew in the distance between us. It would take about a dozen steps forward to close that distance—physically

and metaphorically speaking.

"The whole school's talking up a storm about how you've started trying to lose weight. But it's all too little, too late for you. Duke Denning and those knights... Everyone in Daryth feigns ignorance when asked about you. *Now* you want to declare that this is your true self, after slacking off all this time? Are you for real...? Even though you ignored me all this time...?"

When I became the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I slowly distanced myself from Alicia. Me calling her my fiancée also became a thing of the past. We were just schoolmates now; nothing more, nothing less.

"You're right. Maybe it *is* too late. But I decided that I wanted to thin down anyway, so...I need that weight loss potion, Alicia."

"In that case," the foreign princess sneered at me, still clutching her own prize, "I wouldn't mind trading you this for that wooden box you've got there."

"Just putting it out there, but in terms of value, my prize is worth way, way more than yours," I reminded her. "It's the first-place prize versus the second-place prize. I can't just trade mine away for nothing." *Jeez, Alicia really likes calling me a pig, huh? I know that I look like a pig on the outside, but she could be a bit nicer.* She clicked her tongue at me but said nothing more.

"You're being really rude," I remarked. "I can't believe you're so popular. You've deceived all the boys in this school."

"You have no right to say that," she retorted snidely. "It's almost comical that a pig like you came from House Denning of Daryth, one of the nation's greatest noble families. You are a disgrace to your ancestors. Making us... We all had such great expectations for you, and yet..."

Nobody knows. Nobody knows the real reason why I chose to act the way I did. That was my most well-kept secret, though. My most precious one. It couldn't be helped. After all, I had sworn to never breathe a word of Charlotte's secret—to take it to my grave.

"It's exactly as you say, Alicia," I admitted at length. "All of it. I *am* the embarrassment of House Denning, and I spat in the face of my ancestors' glory. I *am* a disgrace to them. I won't make excuses."

“If your father heard you say that, he would cry tears of joy.”

“Who knows? Maybe he’s forgotten all about me already,” I said, only half joking.

“You reap what you sow,” Alicia said, unmoved.

“Indeed. I can’t deny that.” I was eager to change the topic. “That said...I just noticed you’re still using that old wand, huh?”

Wands were our tool for communicating with the spirits. Nobles would usually arrange for a new one when they went off to enter a mage academy. They had to keep up appearances, after all. Alicia was an overseas student and a member of the royal family, literally a representative of her country, and yet was still using the same one she had as a child. Even my own family had given me a new wand, despite my notoriously bad behavior as the Piggy Duke, as a way of showing off their wealth.

“You always notice the most trivial things, don’t you? The Magic Academy has proven the value of a familiar wand, and such wands should be used with care. As a member of the royal family of Cirquista, it is my duty to set an example for others.”

“That’s true. I’ve heard that before,” I agreed. “It’s admirable that you cherish your belongings like this too.”

Alicia was silent for a long moment. “You might have given me the gemstone used in this wand when we were young, but I’m only using it because it’s easier for me. So don’t get the wrong idea,” she finally muttered.

“No, I’m not assuming anything. Honestly.”

I didn’t understand why, but I must have angered her. Flushing a deep shade of red, Alicia chucked her wooden box towards me. “Who needs this disgusting potion, anyway?!” she yelled.

“Woah, don’t throw it! There are valuables insi— *Ow*!” The box with the second-place prize inside soared towards me in a perfect arc and landed squarely on my head. I dropped the box with the beauty potion in it onto the ground without realizing it. “You didn’t have to throw it...” I complained, whimpering in pain and clutching at my head.

“I’m only using this wand because I’m fond of it, so don’t jump to any weird conclusions!” Alicia seethed with anger as she closed in on me like a cat stalking its prey. Her short temper hadn’t changed a single bit. The whole thing felt nostalgic to me, as if I’d regained a fragment of something I had lost. A small bud of happiness blossomed within my heart.

“What are you grinning at?!” she snapped. Ignoring my pain, Alicia moved to snatch the beauty potion off the ground from where I dropped it.

“Hey! Don’t just take it...”

“Piggy Slowe! I definitely think you’re beyond changing now!” Alicia harrumphed at me again. “You’d better work hard so that Charlotte doesn’t give up on you because she’s the *only* one who hasn’t!” With that, Alicia stormed off, her pigtails trailing in her wake. Her skirt flapped against the wind, allowing for a brief glimpse of her fit legs.

“When was the last time I talked with her for this long?” I wondered aloud after a pause. “Oh well. At least I have the weight loss potion now.”

I brushed off the dirt from the wooden box that had fallen to the ground before I opened it to check its contents. Inside the box lay a transparent bottle filled with yellowish-brown liquid and neatly packed with wood shavings around it. Inside it, a giant earthworm floated in the liquid with its eyes closed.

“This is the first time I’ve gotten to see the weight loss potion for myself...” I mumbled. “A Fat Worm in hibernation, just like the rumors said. Ew, it’s really gross...”

This creature was a monster named the Fat Worm, and it lived only in the darkest depths of dungeons. Because the fluid it excreted during its hibernation was said to break down fats, the Fat Worm was an extremely valuable monster that fetched a high price. A weight-loss potion like this one was little more than a hibernating Fat Worm soaked in a specially spiced liquid to make the worm easier to stomach.

Having checked the contents, I gingerly placed the potion back into the box. I didn’t move for a while, basking in the sense of accomplishment. That was when someone tapped me on the shoulder. Turning around, I saw an endearing silver-haired girl standing there behind me.

“Master Slowe, how did it go?”

“Glad you asked, Charlotte.” Chuckling, I held up the box for her to see. “Look at this!”

“Wow! You actually managed to trade with Lady Alicia! The operation was a huge success!” There stood Charlotte, exuding excitement that her plan had worked.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Charlotte. I honestly didn’t think Alicia would talk to me at all, even with no one around.”

Charlotte was the one who noticed that Alicia was extremely frustrated during the awards ceremony. *“After the contest...if you take the beauty potion with you somewhere deserted, you’ll give Lady Alicia an opening to talk to you without being seen. She would definitely ask to exchange the potions with you if you did that!”* Charlotte had said, presenting me with a plan to obtain the weight loss potion.

“But Master Slowe, you talked with Lady Alicia for quite some time, despite it being just an exchange. What happened?”

“She was just making snide comments about me. According to her, she couldn’t understand why I wanted a weight loss potion because, in her words, it’s ‘too late’ for me now. She threw the box at my head too. What a terrible person.”

“Oh... I thought Lady Alicia would say that she changed her opinion of you for the better, but...” Charlotte trailed off. “In any case, Master Slowe, please show me what’s in the box!”

“Whoa! Charlotte, careful! Be very careful!”

“I know! I’m amazing at being careful, don’t you worry!” Charlotte assured.

Charlotte’s snow-white hands were lit by the gentle spring sun as she took the bottle of potion out of the wooden box. The incident occurred a split second later.

Holding up the bottle of yellowish-brown liquid, Charlotte let the sunlight shine through it. “Huh? Wha— Ew! Wh-What is this?!” Charlotte screamed as

she saw the Fat Worm in the liquid up close.

I quickly reached out, desperate to catch the bottle that slipped from Charlotte's grasp. My fingers, however, barely brushed the surface of the bottle. Before my eyes, the weight loss potion shattered as it hit the ground, its liquid contents spilling out onto the grass.

Charlotte squealed again at the sight. "A-An e-earthworm..." With shaking fingers, Charlotte pointed. "Master Slowe, there was a disgusting earthworm in that potion..."

The valuable earthworm monster crawled out of the remains of the shattered bottle, lazily burrowing itself into the ground.

"...The worm *is* the weight loss potion, Charlotte. The Fat Worm is a monster that secretes a fluid that breaks down fats when it hibernates. A weight-loss potion is just a hibernating Fat Worm placed into a drinkable liquid."

"O-Oh, so that's what it was," Charlotte stuttered. "I-I'm so sorry, Master Slowe, I... I...!"

"I see... It's okay, you didn't know, Charlotte..."

Fat Worms had no value once they awoke from hibernation. Her shock couldn't be helped. If someone saw that kind of thing without knowing what it was beforehand like I did, they would definitely be grossed out by such a sight. I was about to console Charlotte, to tell her not to worry and that it had returned to nature, when I froze. Tears were trickling down Charlotte's face.

"You don't have to cry about it!" I said, panicked.

Charlotte sniffled. "But Master Slowe, you worked so hard to get it. Lady Alicia just gave it to you, but I...I'm such an idiot. Earthworms are just fine as food. I ate lots of them back when we lived on Denning lands..." I couldn't stand to see her beat herself up like this.

"You helped me by joining the Magic Speed-Eating Contest with me, Charlotte! It was really fun for me! Plus, I was able to talk to Alicia for the first time in ages! And earthworms aren't food!"

If I hadn't had Charlotte's help, I wouldn't have been able to enter the contest

in the first place. More than that, losing the weight loss potion didn't change the fact that we competed and won first place together.

"...Mind," she muttered. My desperate attempts to console her seemed to be working. Charlotte rubbed the corners of her eyes and murmured, "I've made up my mind."

"Um... Made up your mind on what?" I questioned.

"I'll make a weight loss potion," Charlotte declared.

"You, Charlotte?" I asked, unsure. She nodded in response.

Does she intend to catch a Fat Worm from a dungeon? I swallowed that question down before I let it slip out. *If my beloved Charlotte is going to make a weight loss potion for me, no matter what recipe she follows, nothing in the world would make me happier.*

"I'll...I'll make it. I'll definitely make a weight-loss potion for you." Clenching her hand into a fist, my retainer made her declaration with a fierce look of conviction on her face.

True to her word, Charlotte started brewing weight-loss potions after that.

Chapter 3: Who Is the Protagonist?

Light shone through a gap between closed curtains, gradually growing brighter until it lit up the darkened room. Sensing the arrival of morning, I rolled out of my fluffy bed and stretched from head to toe. When I opened the curtains, there was a vast fantasy world outside my window. You could imagine how my breathing picked up, a little excited at the prospect of another day at Kirsch Mage Institute.

"Oink... Oink..." *Ah jeez, I really sounded like a pig just then. I need to calm down.* Still, I couldn't help but celebrate in my mind. *Thank the spirits for this other world!* I thought, cheering inwardly. My good mood wouldn't last long, though; it soured the moment I stepped out of my bedroom and laid my eyes on *those* things.

The first thing was the big mirror that I'd moved from the bedroom into the living room. In it, I saw a pig still fat enough to send for slaughter reflected at me. *Reality can be so cruel,* I thought in despair. The second thing was a drink I'd set out last night before I slept. It sat on the desk in an almost menacing way, as though it were threatening me to drink it as soon as possible.

All of the furniture in my room, like in the other rooms on the fourth floor, was top-notch. The desk wasn't just any old wooden desk; it probably cost a fortune. *Whatever, that's not important. I need to quit getting distracted by my own pride and get a grip.*

I groaned, my mood plummeting all the way to rock bottom immediately. *How many people would have the guts to drink something that looked and smelled so disgusting? I wouldn't drink this even if I were stranded in a desert and had nothing else to drink. I'd sooner throw it away. Honestly, who the hell would drink this?*

I was silent for a while, just staring at the offensive drink. This liquid was, in fact, a weight-loss potion. It was a potion made specially for me by my precious retainer—a beautiful, klutzy girl. *How could I* not *drink it? I have to drink it...*

Mustering up the courage, I downed the liquid in one big gulp. For all my

bravado, I still gagged. My stomach lurched in protest but I forced myself to keep the liquid down, despite the strong urge to hurl.

Terrible. Is this really safe to drink? Th-This isn't orc piss, right?!

"Ch-Charlotte...couldn't you have done *anything* to make this taste a little better?" I muttered.

The moment the words left my mouth, I had a sudden flash of inspiration. I had knowledge of the future, but I also had inherited all of the Piggy Duke's memories from his life before I reincarnated as him. It dawned on me now that Charlotte was a notorious disaster in the kitchen. I thought back on my previous encounters with her culinary skills, or rather lack thereof.

When Charlotte was training under House Denning, she only ever learned cooking skills that would be useful for survival out in the wild and had no use in a proper kitchen. One time we were both abandoned on a mountaintop and I ended up eating what was listed in the Monster Encyclopedia as a Venom Frog, all because Charlotte insisted it was nutritious. We didn't starve thanks to those survival culinary skills of hers, but I still shudder whenever I recall that particular nightmare.

"Would the actual weight loss potion have tasted this bad...?" I wondered aloud.

Later that evening.

I was jogging before dinner when I ran into a girl sitting under the big tree I used as a goal marker. When I asked her why she'd come here, she replied that she'd heard rumors of me jogging around this area and that her secret training place was nearby.

"So this was actually a weight loss potion, huh? It smelled so bad I thought it was a prank," Tina said, staring down at the bottle I'd left there by the tree. "Lord Denning, you should probably make sure to close the lid..."

"Oh, you're right. I left it open. I started jogging right after I drank it, so I hadn't noticed..." I trailed off as I suddenly had an epiphany. "Wait. I knew I recognized that voice, but now I finally remember from where. *You* were the one who cheered for me during the contest, Tina."

“Yes, that was me.” The charming first-year, who was able to use magic now, laughed to herself as she prodded the bottled potion with a finger.

“Why *did* you cheer for me?” I asked.

“Of course I’d cheer for you. You’re my secret master in magic!”

“You stopped cheering for me pretty quickly, though,” I reminded her.

“Wow! You sure have a good memory, Lord Denning,” Tina replied in mock surprise. “I called out to you because you were trying so hard. But I had to back off once everyone started looking at me.”

“Pfft, are you serious?” I said, laughing.

As for how Tina and I could converse so casually... The day after I’d spied her succeeding in magic for the first time, Tina had cornered me and interrogated me. I had no choice but to tell her that I’d seen everything. She didn’t take it too well at first, but it didn’t take her long to come to terms with it. After that, Tina started coming to me for advice on magic, and we became close enough to have the occasional conversation.

But Tina only talked to me whenever there was no one else around. She acted the part of a well-mannered girl around the other nobles to maintain a decent social life within the school, but when she was with me she could drop the act and be herself. Honestly, it was pretty bold of her, considering my family background *and* my fearsome reputation.

Well, I am *pretty much an outcast here. I guess it’s only natural that she’d want to avoid being seen with me.* There was one thing that struck me about what she said, though.

“Me? Your master in magic? *Really*?” I almost couldn’t believe it. “But I’m a noble. You hate nobles, remember?”

Tina took a moment before replying. “You aren’t arrogant, even though you’re from *the* House Denning, so I really don’t see you as one of those other idiot nobles.”

“I guess so...” I trailed off. “Anyway, enough about me. What about you? You’re a commoner who managed to use magic after barely setting foot in this

place. I bet you're the talk of the school."

"Yes, I suppose," Tina replied.

Ambitious and competitive, Tina was eager to improve her magic and learn from me to control her spells. It wasn't hard to see why the earth spirits were willing to lend their power to her, considering how hard she worked for it.

"Everyone started talking to me, asking how I did it. They all looked so shocked when I told them I couldn't have done it without your help," Tina said. "No matter how hard the other commoners tried to do what the teachers taught them, they couldn't use magic. Nobody believed me when I told them you'd helped me. Some of them flat-out accused me of lying. Just how infamous *are* you?"

"This is *me* we're talking about here, you know," I said. "It comes with the territory."

"There's got to be some way I can thank you for everything, Lord Denning. I can start by calling you my master."

"Big words for someone who won't talk to me when there are other people around," I retorted.

"That's..." Tina paused, choosing her words carefully. "Please think about my social life here in the institute. I don't have a powerful family like House Denning to back me up."

"Jeez..." I sighed, exasperated and fond at the same time. *Me, a master in magic, huh? Tina insists on calling me that, but she's wrong about my advice helping to manifest magic in general.* In truth, while I spoke at large to the group of commoner students that day in Practical Magic class, my advice was actually meant for Tina alone.

I could see the spirits that roamed this world. Among that group of commoners, Tina had the most potential for awakening magic. Therefore, I could see the spirits were torn about not answering her call due to her heritage. Tina herself had the potential within her all along; I only gave her a chance to prove it, nothing more.

"I couldn't do anything but cheer for you at the contest, but I want to help

you, Lord Denning," Tina declared. "I want to return the favor."

"Return the favor?" I echoed.

I thought back on Charlotte's words.

She'd said that it was important to change my off-putting appearance, but that it was just as important to work on my reputation at the same time. From what I could tell, the rumors said I never took classes seriously, always played pranks, and even extorted money from other noble students by abusing my family name. So it was more important than anything to shed my negative image! And so we came up with a plan—a plan I called "Operation: Reputation Repair."

I explained this all to Tina, and she vehemently agreed.

"That's true. I feel like everyone has the wrong impression of you. I only got to know you because of that one encounter in class, but you are completely different from what the rumors say you are," Tina commented. "I could ask you for advice on magic out in the open too if you managed to make a dent in that infamous reputation of yours."

"What exactly do the rumors say about me, anyway?" I asked. I only knew about the vaguest ones.

Tina was reluctant to answer. "Uh... I really don't think you want to hear them..." Her hesitation told me everything I needed to know.

"Never mind, then... I'm probably better off not knowing..."

"I think that's for the best. Still, 'Operation: Reputation Repair.' Hmm..." Tina trailed off in thought.

Yeah, I figured as much, I thought. Even Tina seemed stumped. *It's not like we're going to solve everything right this instant.*

After a long silence, Tina hit her palm with her fist, her eyes lighting up in realization. "Oh, I might have a favor I'd like to ask of you, actually."

"Oh? You do?"

"Yes. I have a friend who works here as a maid, but there's something that's troubling her..." Here, Tina hesitated. "Oh, but it might be a bit shameless of me

to ask this of you just because you're a noble, never mind a Denning..."

"This isn't like you at all," I snorted. "You haven't been shy around me up to this point."

"Yeah, you're right," Tina agreed, smiling impishly. "Then I have no problem asking you this. Lord Denning, you run around here every morning, right?"

The next morning at daybreak.

In a quiet corner of campus, a sweaty pig jogged near a deserted research building. That oinking pig was me. As I diligently ran my morning rounds, I had only one thought on my mind: *Getting the fat off sure is some hardcore work!* But I continued to push myself despite my body protesting. I was definitely getting into shape, even though you couldn't tell just by looking at me.

I could even do something now that I couldn't before—I could sprint, even if it was only for a short distance! Up until now, I could only manage jogging because my knees couldn't handle it! *But I'm different now!*

"Oi-Oi-Oink!" I panted.

Another sprint! I challenged myself. *My muscles are gonna hate me! My fat doesn't want to disappear? Hah! Too bad. It's outta here! I'm gonna become a lean, mean running machine! All right, time to hammer another nail in the fat coffin with one last sprint!*

When it came to jogging, persistence was key. Before, I couldn't even do half a lap around the research building. Now, I could easily run one lap. Even if it was tedious, I couldn't slack off even the smallest bit. I still couldn't stop the oinking when I panted, though. To ease my breathing, I slowed down to a brisk walk. Sprinting put a lot of stress on my body, especially on my knees. I could seriously hurt myself if I pushed myself *too* far with it.

"Good work out there, Master Slowe," Charlotte called out in that clear, soothing voice of hers. "Oh. Um... Who might this be?"

"Hm? Oh, that's Tina," I replied.

Charlotte stood beside the tree that served as my goalpost, her beautiful silver hair tousled by the wind. Beside her stood Tina, the commoner first-year

student. She had an innocent, childlike face, but sported a well-proportioned body with very pronounced curves. It was still pretty early, and she wore an outfit so casual I almost mistook it for pajamas. The collar was wide open, and I couldn’t be blamed for being restless on and off about the large curves on her chest.



“I’ve never heard that name before, but that’s not the point, Master Slowe...” Charlotte stammered. “Sh-She’s a... She’s a *girl*!”

“Of course she’s a girl! Look at her!” I exclaimed.

“Sh-She’s got *curves*! Not even Lady Alicia has curves!” Charlotte exclaimed. She cast a sideways glance at Tina’s well-endowed chest and froze. It was like she couldn’t compute what she was seeing, and I allowed myself to follow her gaze to Tina’s attire. No daughter of nobility would ever wear something like this, not with the way they fussed about how they dressed. Maybe she had come here straight out of bed. It *was* pretty early in the morning.

“...I’m not even going to ask what you mean by that,” I said. “I think your tongue did the talking without consulting your brain.”

“I-I m-mean— A girl befriended Master Slowe?!” Charlotte exclaimed. “I can’t believe my eyes... This might be the biggest shock I’ve had since I came to this school. I’m even more surprised than that one time you threw a fit and went on a rampage during the school’s entrance ceremony, Master Slowe.”

“If I put my mind to it, anything is possible,” I said, puffing out my chest.

“You *did* say that you were going to change, but...it feels like it’s way too early for you to see any results...” It seemed Charlotte still doubted me, and I could see why. Barely ten days had passed since I declared I would change. Within such a short span of time, I was able to accomplish two lifetime achievements: I befriended a guy and even a girl for the first time.

Part of that was because Tina was a first-year and a commoner, and so she was less biased against me to start with. At least, that’s what she had told me after the speed-eating contest.

“Mmm... Lord Denning, would this be your retainer?” Sleepily rubbing at her eyes, Tina peered over Charlotte from head to toe.

“Yeah, this is Charlotte. She’s been my retainer since we were kids,” I explained. “She’s technically employed by House Denning, but since she’s my personal retainer, she accompanied me here to the institute.”

Charlotte smiled gently at Tina, graceful as ever. Just like that, Tina flushed,

her cheeks dusted a faint pink. Charlotte was a beautiful girl with snow-white skin that seemed ethereal in the light. Of course Tina couldn't take her eyes off her.

"Wow," Tina said, breathless. "I'd heard that your retainer was really pretty, but wow, the rumors weren't kidding. Oh, uh, my name is Tina. Lord Denning helped me out in class one time," Tina said, belatedly introducing herself.

"Ah, it is a pleasure to meet you. I hope you'll get along with Master Slowe from now on too. Um..." Charlotte hesitated, seemingly unsure if she should press on. "Are you a friend of Master Slowe, Miss Tina?"

"Huh? Lord Denning and me, friends? I could never!" Tina gasped, emphatically denying the question. "That would be far too presumptuous of me!"

"Presumptuous"? I thought incredulously. *Hah, as if. She'd never actually think that.*

It didn't take long for me to realize Tina was putting on her usual Goody Two-shoes act. When it was just the two of us, Tina had a sharp tongue and was precisely the type of girl who would tease me for finally managing to befriend a girl.

"I would be humbled if Lord Denning thought fondly of me as his junior!" Tina insisted. "He belongs to House Denning, after all, a family that stands out even among the nobles... I can only talk with him because we're in the same school. I am but a mere innkeeper's daughter. We live in completely different worlds. Claiming to be his friend would be reaching far beyond my station!"

Tina had quite the way with words, it seemed.

Her words weren't total lies. The average commoner definitely had that kind of mindset when it came to dealing with nobles. However, Tina had spent her childhood helping out at her family's inn, so she had to have developed a sense of reading people. She excelled at figuring out people's boundaries, knowing when to toe the line, and knowing when she could safely cross it. I should know—she used this particular skill on me plenty enough. I enjoyed sharing witty banter with her.

“So what brings you here, Miss Tina?” Charlotte asked. “The dining halls aren’t open yet, and...your clothes...” Her words died in her throat, as though she’d decided whatever she’d had to say was best left unsaid.

Tina, who’d been fidgeting and babbling on about her lowly commoner status, suddenly seemed to remember why she’d come in the first place.

“Oh, that’s right! Um, as I mentioned to Lord Denning, I recently became friends with one of the maids.” She fished out something from her pocket. With the way the thin spaghetti strap on her blouse moved, I was nervous that it could slide down at any moment.

“Apparently, there’s a special parlor where Headmaster Morozov welcomes guests when they come to visit, and there are a lot of valuables and rare items on display,” Tina continued, unaware of the precarious state of her top. “My friend is in charge of cleaning that room, but... Please take a look at this.” She held her hands out so we could see.

