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She Was Executed 99 Times, So How Did She Unlock "SuperLove" Mode?!


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The 100th Time's the Charm: She Was Executed 99 Times, So How Did She Unlock "Super Love" Mode?! Volume 2 [Complete]

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Chapter One

About a year had passed since the battle at Heavenrose Castle against Saint Debonaire—the one that Alphina had spent her hundredth life finishing. Afterwards, she'd embarked on an adventure around the world and then managed to return to her safehouse in the Amazone Forest. Though some irritating men—namely, Prince Lionett, Prince Avenlock, and Kithling—had followed her, she'd escaped from them and hid herself, along with her butler, Scarlet, and her brother, Carl, away.

Carl had turned eleven years old this year. Under normal circumstances, he was old enough to be in his fifth year at elementary school. He was a prodigy when it came to magic, so even if he didn't attend school, he could probably make a living as a mage or a magic device craftsman. But he couldn't continue to live with his sister like this. Unless he acquired general knowledge, as well as learned how to work and live with other people, he would be an unfit heir to House Sylvana.

It'll make me suuuper lonely to say goodbye to him, though! Alphina thought. But it was *because* she loved her brother so much that she knew she had to steel her resolve. "Carl, I'd like you to go back to House Sylvana and continue your studies."

Carl didn't say anything, but his mouth moved in a silent, "What?" He stared at his sister confusedly, and Alphina felt as if blood would come spurting out of her nose. He had siblicide-levels of cuteness.

"What're you so confused about, Carl? You're already eleven years old. You have to go back to school and study, become a great scholar or minister in the future, and then lead that country full of fools."

That was necessary because the Lione Empire had once been controlled by a sow, otherwise known as the Saint. Thanks to her influence, Alphina had been forced to go through ninety-nine deaths. Unless someone as smart as Carl obtained a high position within the empire, it might get invaded and be destroyed one day. Though they had signed a treaty of amity with the

neighboring kingdom of Heavenrose, there were lots of other countries that could pose a threat.

Alphina could care less about whether or not the empire was destroyed. But it would be terribly unfair if her parents and Carl were forced to go down along with it. It was unclear whether Carl understood his sister's feelings on the matter or not, because he shook his head with a stubborn expression.

"No!"

"No...?"

"No! I don't wanna be a scholar! I wanna become your wife!"

"GAH!" This time, blood really did come pouring out of Alphina's nose. Scarlet, who had predicted this would happen in advance, swiftly held out a handkerchief, and Alphina took it gratefully. Using it to stem the flow from her nose, she tried to reason with her brother, who was a little mistaken on a lot of matters. "Uh, no, you can't do that, Carl. Under normal circumstances, a boy can't become a wife."

"No!" With that, Carl turned his face away with a pout.

Neither of them paid any attention to Scarlet's murmur of, "Actually, under normal circumstances, siblings can't get married."

"Carl, stop being so selfish." When he didn't reply, Alphina continued. "Our parents are worried about you. The last letter I got from them had, 'At the very least, get Carl to come home,' written in super thick red ink!"

*At least I...*think *it was red ink. I really don't want to believe that my mother used her anger, resentment,* and *blood to write those words. Hmm... I wonder how I should go about convincing Carl?*

As Alphina tilted her head to the side in thought, Scarlet spoke up. "If it's too difficult to be separated from each other, then why don't you stay by Lord Carl's side and watch over him at school?"

"'By his side'? I don't really want to go back to being a noble."

"Oh, I didn't mean to watch over him from House Sylvana. I was thinking that you could go to school, Lady Alphina."

“Huh? Go to school? After so much time’s passed?”

Alphina didn’t really like school. While she didn’t mind learning things through practice, it was impossible for her to just sit and listen to someone lecture. So after she’d graduated from high school, she hadn’t continued on to the academy. Her mother objected, but Alphina had managed to get her way.

“Not as a student,” Scarlet corrected. “As a teacher.”

“Me? A teacher?” Alphina exclaimed.

“Yes. You could become an elementary school teacher and watch over Carl’s school life right at his side. As for how you may accomplish that, you can leave it to me. I’m sure you could teach whatever subject you desire, whether it’s physical education or magic. Right, Lady Alphina?”

“Huh... I see.” She hadn’t even considered such a method.

Carl also looked interested, and he leaned towards her with his eyes sparkling. “Teacher Alphina?” He’d probably listen to her now.

“I guess I don’t have any other choice...” She would miss spending her days having fun outside in the forest, but like Carl, she also didn’t want to separate from her sibling. She might not have liked school very much, but she didn’t mind children, and it wouldn’t be so bad to experience what it was like to be a teacher—until Carl graduated, of course. “All right, then. Let’s give it a whirl!”

“Understood!”

And that was that. Alphina had never expected herself to become a teacher, since she’d hated school so much. Living through a hundred lifetimes really allowed one to experience lots of new things...

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Two weeks had passed since Alphina’s decision to go back to school as a teacher. Carl would be returning to his studies starting from the third semester of the fifth grade. He’d missed about a year’s worth of lessons thanks to the trip they’d gone on, but he had managed to learn all of the material in three weeks of supplementary classes. Alphina’s parents and the teachers at the school had been too impressed for words, and it was proof once again of how much of a

genius Carl was.

As for the sister of said prodigy...

“Lady Alphina, I bear good news! The results of your Temporary Teacher Qualification Exam have returned! You’ve passed!”

“Wha—? I did?” She grabbed the papers from Scarlet and looked over them. The form stated that she would be the assistant homeroom teacher for class 5-1 once the third semester started. “Honestly, I thought I’d fail.”

A week ago, Alphina had taken the recruitment examination at the school, but it had gone terribly. She hadn’t done well on the written portion of the exam. And during the practical portion, she’d been asked to cast the intermediate-tier spell Lightning. Instead, she’d used the super high-tier magic Thundershock.

“Even the examiners were *shocked* to see that one. I knew you could do it, Lady Alphina!”

“Ha ha...”

Scarlet was praising her, but that incident had been a simple issue of Alphina’s lack of control over her excessive amounts of magic. She’d thought that if she passed her exam, they would assign her to be the physical education teacher. She had passed that particular test with flying colors. But it seemed that the school already had more than enough staff for that subject.

This time, Alphina’s identity was that of a mage who used to work in a Far Eastern country’s Department of Magic and was now traveling the world to further her studies. She’d faked her documents using the pseudonym “Arlicia Mia Alice.” Alphina had finished her subterfuge off with her usual Disrecognition spell. She’d chosen not to use the name Arle Phia Earnes, an identity she’d used in the past, this time. If something happened and news of her employment at the school reached Prince Lionett, then her true identity would be exposed.

“Well, I’m sure that he doesn’t have any time to chase me around now.” Now that relations with Heavenrose had improved, the empire had reduced its military funding, and the soldiers had nothing to do. Since Lionett was popular

in other countries, the emperor had started using him as a diplomat. Lionett's daily life was full of dinners and tea parties with foreign guests. "I just hope that he goes on to marry a princess from some other country."

"I don't think that'll happen," her butler said, easily crushing his master's hopes. "Prince Lionett has a very pure and devoted personality, so I imagine it's impossible for him to even *think* about other women."

"Grr..." What Scarlet said was true, but that really made things difficult for Alphina. "Right now, I'm an average commoner and not a princess. Even if it's what the prince wants, the imperial family and nobles wouldn't approve of an engagement between us."

"I believe that, on top of being pure and devoted, he's the type of man who would get fired up over obstacles."

"Oh, you! Stop that."

Alphina used her hand to fan her cheeks. She was terribly uncomfortable with the topic of romance, as if her body physically rejected it. One could even say that she had no talent in it. During her school days, she'd never had interest in the conversations everyone else had about who was cool or who was dating whom. She'd chalked it up to not having any talent in that type of thing, and it had never been a problem in her life.

"Well, in any case, I don't think a busy prince would come visit an elementary school," she said. "That means his retainer Kithling won't show up either. The only one left is..."

"How about Prince Avenlock?" Scarlet asked. He was referring to the prince of the neighboring kingdom, a man whose nickname was Lord Blackrose.

"Isn't he busy with his own things? I heard that the issues over succession haven't calmed down yet in Heavenrose."

"It must be bad if Prince Avenlock, who's the seventh prince, is the top candidate for the crown."

"Yeah, exactly. There's no way he has time to mess around in the empire. Or, actually, I *hope* he doesn't have the time!"

Alphina couldn't help but pray for Avenlock's busy schedule. She was still able to use the old magic spell Telepathy and wouldn't be able to handle it if she had to listen to that passionate but out-of-tune love song again. It was just as bad as the "squee hee hee" laughter of the now-deceased Saint.

"Lady Alphina, in my humble opinion, if you are to spend time as a teacher, you should consider keeping your Telepathy sealed away," Scarlet suggested.

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing," she replied.

Being able to read others' minds was a terrifying magic. If Alphina knew that a mage capable of such a feat existed, she wouldn't want to get anywhere near them either, since it meant that everything inside of her would be completely exposed. If others found out about her Telepathy, she might become a target of persecution. That was part of the reason why Alphina had chosen to leave the empire. During her travels, she'd always worn a Sealing bracelet. A white magic gem was embedded in it, and so long as she kept it on her person, her Telepathy wouldn't activate.

"But if push comes to shove, I'm going to remove it," Alphina warned.

"Yes, please do not hesitate to use your magic if you or Carl are in danger," Scarlet agreed.

"In any case, I'm sure that nothing too dangerous would happen in a learning establishment for children." Despite her past troubles with authority, she would take on the identity of a teacher for a while. So she'd be staying in the employee dormitory located within the school grounds. "Scarlet, come with me as a cat."

"Of course! I'll never leave your side!"

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By the time Alphina realized it, the morning of the first day of classes—and her first day of work—at Melvina Elementary School had arrived. In truth, she was an alumnus of this public school.

"Good morning!" Miss Arlicia's (in other words, Alphina's) cheery voice rang out in the staff room. She was greeted by the solemn stares of all the teachers. *Urk, I still reaaally can't stand this atmosphere!* After all, she'd mostly spent her

years as a student, being summoned to this place for lectures every time she played a prank, so she didn't have any good memories of her time at school.

It was only temporary, but Alphina had never imagined that she would one day end up working at this school. She once again savored one of her grandma's favorite quotes: "Life is stranger than the stories of the Theva."

"We've been waiting for you, Miss Arlicia." Having said that, a middle-aged woman wearing a blouse and a long skirt stood up. She looked to be in her mid-fifties, with lots of prominent grays in her tied-up hair. The lenses of her glasses could not fully soften the sharpness and severity of her silver eyes.

Incidentally, Alphina was wearing similar clothes to her, and her hair was pulled up in the same style. That was essentially the female teachers' uniform. It was dull, on top of being hard to move around in, but Alphina was grateful that she didn't need to worry about what to wear every day. Just in case, she had on a pair of glasses that served to further disguise her identity.

"My name is Velor Si Cassecoute," the woman said. "I'm the vice principal here. Until you've settled in, I shall supervise your classes. I'm happy to make your acquaintance."

"I-I'm happy to make your acquaintance as well! Please refer to me as Al instead of Arlicia!" Cold sweat broke out on Alphina's back even as she greeted Velor. And it was hardly a surprise, for Miss Velor was Alphina's old homeroom teacher.

Alphina couldn't even count how many times she'd been summoned to this very staff room for one of Miss Velor's lectures.

"Princess Alphina! I heard that you snuck into the classroom from the window again! Go back and try it again the proper way this time, from the door, please —actually, go all the way back to your mother's belly!"

"Oh, Princess Alphina, why are you staring so passionately at the sky? Was a rooster flying by? I'd love it if you could pay this much attention to your teachers' classes."

And on and on they went. Alphina didn't want to remember the many insults and snide remarks she'd heard. The trauma of it all made her heart ache.

“I... I wanna run away from here.”

“Did you say something, Miss Al?”

“N-No? Nothing at all!”

Upon seeing Alphina shaking her head violently, Velor furrowed her brow. “Please make sure that you act with more sophistication and grace. Melvina Elementary School is the most elite primary school within the Lione Empire, and we’ve sent many wonderful nobles out into the world.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” Alphina said with a nod.

“Among our alumni, we’re proudest of the Greatest Vermilion, Alphina Shinn Sylvana.”

“G-Great what?” Alphina’s eyes widened at the weirdly grandiose title accompanying her name.

There was an ecstatic expression on Velor’s face as she explained. “Since you’re from the Far East, you might not be aware of her. Alphina’s our newest hero. When the Dark Saint tried to take over our country, the Greatest Vermilion was the only one who was aware of her plot, and in exchange for her life, she exposed the Dark Saint’s evils to the world.”

That was a surprise. Alphina hadn’t realized that her off-ering of her head had been interpreted in such a way.

“Um, just who’s spreading these lies?” she asked nervously.

“What do you mean ‘lies’?! Are you implying that Prince Lionett is a liar? That’s *very* disrespectful.”

Alphina was speechless. *I knew it*, she thought. That prince had a habit of over-romanticizing his former fiancée. She was grateful that he was keeping the secret of her survival, but she wished he would stop praising her to death because it caused this sort of misunderstanding. It was true that Alphina had exposed the Saint’s conspiracy, but that wasn’t for the empire’s benefit. At the end of the day, she had done it for herself.

“According to the prince, Princess Alphina used her own life as a medium in order to dispel the Saint’s Geis,” Velor continued. “Even the emperor couldn’t

help but shed tears at that beautiful sacrifice, and he ordered the state to honor her with an Imperial Funeral."

"Ah right." Alphina had heard about that during her travels. It had felt really bizarre knowing that she was being mourned in such an impressive and flashy funeral. She'd unconsciously murmured, "That princess named Alphina or whatever must have been quite the great woman. Not that I've met her before," while staring off into the distance, causing Carl and Scarlet great worry.

"If the Dark Saint had accomplished her goals, then the empire might have been destroyed. Princess Alphina is literally our savior, and I'm proud that she was my student!"

"Ha...ah ha ha... That's quite something." Alphina couldn't help but mentally add, *"Not that I remember anything except being scolded by you!"*

"And so! I'm going to keep a *very* close eye on you so that you'll become a teacher worthy of our glorious school. Please keep that in mind."

"Oookaaay," Miss Al sang out. Her reply was very weary indeed.

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And so, Alphina became the assistant teacher of class 5-1, the same one that Carl belonged to. This actually hadn't been planned out and was a complete coincidence.

"It must be karma because of how good of a person I am!"

"Did you say something just now, Miss Al?"

"N-Nope! Nothing!"

"You sure talk to yourself a lot. Is that a habit?"

"No, uh, I'm just...nervous! That's all!"

Upon seeing Alphina try to excuse her behavior, Velor nodded her head. "There's still time before class starts, so would you like to go and check it out beforehand?"

"Check it out?" Alphina echoed.

"Yes. Why don't you look in on the class that you'll be in charge of?"

Alphina followed Velor out of the staff room. *Wow, this campus is exactly like I remember*, Alphina thought as she looked around. A wave of nostalgia washed over her as she took in sights that hadn't changed since her days as a student. The buildings were old, but because they were well-maintained, they had a clean atmosphere. Art drawn by the students and magic devices crafted in the beginner magic classes were displayed in the halls. The feeling of the creaky wooden planks brought back so many memories that Alphina found herself happily making them squeak on purpose with every step.

"Miss Al, if you walk like that, you'll damage the floors," Velor said.

"I-I'm sorry!" At the end of the hallway, Alphina started to turn left, but Velor turned right. "Miss Velor, I thought the classroom for 5-1 was this way."

Velor's eyes widened. "I'm impressed you know that, Miss Al. It's your first day at school, but you're already familiar with our grounds?"

"Er, y-yes. I hammered the documents I received yesterday into my skull, you see. Oh ho ho."

"I'm quite pleased to hear that! I thought we could peer into the classroom from the hallway on the other side, which is why we can take this route."

The two of them arrived at the building across from the one that class 5-1 was in. From the hallway window, they could very clearly see what was going on inside of the classroom.

"Those are the students who you will be in charge of," Velor said, gesturing to the kids. "Please observe them as best as you can."

Through the window, Alphina could see about twenty children in the room. They each had their own way of spending the time, from chatting, to reading, to studying. In the midst of that crowd, Alphina finally found the little brother she'd spent so long looking for. Carl's desk was in the row by the window, second from the back. He was surrounded by about five other students.

All of them were saying something to Carl, but it was impossible to make out what. His mouth was tightly shut, and he was staring straight forward. The sight caused a bad feeling to begin stirring in Alphina's heart.

Don't tell me that he's being bullied? Carl was a child who rarely let others see

his emotions. Rumors had flown around about him, saying that he'd left his emotions in his mother's womb in exchange for his too-powerful magical talent; he was also extremely silent. So he had been bullied in the past, with his classmates calling him names like "doll."

Alphina had given those bullies exactly what they'd deserved, but could the same thing be happening again? If that was the case, then she would go and show them what was what! Forgetting her position as the teacher, Alphina immaturely gripped her fist and activated the Eavesdrop spell. As one would expect from its name, it allowed the user to hear things from a distance.

The conversations in the classroom flowed into Alphina's ears. Just as she started wondering what kinds of terrible insults her brother had to suffer through, she heard, "Carl, could you teach me how to solve this question from our textbook?"

"Carl, thanks to you, my grades have been getting better! My mother even praised me!"

Hearing two girls say that, Alphina blinked her eyes.

"Hey, Carl, do you wanna play ball with everyone during lunch break?"

"No, let's go to the mountain out back and catch some bugs! I found a super great spot for it!"

This time, he was being invited to play by two boys. Just a little while ago, this would've been an unbelievable scenario. As far as Alphina knew, no one had ever spoken in such a friendly manner to Carl, who was silent and emotionless. As for the boy in question, his face was as blank as it always was. But he was nodding, shaking his head, and murmuring his responses to everyone's questions and comments. Despite how taciturn he was, he was making conversation with his classmates.

Ah, Carl, you've come so far! A prickling started up in Alphina's eyes at the sight of her brother's growth, and she couldn't help but pull out a handkerchief.

"Carl's as popular as ever," Velor said. The students' voices couldn't have reached her ears, but due to her experience as a veteran school teacher, she was able to grasp the situation with nothing more than a look. Alphina felt

ashamed that she had suspected the children were bullies. “Miss Al, are you familiar with that redheaded boy?”

“Y-Yes, though nothing more than the rumors. He’s the genius son of House Sylvana, isn’t he?”

“That’s absolutely correct. Not only that, but he’s also the younger brother of Princess Alphina, so it’s a given that he would be popular.”

For a long while, Alphina didn’t say anything. But as the words sunk into her brain, she said, “What?” Why would being her younger brother make Carl popular?

Then, three other girls approached her brother.

“Hey, Carl, can you tell us the rest of that story from the other day?”

“Can you tell me more about your sister?”

“I wanna learn more about Greatest Vermilion!”

After the girls said that, the eyes of the other children started to sparkle, and they all leaned forward, exclaiming, “Me too, me too!”

Even from a distance, Alphina could see how Carl’s little nostrils flared with pride. “My sister always runs to my rescue when I’m in trouble! She’s so nice and pretty and cool—the best sister in the world!”

“Hm? Is something the matter, Miss Al? Why are you holding your head in your hands all of a sudden?”

“N-No, I... Um... Oh ho ho!” Alphina’s face was completely crimson.

“Princess Alphina defeated the Dark Saint, right?” a child asked Carl.

“Yep!” he replied.

“How did she manage to defeat her when the Dark Saint was able to control His Imperial Majesty?” another child queried.

“Alphina can use stronger magic than what I use, and she’s a good fighter with a sword too. She’s so good that even Prince Lionett is impressed by her! She’s so smart that even the prince’s advisor Kithling acknowledges her. And of course, she’s so beautiful that even Prince Avenlock from Heavenrose is in love

with her!”

Every single embarrassing compliment that flew out of Carl’s mouth caused Alphina to cringe backwards.

“Princess Alphina sounds wonderful! I can’t believe that both Prince Lionett and Prince Avenlock are in love with her!”

“It’s exactly as my father said! Princess Alphina is amazing!”

“My mother told me about her as well! She said without Princess Alphina, the empire would’ve been destroyed by the Saint!”

“My grandfather was crying, you know. He said that even though he was under the Saint’s control, he said bad things about princess Alphina. He feels so bad that he’d give his life if that would serve as an apology.”

Er, my reputation sounds a lot crazier than I thought it was. She’d gotten regular updates on the empire from Scarlet, so Alphina had an inkling of what was going on. But now that she was hearing it with her own ears and seeing it with her own eyes, the way that people were overvaluing her simply made her skin crawl. She would’ve understood if stories about her were just being passed around between the adult nobles who had actually been under the control of the Saint’s Geis. But she’d never thought that those stories might’ve reached the ears of their children.

I’m begging you to stop adding more fuel to the fire! Alphina willed.

But unfortunately, Carl opened his mouth and said, “I was also under the Saint’s mind control, so I don’t hate your moms and dads. I just want to talk more and more about how wonderful my sister is!” He wasn’t just fanning the flames. He was pouring oil straight onto them.

“You’re right! Princess Alphina’s the best!” the children cheered.

“All hail the empire’s hero, Alphina Shinn Sylvana!”

“Lady Greatest Vermilion!”

“I heard that the latest fashion trend in town is dyeing your hair red to look like hers!”

“Wow, maybe I should dye mine too!”

Alphina turned to Velor with a serious expression on her face. “Miss Vice Principal, let’s make a new school rule: absolutely *no* red hair dye.”

“Huh? Where’d *that* come from?”

“In any case, let’s ban it! Please! I’m begging you!”

When Alphina was a student, Velor had always been nagging at her to obey the rules. So it was hard to believe that the day would come when *Alphina* was the one begging her to come up with a new rule. *Jeez, life really is stranger than the stories of the Theva.*

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After they returned to the staff room, Velor introduced Alphina to the homeroom teacher of class 5-1.

“It’s veeery nice to meet you, Miss Al! My name is Bayard MacGuyer!” His voice boomed in a way that befit his large, bear-like body. Based on his buzz cut and the bulging muscles protruding from his short-sleeved shirt, he looked like he would be the physical education teacher, but surprisingly enough, his expertise was in holy magic.

“I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance as well, Mister Bayard,” Alphina said. “I’m still learning, so I apologize in advance if I make any mistakes.”

“No problem! Let’s work hard together and make our class a great environment for the kids!”

Alphina shook his rough hand, and then the two of them finally made their way to the classroom. She nervously followed him in and was greeted with curious stares from all of the students.

“Mister Bayard, who’s that lady?!” a blonde girl sitting at the very front of the class asked after raising her hand. She’d been one of the girls talking to Carl. It seemed that she was a gossip, and just like earlier, her eyes glittered with interest.

“My name is Arlicia, and I’m going to be your assistant homeroom teacher starting from today. Oh, but just Al is fine, though!” Alphina said.

“Okaaay,” the students chorused obediently. For now, Alphina could breathe

a sigh of relief. Though all of the kids who attended the school were sons and daughters of rich noble houses, the majority of the children in this class seemed docile.

Carl was staring straight at her. She'd written a letter to him in advance to explain that she would become a teacher at this school. Therefore, the Disrecognition didn't affect him, and he was able to recognize who Alphina was. But this should have been his first time learning that she would be his assistant homeroom teacher.

When their eyes met, Carl nodded softly. His lips were faintly upturned, as if he was congratulating his sister on passing the exam and getting a position at the school. Alphina breathed another sigh of relief, thankful that Carl didn't find it embarrassing that his own sister would be his teacher. The freckled boy next to Carl raised his hand.

"Miss Al, where did you come from?!"

"From a country in the Far East," Alphina replied.

"From the Far East?! Then can you use ninjutsu?"

"Ah ha ha, unfortunately not. But I can make origami shuriken."

The other children started to raise their hands as well.

"Miss Al! Do you have a boyfriend?"

"U-Um, no, I don't! I've only just arrived in the empire, you see."

"Then, what kind of guys do you like?"

"E-Er..." As Alphina started to shrink back from the furious wave of questions, Bayard guffawed loudly.

"Gah ha ha! C'mon, you lot! Stop making the new teacher uncomfortable!"

As laughter filled the classroom, Alphina felt something was off and started to look around to discover the source. It ended up being a young boy. From the podium, he was seated behind Carl and diagonally to his left. The boy had dark skin and curly black hair.



He looked like he was the athletic and naughty type, which was a fairly rare combination for this school. If his skin color was anything to go by, there was a possibility that he was a transfer student from another country.

The boy was staring at Carl's back with a troubled expression on his face, rather than looking up at Alphina as she stood behind the podium. He wasn't paying any attention to the new assistant teacher.

I wonder what's going on there? Perhaps he had some sort of personal grudge against Carl? Or he just simply didn't like him? It was hasty to jump to any conclusions since the boy was just glaring at Carl, but it was clear from the look in his eye that he had a fairly serious problem with him. *Looks like I'll have to keep an eye out*.

Assistant homeroom teacher Alphina had found her new mission.

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The first period was a practical class on magic. One by one, the students, with magic wands on loan from the school in hand, gathered in the courtyard. The wands doubled as a medium for spells, so they cost quite the pretty penny. More specifically, a single wand cost a month's worth of Alphina's salary. Apparently, normal schools would have only one wand per class, and the students would share it. So it was clear just how rich Melvina Elementary School was in that it could afford to give each student their own wand.

Standing in front of the line of students, Bayard raised his voice and said, "We're going to continue from last class and keep practicing our Fireball today! We'll be producing actual flames, so make sure you maintain your focus!"

"Okaaaay," the students replied, but they didn't sound very confident.

That was hardly surprising, though. Even if it was an elementary-tier spell, it was still an offensive one. Children around the age of ten wouldn't go so far as to learn how to actually produce a ball of fire. At most, it would be impressive if they could even create a spark from the tip of the wand. Normally, children wouldn't be able to summon and shoot out a fireball until they were about fifteen. In order to learn how to cast this particular spell, they typically started learning from the age of ten, and they would have to study hard in their classes. That was how much effort it took before they could finally cast it.

In the empire, learning elementary-tier spells from the four main elements—fire, water, wind, and earth—was part of the mandatory education. But many

students graduated from middle school without ever being able to cast them. Alphina herself had graduated without ever learning how to cast the wind spell Squall.

However, talent greatly affected one's ability to use magic. You could only roughly estimate one's skill in it based on their age and years of study. For example, some kids couldn't even light a candle, while others could immediately create fireballs bigger and hotter than an adult's.

"Now then, why don't we start off with a demonstration. Carl Mann Sylvana!" Bayard said, and upon hearing his name, Alphina's little brother took a step forward. "Why don't you show them how it's done? Give that scarecrow target over there a blast for me, will you?"

There was no hint of anxiety on Carl's face as he nodded. Under the expectant and excited gazes of his classmates, he held his wand up and pointed it at the target. He muttered, "Fireball," and as soon as he did so, flames shot out from the magic gem embedded in the wand. The fire curled in upon itself like waves to create a sphere, and it flew towards the scarecrow target, instantly turning it into ash.

Cheers as well as a round of applause rose up from the students. Next to them, though, Bayard was clutching his head. "I should've told him to take it easy!" It seemed that the scarecrow target getting incinerated into a crisp hadn't been within his calculations.

"Carl, you're soooo cool!" one of the students cheered.

"That was a bigger Fireball than my tutor's!" another of his classmates exclaimed.

"You're a genius! A genius, I say!" yet another shouted.

Seeing one's beloved younger brother receive so much praise was a welcome sight for any older sister, and Alphina was no exception. She felt so good that she wanted to dance a jig right then and there.

"Er, what's the matter, Miss Al? Why are you smiling while shaking back and forth like a pendulum?"

"Ah, n-nothing! It's nothing more than a little far eastern bon dance! Oh ho

ho!”

As soon as Alphina looked away from Bayard, the boy with the dark, curly hair from earlier happened to enter her field of vision. Like before, there was a hard glint in his eyes as he stared at Carl’s profile, and he was the only one of the children who wasn’t clapping for him. Instead, his hands were at his waist.

“You’re a cheater.” The three words that came out of his mouth were quiet—but only in the beginning. “You’re a cheater!” The second time he spoke, it was with a much louder voice. All of the students turned around in surprise, and Carl also flicked his eyes his way. The curly-haired boy glared daggers at Carl as he continued in a dark voice, “Some genius you are. You must’ve been cheating!”

There was a confused look on Carl’s face, as if he couldn’t even fathom what he was being accused of. Granted, Alphina was the only one who could interpret his expression, so to the other kids, Carl’s face remained as impassive as ever.

The other students opened their mouths. “You’re still on about that, Hipper?” one of them said.

“There’s no way Carl would cheat,” another one piped up.

It seemed that the boy with the curly hair was named Hipper. This must’ve been a repeat offense of his too, if his classmate had used the word “still” to describe his behavior.

“How would you know? He’s the oldest son of House Sylvana. He has all the money in the world to cheat and lie,” the boy named Hipper argued.

Hey now, young man! We’re a noble house in name only, and thanks to my airheaded father, we hardly have any assets. Alphina would have dearly loved to say that. In fact, the Alphina of the past might have grabbed his ears until they stretched all the way out and screamed those words straight into his skull. But thanks to Lord Cold Heart, Lord Blackrose, and especially that sow of a Saint, she’d gotten a master class in patience.

But that didn’t mean she wasn’t angry. Of course she was miffed about the fact that her adorable little brother had been called a fraud. *It kinda doesn’t seem like he’s saying it out of spite or jealousy, though?* From what Alphina

could see, there was a stubborn, severe, and furious look on Hipper's face. He seriously believed that Carl was cheating.

The urge to use Telepathy to listen to his inner voice welled up within Alphina, but she would restrain herself for now. Invading others' mental privacy wasn't something that she should just casually do. She'd promised Scarlet that she would only use her Telepathy if Carl was truly in danger.

"Miss Al, is something the matter?" Bayard asked suddenly, snapping Alphina back to the present.

"N-Nope! Nothing's wrong!" She'd gotten completely lost in her thoughts.

"Since we're already demonstrating, I thought you could show the kids an example as well! How about it?"

"Huh?! Um, no, I'm not...really good with fire magic..."

"Oh, then you can use water or wind if you like. Everyone wants to see how good the new teacher's magic is. Isn't that right?"

At Bayard's question, all of the children cheerfully chorused, "Yes!" Without a choice, Alphina reluctantly walked up to the scarecrow target.

"Miss Al, you've forgotten your wand."

"Huh? Ah... I'm sorry. Then I'll borrow that for a sec." Frankly, it was completely unnecessary for Alphina to use a medium to cast elementary-tier spells, but that was because her body had accumulated an unnatural amount of magic after reincarnating ninety-nine times. She had to remember to act naturally while she was moonlighting as Miss Al, who was supposed to be a normal person. "Then I'll cast Fireball as well."