“Oh... It’s pretty. This is a magic sculpture, isn’t it? Those were popular in the past,” Charlotte said. “They don’t make things like this much anymore.”

A small but splendid magic sculpture shaped like a bird sat in Tina’s outstretched hands. It was delicate and translucent, and even at a passing glance I could tell just how much of an antique it actually was.

“But the wing is broken,” Charlotte noted. Sure enough, the right wing on the back of the sculpture was broken off at its base. The wing itself sat to the side of Tina’s palm.

Tina nodded solemnly. “Apparently the room is used so infrequently that they only need to clean it once a week. My friend said this sculpture was still in one piece when she last cleaned the room. When she went to clean it this week, though, she found it broken. Without thinking, she took it with her. Nobody else was supposed to enter that room, so she was afraid that if she reported the damage, she would be accused of being the culprit...”

I could hazard a guess as to what had actually happened. “I see. Someone probably broke it by accident after sneaking into the room as a prank, or out of curiosity,” I said. “People are drawn to touch things they aren’t supposed to, *especially* things that look as old and fragile as this.”

“I brought it here because it’s a magic sculpture. I thought you might be able to fix it, Lord Denning. Do you think you can?” Tina asked.

I gently took the broken pieces of the sculpture from Tina and peered closely at them. The clear bird stared back at me, looking so forlorn with its lost wing.

Even so, it seemed to be a simple fix. “Yeah, I can fix it. Right now, if you want. I just need to reattach the wing. I can’t see any other obvious issues with it,” I said. “You were right about it being rare, Charlotte. This thing has to be pretty valuable, too; the mage who made this probably made it ages ago.”

“You liked this kind of thing back in the day, didn’t you, Master Slowe?” Charlotte asked, curious. “You made sculptures just like this a lot for Lady Alicia when you were young.”

I was taken aback. “I’m surprised you remember that.” I *had* made things like this for Alicia as a kid. None of them were ever as pretty as this, though.

“No way! You were good at magic even as a child, Lord Denning?” Tina’s eyes shone with excitement. She seemed to like pieces like this, listening with rapt attention to Charlotte talk about sculptures I made for fun as a kid.

“Yeah, I guess,” I replied with a shrug. “I had nothing but magic going for me.”

Speaking of which, Tina uses earth magic, I thought, the idea only just occurring to me*. She mentioned that she wanted to make earth dolls in the future. She’s probably interested in the arts.* Such endeavors would have to wait. For now, we had a sculpture to fix.

“Tina, hold out your hands,” I said. She did as she was told, and I placed the broken pieces carefully back into her hands.

I took out my wand from its holster at my waist and smiled. Before our eyes, the broken wing slowly began to float in the air. Tina stared, transfixed.

“I’m not talented enough to make something like this from scratch,” I admitted, “but I should at least be able to fix it.”

When I’d met Tina in a corridor that time she cornered me, she’d said that she wanted to improve as a mage. There were around a hundred or so commoners who enrolled each year, but only one or two ever managed to even

cast so much as a semblance of a spell by graduation. Her strong ambition to rise beyond her status as a commoner stirred in me a desire to work hard that I hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Using fire magic, I heated the jagged edge of the wing and gently placed it on the broken seam. Then, I immediately cooled it with water magic to seal it back into place. Had there been any missing pieces, I could have added in some earth magic too, but it seemed there was no need for that.

"What an intricate spell... You're so adept with fire and water magic... But wind magic is what you excel at, isn't it?" Tina was slack-jawed in awe. "Since you're from House Denning, I thought you would be a powerful wind mage."

"That's not really the case," I replied. "I'm a jack-of-all-trades, but a master of none."

"I can't even come up with a sarcastic response to that..." Tina gave me such a serious look that it took my breath away.

"Phew, it's fixed now," I said, hoping to ease the sudden tension. The wing was now reattached and the bird had been restored to its former glory. You couldn't even tell it'd once been broken.

"Wow! That's incredible! You're amazing, Lord Denning!" Tina exclaimed, overjoyed that the sculpture was fixed. She handled it as delicately as if it were her own family heirloom as she put it away, bowing her head repeatedly in gratitude. It made me feel humbled and more than a little self-conscious, seeing her act that way.

"My friend is going to be really grateful too! I've been worried about her because she's been really down the past few days, but this should cheer her right up! Thank you so much, Lord Denning!"

Commoners had a strong bond with each other, considering that they were the outsiders in this institute founded for the nobles. It wasn't uncommon for the few commoner students and any maids close in age to help each other survive in this kind of environment.

"Don't worry about it," I assured.

"I have to thank you! Please let me treat you some time!" Tina insisted. I bet

she hadn't expected me to be able to actually fix it, and that's why she was showering me with praise. She seemed so moved that she might hug me at any moment.

"If you're this good at magic, Lord Denning, does that mean Charlotte is great at magic too?! I've heard that all the retainers from House Denning are excellent at magic!"

Charlotte went stock still. "U-Um, I..."

Tina wasn't exactly wrong, per se. Most of the retainers employed by House Denning *were* expert mages in their own right, if not all noble retainers in general. Those retainers who accompanied their young masters to this school were hired from the ranks of lesser nobility, as a retainer served as a reflection of their employer.

Charlotte panicked as Tina looked at her with great expectation. Her black doe eyes were wide and curious, clearly those of a young girl wanting more juicy information about prestigious nobles. She was also probably genuinely curious about this retainer of House Denning. Even as a retainer, Charlotte came from a whole other world than that of a commoner.

"I've also heard that the retainer training in House Denning is beyond difficult," Tina continued, ignorant to Charlotte's growing panic. "I hear that some fight and protect their masters in battle, killing vicious monsters with a single spell! Some can even use *swords*!"

"Y-Yeah, the training I received when I served under House Denning was very harsh..." Charlotte stammered. "It's painful for me to think about, it was so extreme..."

"Please tell me more!" Tina looked hungry for anything that Charlotte would tell her, but she suddenly stopped, confused. "Huh? You don't have a wand though, Miss Charlotte."

"Th-That's... Well, we're at a school now, so it's quite safe around here... I-I have no need for a wand... I-I can use magic, though! I'm very good at it... Isn't that right, Master Slowe?" Charlotte turned to me.

"Uh—"

“I am good at magic. Wouldn’t you agree, *Master Slowe*?” Charlotte’s tone suggested she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

I had to stop myself before I took a step back without thinking. Charlotte could be downright intimidating when she wanted to be... “Um, about that...” I stammered.

Tina, oblivious to the entire exchange, barreled on in excitement. “It’s just like the rumors said; all retainers employed by House Denning are incredible. What element do you favor, Miss Charlotte?! Is it wind, like most of House Denning? Oh, and also, you’ll have to forgive me, I’m a little curious so I have to ask... Are you a noble like Lord Denning too? Or are you a commoner like me?”

“A c-commoner?” Charlotte spluttered. “Um, Miss Tina, whatever gave you that idea?”

“Well, at first, I honestly thought that you were definitely a noble because of your position as a retainer to House Denning, but...” Tina trailed off. “You help wash the dishes in the dining hall, right? A noble wouldn’t do that.”

Charlotte’s face flushed red and my breath hitched in my throat.



Charlotte had never told a soul about her true identity after House Denning took her under its wing. I knew that she was, in fact, a princess because I'd heard it from a spirit, but Charlotte probably didn't even know that I knew. I was the only other person besides Charlotte herself who knew this closely kept secret. I'd just been waiting for the day when she would tell me this herself.

"How do you know I help out in the dining hall, Miss Tina?" Charlotte asked.

"I saw that apron over there." Tina pointed to where a bright red apron, embroidered with a gaudy-looking fire-breathing dragon lay draped across a wooden bench. "That's the kitchen uniform, right? The one that has the really lame dragon on it because the head chef likes it, or so rumors say."

"W-Well... I mean...yeah, I suppose it does belong to me..." Charlotte stuttered.

Tina didn't have an ounce of malice in her innocent eyes as she peered over at Charlotte. She didn't mean any harm by her questions; she was probably just curious about the fancy lives nobles and their retainers led in a place like this. Even so, it had to be hard for Charlotte to realize she'd been essentially demoted to a commoner. Knowing her history, I had to give her a way out so she could keep what little remained of her dignity.

"Charlotte, don't you have to go help out soon?"

"Huh, is it that time already? I-I have to go!" Charlotte hurriedly replied. "Master Slowe, please be nice to Miss Tina!"

Charlotte usually watched me jog in the morning before heading off to the dining hall kitchen to help out, but we'd spent a lot of time talking today, and now it was well past the time she usually took her leave. Charlotte snatched the apron she had left on the bench and hightailed it out of there, leaving the two of us behind. Only the sound of not-so-early birds chirping in the background broke the awkward silence.

"Lord Denning, did I say something to offend her? Is she embarrassed by the apron, perhaps? I kind of get that, though. I would rather beg for forgiveness and fork up the money to my employer than wear that hideous thing..." Tina paused. "Ah, there's something I wanted to ask you."

“The dragon apron’s quite unpopular, huh... I like it though.” I shook my head and turned to face Tina proper. “Okay, then. Ask away.”

“Um, well...there’s another person who needs your help,” Tina said at length. “Well, actually...it’s multiple people, really...”

When I had the chance between classes, I snuck away from the lecture building and headed towards the dining hall. It was in the middle of preparations for dinner; surely it would be deserted this early in the afternoon. I peeked in through the nearest windows and found only maids diligently wiping the tables. At the dining hall entrance stood Tina, waiting for me just like she had promised. Once she saw me, she waved at me and beckoned me over.

I wonder if my homemade potion is gonna live up to their expectations... I felt my heartbeat quicken in my chest.

“Wow, amazing! This makes the skin so smooth...” Tina marveled. “Lord Denning, I want one of these, even if it’s a prototype! Please give me one too! Can I at least keep this sample?”

The maids had abandoned their duties to gather at the entrance around me and Tina. To be perfectly honest, they were making a racket, each one of them holding a small glass vial.

According to Tina, the kitchen had started using a new detergent recently, but it seemed to be causing skin problems for the maids in charge of washing dishes. Apparently, this new detergent was really rough on their hands, and so Tina had asked me to brew them up a simple water elixir.

“Just to be clear, people are not allowed to make water elixirs without permission, even if it’s a simple one. It’s a restricted item,” I said. “Everyone knows that the students here make elixirs to earn some cash on the side, but please keep it a secret anyway. And yes, Tina, you can have that one.”

“Yes, Lord Denning, we understand! You heard him, everyone! It’s a secret that we received these water elixirs!” one of the maids whisper-shouted.

“That’s probably for the best!” another maid agreed fervently. “With this, we’ll be able to make it until they let us go back to using the old detergent! Seriously, we were all so against the idea of switching it in the first place, but

the head chef likes trying out new things way too much!”

A water elixir was a potion infused with water magic, the most common type of magic used in healing. Because of how costly these potions were, commoners normally wouldn’t even dream of being able to afford one, so I’d decided to make some water elixirs for the maids myself. During Magic Studies, I took the textbook for Potion Studies into class and read it meticulously. Professor Arle’s lesson was boring as ev— I mean, as focused on the fundamentals as ever. I had the top row of the lecture theater all to myself anyway, so it wasn’t like anyone was actually checking whether I was using the right textbook. I had just used my lunch break after class was over to brew the potion itself.

As easy as I made it sound, brewing a water elixir was actually a challenge. Even Alicia, a tried-and-true water mage from a tried-and-true water kingdom, would struggle to complete such a potion in a day, let alone in the space of a single lunch hour.

“Thank you, Lord Denning! I only knew of you from rumors, but after you started coming to the dining hall, I realized the rumors just *couldn’t* be true!”

“You really surprised me! It’s really hard to make a water elixir, even if it’s a simple one, right? You must be really talented!”

Difficult or not, it still surprised me how moved the maids were. I’d never interacted much with them before this. Now, they were all practically falling over each other to shower me with their thanks... This really changed my impression of them; I’d never imagined they’d ever be so friendly with me.

“Sorry guys, my break is almost over! I gotta go!” I exclaimed. “If I’m late to Potion Studies, the professor will never let it go!”

The biggest shocker of the day came when Tina took my arm in both of hers and hugged it. “Thank you so much!”

“I get it, Tina, I get it! Please let go of me!” Her breasts were pronounced even through her clothes and they were *touching my arm*...

Jeez, just—uh, I don’t know what to— My brain was short-circuiting. *I need to get out of here pronto!*

“Class!” I exclaimed. “I have class now! I need to go!”

My desire to stay right where I was warred with my logic telling me to get the heck out of there. Neither side was winning when someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

“Um, please excuse me. I’m heading to class now,” I said.

“You ain’t goin’ nowhere, Denning. You’re comin’ with me.”

Dread shot down my spine. Turning around, I saw Professor Loco Moco standing there with his arms crossed over his usual black shirt.

“The headmaster wants to see me?” I asked. My ears weren’t playing tricks on me, right? Professor Loco Moco had definitely said that.

“On Stillwindsday next week, yeah. Don’ worry, I checked an’ made sure you had no afternoon classes that day. The old coot’s room is on the top floor of the staff buildin’. Don’t get yourself lost.”

Here stood Professor Loco Moco, a noble from an earl household who had formerly fought as a member of the Order of Royal Knights, a man respected and revered by all, a man who was once a powerful ally to the protagonist in the anime...and he was telling *me* that I’d been summoned by the headmaster. I stood there rooted to the spot, confused and struggling to make sense of what the professor was saying.

“That’s all I got for you. You’re free to go an’ all that.” The professor sauntered off with little more than a lazy wave of his hand.

I was completely blindsided by this. *Why would the headmaster summon me, of all people? Think, Slowe, think! There’s gotta be a reason...*

“Wait. Could it be...?” My knowledge of the future flickered through my mind. Goosebumps crawled up my skin as the realization dawned on me.

Shuya had gotten summoned to the headmaster’s office many times in the anime. In order to break out of his shell and come into his role as the savior of the world, he’d needed to overcome big obstacles in his way. Each time he accomplished the seemingly impossible feats the headmaster had tasked him with, he matured drastically.

Bearing that in mind, the summons I received just now could only mean one thing—the headmaster would be giving me a hero's task!

The following Stillwindsday, I sat through morning classes as normal and spent my lunch hour in peace. I let myself relax, reclining on a bench beside the pathway and watching people pass me by—noble students with their capes and their wands, commoners with wooden training swords in hand, maids armed with brooms, and busy retainers with letters they rushed to deliver.

In the midst of my people-watching, I heard two familiar voices shouting as they approached.

"We're going to be late for class! Run, Shuya! Wait, why are you stopping in the middle of the road? You're going the wrong way! We have History class now!"

"Sorry, Alicia! I actually have somewhere else I need to go right now!"

A cool breeze washed over me as I basked in the solemness of the venerable stone buildings, the old architecture infused with the essence of the forest around it. It was a far cry from the glitz and the glamor in the capital, Daryth City. Everywhere I looked, I was reminded that this was another world—that I lived in this fantasy world now.

Once again, those familiar voices interrupted my quiet contemplation.

"Huh? Where do you think you're going? I've told you time and again that slacking off is bad! You're supposed to set a good example for the commoners! If you fail a class, it would be a disgrace!"

"Who said anything about slacking off? I already let the professor know I wouldn't be in class, so don't worry! I've got good grades in magic, anyway. There's not a chance I would fail!"

Members of House Denning were forged on the field of battle. Unlike the rest of my family, I was sent away to Kirsch Mage Institute and left here to be forgotten. But I decided I would live my own life in freedom.

"I'll see you in the evening! Tell me what I missed in class later!"

"Hey! Get back here! Tell me where you're going!"

This was all to make good on a promise I'd made once upon a time. Nearly a decade ago, I swore to a spirit so full of rage it could have razed the world to the ground that I would protect Charlotte for as long as I lived. I kept that promise with all my heart, and yet *that spirit* lost all its ferocity, choosing instead to spend its days as Charlotte's pet in the present.

Hmph. Good for them. At that moment, Alicia noticed my presence, her attention torn from being left behind.

"Oh... It's you..."

"Is that a problem?" I asked, my eyes flickering to Shuya's retreating figure. "Friendly with him as ever, aren't you, Alicia?"

"Th-That's none of your business, Piggy Slowe!" Alicia stammered.

"That's true," I agreed. "None of my business at all." I stood and gathered my belongings. "See you around. I've got somewhere to be too."

It was nearly time for my meeting with the headmaster.

I felt Alicia's gaze on my back as I walked away; anything she might have wanted to say was left unsaid in the silence behind me.

Chapter 4: The Creeping Shadows

“I can’t believe it. A hero’s task, just for me...!” I whispered excitedly to myself, peering up at the towering building in front of me.

The staff building consisted of individual research labs assigned to each professor, which were separate from their private quarters. They would often spend loads of time in their labs, poring over tomes, researching new spells, and pretty much furthering their own interests. At the top of this building was the headmaster’s office and my destination. I watched a couple of professors come and go before I worked up the courage to step into the building.

Just as my luck would have it, who should be following close on my heels but *him*?

“Why the hell are *you* here, Denning?”

I pointedly ignored both him and the explosions that rocked the building, opting to focus on climbing the stairs instead.

“Ow, my aching body...” I panted. “I should be happy that it hurts, though. No pain, no gain.” I was only able to make it up the many flights of stairs because of my intense workout routine, even if my muscles twinged with every step I took.

I’d recently added to my exercise routine, taking inspiration from *Billy Blanks Tae Bo* in hopes of getting trim and fit faster. I’d already managed to drop a uniform size just by being persistent. *If I can just drop one more size, I’ll fit the largest size they offer and not have to get my uniform custom-made anymore. I can’t wait for that day.*

“Phew, that was quite a long stairwell,” I said to myself.

“Hey, pig—I mean, Denning! What are you doing here?!”

I turned around and came face-to-face with that hot-blooded redhead Shuya. I’d known he was following me when I first entered the building, but had he actually stalked me all the way up to the headmaster’s office?

“I should be the one asking you that,” I replied, even as my stomach sank. *Could it be that the headmaster also summoned Shuya here? Not just me? So it*

wasn't a hero's task just for me, then... I thought, dejected.

"Wait, Denning! Were you summoned by the headmaster too?" Shuya asked.

I grunted as I shoved him aside.

"Hey, don't push me! I asked you a question! I *said*, were you summoned by the headmaster too? Answer me!"

"Oink." Another shove from me.

"Knock it off!" Shuya shouted, shoving me back this time. "Don't you realize how heavy you are?!"

It turned into a race to see who could reach the headmaster's office first, both of us shoving each other back and forth in a sort of tug-of-war until we reached the hefty door at the end of a dark corridor. It'd been a long time since I last set foot here; I hadn't talked with the headmaster in person since my interview for admission to the school.

"You were summoned too, right? Don't ignore me!" Shuya insisted.

"I'm ignoring you because you look all tense and nervous," I replied. "It's turning my stomach just looking at you."

"Of course I'm nervous!" he exclaimed. "Aren't you?!"

"No, not really," I said, nonchalant.

"Oh, I get it!" Realization dawned on Shuya's face. "You don't have many friends, so you probably wouldn't know the rumors!"

"What rumors?"

"The rumors say that the headmaster summons students with good grades and great potential to his office to give them a letter of recommendation for the Order of Royal Knights, or to introduce them to job offers in the palace," Shuya explained. "But that can't be right. I get why *I'm* here, but why *you*?"

"Do you even hear yourself? Your grades are terrible. You, getting a recommendation for the Order? Fat chance that would ever happen, so just chill out."

"*Huh*?! I have way better grades than you!" Shuya retorted.

Ignoring Shuya, I straightened my back and raised my chin as I faced the door. The old Piggy Duke was gone; I'd turned over a new leaf. Just to prove this new change, I gave the door a respectful knock, instead of banging my head on the door or something equally rude like I'd done in the past.

"You could give a guy a little warning, Denning! Let me brace myself first," Shuya groaned.

"Be quiet. I can't hear the headmaster over all the noise you're making," I hissed, straining my ears. I didn't want to risk missing a single word.

"Who goes there?" A quiet voice, solemn but kind, drifted out from behind the large door.

"I-It's Newkern!" Shuya shouted. "Shuya Newkern!"

Jeez, he's so loud! That really hurt my ears!

"Ah... It's you, Shuya. Are you alone out there?" the headmaster asked.

"I'm here too, Headmaster," I said. "It's Denning."

"Which Denning might that be?"

"I'm the exceptionally chubby Denning," I replied. At that, I heard coughing coming from the room for some reason. Most of the people of House Denning were fit and muscular, so a chubby person like me was a rare specimen indeed.

"Please come in," the headmaster said after a pause. "I have been expecting you."

I opened the door without hesitation. Light spilled from the headmaster's office and illuminated the dark corridor.

Colorful plants filled my vision.

Countless shades of green covered the entirety of the spacious room, sunlight shining in from the outside on the array of greenery. For a long moment, I stood rooted to the spot, floored by the ethereal scene before me. *Valjean* did *mention that the headmaster's office was all but a botanical garden when he came here before.*

"Hey there, you two." The headmaster popped out casually from the sea of

green. “I heard some chatter outside. You two seem to get along with each other quite well.” With his robes of gray, a long, white mane, and a fluffy beard to match, the headmaster was a stark contrast to the plants around him.

“Headmaster Morozov! I am honored to receive your summons! Uh, it is a pleasure to mee—” Shuya paused as he registered the headmaster’s words. “Wait a minute! There’s no way I would get along with Denning, sir!”

“That’s my line,” I retorted.

Shuya Newkern was hot-blooded, simpleminded, and he got carried away easily, but it was hard to truly dislike the guy. *He* was the protagonist of *Shuya Marionette*, not the Piggy Duke. In the anime, Shuya and the Piggy Duke were like night and day compared to each other.

My past self would pick a fight with anyone, anywhere, at any time. I would disrupt classes and play pranks with my spells all day long. Shuya, with his strong sense of justice, would confront me about my behavior at every given opportunity. We fought over the smallest things whenever we ran into each other at school. However, ever since I changed for the better, our arguments with each other dwindled, and eventually, we stopped interacting much at all. That is, until we were both summoned by the headmaster.

“Headmaster, is it true that you asked for me?” I asked. “Or was I called here by mistake?”

“Yeah, about that!” Shuya exclaimed. “Why *is* Denning here?!”

I had to know before the so-called “hero’s task” began that my being there wasn’t a mistake. *If the headmaster says something like, “Hm? No, I didn’t call for you. I said to call for Dennis, not Denning. What have you done, Loco Moco…?” I…I’ll cry. My fragile heart won’t be able to take it.*

“No, it was not a mistake. I wanted to talk to the both of you,” the headmaster replied. “Where do I begin? First, Slowe. It appears that the rumors were true. You are a completely different person from the boy that I remember. I recall you were a gloomy student who kept many things bottled up, and yet now, here you stand, looking straight at me with bright eyes. You may be a little obese, yes, but you have lost weight as I heard.”

The headmaster pushed up his monocle. “Now, as for you, Shuya. Is that bulge in your breast pocket the crystal ball you never leave your room without, perhaps? I hear that you use it to perform divination.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” Shuya said. “I can hear the voice inside the crystal ball!”

“Well now, that *is* interesting. Are you able to ask it about the reason you were summoned here today?”

“Please leave it to me!” Shuya took out his crystal ball and shut his eyes in concentration. His face went slack, all emotion draining away as the air around him shifted and changed. “Let’s see... ‘Be cautious, something mysterious and foreign lurks within the school grounds...’” Shuya opened his eyes, a look of confusion crossing his face. “Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Quite an interesting result. I see that I was right to summon you here. Your fortune telling reputation around campus precedes you, and that is not without warrant too, no doubt.”

“Um, this might sound a bit weird, but it isn’t always accurate!” Shuya stammered, backpedaling hard. “Sometimes this crystal ball says weird things! Please ignore it!”

“Not at all. Quite the contrary, it was quite an accurate prophecy,” the headmaster said with a nod. “I see you call your fortune telling ‘the voice of the crystal ball.’ It’s just like you to choose humility over arrogance in regards to your own powers.”