Uh, I just have to...swing my wand like this...? I guess? It had been so long since she'd wielded a wand that she no longer knew what the normal way to use it was. In any case, she tried waving it in what she hoped was a magicky way, but she accidentally created a fireball from the hand that *wasn't* holding the wand.

The students began to murmur among themselves.

"Magic is appearing from her hand?!"

“Maybe she uses it to feint?”

“Oh, you mean like she uses it to let down an enemy’s guard?”

“Wow! So practical!”

For some reason, the kids were heaping praise upon her, and, panicking, Alphina miscalculated how much power she put behind the spell. The fireball—no, the whirlwind of flames—that she created was a lot bigger than she had planned for it to be.

“Oh no, oh no!” She quickly tried to control the fire, but it was too late. The fiery maelstrom rapidly grew so big that it looked as if it could reach the skies, and it incinerated not only the one scarecrow target that she had been aiming for, but the entire row of them.

For a moment, no one, including Bayard, said anything. Their mouths hung open as they watched the scarecrows disintegrate. Even Hipper, whose eyes had been focused solely on Carl the entire time, couldn’t help but turn to look at the disaster zone. *Clap, clap, clap!* Only the sound of Carl’s applause broke the silence, echoing in the air.

“I...uh...just put too much elbow grease into it, that’s all!” Alphina laughed, rubbing at the back of her head. As if her words broke the spell that had been cast upon them, the children swarmed around her, chattering away.

“Miss Al, that was amazing!”

“How can we use magic that powerful?”

“Teach us, teach us!”

“Ah ha ha...” It was only her first day, and she’d completely ensnared their hearts already. But Hipper, the boy with the curly black hair, was the only one who didn’t join his peers, as he was too busy glaring frostily in Carl’s direction.

***

After the morning classes ended, it was time for a lunch break. As she ate her meal, Alphina inquired into the boy’s behavior.

“Hmm? Is there something the matter with little Hipper Wilds?” Bayard asked as he munched on his bread. Despite his burly looks, he had a sweet tooth, and

the round bun in his hairy hand was absolutely covered with honey. It made Alphina decide to refer to him as “Mister Honey Bear” going forward.

“Yes, er, he isn’t of the empire, is he?”

“That’s correct. He’s a noble’s son from the Heavenrose Kingdom. His father was sent to the empire as a diplomat, and Hipper’s been attending Melvina since about a year ago.”

Alphina had been able to make a rough guess thanks to the color of his hair and skin, but it seemed that he really did hail from the same country as Lord Blackrose. Incidentally, Heavenrose didn’t have the same peerage system as the empire, so all of its nobles were equals in terms of the hierarchy. Apparently, there wasn’t as much of a status divide between nobles and commoners either. The country’s more free-spirited culture was reflected in its very structure.

“Ever since the signing of the treaty of amity a year ago, there have been a lot more international students and immigrants from Heavenrose. There’s probably about one or two Heavenrose-born students in every classroom.”

“Oh, I see. Times have changed,” Alphina said.

“Well, yes, more or less,” Mister Bear replied as he licked honey off of his fingers. He didn’t want to miss a single drop of the liquid gold. “There’ve always been tensions between the empire and the kingdom. So even if the two governments want us to be friends, it ain’t so easy for us common folk to just forget that history.”

“Are you sure? I heard that Prince Avenlock, who is rumored to be the next king, really enjoyed his life at school when he was here as an international student. He was super popular with the girls too,” Alphina argued.

Mister Honey Bear’s round eyes grew even rounder. “Huh, Miss Al, I’m impressed you knew that despite your far eastern roots.”

“W-Well, yes, Prince Avenlock is *very* famous.”

“Yeah, his popularity with the ladies is crazy. Aha! You must be one of his fans.”

“Never say that to me, even as a joke.” There was no trace of humor on

Alphina's face when she replied, but Mister Bear laughed uproariously before he continued.

"Aside from exceptional men such as Prince Avenlock, most people are a lot more reserved. Or maybe reticent is a better word...? In any case, there's still some tension lingering between the kingdom and the empire."

"Hmm, I see." In Alphina's opinion, it was silly. But perhaps Hipper's attitude towards Carl stemmed from his dislike of the empire. "Hipper was quite aggressive towards my br—I mean, Carl. Could it have something to do with the history between the empire and the kingdom? Perhaps he heard a lot of bad things about the empire from his diplomat father?"

"Who knows?" Mister Bear didn't sound very bothered. He was using his bread crumbs to soak up every last drop of honey on his plate, tossing them into his mouth. "Before Carl returned to school, Hipper was considered the best student of his grade. He's quite proficient in magic, and he can cast basically all of the elementary-tier spells."

"Huh, he's quite talented." It was really impressive to be able to use all of the elementary-tier spells at the age of eleven. Carl could do it because he was a genius, but Hipper was more than brilliant in his own right. He was on the level of Kithling Ashley, Alphina's old friend from school. *Wait, if he's on Kithling's level, then doesn't that mean he's actually not good at all? No way.* Out loud, Alphina said, "So are you saying that he's lashing out because he's no longer the best student after Carl's return? He didn't seem that kind of kid."

"What do you mean by that kind?"

"I mean that he didn't look like the kind of boy who would be envious of others. Granted, that was just my personal impression of him."

Mister Honey Bear let out a heavy huff from his nose. "Wow, Miss Al! It's only your first day, and yet you're really keeping an eye on these students! I'm impressed, truly!"

"Okay..."

"You know, I agree with you! I don't think Hipper is the jealous type! There must be *some* sort of reason as to why he doesn't get along with Carl!"

Alphina leaned forward. “Yes, totally. Do you have any guesses as to that reason?”

“Nope!”

Nope?! You were speaking so confidently, as if you completely understood what was going on with the kids! You got my hopes up for nothing! Alphina screamed internally.

“There’s no need to rush for answers!” Mister Honey Bear chuckled. “As educators, we should be patient and let our students mature at their own pace. Ha ha ha!”

“Ha...ha...”

He’s kind of a...casual teacher, isn’t he? He’s completely different from Miss Velor. Alphina’s smile was tight, and the corners of her lips twitched with the effort of maintaining it. But then, Miss Velor returned to the staff room from her lunch, which she must have taken outside.

“Miss Al, I heard that you revealed your wonderful magic during this morning’s practical lesson. That pillar of fire was so high that it nearly reached the clouds, not to mention how visible it was from the staff room.” Though her tone sounded like she was praising Alphina, her eyes behind her glasses were cold.

“Huh? Er, no, um, that was a mistake. I accidentally used too much power,” Alphina said nervously.

“I know that you’re a talented mage, so could I ask you to please tone it down? How do you plan to take responsibility if you injure one of the students?”

“I’m terribly sorry!” Alphina hurriedly lowered her head in a bow, and once again Mister Bear let out a booming laugh.

“You’re so innocent! Ah, youth!”

What do you mean, youth*? You know, I’ve lived ninety-nine lifetimes, so I’m technically your elder. Does this school only have too-strict teachers and too-casual ones, with nothing in between those extremes?*

Alphina swore to herself that she would become a teacher who was just right.

Chapter Two

Thus, Miss Arlicia's school life had begun. Though she had started this job in order to watch over Carl, the feeling of, *"This isn't all bad!"* started to well up from within her as she stood at the podium. After all, kids liked Alphina. Much like them, she was energetic and free-spirited. In other words, her mental age was very close to that of a kid's, and that was probably the reason they enjoyed her company. From Alphina's point of view, she much preferred to be around children too, since she could be a lot more casual when talking with them.

"Miss Al, you don't seem very teacher-like! You're more like a friend!" a female student had said to her on one occasion.

Velor had muttered under her breath about Alphina's "dignity as an instructor," but Alphina didn't really mind. There was no need for a teacher to be respected. Of course, she couldn't have the kids look down on her, but she didn't need them to go so far as to respect her. Like with all other professions, all she needed was their trust.

Because you trusted your gardener's skills, you would leave your garden in their hands. Because you trusted a cook's skills, you would go eat at their restaurant. This was exactly the same. Some people thought of teachers as similar to clergymen, but they didn't need to be anything as grandiose as that. Such was Alphina's personal philosophy, or rather, her method of defiance against the education system.

Alphina was fitting into the school as the "fun teacher," but she was still unable to make any leeway with the Hipper Wilds boy. She'd tried to speak with him several times, but he avoided her in a very unnatural way. In the beginning, she'd wondered if he disliked her. However, once she paid close attention to him, she realized that he was just like that with everyone.

He didn't really fit in with the rest of the class either. His face was pretty handsome, even if he did have an impudent look in his eye, and he got good grades. His classmates seemed to regard him with some level of respect, but no one was actually close with him. Hipper was a bit isolated from everyone, but

like Alphina had observed on the first day, he was particularly mean towards Carl. Even though Hipper seemed to wall himself off from his classmates and avoid them, Carl was the only person he became strangely aggressive with. It had reached the point where Alphina wanted to ask Hipper if he secretly had a *crush* on Carl.

As an example, Melvina Elementary School served a school lunch once weekly, which always included a naspy salad as a side dish. Before we continue, you might be wondering what a naspy is. It's an incredibly healthy vegetable—like a cross between an eggplant and a green pepper, often served during meals within the empire; in fact, it's so healthy that it also goes by the name "doctorward." But the flavor is grassy and bitter, and it's covered in green and purple splotches.

"The bravest person in the empire's history is the person who first thought to eat this thing," was what people said about the naspy, and it was the number one most hated vegetable among children. Like other kids his age, Carl really disliked naspies, and so if it appeared on their dinner plates at home, Alphina would sneak it off his plate and eat it for him. Of course, she would have to make sure her mother and the maids didn't see her.

Thus, the students were quite slow to finish their meals on school lunch days thanks to the naspies. The naspy salad was clearly unpopular based on how little of it was eaten, and there would hardly be a dent in Carl's share. Mister Bear smothered his salad with honey and shoveled it into his mouth, so thanks to that, even Alphina didn't have much of an appetite.

One day during school lunch, amidst the despair, Alphina had heard a female student cheer, "Wow, Hipper, that's amazing!"

When she turned her gaze in the direction of the voice, Alphina saw a mountain of naspies on Hipper Wilds's plate. He'd grabbed the food of his own accord too. As everyone stared at him with their mouths hanging open, he calmly returned to his seat, sat down, and started to go at the naspies with his fork. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*, and then one more *crunch* for good measure—his fork never stopped, and within ten seconds, he had demolished the entire plate.

“This is nothing,” Hipper scoffed, and as if a spell had been broken, raucous applause rose up from the classroom like a roar of thunder.

Wow! It had truly been impressive. Even Alphina found herself so engrossed in the show that she was clapping along.

“Humph,” Hipper sniffed again, and then, when he looked around the room, he saw Carl’s untouched plate. His lips twisted in a sneer, and he spoke a single word: “Lame.”

Er, come on now, Hipper! Isn’t “lame” a little harsh just because he couldn’t finish his naspies? They’re little nasties, after all. Though Alphina had wanted to say that out loud, she silenced herself with the realization that her little pun was the exact kind of thing that her father would say. She shuddered at the idea that reincarnating ninety-nine times had turned her mind into that of an old man’s. As she dealt with her internal turmoil, a determined look appeared on Carl’s face.

“W-Wait, Carl?!” Alphina called out. “Don’t be reckless, now!”

Carl didn’t listen to his sister, who had accidentally acted in a too-familiar fashion. He was too busy shoveling the purple and green mountain into his mouth with a fork. Just what could’ve caused her brother to do this? He’d never been baited by any of Hipper’s taunts in the past.

Perhaps he felt frustrated that he’d been insulted right in front of his sister. Or perhaps there was a part of him that had felt embarrassed for being unable to eat his vegetables. Alphina didn’t know what was going on in Carl’s mind, but in any case, he defeated his longtime enemy in a single swoop and held the empty plate in the air as if it was a trophy. Granted, his hand was shaking, his face was pale, and a cold sweat had formed all over his brow.

“Ooh!” Cheers had risen up from the class. Hipper had clicked his tongue and then looked away.

And, well, that was certainly something that had happened in the past!

At the time, Alphina had thought that Carl was becoming as competitive as Hipper, but in the end, that was the only time he’d really retaliated. Nothing had really changed. Hipper would still pick fights at the slightest provocation,

while Carl remained spaced-out.

The majority of the class—especially the girls—viewed Carl's situation with pity. But some of the boys started to believe that something must have happened between them for Hipper to be so argumentative. On Alphina's end, she obviously didn't believe that Carl had done anything, but she also couldn't rid herself of the suspicion that there was a deeper reason behind Hipper's behavior.

From her observations, she could tell that Hipper had a very arrogant personality, which befit his status as a Heavenrose noble. When she took the naspy incident into consideration, it seemed more natural for Hipper to be the type who would say something like, *"Let's settle this with a magical duel!"* She really couldn't believe that he was only being mean to Carl out of jealousy, and so she took the matter to her little helper.

"I see. I had no idea such a thing was happening." During her lunch break, Alphina met up with Scarlet by the flower beds behind the school. It had been a long time since she'd seen him, and she brought him up to speed with everything that had happened. "I agree. There's no way that anyone could possibly hate Lord Carl."

"Right?!"

"But I deduce that there are some extenuating circumstances surrounding this Hipper boy."

"Riiight?!" As Alphina was speaking, she tore up the weeds in the flower beds. Meanwhile, Scarlet was in his cat form on the off chance that someone would stumble across them. "At this point, do you think I should just read his mind? If I time it when Hipper's being mean to Carl, then I'll probably be able to hear his reasons."

Scarlet thought for a minute before he answered. "It's true that we shouldn't just let this keep happening. It'd be terrible if something were to happen to Lord Carl. So long as you do not invade the other students' privacy, I don't see any issues with using your Telepathy."

"All right, then it's decided!" Alphina shoved the weeds that she had pulled into a paper bag and then stood up. She'd heard various off-the-wall inner

voices in the past, so she was a bit hesitant, but she found it difficult to believe that Hipper would be the type to have a “squee hee hee” kind of laugh.

“I shall also look into young Hipper on my end,” Scarlet said.

“Thanks, I’ll leave it to you! Er...by the way, Scarlet, didn’t you have something to report today?”

“Oh, right. You see—” But before he could finish, the two of them heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Scarlet leapt into the foliage of a nearby plant to hide himself, and Alphina turned to face the intruder with a polite smile affixed to her face.

“Ah, there you are, Miss Al. I was searching for you.”

“Why, hello there, Miss Velor. I just thought I would do a little gardening here.”

Velor looked around with wide eyes. “I heard conversation earlier. Was someone else here?”

“N-Nope! The only person who’s been here is yours truly!”

“How strange. I could’ve sworn that I heard vo—”

“O-Oh! You must’ve heard me speaking to the plants! You know, if you talk to them, they’ll grow big and strong! That’s what my grandmother always told me!”

Velor tilted her head to the side as if she had no idea what to make of that, but Alphina must’ve managed to convince her. She didn’t ask any more questions as she collected herself and looked Alphina straight in the eye. “The principal would like to speak with the entire staff. It’s an emergency. Please make your way to the meeting room.”

“Huh? But we’re only halfway through the lunch break.”

“It’s an emergency,” Velor repeated. “Please be sure to show up.” And with that, she hurried off again.

“Ugh...” Alphina had grown to realize that being a teacher was pretty grueling and intense. Back when she was a student, she hadn’t been able to tell that the teachers had plenty of work to do both before and after classes. There was

barely any time to rest. “Urk, I wanna apologize to all of the teachers I had in school.”

As she repented of her past actions, Alphina hurried to the meeting room.

***

All of the teaching staff were gathered in the meeting room, where a deeply intense and aggressive voice boomed out, “I am the principal of Melvina Elementary, Marquis Guts Melviiiiiina!”

This was the same principal from when Alphina had attended the school. He’d always been a wrinkly and white-haired old man, and his appearance hadn’t changed a bit even though over a decade had passed since Alphina’s years here. *Perhaps he looks so well-preserved because there isn’t a single drop of moisture left in his dried-up husk of a body?* Alphina thought rudely as she, along with the other teachers, bowed their heads in respect.

“Today, I have something veeeery important to tell you all!”

No one said anything. *Oh yeah, I forgot that he talks like this.* Alphina could still remember all the times she’d gotten in trouble with Miss Velor because she had dared to impersonate the “priiiiiiincipal.” Well, moving on...

“The Department of Education has bestowed upon our school the glorious status of a model schooooooool!”

Gasps of excitement rose up from the other teachers, but Alphina didn’t understand. What was a model school? Would it entail Miss Velor dressing up in a swimsuit and then posing on the cover of a magazine? And speaking of Miss Velor, she was elatedly exclaiming, “Principal Melvina, our hard work has finally borne fruit!”

“It has indeed, Velor! All of that time spent sucking up to those deplorable bureaucrats will fiiiiiiiinally be worth it!”

The other teachers started to applaud as well. “Truer words have never been spoken about those scumbags!” someone shouted.

“After eating and drinking as much as they did with *our* money! Serves them right!”

“All the elbow grease we put into this has finally paid off!”

“This is the effect of all those golden cookies we got for them to eat!”

Huh! So this is the world of adults! Alphina was no longer able to keep up with the conversation, and so, hiding behind Mister Honey Bear, she took out the ham sandwich she hadn’t been able to eat during lunch and started to chew on it. Mister Bear wasn’t part of the celebrations. Instead, he stood with his arms crossed, an irritated look on his face. *Huh, so Mister Bear’s surprisingly the straitlaced type! Munch, munch.*

The principal was still talking. “It’s a little last minute, but I’ve invited a special guest to Melvina Elementary School—now a respectable model school within the empire!” Even more cheers rose from the gathered staff, and the principal continued, “This guest shall observe our school for two weeks. I’m sure that allllll of you know him quite well. Make sure you give him a nice, warm welcome!”

Wow, someone that famous is gonna show up? Munch, munch, munch. Alphina shoved the rest of the ham sandwich into her mouth, absentmindedly wondering if she should ask him for a signature.

“Please enter, oh pride of our empire—Prince Lionett Lione, the Golden Sword!” the principal announced.

PFF— WHAAAAA?????????!!!!!!!!! As soon as Lionett entered the room with a shake of his golden hair, sighs of admiration escaped from the mouths of the teachers, right as the remnants of the ham sandwich escaped from Alphina’s.

Lionett had always been handsome. Even foreign factions were aware of his good looks. But ever since losing his fiancée to the Saint’s trickery, he’d carried upon himself a shroud of melancholy, only adding to his attractiveness to the point that princesses and noblewomen alike swarmed him the moment he set foot outside of the empire. There were even women so touched by his beauty that they could no longer speak nor breathe, causing them to faint at his feet.

Right now, for instance, the sounds of the female staff falling to the ground were echoing throughout the meeting room. In Alphina’s opinion, a man that good-looking was more troublesome than handsome, but in this case at least, the prince wasn’t at fault.

Incidentally, Kithling Ashley was at Lionett's side, as usual. His hair was no longer in the slicked-back style that he had used during his terrorist days when he'd lived as Blue Lightning, and it was back to his normal cut. He might've taken into consideration what a terrible influence that style would be to the young children of the school.

The prince looked around the room with his blue eyes and then started to speak in a solemn tone. "I apologize for my sudden visit. For the next two weeks, I shall observe your classes. The future of the empire rests upon the shoulders of the children, and thus, the school those children learn in must be a good and proper one. I promise that I will not get in the way of your work, so please conduct yourselves as you would on a normal day. I look forward to seeing your good work."

His face was as scrunched up as usual, but everyone in the empire knew that this was just how the prince was. So no one felt insulted by it. Rather, it seemed that his severe attitude was perceived as unbearably sexy, because two more female teachers collapsed onto the ground. At this point, "troublesome" was no longer enough to describe him. He was on the level of a natural disaster, like a hurricane or a tornado.

Why in the world did he come to observe the school now*?* Alphina thought to herself. *Could they have discovered who I am...? No, that can't be it. If Lionett knew, then he wouldn't bother with an observation. He'd come to me directly.*

But if his goal was to get in contact with Carl, then it wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Alphina held her breath and stayed still, and upon noticing her, Mister Bear asked, "Miss Al, is something the matter? You've been sneaking around for a while now."

"No! Nothing is the matter!" She'd cast Disrecognition upon herself, so there was no way that Lionett and Kithling would figure out she was actually Alphina. And yet for some reason, the two of them had almost managed to see through her disguise in the past. She wanted to avoid bringing attention to herself for as long as she could.

However, if they were going to be observing the school for two weeks, then it seemed impossible for Alphina to avoid them the entire time. *Ugh...my head's*

starting to hurt... Though she didn't want to, Alphina had no other choice but to accept that her school life was going to be a tumultuous one.

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By this point, it had been over a year since Alphina's substitute doll had offered her head at the guillotine. The sight of the successful execution had caused everyone in the empire to believe that Alphina had died. That meant it had been around a year since Alphina last lived in the empire, which also coincided with how long she hadn't dropped by her parents' house. So it was natural that her parents would tell her to visit at least once if she was going to be working in the same country as them.

It's kind of hard to face them, though.

It had been a long time since Alphina had fled her parents' nest, but she wasn't so coldhearted that she would ignore her kind and gentle family's pleas for her to return home. So she decided that she would drop by for at least a "hello." Having said that, though, she couldn't very well just go and knock on their front door. After all, she was supposed to have been executed. Her first homecoming after so many months was done in secret via the back entrance, with nary a servant in sight to greet her.

"Oh, Alphina! How I've missed you!" Her father, Duke George Sylvana, had tears in his eyes. It might've been a trick of Alphina's mind, but it felt like there was more gray in his hair than before. She knew for sure that he was a lot broader than the last time she'd seen him, though, considering his belly was so round that his shirt was practically about to rip apart. Only a year ago, he had looked much too skinny to be healthy. It was quite the drastic change. "It's really you standing before me, healthy and alive, right?!"

"Yes, and as you can see, I'm doing perfectly well. I apologize for any worries I might've caused," Alphina replied.

"To tell you the truth, I couldn't believe that you survived your execution until seeing you with my own eyes! I had my doubts when you said that a doll had been beheaded in your place... I never imagined I'd be able to embrace you like this again!"

Her father's voice was tight with emotion, and not even Alphina was immune to the sight of him like this. Her willpower was as strong as ale that had been fermented for a decade (according to Scarlet) after reincarnating ninety-nine times. But she finally felt her heart soften, and her eyes started to burn from unshed tears.

"By the way, where's mother? Is she still in bed?" Alphina asked. The sun was already high in the sky, but her mother was a late riser thanks to her low blood pressure. Thus, she often slept in until around nine in the morning. "I figured she might be unwell, so I brewed some nutritious medicinal teas for her to drink and build up her stamina. It's a recipe that grandmother left behind, using herbs that only grow in the Amazone Forest."

"Ah, Mary is, um..."

A bad feeling started to well up inside Alphina when she saw the way that her father averted his gaze in an awkward manner. “Don’t tell me she’s been feeling sick again?” When her father didn’t reply, Alphina pressed. “Is it a stomachache? A headache? Both? Does she have a fever?”

The more questions she asked, the more anxious she felt. Right when she was about to rush into the mansion, the wooden door slowly opened to reveal Mary Nan Sylvana herself.

“Oh, it’s Alphina. Alph, is it *really* you?” Mary asked in a weak and raspy voice. Hearing her name said in such a way, along with her guilt over staying away from home for so long, caused Alphina’s eyes to grow hot again.

“Yes, mother, it’s me—the one and only Alphina. Though it was due to extenuating circumstances, I hope you’ll forgive me for being such a disobedient daughter.”

“Please, come closer. I wish to see your face properly.”

“Yes, of course!” Alphina rushed forward, prepared to leap into her mother’s waiting arms, when— “OW!”

Suddenly, she felt a knee—more specifically, a strike from a knee. Her mother’s bony knee had bent and lashed out, slamming straight into Alphina’s stomach. Alphina stumbled backward, but even as she did so, her mother continued her assault with a punch and a body blow. Mary struck Alphina’s solar plexus with pinpoint accuracy, and Alphina’s guttural scream of “GUOH!” (which was very unseemly for a duke’s daughter) rang through the air.

“How! Dare! You!” Mary accused. “Do! You! Even! Know! How! Worried! I! Was?!”

“GAH!” Alphina squirmed about on the ground.

The strength behind her mother’s hits was no laughing matter. Just where had she gotten this strength?! In all ninety-nine of Alphina’s lives, her mother had been so sickly that on the seventy-third time, she’d even broken her rib from sneezing too hard and had to be rushed to the hospital. Upon closer inspection, however, her mother’s thin arms were as taut as an artisan’s bowstring. It was clear that, unlike before, she had gone through some serious

training.

"It's thanks to the far eastern art of 'kara-tay.' Our next-door neighbor Countess Escarlio and I have been taking classes for the past year. In the beginning, it was just for health reasons and so we could slim down, but my instructor said that I've reached the level of being able to execute deathstrike techniques."

"Er, mother, you just really casually said something super crazy!"

How in the world did taking martial arts lessons to stay healthy and fit turn into that*?! And hello?! Don't use the deathstrike technique on your own daughter!*

While still crawling on the ground, Alphina stared up at her sickly mother, who was emanating a powerful aura. "I-It's true that I've caused you a lot of trouble, mother! But how could you air out your grievances through violence when your own daughter has come to see you after so long?! Weren't you the one who told me, 'A duchess must always carry herself in a calm and sophisticated manner'?!"

Her mother's reply was a silent shake of her head as she enthusiastically gestured with her hand for Alphina to stand up.

"I am *not* standing up!" Alphina yelled. "You'll just punch me if I do, right?!" Her mother shook her head some more. "Liar! I bet you'll punch me!" Her mother shook her head even more. "You're really not gonna punch me?" Her mother was still shaking her head. *So which is it?!* Since this was clearly getting nowhere, Alphina figured she would just stand up, and...as she'd suspected, she was greeted with a punch in the stomach. "See? I knew you would punch me... Bleh..."

Something disgusting that should never leak out of a duke's daughter's mouth flew out of Alphina's, and she collapsed onto the floor. From her place on the ground, she heard her father's words, spoken in a comforting voice. "Alph, please try to understand your mother's feelings and see where she's coming from."

"If it's her *fist*, I saw that coming, all right... But her feelings?"

“She wanted you and Carl to be safe on your journey. So ever since she got your letter, she’s climbed Mt. Aralt every single day and offered ten thousand punches of prayer.”

“I see. So she got so tough as a side effect of doing that...” Alphina mused out loud.

“Everything she’s done has been for her beloved daughter,” her father insisted.

“Did she not have the option to pray normally?”

“Everything that she’s accomplished has been thanks to the power of a mother’s love.”

“Is that *really* what you wanna call it right after she punched her own daughter?!”

Her mother heaved a sigh so great that it sounded more like the long exhale of a bull. Alphina’s mother was no longer the same person she was before. She would’ve never, under any circumstances, breathed like a bull in the past. “Well, I’m sure we have lots to catch up on,” Mary said. “Why don’t you come inside for a spell?”

“Mother, I sorely wish you would’ve started our conversation with that suggestion.”

And so, Alphina was led to the parlor. Though the room itself was familiar, several pieces of furniture had been replaced with new, more expensive-looking ones. Alphina found it truly strange that so much had changed in the span of a mere year.

“Now then, Alphina, please take a seat. I’m sure you’re hungry, aren’t you?” her mother said.

“Y-Yes...” At that response, her mother served her some warm black tea and a handmade cheese pie. Sure, Mary had sucker punched her, but at the end of the day, she was still her mother. She’d given her daughter her favorite snack. Cheese pies bought from a stall were delicious, but the ones her mother made were simply divine.

“I’ve given all of the servants today off. The truth of your survival is something that only we and Prince Lionett are aware of. That’s how it must be, correct?”

“Yes. Thank you for your consideration, mother.”

It seemed that her muscles had not infected her brain, so Alphina could rest easy on that front. She once again explained all that had happened to her, as well as what had transpired since the execution, to her parents. The information was a repeat of what she had written in her letter, but like she’d expected, her father couldn’t conceal his surprise at everything. Incidentally, Alphina chose to keep her reincarnation loops and Telepathy a secret. The only people she’d told about them were Scarlet and Carl.

“All of the men in the empire were under the control of the Saint’s spell...? I still can’t believe it,” her father murmured.

“Yes. You, and even the emperor, were affected by the Geis as well. Absolutely no one was spared.”

“I know that she was Lord Xenos’s priestess and that she was capable of using old magic, but I could’ve never imagined that such a feat was possible!”

“Right? It’s unsurprising that even grandmother was looking into that spell.” As she said that, Alphina wondered, *If I told my father right now that I’m able to use old magic to read people’s thoughts, would he believe me?*

In between sips of her tea, Alphina’s mother said, “At the time, I had no idea what was going on. I thought that all of the men in the empire had been seduced by the Saint.”

“I, at the very least, would’ve never fallen for her when I have you as my lovely wife!” Alphina’s father sounded a little miffed, but her mother nodded as if nothing was wrong.

“Of course, I know that you would never do that to me.”

It appeared that the relationship between the two of them was as strong as ever, to Alphina’s relief. There were a few gossipy nobles who loved to spread rumors like, *“That timid Duke Sylvana is so whipped by his wife that he doesn’t have the guts to try anything with other women. Despite his poor standing, he could have as many mistresses as he wanted!”* But as their daughter, Alphina

knew better than anyone how much her parents loved each other.

“However, we no longer need to worry about any of that. The Saint self-destructed in Heavenrose Castle and went on ahead to the afterlife,” Alphina said reassuringly.

“Right, we heard about that from Prince Lionett, but...” her father still had a pinched expression on his face.

“Is there something you’re concerned about?” she asked.

“Actually, I’ve heard rumors that those who still worship the Saint have been acting out lately.”

For a second, Alphina thought she must’ve heard wrong. “Oh my! There’s still people out there who believe in that sow—I mean, the Saint? I thought her brainwashing had already worn off.”

“They must be remnants of the Church of Xenos,” Alphina’s father said. “You don’t have to use magic to convince them that the Saint is absolute.”

“I thought that His Imperial Majesty ordered the arrest of all members of the church?”

“The various branches of the church have closed down, but apparently some of them have gone into hiding. Prince Lionett has been leading the search for their whereabouts, so I’m sure that they’ll be caught eventually.”

“The prince is handling the search himself?” Alphina asked. At the same time, she wondered, *Then why did he come to Melvina?* If he was busy investigating, then he shouldn’t have had the time to perform a task as low priority as observing a school.

“Speaking of the prince,” Alphina’s mother said, “Alph, are you serious about not reclaiming your status as the Golden Sword’s fiancée?”

“I am.” Alphina’s answer had been swift and sure, but her mother continued to speak as if she hadn’t said anything.

“Honestly, when it was decided that you would become his fiancée back then, I was terrified. I wasn’t sure if you would be suitable as a bride for the prince, let alone the next empress of Lione.”

“I wouldn’t, so that’s why I—”

“Oh yes, the past you wouldn’t have been the right fit at all. But you’ve changed. Now, you’re the Greatest Vermilion! You’re so famous that everyone in the empire knows your name.”