Shuya put away his crystal ball and sent me a smirk. *Urgh, don’t look so full of yourself. You’re just parroting whatever the crystal ball tells you. Listen here, Shuya. I know more about you and everyone else than you do about yourselves!*

“You two students are the epitome of the freedom of expression, a quality which this institute holds in the highest regard. You two have strong personalities—no, *unique* personalities, which is a rare find. That is commendable,” the headmaster said. “It would be boring if everyone looked and acted identically, would it not? In fact, I celebrate diversity.”

The institute encouraged its students to be unique. It was because of this celebration of diversity that even a problem student like me was able to enroll.

When I was first sent to Kirsch, I sat through several tests and had an interview with the professors afterwards. Headmaster Morozov was greatly interested in me then, even though I was already a problem child by that point. There was much debate amongst the staff about letting me enroll in the academy; some of the strongest opposing arguments said that I would be a stain on the institute's reputation. In the end, it was the headmaster who decided to accept me, or so I heard.

"You can make highly accurate predictions with that crystal ball of yours, I see." The professor hummed in thought. "You certainly are quite unique in your own way, Shuya, but in terms of uniqueness, you cannot win against Slowe here."

"Professor Morozov!" Shuya protested immediately. "Please don't compare me to the pi— I mean, to Denning! *He's* not unique. He just eats and sleeps all day long!"

Hmph. I'm *the one who doesn't want to be compared to* you*. You carry a crystal ball everywhere and start telling fortunes out of nowhere. It's true that I was once and probably still am the most infamous student in Kirsch, but you're not exactly the picture of normalcy either.*

"Well now, Slowe. Have you no response to contest such accusations?" the headmaster asked.

"No, I don't," I replied after a moment of thought. "He's telling the truth, after all. Every man, woman, and child in all of Daryth knows that I'm the disgrace of House Denning. I can't deny it."

The headmaster's monocle glinted in the light. "Ever since the day you set foot on our campus, you have remained stubborn and resistant to change. That is why I find your answer just now very puzzling; surprising, even. Your father hoped that being among your peers would change you for the better, but alas, his hopes never came to fruition."

The headmaster had allowed me to enroll out of the kindness of his heart, but I still acted as I pleased even after I came to Kirsch. For example, I let an actual pig run amok at the entrance ceremony. I mocked everyone and everything I could during class, much to the ire of everyone.

“Slowe, you are a member of House Denning—a member once known as the Prodigy of Wind, at that. You once fully shouldered a great many expectations. And then one day, you suddenly changed... Enough for rumors of your behavior to cross borders. You were sent here to Kirsch instead of to the battlefield, which is unheard of for a Denning, with only your retainer for company,” he continued. “Everyone was shocked. People speculated why the Prodigy of Wind went mad. According to some, you ate the Fruit of Madness, and still others said that you snapped under the insurmountable pressure. You were the subject of much debate.”

“‘The Prodigy of Wind’?” Shuya asked. “What do you mean, Headmaster?”

“Oh, did you not know? That is news to me. I see. It was that long ago...” The headmaster trailed off in thought. “Well, I suppose it is not unreasonable for you to not have heard about this. Your father’s lands are situated in a dangerous location where it is difficult to get any information about the rest of Daryth. Slowe was such a difficult topic for House Denning that nobody breathed a word of him in noble circles for a long time.”

Shuya was taken aback. “Denning, you were that problematic even before you came here...? I thought you went hog wild because your parents weren’t around to keep you in line after you got here.”

“I guess so. My self-indulgence goes way back. It’s amazing, right?” I replied, mostly sarcastic.

“It’s not amazing at all...” Shuya commented dryly.

If the headmaster minded our brief exchange, he didn’t show it. Instead, he pressed on with a question. “Lately my work has taken me off campus quite frequently, so I have not been apprised of the goings-on. Might I trouble you to regale me with any news of the school from a student’s perspective? Even the most minor of rumors will do.”

“Well...” Shuya took the reins on this one as he began reciting the rumors he had heard. About how the dining hall switched up the spices in the food recently, how there was a noble student who got overly friendly with a maid and embarrassed himself trying to get in her pants, how Lord Pauper moved to the first-floor male dorms...

The sunlight shining through the large windows warmed me, and I couldn't hold back a yawn as drowsiness grew over me. This meeting with the headmaster was going to take ages at this rate. *Maybe I should pull off one of my Eight Hundred Secret Techniques: sleeping with my eyes open... Ugh, no. That's no good. I'd be no better than I was before if I did that.*

"I see. It sounds like most of the youngsters are enjoying their school life. As the headmaster, nothing pleases me more to hear..."

I pulled myself together and straightened my back.

The headmaster listened to Shuya with a smile on his face, but he looked down in thought at times. He then looked up, seeming to have come to a sort of decision. "Kirsch welcomes all kinds of people as long as they have talent, regardless of their lineage or troublesome reputations. Nobody knows what manner of talents they could awaken in the future if only they're given a chance. However...it seems that we have invited some unsavory characters too." His voice trailed off in a whisper, hoarse and faint.

The tension in the room was so thick, you could cut it with a knife. It was the kind of tension that instilled fear in the hearts of men. Hearing the headmaster's words, I had a good guess on what he was about to say next.

"—Headmaster," I said at length.

"Yes. What is it, Slowe?"

"Why are you telling us all of this? Shuya and I are just students. I'm even a problematic one, at that," I said.

"Huh?" Shuya was confused. "What are you on about all of a sudden?"

"Shuya..." I paused, reining in my irritation. "Has your brain gone to mush and leaked out your ears because you rely on your crystal ball too much?"

"A-Are you calling me stupid?! I could say the same for you!" Shuya exclaimed.

I ignored Shuya and gestured for the headmaster to proceed. *The headmaster is suggesting that someone dangerous has infiltrated the school.*

"Once upon a time there was a child who caught the Dustour spy who

infiltrated the palace," the headmaster said, giving me a meaningful look. "I remember that child. You handled the situation perfectly. Everyone praised you and commended you, that you were truly deserving of the title of the Prodigy of Wind."

I had to think hard back on my past, but eventually, the memory resurfaced. As the headmaster said, I'd once dedicated my life to this country. I used to dream of using my power to make this country flourish. Everyone hailed me as the Prodigy of Wind, but in truth, I was just an immature kid who thought that I could be with Charlotte forever, back when she first became my personal retainer.

"Headmaster... There is a spy in this school, isn't there?"

"A spy...?" Shuya froze. "W-Wait just a minute!"

"Kirsch is home to many young nobles, nobles who are the future of Daryth," the headmaster said gravely. "It is a very desirable target for those with malicious intentions. Of course, we have never told the students about such plights when they occurred in the past."

This was the reason the headmaster scouted Professor Loco Moco from the Order of Royal Knights: he wanted someone with the power to protect the students of Kirsch if it was ever involved in a war. The headmaster predicted that the conflict between Daryth and the Dustour Empire would escalate to an all-out war sometime in the foreseeable future and acted accordingly. His concerns weren't without merit, either; in the anime, members of the Dustour Empire hired a mercenary to attack the institute.

"Then headmaster, you mean...!" Shuya exclaimed.

"It is exactly as you fear, Shuya. I recently discovered evidence of someone attempting to break into my office and into rooms that contain confidential information about Kirsch and its inhabitants. I do not know if they are aiming for the valuables or the information stored there, and I do not know their identity. But I *do* know that we have a mole here."

"Th-That's... You must be joking..." Shuya looked shell-shocked. "I thought that Kirsch was the safest place in the country. We have guards at the gate and all of us nobles can use magic."

“Indeed, the institute prides itself on its stringent security and safe environment. We even have many students wanting to enroll from other nations,” the headmaster said. “Due to the nature of our school, the royal family of Daryth cannot interfere with how we operate. We have accepted students from hostile nations in the past because we do not discriminate against them for where they hail from.”

The headmaster’s eyes gleamed as he continued. “However, the case we have on our hands right now is unprecedented. The mole is meticulous and hasn’t left a trail for us to follow. We have no information on them... Unless you are an insider of this institute, it is impossible to know where confidential information is stored. Whoever the mole is must be a person of terrific skill for them to go so long without detection. The fact of the matter is that someone among us wishes to wreak havoc on this peaceful school, and I cannot abide by that.”

Shuya was stunned by the headmaster’s frank admission to this ominous situation.

I’m still curious as to why the headmaster gave us this info. What does it have to do with us? Why tell us this? Why tell me*? I’m the infamous problem student who starts fights every chance I get, remember? Sure, I used to be the Prodigy of Wind, but that was nearly a decade ago.* I stared at Headmaster Morozov, hoping to get a read on the true intentions hidden behind his monocle.

“Shuya, I have heard rumors of your reputation as a fortune-teller for quite a while. You said earlier that something foreign was in this institute, almost as if you were truly able to predict the future. I am amazed by this power of yours. I wish to borrow that power.”

“Uh, thank you?” Shuya blushed and sheepishly scratched at the back of his head. Shuya was both a genius at divination and incredibly perceptive. He could be a bit dumb like the hot-blooded protagonist he was, but he’d earned the approval of whatever extraordinary being lived within his crystal ball for a reason.

I could understand why Shuya was summoned by the headmaster. I knew of his accomplishments in *Shuya Marionette.* He was the protagonist, after all, and he had a kind of charisma to him that made people want to rely on him. Even I

could tell you that much, despite being at odds with him constantly.

"As for you, Slowe." The headmaster turned to address me.

"Yes. Please tell me why you summoned me here, Headmaster," I said.

"Loco Moco put your name forward."

I froze at the unexpected name.

"Your professors tell me that you have been acting strange as of late. You suddenly started training to lose weight, and many suspected that you were preparing for a new prank." Surprisingly, he let out a chuckle. "It is little wonder, then, that everyone has their eyes on you, Slowe of House Denning, former Prodigy of Wind."

"Huh? *This* guy?" Shuya asked incredulously.

"Yes, Shuya. The name of Denning carries a lot more weight than you think," the headmaster said.

Jeez, being a problem student is hard. Whenever I do something that differs from the norm, everyone questions why. Even the teachers are gossiping about me! And after I turned a new leaf too.

"The incident during Loco Moco's class was the deciding factor. He was surprised that you were able to knock out a student who nearly lost control with a single spell to protect him and your fellow classmates. You may have deceived the students, Slowe, but you did not—indeed, cannot—deceive Loco Moco."

He must have been referring to when I saved Valjean in Practical Magic. Valjean's magic would have imploded on him had I not knocked him out with a darkness spell. Everyone had their eyes on Valjean at the time, so I thought that nobody would notice what I was doing. I suppose I wouldn't be able to fool someone of Loco Moco's level; of course, he would realize exactly what happened.

"You certainly *were* a problem student. You picked fights with everyone and intentionally messed up every lesson you could. Some teachers even said that you should be sent right back to House Denning. Despite all this, you are a

natural at magic, and you are a Denning, a member of the family that protects this country. You are a direct descendant of a family that sends their children out onto the battlefield from their early teens."

I could say nothing. The headmaster continued through my stunned silence.

"Because of this, you do not panic at anything. You did not so much as bat an eyelash at the fact that someone dangerous has infiltrated the academy. You calmly dealt with the student before his spell could hurt himself or anyone else. You acted exactly like a member of the House in charge of defending this country should."

"...I guess you could say that," I said after a pause.

It was true that my family was the House tasked with Daryth's national defense. Unlike a certain someone, I never had the luxury of moping after losing control of a spell. I threw away such a naive way of thinking along with any chance of having happy childhood memories long ago.

But I was also the guy who chose a single girl over the entirety of Daryth. As a member of House Denning, I was supposed to live for the sake of my country, but I was a fool who wished to live with the girl most precious to me instead.

"You prevented the spell from truly going out of control without anyone but Loco Moco realizing and left the scene with nary a word, or so I hear. Though you prevented what could very well have been a disaster, you did not brag about your achievement and chose instead to keep it a secret," the headmaster said.

"*This* guy? Are we talking about the same person here?" Shuya asked, incredulous. The headmaster paid him no mind.

"Now then, Slowe. With all of that said, I think you have an idea why I summoned you both here, considering how much you have changed."

"Headmaster Morozov... What you're saying is you want us to look for the intruder," I said.

Shuya sighed in exasperation. "What are you on about? That's a bit of a stretch."

“Shut up, Shuya. This is important,” I hissed.

“Hey, don’t use that tone with me!” Shuya protested.

“Listen up, Shuya,” I said gravely. “If the headmaster and Professor Loco Moco can’t find the infiltrator from whatever intel they can gain on their own, they need to approach the issue from a different angle. No matter how cautious the mole is, they wouldn’t expect students looking for them, much less problematic students like us.”

“Huh? *That’s* what this is about?” Shuya thought for a moment. “Hey, hold up! I’m not a problem student like you! You’re the only problematic one here, Denning!”

The headmaster nodded solemnly at me; clearly, he meant for Shuya to use his divination powers and me, my skills as a Denning to gather intel about the mole.

“I feel that an unprecedented danger is lurking in the shadows, threatening the peace we’ve built here at this institute. Therefore, I want you two to report back to me about anyone suspicious or any changes you notice from your perspective as students, no matter how small.”

Any hint of my earlier drowsiness evaporated as light filtered in from the windows, making me squint against the glare.

“For this, I will need Shuya’s mysterious power and you, Slowe. Many would object to me relying on you no matter how much you’ve changed. However, my experience as an educator tells me that the two of you, Shuya Newkern and Slowe Denning, are the ones best suited for this task. How exactly you go about this task, I leave up to your discretion.”

“Understood!” Shuya’s voice broke the tension that hung in the air; he was clearly all riled up and raring to go. “I will definitely find this intruder! Please leave it to me!”

As expected of the protagonist, I thought with a roll of my eyes*. He rushes into things without thinking, as always.* Of course, I had no plans to refuse the headmaster myself. I, too, had a reason to accept. I had someone here who I wanted to protect. Even if the headmaster and Professor Loco Moco had a hard

time finding this enemy, I *would* find them, and I *would* face them.

"I have sent in a request for aid to the royal family for military reinforcements to apprehend the infiltrator. They accepted my request and will be sending a few Royal Knights in secret. The knights are likely en route on horseback at this very moment."

"Royal Knights?!" Shuya could not hide his excitement. "That's awesome!"

"Why would the Royal Knights be assigned to this?" I asked. "They only act when the royal family is involved."

"Cardinal Maldini is a good friend of mine. He is the one in charge of the Order, and he did not hesitate to accept my request." Here, the headmaster paused. "...Admittedly, that may be in part because he is eager to make a name for himself. There has been some significant demand as of late for the deployment of the Royal Knights to the front lines due to escalating tension between our nation and Dustour to the north. Cardinal Maldini is wary of giving any more power to House Denning, given that they already wield significant military strength as our nation's primary defenders."

Cardinal Maldini was a very prominent figure who administered Daryth's internal affairs. He was practically the most powerful political figure in the country, second only to the queen herself, and stood toe-to-toe with my father, the leader of Daryth's military.

"I would like to have a few suspects to name before the Royal Knights arrive, if at all possible," the headmaster said.

"Please leave it to me, Headmaster!" Shuya declared.

"...When will they arrive?" I asked, cautious.

"In a few days. They said that they will give me a more precise time of arrival at a later date."

That's fast. It usually takes a week to travel from the capital to Kirsch. The headmaster must be warier of the intruder than he's letting on.

"Okay, understood! I will definitely find them!" Shuya exclaimed. "Leave it to me, Headmaster!"

“I will make them regret the day they decided to infiltrate this school, Headmaster,” I promised without hesitation. *Exterminating unsavory things sneaking up to ruin the peace, huh...? That was exactly what the Piggy Duke did in the anime, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do now.*



“The Great Spirits of Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, Light, and Darkness have lent their powers to us since time immemorial, and greatly contributed to the development of each nation on this continent. The royal family, which was a big contributor to the founding of Daryth, is said to have a special relationship with the Great Spirit of Light. It is even said they’re able to speak with that wise Great Spirit—”

Right now, I was in the middle of class. Like always, many students couldn’t stifle a yawn in Professor Arle’s infamously boring Magic Studies class. Since I sat in the top row, I could clearly see each and every student in front of me.

But I wasn’t the least bit sleepy. As the professor droned on about the founding of the country and the history of the Order of Royal Knights, I found my thoughts drifting back to the task the headmaster had entrusted me with. *There’s no way I could doze off in this situation.* After learning the shocking truth that some shady character had infiltrated the school, I couldn’t even so much as let out a yawn. However, the lecture hall in front of me was the same as always, and I saw Alicia struggling to stay awake next to Shuya like usual.

“Now, on to the history and current state of other countries. Take Lady Cirquista, for example,” the professor began.

“Y-Yes?!” Half asleep, Alicia mistakenly thought the professor had called for her and stood up, only to realize her error too late.

Once Alicia had sunk back into her chair in embarrassment, the professor continued. “The allied country where Lady Cirquista originates from is on the central-eastern side of the continent. There, the Great Spirit of Water lives in the lake at the heart of the metropolis, protecting the citizens of the country and helping the country flourish. Dustour, on the other hand, is on the northern side of the continent and holds the largest amount of territory. There, the Great Spirit of Darkness—”

I tuned back out, my thoughts drifting once more to that spy who’d gotten into Kirsch.

Were they a thief who wanted to steal valuables from the guest parlor, or were they after information on the students? In the anime, some students were kidnapped even before the war began, and afterwards, students were taken as

hostages by the invading troops. However, it was currently before the timeline of the anime began, and there was no sign of war yet.

“You students are the future of Daryth. It is absolutely essential for you to learn about other countries, especially our allies in the Great Southern Alliance,” the professor concluded. “Are there any questions?”

There was one thing I was sure of, though. No matter who the intruder was, the fact that they chose to infiltrate a school full of noble mages could only mean one thing: they were a very talented mage who could swiftly adapt to any situation.

“Professor Arle, I want to know about Huzak. It used to sit between Daryth and Cirquista, right? Where did the Great Spirit of Wind that lived there disappear to after the Dustour Empire destroyed the place?” Valjean asked. “Many tried to search for the spirit, but there isn’t even so much as a whisper of any information on them anymore.”

“Ow!” Shuya yelped as Alicia pinched his arm. He’d been fast asleep. I saw it all. *Looks like Alicia’s merciless with Shuya as always, huh?* I tried to put them out of my mind; I had more important things to worry about.

“That is a good question, Lord Greatlorde. I am afraid to say that nobody knows the answer to your question. Huzak was situated between Daryth and Cirquista, and Altanger was the Great Spirit of Wind that protected it. However, we have no idea where they went. The general consensus is that they hid away, recovering from the wounds they sustained in the war, but—”

The professor’s voice went in one ear and out the other as I thought back on the anime, trying to remember any possible hints about who the mole was. The plot of the anime was mainly centered around Kirsch. Many characters visited the school and interacted with the main cast; so even though it was currently before the anime had begun, I wondered if anyone mentioned anything that could be of use.

“—However, to combat Dustour, which is currently setting its sights on the southern side of the continent, Daryth formed an alliance with the three major countries in the south. Cirquista is one of them, and as all of you know, Lady Alicia is—”

“Hmph. Who would have thought Alicia is a real princess?” one student interrupted the professor’s lecture with a snort. “Cirquista girls are all fashionable and graceful, so I was really excited when I heard she’d be in the same class as me. But ‘Her Majesty’ over there treats poor Shuya like he’s her retainer and does whatever she wants.”

“Exactly! She’s pretty much a first-rate tyrant at this point... Whoa! She threw a textbook at me!” said another, ducking out of the way of the offending textbook. “This is why people say you only have your looks going for you, Princess Cirquista!”

“Shut up! You lot are just good-for-nothing nobles who don’t even own territory. You have no right to speak out against me!” Alicia shouted.

Tsk, the classroom got so rowdy all of a sudden, I thought in displeasure.

This was the usual in Professor Arle’s class; one of the Daryth nobles would mock Alicia and she would reply in kind. Shuya would then desperately try to calm her down as commoner students shook in their seats hoping not to be caught in the middle. Back when I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I would shoot off spells and cause more chaos, but I didn’t have the time for such nonsense right now.

“Stop it already!” Valjean exclaimed. “Look at yourselves! This is why other countries slander the nobles of Daryth as violent and sexist! Shame on you!”

“I haven’t seen you since you moved to the first floor, Valjean. You’re still coming to classes, huh?” a classmate jeered. “Shouldn’t you focus on working your part-time jobs instead of studying magic? You can barely afford the tuition fee.”

“Y-You there, I won’t tolerate any more slander from you. If you don’t close that mouth of yours right now—” Valjean snapped.

“Shuya, Shuya!” Alicia cried. “They’re mocking me. *Me*! Fight them like you always do! ...Are you seriously still asleep?!”

“Mmm...? What?” Shuya mumbled.

“Truce!” one of the students shouted, honing in on Shuya as their next scapegoat. “Professor Arle, Shuya is napping in class! Dozing off in class means

points taken off the final exam, if I remember right!”

The professor was quiet for a while. “You’re right, that is the rule... Um, Mister Newkern, sleeping in class will result in a penalty.”

“Huh?” Shuya finally snapped. “Wha— I-I wasn’t sleeping! I swear! It’s a misunderstanding! I was doing something really important last night, so I’m a little sleep-deprived...” His head swiveled around towards the student who’d snitched on him. “There’s a ton of other students sleeping! Did you check with the people around me that I was even asleep?!”

Urgh, I’m at my limit. They’re so freaking noisy. I looked around the classroom. Students who’d been dozing off were shouting that it wasn’t fair of Shuya to throw them under the bus. It seemed that the classroom wouldn’t calm down anytime soon; Professor Arle looked very troubled. *I guess I should give her a hand. Shuya, you’ll be the sacrifice here.*

“—You don’t have a clue, Shuya.” I slammed my textbook on the desk, and everything in the classroom instantly stilled. It didn’t take anything more than that to get people to avert their eyes, because they feared getting involved with me.

“—What’s that supposed to mean, Denning?” Shuya glared back at me. The whole classroom waited on tenterhooks as we stared each other down.

“I’m telling you to shut up before you say something you’ll regret,” I hissed. “If you don’t know what I mean, then you’re more of a hopeless idiot than I thought.”

“Say *what*?” Realization slowly dawned on his face. “...Oh yeah, you’re right...”

It seemed that he finally got a grip on why the headmaster only told the two of us about the mole. *From what he said earlier... Did he spend the whole night searching for suspicious places? I mean, Shuya acts on his instincts, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he did.*

Just then, I felt a pair of sharp eyes on me. Two rows down, the girl sitting next to Shuya glared up at me. She looked delicate like an artwork made of candy. She stared intently in my direction, her long lashes framing her large

eyes. When I noticed her gaze, she hurriedly tore her eyes away, sulking like a little kid. Alicia had her golden blonde hair fashioned into two cute pigtails. I thought for sure she'd comment on my jabs at Shuya. *What?* I thought, almost daring her to say something. *You want a fight? Are you angry because I was rude to your friend? If that's the case, he's at fault. He nearly spilled the beans and I stopped him, that's all.* But she said nothing. She *did* chance another peek back up at me; being an outsider in this situation, there was no way she could understand what Shuya and I were talking about.

That's when it hit me. Seeing Alicia looking at me with that upset expression, I suddenly remembered a character who fit all the criteria for the mole: No Face, a mercenary who lived in the underworld. A gifted mage specializing in dark magic, she used a secret magical artifact used to disguise herself as anyone she wished, and for some reason was obsessed with Alicia's beauty. Later on in the anime, they ended up attacking Kirsch alongside the troops of the Empire. *Speaking of that attack, they ended up admitting to the main cast that they'd infiltrated and stolen otherwise confidential information.*

"I shall continue class now," the professor declared. "Please flip to the next chapter of the textbook. That means you as well, Lady Cirquista." She paused to allow the class to reopen their textbooks before resuming her lecture. "Chapter Two: The Relationship between Spirits and Magic. I am aware of the number of times you've heard this and are sick of the topic, but that is a bad attitude to have," the professor chided, as some of the students didn't even attempt to hide their dread. "I'm sure some of you have heard the rumors of the commoner who managed to manifest the ability to use earth magic by now. If you don't study hard, your talented younger peers will leave you in the dust."

Of course, I thought*, that's the only thing that makes sense. If No Face really is the intruder, even the headmaster wouldn't notice. No Face was already powerful enough with the ability to change her appearance at will, but she was also abnormally cautious for a mercenary. She took great pains when infiltrating a location, making sure that she blended with the environment.*

"Professor Arle, that commoner was surely the illegitimate child of a noble, weren't they? They have enough money to enroll here, after all," one student said, her tone dripping with the desire for gossip.

“Miss Maya, reality is different from those books you love to read,” Professor Arle replied. “The student in question is a commoner through and through... No, that’s not an appropriate way to put it. She is not an illegitimate child, at any rate.”

“Oh, so she’s a girl, huh? I bet she’s on cloud nine right now. All commoners who can use magic are like that,” Maya remarked.

If it was currently the window of time when No Face snuck in to gain a foothold for the later invasion, then everything fit. Once I had this train of thought going, I couldn’t stop it. Now that I had a possible idea of who the mole might be, I could focus on where and how to proceed from there.

Now... I just need to confirm the identity of the mole without anyone noticing me.

Though Kirsch was full of talented young mages like Shuya, if a seasoned mercenary like No Face started fighting no-holds-barred here, it would be a disaster.

“Professor Arle?” Valjean said.

“What is it, Lord Greatlorde?” the professor replied.

“Shuya has dozed off again. Please make sure to penalize him. It is for his own good.”

“It seems that Mister Newkern is quite sleep-deprived today,” the professor murmured after a moment of hesitation.

It wasn’t just us local nobles and commoners whose lives were in danger; the international students, the retainers and maids who supported our daily lives, the professors, the chefs who made food for everyone, and the merchants all made their home here on campus. There were even messenger birds and horses for carriages. And amongst all of these people, there was one precious person who I swore to protect above all.

I won’t let anyone ruin this peaceful place. This solemn vow I made to myself, I would keep it, no matter the cost.

“Hey, Denning, wait up.”

Just as I was about to leave the building, I heard a voice call to me and I turned around. “...Oh, it’s you.”

Shuya stood there, looking exhausted. His usual cheerful demeanor was subdued; he looked a little suspicious as he warily watched students leaving the building. A little obvious, more like.

Shuya was the kind of guy who followed his instincts and acted without giving it a second thought. He had probably left the headmaster’s office and spent the rest of the day and the better part of the night scouring the campus for clues. That would explain why he’d been drowsier than usual in Professor Arle’s class, in any case.

“Just to be clear, I have no intention of being all chummy with you,” I declared.

“That’s my line, Denning,” Shuya said. “I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask me what?”

“...How do you intend to carry out your search?” he asked eventually.

“For?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Shuya snapped. “Yesterday, the headmaster—”

“—Use your brain, Shuya. It’s unnatural for us to be talking like this. Have you ever started a conversation with me even once since you enrolled in Kirsch? Why are you purposefully making us look suspicious?”

“I...I knew that,” Shuya muttered in frustration.

I left Shuya standing there rooted to the spot in frustration, heading out into the greenery of the campus that awaited me outside.

He’s probably getting restless, I thought*. He’s the anime protagonist, and I know full well that he’s not a bad person at heart. The headmaster’s expectations and his own animosity towards the spy are probably eating away at him. He doesn’t even know where to start. We’ve fought every single time we’ve met, and yet he chose to swallow his pride and ask me for help. He’s obviously beating himself up over it.* I heaved a sigh. *It can’t be helped. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to give him a bit of a hint.*

I stopped walking, turning back to face Shuya. “The headmaster and Professor Loco Moco didn’t have a clue, remember? There’s no point searching blindly,” I said.

“Then how are *we* supposed to figure it out?” he asked.

“How would I know? Although...” I looked at the transparent crystal ball in Shuya’s hand. He normally used his crystal ball to make money with simple fortune telling, but that thing was anything but ordinary. It was a sentient magical artifact that had guided Shuya on his path to becoming the savior of the world in the anime.

“Is that thing you’re holding just for show?” I quipped. A small flame quivered within the crystal in response.

I was pretty certain my theory was solid, but I needed to confirm it with my own two eyes first. This was the best moment to test my all-powerful anime knowledge.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered to myself.

I was at the enormous dining hall that probably had the capacity for a few hundred people. Beyond the windows, countless maids hustled and bustled around the students who were snacking inside. It was a perfectly normal scene in this perfectly peaceful institute—a snapshot that perfectly illustrated how vulnerable the school really was.

A place like this where a ton of people gathered in a concentrated spot was the perfect target for an attack.

Squatting down, I brushed away the grass to look for what I had in mind. On the one hand, I inwardly prayed that I wouldn’t find what I was looking for; on the other hand, I sorta hoped I would. I was stuck on a figurative pendulum swinging between these two desires when a spirit sat on my shoulder.

“Well... I guess I should have expected this.” There was a carefully concealed magic circle in the grass. The dirt around it looked freshly dug.

Depending on how I chose to wield the knowledge my previous life had granted me, I could do anything in this world. But with great power came great responsibility, a harsh truth I had no choice but to confront as I stared down at

the vivid magic circle in front of me. As I suspected, the intruder at Kirsch was the Faceless Woman—No Face.

“I now know for sure that No Face is preparing for an assault on the school in the future,” I muttered to myself. “Jeez... Such a strong character as my enemy from the very start? Life’s tough.”

I allowed myself only a brief moment of despair before I pulled myself together. There just wasn’t time for that. No Face might have been one of the strongest antagonists in the anime, but I had the advantage of knowing a lot about her and what her plans were.

This would be a test case, I decided. This was my chance to test just how far I could go with my powers in this world. If I looked at it from that perspective, No Face was a good opponent for me. I had no reason for fear. *Right, Piggy Duke?* I asked myself rhetorically.

As if it was answering my thoughts, the wind spirit flew off my shoulder and soared off into the azure-blue sky.

“Guess I’d better go get some lunch,” I muttered.

Many rows of long tables stretched from end to end of the dining hall. Large windows lined the walls beneath the vaulted ceiling, the light of the high noon sun shining through. Maids hustled around and many students chatted amongst themselves while enjoying their meals.

“Please make my portion a large one!” I called out to a maid in a joking singsong, snorting.

The maids hired by the school were responsible for delivering meals to students and refilling our glasses of water. Their uniforms consisted of white lace headpieces, black dresses, and white aprons. Their work wasn’t just limited to the dining hall either; they also took care of the laundry, waitressing, and cleaning for the entire campus. They worked hard day and night to support our daily lives here and were compensated with a monthly salary.

Sometimes the commoners helped out with the maids’ chores for some extra cash. Apparently, the pay was good, so a bunch of students were willing to volunteer.

“Today’s main course is teriyaki-style Roc beast, accompanied by a side soup filled with fresh vegetables and flavorful white bread from House Garla’s lands. Oh, and Miss Tina over there ordered a Chef’s Special Dessert especially for you, Lord Slowe,” a maid said as she placed a silver tray before me, pulling me out of my thoughts about part-time work.

Lunch, finally! I’m famished, I thought, giving the maid a nod. “I see. Thank you.”

But I was in for a nasty shock the moment I laid eyes on my tray. *Wait... Th-That’s a lot of food!* I gawked at my tray. *Look at all this bread! A standard portion is enough! I’m on a diet!* I felt several sets of eyes on me and looked up and around. *Everyone is looking at me with envy...*

“I-I was joking about giving me a large portion earlier...” I mumbled. I was about to call out to the maid who had delivered my tray and apologize for my blunder when I noticed what exactly was happening in front of me.

“Huh?! W-Wait! Why is there a gigantic pile of dessert here now?!” I exclaimed, my hands beginning to tremble in shock.

“Milord, please accept this as a sign of our gratitude!” Maids appeared at my table one after the other and piled a mountain of dessert onto my plate. I could only stare entranced by the assortment of colorful sweets. Among them were some rare dishes I’d never eaten before, not even when I pigged out on everything I could get my hands on.

Then, a familiar voice snapped me out of it.

“Wow, it’s gotten a little out of hand, Lord Slowe,” said Valjean, his tone light. “I *did* hear that you gave water elixirs to some of the maids to help them with their skin problems, though. Perhaps I should have expected this from them.” He took a step back as he gave me a respectful bow of his head. Valjean wore a black waiter’s uniform, his beautiful golden hair was slicked back neatly, and his sapphire eyes shone under the light. *Oh yeah, he mentioned that he started working as a part-time waiter in the dining hall,* I thought, looking him up and down.

“Lord Pauper, how in the world did you know that?” I asked, narrowing my eyes in slight suspicion.

“It’s quite strange for maids to have expensive water elixirs, so I was able to make an educated guess. Don’t forget that I work in the dining hall too. I learn all kinds of things, listening to the gossip shared at break time.” Valjean paused, admiring my plate. “Still, that’s a lot of dessert you have there.”

Charlotte mentioned before that the maids loved to gossip, and Valjean’s explanation just now backed up her claims. *This means that...“Operation: Reputation Repair” to combat my past as the blackhearted Piggy Duke was probably a success!* I cheered in my mind.

“Speaking of which, did you know that some of the staff members in the dining hall were recently reassigned? It caused quite the stir,” Valjean said in a mischievous tone. “I’m sure you’ll know what I mean when you see it, though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Okay, so...” Valjean cut himself off as if he suddenly remembered where he was. “Oops, sorry. If I start chatting here, the maids will reprimand me. You’ll just have to find out for yourself.” Valjean gave an exaggerated shrug and hurried back towards the kitchen.

It was a strange sight to see a noble doing chores. Seeing the small, warm smiles on the faces of maids and retainers as they looked at this unusual noble, though, it was easy to tell that they accepted him as one of their own.

I could feel a smile creeping onto my face at the heartwarming scene of a noble and commoner speaking comfortably with each other. But I forced it down, straightened my back, and looked around the dining hall. It was full of familiar faces, but I needed to keep my guard up.

After all, a veteran mercenary had infiltrated this peaceful school—one who could change her appearance at will. Nowhere was truly safe.

“Wow, they got really carried away! This is way over the top. How do they not realize that?” Tina said as she looked at my plate. She’d come over from another table and sat next to me in the middle of lunch. The desserts she had ordered for me also arrived, adding to the already-large mountain of desserts on my table. She gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry about this. Apparently, the water elixirs were really effective, and all the maids wanted to thank you for helping them. I really didn’t think it would lead to *this*. Sometimes they just

don’t think before they act on the first thing that comes to mind...”

“I probably would’ve celebrated this without a second thought before, but I’m on a diet now, so this is a little...” I trailed off.

“Yeah, it’s way too much...” Tina said, staring. “I’ll tell them to rein it in next time.”

I focused on eating the savory part of my lunch first. *I’ll decide what to do with this mountain of desserts after I finish the main course...* As I debated this dilemma, a thought occurred to me. “By the way, Tina. Usually, you keep your distance from me. Is it okay for you to be seen so close to me today?” I asked.

“The dining hall is always pretty full, but the seats around you aren’t taken,” Tina said. “I figured people would think that I was a first-year who only sat here because my eyes were glued to the mountain of desserts and didn’t notice you.”

“You’ve clearly put a lot of thought into this.”

“This school is a lot harder on us commoner girls than you’d think. We have to keep our heads low so that nasty nobles don’t notice us, and desperately scrounge together the money for those expensive textbooks...” Tina paused, her eyes fixated on something. “Wait, look at her. Oh, wow. That was close.”

“Huh? Who?” I asked, swiveling my head in search of who Tina was talking about.

“Oh, dear. Oh, wow...” Tina sounded anxious as she pointed her finger. “That girl over there. The white-haired maid.”

Following the direction Tina was pointing in, I spotted a problematic maid. The maid groaned in pain as she repeatedly bumped into the backs of chairs, she occasionally spilled water from her pitcher onto students on accident, and in general, she seemed very clumsy.

“Look at her. She’s going to drop that tray, I swear. I don’t understand why anyone would stack that many plates on a tray at once. Oh, this is bad. She definitely can’t see anything past those plates.” Worry laced Tina’s voice as her eyes followed the unfortunate maid.

I could only see the back of the aforementioned maid, but I couldn't bear to watch. Her precarious actions could only lead to disaster, so I pointed my wand towards her just in case. Sure enough, the klutzy maid bumped into a student as they stood up from their seat. The tower of plates tilted and wobbled before they toppled over. Everyone braced themselves for disaster.

"Oh no!" Tina exclaimed.

But the disaster everyone braced themselves for didn't happen.

"Huh? Nothing crashed?" Tina was confused. I'd used a wind spell, causing the plates to float neatly onto the long table well before they could fall. Tina oohed in wonder and awe at my display of magic as the maid I'd just saved quickly approached us with large strides.

Wait a minute... Realization slowly dawned on me. I hadn't recognized her at first because she had her hair tied back in a single ponytail instead of her usual two and was wearing a frilly apron. Up close, however, there was no way I could mistake her for anyone else.

"Th-Thank you very much for saving me, Master Slowe..."

"Ch-Charlotte?!"

"No way! That was *you*, Miss Charlotte?!"

Tina and I were so shocked that we shouted out at the same time. The Charlotte standing before us was the spitting image of a maid. But I was confused; that couldn't be right. "Weren't you helping out in the kitchen, though?"

"A spot opened up because of the recent reassignments, so I requested to change my post. I wanted to check on you, since you've been coming to the dining hall a lot lately, but...I didn't think this job would be so hard." Charlotte trailed off as she approached, seeing my tray. "Wait, why is there so much dessert here? Did you order all of this, Master Slowe?"

"The maids over there brought it for me. I didn't ask for it," I explained. "It's probably because of... Well, you know what I'm talking about."

"Oh... Do you mean when you made water elixirs for them before? I see, that

makes sense, but...” Charlotte, who had exchanged the gaudy dragon apron for the wonderful maid uniform, nodded at me. Then, she immediately picked up my plate of dessert and placed it on her tray. “I’m confiscating it all.”

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “Wait up. What are you doing?!”

“Ordering a large portion is fine, but this is too much for you. You’ll get fat again. You can’t eat something this sweet on top of your already-large meal. You’re still on a diet, remember?” Charlotte chided as she took the dessert away.

I mean, I had been debating whether I should eat something so fatty during my diet, so I guess she’s helping keep me honest. Just as I thought that, the plate was immediately snatched back from Charlotte’s delicate hands. The culprit: Tina, who had been sitting next to me.

“Oh, come on. It’s fine,” Tina argued. “Lord Denning is working hard every day, so it won’t hurt him to have it. Plus, this is a gift of thanks from me and the maids. He helped my friend too!”

“That’s true. It’s not very nice to waste someone’s gift, Charlotte,” I said, nodding in agreement with Tina.

“Master Slowe, you’re on a diet. You’ve worked so hard all this time, waking up early every morning to train. It will set you back if you give in to such temptations.” Charlotte turned to Tina, unimpressed. “Miss Tina, as Master Slowe’s friend, you should be a bit more considerate.”

“That’s true too, I *am* in the middle of a diet. Charlotte is right.” I found myself torn about whose side I should take.

“Lord Denning can make decisions for himself, don’t you think?” Tina rebutted. “I’m not saying that he should eat all of it.”

“That’s true. I *should* make the decision myself. Tina has a point.”

Charlotte pouted, puffing out her cheeks. “You still really shouldn’t. You’re so close to your goal of fitting in a ready-made uniform size. You won’t have to order custom-made uniforms anymore!”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. I *can* nearly fit into a ready-made size.”

Tina paused as she thought of a response. “Losing weight is important, this is true, but why are you even trying to lose weight in the first place?” She turned to me. “Some people think you’re cute just the way you are!”

“Oink!” I exclaimed in surprise. “Cute?! Me?! I-I see. That’s a different way of looking at it!”

Charlotte and Tina’s back-and-forth slowly grew in intensity. I became a little worried as I realized the amount of attention we were getting. Usually, Tina kept me at arm’s length, and Charlotte also tried to keep a low profile. But now all eyes were on the three of us as the two of them argued over the fate of my dessert.

“No! Don’t eat it, Master Slowe!”

“Just a little bit is fine! Right, Lord Denning?!”

How in the world did this happen?! Huh?! Why are they arguing?! Hm? I turned to look at the offending dessert. *Is it your fault? This has to be all your fault! This is all because you exist! Hmph. I am a man of action, and I won’t hesitate to be cruel when I have to be! Prepare yourself!*

“*Master Slowe*!”

Without further ado, I began to brutally decimate the plate of dessert, a gobbling sound escaping me without my meaning to. First, I shoved the dessert that Tina ordered—a treat stuffed with sweet whipped cream—into my mouth. The whole thing fit in my mouth in one go and absolutely just melted on my tongue. I once heard that the head chef of Kirsch was very famous in the dessert world; I could definitely believe that, if the taste was anything to go by, because it was something worthy of presenting to the royal family themselves.

I demolished the mountain of desserts with a spoon in one hand and a fork in the other, and in the blink of an eye, it was gone. Even Tina was taken aback by the sugary destruction I left in my wake.

“Oink!” I snorted as I finished off the last bite.

“I insisted *so* many times that you shouldn’t eat all that, yet you did it anyway,” Charlotte sulked.

“Sorry, Charlotte, but please hear me out,” I pleaded. “I didn’t give in to the temptation of sweets.”

“What do you mean?” Charlotte asked at length.

“Losing weight is important. Changing my figure completely is the easiest way to prove to the people around me that I’ve changed my old ways,” I said. “But...when I thought about it, I realized that nobody has ever treated me to food just because they wanted to before. It made me really happy, and I couldn’t turn that kind of gesture down.”

I waved at the maids, who were watching us along with the other onlookers from a distance. In response, they bowed their heads happily, and Charlotte noticed them for the first time since we started talking. They’d looked anxious before; they probably wondered this whole time whether I was going to eat the treats. But now their happiness showed on their faces even though they were in the middle of work. Looking at them, Charlotte seemed to understand my choice, her cheeks slowly deflating with a sigh.

“I understand, Master Slowe.” Charlotte paused for a long moment. “This is the last time, though. I really will confiscate your sweets if this happens again!”

“Okay, understood. I’m in the middle of a diet; eating like this will be an exception and not the norm. I promise.”

“U-Um... Sorry, Miss Charlotte,” Tina said meekly. “I got a little carried away when I saw the maids looking our way. Losing weight is important, so I’ll tell everyone to stop giving Lord Denning so much food. Though he is cute, I think everyone agrees that he’s better off losing weight.”

“Oh... No, I went a little too far too. I’m Master Slowe’s retainer, so I’m too passionate when he’s concerned. Sorry, Miss Tina,” Charlotte said, sheepish.

Charlotte had been elated for me when I obtained the real weight loss potion, and she was the one who’d thought up “Operation: Reputation Repair” in the first place. I knew very well that Charlotte was being tough on me for my own good.

“By the way, Charlotte, you look really good in that uniform,” I said, turning to face her and give her some praise. “Washing the dishes in the kitchen is an

important job too, but you're very cute as a maid."

"Yeah... You might not realize this, but everyone can't take their eyes off you, Miss Charlotte," Tina agreed as she looked around.

"...Everyone is looking at *me*?" Charlotte asked, puzzled.

All the maids in the dining hall were cute, but Charlotte stood out head and shoulders above them all in the looks department. She was adorable and carried with her a graceful aura, though she was more than a bit clumsy, but that only added to her charm. It was hard for anyone to take their eyes off her.

Charlotte flushed bright red and cupped her cheeks with her hands when she realized everyone was looking at her. She must not have been used to the maid apron yet and was a little shy because of all the attention she was getting.

"You're a lucky man, Lord Denning. There are a ton of retainers in Kirsch, but most of them are men. Yet you have the sweet, adorable Miss Charlotte cheering you on all the time. It's a crime, I tell you." Tina smiled mischievously and Charlotte blushed an even deeper shade of red as she fidgeted. She'd probably forgotten all about the mountain of sweets.

"Th-That's right... I need to get back to washing the dishes... Master Slowe, I shall return to the kitchen now. I'll see you later," Charlotte mumbled before she made a beeline for the kitchen. She clutched the hem of her skirt as she ran off, lacking her usual graceful composure. It was rare to see her so flustered.

Wait a second. Charlotte's a waitress in the dining hall now; she's not doing the dishes. You're not supposed to go back to the kitchen... I sighed internally.

"Miss Charlotte really is adorable." Watching Charlotte make her escape, Tina teased me in a whisper. "You nobles sure do know how to smooth talk. Do they teach you that back home or something?"

"Of course they..." I trailed off, noticing Valjean looking our way with an amused smile from a distance. "...don't..."

He accepted the tray from Charlotte as she entered the kitchen, taking over her waiting duties. He smiled at me kindly in the same way Tina did, his face seeming to praise me for not mucking up that conversation with Charlotte. *Darn, was he really watching the whole time?* A little irritated, I waved Lord

Pauper over.

“What is it, Lord Slowe?” he asked innocently.

“You probably already know this, but that girl is my retainer,” I begrudgingly muttered. “Her name is Charlotte. Give her a hand from here on out, will you?”

Lord Pauper graced me with a bow in response. “Please leave it to me. It would be most unfortunate if she gains any...*undesirable* attention, after all.” Lord Pauper was the personification of the ideal noble, what with his impeccable sense of responsibility towards the commoners and all. I’d seen him patiently helping a maid earlier when I’d been watching him. If he kept an eye on her, surely Charlotte would feel more at ease with her job.

“This must be a dream... The pig was being considerate...?!”

“Hm?” Several rows of tables away, I spotted Alicia staring at me with her jaw hanging open in shock, her silver fork frozen halfway to her mouth. She was muttering things under her breath, but because of the several tables between us, I couldn’t make out much more than that. *She’s a little scary like that... I’ll leave her be. Nothing good can come of getting involved with the main heroine of the anime.*

“Lord Denning, I’m not exaggerating when I say that Miss Charlotte is cute. Anyone with eyes can see that.” Tina paused. “You didn’t pick her based on her looks, did you? ...Lord Denning, did you use your family clout to snag her or something?”

I had been wandering around the campus looking for magic circles when Charlotte approached me and asked to talk.

“So Charlotte, what did you want to ask me?”

“Um...” Charlotte hesitated. “I’ll get straight to the point. It’s about Miss Tina. I noticed something about her.”

“What is it?”

“Miss Tina had a wand! Why is that?” Charlotte asked.

“Huh? Well, Tina’s a mage,” I said, puzzled. “Of course she’d have a wand.”

“What are you saying? She’s a commoner!” Charlotte said with conviction.

We were in the square in front of the cathedral. A few students were sleeping on the lawn, while others leaned against one of the myriad trees, reading books in the shade. Everyone seemed to enjoy spending their free time just relaxing. I watched this peaceful, unchanging scene, a stark contrast to the restless Charlotte beside me.

“Sure, she’s a commoner, but she was able to awaken her magic recently,” I answered.

Usually, my wonderful retainer was the epitome of grace and nobility.

“...Whaaat?! A commoner?! Using magic?! You must be joking!” she yelled in shock.

That wasn’t the case today, though.

“She’s still a first-year, right? One of the maids I worked with today told me so!” Charlotte exclaimed. “I’ve never heard of a commoner awakening their magic so quickly!”

“You’re too close, Charlotte. Personal space,” I reminded her as she leaned towards me in her emotional state. “But you’re right. Tina was able to awaken some earth magic, even though she only just started her first year. You’re a commoner too, but you’re able to use magic. Is it that surprising?”

“Well, I mean...I guess that’s true, but I’m an exception. That is...” As soon as I pointed that out, Charlotte’s voice grew small as she mumbled her reply. She didn’t have to say anything more; I already knew why she’d gone quiet. It was her secret to tell. I already knew it, but I’d let her approach me when she was ready to talk about it.

I suddenly stopped in my tracks.