“Woooow...” Ever since becoming a teacher, Alphina would often hear people mention that title, but hearing it from the mouth of her own mother was a different kind of embarrassing.

“Over the past year, the Saint’s villainous conspiracy has been thoroughly exposed. In contrast, your reputation has only been skyrocketing. Alphina, you’ve earned the people’s esteem as both an inspiration for the empire’s women and as a tragic heroine.”

“A... A tragic heroine?” Alphina could feel goose bumps all over her skin. “Tragic heroine” was a phrase that should never have been put in the same sentence as her name. At the very least, it was the complete opposite of her personal taste.

There was no part of Alphina Shinn Sylvana who found beauty in sacrificing herself for the greater good. Unless it was a world that strictly followed the philosophy of, “I can help others while benefiting myself, so everyone is happy,” then something would inevitably go wrong down the line. However, Alphina knew perfectly well that not everyone thought the same way she did.

“It’s not just the citizenry; I heard that His Imperial Majesty has been completely heartbroken,” Alphina’s mother continued. “A lot of his vassals have heard him lamenting over the loss of ‘his Alphie-poo.’”

“H-Hmm...” She’d completely forgotten until now that the emperor had referred to her as such in his inner thoughts. It was difficult to imagine the word “Alphie-poo” coming from that severe face of his.

“There’re also rumors that when the prince heard the emperor say that, he said, ‘She’s *my* Alphie-poo.’”

“Okay, someone must’ve been exaggerating that one!” Alphina couldn’t believe that even Prince Lionett called her ‘Alphie-poo’... Except, it actually *was* a little plausible.

“Alph, take a look at this.” Her mother pointed to a stack of books on the parlor table.

When Alphina flipped through them, she saw that they were all published works dedicated to her. “Whoa, what is this?! *The Reason She’s Loved: The Beautiful History of the Duke’s Daughter’s Romances*; *She’s Called the Princess Who Offered Her Head*; *Ninety Percent of a Woman’s Charm Is Her Tragedy*; *Superheroine Power*; *Greatest Vermilion-Style Tragic Love Strategies*... A-Are all of these books about me?!”

“That’s right. Every publisher in the empire wants to put out a book about you, so authors and editors have been dropping by constantly.”

“It’s a total waste of printing magic and paper, isn’t it?”

Ever since someone had figured out how to easily use printing magic so long as you had a fairly high-quality facility for it, something called “publishing” had become popular in the empire. Many written media—such as newspapers, novels, and picture books—had been published en masse, and it became the norm for even small towns to have at least one bookstore. But Alphina had never thought that any of those bookstores would carry works about *her*.

“What is this? *Alphina’s 100 Motivational Quotes*? I don’t remember leaving behind any quotes.”

She started to thumb through it. The twenty-second “quote” was, “Start from your favorite food during mealtimes.” Well, she *did* say that, but was it really a motivational quote?

“By the way, I’ve published three books myself,” her mother said. “*Dear Alphina in the Afterlife: Giving Birth to the Tragic Princess*; *Mother Will Win in the End*; and *365 Meals to Raise the Vermilion Heroine*.”

“Mother, not you too?!” It could’ve been her imagination, but Alphina started to feel dizzy. “By the way, father, I’ve been a little curious about something for a while now.”

“What is it, sweetie?” he replied.

“Is it just me, or is the furniture a lot nicer than before? This table used to be an old family heirloom, but now there’s a brand-new, sparkly one in its place.”

Alphina's father gave her a bright smile. "Why, that's thanks to the Alphina buns."

"The... The what buns?"

"Ha ha ha! Alphina buns!" He took out a paper bag. On it, there was a drawing of a girl with long red hair, and inside, there were about five little soft sweets that appeared to be made of bread. The same picture of the red-haired girl from the bag was stamped on top of each one. "You know what buns are, don't you? They're snacks from a country in the Far East."

"Right, I remember you loving them."

"That's correct. After I lost you, I found myself devouring buns in order to fill the gaping sadness in my heart. But that's when an idea struck me."

"So that's how your stomach became so big..."

"In the beginning, I started selling them so that no one would forget you, but they became insanely popular. I hit the jackpot! My income last year was the highest among the seven noble families."

"I see..." Alphina felt so tired that she couldn't even muster the energy to sigh. She picked out one of the buns and took a bite. There was bright red jam in the middle, which had the perfect amount of sweetness. It was pretty good.

"That jam really gave me trouble," her father said. "I was very particular about every single ingredient that went into it, since I wanted it to recreate the red of your hair."

Words failed Alphina, though she wasn't sure if that was because she was impressed or in disbelief. Her father was kind and gentle, but he was known to lack business sense. She had no idea how it could've happened, but he seemed to have awakened to his talent after his daughter left the house.

Her mother cleared her throat and said, "Well, there you have it, Alph. Now that you've become the 'idol' of the empire, no one would look down on you if you were to get married to Prince Lionett."

Alphina scratched at the back of her head. "Umm, I don't think that's a good idea."

“Whyever not?”

“I mean, everyone’s talking me up like I’m some tragic heroine. So if I pop out like, ‘Hey, folks, I’m actually alive!’ and then get married to the prince, wouldn’t they get mad at me because it would feel like I’d tricked them?”

Her mother shook her head firmly. “No, they’d welcome you with open arms.”

“Why do you say that?”

“From time to time, newspapers and magazines bring up conspiracy theories about your survival. This sort of thing happens every time a hero dies. You’ve heard stories like, ‘So-and-so is supposedly dead, but they’re actually still alive,’ haven’t you?”

“Ugh, I have.” When a great person dies, the public can’t accept it and thus make up a story about how they’re living somewhere completely unharmed. In Alphina’s opinion, that was perfectly understandable. But she’d never thought that she would fall into that category.

“I believe that if Prince Lionett brought you back, no one would object to your return. In fact, they’d probably lose their minds with excitement. Don’t you agree, dear?” Alphina’s mother turned to her father with the last question, and he nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s exactly as Mary says. Your presence in the empire would have an amazing effect on our international prestige too. Under present circumstances, your marriage with Prince Lionett would guarantee a bright future for the Lione Empire.”

“Hmm...” Though Alphina hated to admit it, her father was probably right. From a logical standpoint, she could accept it, but emotionally? No way! She’d finally started to live her own life, free from her previous status as the prince’s betrothed, and now she had to go back to all of that? “I’m deeply sorry, you two, but my mind is set. I’ll come by to see you every now and then, so would you please offer your blessings for this tragic heroine to live her own life?”

Her parents’ brows furrowed. “On our end, we’d feel much better if you were to get married to the prince,” her father said.

“Yes, I agree, Alph. When are you going to give me a grandchild to hold and coddle?” her mother asked.

Oof, that’s something I never wanted to hear! Alphina thought. Out loud, she said, “In any case! I am not thinking about marriage at *all*, whether it’s with the prince or with anyone else!”

Her father rubbed at his healthy-looking face. “Well, I guess there’s no helping it if you’re so sure about your future. But it doesn’t seem like the prince has gotten over you.” Alphina’s shoulders jumped, but he didn’t seem to notice as he continued. “Prince Lionett himself asked us to inform him if you ever returned, Alph. So I guess we’re going back on our word.”

“I apologize...” That was the only thing Alphina could say to that.

“If you ever change your mind and decide to marry the prince, don’t hesitate to tell us. I’d be more than happy to have him as my son-in-law,” her mother said.

“That’s never going to happen!” Alphina shook her head violently. She was going to have to think carefully and come up with a plan to deal with the prince’s proposal.

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That night, at her parents’ request, Alphina stayed over at their house. “It’s been forever since I’ve slept in this bed!” she exclaimed, stretching out with a sound of pleasure. As she lay on the wooden bed she’d slept in since middle school, she stared up at the nostalgic view of the ceiling. Many things had changed, and plenty of things remained the same. But at the very least, it seemed that her bedroom was as welcoming as it had always been.

After she’d lazed around for a little while, she heard a cat meow three times from outside of her window. It was the signal that she and her loyal butler had decided upon together. Alphina stood up, opened the window, and smiled at the cat.

“Good work, Scarlet. I’m sorry for having you make such a long trip.”

“My pleasure. It’s truly an honor to be summoned to the glorious Sylvana mansion. Please excuse my entering from the window.” Scarlet, in his white cat

form, leapt in from the window and onto the floor, swishing his long tail. “So this is your room, Lady Alphina?”

“Yep. It doesn’t look like a princess’s room at all, does it? It’s nothing but wide, empty space.”

“Oh no. It’s a wonderful room that visually represents your honest and straightforward personality, Lady Alphina.” Scarlet spoke the words so casually, and without changing his expression.

Goodness, but leave it to him, and he can turn any of my negatives into positives! If a publishing company ever meets him, it’ll probably ask him to write an entire book about his “Lady Alphina.”

“I see you’ve been enjoying your stay at home. It has been a while, hasn’t it?” Scarlet said.

“Pretty much! My stomach kinda hurts, though.”

“Have you...eaten something expired?”

“I ate my mom’s delicious cheese pie, but the problem was more that I also ate her fist.”

“Her fist?”

“Ah no. It’s nothing.” Alphina gave Scarlet a strained smile and then changed the topic to the one she’d summoned him for. “As soon as we solve the whole thing with Hipper, I’m going to leave the school. I feel kind of bad because I’ve only been a teacher for about a month, but I’d like you to handle the paperwork for me.”

Scarlet flicked his tail. “Yes, I agree that leaving would be the best option. Now that the prince and Kithling are at the school, prolonging your stay would only increase the chances of your true identity being exposed.”

“Right?”

“Even if you use Disrecognition, it can be overridden by a more powerful perception of your identity.” If that happened, then this time for sure, Alphina would lose her freedom. She’d be taken to the palace and tied down through a marriage with the prince, never able to escape again. “But are you sure you’re

all right with departing? You wouldn't be able to watch over Lord Carl."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Alphina said firmly. She'd been sure of her resolve ever since the naspy incident. Her little brother had matured and changed far faster than his sister could have predicted. She'd been under the impression that he was still soft and spoiled. However, he was slowly but surely creating new friendships and connections at school. "Before, Carl would've never tried to compete with Hipper. He wouldn't have shown any emotions or reactions, and would've continued to ignore him no matter how much he was getting bullied."

"I'm not familiar with how Lord Carl was before, but is that really the way he would have reacted?"

"Yeah. He never showed any interest in anything." That was why people had said he'd forgotten his emotions inside of his mother's womb. He hadn't tried to interact with his peers, nor had he even attempted to make friends. "But Carl's different now. He's starting to mature into a proper adult, and if I'm around, I'll end up getting in his way. I wouldn't be able to help myself from trying to take care of him."

"I understand, but Lady Alphina, how about you? Will you not feel lonely?"

She heaved a heavy sigh. "I mean, of course I'm reluctant to say goodbye to Carl. I'll miss him so much. But I'll return to the empire once every year, so I'll be able to see him then."

That was the compromise she and her parents, who wanted Alphina to get married to the prince and stay in the empire, had come up with after their discussion.

Scarlet's tail swished gently. "So it won't be an eternal farewell, then. In that case, I believe it is a good decision for your family as well."

"Yeah. I'd hate to eat my mother's punch in the stomach a second time." Upon remembering that powerful blow to her body, Alphina shuddered and rubbed at her torso.

"I see. Then I shall arrange for the temporary teacher Miss Al to leave at the end of the month. What are we going to do after that?" Scarlet asked.

"I'm thinking of leaving the Amazone Forest for a bit and then setting up a

little hideout at Mt. Flame Dragon." Though it was still called Mt. Flame Dragon, the dragon was no longer there. Prince Lionett had defeated it in the past.

"And how do you plan on dealing with Lord Hipper?"

Alphina nodded resolutely. "I'll listen to his inner voice. If I do that, I'll be able to figure out why he's picking fights with Carl."

"Is there really no other way?"

"Nope. I didn't really want to use it, but this'll be the last time." If she had planned on remaining as a teacher, then Telepathy wasn't something that she should pull out willy-nilly. But it should be all right since this was the last thing she planned to do before leaving the school. Carelessly reading other people's thoughts was wrong, but in Alphina's opinion, it was a given that you should utilize the power you had to in times of necessity. "It'd be a delightful relief if the two of them became friends after all's said and done."

"I understand."

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Back at Melvina, Alphina spent her lunch break in the staff room. She'd discovered that even the school cafeteria carried Alphina buns and was shocked at how amazingly well her father's business was doing. After eating a bun of herself so that she could contribute to his sales, she removed the sealing bracelet from around her arm. She normally wore it as a safety measure so that she didn't accidentally activate her Telepathy.

I'm going to have a direct discussion with Hipper today and try to read his mind. With determination in her heart, she stood up, and Mister Bear, who was eating his honey as usual that day, called out to her.

"Oh, Miss Al, where are you going?"

"Ah, I thought I'd get in some postlunch exercise."

"I admire your diligence," Mister Bear said. After his initial carefree words, he lowered his voice and continued. "Please keep an eye out for Prince Lionett. I heard that he's looking around the school today as well. It'd be terrible if you did something strange and caught his attention in a bad way."

“Yes, I’ll be careful.” Even as Alphina answered, she couldn’t help the curiosity welling up within her. It seemed that Mister Bear didn’t like the prince very much. “Disrespectful” was too strong a word for it, but it looked as if he was at least distrustful of Lionett. Considering the prince had been given the nickname “Lord Cold Heart,” there were quite a number of people who didn’t like him. But what could’ve been the cause behind Mister Bear’s negative feelings for him?

Wait, I’ve got something more important to deal with. Alphina left the staff room and made her way to the classroom. School lunch wasn’t being served in the cafeteria today, so the majority of the students should’ve been eating lunches they’d brought from home. She planned to come up with a random reason to call Hipper out and create the opportunity to speak with him one-on-one.

When she opened the door, about half of the class was present. All of them had finished eating and were spending the break in various ways, such as chatting among themselves or previewing for their afternoon classes. Any students who weren’t in the classroom were likely out playing in the schoolyard. Carl was helping some female students with their studies, likely after being asked to do so. Hipper, however, was nowhere to be seen. Two boys at the back of the classroom were playing catch with a rag they’d balled up, and Alphina asked them his whereabouts.

“You’re looking for Hipper? I dunno where he is.”

“He always goes off by himself during lunch break.”

At the same time they spoke out loud, she heard their inner voices.

(He’s so unsociable!)

(He’s always so cold when we try to talk to him. I wonder if he doesn’t want to be friends with people from the empire?)

After thanking them, Alphina left the classroom. She’d never thought that he was the type to eat lunch all by himself, which just furthered the mystery. How did a proud transfer student from Heavenrose spend his lunch break? Was he playing in the courtyard, or was he taking a nap somewhere? Or perhaps he was practicing his magic in some secluded location? In the past, the famous Lord

Blackrose had spent his lunch breaks having tea parties with beautiful girls in the cafeteria, so that was a possibility too.

As she continued to walk down the hallway, she heard someone call out to her from behind. “You, over there. May I have a word with you?”

She stopped, heart in her throat. When she turned around, she saw a bespectacled man with blue hair standing there.

“Oh my. Hello there, Mister Shitty Specs.”

“I beg your pardon? What did you say just now?”

“I said your glasses suit you very well, Lord Kithling. Oh ho ho.” She’d accidentally let slip her true emotions.

“You know my name?”

“Y-Yes, of course. Everyone knows of Lord Kithling Ashley, the prince’s right-hand man and one of the best strategists in the empire.”

Mister Shitty Specs started to push up said specs with his fingers. “Oh no, that is far too much praise. I’ve only been doing whatever I can by the heroic Prince Lionett’s side. With less military tensions to worry about, the prince has been very busy with diplomatic talks and domestic affairs. I might not be able to accomplish much, but I have been assisting as best as I blah blah blah...”

“Woooow, that’s amazing.” Alphina smiled as she let Kithling’s words go in one ear and out the other. She clenched her fist tightly by her side. *Aaaaahhhh!!!!!!!!!! The lunch break is gonna end soon! You’re in the way, you talkative, shitty four-eyes!*

She wanted to say, *“I’m in a hurry, so pardon me!”* and make her escape, but Mister Bear had just given her a warning. She absolutely must avoid doing things that would raise suspicion, or else Kithling and the prince would keep a closer eye on her, leading them to figure out who she was.

“Oh, by the way, what’s your name?” Kithling asked.

“My name is Arlicia Mia Alice, and I am the assistant teacher for Class 5-1.”

“Hmm? That’s Carl Mann Sylvana’s class, isn’t it?” From behind the lenses of his glasses, it looked as if his eyes glimmered sharply.

“I-It’s true that Carl is in my class, but what does that matter?”

“No. There’s no particular reason, but... I see... So you’re his class’s assistant teacher?” He was staring intently at Alphina’s face—or, more precisely, at her red hair. Thanks to Disrecognition, it should’ve been more difficult for him to mentally tie Alphina with Arlicia, but like Scarlet had said, a strong perception of her identity would be able to break through the spell.

“Umm, could you not stare at me so much?” Alphina said nervously.

“My apologies. I exercised improper behavior towards a lady.” Kithling cleared his throat, and as he did so, Alphina heard his inner voice. *(What beautiful red hair she has! I can’t help but remember* her*... Ah, Princess Alphina, where are you now? The prince and I are waiting for your return!)*

Um... Excuse me, but...I didn’t remove my bracelet because I wanted to listen to your *inner voice, you know?*

At that moment, the bell cruelly began to ring.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!! THE LUNCH BREAK IS OVER!!!!!!!!!!” Alphina screamed.

Kithling cleared his throat and then said, “By the way, Miss Arlicia, how would you feel about having tea with me one day?”

“I’m! Flattered!” Alphina screeched. “But! No! Thanks!”

Aren’t you here to observe the school?! What in the world do you think you’re doing, hitting on one of the teachers?! Now that you’re done terrorizing Heavenrose, you’ve decided to terrorize women?! She desperately wanted to yell these words at Kithling but held her tongue. She had to protect her identity.

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“Bye-bye, Miss Al!” the students said.

“All right, everyone, bye-bye!” After classes ended, Alphina bid her farewells to the students on their way home, and then sprinted through the hallways.

She’d tried to say something to Hipper as soon as classes ended, but Velor stopped her before she could and gave her some small tasks to do. That had eaten up about ten minutes of her time. No matter how you spun it, searching for the principal’s dentures because he’d lost them somewhere in the magic supplies closet was *not* part of a teacher’s job description. For starters, why were his dentures in the magic supplies closet? Alphina couldn’t help but worry about the collective sanity of the school. In the end, the dentures were found in the girls’ bathroom, which was even crazier.

That wasn’t important, though. Hipper was. When she asked one of her students, he said, “As soon as school’s over, he goes home by himself!” So it appeared that, like during lunch break, he spent his after-school time by himself. Things got fishier and fishier. Shouldn’t a child his age be walking around with his friends or staying behind to chat with his peers on school grounds? What could he be doing, and where?

Alphina walked all the way to the students’ foyer and just so happened to see Hipper leaving from the front gate. She was able to recognize him immediately

thanks to his lovely black hair. *Phew! I made it in time.* She was still wearing her inside shoes, but she was just about to leave the foyer when someone spoke to her from behind.

"Humph. You're Arlicia Mia Alice?"

She recognized who it was without even needing to turn around. Alphina had lived a hundred lifetimes, and in every single one, she'd only met one person who couldn't be satisfied unless he prefaced every sentence with "humph." She slowly turned around, and like she'd expected, a man with golden hair and icy blue eyes was standing there.

It was Lionett Lione—a hero who had received all of the beauty goddess Dite's blessings and earned the dragonslayer title. Women who didn't blush upon being spoken to by the prince were likely in the minority, but right now, he was nothing more than an obstacle in Alphina's way. He had as much value as a pile of cat turds in the middle of the road. She dearly wanted to leap over his head and avoid him, but that would've been a tad too disrespectful.

"O-Oh, if it isn't Prince Lionett! What a pleasure to see you." She shot him a courteous smile while glancing in Hipper's direction. He was walking off at a brisk pace, so she had to hurry after him if she wanted to speak with him. "Er, I apologize, but I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Humph. This won't take long." Despite saying that, though, the prince didn't seem like he planned on getting to the point any time soon. He was much too busy staring at Miss Arlicia's face. Against Alphina's wishes, his inner voice rang in her head. *(Hmm? Hmmmm?! It's exactly as Kithling said! She truly resembles my Alphina! My adorable Alph!)*

I'm not yours, *and I'm not cute*, Alphina suppressed the urge to say and, as Miss Arlicia, tilted her head to the side. "So, Your Highness, what is it that you want from me?"

"Humph. Do you know a woman named Alphina Shinn Sylvana?"

Oh boy, here we go. Out loud, she said, "Yes, of course I know of her. She's Lady Greatest Vermilion, isn't she? She's *very* famous. I heard that she was a tragic heroine who was executed as a result of the Saint's conspiracy, and I aspire to reach her levels of beauty and sublimity. Oh ho ho..." She was

laughing, but she could feel goose bumps break out all over her skin. There was nothing more cringey than praising herself in this manner.

"Humph. Your hair is the same color as Alphina's."

"This isn't my natural hair color. I wanted to be like Princess Alphina so bad that I went and dyed my hair. Have I done a good job at it?"

"Humph. Do you know about the Alphina buns?"

Stop changing the subject so quickly! This conversation is going as fast as my head did when it flew off of my neck. "Of course. They were available in the school cafeteria, weren't they? I heard that Princess Alphina's father is the one selling them."

"It appears so. There's red jam inside that, according to Duke Sylvana, matches her hair color."

"Woooow, I see! Well, the jam really is a lovely color."

At that moment, Lionett's azure eyes shone brightly. The bards often compared his gaze to the intensity of lightning, and he directed that fierce look onto Alphina. "No! No! It's wrong! It's *all* wrong!"

"Huh?"

"Alph's... My Alphina's hair was a much more passionate crimson that mirrored her personality! It was a red that burned like the sun setting across the horizon! That jam doesn't convey even half of what was special about her!"

"Okaaaay..." *Oh, this is terrible. What kind of hero gets so worked up over bun fillings?* Hipper's back was a mere dot in the distance at this point. "Your Highness, if this is what you wish to discuss, then I should really get—"

"In that regard, your hair is a spectacular shade of red. It's truly close to what her hair color was."

"Th-Thank you very much." *You're still going to talk about hair?!*

"Did you really dye it? How did you manage to get such a beautiful shade?"

"Th-There's a secret tonic that we use in the far eastern countries, but it's confidential, oh ho ho."

“I see. It’s a color that truly captures the essence of who she was. Is she famous in the Far East as well?”

“Um, who knows? It’s been a while since I left on my journey.”

“A journey, huh? Alphina loved journeying as well. Perhaps she’s off on an adventure in some distant land. I’ve been searching for her for so long, but I have no clue as to where she is.”

I’m here! Right in front of you! With my anger burning as red as my hair! Oh, how Alphina sorely wished she could scream those words at the prince. Meanwhile, the prince’s inner voice was still reciting his love with tragic sincerity.

(My Alph... Where are you, and what are you doing right now? I can’t help but think of you when I look at the hair of the woman in front of me, and I can hardly contain myself. I wish I hadn’t thought to seek her out. I wish I had listened to Kithling’s warnings. But alas, I’ve come to see her. And like I’d feared, I find my heart stolen away. What a shameless man I am... Alph, won’t you laugh at me?)

“AH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!” Alphina shrieked.

“Wh-What’s the matter with you? Where did that laughter come from?” Lionett replied, sounding taken aback.

“Ah, it’s nothing to concern yourself over. AH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!!!!!”

I’m laughing because you told me to, Your Highness! And besides, just what am I supposed to do other *than laugh?!*



Incidentally, there was no longer hide nor hair of Hipper in Alphina's line of sight. Her talk with him had been delayed until tomorrow.

***

During lunch break the next day, Mister Bear asked, "Oh, Miss Al, you're not going to eat anything?"

"I have some work left to do in the classroom!" Alphina lied. With no food in her belly, she dashed from the staff room to the classroom, but life was a cruel mistress. Hipper, the boy who occupied her every thought, was absent.

He was so quick to run away! Of course, he wasn't trying to run away, but he was so fleet of foot that Alphina couldn't help but mentally click her tongue. Was there a secret that he didn't want anybody to know? He moved fast enough that she'd started to suspect as much.

Fine, if that's how you wanna play, then I won't hold back anymore! In the classroom, which was buzzing with the excitement of a lunch break, Alphina took a deep breath and, after focusing her mind, unleashed the entirety of her magical power. She would expand the range of her Telepathy to its absolute limit and make it so that she could listen to the inner voices of everybody on campus at the moment.

In the past, doing this would cause a migraine. It would also feel like other people's inner voices were stuck echoing inside of her mind even until the next day. So she didn't want to use this method, but she no longer had the luxury of time. She had to escape from the school before Kithling and the prince discovered her true identity. And in order for her to do that, she had to figure out what Hipper's true intentions were. Several "voices" reached Alphina's mind.

(Ugh, I told her not to put any tomatoes into my lunch! My mother's such a dummy!)

(Eww, today's fried egg is too salty! Is grammy starting to lose it?)

(I'm not really hungry today. Maybe I'll just eat some bread.)

These were the voices of the students as they ate their lunches. None of them

sounded like Hipper. He wasn't here.

(I don't feel like taking my afternoon classes. Maybe I'll skip.)

(Ugh, it's Miss Velor's class later? I wish it was Miss Al's.)

That made Alphina very happy to hear, but these weren't the voices she wanted to eavesdrop on either.

(Squee squee squa-heeeeeee! ♪ Squee squeeeeeeee!)

Huh? What's with this piglike voice? Who is it? It's not as bad as that Saint, but it kind of ticks me off. Obviously, this isn't Hipper.

(Oh, these legs of mine! Wherefore art thou taking me to Class 5-1? Alas, don't tell me, you want to meet that red-haired maiden once again? Don't you understand that she isn't Princess Alphina? She's someone completely different. And yet, why can't I stop walking?)

Oh no, someone terrible's coming. Someone horrible is on his way. I gotta get outta here! This evidently isn't Hipper either.

(Here I am once again, eating buns while pondering upon my beloved Alph... Tsk, why am I doing this?! I hate sweet food! Munch, munch!)

Prince Lionett... Ugh, wait, this isn't Hipper either! Nothing she heard was useful for anything other than making her "heartdrums" feel like they were about to explode. But right when she was ready to call off the search, she heard a familiar voice.

(You guys look as healthy as ever, with your glossy leaves.You'll be able to grow even bigger.) The voice was so gentle compared to his speaking timbre that it didn't sound like him at all unless Alphina really paid attention. *(Speaking of which, I can't believe there's someone other than me who takes care of you. Heh heh, I wonder who weeded you guys?)*

There was no mistaking it—this was the voice of Hipper Wilds. It was coming from the garden behind the school, near the quiet flower beds where she had met Scarlet the other day. Now that she knew where he was, she couldn't waste even a second! As soon as she ran out into the hallway, though, she happened to encounter that talkative Shitty Specs.

“Oh? Miss Al, you seem like you’re in a hurry. Where are you off to?”

“To the edge of the world!” She shoved Shitty Specs out of the way and started to run as fast as she could until she reached the flower beds behind the school. “H-Hello there, Hipper!”

Hipper didn’t say anything, but it was clear that he was shocked to see her. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and he froze in place. He was obviously put off by Alphina’s appearance—drenched in sweat and panting—but she didn’t have the time or energy to make herself look any better.

“So you were the one taking care of these flower beds, huh? Thank you. I didn’t know that.” There was a watering can by his feet, and his hands were covered in dirt. He must’ve spent all of his lunch breaks gardening in secret, which was why no one ever knew where he went or saw him.

Hipper’s cheeks grew red, and he roughly patted the dirt off of his hands. “I-It’s not what it looks like!”

So then what is it? Alphina wondered, but thanks to the prince, she knew how to handle boys who couldn’t be honest with their feelings. In fact, she found his awkwardness endearing. “Oh, I get it. You were just gardening because you like it, right? Then instead of thanking you, I should’ve said, ‘Good work,’ since we’re gardening buddies.”

“What do you mean by ‘buddies’?” Hipper asked sullenly, and Alphina smiled at him.

“I also love flowers and plants. The beautiful garden out front with all of its lovely blossoms is nice to look at, but I really like how snug the flower beds here are. They’ve got their own charm and elegance. Something as big as the front garden would need a gardener to maintain it, but you can easily weed flower beds this size yourself. The act of taking care of them is what makes flowers important, but everyone tends to forget about that.”

Hipper stared at Alphina, looking taken aback. “Miss Al, didn’t you come from a far eastern Department of Magic? Aren’t you one of the elites in society?”

“Err, I guess.”

“Then, weren’t you a noble princess over there? How can you say something

like that?” At that question, Alphina couldn’t quite suppress a snort of laughter, and Hipper’s tone grew sharper. “Wh-What’re you laughing at?!”

“I’m sorry. But aren’t you also a noble from the Heavenrose Kingdom?” In answer to her reply, Hipper grumbled and then fell quiet. “Status and heritage don’t matter when it comes to liking flowers or plants, just like how it doesn’t matter if you like the garden out front or the garden back here. Isn’t that how it is?”

“Yeah...” Hipper said after a moment’s pause.

Wow, what a great kid! She didn’t know how the nobility would view him, but Alphina totally liked his attitude. Now, it was about time for her to get to the point. “Hey, I’ve been wanting to ask you this for a while now, but why do you keep picking fights with Carl?” When Hipper didn’t answer, Alphina continued. “You don’t seem the type to bully others, and Carl isn’t the kind of kid who brags about his lineage as part of House Sylvana. There must be another reason, right?”

Hipper still didn’t say anything, which was hardly a surprise. However, his inner voice was a different matter. *(Don’t fall for her tricks! Don’t listen to a teacher like her! Everyone in the empire is an enemy, especially Carl Mann Sylvana! He’s the enemy I should hate the most!)*

“E-Enemy?” The word unconsciously flew out of Alphina’s mouth, and she hurriedly covered it with her hand. Luckily, it didn’t seem like Hipper had heard her. “Hey, I just want to discuss things with you, all right?”

“There’s nothing to discuss!” He sounded firm and resolute.

“C’mon, don’t say that. I’m sure that if we laid it all on the table, then—”

“Shut up! Leave me alone!”

Hipper shoved her shoulders, and Alphina fell to the ground. He wasn’t very strong, but he had momentum on his side. It demonstrated just how powerful his will to reject her was. Without looking back or saying another word, Hipper ran off.

“H-Hey! Please, wait!” But Hipper still didn’t look back. Neither Alphina’s words nor her hand reached him, and within seconds, he’d made it to the other

side of the courtyard. In his place, a beautiful white cat raced towards Alphina from the direction of the back gate. “Scarlet, perfect timing! Go chase after Hipper!”

“Oh, there’s no need for that.”

“Huh? Why?”