“Master Slowe? What is it? Why did you stop?” Charlotte asked.

“Hm? Well...” I hesitated.

My retainer was a kindhearted girl who shied away from conflict. Charlotte seemed happier now living out her life at this peaceful school than she ever had back on Denning lands. I didn’t want to drag her into the hidden conflict in Kirsch right now.

And so...I decided I absolutely could not tell her about the magic circle on the ground I was standing on right now.

“Well, I’m wondering just how talented Tina is, considering how quickly she was able to unlock some of her power despite only recently learning magic properly.” I played dumb, going back to the previous topic to keep Charlotte’s suspicion at bay. Luckily, it seemed to work. Unluckily, her next question was just as difficult.

“By the way, who do you think is better at magic at the moment—me or her?” Charlotte asked after a moment of hesitation. “I mean, it’s probably obvious who is better. I’ve been practicing magic since I was a child. Tina’s experience can’t be compared to mine.”

Aaand there it is: Charlotte’s inferiority complex about her magic.

Despite being royalty, Charlotte was abysmal at magic. She dreamed of one day gaining control over it, but the reality was harsh; Charlotte had never once succeeded at controlling even a single spell. Her spells were all chaotic and caused collateral damage around her. Of course, House Denning could not let such a problematic mage run free, and so Charlotte was pretty much banned from so much as holding a wand. Charlotte was very sensitive about the topic of her magic skills (or lack thereof), and understandably so.

I mean, I’d lent my wand to her in exchange for her being my partner during the speed-eating contest, but that was a special case. If my family found out that Charlotte had used magic without permission, we would both be in a lot of trouble.

“Tina,” I said without a second thought.

“Wha—”

“Tina is probably better at controlling spells,” I explained. “Even though the spells Tina casts are all very basic, she’s able to control them as she wills.”

“I *would* lose to a girl who’d only just awoken her magic, huh...” Charlotte’s shoulders slumped in dismay.

“But, well...she’s a good person,” I added. “She’s diligent and earnest. I can see how she was able to enroll in Kirsch despite being a commoner.”

“Well, yeah, I get that, but...” Charlotte sighed. “It’s just, why am I so...?”

As I watched Charlotte lament her situation, a wind spirit sat on my shoulder and desperately tried to tell me something. Most spirits weren’t very intelligent, so it was difficult for them to communicate. And that’s not even considering the fact that many spirits would come up to prank me because I could see them, so I usually ignored them. But this spirit was clearly distressed, and I realized immediately that whatever it was it wanted to tell me, it was something serious.

“Maybe I should buy a wand and start practicing again. I hear that store-bought wands are pretty good,” Charlotte murmured. “Hey, Master Slowe, can I __”

“No,” I denied her flat-out. “Remember what happened last time?”

“You’re so stingy. Meanie,” Charlotte said, sulking.

Magic and spirits were closely connected; you couldn’t have one without the other. I was reminded of that fact as the wind spirit floated into the sky and swayed with the wind. I followed it to the back of a bench on the side of the path. It was hard to tell, but there was a small magic circle etched on the back of the wooden bench. It was an explosive spell laced with dark magic. *How dare they set up something so dangerous in this school!* I thought, seething with anger.

“What is it, Master Slowe? Is there something on that bench?” Charlotte asked.

“No, it’s nothing,” I assured her. “I was just thinking about how life at this school is a lot more peaceful than back at House Denning.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Charlotte agreed. “I love how peaceful this place is!”

Looking at Charlotte’s smile, I stealthily destroyed the magic circle disguised as graffiti.

For the next several days, I ran around the large campus and meticulously inspected every nook and cranny. Pouring my blood, sweat, and tears into the search, I was able to find several magic circles concealed around the campus; on the side of the female dorms, on the side of the front gates, in the emergency

food rations storage, even hidden among the graffiti on the wall of the lecture building.

“Damn you, No Face. How many circles did you set up around school?! There are way too many. If all these are set up for the attack on the school... I don’t even want to imagine that.” I shuddered at the mere thought.

I assumed that No Face, who was hired by Dustour, had two main motivations behind her infiltration. The first was to obtain confidential information about the institute and the people who lived here, hence the attempt to break into the headmaster’s office. The second was to set up magic circles in preparation for the attack on Kirsch. She was probably already finished with the latter.

“Should I report this to the headmaster?” I muttered to myself. “It’s going to be hard to explain how I noticed these, though. These magic circles were so well-hidden that even the headmaster couldn’t find them, and he’s lived here for years! I can’t just go up and tell him the reason I could find these all in a handful of days is that I had help from the spirits.”

But I couldn’t rule out the possibility that No Face would notice that I destroyed her magic circles and start a riot, using the chaos as cover to escape. I wanted to destroy as many of them as I could in case that came to pass.

“All right, I’ll report it to the headmaster later.” I paused in thought. “Doing what I need to do during the day is hard with all the people around. I mean, everyone ignores me when I do weird things nowadays, considering my reputation, but Shuya was stalking me today for some reason... I have to be careful.”

I continued muttering to myself. “Shuya is eerily perceptive. Pretty fitting for the guy called the Hot-blooded Fortune Teller. I really don’t want him to find out what I’m doing... I want to deal with the current problem without him getting involved.”

I opened a window, letting the cool evening air flow into my room. From my room on the fourth floor, I looked down at Kirsch, now shrouded in the dark of night. I had a clear view of everything in the campus from my window. A student practiced with a sword under some trees; a boy loitered near the entrance of the girls’ dorms, which was located beyond the sports grounds from

the boys' dorms, like he was waiting for someone; Professor Loco Moco patrolled the campus; and coachmen led horses around by the reins.

I checked to make sure nobody was outside my window.

"Well, I suppose it's more efficient to destroy those magic circles at night." Without any hesitation, I leaped out into the darkness.

Stars twinkled and shone in the night sky.

I found myself in a vast plain filled with weeds, an area which normally served little purpose outside of providing a habitat for the wildlife but was also used for horse-riding practice and the like. During the day, dozens of horses probably ran around this field freely, but I couldn't say for sure because I wasn't very familiar with it. I didn't frequent it when I was the obese, blackhearted Piggy Duke since I didn't take equestrian classes like most of the other students did. I had tried to ride a horse once, but I nearly crushed the poor thing with my weight. I'd never tried getting on one since.

"Oink." Following the spirit guiding me, I approached the long horse stables.

I thought back on what I knew of No Face; she could change her appearance by using a specific magic artifact and use a dual-element spell of dark and water magic of her own design to set up her magic circles. Spirits despised anything infused with dark magic, so as long as I kept a close eye on the spirits, it was easy for me to find the magic circles. I was at an advantage since I could see them.

"Over there, huh." Lighting up my dark surroundings with a light spell, I brushed away some weeds. There, I found one edge of a magic circle etched into the ground, hidden meticulously. *It's way bigger than the ones I've found up until now.* I observed it closely. *Hmm, this is...*

"A magic circle for the *Summon Water Golem* spell, huh?" Something like a water golem wasn't normally violent, but this one was enchanted to attack anything that so much as breathed in its vicinity if given half the chance. "It's even laced with dark magic, programming it to attack the surrounding area when discovered," I noted. "No wonder Shuya had so much trouble with this spell in the anime. He's a fire mage."

If the circle was triggered this close to the students' and maids' living quarters, it'd cause widespread panic. Water golems typically weren't too much of a threat to a mage, but the majority of people in this school weren't fit for combat. Not to mention the fact that this water golem was enchanted to look like an Aqua Slime. A monster like that suddenly appearing on campus? It'd definitely cause an uproar.

I placed my hand atop the magic circle, trying to figure out how the mercenary's spell was constructed and reconfiguring it along the way.

"Oh wow, that's amazing. If the water golem is defeated, it will merge with another magic circle close to it," I muttered, feeling the magic. "It's really complex. This is gonna take me all night to undo."

Nothing less from a mercenary who accepts assignments from Dustour, I suppose. I had to admit, I was a little impressed. I pumped mana into the magic circle until it started to glow with a pale blue light and nearly exploded in my face. I managed to contain it before I set it off, working on making the circle mistake me for its creator. Slowly but surely, I rewrote the spell of the meticulously crafted magic circle from within.

The magic circle crackled. Goosebumps crawled up my arms and down my neck. *I'm performing very high-level magic. If I screw this up, goodbye, field, and hello, gaping crater.*

"I made the right decision to come at night when no one's around," I muttered. Ownership of the circle shifted from the mercenary to me, and I seized that opening the moment I got the chance. "Now for the finish."

I pumped a ton of mana into the magic circle, which glowed brighter and brighter until it culminated in a blinding flash of light.

●

Meanwhile, at the same time that evening.

A group of riders on sturdy horses advanced down the main road under the cover of night.

"Headmaster Morozov has requested our presence again," one of the riders said. "We really can't go against him."

Their lightweight armor and pure white capes gave them away as members of the Royal Knights of Daryth. Coachmen on horse-drawn wagons and traveling merchants turned back to look at them with widened eyes as they passed. Most citizens of Daryth never had a chance to see Royal Knights outside of official ceremonies or speeches by the royal family, so this was a rare sight indeed.

The royal family in Daryth had a long history; said to have the extraordinary ability to communicate with the Greater Spirit of Light, they were well-loved by the people they led. The royal family was the heart of Daryth—a symbol that needed to be protected at all costs.

The Royal Knights who protected them, therefore, were handpicked from only the best of the best of nobles across the entirety of Daryth. Every one of them was an elite mage—masters of magic and proficient with the blade. They were the cream of the crop of Daryth's nobles.

Many students in Kirsch dreamed of becoming a Royal Knight, but it was an uphill battle. To even be eligible for the test to enter the Order, you needed the recommendation of the headmaster and to have contributed a required amount of service for the royal family.

"Professor Morozov and the leader of the Order go way back. It cannot be helped," one of the other knights replied. "That aside, do you think there are any great mages at Kirsch right now? Someone we could potentially recruit, I mean."

"Well, if I had to pick one person, there is *someone*," the first knight replied. "That Denning boy. Not in the sense that he excels, but he's definitely quirky enough."

"Denning?" the second knight asked.

"The Prodigy of Wind who fell from grace. You know, the brat that the entirety of House Denning has finally given up on," the former replied snarkily.

"Hey." The man at the head of the pack turned back to reprimand his underlings for their lack of professionalism. His curly golden hair swayed in the wind. "We will arrive at Yoram as dawn breaks. After a short break, we will press on to Kirsch and should arrive shortly after noon. Remember that we are Royal Knights and must act accordingly—"

“Yes, Captain Oliver. I know. May the refulgent light ever smite our foolish foes,” one of the knights said, cutting him off.

The Royal Knights, the Swords of the Royal Family, were ready to wield their rapiers against their foes.

●

“I’m so sleepy...” Breathing in the refreshing forest air, Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista stifled a yawn as she walked down the path. She was a girl with golden blonde hair, eyes that shone with unyielding spirit, and a delicate body like a fine candy sculpture. Even when wearing the modest school uniform, her grace as a princess showed in every move she made.

She looked like a cute agitated kitten as she walked briskly down the path. “Seriously, *he* really has guts to make me wake up this early in the morning... The nerve.” She wasn’t a morning person, but she had somewhere she needed to be at this ungodly hour.

I hear that Piggy Slowe is jogging every morning. I need to see it for myself, she thought. That was the sole reason why she was out and about when she could barely keep her eyes open.

“Why would he try to lose weight now? His personality is completely different. He’s like how he used to be... No, that’s impossible,” she muttered to herself and shook her head. “Oh well. It’s fine to take a look, I guess...”

She had lived in this school for over a year now, and it was a second home to her. Kirsch housed over a thousand students, and although there were also mage institutes back in Cirquista, none of them came close to being of the same scale. The school was built in the middle of a forest, surrounded by sturdy walls several times taller than Alicia. It was renowned for its security.

“The architecture here isn’t bad, but it’s very behind the times. Daryth usually prides itself in how traditional it is, calling these buildings venerable and all that, but... Honestly, this is why other countries call them old-fashioned,” Alicia muttered. “There’s only one town near the school, and that’s Yoram. I can’t believe *that* is the third-biggest town in Daryth.”

Monsters lived in the forest outside campus grounds. But the school made

sure to cull all but the weakest monsters that students could face, and Alicia heard that there hadn't been any underground dungeons spawning in the forest in decades.

"If I remember right, the pig's jog starts from the old research building." Alicia paused. "Oh, someone's there."

Someone moved beneath the dense trees that lined the aged research building, opting not to go down the paved path people used as a shortcut. Thinking it was the person she was looking for, Alicia hurried to hide behind a tree.

What she saw was not what she expected.

Instead of finding a chubby boy struggling to jog down the path, she found someone waving their wand towards a magic circle etched into the ground. A level-headed someone wearing glasses and a black robe; someone that Alicia recognized. *But what is Professor Arle doing here this early in the morning?* she thought.

"*With this drop of my blood, this dark spell will blossom and shatter... Explosion.*" As Professor Arle chanted those ominous words, her wand flickered with light and the magic circle was engulfed by the sinister dark clouds that flowed out from her wand. Alicia felt goosebumps crawl up her skin. Despite the warning bells going off in her head warning her to get out of there, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the magic circle.

Doing that, Alicia realized what it was. It was obviously a dark magic circle purposed for destruction.

"Oh, dear. I've been spotted." Alicia froze as Professor Arle's calm and mature voice reached her ears. The woman who originated from the Magic Academy and taught the fundamentals of magic in Kirsch smiled wide, staring at the overseas student before her.

•

"I didn't expect someone powerful enough to reconfigure my magic circle to be in this school..." The seasoned veteran was more than a little unnerved by this realization. She had been shocked when she had broken the pretty magic

sculpture in the headmaster's parlor, touching it without thinking, but that paled in comparison to the shock she felt now.

"I haven't obtained the files on the students and graduates of Kirsch yet, but..." She hesitated. "Maybe I should make a run for it." Most of the magic circles she had set up around the institute had been deactivated and reconfigured by someone. Upon making this unexpected discovery, the mercenary spent the night hiding in her base in the research building. Luckily, it seems that her base in this deserted building hadn't been discovered yet, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Her seasoned instincts were ringing alarm bells and demanding her to leave at once.

"I need to make a few new magic circles just in case... Probably just explosive ones will do," she muttered.

Still, who in the world could manage this? More importantly, how did they discover my magic circles in the first place? She thought back on the numerous magic circles she'd hidden with utmost care. *Wait a minute. Even more important than* that *is... Now that I think about it, it should be impossible for someone to overwrite a magic circle of this level.*

She shook her head and focused on planning her escape, clicking her tongue in displeasure. "I didn't think disguising myself as a teacher would backfire on me. I need the headmaster's permission for any outings... That's unfortunate. Urgh... But if I brute-force my way past the guards, *the* Loco Moco Highland will come after me."

She would need more preparations if she wanted to get out in the event the worst-case scenario came to pass. *Let's see, what should I do? Do I cause widespread panic in the school? Do I use the monsters in the forest?* One plan after another surfaced in her mind when she heard a sound.

"Oh, dear. I've been spotted," she said. She looked up towards the source of the noise; there, she found the foreign student from Cirquista gawking at her. "Well, well. Hello, Lady Alicia."

The most valuable hostage in Kirsch stood before her.

Chapter 5: The Mage of All Elements

I need to get out of here, the mercenary thought. *I know that the confidential files I need are hidden in a secret room that only opens on the night of a full moon, but I'm out of time. Waiting for the full moon isn't an option anymore.* Though she wasn't able to obtain the confidential information, she was sure that Dustour would agree that an escape was necessary to avoid the worst-case scenario of being caught and forced to reveal her employer.

"Come on. Walk. Even the horse can follow instructions better than you," the mercenary sneered, tugging on the reins of the horse that walked beside them.

"Professor Arle, none of the nobles in Daryth will let you off scot-free for setting up a dark magic circle in the institute," Alicia hissed.

The mercenary barked out a laugh. "Me? Professor? That's hilarious. Did you really believe I was a teacher? My lessons were so boring. All I ever did was read the textbook out loud, and you call me a teacher? Ah ha ha!"

Alicia clenched her teeth, realizing she had no choice but to finally muster up the courage to accept that this was reality—that the safety she had for so long associated with this school was little more than an illusion.

"Well, you were always dozing off in class, so of course you wouldn't realize the truth," the mercenary mocked. "I'm not a real professor. I was hired to infiltrate this school."

"That's..." Alicia was at a loss for words.

Noble children from all over Daryth gathered at this institute, children who came from all the myriad ranks of nobility, from those who owned territory to those who oversaw judicial or administrative posts. Planning a conspiracy against Kirsch meant risking the ire of all the nobles of Daryth.

Graduates of Kirsch went on to take up many posts in the political and economical world. Even among the commoners who couldn't use magic, there were a few who made use of the connections they made after graduation to start up big merchant companies. These graduates would then go on to donate large sums of money to the school, ensuring the school was able to remain self-

sufficient despite its remote location.

Guards always stood watch at the gate, monitoring who passed through the campus's sturdy walls. Alicia could never imagine Kirsch, the heart of Daryth and home to the children who would usher in its future, being infiltrated by anyone malicious.

"You don't really think you're going to get away with this, do you? There are guards at the gate," Alicia challenged.

"That's where you come in. If I have you with me, they might be a little more lenient with the rules. You and that one duke's son are very special people at this school, you know." The mercenary didn't break her confident stride, marching onward towards freedom.

Beyond the sports grounds, a path winded its way between two lecture buildings leading to the main gate, beyond which lay their destination.

"You will do as I say in front of the guards, *Your Highness*."

"Do I look like I'm about to take orders from someone like you?" Alicia said after a moment of hesitation.

"Think before you speak, all right? If you act recklessly, who knows what consequences will befall the nobility of Daryth? That would be quite the sight."

It didn't matter *who* the little girl that caught her etching out those magic circles was. What mattered was that she was harmless. If it had been Headmaster Morozov or the former Royal Knight he'd hired, the mercenary would have had to whip out her wand and fight to the death. But no amount of royal blood would change the fact that this witness was nothing more than a little girl who knew some parlor tricks. The mercenary had nothing to worry about.

"You think you can get away with treating me like this?" Alicia said, raising her chin in defiance.

"Of course I can get away with it. You're just a little girl. You can't do anything."

There was still something that made the mercenary uneasy, though; she could

not for the life of her figure out who had destroyed her magic circles. At first, she thought it was the headmaster, the elderly man of whom she was the wariest while undercover. But she'd kept a close eye on his every movement, going as far as becoming a teacher to be closer to him. She knew his schedule like the back of her hand; today would be no different. Right now, he should be out in the forest until noon for his daily check for any disturbances there.

"If I suddenly disappear without good reason, it'll cause an uproar," Alicia argued.

"Why, yes, Your Highness. You are the school's precious foreign student, after all, so I'd expect nothing less. That is, however, if they notice your absence to begin with. I expect we have until about noon before anyone notices, at the earliest."

Alicia was silent for a moment. "You'll be a wanted criminal everywhere in Daryth. There's no way you can escape."

The mercenary chuckled darkly. "Are you worried about me? Don't worry. They can't catch someone who doesn't exist, wouldn't you agree?"

It couldn't have been the former Royal Knight Loco Moco Highland who overwrote the magic circles either. He didn't have the skill in magic for that; his strengths lay in combat compared with other Royal Knights. Perhaps he could destroy a magic circle, but he didn't have the finesse to reconfigure one.

Who overwrote my magic circles? Instead of destroying them all outright, they took the effort to leave behind reconfigured magic circles in some places. They must be trying to provoke me. They're trying to make me think they're more powerful than I am.

"You... Just who are you?" Alicia asked.

"I am the Faceless Woman. An ignorant little girl like you probably wouldn't know of me, but I'm very well-known in the underground, you see."

No, I should stop thinking about who this mystery person is. I'm getting nowhere. The mercenary broke that train of thought. *After all,* I *am going to disappear. I will wipe any and all memories I made during this mission from my mind and move on to the next. That is my principle as a mercenary.*

•

Every week, Charlotte sent a report to House Denning about my life at school. Charlotte would monitor what kind of classes I took, whether I handed in my homework, and what my reputation was like in the school. House Denning would then send a reply every month in response to the reports Charlotte poured her heart into.

"Master Slowe, please take a look at this." I was eating breakfast in my room for once when Charlotte approached, taking out a rolled-up parchment from her pocket and showing it to me. "A letter arrived from the House this morning!"

As for why I was eating in my room and not the dining hall... *Well, sometimes I want to have breakfast at my own pace.*

"*That's* why you were so restless," I commented. "What did they write this month?"

"Oh, I haven't read it yet. I'll check it now. Hmm... Hmm? Hmmm? Huh? That's awful..." Charlotte began to tremble and the color left her face as she read, her mumbles setting alarm bells off in my head. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

"What's wrong?" I asked. I never read the letters from my family. I'd tried to read one of them once, but there were so many reprimands aimed towards me that it all just blurred together to me. Charlotte was the one who dealt with the letters each month, and I had a lot of respect and gratitude for her because of it.

"Um, well...they're really mad and told me off, saying that I shouldn't write lies. They wrote that the idea of you making any friends at all, much less a female friend, is 'about as believable as a dragon putting on an apron and cooking.' And that if I wrote such nonsense again, they will cut my pay. 'Are you being threatened?' ...Oh, that last part was addressed to me..." Charlotte's shoulders slumped in dismay. She was a pitiful sight, the complete opposite from when her eyes had shone with excitement only moments ago.

"What did you report this month, if you don't mind my asking?"

“Um...” Charlotte trailed off in thought. “I wrote that you’d reflected on your past actions and turned a new leaf. That you started working out to lose weight and went down a size for your uniform... Oh, and I also wrote about how you made a friend! And how everyone in Kirsch was happy about your change... Well, I might have exaggerated some things...”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. *None of that is nonsense. It’s all the truth! They really have no faith in me at all, huh?*

“It’s all true, though...” Charlotte teared up. “I thought they’d praise me! I was so sure...!”

Oh, dear. Charlotte sank onto a chair and collapsed onto the table, her motivation visibly draining from her. She pressed her cheek against the table as she drew meaningless patterns on its surface with a finger. It was a rare sight. Charlotte was usually very composed. *She probably really thought she would be praised as my retainer for all the changes I’ve made.* We were both rarely praised by my family, and Charlotte probably craved it.

“Charlotte... It’s okay. Cheer up,” I consoled her.

Silence.

Oh wow. She’s really depressed about this, huh? I need to cheer her up somehow. Finishing off the large portion of breakfast I’d requested, I stood up and took a bottle from the shelf. I chugged the nearly empty bottle in a single shot and thumped it on the table.

Seeing that, Charlotte seemed to regain some life in her eyes. “Oh! You’re nearly done with the weight loss potion. I’ll have to make more.”

“I’ve been drinking it every day. I started drinking it at noon too, recently,” I said. The adaptability of humans was a scary trait. I could down the weight loss potion without so much as a twitch now.

“Master Slowe, I’ll brew you a new weight loss potion immediately! Please leave it to me!” Charlotte puffed out her chest.

I’m glad you’re happy again, but...I just heard a very sinister word... “Huh? A new one?” I asked with growing dread.

“I researched the contents of the weight loss potion you got at the speed-eating contest and made a monumental discovery,” Charlotte declared.

“You analyzed the contents? Charlotte, you’re able to do that? Wait, the bottle shattered, didn’t it?”

“I got someone to tell me. I went to ask the company that made the weight loss potion, and at first, they wouldn’t talk to me and told me I was being ridiculous. Once I told them I was a retainer from House Denning though, they were very cooperative. What I learned was amazing! I found out that the weight loss potion has a monumental secret!” Charlotte exclaimed.

Wow. She has so much initiative. A realization dawned on me as I registered exactly what Charlotte had just said. *Wait a minute. I mean, I had an inkling that Charlotte sometimes uses the name of House Denning to her benefit, but it’s definitely confirmed now. That’s my retainer for you! She’s a shrewd girl*, I thought with pride.

“So, uh, what’s this secret?”

Charlotte panicked suddenly. “Oh... I can’t say. I just remembered that the people at the company said to ‘tell no one.’”