The loyal white cat settled at his mistress’s feet and in a calm tone said, “I’ve figured out the reason behind why Hipper Wilds holds animosity towards the empire, and especially towards Lord Carl.”

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Chapter Three

That night, Alphina and Scarlet snuck into the empty school. The security guard was very dedicated to his duties, and so—though she felt bad doing so—Alphina used magic to put him to sleep. Afterwards, she and Scarlet stole into the school's Farsight room. This was an academic facility that allowed students to listen to famous instructors' lectures even from far away.

If all Alphina needed was a simple, bare-bones Farsight, then she could've performed the spell from her room in the staff dormitories. But Scarlet had said, *"We'll be handling some important information, so it would be better if we could use a room that's been properly outfitted."* And so, taking his suggestion into account, the two of them had chosen this room in the school.

Since they couldn't turn on the lights and risk discovery, they used the glow emanating from the miniature illumistones that Alphina had brought with her to look around the room. A seemingly endless number of mirrors covered the walls. The time was just a little over nine at night, so unlike during the daytime, the school was silent, and the mirrors reflected the empty darkness.

"Schools at night sure feel haunted, don't they?" Alphina asked cheerily.

She thought back to the time she'd forgotten something at school and had to sneak in after dark. Though the halls and rooms should've been familiar sights to her, they had looked more like they belonged in a haunted house, and she would jump at the sound of her own footsteps every time she walked around. Back then, she'd welcomed the idea of ghosts—if they existed—popping out in front of her. Now that she was an adult, she knew that humans were infinitely scarier than ghosts could ever be.

"This mirror looks perfect for the task." Scarlet, in his human form, pointed at the largest mirror in the room. He took out a blue magic gem from his pocket, placed it in front of the mirror, and then recited a simple spell. After he finished, he said, "I've recorded what I saw last night into this magic gem. My power was only sufficient to capture a few minutes, but even so, I believe that it's more than enough to get a picture of their conspiracy. Whenever you're ready, Lady

Alphina, go ahead.”

Alphina nodded, placed her hand upon the glass, and then channeled magic into the mirror. The images that had been magically recorded resonated with the Farsight-enchanted mirror and were summoned to the glass. This sort of recording magic was one that Alphina’s grandmother, Yulinar, had initially devised to save memories. Apparently, she’d come up with it for her son after Alphina’s birth, since he’d wanted to record his daughter’s development.

She doubted that any of them could’ve foreseen the spell being used in this way. The image that appeared in the mirror was of an old church inside a forest. A divinely inspiring likeness of a man gallantly raising a sword of lightning had been carved into the front door. This was the most common depiction of God Xenos, who was the supreme deity in the Theva. In other words, the place was a Church of Xenos.

Thanks to the Saint’s conspiracy, the emperor had ordered all of the churches to be closed down. And yet, Alphina could see the faintest glow of candlelight from the window. Through the cracked glass, the sounds of prayer could be heard as well.

“The remaining worshippers have begun to organize in secret,” Scarlet said. “It seems like they’re holding meetings at night when no one would notice them.” The image suddenly became dark. “This was when I snuck in through a small hole in the wall,” he explained.

“So the building’s as dilapidated as it looks?”

“No one’s supposed to be using it right now. So there’s no way they can patch anything up.”

To think they’d be so determined to continue their activities despite the circumstances! Alphina didn’t know if she wanted to congratulate them or shake her head at their unwillingness to give up. Then, an image appeared on the mirror once more. It showed about twenty Xenites, robed in black, offering their prayers. A large portrait of the Saint, Debonaire Lua Lightmist, hung from the wall, and it seemed like that was what they were worshipping.

“Huh? They’re praying to the sow and not to Lord Xenos?” Alphina exclaimed. “Did they forget the hierarchy of their own religion?”

“I agree. It appears that they are no longer Xenites. Rather, they’ve become Debonites.”

Since all of them had covered their faces with their hoods, Alphina couldn’t recognize anyone. But judging by their body shapes, there were plenty of women and children present as well. The church of Xenos preached a doctrine of saving the weak, so they wouldn’t be out of place at a service there, but a religion under the sow would definitely not bother helping the likes of them. Rather, it would be the one oppressing and using them.

At the head of these worshippers stood a tall and wide man. His robes were the only ones that were decorated, to an exaggerated degree. He must’ve been a priest, or held a position similar to one.

“That guy’s probably the leader and organizer of this gathering,” Alphina said.

The sounds of prayer stopped, and the priest stood up. He looked around at the gathered Debonites and started to speak in a loud voice: *“Right now, the world is slandering Her Innocence Saint Debonaire as a villainess. That is a complete and utter lie! The Lione Empire and the Heavenrose Kingdom have joined forces and spread these falsehoods as a way to suppress the Church of Xenos. I’m sure you all understand this, as you’ve gathered here today to pray for the Saint’s resurrection.”*

“Hmm?” Alphina had been listening to his empty speech when she tilted her head to the side. It sort of felt like she recognized that voice from somewhere.

“Her Innocence Saint Debonaire is justice! She is the most beautiful woman in history! She is the light that illuminates this world! She is the one who embodies the will of the great God Xenos! She is the only one who can save this corrupted earth!”

He was so impassioned as he gave his speech that the hood slipped off of his head. A short crew cut and a thick neck with sharp angles were revealed. He was a giant man who looked more like a bear, and Alphina knew exactly who he was.

“M-Mister Honey Bear?!”

Or rather, it was Bayard MacGuyer, Carl’s homeroom teacher!

“He was born in Heavenrose and, as you can see, is a very pious Xenite. I suppose his career as a teacher within the empire is part of his activities as a spy,” Scarlet said.

“So he helped the Saint when she was trying to take over the empire, huh? And then after the Saint died, he had nowhere to go and no one to turn to.”

There was a high chance that the piglike “squee squee” inner voice that she’d heard the other day came from him. It seemed that everyone who worshipped the Saint became a pig on the inside as well.

“Judging by the look on his face, it doesn’t seem like he’s learned his lesson.”

Like Scarlet said, there was an enraptured expression on Mister Bear’s face. It was a look often seen on the most fervent of zealots. Mister Bear slowly prowled through the flock of followers and then stopped in front of one. Black hair was visible from underneath the Debonite’s hood.

“Hipper, stand up.”

“Huh?!” The shocked exclamation tumbled out of Alphina’s mouth. The image of young Hipper Wilds, with his black hair and dark skin, was projected on the mirror. It was unmistakably him, though he had a pained look on his face, as if he was nursing a hurt.

After Mister Bear forced Hipper to his feet, he turned back to the other Debonites and continued his speech. *“This young boy left Heavenrose and came to the empire as a result of his father’s job as a diplomat. His father was a devout Xenite who worked for the church, but was forced to leave the capital because of persecution, and then received a demotion all the way down to the rank of an attaché. Thanks to that, his relationship with his wife crumbled, which is why he was forced to come to the empire with no one else but his son, Hipper.”*

Even through the somewhat grainy image of the Farsight, Alphina could see the way Hipper bit his lip at that statement.

“The empire and the kingdom’s laws vilifying us were what tore this young boy’s family apart. By that same token, the one who denigrated our beloved Saint and caused the closures of our churches was none other than Alphina

Shinn Sylvana!”

“Wha—? Me?!” Alphina couldn’t help but shout. “Hey, that precious Saint of yours sent my head flying off into space ninety-nine times, you know?! It’d be one thing if I hated you Xenites for what she did to me, but *I’m* the one getting the heat?! That’s totally absurd! Hey, are you listening to me, Mister Bear?!”

“This is a recording,” Scarlet said calmly, but Alphina knew that.

“People today praise her as the Greatest Vermilion, but Alphina is nothing more than a villainess! The only Saint in existence is our holy Debonaire Lua Lightmist! Isn’t that right, young Hipper?”

At Mister Bear’s question, Hipper nodded. However, when Alphina took a closer look at his face, it didn’t look like he had been completely brainwashed. Brainwashed Xenites had an empty look in their eyes, but that wasn’t the case with him. There was still a strong will in his gaze and an impertinent expression on his face.

Despite him being a child, Alphina could sense something like pride coming from Hipper, though she wasn’t sure if it was that of a Heavenrose noble or of a “gentleman.” On the other hand, his tightly clenched fist gave off a sense of helpless and directionless rage. That was how things looked to Alphina, anyway.

“Listen up, everyone! We must amass as many accomplices as we can! We must make absolutely certain that those nonbelievers do not find us as we gather our strength, and then we will defeat our enemies! We will send the empire and the kingdom toppling down!”

“Yeah!!!!!!!”

“Her Innocence Saint Debonaire! Squeeeeeee!!!!!!!!!”

“SQUEE SQUEE SQUA-HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!”

Uh... Was all that pig squealing supposed to be a “hip hip hooray”? How am I even supposed to react to that?

Unsurprisingly, the followers of a pig were pigs themselves. And here Alphina had thought that Bayard was a bear. As soon as Mister Bear opened his mouth to give yet another speech, the image suddenly blipped off.

“I apologize,” Scarlet said. “Recording this much took up all the magic power I had.”

“It’s fine. You did a great job,” Alphina assured him. The video that he’d taken was more than enough. “So while Hipper was upset at his parents’ decaying relationship, his homeroom teacher, Mister Bear, invited him to join the Church of Xenos, where he was implanted with hatred towards the empire and me. So that’s why he keeps picking fights with my younger brother, Carl. That’s the gist of it, isn’t it?”

“I believe it’s exactly as you say,” Scarlet answered with a nod. “What are you going to do now? If we hand this magic gem and its contents over to Prince Lionett, then the rest is simple. I’m sure that he would arrest Bayard and then —”

But Alphina shook her head.

“Recording magic is a special trick that only grandmother was capable of. The prince would find out that I’m still alive. And besides, if we leave things to him, then Hipper might get in trouble too,” Alphina said.

Mister Bear was the one who was planting such evil ideas into the head of an innocent child. Even though he was an educator with the responsibility to teach and raise the next generation, he was brainwashing his students and turning them into tools to fulfill his own agenda. There was no way that Alphina could let this slide.

However, if Hipper also ended up receiving whatever punishment she doled out to Mister Bear, then she wouldn’t be any better than a villain like him. She had to tell Hipper the truth as soon as possible and get him away from Mister Bear, all while keeping it on the down-low.

“It looks like this’ll be Miss Al’s first and last big assignment,” Alphina murmured under her breath, even as she burned with fighting spirit.

***

During lunch break the next day, Alphina once again made her way to the flower beds at the back of the school. This time, she took Carl with her.

“Oh, phew. You showed up again today.”

Hipper didn’t say anything in response. In fact, he didn’t even look up at Alphina or acknowledge her existence. He was gardening in silence, and it looked like he was replacing one of the plants with a potted sprout he’d brought. He worked carefully so as not to damage it, going through the task with startling efficiency for an eleven-year-old.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Alphina said. “Do you do this at home too?”

“There aren’t any flower beds in my home here,” he muttered curtly, without halting his task.

His home here—so in other words, the house where he and his father lived in the empire—didn’t have any flower beds? He must have had one at his real home in the Heavenrose Kingdom, then. Alphina knew a thing or two when it came to gardening, and even from her point of view, she could recognize the

fluidity in Hipper's motions. This was not a level of skill that you could attain in a short period of time. He must have been taught how to garden from a young age.

And the person who taught him was probably his mother. Her grandmother Yulinar used to say, "A garden reflects its owner's temperament." From the way he was working, Alphina could see the love that Hipper's mother likely poured into her garden. It was the same affection she must have showered upon him.

"Today, we came here because we wanted to tell you something. Right, Carl?" Alphina said.

Carl nodded and then walked to stand in front of Hipper. Hipper stood up as well and pushed their faces close, glaring straight into Carl's eyes. "Getting a woman to stand up for you? You're a dirty cheater, all right." But Carl didn't rise to the bait. Instead, he stared straight back at Hipper without blinking, and Hipper continued: "Everyone in the empire is a liar and cheat. It's exactly as my teacher said."

"By teacher, you mean Mister Bayard, right?" At Alphina's words, Hipper's shoulders jumped up to his ears. "Hey, Hipper. I may not know all the details, but are you sure what your teacher taught you is right?" He didn't respond. "It's true that the empire has its share of dishonest people, and I probably count as one of them. But is that something you've confirmed for yourself? Isn't that just something you're parroting from Mister Bayard?"

"Shut up!" Hipper turned to glare at Alphina, hostility burning in his gaze. "You lot were the ones who set up Her Innocence with a dirty trap! She was supposed to bring light to this world, but then the empire and the kingdom worked together to kill her! Thanks to that, my family got broken up, you know?!"

"Isn't that just the narrative that Mister Bayard told you?"

"It's not!" He shook his head violently. "I respect Her Innocence! My dad and I went to pray at the church every week, and she even spoke directly to me!"

Apparently, his father was a devout Xenite. Truthfully, not even Alphina thought that all Xenites were evil. For starters, her own parents were also believers of the religion, and they occasionally visited the church to worship

Him. That was considered the norm in the empire. However, it was a completely different matter when it came to zealots.

Faith at its extreme could blind someone to the truth. They would even believe black is white if they were told that. Whether Hipper Wilds was a zealot or not wasn't the issue. The problem was simple: How should Alphina bring him back to his senses? And for that question, there was only one answer—to shove the truth into his face.

"Hipper, I want you to take a look at this." Alphina pulled out a large hand mirror from her pocket. It was used for magic rituals and was a lot bigger than a typical hand mirror. In fact, it seemed closer to a makeshift club or weapon than a makeup accessory or magic device. However, this was the minimum size needed for recording magic. "My grandmother was a brilliant mage. She created a spell that can perfectly record all of the sounds that we hear and the sights that we see."

"Re...cord? What're you talking about?" There was a confused look on his face. He was smart but a little overserious. It was unlikely that he was able to even imagine what kinds of undiscovered magic were out there.

"What's amazing about recording magic," Alphina continued, "is that it can even record things from the past."

"The past?"

"That's right. I can record the sights that I've seen in the past and then, using this mirror as a medium, show them to you."

"A-As if!"

The proof was in the pudding. "Carl, if you please."

Carl nodded and then took the hand mirror from his sister. In order to play images from Alphina's memories, the spellcaster would need to expend an immense amount of magical energy. It was difficult for Alphina to generate enough all by herself, so she needed to borrow some from Carl. After he recited the incantation, the mirror started to emanate a powerful glow.

Upon seeing Hipper reflexively turn away, Alphina shouted, "Hipper! Don't close your eyes!" She overlaid her magic atop Carl's and added, "I don't want to

remember something like this either! But it's something that you must see! Something that you must overcome! Don't look away from it!"

Perhaps her words reached him and perhaps they didn't. Either way, Hipper returned his gaze to the mirror. The face of a hideous sow was reflected upon the surface.

"And here I was wondering whatever the problem could be! Alphina... Alphina, you say?! That pathetic princess whose head went sailing off her shoulders? I'd completely *forgotten about her! Squee hee hee!"*

That familiar laughter rang out in the silent schoolyard. Well, that wasn't exactly accurate. It was only familiar to Alphina and Carl, whereas this was Hipper's first time experiencing it all. The person making such unbearable and bizarre noises was a beautiful young girl with blonde hair as pale as the mist. She looked so clean and innocent with her pure-white robes that she truly embodied her title as the "Saint." Or that was how she was *supposed* to look, anyway.

"Huh? Are you gonna cry? Hey, little boy, you're gonna cry? Even though you're a guy? Huh? Huh??? Then go ahead and cry! ♪ Cry! ♪"

In the mirror, the so-called Saint was jumping back and forth as she goaded Carl, who had tears in his eyes. Even reflecting upon it now, Alphina thought Debonaire was so revolting that her irritation rounded back into amusement. This was a sight that Alphina had witnessed about a year ago, during the final showdown against the Saint at Heavenrose Castle.

"Wh-What the—? Who's this pig?" Hipper whispered. Though he believed all of the lies that Mister Bear concocted, it seemed that he still had a normal and working sense of aesthetics.

"That's right. It's a pig. Actually, this pig is the true identity of the Saint you guys all worship."

"H-Her Innocence?! This thing?!" Obviously taken aback, all Hipper could do was shake his head. "D-Don't lie to me. It's true that she's got the blonde hair and she's wearing the same robes, but there's no way that this annoying jumping thing could be the Saint!"

“Yeah...” It was hard to fault him for not immediately believing it. Alphina could fully relate to that. When she’d first heard the Saint’s true nature through her inner voice, she had also been startled and skeptical. “Look verrrrry closely at this image.”

“N-No! I don’t wanna!”

“Look at it! Don’t turn away from the truth!”

“Yaaaay, thanks for the tears, you beautiful little boy!!!!!! Aaahhhh!!!!!!!! I just wanna lick ’em allllll up! ♪ Squee hee!”

Upon seeing how the hideous sow was wagging her tongue rapidly next to Carl’s cheek, Hipper could no longer contain his groan of disgust. “E-Ewwwww!!!!!!!!”

“Hear, hear!” Alphina and Carl nodded. “So as you can see, this nasty piece of work is who the Saint really was.”

Hipper curled up on the ground, running his hands rapidly through his hair. “No way, no way, no way, no way! Then, are you saying that no matter how much I pray, nothing will change?! I can pray all I want, but my family... My mother and Yulia...” His voice had grown thick with tears.

Alphina crouched down next to Hipper and looked him in the eyes. “Is there anything that I can do to help?” When he didn’t reply, she continued. “For example, I could show this recording to your father and have him change his mind about the Saint. Maybe if he does that, he can try to talk with your mother again.”

“Shut up!” Hipper’s yell was so loud that it was like a physical blow, and then he shot up to his feet. “I didn’t ask for your help, and it’s none of your business anyway, Miss Al!” He shoved at Alphina’s shoulders, and even though he only had the strength of a young child, she was already unbalanced thanks to her crouched position. She ended up falling onto her behind.

“Don’t be mean to the teacher!” In a rare show of emotion, Carl yelled and dropped the hand mirror. He stood defensively in front of Alphina, shielding her from Hipper’s glare.

“Carl, you have no idea how I feel. You’re the duke’s heir, and your sister’s the

hero who saved the empire. That's not even including the fact that you're a prodigy in magic. How could someone like that *possibly* understand how my father and I feel?!"

This time, Hipper pushed Carl aside and then, without slowing down, ran off. But when he passed by Alphina's side, she saw the fat tears welling up in his eyes.

"Alphina, you okay?"

"Yeah. This'll be a tough one."

With Carl's help, Alphina stood up. As she did so, she mentally kicked herself over how much she had underestimated the state of affairs. She'd thought that if Hipper could see what the Saint was really like, then he'd understand. She'd believed that with Hipper's smarts and pride, he would definitely realize the truth of what was going on. But she'd been wrong—completely and utterly wrong.

People only saw what they wanted to see, and they only perceived things in the way they wanted to. Alphina, with her powers of Telepathy, knew that more than anyone else. The truth didn't always make people happy. In fact, it was the opposite. There were some who could only find salvation in lies. In other words, Hipper never *believed* in the Saint. He'd only *wanted* to.

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Even after lunch break and the final bell of the day, Hipper never returned to the classroom.

"Just what is the meaning of this, Miss Arlicia?!" Miss Velor demanded once Alphina returned to the staff room.

In response, Alphina lowered her head. "I deeply apologize for this, Miss Velor. I believe it's because I scolded him during the lunch break." In truth, she knew it was her fault and deeply lamented it. She should've been more considerate about his sensitivity. Bringing Carl along had backfired as well. Though she had only done so because she'd wanted them to make up, it might've triggered his pride and caused him to become stubborn instead.

"Oh goodness, what should we do?! If *anything* were to happen to him, then

‘trouble’ doesn’t even begin to cover what’ll befall our school! Heck, considering his father is a Heavenrose diplomat, it might even escalate into an international incident!” Miss Velor paced around and around the room as she spoke.

Alphina called out to her. “I’ll take responsibility for this and find him. If it helps, I do have an idea as to where he might be.” She’d already asked for Scarlet’s help, and he’d confirmed that Hipper had never returned home. In that case, there was only one location he would run off to. Carl had adamantly insisted that he wanted to search for Hipper as well, but Alphina had managed to persuade him to go home for the day. Their parents would worry if he stayed out too late, and his presence might make things worse again. “By the way, Miss Velor, is Mister Bear...I mean, Mister Bayard not here today?”

“He asked for the day off a while ago. Ahh, to think that he wouldn’t be here today of all days...!”

“Did he mention anything about why he requested the day off?”

“No. He takes a day off once every month, so I’ve never bothered to ask him about it.”

Hmm. It sounds like he’s hiding some sort of secret. But at that moment, Prince Lionett and Kithling, who had finished their observation for the day, returned to the staff room. Their gazes locked onto Alphina.

The prince said, “Humph,” before he looked away, and then his eyes darted back at her.

Kithling made a noise like, “Hmm,” and then pushed up his glasses. Then they started their approach.

Upon seeing the both of them making their way towards her, Alphina quickly said, “W-Well then, Miss Velor, I’m going to go look for him!” and then she ran off. If those two got involved, things would take a turn for the complicated, and she had no desire for that. In any case, the most important thing at the moment was to find Hipper.

Chapter Four

It's a lie. She was lying! She was lying! She was lying! She was lying! As Hipper Wilds ran blindly through the streets, he was screaming at the top of his lungs. "She was lying!!!!!!!"

Her Innocence Saint Debonaire had been sent by the great God Xenos to do his bidding. She would bring peace and light to the world, and if they kept on believing in her and the church, then the only thing that awaited them was certain happiness. That was what Hipper's father had said.

"Listen up, Hipper. House Wilds thrives because we put our faith in the Saint. The reason I backed the seventh prince, Avenlock, instead of the first prince is because I did as the Saint's prophecy instructed. And the prophecy was true! Prince Aven is the strongest candidate for the crown, and thanks to that, I've been promoted to capital consul. I rose up in the world! Wah hah hah!"

Hipper's father got carried away a little easily, but his reputation in society was never bad. He was a bright and cheery socialite who loved to tell jokes and make people happy. Hipper was proud to be his son. But his mother was terribly hard on her husband.

"How can you believe in something as far-fetched as a prophecy? I've heard rumors that the Saint told you to support the seventh prince but she went and told other *nobles to support the third! Would you really be happy moving up through society because all you did was blindly follow the words of some weird Saint?"*

The more Hipper's father believed in the Saint's words, the more often he and his mother fought. Hipper and his little sister, who was five years younger than him, grew up to the cacophony of their parents' yelling. Every time an argument started up in the parlor, the two of them would run into Hipper's room and start talking to each other.

"Hey, Hipper, is the Saint really that amazing?"

"Yeah, she is. Didn't you hear what father said about her?"

“But mother said she isn’t. So who’s tellin’ the truth?”

“I... How should I know?”

Eventually, their father made an excuse about how busy work was, left the mansion, and then never returned. Their mother started to go out and socialize every night, so the two young Wilds children spent every night in the spacious mansion with only each other and their servants as company. Though the house was quiet, it was, in turn, very cold.

Hipper’s mother enjoyed gardening and took care of the plants on the mansion’s grounds herself. Considering the size of the property, it was a lot of room to cover, but she was very particular about everything. She never left anything to the servants and even handled choosing which seeds would be planted. However, after things fell through between her and Hipper’s father, she started to stay out more and more, which in turn meant that she started to neglect the garden.

Every inch of the garden had been maintained with utmost precision, to the point that other families would often marvel at the amazing gardener the Wilds must have hired. But now, Hipper was the only person who took care of it.

That was when an incident so momentous that it shook the kingdom to its core took place. Terrorists had bombed Heavenrose Castle, and the perpetrator was none other than Saint Debonaire Lua Lightmist.

Prince Avenlock himself announced that she had been motivated by dissatisfaction with the monarchy and she had incited the Xenites into taking action. Not only did she bomb the palace, but she lost control of her magic and died by self-destruction. In the end, the whole incident revealed that the Church of Xenos had accumulated an immense fortune through disproportionately large amounts of charity. As a result, the reputation of both the church and the Saint completely sank in the eyes of society.

Since Hipper’s father was a devoted Xenite, he got demoted, much to his misery. He was forced to leave the capital and became essentially exiled from the kingdom while working as an attaché residing in the Lione Empire.

“Where did it all go so wrong, my son?” his father said to him one day. *“Have I been unknowingly brainwashed by the Saint and misjudged her character? Your*

mother won't even speak to me anymore, so she probably won't come with me to the empire..."

Upon seeing the stress on his father's usually happy face, Hipper said, *"I'll go with you, so don't worry about it. Let's do our best in the empire together. All you gotta do is make it big over there, father. Once you do that, I'm sure mother will understand why you did what you did."*

And thus, Hipper and his father—just the two of them—made their way to the empire, while his mother and younger sister remained behind in the kingdom. His sister was sobbing at the idea of being separated from her brother, so he reassured her by telling her that he'd be home soon. He didn't let her see any of his own pain.

Hipper ended up attending Melvina Elementary School in the empire, and that was where he met a particular boy, Carl Mann Sylvana. He'd been severely impressed by his prodigious talents and at the fact that he could use super high-tier magic. Back in the kingdom, Hipper had been the top student of his grade. Whether it was academics, sports, or magic, none of his peers could rival him. He'd even thought school was boring because no one was providing a challenge. But Carl went and showed Hipper just how small his world had been back home.

He's amazing! Hipper even felt something like admiration towards Carl. But that only lasted until he found out that Carl was *the* Alphina's little brother. All of that admiration flipped to dislike.

Alphina was the woman who first exposed the Saint's conspiracy. She'd been one of the causes for the Saint's downfall, and in turn was the person behind why Hipper and his father had been forced to leave the kingdom. Of course, Hipper didn't bear any hatred towards Alphina, considering he'd never even met the woman. Her demise—being executed via guillotine as a result of the Saint's plotting—was worthy of sympathy.

But even if he understood it in his mind, his feelings weren't so rational. Alphina's popularity in the empire was something else. It was crazy, what with all of the books being published about her every month and all of the buns being sold. The more the people worshipped Alphina, the more they hated the

Saint.

Hipper's father had been a supporter of the Saint during their time in the kingdom, so he often grew ashamed of his past. Hipper didn't get off easy either, since his peers would tell him things like, *"Your father was wrong,"* or *"Your father was an idiot who got brainwashed by the Saint!"* Under those conditions, there was no way he could just go up to Carl and openly ask him if he wanted to be friends. He'd always hated to lose, and with their classmates constantly heaping praise upon Carl, he had no choice but to remain alone and aloof.

Then one day, when Hipper was eating his lunch alone at the flower beds behind the school, a certain person came to talk to him. With kindness in his eyes, he said, *"Young Hipper, you and your father didn't make a single mistake. The Saint is in the right; it's the world that's wrong. On paper, I work for the empire, but that is a disguise. It's how I trick my enemies so that I can fulfill my dreams of reviving the Saint and restoring her power."* As Hipper stared up at him in dumbfounded silence, the man continued. *"I'll say it as many times as you want, all right? You and your father weren't in the wrong. The world is. I mean, think about it. How can your father, whom you love and respect, have made a mistake? Your mother's just misunderstanding things, but she'll eventually come around. Granted, that's as long as we can dispel the false rumors surrounding the Saint right now."*

This was a classic brainwashing tactic. All you had to do was suggest to the person in a plausible way that what they wanted to believe in was the truth. No matter how outrageous the lie— No, in fact, the more outrageous and unbelievable the lie, the more effective it was. After all, the person *wanted* to believe in it.

The man had manipulated Hipper's love for his father. Cunningly enough, he'd suggested a false solution. Hipper's father was right, and therefore, the Saint was also right. So if their rightness were to be accepted by the world, then everything would be resolved.

At first glance, the solution made sense. But in truth, it was complete nonsense, and yet Hipper had been made to believe in it. For an eleven-year-old boy forced to live his life out in a foreign country, friendless and separated from

his mother and younger sister, the only escape from the cruel reality was through this sweet lie.

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Hipper left the school grounds and made his way to the forest on the outskirts of the empire. It was small compared to the Amazone Forest, but even so, after four in the afternoon, the sunlight couldn't make its way through the canopy of branches overhead. Despite the dark road, he ran without faltering until he reached an old church.

His father was often late to return home thanks to work, which made it easy for Hipper to sneak out every night and visit the church. He participated in the group prayer to the Saint, fervently hoping for the return of the Saint and the Church of Xenos's glory along with her. Of course, prayer wasn't all they did.

The certain person who acted as the leader of the church had said, *"Soon, we will take action and perform a ritual that'll revive the Saint. For confidentiality reasons, I can't give away any details right now, but I'm counting on all of you when the time comes!"*

The words were very reassuring. Ever since he'd come to the empire, Hipper felt like he was deep in a dark hole, but he'd finally found an exit, brimming with light. If he followed the leader's orders, then surely he would be able to return to the kingdom with his father. He would be able to return to that home he missed so much, where his mother and sister and garden awaited.

That was what he'd believed, anyway. But now, his conviction had been deeply shaken. And what shook it was the true nature of the Saint that Miss Arlicia and Carl had shown him. *Was the Saint really that kind of person? That woman—who laughed like a pig—was the Saint? That's a lie! That can't be true. That just...simply can't...*

"Mister Bayard!" Hipper pounded his fist against the door of the church as he yelled. "Mister Bayard, you're inside, aren't you?! Please, open up!"

After a short moment, the door slowly slid open with a creak. A large man with a somewhat carefree bearing stood in the frame. "What is it, young Hipper? You're raising your voice a tad—"

Hipper forced himself through the gap of the doorframe and entered the building. “Hey, Mister Bayard, was the Saint a sow?”

“*What*?”

“Wasn’t she a person who was noble and brilliant, who’d received the love of God Xenos? But she still laughed all like, ‘squee hee’?”

“Just...who told you that?”

“Never mind that! Mister Bayard, c’mon, just say that it wasn’t true!”

The man shrugged his shoulders as if exasperated that it was even being brought into question. “Of course it wasn’t true, Hipper! I dunno what kind of person filled your head with that hogwash, but you mustn’t let yourself be tricked. If it could lead to slandering the Saint’s name, why, they’d come up with all sorts of garbage. Everyone—including Prince Lionett and Prince Avenlock—is a liar. The only people who are right are pious Xenites like your father. Understand?”

“Yeah...” Hipper sniffed. “My father is right. He’s in the right. He’s not wrong about anything, right?”

“Yes, of course.” He placed his large bearlike hand upon Hipper’s head.

“By the way, Mister Bayard, what’re you doing here?”

“Oh. I was just preparing for the ritual. You know that I take a day off once every month, right?”

“Yeah. That’s why I figured you were here.” A giant magic glyph had been drawn upon the floor that the Debonites always gathered on. The chairs and tables had been put away, and in place of them, candles were lit on the four edges of the symbol. “What kind of ritual is it?”

“Um...” The man hesitated as he scratched at his cheek. “Ah well, I suppose the time is right. I’m pretty much done with the preparations, and it seems like the perfect opportunity. I suppose this is also thanks to the guidance of Her Innocence.”