That made sense. The weight loss potion was a revolutionary product; it would be disastrous if a rival company got its hands on that information. *I don’t actually care about the secret of the weight loss potion. I’m just glad Charlotte cheered up.*

“I see. Well, I’m done with breakfast, so I’ll head off and torture the fat off my body with some training,” I joked.

“Good luck, Master Slowe,” Charlotte said. “Oh, I need to write another letter. I need to send one out immediately to tell them that I’m not lying! May I write it here?”

“Go ahead. I’ll see you later.” I left her to write her letter in my room, stepping out into the corridor. It had been a peaceful morning, and I had a feeling that today would follow that pattern. Surely, it would be a peaceful day lit by the warm sun with very little wind.

I’d started my *Tae Bo* workout routine all alone that morning, but after a

while, I started to feel many incredulous eyes on me. *Are they all weirded out because I'm sweating buckets and making incoherent sounds, working hard to lose weight?*

Apparently, word on the street was that I was preparing for some ritualistic curse and that this was the only explanation for my sudden change in behavior. Students initially sent out scout teams in hopes of figuring out my motives. *How rude!* I scoffed inwardly. *There are so many insensitive people in this school. I wouldn't curse anyone.*

A few weeks had passed since I decided to lose weight. From what I could tell by the whispers of students around me, it seemed that the people of Kirsch were starting to accept that there were no ulterior motives behind my change. I hadn't even realized that people could entertain the notion that I was being genuine until now.

"That Piggy Duke is still going," I heard a student mutter.

"I won the bet. The Piggy Duke didn't immediately call it quits, so you owe me fifteen shilling coppers. Fork up," his friend demanded.

"Damn." The first student clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Students had even started betting on how long I could persist with my weight-loss routine. *These people are way too easily entertained, huh? Following my every move like this... They should just call me the Best Entertainer in all of Kirsch—no, in all of Daryth.*

When Lord Pauper told me about the bets, I'd said that he should bet his entire fortune on my success. However, he was astoundingly poor despite being from an earl household, so it wasn't like he actually had a fortune to wager in the first place. I couldn't help but pity him.

I refocused my attention on my jog, panting. I was more fit than when I began working out, so I'd been taking a new route on my jogs. I started from the side of the research building, then did a lap around the sports grounds and headed towards the main gates. Once there, I'd tap the wall once before retracing my steps all the way back.

"Oh, good morning, Lord Denning. Please teach me magic again sometime,"

someone called out to me, huffing.

It was Tina. She was struggling with a stack of hay in her arms so big that I could only see half of her face above it.

“Hard work in the morning, huh,” I commented. “Yeah, sure. Let’s practice together sometime.”

“Yay, thank you!” Tina said happily as she walked past me with the hay.

Tina worked part-time in the stables feeding the horses in the mornings. Commoners like Tina worked hard at part-time jobs to be able to afford the expensive tuition and their own living expenses on top of that. Tina had once told me, “The jobs here are very different from the ones in town, so I’m actually having some fun, surprisingly.”

After I had passed a relatively deserted area, I reached the open and spacious sports grounds.

Everyone spent their mornings differently in Kirsch. Some commoners practiced with their swords and their wands in an open area that had been flattened by earth mages, and some students chose to read books with fancy covers like stereotypical mages-in-training. As for me, I carried out my routine for losing weight as usual.

But I knew that this peace was fragile, for someone had infiltrated this school.

If the students heard that there was a spy in here, the school would be thrown into complete chaos. Some of the noble students would start to look for the spy in a bid for glory, while many other students would hole up in their rooms out of fear. Stirring the pot was her specialty, and I’d bet money that she would seize the chance to sew further discord for her own gain.

Damn that mercenary. She’s so overpowered. I’ll definitely bring the full force of my anime knowledge to bear against her! I thought with conviction.

I had managed to deal with almost all the magic circles she’d set up around the school over the last few days. It was only a matter of time before she noticed something was off.

Now, it all depends on how she reacts. Her first priority should be getting

confidential information, but in an unexpected situation like this, she might plan an escape.

And so I'd made...*preparations*.

I'd ordered the guards to report to me if anyone wanted to leave the school unexpectedly due to urgent business. Normally students couldn't order soldiers around, but my status from being from House Denning had its perks. *My father and the other dukes are in charge of the soldiers in this country, and my father's name is very effective when it comes to dealing with them. I'll use the name of House Denning if I need to. I've come this far; I can't let her escape.*

I'd also asked to talk with the headmaster later tonight so that I could report back on the magic circles. I'd done everything I could to prevent her escape; now all I could do was wait.

"Oink, oink..." I panted, jogging along as usual. That was when I noticed something. "Hm? That's..."

I spotted a girl walking with an aloof expression on her face. It was Alicia, and she walked with a staff member I'd seen around campus a few times and a horse in tow. She carried herself with arrogance and entitlement as she made the staff member follow her like a retainer. *That's probably what the blackhearted Piggy Duke looked like to everyone else.* Thinking that, I sighed.

●

Though she was familiar with her surroundings, a surreal feeling clung to Alicia and she couldn't shake it off. It was like a nebulous cloud hung over her, painting the world awash with muted colors and separating her from reality.

Alicia remained silent for a long while.

Being a member of the royal family, Alicia existed to be protected. Her only future was supposed to see her wedded off to a powerful noble or into the royal family of a foreign country. Fighting was never supposed to be a part of her life, and so accordingly, she was never taught how to hold her own in battle.

If she had been in a mage school somewhere, *anywhere* in Cirquista right now, she would have called out for help. In her country, many nobles wouldn't hesitate to put their lives on the line for her sake.

But this wasn't Cirquista. This was *Daryth*.

If a noble of Daryth died as the result of Alicia's request for aid, Cirquista would be indebted to Daryth. She couldn't afford to let that happen, especially since she was the one who'd made the unreasonable request to enroll in Kirsch in the first place. She was only here because she had managed to pull through with that ridiculous request.

Alicia thought back on when she first came to Kirsch.

A foreign princess like Alicia was bound to attract attention in a foreign school with no familiar faces. When she started her first year, everyone treated her like she was some kind of freak show. Or, on the flip side, they resorted to flirting with her; she lost track of how many times she'd been hit on. It was at this point in her life, when Alicia had been overwhelmed by everything at this school, that she chanced to meet a strange boy. The redhead had accidentally shattered an expensive vase sent by her family that first meeting, bumping into her and knocking it out of her hands.

This boy barged into Alicia's world and forcefully made a place for himself there. And now this dumb, mysterious, energetic boy who didn't go anywhere without his crystal ball, this boy who worked so hard to repay the debt he swore he owed to her, this boy who had a special place in Alicia's heart—Shuya Newkern—stood before her and called out to her.

"Hey there, Alicia. Where're you going with that horse?"

Alicia didn't actually care about the money and never intended to ask Shuya to pay her back. Shuya, however, was adamant in his desire to repay her for the loss. He had a strong sense of responsibility, one befitting a noble of Daryth. Alicia didn't have a retainer here at Kirsch, unlike back when she was in Cirquista, so he made a perfect errand boy. Now that she thought back on it, she'd bossed him around for nearly half a year.

"Shuya," Alicia answered evenly, "something urgent came up and I need to leave campus."

"Huh? Did you fill out the permission form for it?" Shuya asked, puzzled.

"No, I didn't, but it won't be a problem."

“Oh really? Well, you’re a princess, so I guess it makes sense they’d bend the rules for you,” Shuya said with a shrug. “Did you want me to go with you?”

“Huh? But...” Alicia was taken aback by his offer.

“I’m a little worried about you.” Shuya paused for a moment. “I’ve heard some shady rumors lately, you know?”

For the past few days, Shuya had been acting strangely. Ever since the day he suddenly ditched class, he’d been walking around with an agitated look on his face, and he avoided all of Alicia’s questions when she asked what he was doing.

Does Shuya suspect that there’s a spy here in Kirsch? Alicia thought. Whether he suspected it or not, she wouldn’t be able to confirm that with him. A wand dug into her back even now, silently threatening her. Alicia thought back on the woman, on the way she made the magic circle, and how she snatched Alicia’s wand with practiced ease. This woman was a powerful mage and most likely an outlaw. She was not to be trifled with.

“Shady rumors? Well, I suppose.” Alicia brushed his question off. “Besides, don’t you have Potions this morning? I remember you complaining about having a hard time preparing for that class a while ago.”

Shuya froze. “Oh, crap, I forgot about the Potions homework! Thanks for reminding me, Alicia!” he said as he hurried off.

You impulsive simpleton, Alicia thought fondly. *I can’t drag you into this.*

“My, my, what a considerate friend you are,” the woman jeered. “Keep up the act, Your Highness.”

Alicia harrumphed, putting up a front. Just as she did that, she spotted *him*. The obese piggy, who was by far the biggest problem student in Kirsch’s long history and her former fiancé...the Piggy Duke.

However much she may have tried to forget it before now, his past as a prodigy was still deeply ingrained into Alicia’s mind. She could never forget what he’d said to her the first time they met.

“It is nice to meet you, Your Highness. I have heard many things about you,

but this is the first time we have met in person. Please allow me to give you a tour of the Denning lands. Our territory is said to be the most dangerous in this country, but you needn't fear. You are safe with me. Now please, take my hand, Lady Alicia."

With a small, desperate hope in her heart, Alicia raised her chin.

●

"Wait," a voice commanded.

Keeping up a steady pace was essential for successful jogging. Every time he paused, the urge to collapse and rest on the ground only grew, so normally pausing for even a moment was out of the question.

But with one word from *her*, I broke my rule and stopped dead in my tracks without thinking. It was rare for her to start a conversation with me; in fact, she'd avoided contact with me pretty much at all costs up to this point.

"What do you want, Alicia?"

Being the former fiancée of such an unappealing person as the infamous Piggy Duke, Alicia had suffered much not-so-discreet harassment back in Cirquista. It really made me wonder why she had chosen to enroll in the mage school of Daryth in the first place, despite me being here. It wasn't even revealed in the anime why she came to Kirsch.

"Are you still trying to lose weight?" Alicia asked.

"Of course I am. Can't you tell? I'm jogging. It's one of the fundamental weight-loss exercises. I'm much thinner compared to before, don't you think?" I replied.

According to Tina and Lord Pauper, I was losing weight incredibly fast. I inspected my figure with the big mirror in my room every morning in my underwear, and they were right. I was a whole new person compared to that pig ready for slaughter. I could even proudly declare that I had gone down two sizes. Alicia scrutinized my body, looking up from head to toe and back again.

"It looks like it," she agreed. "You're always pranking everyone and causing trouble for us all, so I thought you started your diet on a whim. I honestly didn't

think you'd last this long. I'm very surprised, Slowe."

There wasn't any reason for Alicia to talk to me anymore. In her eyes, I'd already lost my place as the rightful heir of House Denning. Traditionally, the heir of House Denning would marry a daughter of a powerful foreign noble or foreign royalty. They were duty bound to secure strong ties with other countries to combat Dustour.

But in my case, my infamy was international, and there was absolutely no way I could force myself back into the running to become the next Duke Denning. The mere mention of me was taboo even in House Denning, which made it even more improbable. *I mean, I have no intention of pursuing that particular title, but, well...honestly, the position doesn't really matter to me, anyway.*

In any case, I was the worst contender imaginable for the fiancé of Cirquista's princess, since I had no chance of becoming the heir.

"Fine, whatever you say. What about you? Did you stir up any trouble? You look very tense." I paused in thought. "Bingo, I've got it. You got into a fight, didn't you? You're currently on your way to Yoram to buy expensive medicine by way of an apology. Am I warm?"

Alicia hesitated. "Well...something like that."

Kirsch's main gate led to a road that cut through the forest, stretching all the way to Yoram, a town in the southeastern region of Daryth. It was the third-largest town in this country and was about a two-to three-hour journey by horseback. I'd heard rumors of young noblemen students in Kirsch who left for Yoram on the weekends to hit on the girls there.

"Wait. You're riding with a staff member? I know you can't ride a horse by yourself, but you're not riding with Shuya this time?" I asked.

"Shut up. I can do whatever I want," Alicia snapped. "Besides, Slowe. Have you forgotten the fact that *you* are the one with the reputation for causing trouble up until now?"

I nodded. "Can't argue with that."

"—Apologies, Lord Denning, but we are short on time," said the staff member, cutting into our banter. It sure was a familiar face. *I'm sure I did stir up*

trouble for her quite a few times, among others. I thought. “We need to return before nightfall. Your Highness, we should take our leave.”

Alicia was silent for a moment. “Slowe,” she began, “a bad wind is blowing on campus today. You should be careful. You’re pretty obese, so you might injure yourself if you trip and fall.”

“You sure? It’s a beautiful summer day out here today. There isn’t any wind at all.” I paused, just to be sure. “Nope, not even a breeze.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you, Slowe,” Alicia said.

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the warning. I’ll keep that in mind, thank you very much. See you, Alicia.” Having said my piece, I started jogging again.

Just as I passed her, I reached for the holster at my waist, and—

●

One step. Another. And another.

With each step, Alicia felt her anxiety morph into fear. Did she really have a way out?

With every step she took into the sports grounds, it took her farther away from everyone in Kirsch. If she walked on any farther, she would reach a point of no return.



Please.

Please, she begged in her heart. *Please realize what I was trying to say.*

Alicia was robbed of her wand. She had never trained for combat, and without it, she was no different from a commoner. Grasping at straws, Alicia turned back.

"You seem to be bad at following instructions even outside of class, Your Highness," No Face said irritably from behind Alicia. *Does she not understand the position she's in? Even though she's royalty?* she thought with ire.

No Face looked in the direction her hostage turned to. There stood the problem student of Kirsch, and she jeered. "He's *Slowe Denning*. What can the Piggy Duke do? Nothing."

Despite that, Alicia had turned back anyway. *Please,* Alicia pleaded inwardly. *Please realize. You should be able to tell. I used code words only you would understand.*

And there, before Alicia's eyes, the boy was pointing his wand in her direction. Alicia could not tear her gaze away from the sharp look in the boy's eyes.

The time has now come for his debut battle.

"Alicia..." he began slowly. "...take two steps back."

No matter where the stage may be, it's always nice to start the show with a surprise. The flashier the first attack, the greater impact it will have on the audience.

Alicia leaped backwards. Seeing that, the boy gave his black wand a wave with a flick of his wrist.

A large wall of earth appeared with a deafening rumble, separating Alicia from the staff member. The enormous wall seemed like it would reach ten meters long before it finally stopped growing. Startled by the sudden noise, the horse pulled its reins free and galloped off with a panicked whinny. That a seemingly whimsical wave of his wand could conjure such an incredible result bordered on the miraculous. *This* was magic, the power granted by the invisible

spirits of this world.

“He was able to summon this much earth without uttering so much as a word?!” No Face’s eyes widened in shock.

Considering the enormous monument of earth that appeared before her out of nowhere, her shock was understandable. Though she was still reeling from shock, No Face wasn’t a seasoned mercenary for nothing. Quickly, she pulled herself together, taking out her wand and beginning to chant. In response to her call, water gushed out from the ground and sliced the wall diagonally in two. It crumbled.

And so it begins, this tale of a boy beloved by spirits, and his boundless rise to greatness.

●

My knowledge of *Shuya Marionette* wasn’t the only thing I knew about this world. I had memories of when I met Charlotte in the forest when I was young. I had memories of when I was chosen as the heir of House Denning. I had memories of the two talented knights assigned to me and the time I spent with them.

I had all of it—all my memories from the time I was the Prodigy of Wind to the time I became the blackhearted Piggy Duke and came to Kirsh.

Alicia often came to visit and have fun in Denning lands under the pretense of getting to know me better. Cirquista was part of the Great Southern Alliance, and House Denning was powerful enough in Daryth to arrange a marriage between their son and the Cirquistan princess.

House Denning was so powerful that we had targets painted on our backs, danger lurking on all sides. Within Daryth, many tried to seize power from us. From outside Daryth, many countries targeted us too, and many times, they tried to tempt us into declaring independence from Daryth or abandoning this country for theirs.

Right now, the world was restless, enough for rumors to circulate about the very large Dustour Empire in the north preparing for an invasion. Knowing that, House Denning had made all kinds of inconspicuous preparations for the day

that scenario came to pass.

The use of code words was just one of the aforementioned preparations. We Dennings were often called the Clan of Wind because of our affinity to wind magic. Because of that, we often compared people to the wind. *I'm surprised she remembered, though.*

It was a calm, sunny morning. There was no actual wind anywhere. Just now, Alicia had used the word "wind" as a code word for a *person*.

"She's that far away already...?" the staff member muttered, astounded. Alicia had escaped with lightning speed. The staff then turned to me in fury. "How dare you get in my way," she hissed. I turned to face the staff member who'd threatened Alicia right before my eyes.

"You made a big mistake, choosing her as your hostage," I said. Alicia left me many hints in our conversation. *The main heroine isn't to be trifled with. She is very quick-witted, even in difficult situations.*

The staff member paused. "I thought you two were like oil and water, but it seems that I was wrong."

Alicia wasn't an idiot, and neither was I. There was no way I could let the culprit escape right in front of my eyes. I was a *Denning,* after all.

"Nope, you were right. We don't get along at all," I quipped. "Our conversation earlier was so weird that I'm actually pretty grossed out."

I looked at the dark spirits that were gathered around the woman before me. *Unless you're using a powerful dark spell to change your appearance, those spirits wouldn't be there!*

"No Face," I declared her name with conviction. "Didn't you know? Alicia *never* misses the opportunity to call me a pig!!!"

●

A large earth wall appeared in the middle of the sports grounds, only to be destroyed the next moment by a water spell. The students in the area were dumbstruck, and in an instant, the illusion of peace shattered. One after another, students having a leisurely morning just a moment ago raised their

voices in a frenzied panic.

“Wh-What in the world?!”

“The Piggy Duke’s got his wand out! He cast the earth spell! Dang, I thought he’d finally calmed down lately! What does he think he’s doing?!”

In Kirsch, unless you had permission, everyone was banned from casting spells against other people if it could cause bodily harm. If the teachers found out about this, there would be consequences. But surely even the Piggy Duke knew this and wouldn’t act *that* recklessly.

All eyes moved from the Piggy Duke to the woman standing across from him. The truth of the situation became chillingly apparent; the Piggy Duke wasn’t the threat here.

“Someone call a teacher!” one student yelled. “That woman is using very powerful spells even though she’s not a noble! She’s definitely an enemy!”

“Out of the way, first-years!” another student barked. “I intend to join the army, so this is a perfect chance to fight! The monsters in the forest have been boring me!”

Some of the students whipped out their wands one after another in the chaos, aiming towards the woman. Though they may have been mere teenagers, they were unmistakably still the honorable noblemen of Daryth, and the sense of duty to protect the common folk had been ingrained into them since childhood. Each of them glared at the woman with their wands out.

“Commoners who can’t use magic, get back! This is a problem we nobles ought to deal with!” a noble student shouted. The nobles, who grew up with magic, realized that she couldn’t possibly be a commoner considering how powerful her spells were. No commoner could wield water the way she was, reducing an enormous wall of earth to little more than mud. She was *their* problem.

With a wave of the woman’s wand, dozens of sharp icicles and ice spears appeared in the air. The ice spikes zoomed towards the boy with shiny black hair at lightning speed; if they struck true, they could very well maim or even kill the Denning brat.

“She’s a water mage! Be careful!”

Before they could hit their mark, a gust of wind blew the spikes off their course, instead striking the ground at the feet of several of the students who were out for blood. The cold air radiating off of the remnants of the spell immediately cooled the hot-blooded students’ heads. Realizing that the woman was using spells with a lot more precision and speed than what they could cast in Practical Magic, the bystander students who’d gathered to see the commotion fled the scene.

“H-Heeelp!!!!!” Screams echoed over the field. The students’ hostility evaporated in place of fear. One student even had a trail of blood trickling down her cheek from a cut caused by one of the icicle spikes.

“Damn it! Don’t just stand there! Get out of there, all of you! We can’t fight her!” a student snapped at the ones who remained. “Only a professor could face her!”

The woman sighed. “Oh, deary me. The most important part of my mission was anonymity. I really screwed up... That’s strange though, I was aiming for the chubby brat, not those students...” she trailed off.

No ordinary gust of wind had blown her spell astray; that was a wind spell. The near-miss had only served to scare the students off, leaving behind only one as the rest fled in terror. *What a shame,* she thought. *They would have made perfect hostages.*

“Now, then...” she muttered as she turned to the only person left. He stood there with his wand raised; it was clear that he still wanted to fight her.

I’d heard that the Piggy Duke used to be engaged to the princess. That must have been some sort of code they used with each other earlier. None of those thoughts mattered now, and the mercenary instead focused all her attention on the brave boy in front of her. A gentle breeze blew and rustled his cape, which only noble students wore.

“That woman is dangerous!” someone yelled in the chaos. “Someone go and get Professor Loco Moco!”

Her infiltration was busted, and there were too many witnesses for her to

dispute otherwise.

He was right. I shouldn't have chosen the princess as my hostage, No Face admitted to herself. *I thought she would have been the perfect hostage to secure my passage to Yoram. I figured that the girl didn't have many friends due to her quick temper and her high status as royalty. Though she is popular among the boys, not many people can approach her casually like that Newkern boy did earlier, so she wouldn't have an opportunity to seek help. That was my mistake.*

No Face smiled wide with derision in her eyes. "Lord Denning, you know you're not permitted to point your wand towards people outside of class," she jeered. *So what? He might have caught me off guard, but that doesn't change anything.*

It didn't matter how many students pointed their wands at her; No Face wouldn't be fazed. They were merely students—young, immature nobles whose only accomplishments were defeating weak monsters ranked lowest in threat by Adventurers' Guilds across the continent. These students posed no threat to her. They were cowards who fled with their tails between their legs and were running even still.

She was a seasoned mercenary, and she had the experience to go with it. She'd succeeded *many* times at assassinating commanders by infiltrating deep into enemy camps on battlefields much harsher than Kirsch. Kirsch couldn't even compare to the brutal environment there. She was a legend among mercenaries, and rightfully so. She had never once failed a single mission, and she succeeded at escaping every single time.

Until now. Now she was in a bind, and with only herself and the Denning boy left behind, she had to find herself a way out.

"Lord Denning?" she called out cautiously.

The boy in question had his eyes closed as he pointed his wand towards her.

The enormous earth wall the boy had summoned earlier melted into mud with a wave of No Face's wand. The ground itself became muddy along with it, and the area around them transformed into a swamp.

"Lord Denning, are your ears working?" No Face repeated. Finally, the chubby

boy opened his eyes.

“A regular commoner staff member using magic? Casting a water spell powerful enough to melt a magically made wall of earth?” The boy’s lips curled upwards, seemingly amused and finding humor in her statement. “You should really look for a new job. People would pay good money to hire a commoner who could use magic. I’d personally recommend becoming a mercenary.”

“A mercenary, huh? That’s not a bad idea. I’d definitely earn more money that way,” No Face replied. She wasn’t having this conversation out of haughtiness—she was just buying time. She’d already snuck an item into her free hand. No Face had many magic artifacts hidden up her sleeve, literally and figuratively; never let it be said that the legendary mercenary wasn’t very well-prepared.

“So you want money, then? Too bad for you,” the Denning boy declared.

“What is?”

“Too bad for you that your journey ends here. I won’t allow you to pass, no matter what your reasons are.”

“Oh, really?” No Face replied with an amused tone. “I’d like to see you try.”

Smoke poured from No Face’s clothes, spreading out into a thick fog that quickly rose high into the air. In mere moments a thick white fog covered an entire section of the school’s campus.

“Wha—! What the hell?!” a student exclaimed.

“My eyes!” another student wailed. “It hurts!” The students, who’d been watching the standoff from a distance, clutched at their eyes and were rooted to the spot.

Ah, yes. Same old, same old, the mercenary thought. *Nobody can see a thing in this fog, let alone move. I just have to wait for hysteria to spread, and then I’ll change my appearance where nobody is around. After that, I’ll get out of here before the chaos settles and my escape will be successful.* No Face let a smile creep onto her face, assured of her victory as she was. That sense of assurance didn’t last long; her smile froze and immediately disappeared the next moment.

A gust of wind swept through the grounds, blowing away the fog.

“Wha—!”

A windstorm ran rampant with gales so strong that anyone in the area could scarcely keep their feet, its eye centering around the sports grounds. Within seconds, the skies were clear once again.

A wave of the boy’s wand had caused this powerful wind spell, summoning the howling gales. “Unfortunately for you,” the boy began, “I expected that.”

“What did you just do?!” No Face exclaimed.

“I summoned a refreshing breeze, fitting for a clear, sunny day like today,” the boy said lightheartedly. “It’s just a gentle breeze.”

“A mere breeze can’t disperse my magic artifact!” No Face spat in frustration. “That thing cost me a fortune!”

“Well, let’s put it this way, then,” the boy said mildly. “It was a slightly strong breeze.”

“You arrogant Denning brat!” she cursed him. “You’ll pay for this!”

I still have many more cards up my sleeve. Smiling haughtily at that thought, No Face waved her wand.

Water vapor in the air gathered and froze, forming infinite sharp blades of ice. Swarming like a hive of angry wasps, the ice blades soared through the air as they honed in on the boy. The scene was brutally one-sided; everyone saw the disaster in the making, and some screamed with fright and dread.

Though the boy was scorned by many, he was still one of them. The students could not bear to watch.

A moment of silence hung tense in the air.

“Who would have guessed?” a small mumble rang out into the silence. “Huh, I can move better than I thought I could. All of that weight-loss training is paying off.”

No Face’s eyes widened to the size of saucers.

The hail of icy blades littered the ground around the boy, and he didn’t have a single wound, his uniform prim and perfect as if nothing had happened. He

stood even as the ice melted to water, leaving little more than a puddle at his feet.

She couldn't believe it—*every single one* of her spells had missed.

No Face flipped a switch in her head. She recategorized Denning in her mind. Slowe Denning was no longer a student that she'd grown somewhat fond of, but a clear threat.

Both Slowe and No Face raised their wands. The two were primed to strike, a ticking time bomb about to blow. Nobody dared to move. All the onlooking students watched the scene unfolding before them with their hearts in their throats.

Watching them from the corner of her eye, No Face chuckled with glee in her mind. Dueling with spells was always the last resort for her, but she could easily take one of the students hostage and wriggle out of her current situation instead. However...

"—Do it, Professor Loco Moco!" her opponent yelled. "Don't worry about me!"

The air shimmered as if in response, and a giant, translucent dome rippled as it enshrouded the sports grounds.

"Wait, this is..." No Face scoured her surroundings. "Damn it! I've been had!" At the edge of the sports grounds, a man with a distinctive untamed curly mane pointed a wand at her.

No Face couldn't suppress a click of her tongue in displeasure. "That stupid Royal Knight dropout!" she spat. *It's a barrier infused with an enormous amount of mana. This will be hard to break.* For the first time, No Face's composure failed her. *There's no way out.*

Loco Moco Highland was definitely a tough opponent. She might not lose in a one-on-one fight against him, but No Face knew very well from experience that the battlefield was unpredictable. The only option that surfaced in her mind was escaping, despite all the odds. To do that, she'd need to get past the Denning brat first.

"Out of the way," she ordered the third son of House Denning, the

problematic second-year student. “I said, *get out of the way*!”

He didn’t reply. He didn’t seem fazed by her at all. Though he was only a student, somehow he’d figured out her real identity. And yet, he was so calm before her despite knowing how dangerous she was. Was that because of courage, recklessness, or confidence?

I’m not done yet. No Face clenched her teeth. *I’ve gotten out of worse situations than this.* “Denning brat!” No Face pointed her wand, hollering. “If you don’t want to die, get out of my way!”

Howling winds grew to a tempest within the barrier, and she nearly recoiled from the force of it. “If you don’t—” She gave a last warning.

Playtime was over. Things were about to get *real*, with their lives at stake.

Just like that, an extraordinary clash of spells began.

●

Loco Moco Highland gripped tightly on to his wand. “Kiddos! Don’t jus’ stand there, go get the headmaster!” he yelled. “The old man is near Cassula Pond in the forest! I’ve taken y’all there countless times durin’ Practical Magic!”

Sharp blades of counter-magic collided head-on with glimmering ice. Neither side slacked on their offense, channeling up a storm of attacks. Loco Moco’s barrier struggled to keep up with the incredible exchange of spells, and he channeled all his focus into preventing it from collapsing.

“Just how many spells are they firin’ off?!” Loco Moco tightened his grip still further. “They’re keepin’ *me* in place?!”

Spells flew around wildly within the barrier, crashing against the barrier walls. If Loco Moco let any spell slip out, it could hit a student. That could only end in catastrophe.

“Move, kiddos, move!” he urged. “Run! That woman is an enemy! Denning’s keepin’ her at bay for now, but he won’t last long! If that happens, you’ll all be killed!”

At first, none of the students heeded his warning. They couldn’t, transfixed by the mystical scene before their eyes as they were. Commoner students were

the first to snap out of it, fleeing as Loco Moco's warning sank in. The noble students, however, did not move. They chose to stay of their own free will.

"Tsk! You're just little brats; you don't have to act so much like nobles! Fine, if you're not runnin' for the hills, get your wands out and make ready for when she gets out!" Loco Moco ordered. "That woman is definitely an infamous criminal. I'm willin' to bet that she has a large bounty on her head!"

Truth be told, Loco Moco was impressed by the kids' bravado, and he certainly didn't judge them for sticking around. If it'd been him in their shoes back when he was a student of Kirsch, he wouldn't have run off either, even if his life was on the line. "If you don't want to run, then protect yourselves! I'm not takin' responsibility for anyone who gets injured!"

Inside the barrier created by the former Royal Knight, the two combatants brandished their wands while keeping their distance from each other. Every spell could be fatal. Each and every spell clashed with each other, vying for victory.

From a distance, Loco Moco felt his lust for battle rise sharply as he watched the two fight in the heat of combat.

After all—

"Well, I'll be damned. That Denning brat really had us all fooled! ...Newkern, listen up and stay right where you are! The old man expected you to *find* the mole, not fight her! He wouldn't ask anything unreasonable from you!" Loco Moco barked.

—even Loco Moco Highland, a former Royal Knight, could tell that the battle within the barrier was a *real* battle. A fight to the death.

●

Shuya Newkern didn't need to be ordered to stay put by Professor Loco Moco. In truth, he didn't dare to move an inch from where he stood.

He'd been intimidated by the blades of ice that flew in his direction, but he refused to run with his tail between his legs. He was one of the few students who chose to stay.

“How did the Piggy Duke figure out who the traitor was...?” he muttered to himself questioningly. It was obvious that the woman locked away in the barrier was the spy. Shuya also clearly remembered her as the school staff member following Alicia earlier.

Shuya clenched his jaw. “*I* was supposed to save her, and yet, I...”

Over the past few days, he’d walked all over the campus day and night following the guidance of his crystal ball. He’d even secretly followed the Piggy Duke around because he’d been acting a little off. But Shuya was completely in the dark; there was no way he could have known what the Piggy Duke was doing in the grass in all those deserted places.

“Damn it,” he swore. *I should have realized that she was the spy, but* he *was the one who did, and now, he’s fighting her*, he thought, frustrated.

“—Lord Slowe is amazing,” Valjean muttered nearby.

“Hey, Greatlorde,” Shuya called out to him, “you know a lot about Denning, right? The headmaster called him the Prodigy of Wind. What does that mean?”

The battle within the barrier was way out of Shuya Newkern’s league. Shuya could only stand there watching awkwardly with his crystal ball in his left hand and his wand in his right.

“You must be kidding me, Newkern,” Valjean replied, incredulous. “Have you never heard of Lord Slowe’s past?”

Slowe Denning was once the Prodigy of Wind. Shuya didn’t know what that meant, and he couldn’t help but feel frustrated at his own ignorance.

●

Is this reality? What am I doing*?*

“I must be dreaming!!!” she screamed hysterically. *There’s no way this is real. This is impossible. This can’t be happening!* “You’re supposed to be a *student*!!!”

I am a seasoned mercenary. I’m sure of that, No Face thought feverishly. She specialized in infiltration, assassination, and dealing with intel, but she was no pushover when it came to magical combat. She’d succeeded at getting herself out of a battle with the Royal Knights once. She’d even recently put her life on

the line facing monsters in the depths of a dungeon alongside a party of highly skilled adventurers, all for the sake of money.

"*Ice Lance!*"

Headmaster Morozov and Loco Moco Highland were supposed to be the only threats on this mission. Even so, she was confident that she could worm herself out of a straight-up confrontation against the two of them if push ever came to shove. Everyone else was small fry.

Even as she thought that, a blade of ice failed to materialize beneath Slowe Denning's feet as she commanded.

"You neutralized my spell before it could manifest?! You impertinent brat! I'll have you know that I've experienced countless battlefields before!" she exclaimed, seething with fury.

She'd cast all of her spells with the intent to kill the chubby boy so that she could make her escape. She was *sure* of it.

"*O darkness, call—*" she began.

"You're very predictable, you know," Slowe said, cutting off her chant with a counter-spell. "But admittedly, you're pretty graceful with your wand."

Yet another spell was foiled. "Tsk!"

Slowe Denning was just a student and an underachiever at that. House Denning had given up on him and sent this good-for-nothing lout to Kirsch. *Then why? Why?!*

Slowe Denning certainly is talented, and it showed in class. No Face admitted to herself. *He is a member of House Denning, and they place a lot of importance on fighting skills. He probably trained hard as though his life were at stake from the moment he could hold a wand. Compared to other students, his skill in magic is certainly extraordinary.*

But casting spells in classes is very different from fighting with spells!

A fight to the death is a balancing act on a knife's edge. Lose your focus for even a split second and it can spell your defeat. No Face glared at the boy before her. *This brat hasn't lost his composure even once. No matter how many*

times I tried to distract him or purposefully fake an opening for an attack, he doesn't take the bait. Is that even possible?

"No!" she yelled aloud. "There's no way that can be possible!!!"

No Face had found herself in life-and-death situations countless times before, and she had the skills to show for it. Yet, a mere student wouldn't fall for her traps.

"*Ice Drift, Fleur!*" she chanted.

It was generally accepted that what determined the victor in a battle between mages was precision, not power. Blindly firing off dozens of fireballs was pointless; a meticulously aimed gust of wind to knock the wand out of the enemy's hand, on the other hand, was enough to secure victory.

The fireballs tactic would certainly work against commoners, but it wasn't very effective against fellow mages. Due to this, students often paired up and cast spells against each other in Practical Magic class. There, they would learn how useless it was to cast spells without aim.

However, No Face did not wholeheartedly agree with that philosophy. All great mages had precise control over their spells and couldn't win with precision alone. The *real* deciding factor in combat between two mages was concentration.

That was all the more reason why No Face was so frustrated at how stoic her opponent was.

"Your chants are very refined," Slowe noted. "Were you a noble at birth or something?"

She was the one losing her composure in this match. She'd been unflappable, cold, and unmoving as ice right down to the core, but now, for the first time in her life, she was out of her depth.

"You damned pig!" she hissed.

Anger cost her her spell control. Her precision was dropping. A glacier she'd summoned sailed past her target, shattering into splinters as it crashed against Loco Moco's barrier.

“This can’t be happening!” she screamed.

No Face knew that spirits lent their power to those with blood they fancied. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think that all the spirits in the area were lending their powers to the boy before her, what with how the battle was playing out.

By now, she had lost count of how many spells she’d hurled at him. Large beads of sweat rolled down her forehead, and she panted heavily at the exertion. She’d never lost her breath during a magic battle before, not even once.

“*Blanket everything in rose and snow—*” she began chanting, mustering up the last of her strength in a last-ditch effort. One last spell—a dual-element spell of dark and water. The air turned frosty within the barrier, and No Face prepared to encase her enemy in a tomb of ice. “*—Rozen Aias!!!*”

However...

No Face’s inner turmoil ended without warning. A gust of wind seized the last of her backup wands, rendering her utterly powerless to attack any further. Her spell fizzled out with nary a sound.

“This is checkmate, No Face.” With cold and unflinching eyes, the student pointed his wand towards her. The mercenary realized now just how dangerous Slowe was. The battle-hardened woman knew when she’d been bested.

“I have no intention of taking your life,” Slowe continued. “Show your true form.”

She raised both of her hands, and her appearance warped and shifted as the glamor fell away. The woman before Slowe was beautiful and refined, but there was something wild about her.

“It’s my loss,” she admitted. *How did I lose?* No Face wrestled with that question. Her mind started a cycle of internal debate. After much contemplation, she arrived at an answer.

She should have known. It was a fact that everyone in this country knew of.

Once upon a time, this pig had been the pride and joy of House Denning. The

whole world had known him as the Prodigy of the Wind...and somewhere within this pig, that prodigy still lived on.

Headmaster Morozov arrived on the scene, pushing his way through the crowd as he was led by a handful of frightened students.

“Loco Moco, what happened?!” the headmaster exclaimed.

“You’re late, you old coot!” Loco Moco shouted. “You’re asking me *what happened*?!” Gone was Loco Moco’s usual laid-back drawl, though there was no denying the hint of exhilaration in the former Royal Knight’s voice.

“Can’t you tell?” Loco Moco gestured broadly at the scene before them. “The Denning brat caused all of *that*.”

Headmaster Morozov followed the line of Loco Moco’s gesture.

The sports grounds were a complete mess. Holes littered the ground, leaving it pockmarked by something—or *somethings*—razor-sharp and enormous. Whatever parts of the ground that weren’t full of holes were reduced to little more than a muddy swamp. Students stood rooted to the spots upon which they stood, as if time had ground to a halt. Even the noble students were stunned into silence—a most unusual occurrence, indeed.

“I see now why we weren’t able to find the mole. That woman’s *quite* the big fish,” Loco Moco said.

The headmaster took in the scene before him in silence, a long moment stretching before he spoke. “Who *is* she?”

At the heart of the mess of the sports grounds stood a boy, who aimed his wand at the throat of a woman who held up both hands in surrender. This woman could be none other than the mole who infiltrated the school.

What Morozov couldn’t understand was why she had caused such an uproar. She had gone through such great lengths to cover her tracks up until now. Why would she blow her cover so spectacularly?

“Don’t have a heart attack when I tell you the truth,” Loco Moco joked.

“Don’t be silly. Answer me.”

Only a vicious barrage of spells from combat could have caused the amount of

damage to the area. The exhaustion on Loco Moco's face from upholding the barrier for so long to contain the damage there made that fact very clear.

"That woman changed her appearance," Loco Moco spat.

Many of the students around them nodded, still half numb from shock.

"*What*?! Changed her appearance? That kind of spell requires very powerful dark magic!" Morozov said, shocked.

"As it turns out, the legendary mercenary is surprisingly pretty good-lookin'. She might be my type."

The headmaster froze. Legendary mercenary? "Wait, you mean—"

"Yeah. No Face is our intruder."

Headmaster Morozov never thought he'd hear that name *here* of all places. He looked up at the sky and heaved a heavy sigh. Silence blanketed over the gathered crowd once more.

Headmaster Morozov wasn't an ordinary headmaster; he was a powerful mage, one who earned the title of Archmage in Minerva. The surrounding students suddenly noticed this great man's presence, and what time seemed frozen now appeared to flow once again.

"No Face... That's *No Face*!" one student muttered, breaking the silence.

In the next moment, all hell broke loose.

"I've heard of her!" one student exclaimed. "She's the faceless woman who can change her appearance. They say she's a mercenary who even escaped the pursuit of Royal Knights!"

"That's No Face! The mercenary with a bounty of five hundred gold coins! She's one hell of a bounty!"

The atmosphere changed completely, and the initial excitement quickly grew into a roaring flame of exhilaration. Cheers of delight rose from the clamor until they spread all over the school into a celebration more heated than the weekend festivals.

"It's Denning! The Piggy Duke! *He* captured her!!!"

The calm and quiet of the morning recess hour was no different than usual, which made it all the easier for the commotion to spread like wildfire to the far reaches of campus. Students peeked from classroom windows, wondering what was going on, and they all rushed outside upon seeing the aftermath of the battle. The students who had fled from the terrified screams also raced back to the epicenter of the noise.

These bystanders didn't know what happened, but that sort of noise could only mean one thing: a celebration, surely. Something fun. Something like that was sure to attract people with the promise of a party.

"What is it?! What happened?" a student yelled.

"Someone infiltrated the school, but the Piggy Duke caught them! And they started dueling with spells! Forget about prepping for your next class!" another yelled in reply.

For that one moment, there was no difference between nobles and commoners as they all rushed to squeeze themselves into the decimated sports grounds. Teenagers craved spice and entertainment in their repetitive everyday life, so they were very eager to find out what happened.

One student began to recount the dramatic battle between No Face and the Piggy Duke. Another waved their wand and tried to re-enact the battle with their own magic. Though their spells were much less sophisticated than what *actually* happened, the show was enough to send other students into a frenzy.

"I knew he could do it! The Piggy Duke's a *Denning*! Plus, he's the Prodigy of Wind!" one shouted excitedly.

"Did you see that?! He was *so* cool!"

Caught up in the heat of the moment, the students seemed to forget everything he had done as the Piggy Duke—and how much they had bad-mouthed him—and started singing his praises.

"He used a light spell to counter one of her darkness spells!"

"I've seen him use a darkness spell in Practical Magic before!"

The boy in question didn't bat an eye at all the comments thrown around

about him, instead keeping his wand trained on the woman. He was no longer the pig he used to be, figuratively or literally; he'd shed two sizes, and the people of the school knew how hard he'd worked to get there. No longer was he the blackhearted Piggy Duke, but a boy worthy of the Denning name. The students, who all lived in Kirsch with him, had witnessed his change with their own eyes.

"The rumors were true! The Piggy Duke isn't a dual-element mage nor a triple-element mage! He's even above that!"

Let us now toll the bell to announce his rise from the ashes of shame.

This young hawk, the prodigal son who fell from grace, soared once more, high up into the boundless sky.

"He's a mage who can use all elements—" a student started excitedly.

His first big impact was a resounding success. On this day, he was able to bring the legendary mercenary's infiltration at this school of Daryth to an end.

"—an elemental master!!!"

The princess of Cirquista, the glamorous main heroine of *Shuya Marionette*, could only stare with disbelief written all over her face at the scene unfolding before her.

Final Chapter: This Time, I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!

The Flower Knight Oliver left the other Royal Knights to lay in wait in the forest as originally planned. Oliver marched straight through the main gates, taking advantage of the morning rush hour. Even if there were people familiar with the Royal Knights, they wouldn't notice him entering along with the commoner merchants coming and going.

A pang of nostalgia hit him as his gaze passed over the campus, but was quickly replaced by the feeling that something was amiss. The people milling about were oddly restless.

"Hurry, head to the sports grounds!" one shouted. "The Piggy Duke did something *crazy*!"

"They say that he caught a spy! Let's go take a look!"

It was almost as if he had come by in the evening, as nobles and commoners alike spilled out from the school buildings in a large crowd, indistinguishable from each other. Even the maids were gathered in one spot with their brooms in hand, whispering excitedly to each other and abandoning their posts.

"The Piggy Duke's amazing! Come on, you guys should take a look too! Classes today are all canceled anyways; it's not like you have anything better to do! I'm not lying! The sports grounds really turned into a swamp!"

"Hey, have you heard the news?!" a maid whisper-shouted. "The little lordling did something amazing! Remember him, the chubby lord who gave us the water elixirs? Yes, *him*!"

The stampede of students flowed towards the heart of the campus, where important structures such as the cathedral and sports grounds were located, the chants of "Piggy Duke" echoing in all directions.

Oliver once attended Kirsch himself. He could ramble for *days* about his memories back at the school. For him, this mission was almost a vacation from his usual post guarding the royal family at the palace. Somewhere in his heart,

he'd been a little excited at the prospect of coming back.

His every waking hour saw him dealing with wolves in sheep's clothing trying to outwit each other day in and day out. The school was a much noisier place compared to the palace, but he rather thought it was more relaxing for him personally.

He couldn't forgive the intruder who'd dared to sneak into this school he loved. Oliver's righteous anger and justice smoldered within him, and he was ready to bring that fury to bear upon them at a moment's notice, but...

What in the world is this uproar about? he thought, puzzled.

Now that he had a good look around, the professors who used to teach him also stood in the crowd, talking amongst themselves. Taking off the hat he had put on for disguise, Oliver decided to ask someone about what was going on. Before he could so much as flag anyone down, however, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Originally, he was supposed to hear the details about the intrusion from the informant who requested for aid. However, instead of waiting for him in his office at the top of the staff building, the headmaster was talking to a student at the edge of the sports grounds. Oliver would ordinarily never break protocol, but the unusual circumstances forced him to change plans. He turned on his heel, making a beeline towards the headmaster.

"Headmaster Morozov, what is the meaning of this commotion?!" Oliver exclaimed as he approached.

"Who might you be...?" The headmaster gave him an appraising look. "Oh, it's Oliver, the Flower Knight! Your disguise really is quite something. I did not expect for the cardinal to send a famous, honorable knight such as yourself! I owe him one for this! Are you alone on this mission?"

"No, there are others waiting in the forest," Oliver said. "But tell me, what is going on? I couldn't help but overhear people saying that *No Face* was caught!"

"You catch on quickly. I should expect nothing less from a Royal Knight," the headmaster praised. "Look over there. Do you see that woman next to your former colleague? That is No Face."

Former colleague? Oliver's eyes widened, and he did as the headmaster bade him. There stood a man with messy, curly hair which made him look like he had recently been in an explosion. His casual black shirt was more fit for relaxing on vacation rather than restraining a woman with magic binds.

When I heard Loco Moco say that he was quitting the Order to become a teacher, I thought that he had genuinely lost his mind from having one too many drinks. I never understood why he made that choice, Oliver thought.

"You must be joking," Oliver said. "There isn't a chance Loco Moco captured No Face. He lacks the finesse to do such a thing. I remember him from back when he was in the Order. I am sure of it."

"Loco Moco wasn't the one who did the deed. If he had, he would be celebrating with the students right now, but look at his dissatisfied face," the headmaster pointed out. "He looks like someone snatched his dessert from him just before he could dig in."

"Then who? No Face evaded capture even by us Royal Knights." Oliver paused in thought. "Wait, could it be the favored child of Earl Lasbury? The one the rumors say you are planning to recommend to the Order?!"

"Oliver—no, *Sir* Oliver. While it is true that the Lasbury boy is a talented mage, you should know from your experience on the battlefield that he doesn't have the ability to capture an outlaw mercenary."

"Then who do you mean? No Face has caused no small amount of grief to countless nobles. There's a bounty of five hundred gold coins on her head, for goodness' sake. She is *that* slippery. I can't believe that a person powerful enough to capture her would be in this school."

"*He* is the one who captured No Face." Headmaster Morozov pointed with a shriveled finger. "Over there. The rather round boy."

The headmaster pointed past Loco Moco at a group of students gathered in the center of the sports grounds. Oliver squinted at the group and noticed a student at the center of the circle. He was a little—no, quite a bit larger than the surrounding students, and he had a cape on, so he was probably a noble. But Oliver did not recognize the boy.

As Oliver watched, an adorable girl with light auburn hair began to yell at the chubby boy.

“Interesting. Even *you* don’t recognize him, I see,” the headmaster chuckled. “It seems that his diet is quite a success.”

“Master Morozov, ridiculing a Royal Knight is the same as mocking the royal family,” Oliver warned, irritated. “*Tell me his name.*”

“Ah, yes, that’s right.” Amusement laced the headmaster’s voice. “You have truly become a Royal Knight and a protector of the royal family, inside and out. You certainly take your job to heart.”

“Headmaster Morozov!” Oliver exclaimed in frustration.

“That’s the Denning boy.”