“The perfect opportunity?”

“Yup. I’m really tickled that you came here all by yourself, young Hipper. You

sure did save me a lot of trouble."

"Trouble?" Hipper tilted his head to the side. It felt like they were having two entirely different conversations.

"To tell the truth, I was preparing the ritual to revive the Saint."

"To revive her?"

The man nodded with satisfaction. "The Saint really liked handsome men, and she wasn't satisfied by your run-of-the-mill hotties. They had to be absolutely unparalleled, much like how Prince Lionett is." When Hipper didn't respond, he kept going. "So it took me a long time to find a kid that would suit her taste, but...Hipper, I think you'd be more than satisfactory for her."

"Satisfactory? What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?" A grin split the man's face. "As a sacrifice for her revival."

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Alphina's idea as to where Hipper had run off to was, of course, that church. It was the only place she could think of. The church was located in the western side of the empire, in a district called International Lane where all of the foreign embassies were located. According to Scarlet's investigation, the church had not seen any use even before the emperor ordered all of the Xenite's churches to be shut down. But Hipper and the other Xenites had still been gathering there every night to offer their prayers.

Mister Bayard, aka Mister Bear, was undoubtedly the one behind this whole incident. Alphina had to gather evidence that he was a remnant of the Church of Xenos and take him to the authorities as soon as possible. In order for her to accomplish that, Scarlet had been running around the empire on her orders, but there was a chance that the situation had become closer to an emergency.

It nagged at her that Mister Bear had taken the day off. Like Alphina, he resided in the staff dormitories, but he'd apparently left first thing in the morning. The superintendent had told her that he did that every time he had a day off.

Perhaps he's at the church right now? It was more than possible that after

Hipper had learned the truth about the Saint, he'd gone into shock and fled to the church in order to meet with Mister Bear. Alphina had a really bad feeling about it all.

Just why had Mister Bear, who'd devolved into a heretic, recruited Hipper into his ranks? He could've simply wanted to increase his followers, but something about that idea didn't sit right.

Alphina made her way to the school stables and borrowed one of the fastest horses they had. "Miss Velor asked me to run an urgent errand!" she exclaimed to the caretaker, but it was, of course, a lie. She'd wanted to purchase a horse of her own, except its price was easily three years' worth of Alphina's teaching salary. Borrowing such a horse without permission was grounds for termination. However, Alphina had long since made up her mind that saving Hipper would be her final job as an educator.

Her hands clutched the reins, and her feet were steady in the stirrups. She'd even cast Steeplechase on the horse to make it go faster, and together they blazed towards International Lane. This was a much faster way to travel than using Swiftness. Alphina was a fairly accomplished equestrian. She had stolen a military horse during her thirty-eighth loop and died after it bucked her off of its back. That event had been so embarrassing and frustrating that she had spent some lives after that one putting her all into learning how to ride a horse.

At the pace she was going, she would arrive at the church in less than ten minutes. With that thought in mind, she smacked the riding crop against the horse's hindquarters. But at that moment, Scarlet's inner voice rang through her head.

"Lady Alphina, can you hear me?!" He was using calling magic, something that Alphina had started developing so that they could communicate in emergencies. Though it had the unfortunate defect of fizzling out as soon as someone else's magic energy interfered with it, the call seemed to be working fine now. Scarlet sounded uncharacteristically frazzled, and Alphina unconsciously slowed the horse's pace.

"What's wrong? Did something happen to Hipper?"

"No, it's not about him." After taking a deep breath, Scarlet said, *"Lord Carl has still not returned to the manor."*

Alphina's breath caught in her throat. *"It's been over two hours since classes ended. He's not the kind of kid who would make pit stops on his way home."*

“Earlier, I saw House Sylvana’s butler searching around town, looking awfully worried. He said that Carl has his eastern languages tutor today, but he still hasn’t returned...”

Unlike his sister, Carl would never skip classes. Nor would he ever do something like go play and let the time get away from him either. His absence undoubtedly had something to do with the whole Hipper situation.

“Oh no... Don’t tell me that he went to go look for Hipper by himself?”

“Unfortunately, it is more than plausible.”

This was very dangerous. If Carl really *had* made his way to the church, then there was the chance that he’d already reached it while Velor was scolding Alphina. Carl may have been a prodigy at magic, but there was no telling what tricks Bayard could pull.

“Now that it’s come to this, we must *secure Lord Hipper as soon as possible!”*

“Right!” Alphina cut off the calling spell and willed the horse to go faster using her crop.

Like a storm, they plowed through the streets of International Lane, shooting past the various embassies as the guards standing in front of them stared on with wide eyes. And then, Alphina made her way into the deep forest in the district’s eastern side. A horse would no longer be of use from here, so she stopped it at a random spot to continue the journey on foot.

She hadn’t even run for five minutes before she noticed the familiar silhouette of the dilapidated church. It was the same one that she’d seen in the magic recording. For a second, she wondered how she would sneak in but stopped when she realized how much work that would be. There wasn’t a single second to waste. If Hipper and Bayard were here along with Carl as she’d theorized, then this was no longer the time for her to put on airs.

Her enemy was a practically crazed cultist. There would be no room for negotiation. *Sneaking in? No, I’ll force my way in!* She went right up to the front door and kicked it open. She’d managed to infiltrate the church.

“Carl! Hipper! Are you all right?!” Her yell echoed through the room, but no one answered. The spacious chapel was empty, devoid of even a single rat

scurrying about. The only thing in it was an eerie magical circle drawn upon the ground. Alphina could see the burnt remnants of a candle left in the candlestand, and judging by that, it didn't seem like too much time had passed since someone was last here.

But even so, she was too late. Had the two of them already been abducted?

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I was such an idiot. Though Hipper cursed his own stupidity, he knew that it was already too late.

Bayard had taken them to an old mine located at the base of Mt. Ice Dragon, where the Ice Dragon was said to have lived. As one might expect of a location so close to an ancient dragon's home, the land was brimming with magical energy. In the past, the mine was renowned for the magical gems that it contained. But now, it had been completely stripped of its resources, with only rusted buckets and pickaxes left behind.

This kind of desolate place was perfect for someone like him, considering how he was all alone in the Lione Empire after being exiled from Heavenrose. Hipper couldn't stop the self-deprecating thoughts from spiraling through his head.

"Young Hipper, hold your head high," his mentor said. His bearlike frame was wrapped in black robes, and he was accompanied by around ten other Debonites wearing the exact same outfit. All of them had matching dull, dead fish eyes, and Hipper couldn't help but wonder if there was a similar look in his own. "Being the sacrifice to bring back the Saint is a truly wonderful thing. Ahh, to think that my student could have such glory bestowed upon him! I'm so happy to be a teacher! This is amazing!!!"

As if the Saint had possessed him, Bayard was chuckling "Squee hee hee" to himself as he affixed Hipper to a giant cross. Both his arms and legs were tied up by thick ropes, and he couldn't so much as move a muscle. However, even if the bindings had been loose, Hipper had no energy or strength to fight back. Why would he when nothing mattered anymore?

Hurry up and put me out of my misery. Hipper's unchildlike resignation to his looming fate, as well as the realization that he had been betrayed by a mentor he once looked up to, weighed upon his limbs.

“Hey, Mister Bayard,” he said.

“What is it?”

“If I die, the Saint will come back to life, right? And if that happens, the Church of Xenos will come back, and my father will be able to return to the kingdom? Return home?”

Bayard let out a loud hum as he crossed his arms. “That might be a tad difficult.”

“Huh...?”

“When Her Innocence returns to this world, she’ll likely destroy both the Lione Empire and the Heavenrose Kingdom. They dared to harm the Saint, who is the servant of the great God Xenos, so she will likely consider them unfit to continue plaguing the planet with their existence.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Squee hee hee,” Bayard laughed again. “It means that you and your father will no longer have a home to return *to*! Your home, your mother, and your sister will all go *whoosh*!”

Hipper clenched his teeth. A wave of fury welled up from somewhere within him, and his body, which had been as unresponsive as a corpse, tensed. “Stop messing with me, you bear bastard!!! Just see what I’ll do to you if you hurt my mother or Yulia!!!”

“Oof, so scary,” Bayard chuckled jokingly. He gently slapped the blade of the knife in his right hand against his pupil’s cheek. In his left hand, he held a black magic gem that emanated an eerie glow. “Don’t give me too much trouble now, young Hipper. I don’t wanna have to hear my student scream. All I’m gonna do is poke your little neck with this knife here, see? And then you just have to let this magic gem here soak up your fresh blood.”

The Debonites started to light the candles they were carrying in candlesticks. The mine, once shrouded in darkness, became brighter and brighter in this one area, illuminating Hipper’s furious face. On the ground, someone had drawn the same magic circle as that in the church. Upon closer inspection, Hipper saw that it was even bigger than that one. At its center rested the cross that Hipper was

tied to.

“Now then, let’s start the ritual!” At Bayard’s order, the Debonites marched up alongside the magical circle and Hipper as they loudly sang a hymn praising God Xenos and the Saint. The song that sounded so sublime during services sounded terribly creepy when heard in this situation. It was literally a requiem dedicated to Hipper.

Dammit! Hipper mustered all the rage he could to glare at Bayard, and at that moment, he noticed the shadow of a person approaching them. It was coming from the direction of the forest where the church was, deftly weaving in between the trees. Within the thick canopy of the forest, Hipper recognized that flash of red hair.

It was a color that he was more than familiar with. After all, he had spent the past few months staring at that burning hue. That person was...

“Thundershock.” With a soft whisper, a flash of super high-tier magic shot through the area.

The bolt was so bright that it snuffed out the candles, illuminating the area like the midday sun. The lightning tore through the ground by Bayard’s feet, and with a high-pitched squeal, he flew backwards, as if he only weighed as much as a stalk of straw. While the dust clouds and a burning stench closed in on Hipper, someone came running up to his cross.

“C-Carl?! Why’re you here?!”

His savior was the magical prodigy whom Hipper had always detested. Carl awkwardly took out a knife, obviously unused to doing so, and sliced away at the ropes binding Hipper’s limbs with some difficulty. “I came to save you.”

Hipper couldn’t say a single word. Carl’s face was devoid of emotion, as usual, but fat beads of sweat clung to his brow. There was blood on his small, white fingers, likely due to scraping them against the rough material of the ropes.

“You can use such amazing magic, but you suck at using a knife.”

Carl nodded. “Are you...good with a knife?”

“Huh? Er...yeah. Better than you, anyway.”

“Then teach me...next time...okay?”

What in the world is he talking about? Does he understand the situation we’re in? Hipper started to laugh, suddenly finding the whole thing ridiculous. No, *he* was the ridiculous one, to laugh in an ordeal such as this. Not only that, but the person he was talking to was his nemesis, Carl. And yet he was laughing?

“Thanks,” Hipper said, and Carl blinked in confusion without replying. “But I don’t think we’re saved just yet.”

Bayard might have been blown away, but the ten Debonites were still standing. They glared at Hipper and Carl with their dull eyes and slowly approached. An incantation poured out in a low din from their pale lips. Hipper grabbed a stick from the ground. Judging by its metal end, it was the handle of a broken shovel or pickax. It had a hefty weight in his hands, so he could probably use it as a makeshift sword.

“I’ll keep them at bay, so you take that chance to use magic like you did earlier.”

“All right... But...”

“What?”

“Won’t you get caught up in it?”

Hipper laughed and shook his head. “I’ve already figured out the timing of your magic. It wasn’t very hard. So I’ll be able to dodge it...probably.” It was Hipper’s stubborn pride that stopped him from telling Carl that he had been watching him ever since he’d arrived in the empire. “All right, let’s go!”

Hipper raised the stick above his head, recalling all the swordplay lessons his father had given him in the past. Then, he swung it down upon the right shoulder of the first Debonite. The impact shot through Hipper’s arms, and the Debonite fell to the ground with a cry of pain, curling in on himself. The other Debonites faltered in their steps, their incantations stuttering to a halt.

“There’s more where that came from!”

As Hipper continued to swing the stick, he remembered that in his youth, he had always preferred swordsmanship lessons over magic classes. His father had

become infected by the ideals of the Church of Xenos, which prioritized one's magic ability. So he had put more effort into those lessons and neglected his sword skills. But Hipper had always preferred physical activities. He reveled in how good it felt to move his body to its limits—a sensation that he had long since forgotten.

If Prince Avenlock were present, then he would undoubtedly have praised Hipper's bold, free-spirited swordsmanship. He might have even said that he wanted to scout Hipper for the kingdom's knights. Everyone knew that praise for women flowed out of Lord Blackrose's mouth like water from a teapot. But he seldom complimented men. That he would be willing to say anything kind about Hipper's swordsmanship was a testament to the boy's talent.

But his skill with the sword was not the only thing outstanding about Hipper.

Now! He immediately picked up on the swelling of Carl's magic energy behind him and swiftly dodged to the right. An icy wind blew through the space Hipper had occupied a mere second ago. The Debonites, off-balance from their attempt to charge at Hipper, couldn't dodge the spell and ate it straight on. They froze into a big clump and were blown away as one.

"Wasn't that an intermediate-tier ice spell? You went easy on them." Despite his complaints, Hipper was impressed by Carl's control over his magic. He was able to aim it so that his spell only struck the enemies and not his ally. *Prodigies really are infuriating*, Hipper thought to himself with a smirk.

If Prince Lionett were present, then he would have praised Carl's magic, along with Hipper's quick wit at being able to sense the timing of the spell's activation and evade it completely. *"This is the kind of coordination all vanguards and rear guards should aspire to,"* he undoubtedly would have said, speaking from the perspective of both an experienced adventurer and as the empire's dragon-slaying hero. That was how in sync Hipper and Carl were as a duo.

"We did it!" Hipper exclaimed and slapped his palm against Carl's. The other boy didn't respond. That was when Hipper came back to himself and realized what he'd just done. "I-It's not like we're friends now or anything, got it?! This is just because we're in an emergency situation!" There was a furious blush on Hipper's face, whereas Carl maintained his usual stoic expression. The two of

them stood in sharp contrast to each other. “That reminds me. How did you know where I was?”

“I followed the scent of your magic.”

“Scent? Is that, like, a normal thing people can do?”

“Miss Arlicia is...probably looking for you too.”

Hipper scratched at the back of his head. “That teacher is something else. I’ve never heard of recording magic or whatever she was talking about. Are you sure she isn’t better than you at magic?” Carl nodded enthusiastically, and Hipper scoffed. “Ha! You sure seem pleased that I’m praising Miss Al.”

“Yeah.”

“Just who is she to you? Is she related to you in some way?”

“Well...”

But right when Carl opened his mouth to speak, something exploded behind him. Several balls of flame flew towards them, and when they dissipated, Carl collapsed against Hipper.

“Hey, Carl?!” When Hipper grabbed Carl to support him, he heard pained moans and the stench of burning flesh hit his nose. He saw sparks clinging to Carl’s crimson hair, so he hurriedly brushed them away. Someone had attacked them with fire magic.

“Oh wow. Ah ha ha, Carl, your magic really is amazing,” someone said. Hipper looked in the direction of the voice and saw Mister Bayard starting to stand up within the smoke. He thought that they had defeated him! “Young Hipper, that was impressive swordsmanship too. As your homeroom teacher, I’m *very* proud of how strong my two students are. Fantastic!”

“You can still move?!” Hipper snarled.

“You know, I’m quite a tough cookie. That’s pretty much the only thing I have going for me. I may not look it anymore, but I was the tank of an A-class party during my youth.” Bayard spoke in a very calm manner, sounding much too energetic for someone who’d taken a hit from Carl’s super high-tier magic. His toughness was unbelievable. “I didn’t expect young Carl to drop by, so this is a

pleasant surprise. Now we have two sacrifices! Hooray, Your Innocence!!! I'm so happy!!! We're all so happy!!!"

Bayard started to applaud, and it was clear from his expression that he was nowhere near a right state of mind anymore. He had completely transformed into a zealot for the Saint, and Hipper shivered at the thought that he and his father might have turned out the same if they had continued to believe in the Debonites.

Carl was still unconscious in Hipper's arms. He must have put up a magical barrier at the last second, so his injuries weren't fatal. But he wasn't going to wake up any time soon.

"W-Wait, Mister Bayard!" Hipper yelled.

"Hmm?"

"Please just s-spare Carl... All he did was come rescue me, and he has nothing to do with the Church of Xenos, right? I'll be your sacrifice! Okay?"

Bayard pressed his fingers against his eyes. "Phenomenal! Oh wow, what a beautiful friendship!!! You almost made your teacher cry! So this is what people mean when they say something is 'super precious'! You guys really schooled me! How extraordinary! Hooray! Hooray!!!" He shouted those last words to the sky before he turned to face Hipper with a wide grin on his face. "How could I do something as cruel as separating two good pals? I *must* send the two of you to the afterlife together!"

"You...!"

Bayard unsheathed the large knife hanging from his waist with his right hand and reached out towards Hipper with his left. There was nothing more that Hipper could do. But even so, he had to protect Carl. He moved in front of Carl's body, but at that same moment, a third party entered the scene.

"That's enough, Mister Bear!!!"

The voice came from above. When Hipper looked overhead, he saw a red-haired woman standing on top of a tall mountain of sand. Her hair was also familiar, and it didn't take long for Hipper to recognize Miss Arlicia, whom he and Carl had just been speaking about.



“While I, Alphina Shinn Sylvana, still draw breath, I will *never* let that sow of a Saint come back to life!!!” she yelled.

She had gallantly delivered that announcement while standing there striking a somewhat cool-looking pose. But right after, she froze as if she’d just realized something and then grabbed at her hair.

“AAAHHHH!!! OH NO!!! I SAID MY REAL NAME!!!!!!!!!!!!”

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The sight of the empty church had shocked Alphina so much that she could do nothing apart from stand there, rooted to the spot. She’d only realized what was happening at the mine thanks to the sight of Carl’s super high-tier magic. That flash of lightning had reached all the way to the windows of the church, several kilimeters away, revealing to her the location of her little brother.

It seemed that she’d arrived just in time too. Mister Bear, or Bayard, was right in the middle of approaching Carl and Hipper with the intent to harm them. Hipper was poised in front of an unconscious Carl, clearly ready to protect him, and the sight of that made something warm well up in Alphina’s chest.

That was why she’d gotten caught up in the moment and ended up yelling while trying to make herself look cool. But she’d accidentally done the unthinkable—revealing her real name! And not only that, but her name was that of the Greatest Vermilion, who was supposed to be dead.

“Ahh...” After taking a second to reflect on her own stupidity, Alphina decided to switch gears. “Well, whatever! This is my final job, anyway!”

With that, she dispelled her Disrecognition magic. There was no longer any need to put on a facade, so why not cut loose? Until now, Bayard had been staring at her with his mouth hanging open, but upon recognizing her, his expression morphed into one of pure shock.

“Miss Arlicia, you’re Alphina?! W-Wait, aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

“None of that matters, so why don’t you take a step away from those two?” She pointed at Bayard and muttered a quick incantation. “Lightning!” A flash shot out from the tips of her fingers, coursing through the air. The bolt struck

Bayard's right hand and knocked away the knife he had been holding.

However, Bayard didn't falter. He glared at Alphina with bloodshot eyes, lowered himself to the ground, and then charged towards her. It looked like he planned on taking advantage of the difference in their builds to turn the fight into a physical one. *"I might not win against her with magic, but I won't lose in a wrestling match,"* was probably what he was thinking.

That was exactly what Alphina wanted. She'd wrestled boys a thousand times over during her childhood, which was far more times than she'd engaged in battles of magic. This was the exact kind of situation a tomboyish princess thrived in.

She delivered the hardest slap she could muster to Bayard's right cheek as he ran towards her. There was so much force behind it that his face snapped to the side and he made a noise like "Squee?!" Seeing her opening, she gave his left cheek the same treatment.

"Squeeee?!"

"This is the same double slap I gave Saint Debonaire. Aren't you happy you got to experience the same thing as your precious Saint?"

"Wh-What'd you say?!"

"Shame on you. How dare you, a teacher, try to harm your own students? You can worship whatever you want, but that doesn't excuse an adult trying to sacrifice children."

"Shut up! You were the one to kill Her Innocence!" Bayard roared with fury. This must have been his true personality, whereas his usual carefree one was a mask. "Her Innocence is a wonderful person! She's going to purify this corrupt land! That's worth the death of a child or two!"

"*You're* the one who's corrupt. Why don't you clean up your own heart before you start worrying about the land?"

Considering the kind of person the Saint was, it shouldn't be a surprise that this type of person was her follower. It was time to finish things.

"Hipper." All Alphina said was his name, but he immediately understood what

she wanted. He heaved Carl fully onto his back and walked away, though he stumbled a little under Carl's weight. Hipper truly was a smart kid.

Alphina took a quick breath and then focused all of her magic energy into her right hand. A blinding light enveloped her clenched fist, which became harder and harder by the second. It quickly surpassed the density of steel, resembling something closer to diamond, the pinnacle of all minerals. This was the Harden spell, which was a type of adherence magic. It was normally used to strengthen weapons and armor, but Alphina's unique version of it allowed her to enhance her own body. Even a woman's soft fist could transform into the calloused weapon of a seasoned warrior.

When she created this magic, Scarlet had said, *"Many women in this world dream of owning a diamond ring, but Lady Alphina, you are probably the only princess who went and created a diamond fist."*

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

At Alphina's question, Scarlet had smiled. *"It's because you're that kind of person that I chose to serve you."*

"Eat the iron—no, the diamond fist of justice!" She slammed a punch into Bayard's stomach that was so strong the wind blew around the two of them like during a storm. His bearlike body flew into the air, spinning and twirling limply before falling into the ground. There he remained, motionless, in a Bayard-sized crater.

Alphina had asked Scarlet to contact the guards in International Lane, so all that was left now was to wait for them to arrive and have the empire prosecute Bayard. But there was something more important than that.

"Thank you so much, Hipper. You saved my brother's life." If Hipper hadn't taken Carl away, then he would have gotten caught up in the impact of Alphina's punch.

"It's no big deal," Hipper said, looking away. He was still carrying Carl on his back. "Miss Al, are you really Alphina? Why are you alive? You got your head chopped off by a guillotine."

"It's a long story, so I'm just gonna skip that question!"

“S-Skip...?”

“Can’t I? Besides, a youngster shouldn’t dwell so much on the past.”

“Aren’t you a youngster too?”

“Heh heh, yeah, pretty much!” Alphina grinned at him, and he gave her a small smile in reply.

That was when Carl woke up. He blinked about blearily and stared straight at his sister. “Alphina...?”

“Oh, I’m so glad! You’re awake! Do you have any pain?” she asked him.

“If you’re awake, get off, you lump.”

At those words, Carl hopped off of Hipper’s back, dodged Alphina’s embrace, and then turned to look at his friend. “Thank you. You saved me.”

“I mean, you were the one who saved *me*, so...this makes us even...”

Hipper was still looking to the side. Alphina wanted to tell him to be honest with his feelings, but there was no longer any need for her to say anything. Even without a teacher or adult running interference, the two of them had become friends.

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The next day, Melvina Elementary School was in an uproar. News had reached them about class 5-1’s homeroom teacher, Bayard, being arrested due to his activities as a zealot from the Church of Xenos. Such activities included the unthinkable act of attempting to sacrifice his students in the name of resurrecting the Saint. Upon hearing this, Miss Velor had fainted right in the middle of the staff room. Alphina had been the one to tell the whole story, and the sight of Miss Velor’s unconscious body was so shocking that she found it hard to hand in her resignation.

“A teacher trying to sacrifice his own students? This kind of scandal is the *last* thing we need!” Miss Velor wailed from her bed in the infirmary. “Oh, how absolutely terrible! And we had just been appointed a model school too! We can say goodbye to our applicants for the next year! Our donations from the students’ families! Our funds from the empire!!!”

Er, wow, Miss Velor, I didn't know you were this greedy... But Alphina couldn't look down on her. She'd known about Miss Velor's passion for education ever since her student years. Her obsession with funding and donations wasn't because she was trying to line her own pockets. Rather, it was so that she could improve the school's resources and thereby enrich the students' learning experience. That was the difference between her and a villain like Bayard.

Alphina became the homeroom teacher in Bayard's place and kept herself busy with cleaning up his mess. Fortunately, nothing that Miss Velor had feared ever happened. That was because the news media focused on the two small heroes rather than a lone teacher's act of frenzy.

"Friendship Beats Empire-Kingdom Borders and the Saint's Ghost!"

"The Greatest Vermilion's Little Brother Performs Heroics Assisted by Best Friend from Empire!"

These kinds of headlines appeared in newspapers all across the empire, and apparently such stories were also popular in the kingdom. Hipper shyly revealed to Alphina that his mother in Heavenrose had mentioned in a letter that she was overwhelmed with all of the interview requests. Hearing that made Alphina so happy, and she sincerely hoped that the Wilds family could reconcile.

Alphina herself was handling all of the newspaper reporters who visited the school to try and interview Carl and Hipper. They showed up at all hours of the school day, but Kithling dealt with them admirably. He'd set up a specific station for interviews and issued fines to outlets whose reporters kept visiting even after being rejected. He had always been remarkable when it came to administrative duties such as this, and now he could prove for a change that his glasses weren't just for show.

After things finally died down and the school found a suitable replacement for class 5-1's homeroom teacher, Alphina decided to say goodbye to her life as Miss Arlicia.

"I'll miss you all!" she said from the podium and lowered her head. She could hear the students' loud applause.

"Miss Al, thank you!"

“I wish you would stay!”

“Yeah! It would’ve been awesome if you were our homeroom teacher!”

Oh, they sure know how to make a girl happy.

Alphina smiled and said, “I’m going to live out the rest of my days to the fullest they can be. I hope that all of you will be able to do the same, without being tied down by the values of others!”

Applause rose from the crowd again. From their perspective, their teacher Miss Arlicia was giving them her final piece of advice. If they’d known these were actually the words of someone considered to be a national hero, would there have been a difference in their reaction? Alphina wanted to believe that they would act in the exact same way.

As she left the classroom, she met Carl’s eyes. She discreetly gave him a thumbs-up, and he returned the gesture even though his expression didn’t change. Without a doubt, Carl would mature into a strong man at this school, and she looked forward to seeing him in a year. Next, she met Hipper’s eyes. When she gave him a thumbs-up, he looked away bashfully, but she saw him furtively raise his own thumb. *Jeez, he’s such a cute kid.* Alphina hoped that his friendship with her brother would be one that lasted their whole lives.

“All right, everyone. I’ll see you again someday!” She wondered if her students would one day reminisce about the breezy red-haired teacher.

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After she carted out all of her belongings from the staff room, Alphina was left with nothing else on her person except for her bag. *Should I say farewell to my parents before I leave? Nah, I’m sure it’s fine, right? It’d be terrible if the prince were to discover me*, she thought to herself as she walked off of the school grounds.

Just then, a horse-drawn carriage stopped right in front of her. The empire’s emblem was emblazoned upon its door. A bad feeling started to brew in her gut, but just as Alphina was about to turn away and run off, the door to the carriage opened. Lionett Lione, flaunting his blond hair and beautiful looks, stepped out from the cart.

“Where are you going, Alphina?” he asked.

Alphina barely managed to contain her scream. She slowly turned around and smiled at him. “Um, Your Highness, what are you talking about? My name is

Arlicia, you know?”

“That’s enough.” The prince shook his head and placed a hand on her shoulder.

No way?! My Disrecognition isn’t working?! Alphina struggled to mask her shock while the prince stared her right in the eyes.

“Ahh, I wonder how it took me so long to notice who you really are, Alphina.”

“N-No, you’ve got the wrong person! I’m Arlicia.”

“I said that’s enough, Alph. Kithling’s already heard everything from Bayard, and the magical signature left behind in the mines matched yours. You don’t have to conceal your identity anymore.”

“Ah.” The sound unconsciously escaped from her mouth. *Oh yeah, I forgot that it would be totally over for me if Mister Bear said anything!* She’d asked Hipper to stay silent about her true identity, and yet it had completely slipped her mind to do the same to Bayard. Since there were so many pieces of evidence lying about, then it was a given that they would discover who “Arlicia” really was.

Disrecognition wasn’t a perfect disguise. As soon as an onlooker made a mental connection between Arlicia and Alphina, then the spell would be completely useless, even if she were to cast it anew.

“Now then, let’s go to the castle together. Once we’re there, let’s have a nice, long talk.” As Alphina silently cursed her own foolishness, the prince put his arm around her shoulders and walked her to the carriage. Any other woman would’ve killed to hear the next words he whispered into Alphina’s ear, for they were a promise of love. But for Alphina, they were a curse that she had never wanted to hear. “I’ll never let go of you again, Alphina.”

Chapter Five

Alphina found herself in a beautiful yet awfully spacious room. It was so spacious that it would take an entire minute of walking to get to the door from the couch that she was sitting on. In fact, you could probably work up a good sweat just by having a stroll around the room. However, the reason for its size was not because anyone cared about Alphina's health.

(I had the workers specifically make a room that would be perfect for my Alph! All in preparation for this day!) Prince Lionett's inner voice bellowed.

But from Alphina's point of view, this room felt more like a jail cell than anything. In truth, there were two guards positioned outside of the window and two more outside of the door. Inside, too, were the wardens, otherwise known as "the loyal maids of Princess Alphina," who constantly kept an eye on her every move.

"Um, Your Highness?"

"What is it, Alph?" Lionett Lione, sitting across from Alphina, sounded as cold and unfriendly as ever. His inner voice, on the other hand, was a whole other story. *(Ahh, my Alph is sitting right in front of me! I've been searching for her all this time! All right, Lionett, you can do this. With your skills of casual conversation, you'll* definitely *be able to win her over this time!)*

"C-Casual conversation?"

"Did you say something?"

"No, nothing." After lightly coughing into her fist, Alphina said to the prince, "Prince Lio, I apologize for concealing my identity for the past year. I admit, it was dishonorable of me. But if we look at the current situation, I'm sure that we can agree my decision to do so was correct."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, look at what's going on. You've practically imprisoned me; how can you expect me to be all right with that? Look outside at those soldiers glued to the window as if they're slimes in a dungeon! Just how do you explain that?"

Alphina's loud voice must have reached the soldiers outside. But they were loyal to their work and didn't turn around to look inside the room, continuing to focus their gazes out towards the garden.

"Alph, they're there because I'm worried for your safety," the prince said, moving to sit closer. "You're now the Greatest Vermilion—the hero who saved the empire! It would be detrimental to morale if anything were to happen to you."

"Then, what's up with the number of maids in this room?"

"Hmm. There aren't enough?"

"Quite the opposite! There are way too many! Why are there *thirty* maids serving *one* person?! There're more maids in this room than there were students in class 5-1! I won't even be able to remember their names!"

Alphina glared at the head housekeeper standing next to her, who maintained a cool and stoic expression. She was a tall woman who looked to be around fifty years old, and she apparently had experience in the army's special forces. Her maid uniform couldn't completely hide her muscular frame, and it was impossible to think of her as part of the domestic staff, considering her frigid gaze and uniquely silent walking style. If Alphina was going to have a maid around her, she certainly didn't want one who looked like she could kill a man.

"She's here to protect you," the prince insisted.

"'Protect'? Don't you mean 'monitor'?"

"I've received strict orders from His Imperial Majesty about this as well. Please understand where I'm coming from." He bit his soft-looking lips and lowered his face. At the sight of his melancholic expression, the maids all sighed in unison. That was the normal reaction upon seeing such a handsome man's distress. Alphina could also hear their inner voices.

(Prince Lionett... You're so divinely beautiful...)

(Not only is he the next in line for the throne, but he's a famous hero in his own right rather than just another pretty face.)

(Princess Alphina, you're so lucky to have such a wonderful man as the prince

love you with all his heart!)

(Ahh, I'm soooooo jealous! This is the most happiness a woman could ask for!)

So on and so forth... They really just said whatever they wanted to! If you asked Alphina, she'd say she was sick of staring at the prince's face after being forced to do so for a hundred lifetimes. Even the most delicious cheese pie in the world would start to taste awful if you had to eat it a hundred days in a row. Being forced to eat it for a hundred *years* would probably count as torture.

As she struggled to express how uncomfortable she felt in her present constraints, the door that was a minute's walk away slowly opened. Taiga IV, the emperor of the Lione Empire, entered the room accompanied by an array of personal guards.

The prince and all of the maids immediately kneeled upon seeing him. Right when Alphina was about to stand up from the couch to do the same, the emperor ran towards her, closing in thirty seconds a gap that should've taken a minute. He was a sprightly seventy-year-old, though he had no need for all that vigor.

"Princess Alphina, that won't be necessary. Don't move! Doooon't move!"

"H-Huh?" Alphina said. The emperor, who was famous for his severe personality, lowered himself to one knee, and she panicked. "Wha—?! Your Imperial Majesty, please stand up! You mustn't—"

"I apologize! I'm deeply sorry! Please forgive my foolishness!!!" The emperor gripped Alphina's hand tightly, and tears welled up in his eyes. "It was ignorant of me to believe in the Saint's lies instead of your words!"

"Er, you were just being controlled by her magic, so..."

"Even so, that does not excuse my behavior!" the emperor argued passionately, and Alphina focused her attention on his inner voice. *(I could apologize in a thousand—no, a million different tongues, and it still wouldn't be enough! It's unthinkable to execute someone for a crime they didn't commit. And on top of that, I executed the woman who was supposed to become my daughter-in-law! Lionett's fiancée! How am I supposed to make it up to her?)*

If you want to make it up to me, then can you let go of my hand, please?

Alphina wanted to say, but her wish probably wouldn't come true.

"Princess Alphina, I wish to commemorate this date as a national holiday. We can call it Alphina Returns Day."

"I'm begging you to do anything but that."

"Oh, how humble! Today shall also be Humble Remembrance Day, then!"

This is useless, Alphina thought to herself.

The emperor stood up and looked around at the crowd of people kneeling before him. "I hereby declare that Alphina Shinn Sylvana shall be presented with a Cross of Lione!"

The sound of murmuring filled the needlessly spacious room. The Cross of Lione was a medal awarded to those who made wonderful and lasting contributions to the empire outside of the battlefield. It was the highest honor that a civilian could receive, as one's name would thereby be permanently etched into the history books.

If Alphina remembered correctly, the last person to receive the Cross of Lione was Duke Something-or-Other two hundred years ago because he'd made a canal. So that meant Alphina would become the empire's first hero in two hundred years, even though she hadn't dug a canal. The misfortunes disguised as honors didn't stop there.

"Not only that, but the engagement between you and Lionett we called off in the past shall be reinstated," the emperor continued. "The entire country shall celebrate your wedding in a month's time with a grand ceremony!"

Alphina's mouth hung open in a silent gasp. The emperor had just announced the worst-case scenario she'd feared. It was precisely because she'd predicted this would happen that she'd been running around this entire time, trying to escape from the prince.

"Engaged...with Alph... In-beiged..."

"Er, Your Highness?! Get ahold of yourself!" Alphina exclaimed. The Golden Sword, who had always maintained a proud and stoic composure, turned as red as a boiled lobster. *Come on, who did this to Lord Cold Heart? Oh, I guess I did.*

“Please hold on a moment, Your Imperial Majesty. The engagement was already called off. I’ve never heard of nobles getting reengaged.”

“It shall be done with my authorization. I won’t allow anyone to raise an objection. In fact, I believe that even without this warning, the citizens will all approve of this decision! Isn’t that right?”

All of the maids and guards nodded as one. The only people who didn’t were the prince, who had practically melted into a puddle of jelly, and the murderer disguised as the head housekeeper, who was still keeping watch over the surroundings instead of getting swept up in the festive atmosphere. They were both a little terrifying to Alphina, but for completely opposite reasons.

“Ha ha... Ah ha ha ha...” She could only laugh, at a loss for what else there was to do.

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And so, Alphina was forced to live the life of a prisoner until the wedding ceremony in a month’s time. It was the exact same situation she’d found herself in during her past life, when she was imprisoned in the tower while waiting for her execution. Though she was allowed to take walks through the garden twice per day, she was carefully monitored the entire time, with no opening for escape. Any item that could serve as a medium for magic had been removed from the room, which meant that she had to give up on using spells to bust herself out.

The fact that they put so much effort into watching over me just shows how little they actually trust me, doesn’t it? If she thought about it from another angle, this was proof that the government thought she would definitely run away if they didn’t keep a close eye on her. Well, they were absolutely right, so Alphina couldn’t really argue against that.

But they were treating her in such an inhumane manner! She was furious and tried many times to appeal to her guards. “All right, fine! I don’t mind getting married. I mean, I *was* the prince’s fiancée once upon a time. It’s a fate I accepted back then, so I’m perfectly happy with it.”

Of course, she wasn’t happy with it at all, and she hadn’t given up her plans to escape. She’d just tried saying that so it merely looked like she was okay with it.

“But isn’t it generally frowned upon to prevent a bride so close to her wedding day from visiting her parents?! Isn’t it normal for a bride to spend her last few days as an unmarried woman with her blood family?! Don’t I have the right to perform my final acts of filial piety to my parents, who raised me all these years? And here I am, locked up in the castle! Is the prince completely heartless?! Hey, hey, hey! And here I’d thought that there was actually a bit of warmth in Lord Cold Heart!” She ended her tirade with a bit of crocodile tears, but Prince Lionett didn’t seem moved at all.

“If you’re worried about your parents, then don’t be. We’ve already gotten permission from my future in-laws, Duke Sylvana and Duchess Mary,” he told her. Alphina gaped at him, stunned speechless, and he continued: “They said, ‘Go ahead, go ahead. If you’re happy with a girl like that, then be our guest! She’ll probably do her best to escape, so watch out for that! Actually, why don’t you try tying her up with some chains?’”

You sold me out?! Mom, dad, you sold out your actual daughter?! For real?! Alphina screamed internally, but considering her past behavior, her parents were perfectly justified in their suggestion. She only had herself to blame.

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A week passed without any change. Every day, she woke up in her needlessly comfortable bed and wondered how she would escape as she drank her morning tea. Then one day, she had a visitor.

“Excuse me, Your Highness Princess Alphina.” Shitty Specs, or Kithling Ashley, entered with a terribly formal greeting.

“Isn’t it still too early to call me by that title, Kithling? We’re former classmates, so just call me by my name like a normal person.”

“I certainly cannot do that. As His Highness’s right-hand man, I must treat his wife with utmost respect and dignity. Please get used to me kneeling before you,” he said as he smartly adjusted his glasses. Internally, though... *(YAAAAAHOOOOOOOOO!!! ♪ Now I can serve Princess Alphinaaaaaaaaa!!! ♪ I’ll be able to stay by her side all my waking hours! All my waking hours!!! Allllllll my waking houuurssss!!! ♪)*

Is it just me, or does he become more annoying every time I see him? Kithling

Ashley came from a family of earls and scholars, and had walked the path of the elites his entire life. Thanks to that background, he had been an honor student. He was rigid in his way of thinking and inflexible in the face of adversity. Ever since their school days, Alphina had thought of him as a naive little noble boy, but in this lifetime, she'd seen a rather unexpected side to him.

She had never imagined that he would abandon House Ashley to become a terrorist and fight against the Church of Xenos. And not only that, but his motivation for doing so was her! It was all so...

So infuriating! Then why weren't you nicer to me back in school?! All you ever did when you saw me was insult me! It was only natural for a person to think that, and these negative emotions were precisely why it was so difficult for Alphina to play along with him.

"What is it, Your Highness Princess Alphina? Why are you staring at my face like that?"

"No... It's nothing. I was just thinking about how much you've changed."

"Is that so? I don't think I changed very much."

Alphina had meant for it to be an insult, but Kithling didn't seem to notice.

(Heh heh heh, it seems that I've become an even sexier man than before. I must simulate what I'll do when Princess Alphina falls for me instead of the prince. No! Stop that, Kithling! You mustn't imagine such a disrespectful and improper scenario. Ahh, but my brain! It just won't stop! I'll be able to spend all my waking hours with Princess Alphina, after all! Allllll my waking hours!!!)

Ahh, he's so annoying! All of the dangers he'd overcome as a terrorist must have loosened something in his skull. Maybe Kithling was actually part of some new species that became more irritating every time it went through a life-and-death situation. *Aren't you tired of saying 'all my waking hours'? Try to come up with something else.* Despite the many protests running through her head, Alphina smiled at him brightly.

"Hey, Kithling, I have something I want to discuss with you."

"No."

“I...haven’t even said anything yet.”

“You’re planning to say something like, ‘I wanna take a walk outside the castle! May I? ♪’ Am I right? You can’t pull the wool over my eyes. And I suppose that you would try to find an opening to climb the walls and escape from the castle during the walk?”

Alphina tried to smile, but her cheeks felt frozen. “Oh ho ho ho, Kithling, you’re such a jokester. I’m not a student anymore, you know. Do I *look* like someone who doesn’t know when to quit?”

“Yes, you do, actually.”

“Oh ho ho ho!” Alphina laughed, but internally she clicked her tongue. *Humph, was I too obvious?*

Kithling heaved a heavy sigh and said in a far-too-serious voice, “I believe that it would be in your best interest this time to know when to cut your losses. The situation now is one that affects the empire and all of its citizens, rather than just yourself. I hope you understand that your marriage to Prince Lionett directly correlates to the Lione Empire’s prosperity.”

“My parents told me the exact same thing,” Alphina replied, sighing her own heavy sigh. “If you boil it down to basics, isn’t a country nothing more than a gathering of people? It only exists because that’s the convenient way for a large number of humans to survive. So to sacrifice someone for the good of the country seems pretty backwards to me. Since you’re the smart one, you must know that already, don’t you?”

Even through the lenses of his glasses, Alphina could see the rapid blinking of Kithling’s eyes. “That’s a rather bold statement to make.”

“Don’t think of it as something said out of disrespect. I love this empire and respect the royal family in my own way. But I just can’t accept giving up my life and happiness for their sakes, even if it’s an order.”

“You have a point, I admit. But I don’t believe that becoming Prince Lionett’s wife would be throwing your life away.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have, um, an abundance of energy that civilian life would not be able to satisfy. You would shine so bright in a bigger world and on a higher stage. Don’t you think it’s a waste to squander your own potential?”

No, not really. I seriously don’t care about shining or whatever. Alphina didn’t mind living in a small world, nor did she care about how grandiose of a life she led, so long as she could spend it with her feet firmly on the ground and without any major developments. There was nothing that could make her happier than a quiet life of gardening in the countryside.

She wanted to say that, but it was impossible to share these values with Kithling. It wasn’t as if Kithling was especially stubborn either. She simply found it difficult to believe that she could find another person who viewed the world in the same way she did, as someone who had looped through a hundred lifetimes. So as she figured, it was useless to try and debate this point.

“Do you think someone as ill-mannered as myself could actually be an empress in the future? It’s not my problem if I end up punching a royal visitor.”

“None of us are worried about that. It’s true that you’re ill-mannered, on top of being a rough and violent and reckless and selfish and unfettered woman who can hardly be considered to be a lady—”

“I’m honestly impressed at how these attacks on my person are just sliding out of your mouth...” If Alphina really became an empress, then the first thing she’d do is execute Kithling. It would be the start of her tyrant era.

“However, I know that you are also the type of woman who understands that there’s a time and place for everything. If you were to become the prince’s wife and eventually the matriarch of this empire, I believe that our country would gain some vitality in exchange for our caution.” Kithling was speaking while gazing out into the distance, and Alphina eavesdropped on his inner voice. *(There are thousands of cautious and discreet noblewomen in the empire who were raised with proper manners and etiquette. However, none of them have even a fraction of Princess Alphina’s powerful personality. That’s why she’s the most suited to marry the prince, and if there’s anything she lacks, then I can make up for it!)*

I...see... Alphina couldn’t help but feel impressed. She’d never thought of

things that way before. This was the difference between her and someone who was actually smart. There really was a reason why Kithling was the prince's go-to man for answers. However, that had nothing to do with whether Alphina would accept his help or not.

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The next visitor came in like a storm. It was the seventh prince of the Heavenrose Kingdom and the most prominent candidate for the throne—Avenlock Heavenrose.

"Hello there, Alphina. It looks like you're enjoying life as a caged bird."

The easily recognizable foreign prince was dressed in casual clothing, which made him look like a normal youth walking around town. He was holding a bouquet of black roses so big that the flowers practically spilled out from his arms. Alphina had been in the middle of her daily duties—writing up a petition against her reengagement—and his sudden appearance left her staring at him in shock, pen forgotten in her hand.

"Prince Avenlock, how did you make it all the way to this room?"

"I snuck in." With that, he handed her the bouquet.

Choking on the powerful scent of the black roses, Alphina asked, "You snuck in? The security's supposed to be supertight."

The killer head housekeeper stepped in front of Alphina as if to protect her, glaring at Avenlock. Guards were starting to gather outside the room as well, but it was clear that there were fewer of them than usual. Alphina couldn't help but notice that some of the maids were inappropriately blushing at the dangerous allure of Avenlock's beauty. His good looks bordered on the criminal, what with how many problems he knowingly caused. This was exactly the kind of thing that had happened during their school days too, and Alphina couldn't even count on her hands how many of her classmates had been driven to tears because of him.

As if unaware of the trouble he was in, the handsome man before them casually said, "The security in this country is hardly a threat in the face of my powers of disguise."

“You’re saying that the maids and guards didn’t notice you?”

“Even if they noticed me, knocking them unconscious would make it as if they never saw me.”

I see. So that’s why there aren’t that many guards.

“Of course, if it was a woman, I chose to gently seal her lips instead,” he said jokingly, a disarming smile on his face. His behavior was the same as it always had been. Internally, though...

(Alphie, Alphie, Alphie. ♪ Alphie-phie-phie!

Phie, phie, phie, phie-lee, phie. ♪ Phie, phie!

Phie, pho, phum. ♪ Alphie-phie!)

His inner voice consisted entirely of a bizarre rhythm. As per usual, Alphina had no idea what he was thinking. She’d heard the inner voices of a lot of people up to this point, but it was rare for anyone to be as incomprehensible as this foreign prince. He transformed his passion into an aggressively expressed song. It was even worse because of how atrocious it sounded.

“Now that I think about it, it’s been a while, hasn’t it, Alphina? The last time we saw each other was when you ran away from me at Port Glass.”

“I apologize for any disrespect I caused,” Alphina said without a trace of sincerity as she bowed her head. Judging by Avenlock’s tone, he was still a little bitter about her escape. “By the way, Your Highness, what business do you have here that’s so important you would risk an international incident?”

Avenlock shrugged lightly. “An international incident, you say? Ha! After that amity agreement, Heavenrose and Lione are the best of pals—thanks to my skills as a diplomat.”

“Aren’t you throwing all your hard work down the drain, then?”

The killer head housekeeper and the other guards were surrounding Avenlock with murder in their eyes. The last thing Alphina wanted was to deal with a sword fight in this room, so she glared at them to make sure they didn’t do anything.

“Alphina, tell me the truth,” Avenlock said. “Do you seriously plan on

marrying that rude blondie?" When Alphina didn't reply, he continued. "Your free-spirited personality makes you unfit to live in the empire. Don't you think you would be happier if you married into the Heavenrose royal family? We're the land of freedom, if you recall."

Alphina rested her cheek in the palm of her hand and stared with suspicion at the prince's face, which was split in a wolfish grin. "So basically, you're asking me to be your wife?"

"Well, there's no romance in wording my proposition like that. I would like you to interpret it with more of a 'Will you be a blossom that decorates the halls of my palace?' vibe."

Avenlock took one of the black roses from Alphina and held it up to his nose, inhaling its scent with his eyes closed. *What's with this playboy act? What kind of lessons do they offer in Heavenrose?*

The guards were slowly moving closer and closer to Avenlock. They hadn't put their hands on their weapons yet, but the tension was palpable. If Avenlock made the wrong move, then they would immediately jump him. It seemed that Avenlock was aware of this fact, because he was resting his hand on the katana hanging from his waist.

"What in the world are you doing here, Aven?!" That was when the door to the room was violently thrown open, and Prince Lionett ran in. He must have heard the commotion. He butted in between Alphina and Avenlock, protecting her behind his back.

Receiving the romantic attentions of a handsome prince, only for another handsome prince to rush in to protect her... A normal woman in this situation might've been overwhelmed with narcissistic joy, thinking to herself, *"Ahh, what a temptress I am!"*

Sure enough, some of the maids watching this scene inappropriately murmured, "Oh, how precious..." But from Alphina's point of view, all it looked like was two mountain monkeys screeching at each other over some food. Looping through a hundred lifetimes sure affected the way a person viewed romance.

The blond monkey yelled at the black-haired monkey, "You've truly outdone

yourself this time, Aven! To think you would try to hit on another man's bride! You reek of desperation!"

"Lionett, what are you talking about? Look at you, forcing an unwilling woman to be your bride. You're no better than a barbarian. Instead of being called the Golden Sword, they should call you the Bandit Club."

"Speak for yourself. You intrude in a foreign country to steal away their princess—as if you're nothing more than a common thug. Why don't you change your nickname from Lord Blackrose to Blackhearted Gangster?"

"Ha ha ha. What a funny joke... You can tell it in hell!"

"Heh heh heh. Oh please, it really wasn't that funny... Now die!"

The men became more and more heated, and in contrast, Alphina's heart became more and more frigid. It didn't matter if she married Lionett or Avenlock; the only thing that seemed to await her was a lifetime of stress. For starters, both of these troublemakers were hardly her first choice for a husband. She'd much rather stay single for the rest of her life if these were her only options.

She sighed. *No matter how many times I repeat it, life just doesn't want to work out.*

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Alphina had little interest in the instruments that noblewomen played, such as the piano or violin, but she liked to play the flute. When she walked through the forest or hiked through the mountains, she would find a nice, thick branch, whittle it into a flute, and then blow into it whenever she pleased. Now, she didn't have the freedom to explore like that.

She sat on the windowsill and whistled a tune. The sheer loneliness she felt was depressing. The sky outside the window was as sunny as usual, and pure white birds flew through the air, their wings easily carrying them upon the wind.

O Mister Bird, Mister Bird, wherefore aren't I Little Miss Bird? Alphina recited to herself. It was a terribly ridiculous poem, but she was in a melancholic mood.

That was when a small shadow ran up to the window. It belonged to a white cat with beautiful red eyes. The elegant feline stared at Alphina through the glass and meowed softly. She turned to the killer head housekeeper and asked, “Excuse me, could I play with this cat for a little bit?”

The head housekeeper stared at the animal. “It’s unusual for a cat to be able to sneak all the way through the palace to get here. Does it belong to one of the nobles?”

“O-Oh, probably! It looks very well-groomed, and I don’t think there’s anything suspicious about it!”

“All right, but I ask that you play with it where I can watch over you.”

“Yes, of course!” Alphina hurriedly left the room and ran towards the window from the outside. Some of the guards were cat lovers apparently, because they were watching Alphina and the cat with soft smiles on their faces. However, Alphina’s inner voice was anything but soft as she exclaimed, *“Scarlet! I’m so glad you came! I was waiting for youuu!!!”*

Her loyal butler, who had changed his appearance into that of a white cat, meowed. *“I apologize for the delay. The security is unbelievably tight, and it took me a while to sneak in.”*

“It’s fine! Don’t worry about it! More importantly, I came up with a way to get out of here, so I need you to help me!”

The white cat’s red eyes widened. *“So you really plan on escaping, Lady Alphina? Even if it means abandoning the position of the next empress?”*

“Uh, duh?!”

“If that is your wish, then I shall obey,” Scarlet told Alphina. *“However, now that things have become so public, it will be very difficult for you to conceal yourself. To tell the truth, our hideout in Mt. Flame Dragon has been compromised.”*

“Yeah, I figured.”

If the emperor was absolutely serious about having Alphina marry into the royal family, then any of her hideouts that used to belong to Yulinar would no longer cut it. That being said, fleeing the country entirely wouldn’t be safe either. Even if she were hypothetically able to leave the Lione Empire, there was still the chance that she would be discovered by the Heavenrose Kingdom. There was no guarantee that any country with political ties to the empire would take her in as a refugee.

Now that it had come to this, should she run all the way to the Far East, which didn’t have any connections to Lione or Heavenrose? Even that would be a long journey by boat, and all of the waterways leading out of the country were being monitored. When she’d tried to sail out of the empire last year, the princes had discovered her at the harbor. Escaping their pursuit had been a huge headache.

Maybe there’s simply nowhere left for me to run... Such pessimistic thoughts had been beleaguering Alphina for the past few days. In that case, there was only one path remaining. *“Scarlet, listen. I’ve made up my mind.”*

“To do what?”

“I’ll activate the one hundred and first loop. It’s time to say farewell to my hundredth life!”

“What?!” Scarlet’s tail shot straight up into the air, and the guards blinked at him confusedly. *“A-Are you really saying that you’ll use Loop again?! Even though your head hasn’t been chopped off?”*

“A wedding is basically the same thing as a death sentence!” Alphina replied. She was aware that her logic was crazy, but that was exactly how she felt. Wasn’t a spiritual death virtually the same thing as a physical one? *“From my role as the prince’s bride to the Empress of Lione, my entire life would be spent here in this birdcage of a palace. Do you really think that’s how I want to live?”*

“Of course not... No. But another loop, you say?” Scarlet looked up at Alphina’s face, staring right into her eyes. *“I believe I’ve mentioned this before, but the Loop spell that Lady Yulinar cast upon you only activates when you die an unwilling death. That is absolutely not the situation here. So it’s questionable if Loop will even work.”*

“And like I said, a marriage and a death sentence are basically the same thing! My heart will die! As soon as the prince puts the ring on my finger at the ceremony, my mind will register it as a death, and then the Loop magic will activate! I know that for a fact!”

“I... I see... But...”

“Do you still have other concerns?”

At Alphina’s question, Scarlet nodded. *“I doubt that Lady Yulinar predicted a scenario like this would ever happen. I have no idea what awaits you on the other side of this loop.”*

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a possibility that you might enter a whole new timeline. I’m sure that there were a few minute differences in all of your previous lives, but there is a chance that Looping from this point would create a major divergence in our world’s history, causing you to live in a reality where even the impossible becomes possible.”

“Hmm...” Alphina had no idea what Scarlet was so worried about. As an optimist, she actually welcomed the idea of a divergent timeline. In any case, her current situation was the absolute worst-case scenario, so the only way to go was up. *“It’s fine, Scarlet. I survived a hundred lifetimes. I’m sure I can live through one more.”*

Scarlet still looked unconvinced, though. *“Then, how about this? On the off chance that your 101st life doesn’t go well, let’s set up a fail-safe for you to return to this one.”*

“You can do that?”

“I shall carve a Crest into the back of your hand. If you’re ever in a dangerous situation during your 101st life and you wish to return to this one, I’ll use the

magic in it to pull your soul back here."

So the Crest magic worked as a lifeline? Alphina nodded her understanding. *"It sounds like a complicated spell."*

"I'm sure that if we ask Lord Carl for help, we'll be able to pull it off. But as a fair warning, the more time passes, the more your soul will integrate with that world, which might make it difficult for you to come back. You mustn't spend much time agonizing over the decision."

Alphina nodded. *"It should only take a month's time to judge whether the 101st life is worth staying in or not. If I want to return, then I'll send a signal to you through the Crest."*

"I understand."

She didn't think that would ever happen, though. Alphina simply couldn't fathom the idea of a life worse than her current one.

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"Princess Alphina Shinn Sylvana is alive!" This piece of good news, spread with the blessing of Emperor Taiga IV himself, was met with uproarious delight from the citizens of the Lione Empire.

"How? Why? What's her secret?"

"How did a princess survive getting her head chopped off by a guillotine?"

"Have we been brainwashed yet again into believing some fantasy?"

Though some remained skeptical, the vast majority of the citizens were a lot more congratulatory. This was due to the collective trauma they had over the Saint incident. Many countries around the world had branded the citizens of the empire with the label of "pigs" due to how easily a young girl had duped them all. In the span of a single night, the Lione Empire had become an international joke. A princess coming back from the dead was exactly the sort of impactful story necessary to restore the empire's pride and reputation.

The next piece of news that the emperor announced was as follows: "Prince Lionett and Princess Alphina have gotten reengaged and will hold a glorious ceremony in a month's time." The people became even more excited at that. As

more and more time passed, increasing numbers of citizens offered their congratulations at the positive news.

“Long live Her Highness Princess Alphina!”

“Long live Her Majesty Empress Alphina!”

“Ha ha ha, aren’t you being a bit too hasty, there?”

Such conversations occurred every night in the empire’s bars. When she heard about this, the difference between the public’s opinion and her own in regards to her upcoming wedding was so great that Alphina felt dizzy at the gap. No one understood what she was going through at all!

When they’d been under the Saint’s control, they were more than happy to call her names like villainess. Even before the brainwashing, people had looked down on her for her unladylike behavior. They really just said whatever they wanted to!

That was right. So long as a situation didn’t involve them, people said and did whatever they pleased. In that case, Alphina decided that it made perfect sense for her to also have the chance to act on her own selfish desires.

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With the wedding ceremony coming up soon, Alphina was allowed to meet with her family. Her parents had come to congratulate their daughter and offer her their blessings, so she sobbed for them. “Oh, father, mother, I don’t want to get married! Allow your daughter the chance to remain by your side so that she may fulfill her duties of filial piety!”

Duke Sylvana smiled as he watched his daughter tearfully spout out nonsense, and then assured her, “Becoming Prince Lionett’s bride is the most piety you could show as our child, Alphina.”

“Oh, then never mind. I don’t care about filial piety anymore. I’m gonna be a delinquent.”

“Ha ha ha, Mary, just listen to her joke!”

“Oh ho ho, isn’t she so funny, dear? You must be sleepy, sweetie!” Her mother gently placed her hand on Alphina’s shoulder, and then the smile

suddenly vanished from her face. “Give up, Alph,” she said. When Alphina remained silent, too stunned to speak, her mother continued. “You always go on about not wanting to be a bird stuck in a cage, but you must learn to find happiness within your captivity.”

“Does such a thing exist?”

“Of course.”

“Can you give me some examples?”

“Oh, that reminds me. Carl and that Hipper boy will be holding your veil as you walk down the aisle. I hear that they were both very excited to do so. How fortuitous for you, Alph! It’s like you have two little brothers now.”

Alphina didn’t reply. Her mother hadn’t done a very smooth job at changing the subject. She had to admit that she was pretty happy to hear that Carl *and* Hipper would be at her wedding, though. Apparently, the two of them had become friends after Alphina had left the school and Carl brought Hipper home once, much to their parents’ shock.

No one had ever imagined that Carl would make a friend, and one close enough to bring home, at that. Hopefully, their friendship would serve as a symbol of the continued amity between the kingdom and the empire. Such measures were necessary, considering how antagonistic the princes’ relationship was.

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As soon as she found the chance to speak privately with her magical genius of a little brother, Alphina whispered into his ear. “...Blah, blah, blah... So anyway, that’s the situation. I want your help to activate my Loop.”

Carl nodded but then tilted his head to the side quizzically. “Wait, what will happen to the you in this world, Alphina? Will you disappear? I don’t want that to happen!”

It was so sweet of him to say that. Affection rushing through her heart, she replied in a gentle voice, “I don’t think that’s how it’ll work. The Alphina left here will, as the Alphina of the hundredth loop, spend her days as the prince’s bride. My soul will be the only thing to go through the Loop, if that makes

sense.”

The Alphinas of the past ninety-nine lives must’ve been cremated after her head was offered to the guillotine and she was killed. Only her soul returned to a past moment in a parallel world, from which point she would try again. Going by those examples, she reasoned that the bride version of Alphina should continue to live on in this world after the current Alphina left her body.

Of course, she didn’t actually have any concrete evidence to prove the mechanisms of the spell. Even Yulinar, who was considered one of the greatest mages in the empire, had never put Loop into practice during her lifetime.

There was also the chance that after her soul went through the Loop, the empty shell of her body would cease all biological activities and then perish on the spot. But at this point, Alphina didn’t care. Nothing mattered to her except for escaping from this world.

Even if she ended up in a world like Scarlet had described—a world where the impossible became possible—it would surely be better than this one.

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Springtime was the season of the alphina flower. The bright red flowers blossomed all throughout the empire, adding to the cheerful atmosphere permeating Lione. The day of the wedding had finally arrived.

Lionett and Alphina’s wedding ceremony would be held in the massive chapel in the middle of the palace grounds. It was a grand and sublime building that was only ever used for royal weddings, and served as the backdrop for many a young girl’s fantasies about marrying the prince.

Alphina was one of the rare exceptions who’d never listed “marry the prince” as one of her life goals. And yet, in an ironic twist, *she* was the one who would end up with his ring on her finger. She was sitting in the dressing room, still stubbornly pouting about the whole affair, when her parents came to visit her.

“Ohhh, Alph, you’re so beautiful,” her father said. “I’m really telling the truth here. You look lovely!”

“Ahh, finally... Finally, this day has come,” her mother exclaimed. “Mother, are you watching this from the afterlife? That brutish tomboy of a girl is finally

going to get married to the prince!”

Alphina’s heart as she watched her parents celebrate was as calm as the waters of a lake. It was as if she’d reached enlightenment. She no longer cared what anybody said to her about the wedding.

After her parents left, Carl and Hipper dropped by. The two of them were so angelic and cute in their little noble suits that they were the only positives out of this entire miserable experience. Carl’s face was as expressionless as ever, but Hipper’s seemed a little stiff from sheer nervousness.

“I’m so glad to see you here, Hipper. Thank you in advance for holding the veil,” Alphina said. Hipper nodded, a serious look on his face, and then Alphina turned to her brother. “Carl, you too. Thank you for today.”