Oliver sharply inhaled with surprise. “You jest. House Denning prizes experience on the battlefield above all else for their training. They would not send a child of theirs to Kirsch.”

“Ah, but there is one exception. One young Denning studying in Kirsch. Perhaps the name ‘the fallen Prodigy of Wind’ might ring a bell or two.”

Oliver peered over at the students once again, his expression drawn into a tense frown. Even among the Royal Knights, the boy exiled from his family had been a topic of interest, so Oliver knew of him. *But wait a minute...* Oliver thought.

“That child over there is Slowe Denning,” the headmaster declared.

“His black wand has the twin wings of the Denning crest etched into it...” Oliver observed. “Is that *really* Slowe Denning, the fallen Prodigy of Wind? Rumor has it, he became a gluttonous orc in human skin. Is that really *him*?”

Headmaster Morozov nodded solemnly. Oliver was at a loss for words, for at that very moment, he had a premonition. A tempest of change was about to rage across Daryth. The return of the Prodigy of Wind would determine this country’s future—of that, he was sure.

•

Phew, I’m so tired. It was nearly sunset. My afternoon had flown by in a blur.

I'd been reciting what happened to everyone until a prideful-looking Royal Knight pulled me aside and forced me to recount every little detail to him. He probably would have kept me there all night if my stomach hadn't protested with a loud rumble.

Other than that interrogation, everyone showered me with praise, even if Professor Loco Moco made a few lighthearted digs here and there while he did so. I really didn't know how to react to that; I felt like a boar caught in headlights. *Urgh, this isn't like me at all. I'm much more used to them scolding me and being appalled by me! At least I know how to react to that.*

Until recently, I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke, a pig scorned by all. I belonged nowhere. I was like a slug that liked dark, humid, isolated places...and now I'm suddenly a hero. My life is a roller-coaster ride. I really don't know what might happen next.

I sniffed. "Oink? This smells like..."

A delicious smell welcomed me as I opened the door to my room on the fourth-floor dorms. My stomach rumbled in awe as I caught sight of a feast that was spread out on the table of my living room. A feast made up of all my favorites, no less! *Who would do something this considerate? Haha, just joking. There's only one possible candidate.* I looked over to the culprit.

Charlotte sat on a chair in front of the big window overlooking the campus. She must've moved the chair there to enjoy the view. *Same, Charlotte. Same. The view from my room is breathtaking.*

I stood there for a while, looking at her in silence.



Charlotte was fast asleep, her head bobbing on occasion. While she lingered in the world of dreams, her black pet cat lay curled up on her knees.

All of today's afternoon classes were canceled. The students rejoiced, some of them mucking around in the muddy sports grounds, others shooting off spells in a poor imitation of my battle with No Face.

Charlotte, however, retreated to my room and slept, her innocent face undisturbed by all the commotion outside.

On the windowsill sat a bit of parchment paper, rolled up and fastened with string. Several pieces of parchment littered the ground around her feet. She must've written draft after draft before she decided on a final one.

Oh yeah, she said she would write in detail about my accomplishments and send it to my family, didn't she? I see. While I was summoned by that Royal Knight and was interrogated all evening, Charlotte was writing that epic... I sighed in my mind. *I wonder if she's done yet.*

Charlotte mumbled in her sleep before she peeled her eyes open. "Ah, Master Slowe..."

The setting sun poured in from the window and gently lit her face. She was a breathtaking sight, as if she were lifted straight from a painting. *Aw, it's a shame she woke up. I wanted to look at her for just a little longer...*

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

Charlotte took a moment to get her bearings. "You should have woken me up sooner, Master Slowe... Ah, but guess what? I finished writing the letter! I asked the bystanders about exactly which spells you used."

My dear Charlotte was elated and proud of me for the battle with No Face. "We're having a feast today," she declared with a brilliant smile. "Honestly, I wanted to make it myself, but, well, you know... I'm bad at cooking." Charlotte rubbed at her eyes, still a little sleepy. Seeing her adorable, slightly sheepish smile, all my exhaustion immediately vanished.

"I think that on occasions like this, you can eat to your heart's content without worrying about your diet," Charlotte continued. "I worked in the

kitchen for a long time, so I'm friends with the head chef. They accepted my request pretty quickly."

Ah, I see, I thought*. That explains why all this food looks so professional.*

Charlotte stood up with a determined huff. "All right, I will prepare your food right away! Just because it's a celebration, it d— Wha—!" The moment she stood up, she tripped and fell. Chuckling sheepishly, Charlotte clambered to her feet with an "oops," sticking out her tongue.

"Ha ha, I'm so clumsy... It's a celebration for you today, so I really wanted to do this right." Charlotte smiled wryly and started taking out a plate from the cupboard.

However—

"Ow!"

—the plate slipped from her hand and crashed on the ground.

Charlotte bowed in apology at me, but her gaze was fixated on the shards scattered on the ground. "I-I'm so sorry, Master Slowe. I'll clean that up right away!"

"No, don't worry about it," I said as Charlotte rushed to clean up the mess...and noticed that something wasn't quite right. Charlotte was fidgeting and restless. She blinked too often for it to be normal, and she wouldn't meet my eyes.

I'd been with Charlotte for a long time, and I knew very well what that meant. We'd been together for nearly ten years, and I'd watched her all this time. There was no way I wouldn't recognize her tells. Charlotte only ever acted this way whenever she wanted to hide what she was thinking.

"Charlotte."

"Wh-What is it, Master Slowe?"

Her fat black cat stared at me intensely from the chair next to the window, where Charlotte had been sitting moments ago.

"They say that an infamous outlaw infiltrated the school, but honestly? They were just like any old pickpocket on the streets. It might take a while for

everything to calm down, but give it a few days and it'll all go back to normal."

This was a lie, of course. No Face had been a tough opponent. It was honestly a miracle that nobody was seriously injured. If Professor Loco Moco hadn't shown up when he did, and if Alicia didn't choose to confide in me or have the forethought to speak in code... I shivered internally at the implications of those what-ifs. But I shoved them aside, because I had something more important to do at the moment.

"Everything's all right, Charlotte," I assured her.

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

I know that my consolation was just that; it didn't change reality, but... "There's no need to be afraid," I said gently. "Kirsch is safe like it always is, and tomorrow will be just another normal day."

My words were empty consolation. I knew that, but I had to say them anyway. Charlotte listened, tensing up for a moment before relaxing and smiling weakly. Charlotte then gave a nervous chuckle, but she didn't deny her fear. She slowly sank to the floor and hugged her knees to her chest, heaving a small sigh. She looked up at me. "...How did you realize?"

"Don't underestimate how long we've been together. I've known that you're a scaredy-cat since we were kids. Of course I'd notice."

Charlotte was quiet for a moment. "Yes. Quite a long time has passed since you saved me and made me your personal retainer under House Denning. I shouldn't be surprised."

"Exactly." I nodded. "It might feel as if it was all a blur, but a very long time has passed."

Charlotte's eyes watered slightly. The sun nearly set below the faraway mountains, and the last of its warm glow caressed Charlotte's snow-white cheeks.

"That's how I could tell you're scared, Charlotte," I continued. "I can see right through you."

"Ha ha, I'm that obvious, huh...?" Once again, Charlotte gave a halfhearted

laugh. “I don’t know why, but I’m really scared. You did a fantastic job, and I should be celebrating that, but...I’m scared,” she admitted in a small voice. There was no elation in Charlotte’s eyes; only fear and dread. It was almost as if time had rewound. She looked exactly like the day when I first met her.

“I thought this school was safe... I’m not a student, and I don’t have many friends, but I still had a great time here.”

When she was young, Charlotte was plagued by night terrors even after House Denning formally adopted her. Every night, I heard her whisper things that were too tragic for a young girl to be saying. *“Monsters... They’re coming... Papa, run* with *me!”*

Charlotte had wounds bleeding fresh in her heart at the time, and I set out to help her heal. I worked hard for that, and finally, we arrived here at this academy and found the freedom it valued so highly. I wasn’t the only one who felt safe at Kirsch; Charlotte found solace here too.

“But...when I heard that someone scary snuck in, and that Lady Alicia was taken as a hostage...” Charlotte swallowed. “I realized that there was no safe haven. Ah ha ha, I know that it’s pointless to ask you this, Master Slowe, but...why am I acting like this? It’s not like me at all, is it...?”

“That’s not true.”

I couldn’t answer her last question. I *couldn’t.* Charlotte’s kingdom was destroyed. To her, happiness was fleeting, a fragile concept bound to shatter eventually. I *knew* her reaction to the day’s events stemmed from this insecurity, but I couldn’t just tell her that. How could I possibly fess up that I’d known her history all along?

“Hey, Master Slowe...” Charlotte trailed off. “If I were taken hostage like Lady Alicia—” Her eyes wavered with fear and distress. Huzak was overrun with monsters, the land claimed by them as their paradise. Charlotte was Huzak’s princess, and if someone found out that she yet lived, she would be a huge target. She’d already decided to leave behind her past as a princess, but she couldn’t throw away her identity that easily.

“—would you save me?” Charlotte finished, looking up at me, voice quivering.

My beloved Charlotte was drowning in an ocean of fear.

Realizing that I'd left her alone until she got to this point, deep shame rose in my throat. I'd been on cloud nine.

I caught the mole and was praised by the headmaster and the professors and even the students who usually joked that I was cursing them. With all that going on around me, I didn't have anything but myself on my mind. I had forgotten about the person most precious to me. I sighed inwardly. *I'm so dumb. I'm still a good-for-nothing idiot pig. I haven't changed a bit.*

"Of course I'd save you," I declared. "If I knew that someone evil had you in their clutches, Charlotte, I'd go and save you no matter the cost."

The great noble House Denning had power over the Daryth military and was often called the Sword of Daryth. Rising through the ranks meant being constantly on the battlefield. Of course, magic talent was more important than any other skill for a retainer of Denning. Thus, the higher my position, the more was expected of my retainer. If I used my powers to their full extent, I couldn't be with Charlotte. Though she was assigned to me, she wasn't very good at magic. I had something more important to care about right now than worries about such things. I needed to make it up to Charlotte, to chase those fears of hers away.

"Even if it means losing a mountain of delicious food?" Charlotte asked. "Even if you were offered food made by the best chef in the world?"

Her example was a little peculiar, but Charlotte was probably trying to lighten the mood. Looking at her made my heart swell. My feelings for her surged to the forefront of my mind. *Oh, princess of a destroyed kingdom. My precious retainer, who is quite a klutz and a very kind girl.*

I love you, Charlotte Lily Huzak.

"I promise. Even if my enemy is all the food in the world, I wouldn't back down so long as you were in danger."

In my heart I held a vow, one etched deep upon my very soul so that I would never forget it.

"You've followed me all this way as my retainer, despite everything I did. You

were by my side without fail," I began.

My knowledge of *Shuya Marionette* told me the future. Only I knew that this world would be thrown into chaos from here on out. Dustour Empire in the north. The Great Spirit of Darkness looking for a magic artifact that didn't even exist. Monsters roaming the land, ever seeking new territory. Daryth, the leader of the Great Southern Alliance. Shuya Newkern, who had a deep scar from his past. I knew how these different players would shape the stage that was the future. In that future, there would never come the day when the scaredy-cat Charlotte would feel truly safe.

"I've been thankful for that this whole time, and I want you by my side forever."

After the fight with No Face, I was sure of one thing. I had *power*. I was a lot more powerful than back when I wielded my power as the Prodigy of Wind. So I should be able to do this, at least. I should be able to carry out this vow to the very end.

"I know that people weren't kind with their words towards you back in House Denning, saying that they didn't need retainers who were awful at magic, but I really don't care about that."

Charlotte blinked her eyes a few times. A single teardrop slid down her cheek and splashed to the ground. I didn't want my precious retainer to become more anguished than this, so... *Let me start by telling her how I feel.* The anime Piggy Duke never professed his love for her in his lifetime, but that wasn't the future for me. I didn't want it.

"To me, Charlotte, more than any food in this world, more than anyone else in this world..." I paused. "*You* are the most precious person to me."

By my own choice, I ended the story where my confession never happened. From now on, I would no longer hesitate.

The anime Piggy Duke locked away his feelings for Charlotte and her true identity deep within himself to the very end. *Shuya Marionette* was Shuya Newkern's story, a tale of his conquest to save the world together with the Great Spirit of Fire. At the same time, it was the tragedy of Slowe Denning, the Piggy Duke who fought on and on, all alone.

The blackhearted Piggy Duke must have had many, *many* chances to confess his love. However, he decided that he would reveal the hidden feelings he had for Charlotte after he had finished everything he needed to do. To his regret, that day never came.

I will leave that future behind, never to come to pass. I wanted to pave a new future for myself right here, right now.

So, I will tell you that I love you.

"So...please don't worry," I continued. "No matter what happens, I *will* protect you, and I will always be by your side from now on so that you are never in danger again. I swear that with this scrumptious food as my witness." *This* was what I wanted her to remember—my genuine emotions, my whole heart. Even if she never returned my love, it didn't change a thing.

"...H-Huh?" After that heartfelt declaration, all Charlotte could manage was a dumbfounded croak. It reminded me of the snorts that usually escaped *me*.

"What do you mean, 'huh'?"

Charlotte gawked up at me, her jaw hanging wide open. *I've been with her for a decade, and yet it's the first time I've seen that face on her.* I was amazed. Even after ten years, Charlotte still had new expressions I had never seen, and I was moved at my discovery.

"Um, um, um, well—" Charlotte stammered, covering her face with her hands. She swiftly stood up and fled, her face glowing crimson between her fingers.

I watched as she slammed open the door and disappeared into the dark corridor. Just had to get away from me so badly she had to leave my room entirely.

"...Oink," I whispered sadly. *Life is hard, huh.* However, I was filled with a sense of accomplishment. *Ha ha, who would have known that confessing my feelings could make my heart so light?*

A quiet descended upon my room in Charlotte's absence.

"Hey, you," I whispered out into the silence. "You've been listening the whole

time, right? You're not really asleep, are you?"

The black cat meowed in response. Charlotte was probably so distressed after hearing that a mercenary had infiltrated Kirsch that she decided to bring her pet along with her to my room for comfort. With its ears perked up in attention and eyes half-lidded, the cat looked like any old cat. I knew that *this* wasn't a normal cat, though. It was far from something domestic like a house pet.

This black cat, which Charlotte pampered and nicknamed "Al" affectionately...was actually the Great Spirit of Wind, the former protector of Charlotte's destroyed homeland.

"Altanger, you might be mad at me for this decision, but I'm not going to be a pig any longer," I declared. Any other person might have feared and respected this extraordinary being. But my knowledge of *Shuya Marionette* showed me a new future I could aim for. Armed with this knowledge, I might just be able to save the world, so I decided that I wanted to choose a different path to protect her.

"It doesn't mean that I'm breaking my promise to you. Charlotte is someone very precious to me, and—"

"Slowe." The Great Spirit of Wind cut me off. It had been a long time since I heard the spirit's voice, and their tone was kinder than I expected. "For the past ten years, I have watched over you, meow. Ten years is a long time for a human. I pitied you at times... You lost everything for Charlotte's sake: your position as heir, your social standing, your friends, meow..."

Choosing to act the part of a pig, I lost everything and everyone, other than Charlotte; my fiancée Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista; the trust of my parents; a bright future as Duke Denning; my two personal knights, who were like family to me; the trust of the people in the Denning lands... Like Icarus, I fell hard from the Prodigy of Wind to the blackhearted Piggy Duke.

"However, I couldn't make the suggestion of my own volition for you to stop being a pig. I myself was reluctant to let go of my comfortable life lazing around and living together with Charlotte, meow."

I was silent for a moment. "What's with that? Well, the Great Spirit of Wind did become quite the fat cat. Nobody would've guessed that a cat as round as a

pig is actually the Great Spirit of Wind."

"You didn't have to say that out loud, meow," the cat complained.

"Sorry, my bad," I said with a shrug.

Charlotte was overcome with fear when she was a child, but as time passed, she slowly regained her former self. Just like Charlotte, the enraged Great Spirit of Wind slowly calmed down and led a relaxed life as a house cat.

"I am thankful to you. I made the right choice when I told her to flee to the Denning lands back then."

The much-revered Great Spirit of Wind did not continue speaking on for long. At that moment, we both heard the sound of someone running down the corridor outside my room, drawing closer.

"Slowe, you have proven to me your conviction. You are free to do as you please from now on, meow."

"Altanger—" I began.

"I will sleep now. A pleasant wind is blowing today, meow."

With that, the Great Spirit of Wind closed their eyes once again on the chair they curled up on. The great spirit seemed to know the most comfortable spot in the room, I observed. *Maybe it's the instincts of a cat that led them there.*

I breathed a sigh of relief. Truth be told, Altanger's approval lifted a big weight from my shoulders. I reminisced back on when I first met this spirit and couldn't help but smile wryly. Gone was the spirit who had been so furious that they threatened to destroy the world, their ferocity lost to time as surely as once I lost my ambition as a Denning.

"Master Slowe! I also have something I want to tell you!"

Just as I thought, *she* was the source of the footsteps. However, her earlier gloomy atmosphere completely vanished, and the cheerful Charlotte I knew her as had returned. My dear Charlotte was right in front of me, and I listened to her with a kaleidoscope of emotions running amok in my heart.

"I will also be by your side forever! And I will be protected by you forever!" Charlotte exclaimed, having made up her mind. "I'm your retainer, after all! I

may be terrible at magic, but I will improve. Please teach me like you taught Miss Tina!”

I didn’t know whether she truly understood my confession, or the emotions behind it.

But...I’m satisfied with this, I thought. I was able to convey my love for her, even just a little, once more deciding to fight against the fate where I’d forever hidden it away in my chest. I was over the moon.

“Now, Master Slowe, do you know what this is?”

“It’s...the uniform, right?”

The sun had set outside, and the veil of night had blanketed the horizon. My heart was full of joy. Even if I had no proof, I just *knew* that tomorrow would be a better day than today.

“It *is* the uniform, but listen to this! It’s not a custom-made size! It’s the biggest size the store offers, but you don’t have to wear a custom-made size anymore, Master Slowe!” Charlotte said, excited.

I don’t need status or honor. I just want to be by your side. That’s why...I will tell you how important you are to me, bit by bit.

“In other words, you have a normal figure now, Master Slowe! Congratulations!!!”

I will tell you that I don’t just love you as my retainer. You are the girl I fell in love with, Charlotte.

“Aaand, look at this!” Charlotte forced a bottle into my hand. “Ta-da! It’s a new weight loss potion! Please drink it right away! You’ll lose weight and make everyone eat their words, Master Slowe! We’ll force *everyone* to eat their words; not just the people at school, but House Denning too!”

Blown away by Charlotte’s eagerness, I opened the cap of the bottle as told. A *very* unpleasant fishy stench quickly filled the room.

“Meooow!!!!!!!!!” In the next moment, the Great Spirit of Wind writhed on the chair and started screeching in protest.

I totally get that, I inwardly nodded in agreement. *I’m used to this smell*

already, but they aren't. The cat zipped off at lightning speed, meowing hideously all the way. *Oh wow, they're* fast*. Quite nimble for such a fat cat, huh.*

"Al ran off!" Charlotte exclaimed. "I'll go and catch Al quickly and come back, so please finish off the potion before then! Please tell me what you think of the taste later!"

"W-Wait, Charlotte!" I cried. "We had a moment going on her—"

I protested in vain. My shoulders sagged and I couldn't help but sigh, "She's off, I guess."

I was left behind all alone in the room.

Somewhere down the line, my once-in-a-lifetime confession was left hanging in the air and was swept under the rug. I heaved a heavy sigh. *Nothing ever goes as planned, even if I know the future.*

But, well...I had no regrets. I couldn't hold a candle to the suffering of the Piggy Duke of the anime.

"I guess I'd better drink this," I said, looking down at the bottle I'd sat on the table beside Charlotte's thoughtful feast. Like any other skill, culinary skills could also improve over time. Surely, she had improved...or at least, I hoped.

All right, I should make use of my regret and reflect back on today so that I can aim for a better tomorrow, I decided. To seal my vow, I downed the weight loss potion in one gulp.

As for the taste, well...for the sake of Charlotte's honor, I'll leave it up to the imagination.

Now then.

This world had followed the anime *Shuya Marionette*, but my actions had changed the future entirely from this point on. The blackhearted Piggy Duke turned over a new leaf, so I had no clue what awaited me in the future. News of No Face's capture at my hands would probably reach House Denning in the blink of an eye.

Still, no matter what happens, I swear this to you, Charlotte. I will protect you. I will.

I made this solemn vow in my heart.

Afterword

Happy New Year.

Well, I'm actually writing this afterword on the 4th of January, so that's the reason for this greeting. The New Year public holidays are over, and it's nearly the deadline for the afterword. With that on my mind, I'm typing on my computer.

Sometime last year, just before summer, someone contacted me and offered to publish this book. After that, I met with my editor-sama and created this story together with them. Writing a book is *really* difficult... I was in for an emotional roller-coaster while writing this one book.

Thinking back, last year was a year of change for me. Then, this year will be a year of...

(Oh, please excuse me, my editor-sama just called me, saying that they are coming over to pick up my manuscript for the first volume. Right now, I'm in a very comfortable café with a tall ceiling. I shall go take care of that.)

Okay, I'm back. I handed over the manuscript, and we talked about the bonus short story for booksellers.

Of course, a story about Slowe's weight loss with Charlotte would be the most fitting for a bonus short story, don't you think?

This main story revolves around those two, after all. In the main story, Slowe takes the initiative and works out to lose weight. However, behind the scenes, surely Charlotte would come up with all kinds of diet plans, and Slowe would carry them out dutifully. Okay then, the specialty story will be his interaction with her, I've decided.

Now then, how long would it take for our protagonist to lose weight? Where would he show off his lean figure? If everything goes according to plan for him, it might not be that far off in the future.

And with that, there isn't much space left in the afterword corner.

The cover art and all illustrations are very charming and really depict the

characters in the most charming way. I think everyone who picks this book up will feel the same as me.

Here, I would like to thank everyone who had a part in the publishing of this book. My editor-sama, nauribon, the graphic designers, proofreaders, printing companies, and all those who helped in places I couldn’t possibly fathom. This book was only possible thanks to each and every one of you. Thank you so much.

Lastly, I would like to ask this question to all of you readers who picked up this book: how was it?

Volume two is planned for release in April, so I will be very glad if we could meet again in the next afterword. How much weight will he lose in the next volume, I wonder...?

See you again.

Rhythm Aida

(Published February 18, 2017)



Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!


"It's too late for you to hope for my approval. Ever."
"I can't believe you made this water elixir by yourself..."
"Not a single person in this world could beat you at a speed eating contest, Master Slowe!"
"Amazing, Master Slowe! Your waist shrunk by three millimeters!"
Shuya Newkern
A hot-blooded fortune-teller and a fire mage. Slowe considers Shuya his rival.
Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista
The second princess of Cirquista, the Metropolis of Water. Slowe's former fiancée.
Slowe Denning
The protagonist who reincarnated into the world of his favorite anime. The third son of House Denning, and a problem student of Kirsch Mage Institute. At least, he used to be...?


"Lord Denning! Please teach me more about magic!"
Tina
Slowe's adorable underclassman. She uses earth magic, an uncommon feat for a commoner.
"Master Slowe is so unfair... 'Just because I'm good at magic,' he says..."
Altanger
Charlotte's pet black cat. They are actually a great spirit who was once the guardian of Huzak, Charlotte's home country.


"Take two steps back."
That a seemingly whimsical wave of his wand could conjure such an incredible result bordered on the miraculous. This was magic, the power granted by the invisible spirits of this world.

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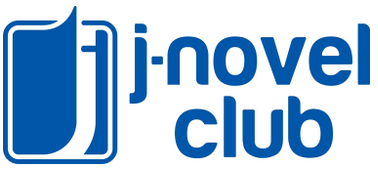
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Afterword

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I’m Gonna Tell Her How I Feel! Volume 1

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Zihan Gao

Edited by Ori Starling

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Rhythm Aida
Art By
nauribon
Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
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