Carl didn’t reply. He understood the hidden meaning behind Alphina’s words of gratitude. Hipper, who had no idea what they were planning, seemed confused.

“Don’t you have anything more to say?” he asked. “Your sister’s getting married, you know.”

“It’s fine; it’s fine,” Alphina said, a forced smile on her face.

The magic circle on the back of her hand was the Crest that Scarlet and Carl had placed upon her the previous night. Their preparations were complete. However, there was no telling whether or not the Loop would even succeed under such irregular circumstances.

After Alphina bid her farewells to her family, Lionett entered the room. He was wearing the full uniform he used as the crown prince, and he was so beautiful that he practically glowed with divine light. She could already hear the attendees’ admiring sighs echoing through the chapel.



Lionett must have greeted and spoken with Alphina's—the bride's—parents as well, because his voice was rough with nerves and excitement when he said, "It's finally time, Alph."

"Ah, yeah," she replied in a dull voice.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw soldiers standing in the hall dressed in full armor. They looked quite dangerous for the guards of a wedding. Their presence was due to rumors flying around the empire insinuating that Prince Avenlock planned on interrupting the ceremony and whisking away the bride.

"Let's go."

"Ah, yeah." Alphina hid her Crest with a white glove and then held the hand of the man who would become her husband.

Their wedding would not be a Xenite ceremony. Rather, they'd chosen to conduct it in a traditional way that had been passed down through the history of the Lione Empire. It involved the bride and groom walking up to the emperor, reporting their marriage to all twelve gods (including Xenos), and then sealing the deal with a kiss.

The moment that her lips touched his would be the moment her heart faded away in a spiritual sense. That would be the trigger for her reincarnation.

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When the audience gathered in the chapel saw that the bride and groom had entered, they exhaled as one at the sheer beauty they beheld. Alphina walked down the aisle with quiet, elegant steps, and she listened to the whispers traveling through the crowd like waves.

"Ohhh, Prince Lionett, he looks so divinely handsome! It's as if the very personification of beauty has deigned to set foot upon the mortal realm."

"Princess Alphina is no slouch either. Her hair, as red as flames, is such a beautiful contrast to the pure white of her dress."

Everyone who had received an invitation to the wedding was a high-ranking and prolific noble. Therefore, it was very likely that many of the gathered ladies had viewed Alphina with scorn and disdain in the past. Ever since the emperor

had chosen her to be the prince's fiancée back during her student days, she'd been the target of countless jealous glares.

Alphina took a surreptitious glance around the crowd. She recognized one guest as an earl's daughter who had, in the past, described Alphina's dance moves as those belonging to a rampaging horse, despite the fact that she herself would step on her own overly long dress and end up dancing like a lame mare. Alphina recognized another as the daughter of a marquis who had, in the past, declared that she'd rather jump to her death than watch the prince marry a barbaric tomboy, only for the whole affair to end with her using the ledge of the roof as a springboard for some lunges.

There were more faces that she remembered from her past. But now that Alphina was the empire's hero, none of the ladies there viewed her as a source of jealousy anymore. Envy only arose between those of similar ranks. The moment that one party became too far out of the other's league, the envy would transform into feelings of worship instead.

Lionett and Alphina flaunted their exquisitely extravagant appearances to the gathered audience. They slowly walked down the red carpet towards the altar, where the minister awaited them. Emperor Taiga IV was fulfilling that role today, and he greeted them with a loud and cheery voice.

"I hereby pronounce Lionett Lione and Alphina Shinn Sylvana husband and wife."

The two of them bowed their heads in respectful acceptance of his proclamation. From what they'd heard of the wedding's agenda, the next ritual would immediately begin from here. However, the emperor had not yet finished speaking.

"I shall make another announcement," he said. Whispers rose from the crowd at the unprecedented break in tradition, but the emperor did not seem to mind them as he continued in a booming voice: "At the beginning of the coming year, I shall abdicate from the throne and appoint Lionett as the Emperor of Lione. The couple we bear witness to today shall become the new emperor, Lionett Lione, and the new empress, Alphina Lione!"

At that moment, it felt like time had completely stopped in the chapel.

Everyone froze, their eyes wide open as they stared at the emperor's solemn expression. This was truly a surprise.

It was a given that Lionett would inherit the throne; nobody had ever doubted that. But this was the first time that the emperor had ever made a direct announcement about succession—at least, a direct announcement in public.

"Long live the Lione Empire!" someone suddenly yelled.

As if that were the catalyst to break the spell of silence that had been cast upon them by the emperor's unexpected declaration, cheers rose up from the audience, resonating off the walls of the chapel.

"Long live Emperor Lionett!"

"Long live Empress Alphina!"

A passionate fervor filled the air. The prince and princess stared at the roaring crowd with matching dumbfounded expressions. Blank from shock, Alphina's mind still managed to make a realization: *Ah, it's over. My life is over.*

The emperor yelled in a voice louder than the cheers, "Now, you may kiss the bride!"

Fingers as pale and strong as ivory lifted the veil from Alphina's face. The groom's honest and zealous eyes met his bride's, which were as dull as those of a dead fish. This would be their first kiss.

"Now then, if you'll excuse me, Alph."

"Yes, of course."

Lionett's voice was tight with anxiety, and Alphina's was equally stiff. However, their interpretations of what "if you'll excuse me" meant were vastly different. As soon as Lionett's lips grazed hers, she felt it.

It was a sensation that Alphina had experienced time and time again, as if someone had simply turned off her consciousness with a *click* before a door opened and sucked her body in. This was the exact same feeling that she had felt ninety-nine times before.

Chapter Six

Alphina found herself sitting on the parlor sofa when she opened her eyes.

“Ngh...” Feeling like she’d awoken from a long slumber, she raised her head and looked around. Three elderly servants as well as her mother, Mary, were nearby. The furniture and red carpet were familiar. On the wall was hung a portrait of Yulinar. It was the parlor of the mansion Alphina had grown up in.

So my 101st time is from home again?

She’d started from here last time as well. If she recalled correctly, the prince had immediately shown up to arrest her on suspicion of conspiracy to assassinate the Saint. A gentle beam of sunlight entered the room from the window. It had been nighttime when she’d started her hundredth loop, but it looked like she would start her one hundred and first from the daytime.

Her mother was sitting next to her on the couch, so she turned to her and asked, “Mother, what year, month, and date is it today?”

Mary’s eyes widened. “Oh, Alph, what’s wrong? Have you become out of sorts as well?”

“I’m perfectly calm. My mind is clear.”

This interaction was so similar to one she’d had with her mother in her past life.

“Today’s July 5, 844 Anno Xenos, and it’s two in the afternoon. Prince Lionett is going to come visit us in a little bit so wake up.”

“844?!” Alphina yelled, unable to contain herself. She’d gone back a year further than when she’d started her hundredth life.

If it was July of 844, then the Saint shouldn’t have arrived in the empire yet. And if the Saint hadn’t arrived yet, then it meant that Alphina wouldn’t get arrested on conspiracy to assassinate her. So at this point in time, she was still the prince’s fiancée.

“U-Umm, so then, why is the prince visiting us today?”

Her mother sighed. “The same reason he comes every time. He’s sick.”

“Sick? Does the prince have an illness?” This information was new and completely unprecedented. Prince Lionett was in excessively good health, and the only time he was ever bedridden was when he caught a cold.

“He’s sick with *love*. You could also describe it as a sickness of the heart.”

“Love? You mean he’s in love with me?”

“I’m not sure what about you appeals to him so much, but his feelings are pretty obvious,” her mother said with yet another sigh.

Just what’s going on? Alphina wondered to herself as she placed her hand to her chin.

In all one hundred lives she’d gone through, her mother had been absolutely delighted with Alphina’s engagement to the prince. She’d been equally worried about it as well, urging Alphina to act more like a lady or to learn how to be a proper bride. She’d insisted that if her daughter didn’t change herself, then the marriage would get called off, scolding and nagging Alphina countless times. And yet, today it seemed as if her mother was actually *annoyed* that the prince was visiting.

Bang, bang! The sound of harsh knocking reverberated throughout the room.

Just like last time, the middle-aged maid bustled into the room. “M-Ma’am, my lady. His Highness...Lord Lionett is...!”

The prince of this loop, accompanied by soldiers, entered the room. But something was off. Something was terribly off, indeed. For some reason, he was holding a single blue rose between his plush lips. It was the exact kind of playboy move that his rival, Avenlock, would pull off, and it was an action that Lionett would have normally looked down upon. Just what was he thinking?

“Heyyyyyyyyyy, sweet cheeks. How you doin’?”

Silence...

Even more silence...

Yet even more silence...

“Huh?” Alphina said, stunned, after sitting there and working her brain overtime to process Lionett’s words. “Wha—?” Those were the only utterances that she could manage. *“Heyyyyyyyyyy”? “Sweet cheeks”? “How you doin’?” Is this some sort of secret code?* she wondered before trying again. “U-Um, Your Highness? What cipher... I mean, what do you wish to discuss with me?”

“Shh, don’t say anything yet, milady. I’d like to bestow upon you this fair rose. ♪” He got down on one knee and held the blue rose out to Alphina with a perky bob of his arm. There was a dash of crimson blood running down his porcelain chin. He must’ve cut himself on a thorn.

This is what you get for doing things you’re clearly not used to, dummy, Alphina thought to herself. “Your Highness, you’re hurt. Please receive some first aid first.”

“Don’t worry—it’s all cool!” After practically shoving the rose into Alphina’s hands, Lionett stood up and pushed back his bangs with a flourish. “Hey, sweet cheeks, wanna go on a hot castle date with meeeeeee?”

“D-Date?!”

It was just surprise after surprise with this guy. In her entire acquaintance with Lionett, Alphina had never been invited on a date before. And one had to bear in mind that she’d known him for over a hundred lifetimes. In fact, she’d believed for ninety-nine of those lives that Lionett actually hated her. When she’d received the power of Telepathy on her hundredth loop and learned the truth (that he liked her so much he *couldn’t* invite her), she’d been bowled over by the realization.

A prince as shy and socially awkward as Lionett inviting Alphina on a date was as shocking as a bolt from the blue. On top of that, he was talking like an overly forward flirt for some reason. Nothing made sense at all!

In that case... Alphina activated a spell from the old magic. Her Telepathy—the ability to listen in on someone’s inner voice—was still present in this 101st life, so she could immediately access the prince’s mind.

(I ain’t gonna let go of you tonight, kitten.)

“Wha...?” The word that escaped Alphina’s lips after a long while of confused

silence sounded far too foolish to have come from a princess. But that was the only response she could give. *“Kitten”? You’re really going to act that way in your inner voice too? Seriously?*

This could only mean that the 101st Lionett Lione was, from the depths of his heart to the marrow of his bones, a playboy flirt.

“Er, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Just give me a moment.” Unable to sort out her emotions, Alphina massaged her temples with her fingers.

Though there had been little differences here and there between all the previous Lionetts she’d met, this was the first time that the prince’s personality had undergone such an extreme makeover. Her mother and the maids were the same as ever, so why was the prince the only one who was so different? Actually, now that she thought about it, Alphina didn’t have proof that this change only affected the prince.

“U-Um, Your Highness, is Kithling not with you today?”

At her question, one of the guards in the back raised his voice along with his hand. “Hey, I’m right ’eeeeeeere.” Kithling Ashley, AKA Way-Too-Talkative Shitty Specs, came walking up to them with an unusually bizarre level of excitement. He patted Alphina on the shoulder in an overly familiar fashion. “C’mon, Princess Alphina, why dontcha take the prince’s feelings inta consideration?”

“Right... Um, Kithling...? What? You...*are* Kithling, right?”

“Uh, duh?” Way-Too-Talkative Shitty Specs, who should’ve been renamed to Bizarro Shitty Specs, blinked in confusion.

“By the way, Princess Alphina, I got cursed lately. It turns me inta an idiot every ten seconds.”

“Okay...”

“I can’t control the symptoms even when I’m around y— BOINGGGGG! Wait, I’m tryin’ to be serious he— BOINGGGGGG! But I really can’t control these— BOINGGGGG!”

Huh? Are you pulling my leg? Alphina used her Telepathy on him.

(BOINGGGGG! BOIIIIIINNNGGGGG! BOI-BOI-BOI-BOINNNNGGGGGG!)

She immediately regretted using her Telepathy on Kithling. Rather, she regretted using it on the boy-ng formerly known as the top student in her grade and the smartest advisor in the empire.

So in other words, Lionett had turned into a playboy and Kithling had turned into an idiot.

Like Scarlet had been warning her about, Alphina seemed to have entered a world where the impossible became plausible. Even if that was what had happened, this was just completely out of line.

“Oui, oui, oui! ♪ Heeeere we go!!! ♪” shouted Lionett.

“Boing-phina! Boing-phina! ♪ Boing, boing, boing!” yelled Kithling.

Just what went wrong in the 101st world?!

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And so, even though Alphina had no idea what was going on, the prince took her on something he called a “castle date.” She’d long since lost the will to try and resist his bizarre whims. The date would consist of the two of them sitting in a gaudily decorated horse-drawn carriage, which would then take them on a tour through the vast garden in the castle.

All of the women in the empire surely dreamed of spending time with the Golden Sword like this. In the past, several ladies had approached Alphina at social gatherings, inquisitively asking her, “Excuse me, but you’ve had a castle date with His Highness before, haven’t you? What was it like?”

Every single time Alphina heard the question, she’d truthfully answer, “He’s neeeever invited me! ☆”

Of course, the ladies had always criticized her at that point, mercilessly accusing her of either lying, playing coy, or acting full of herself. So Alphina had never expected to actually go on a castle date with the prince.

“Ohh, what a wonderful day it is today! I get to spend time alone with my precious Alph! In a horse-drawn carriage! On a walk! Yahoo!!!”

However, this was not what Alphina had imagined a castle date with Lionett would be like. Every time he spoke, his bangs swished, even though there was no wind inside of the carriage. Just how was he doing it? Perhaps his hair was vibrating in place of his vocal cords.

“Wahoo! ♪ To tell you the truth, Alph...”

“Okay...”

“I’ve alllllllllllways wanted to invite you out on a date! Ahh... I can’t believe I was so bold as to say that out loud! Waahhhh!”

Is that what you’re embarrassed about?

The prince used both hands to hide the furious blush on his face, turning away from Alphina. He looked exactly like a young maiden struggling with the feelings of her first crush. Over beside Lionett, Shitty Specs was twisting his body and blushing while spouting nonsense like, “Wow! A shocking confession! ≡” It made her want to punch his lights out.

“Umm, so why did you suddenly feel like inviting me out today?”

The prince’s eyes twinkled like stars. “Do you wanna hear about it? Do you wanna know why? Do you wanna heeeear me go?”

“Uh...go, go.” Alphina wasn’t really that interested in learning why, but she had to talk about *something* to keep the atmosphere in the carriage from becoming more awkward than it already was.

“Okay, you know what...? Now, this is actually still a secret, by the way... The truth is...”

“Uh-huh?”

Shitty Specs was yelling something like, “Secrets! ≡ We’re secreting secrets! ≡” Thanks to him, the coachman was glancing back at them, curious as to what was going on. Alphina desperately wanted to apologize to him on Kithling’s behalf for how loud and annoying they were being.

“Last night, His Imperial Majesty summoned me to his room. He said, ‘If ye truly love that lass Alphina, then I gives ye mah allowance tae marry her before earlier. ♪’ WAAAHOOOOOOO!”

“‘I... I gives ye’?” Was there a hidden rule in this world where you had to speak in some bizarre manner or use an accent? “And what did he mean by marrying ‘earlier’?”

“For some reason, our marriage had been postponed, but...now it’ll happen in a month! We decided to go all ‘ah, to heck with it,’ and we’ll hold the ceremony in a month’s time! Round of applause, please!”

Smack, smack, smack!!! The prince furiously clapped his hands together.

For some reason, Kithling's version of applause involved slapping his cheeks, all while yelling, "This don't hurt! This don't hurt!" He was honestly terrifying. It was like a spirit had possessed him.

"W-Wait just a second, please! Marriage?! Here too?!"

Alphina had been so determined to escape from her fate that she'd activated the Loop spell, but it all amounted to nothing. In fact, since Kithling and Lionett were five times more irritating (compared to her previous lives), her situation had gotten even worse.

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Upon being freed from the absolutely exhausting castle date, Alphina staggered home. When she told her parents about the wedding ceremony, both of them raised their hands in the air in excitement.

"Please do it, Alph! The prince needs you!" her father yelled.

"You were the one who ruined the prince with his affections for you, so you'd better take responsibility and become his bride!" her mother agreed.

"You're blaming *me*?!" Alphina screeched.

She had absolutely no memory of having done anything of the sort. But now that she thought about it, there was the chance that Loop affected others' personalities as well. Could this have been what Scarlet meant when he'd said that the impossible would become plausible?

"You must be the responsible one and make sure that idiot...I mean, His Highness doesn't get into any trouble."

"Idiot?! Did you just call the prince an idiot?!"

It looked like her mother was quite the courageous soul in this life. That was hardly surprising, though. Anyone would view the prince the same way she did upon seeing him and hearing his loud 'yahoos.'

"But still..."

"Is something the matter, Alph?"

Her parents watched quizzically as Alphina held a hand to her chin, thinking hard. From what she could tell, her parents weren't so different from the way they'd been in all of her previous loops. Although it was a little strange how much stronger a person her mother was, that wasn't as big a change as with the prince or Kithling. Those two were completely different people. In that case, what about her brother?

"Mother, has Carl returned home yet?" Alphina asked. She looked at the clock and saw that it was just a little past four in the afternoon. His classes should've already ended by now.

"I suppose that he's spending some extra time on his research at the academy. He does this all the time, remember?"

"The academy?! Isn't he attending Melvina Elementary School?!"

Her mother looked confused. "What are you talking about? Last year, he skipped grades all the way to the National Academy. Don't you remember? You were also in agreement with him doing so."

"Ahh... I see..." she replied. *So that's how Carl's doing in this world.* It was true that Alphina had always held the belief that her genius little brother should advance to a higher grade in school. However, that had never come to pass. Carl hadn't expressed an interest in skipping grades, and it would've been useless for him to do so if he still couldn't communicate with his peers.

That was when a maid entered the parlor and said, "Lord Carl has returned from the academy."

Before the maid could even finish her sentence, the door burst open, and a boy with red hair ran inside. His green eyes, so similar to Alphina's, were sparkling with an overabundance of energy and delight.

"Alphina! I'm homeeee!"

Alphina stood up, and Carl charged at her, slamming his face into her stomach then wrapping his arms around her waist. He was so unbelievably lively.

"C-Carl? You're Carl, right?"

"Huh? Uh, duh?"

D-Duh? Carl had turned into such a little brat!

He continued to speak with the speed and enthusiasm of a geyser. “Alphina, you know what? Today at the academy, Hipper succeeded in learning a new advanced-tier spell! He combined fire and ice! Isn’t that sooooo cool? It’s something that’s never been done before! The teachers and all of the older students were sooooo surprised! Oh, I wish you could’ve seen their faces! Eh heh heh!”

With his bright smile and little snicker, Carl looked every bit like an ordinary boy with a bit too much energy. In Alphina’s opinion, he was as cute as ever like this. Maybe her 101st life wasn’t all bad, but there were still many things she wanted to ask him about.

“H-Hey, Carl, you mentioned Hipper just now, right? Is Hipper Wilds your friend in this world too? He’s here in the empire right now?”

The reason Hipper, who was a citizen of the Heavenrose Kingdom, had come to the empire was because his diplomat father had been assigned to Lione as per the amity treaty between the two countries. However, that treaty shouldn’t have existed in 844. So Hipper’s presence in the empire didn’t make sense.

Carl blinked up at Alphina, looking confused. “I mentioned him to you before. Don’t you remember? I said that a really smart international student had come from the kingdom. I was talking about Hipper.”

“An international student? From Heavenrose Kingdom?”

“Huh? I mean, it’s not like that’s rare or anything.” Neither of them seemed to be following the other in this conversation. “Actually, Hipper came over to play today! Heeey, Hipper! Come say hi to my sister!”

Carl called out to someone behind the door, and upon hearing his words, a young boy with black hair and dark skin peeked out, scratching at his cheek awkwardly. “I already said I didn’t wanna... I just wanted to borrow a book from you.”

His pouty expression was the exact same as the one that Hipper from the past loop would make. *Oh, seeing him is such a relief...* Alphina thought to herself. Out loud, she said, “I think this is the first time we’ve met. My name is Alphina.

I’m Carl’s older sister.”

“I’m Hipper Wilds. And I know who you are. Everyone does. You’re Prince Lionett’s fiancée.” His curt manner of speaking was exactly the same. Alphina liked him more and more.

“Hipper, you came from the kingdom as an international student, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Is that because your father is a diplomat?”

Hipper’s eyes widened. “How do you know about my dad?”

“Huh? Um, well, that’s...because Prince Lio told me! Your dad must have a difficult job, since he has to make sure the kingdom and the empire play nice even though they hate each other.”

Now Carl made a similar face to Hipper, blinking at Alphina like he didn’t know what she was talking about. “Alphina, the kingdom and the empire don’t hate each other. Right, Hipper?”

“Yeah. They don’t even fight or anything either.”

Wow. So this 101st loop had even changed the political situation between the various countries.

“B-But, weren’t there a lot of conflicts in the past about things like the borders and ocean resources? Have all of those problems already been solved?”

“Well, no, they haven’t,” Hipper replied. “But, you know, considering our prince’s personality...”

“Your prince? You mean Prince Avenlock?”

“Lord Aven could *never* fight with anyone. He’s always crying about something or other.”

“Huh? But isn’t he a hero? A dragonslayer?”

“The kingdom’s full of rumors about how he did it. The most common one is that he weaponized his tears to make the dragon feel bad and give him a scale.”

“W-Weaponized his tears?!”

Lord Blackrose, who had always been so arrogant, courageous, and nonchalant, using tears to get what he wanted? Could he have also suffered an unbelievable personality change? *Ugh... I hope I never have to meet him!*

That was when the door burst open yet again. Standing there was Prince Lionett, whom Alphina had bid farewell to not so long ago. He was holding a blue rose in his mouth again, all while bleeding profusely from his lips. He really should've learned when to call it quits—he looked ridiculously lame!

"My beloved Alph! I can't wait any longer! Wahoo!"

"H-Huh?"

"His Imperial Majesty and I have decided to prepare a room for you in the palace! You can stay there for the month leading up to our wedding, and we can slowly prepare for the ceremony together! Nice idea, right?! Hoo!!!!!!!!!! HOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!"

Uh, what is wrong with him? Is he okay? Has he been taking drugs?

"No way!" Alphina yelled immediately. *Why is getting locked up in the castle the* only *thing that this world has in common with the others?!*

However, both of her parents' faces glowed with joy.

"That sounds like a *wonderful* idea, Your Highness! Now, please accept our humble daughter! Please take her home with you!"

"I believe that she'll try to run away, so I recommend keeping security tight around her room! Now, do what you wish with her! Literally, do whatever you wish with her!"

"Father?! Mother?! You're going to sell out your own daughter in this world as well?!"

The prince exhaled as if he could hardly contain his delight. "I've gotten your parents' blessings! Now, let's go, Alphina! Heeeeeeeere we goooooooo!!!"

But before Lionett could grab Alphina's hand, Carl got up, guarding her behind his back. "No! Don't take my sister away! I won't let you, even if you are the prince!"

Yes! I knew it! The only person I can trust in this world is my adorable little

brother!

In response, the prince ran his hand through his hair, pushing his bangs out of his face. This action of his always irritated Alphina to no end. “In that case, Carl, why don’t you come with us to the castle? Come, and bear witness to the thick ties of love between your sister and myself! Let’s go...*together*...”

“Huh? May I really?”

“Of coooourse! ☆ Now, say it with me: heeeeere we gooooo!!!!!!!!! Togetheeeerrrr!!!!!!!!!!”

The Carl from the past loops would’ve never let himself become influenced by such a bizarre invitation. But in this life, Carl raised his arm and exclaimed, “Then I’ll gooooooo as well!” He was completely caught up in the flow of things. Prince Lionett’s influence—or maybe it was his powers of contagion—was frightening. “Hipper, why don’t you gooooooo with us?”

“Uh, no. I’m fine, thanks.”

Alphina could only stare blankly as the prince and her family cheerily discussed what they’d do in the days leading up to their wedding.

Oh, grandmother, who first cast the Loop spell on me, I need your advice! Just what is going on with this world?!

However, the portrait of Yulinar hanging on the parlor’s wall remained silent and did not grace Alphina’s question with an answer.

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And so, the princess had once again returned to her life as a bird in a cage. The room they kept her prisoner in was the same as before, and even the guards were the exact same. The familiar killer maid stood silently by Alphina’s side.

Alphina walked for an entire minute from the door to the couch and then sat down on it. She leaned back and stared up at the ceiling with a heavy sigh, at a loss for what to do. *I wonder what’s going to happen now?*

Last time, Prince Avenlock had broken into the room. That was an action characteristic of the bold and daring version of him, but according to Hipper,

the Avenlock in this world was a mess who couldn't stop crying. Alphina couldn't imagine Lord Blackrose weeping at all. But if that was true, then he probably wouldn't do something like walk into a foreign country's castle without permission.

"Alphiiiiinaaaaaa..."

Suddenly, she heard someone calling for her. She looked down at her feet because the voice sounded so deep that she thought it had emanated from the earth. However, the only things she saw there were the gray carpet and her own shoes. Then, when she raised her head, she was greeted by the sight of a man with long black hair standing silently before her.

"WAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!" She couldn't suppress the scream, convinced that a ghost had appeared in the room. After a second look, though, she realized that the man was a living person. In fact, he was a very familiar living person. She would've recognized that dark skin and handsome face anywhere. "P-Prince Aven?! Is that really you?"

"Oh... I see you remember me..." Avenlock's voice was weak and raspy, and his lips trembled with every word. It took a second for Alphina to realize that he was trying to smile at her.

The foreign prince standing before her was nothing like the one Alphina had known in her previous lives. He looked unhealthy and weak willed. But it seemed that this man was indeed the Avenlock Heavenrose of this loop.

"H-How did you get into this room?" Alphina asked.

"No one noticed me."

"Oh, because of your powers of disguise, right?"

"No. It really was just that no one noticed me... Ha ha, this happens to me a lot. I don't have a very strong presence..."

Watching him chuckle at himself in a dry voice made Alphina pity him a little. She wasn't the only one. The prince seemed so pathetic that even the killer maid hesitated to arrest him. Avenlock looked so feeble that if the killer maid tried to hold him down, she'd probably accidentally break two or three of his bones.

“I asked the guard to let me in... I asked him tons of times... But he never noticed me...”

Alphina couldn’t answer. This was a little beyond what she’d expected.

“And still after that, no one paid any attention to me... The palace is so large that... *Sniff*... It took me half a day just to get here... Boo-hoo...”

“I-I’m sorry, Prince Avenlock. Come on, please don’t cry!” Without thinking, Alphina took out her handkerchief and handed it to him. He stared at her, his eyes as big and watery as those of a puppy begging for food.

“You’re just as wonderful as I remembered, Alph,” he said. Alphina had no idea how he might’ve ended up with that interpretation, so she stayed silent. Avenlock continued: “When I heard that you and Lionett were getting married...I wasn’t surprised at all. Wonderful women like you allllll get taken by extroverts like Lionett... Every single one of you... Ahhh, I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry that I was born an introverted wimp!!!”

He kneeled down onto the floor and rubbed his forehead against the ground, apologizing for his entire existence. Just what was going through Avenlock’s head while he was like this? Alphina activated her Telepathy and focused her heartdrums onto him.

“ A Stanza for a Black Rose in the Nadir ”

Lyrics: I Composer: I Arranged By: I

♪ Na-Na-Nadir, Aven!

♪ Na-Na-Nadir, Aven!

♪ The frigid rain falls from the sky

♪ Not even the rose can stay dry

♪ My cheeks are drenched from the heavens’ tears

♪ And when I asked for why they cry

[Spoken]: “Because Alph has gone and gotten married...”

♪ Oh, what the heck?

♪ What the absolute heck?

♪ Heckle, heckle

♪ Na-Na-Nadir, Aven!

♪ Na-Na-Nadir, Aven!



“So in this life...you sing enka...”

Avenlock, who was dressed up in a light kimono robe, was tearfully singing a unique type of song that could be heard in the Far East. It was called “enka.” Heavenrose had always been known for incorporating far eastern culture and technology, but Alphina had never realized that it even influenced the prince’s mindscape.

Speaking of which, Avenlock was singing such a pessimistic song! In her past life, he would always tumble around yelling “Phie!” Just where had that cheery version of him headed off to? It wasn’t as if Alphina could do anything about the fact that she had “gone and gotten married” either!

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After the guards who rushed to Alphina’s rescue took Avenlock away, she once again heaved a heavy sigh. She turned to the killer maid, who was hovering near her with a cold expression, and said, “It’s actually very reassuring to me that you haven’t changed since my last loop.”

She quirked a brow and said, “I see.” However, it was clear that the maid had no idea what Alphina was talking about.

“I already know the answer, but just in case, what’ll you say if I ask to take a walk outside the castle?”

“That is not allowed.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Her loyalty to the job was also the exact same as in the previous life. Alphina wished that this maid had gotten even one percent of Lionett’s or Avenlock’s dramatic makeover.

Perhaps Alphina’s slumped shoulders inspired a smidgen of pity, or perhaps she simply wanted to change the subject, but the maid opened her mouth and said, “You’ll be able to go outside tomorrow.”

“Wait, really?!”

The maid nodded. “Tomorrow, the new Saint who’s apparently appeared shall come to meet with His Imperial Majesty. You’re supposed to be in attendance

as well, so you'll get the chance to go outside, Princess Alphina."

Alphina's breath caught in her throat, and she froze in utter shock. How had it completely slipped her mind? Like in all the previous loops, the Saint would appear in this world as well. She would cast the mind control spell, Geis, upon all of the nobles present in the audience chamber and then manipulate them to do her bidding. That terrible event would happen again in this world.

I wonder if the 101st Saint will still be that little sow?

The sow, also known as Debonaire Lua Lightmist, had seemed pure and innocent on the outside. However, on the inside, she'd been an ugly little pig. Just what kind of change had she gone through in this world? And if she was still the same as she was back then, would she again use Geis on the gathered nobles? There was the chance that, like Lionett and Avenlock, her personality would be the complete opposite of what it had been.

What's the opposite of a pig? A cow? No, there's the chance that she'll be like a chicken... As Alphina started hypothesizing about the Saint's new personality, she started to feel excited about what the new day would bring. "All right, then! I'm gonna have to prepare for tomorrow!"

"Right."

"I'll be meeting the servant of the great God Xenos! I'll have to look my best. Hey, I wanna pick an outfit, so can you help me?"

The killer maid looked confused at the sudden change in Alphina's mood, but she obliged anyway.

***

The next day, many members of the nobility were crowded into the chapel at the palace's center. The last time this many people had gathered was probably during the empress's funeral, over ten years ago. The emperor hadn't called for a particular meeting today, but everyone had come to get a look at this generation's new Saint. Their whispers even reached Alphina, who was sitting next to Prince Lionett.

"I hear that it's been a hundred years since a Saint appeared."

“A few candidates have popped up, but those corrupt priests from the church were so picky about their criteria and didn’t acknowledge any of them. I’m surprised they accepted this one!”

“I hear that she’s a beauty without parallel, and that her face is as lovely as the stars themselves.”

“I’ve heard rumors that if you stared at her straight on, she’d blind you with how radiant she is!”

“That’s nothing! We have Princess Alphina.”

“I agree. I doubt even the Saint could rival the beauty that comes from Princess Alphina’s inner strength.”

Uhh, why’d you drag me into this? And in my past lives, you all described my “inner strength” as my “tomboyish brutishness” making its way onto my face. Jeez, everything really comes down to how you word things. Even my reputation at social gatherings is completely different from the previous loops. Just what is going on? Please save me from this disgusting world, Little Miss Piggy!

As Alphina prayed for salvation, a young girl with light-blonde hair, dressed in pure white robes, approached the emperor. When she raised her head to look at him, allowing the nobles to behold her visage, they all sighed in admiration.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Imperial Majesty. I have been declared the Saint of the Church of Xenos. My name is Debonaire.” Her beautiful, clear voice echoed throughout the chapel. The audience was unable to take their eyes off of her good looks, completely enthralled.

Good job, Little Missy Piggy! Yes, that’s it!

This was a fantastic sign. If all of the people who had been praising Alphina focused their attention onto Debonaire instead, then they’d start to leave the rowdy red-haired princess alone. That was exactly what had happened in all of the previous loops. If the Saint went on to control Lionett, Kithling, and the emperor with her Geis, then Alphina might finally be freed from this nightmare. However, while Alphina was plotting her escape, the Saint said something truly bizarre.

“I have just become the Saint of God Xenos, he who rules the heavens. But I

have come today to return my title to you, Your Imperial Majesty."

Huh? Alphina wasn't the only person gaping at Debonaire. All of the other nobles present were staring in shock at the beautiful blonde girl before them. The Saint bowed to the emperor and then turned to face the assembly, her eyes shimmering brightly. Her gaze was focused on Alphina.

"I shall return my status as the Saint to the country, and in my stead, I'd like to nominate Princess Alphina Shinn Sylvana as the new Saint of Xenos!" Applause and cheers rose from the crowd. Alphina's mind blanked out, and by the time she realized it, the Saint had run up to her. "Oh, my most beautiful Princess Alphina! I love you!"

Huh? This is supposed to be our first meeting in this world...

"You're far more worthy than I am to be called the Saint! Please, guide the lost lambs and bring light to this world in my place!"

"W-Wait a second! Just wait a second!" Alphina stood up and tried to back away, but before she could do so, someone grabbed her shoulder from behind. When she turned around, she saw His Most Annoying Highness Prince Lionett standing there, spinning his head like a tornado to make his bangs billow in the wind.

"I NEVER THOUGHT OF THAAAAAAAAT!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Thought of what?!"

"My Alph will become the Saint! And then marry me! The Saint would be the princess consort, and everyone would be happy! Isn't that the perfect plan?! I wonder why I never thought of it! Aaahhhh!!! AAAAAHHHHHH!!!"

The prince was so loud with his frustrated yells that Alphina looked around her to see if anyone could help calm him down. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kithling sobbing, a veritable waterfall of tears gushing from his eyes.

"How could ya...? How could ya say such a thing...? Miss Debby..."

"Uh, and just who are you supposed to be?!" Alphina screamed.

The smartest guy in the empire kept changing up his personality. He'd said

that he would become an idiot every ten seconds, but he was probably closer to becoming an idiot every single second. He was an unstoppable one-man comedy show.

“Yeah, yeah!” Kithling continued. “If Miss Alphie becomes the Saint, then, why, it’ll be perrrrfectly swell! The empire’s future will be absolutely stable! Boing!!! Everyone will be happy! Boing!!!”

Behind the jumping form of Incessantly Loud Shitty Specs, Carl was also expressing his excitement in an explosive display of energy. “Hooray! My sister will be the Saint! Alphina’s the best!!!”

“Hey, Carl, it’s dangerous to be jumping around,” Hipper said, managing to keep his cool, even in the midst of such an outlandish situation. He was the only balm for Alphina’s sanity.

As if she was pouring oil right over an open flame, Debonaire shouted, “It seems like no one has any objections! Your Imperial Majesty, we await your decision!”

The emperor nodded. “In no reality would I ever object to this. I shall take responsibility and discuss matters with the Church of Xenos! My Alphina... My Alphie-poo will be the Saint!”

Alphie, Alphie-poo, Phie... Just give me whatever nickname you want, I guess... In contrast to Alphina’s worsening mood, the crowd’s excitement was reaching a feverish peak.

“Long live Saint Alphina!” At Debonaire’s cheer, the emperor, Kithling, and the rest of the audience started to raise their voices as well.

“Long live Saint Alphina!”

“Long live Princess Alphina!”

“Hooray!!! Hooray!!!”

The venue was filled with congratulations and well-wishes. Though the words were meant to lift Alphina up, she couldn’t have felt any more downtrodden by the events.

Wait. That’s it! Right when Alphina’s mind was about to succumb to despair, a

thought suddenly occurred to her and stopped her at the edge. The Saint was the one who'd started all this! If she listened to Saint Debonaire's inner voice, then there was the chance that she'd be able to figure something out! So she quickly focused her mind and stared at the face of the Saint before her as the other girl waved her hands up and down in delight.

*(You ***! *****, *** and ***, **********! I'll ***, and *********, and ******! **********, **********!!!)*

*Huh? What's with those ***s?* There was some weird interference in Debonaire's inner voice, and Alphina could barely hear anything. Debonaire had cast Disrecognition on her own heart. *Just what's happening?*

This was the first time something like this had ever happened. If Scarlet had been here, then Alphina would've immediately bombarded him with questions. But unfortunately, her loyal white cat still hadn't shown himself in this 101st loop. So this was a problem that Alphina would have to solve by herself.

Perhaps the key to figuring out this strange world lay in dispelling Debonaire's Disrecognition and finding out what she was truly thinking. Alphina was at the end of her rope. She had no choice but to pin her hopes on this final ray of hope.

***

A month later, it was once again the day of Alphina's wedding. Like in her previous life, the ceremony to celebrate the marriage of the newly appointed Saint Alphina and Prince Lionett would be held in the chapel. The whole affair was a lot more grandiose than before, and there were even VIPs from foreign nations among the invited guests. Apparently for this version of the wedding, Prince Avenlock had received an official invitation as well.

In the bride's dressing room, the Saint-slash-princess sat in a melancholic mood. That was the sight that greeted her parents when they came by to visit her.

"Ohhh, Alph, you're so beautiful," her father said. "I'm really telling the truth here. You look lovely!"

"Ahh, finally... Finally, this day has come," her mother exclaimed. "Mother, are you watching this from the afterlife? That brutish tomboy of a girl is finally going to get married to the prince!"

Ahh, they're even saying the exact same things as last time. At this point, Alphina felt like a spectator to the tragedy that was her life.

After that, Carl and Hipper entered the room. They were in charge of holding on to Alphina's veil this time around as well, and they were as cute as ever. Their adorable little faces helped to soothe how wretched Alphina felt.

"Alphina! Can I still come play with you after you get married? Can I?"

"Of course!"

"Yaaay!" Carl cheered, looking relieved. "Hipper told me that I wouldn't be able to see you whenever I wanted since you'll be the Saint *and* the crown princess."

"I mean, that's the logical conclusion to make," Hipper grumbled as he scratched the back of his head.

Upon seeing his reaction, Alphina smiled at him. "That's not true. Carl, Hipper, you two can come play with me anytime you want."

"But..."

"No matter what title I have or what fate I shoulder, I'll still be me." Those

words were directed more to herself than to the boys. *That's right. I have to stay strong.* She'd survived all of the dire situations and head choppings that had come her way before. She ran her fingers down the Crest carved into the back of her hand. *If push comes to shove, then I'll—*

That was when Prince Lionett entered the room. As usual, his appearance was lovely, but his bangs were being blown about by a nonexistent breeze. Just what was the physics behind that? This world's version of him lacked weight in both his words and his hair.

"It's finally time! ☆ Al! ☆"

"Ah, right."

"Let's goooooooooo!!!"

"Ah, right."

There were many couples in this empire, but it would likely be difficult to find a pair with a wider gap in excitement than the two of them. As that thought ran through her mind, Alphina, just like she'd done in her last life, took the hand of the man who would become her husband.

***

As soon as the bride and groom entered the chapel, the room was filled with an uproarious cheer. In her past life, the audience's reaction had been closer to a quiet exhale, as if everyone had been scared of disrupting the artistry unfolding before their eyes. But this time, extravagant displays of excitement were the norm.

Perhaps this was due to the drastic change in Prince Lionett's personality. Alphina's mind was occupied with hypotheses regarding the strange logic of this timeline. She walked down the carpet, which was as red as her hair, while the prince tugged her along by the hand. This was the path that would lead her to her metaphorical grave.

Emperor Taiga IV, as well as Saint Debonaire, stood at the end of the carpet. Debonaire would serve as the witness to Alphina's wedding. The both of them were standing at opposite sides of the altar, waiting for Alphina and Lionett.

In the past timeline, Alphina had heard the whispering of the gathered audience, but in this life, no one was saying anything that made sense. All that reached Alphina's ears were sighs and cheers. When she arrived before the altar, the emperor spoke in a voice even more severe than during the previous ceremony.

"I hereby declare Lionett Lione and Alphina Shinn Sylvana husband and wife."

The two of them bowed their heads and accepted the words with grace. A disorderly round of applause rose from the audience, which was followed by Saint Debonaire's bright smile.

"I would also like to make a declaration before this venue," she said. "From today onward, I formally retire from my position as the Saint to offer it to Princess Alphina Shinn Sylvana. That is the divine will of God Xenos, and it is this act that shall bring light to the world."

The applause that rose from that statement was louder than any that had come before. A deep, dark voice that sounded like something from out of hell was singing, "Na ♪ Na-Na ♪ Nadir, ♪" but Alphina did her best to pretend she couldn't hear anything. She couldn't afford to lose her concentration when the time was right.

"Now then, to officially hand over my title as the Saint to her, I shall present Princess Alphina with this emerald. It is proof that I am a humble servant of God Xenos," Debonaire said as she removed the circlet that was sitting atop her pale blonde hair. A large emerald was embedded into the circlet. Alphina knew perfectly well what that emerald really was—it was a magical medium that had brainwashed the men of the empire a hundred times over with Geis. What was her intention in handing Alphina that circlet? "Here you go, Princess Alphina."

Alphina stared at the emerald, offered to her along with a gentle smile, and then met Debonaire's eyes. "Thank you, Debonaire. I'm truly touched by your...consideration!" She reached out, not for the circlet, but for Debonaire's hand. She tightly gripped Debonaire's wrist, refusing to let go even when she felt the other girl struggle.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this, Princess Alphina?! What are you doing?!" Debonaire cried.

“I figured that this would be the only time I’d be able to touch you, considering how careful you are.”

Debonaire had gone through the effort of casting Disrecognition on her own heart. So Alphina guessed that she had taken serious precautions when it came to her safety, which was why she’d been waiting for this exact moment. The spell that she wanted to cast was impossible for her alone. Using the Crest on the back of her hand, she’d asked for help from Scarlet and Carl, who were waiting for her in the previous timeline.

“Dive!”

The Crest glowed as she activated the spell. Dive was old magic, a more advanced version of Telepathy. It allowed the user to directly enter the target’s mind. Alphina had only read about it in a book at Yulinar’s home, back when she’d lived in the Amazone Forest. So it was impossible to determine if the spell would succeed or not. None of them would’ve had the chance to practice or test it until the real deal.

***

It was a dream—Alphina knew for a fact that she was observing a dream. She was standing in a soft and fluffy field. Though “fluffy” was a strange word to describe grass, the sensation of the ground under her boots felt fragile and unstable, as if she were walking on clouds.

This was a phenomenon that would’ve been impossible in reality. It felt slightly different from the sensation that she would always get when she woke up in a new timeline after using Loop. Was this Saint Debonaire’s internal world?

Everywhere Alphina looked, all she could see was grassland. But beyond the horizon, she could see a point that was sparkling bright pink. It was the only place emanating light, almost like the sun rising in the sky. But Alphina had never heard of a pink sun before. Driven by curiosity, she approached it, and that was when she realized the identity of the pink light.

Wow! What cute little pigs! Alphina often referred to the Saint as a “pig,” but the ones gathered before her the literal, genuine article. They were cute little piglets, oinking and squealing. All of them had gleaming coats of fur and were

nice and fat. In Alphina's honest and merciless opinion, they were not only cute but looked delicious as well.

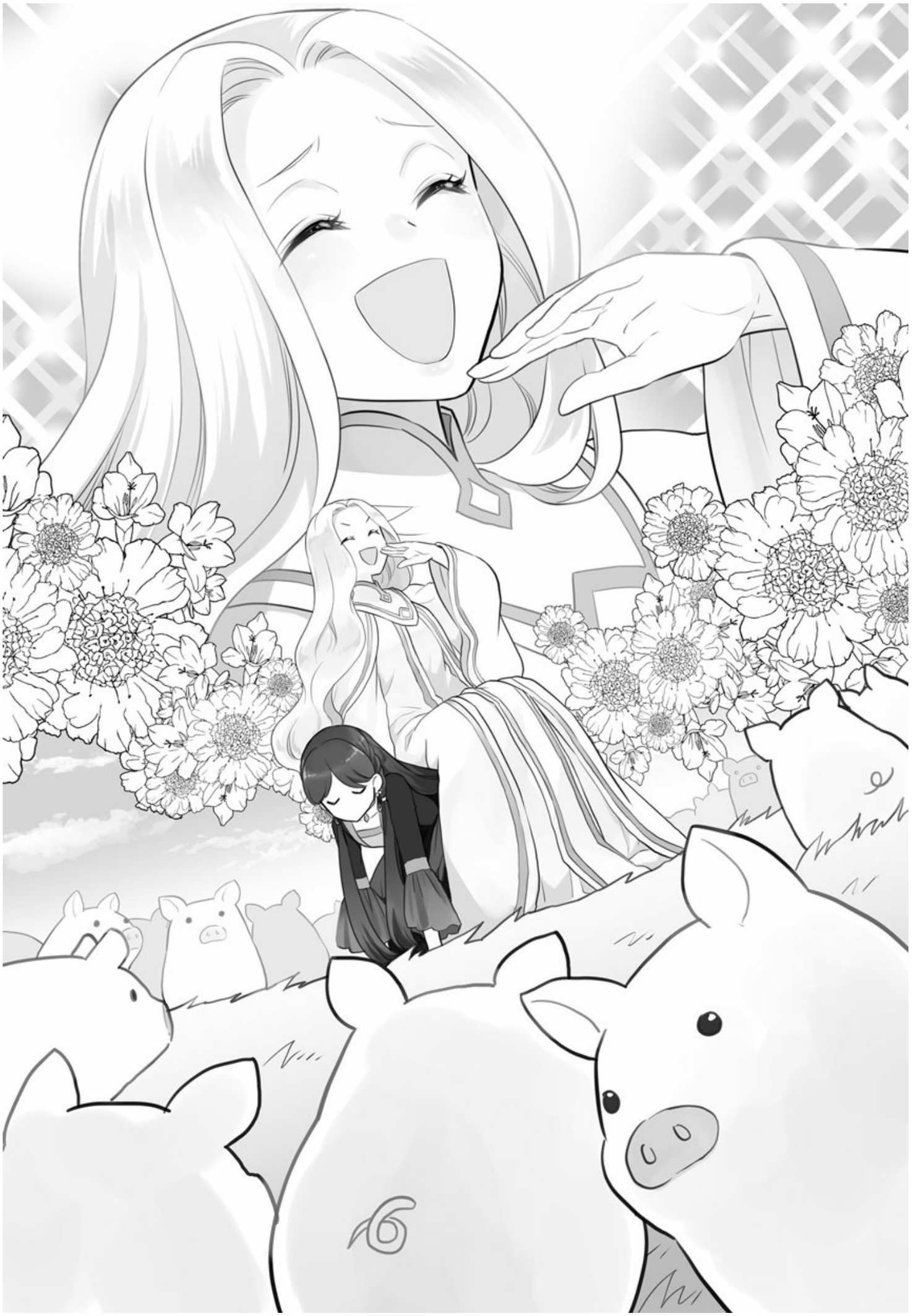
The piglets were walking around in circles as they oinked. In the center of the drove, a pig leader, twice as large as the others and with the exact same appearance as Saint Debonaire Lua Lightmist, was sitting in a chair.

"Squeeee hee hee!!!"

Ahh, what nostalgic laughter! It had been so long since she'd heard it that Alphina had to suppress her tears, but the Saint didn't notice anything amiss. Neither the piglets nor the Saint were aware of the red-haired princess's approach, continuing their rowdy little party.

It seemed that Alphina had come to this inner world as something akin to a spirit. As evidence of that hypothesis, her hand went straight through the piglets when she tried to pet them. All she could do was observe the Saint's inner world; she couldn't do anything to interfere with the goings-on. So of course, Debonaire and her pigs weren't able to notice her either. In that case, Alphina figured she could get close to them without worrying about anything. When she did so, she finally recognized just what exactly the Saint was sitting on.

I-Is that me?! The Saint was indeed sitting on the back of a dream version of Alphina. The princess was on all fours in a caricature of obedience.



I...see... This is how the Saint thinks of me...

"Gah ha ha ha! What do you think? My plan was so perfect that it left you all tongue-tied?" the Saint said, her voice high-pitched with delight. It looked like she was boasting to the Alphina she was using as a chair—Chairphina, in other words—about her victory. "Truthfully, I'd planned to use Geis to turn all the men in the empire into my little puppets, but your influence was stronger than I expected. So I feared the brainwashing wouldn't completely take. That's why I had to change my plans in a hurry. I came up with the idea that I'd praise you to pieces, have them appoint *you* as the Saint, make you fall in love with *me*, and then I'd manipulate you from there! I'm soooo smart! Smart little me!"

Her squeals of laughter continued to echo through the field.

In response, Chairphina said in a submissive voice, "Ohh, *wooow*, you're soooo amazing, Mistress Debonaire! You're just *perfect*! So perfect that no one would ever need me! I'm already soooo in love with you!"

"Yeah, I know, right?!" As the Saint screeched with laughter, the piglets began to dance around her and Chairphina while oinking. "Hey, Assphina. To whom does the Golden Sword belong?"

"To you, Mistress Debonaire."

"And Lord Blackrose?"

"He's yours, Mistress Debonaire."

"What about the smartest advisor in the empire?"

"Yours, Mistress Debonaire."

"What about the magic genius?"

"He belongs to you, Mistress Debonaire."

"And all of the hot men in this world?"

"They're allllllll yours, Mistress Debonaire!"

It was difficult to watch and listen to how docile Chairphina was being, and even worse was when the Saint started to squirm on top of her, hardly able to contain her excitement. She practically fell off Chairphina's back as she giggled

and kicked her feet.

“I see, I see! ♪ So allllllll of the hot men in this world are mine? Ha ha ha! The empire is the best! My life is the best! SQUEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

As the Saint raised her voice in a holler of triumph, the piglets harmonized with her and created a uniquely bizarre tone. Alphina continued to watch over the scene, not sure if she should feel impressed or exasperated. It was almost refreshing how the Saint cared so little about what a piece of human garbage she was. She was completely different from Mister Honey Bear, the small-time criminal Alphina had defeated in the past. They were entire leagues apart when it came to their levels of villainy.

Debonaire Lua Lightmist was truly a villainess—no, a villain pig who was worthy of their worship.

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Ah! It felt like waking from a nightmare. When Alphina looked around her, she saw that she was standing in the chapel during her wedding ceremony while the enormous crowd of guests stared at her. She’d returned to the exact moment when the Saint had removed her circlet and started to hand it over.

“Wh-What’s the matter, Princess Alphina? What are you doing?” Debonaire asked, blinking rapidly. Her thin wrist was still held in Alphina’s tight grip.

Alphina looked up and stared into her innocent eyes. “Thank you, Debonaire.”

“Yes... You’re welcome?” Debonaire smiled at her, obviously confused, and Alphina returned it with one of her own.

“My words of gratitude were not because you’re giving me the title of the Saint. I’m thanking you for remaining the exact same as you always were.”

“U-Um... I don’t quite understand what you’re saying.”

“In this 101st world, where everything and everyone has changed, you’re the only one who’s remained constant. You are the only one who has stayed the same. Even if we repeat our lives a thousand, or a million, or even a billion times more, I hope that you remain true to yourself.”

All right, now that that’s out of the way... Alphina released her hold on the

Saint's wrist. She placed her arms around the Saint's neck and drew her in close. Right when the Saint leaned forward, Alphina pulled back her leg and then slammed her knee into Debonaire's stomach with all of her strength!

"How *dare* you treat my body like your chair?!" she screamed.

"BLEURGH?!"

Saint Debonaire flew backwards, a sparkly liquid that should never be spilled during a wedding ceremony flying out of her mouth at the same time.

"All of the hot men in the empire are yours, you say? You can have as many princes and Lord Blackroses and pairs of glasses as you want, but you can't have Carl! What kind of sick fantasies are you imagining about my brother?!"

"Wh-Wh-What are you talking about, Princess Alphina?! Have you gone mad?!"

"Compared to *you*, I'm perfectly sane!"

Alphina approached her to continue her assault, and the Saint ran to hide behind the wedding cake on the altar. But Alphina didn't stop. So with a mighty, "Hup!" Debonaire kicked the cake over, even though it was bigger than her entire body.

At the last second, Alphina dived to the side and avoided the toppling dessert. However, the old emperor was unable to dodge it. Cream covered his entire body, turning his already white beard even whiter.

"OOOOOOOF!" The emperor fell backwards, strawberries stuck up his nose. Alphina leapt over his prone body as she relentlessly chased down the Saint.

"Y-Your Imperial Majesty..." said an onlooker.

"Hey! Someone go fetch a stretcher!"

As the chapel descended into chaos, a loud scream rang through the space. "SQUEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!" The Saint had finally showed her true piggy self. "I don't know how it could've happened, but I guess I have no choice if my true aims have been discovered! Assphina, I'm going to kill you right here!"

She raised her fingers and cast the advanced-tier spell Burning Flame. Her sudden attack, delivered without so much as an attempt at negotiation, was

truly something only a pig bastard would do.

“Too slow!” Alphina leapt away, once again barely avoiding the hit. However, the timing of her dodge couldn’t have been worse, since the prince had rushed forward to protect his fiancée.

“I’ll rescue you, Alph! I’ll pull off an Alphscue! ≡”

“Your Highness?! Watch out!”

The Golden Sword was not a warrior who would idly allow an offensive spell to hit him, but that was the Lionett of all of the previous loops. Thanks to this version’s irritatingly gravity-defying bangs, his hair caught on fire and started to burn.

“So hot! ♪ So hot! I’m burning up! Burning up from the passionate love Alph and I share! ♪”

Lionett Lione displayed to the world both his terrible luck and his amazing dancing skills, keeping his movements light and casual despite the flames in his hair. He looked like he was having fun, but this wasn’t the time for that.

“Kithling! I’ll leave the prince to you!”

“What kinda...? Just what kinda cake didya have us eat...Miss Debby...?”

“Kithling?!”

Shitty Specs had apparently gotten a face full of the cake, and his glasses had flown right off. He couldn’t see anything without them and thus had become completely useless. How weak! His defenses were much too weak. It made Alphina suspect that he was really just a pair of glasses controlling a human body.

“Alphina! I’ll help you!”

“No, Carl! Go hide somewhere with Hipper!”

Carl attempted to rush forward and aid Alphina, but Hipper grabbed him from behind. “Don’t do it, Carl! Don’t get involved with this comedy group!”

That was honestly hurtful, but he wasn’t wrong. The mess they were making certainly looked like something out of a comedy show. All of the guests were

running for the exit, pushing their fellow attendees back in an attempt to save themselves. However, a man with wavy black hair that looked like seaweed fought against the flow of people to get to Alphina.

"Na ♪ Na-Na ♪ Nadir ♪ Avennnn. ♪"

"Prince Avenlock, can you *please* not sing at a time like this?!"

"But... But the only thing I can do is sing enka... *Sniff*... Don't yell at me...!"

"I'm not yelling at you! I'm not yelling, so let go of— Watch out!"

A magical bolt of lightning cast from the Saint's fingers hit Avenlock straight on as he staggered towards Alphina, causing a fierce zapping noise. *Bzzzzzt!* His body shook from the electrocution. Covered in soot and ash, Electrified Avenlock certainly looked like he'd just crawled out of the nadir.

Is he dead?! Alphina wondered, but she could see his limbs twitching slightly. Perhaps this version of Avenlock was sturdier than the other ones.

"Are you sure that was smart, Debonaire?" Alphina asked. "Your precious hotties are going down left and right."

"They wouldn't if you'd just stop dodging, Assphina!" Debonaire held one arm up in the air to imitate the shape of a cross. Light energy slowly gathered in front of her limbs.

Whoa! It's my first time seeing this!

She was casting the super high-tier light spell Crossbeam. It was exceedingly rare to find someone capable of it, and even Alphina only knew about it from her grandmother's books. This was the ultimate light spell, truly something that only the Saint could use.

"This is my strongest and baddest spell! With this, you'll die for sure!!! You eyesore of a princess!!!"

"That's nothing!" Alphina raised her hand, prepared to borrow the magic in Scarlet's Crest, but at the last second, she changed her mind.

She'd decided that defeating this sow was something she would do with her own strength. Debonaire had killed her ninety-nine times in the past, so surely Alphina housed the power to pull this off. *I won't let her kill me ever again!*

A cross-shaped light flooded towards Alphina. Her crimson hair blew behind her, the wind pressure so strong that it made her think the strands would be pulled from her scalp. She felt her feet start to leave the ground, so she tightened up her core, lowering herself to the ground to keep from getting blown away. Alphina placed her palms together and faced down the Crossbeam.

“Mirror Wall!” This was a defensive barrier that her grandmother Yulinar had created. It could reflect an attack spell back to its caster.

The moment before Alphina’s body could be burned to a crisp by Crossbeam’s light, a wall of mirrors appeared before her and blocked its path. The Saint’s spell bounced off of the barrier and then returned to its caster.

“YEEEOOOWWWCHHH!!!!!!!!!” The Saint let out the same dying scream she’d made the last time. Her own flash of light swallowed up her body, and she disappeared into dust.

“That’s what you get,” Alphina said with a sigh. This made the score two wins and ninety-nine losses. Looking at the numbers, she’d lost an overwhelming number of times, but her two wins had been consecutive. Not only that, but she knew that she would never lose again.

Now then. Upon finishing her battle with her fated rival and turning around to look at the chapel, she saw that the place was a terrible mess. All of the nobles had already escaped, and the room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Cream and burned glasses covered the red carpet, and the emperor, along with the trio of dumb, hot men, were lying on top of it.

I’ve never heard of a woman who could turn her own wedding into such a disaster... Alphina had to admit, even she was a little put off by herself. *Don’t tell me that I have to be the one in charge of cleaning this up and explaining things?* As soon as that thought entered her brain, her heart started to sing, “Go home! ♪”

Yeah... In any case... I should be heading back! ♪

She raised her Crest-engraved right hand high in the air and called out to the two people waiting for her even timelines apart. “Sorry, Scarlet! Sorry, Carl! I messed things up again!”

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When she opened her eyes, she found herself lying on a bed.

“Ohh, you’re finally awake, Alph!”

As soon as she slowly blinked her eyes open, Alphina was greeted by Prince Lionett’s worried face staring down at her. “Your Highness? Where am I?”

“You’re in the infirmary. You suddenly passed out during the wedding ceremony.”

“What...date is it today?”

The prince’s face darkened. “It’s March 15, 847. Are you sure you’re all right? Did you hit your head?”

“No... I’m fine, I think.”

It looked like she had managed to safely return to the hundredth timeline. The prince’s attitude was more than proof of that. His overly serious personality was the one that Alphina was familiar with. He was definitely not the kind of person who would say things like, “Heeere we go!”

She sat up and looked around. That was when she noticed that the spacious room was full of people she knew. Aside from Lionett, she could see Kithling, Carl, and even Prince Avenlock standing around her bed. Of course, Scarlet, in the form of a white cat, was also present, looking up at her from the ground.

“Jeez, stop making all of us worry,” Kithling said and then sighed. “This does not bode well for your married life.”

Alphina stared at him. “Hey, Kithling, you don’t turn into an idiot every ten seconds, do you?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t, right?”

“Of course I don’t. A man as elite as myself never loses his reason. I’m simply built that way. Ahh, it’s truly a curse!” His irritatingly smug way of talking was definitely that of Shitty Specs.

“See, this is why you shouldn’t get married to Lionett,” Avenlock complained.

“It takes a lot to make you faint, Alph. Your marriage to Lionett was simply too much of a shock, wasn’t it?”

“Uh...” *Well, he’s not wrong.* “Um, Prince Avenlock?”

“What is it?”

“Do you like enka?”

Lord Blackrose tilted his head to the side. “You mean the songs from the Far East? No, many of them have a gloomy atmosphere, which isn’t exactly to my taste.”

“Yeah, I figured!” Alphina replied. Avenlock was the kind of person who was always positive and ready to dance. These versions of these three, with their specific idiosyncrasies, suited them the best. Next, Alphina looked at Carl. “Carl, you...”

He didn’t say anything, but he blinked in confusion.

“You were awesome in this life and the next.”

Carl in the other timeline had been adorable, and this Carl was as well. Both Carls were the best! Confirming that fact was the only positive to come out of the 101st loop.

Lionett cleared his throat as if trying to take control of the situation and announced, “His Imperial Majesty has said that we will postpone the wedding until you recover, Alph.”

“You serious?”

That was an unexpected side effect! She had to take advantage of this opportunity and find a way to escape from her life in prison. This time, she would find a safe place for herself in *this* world, rather than trying to rely on another one.

“All right, you know the drill, Scarlet. I’m counting on you.”

“I was waiting for those words! I shall always remain by your side, Lady Alphina!” After their telepathic conversation, he meowed from underneath the bed.

“Hmm? There’s a white cat here,” Lionett said.

“You’re right. Does the Lione Empire usually keep cats inside of the palace?” Avenlock replied.

“I wonder where it entered from?” Kithling mused. “It’s very bizarre for a cat to choose to stay in the castle.”

Upon seeing the three confused men staring down at Scarlet, Alphina and Carl giggled.

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In the end, no matter which world she went to, Alphina was Alphina. She could repeat her life a thousand times, and she’d never change who she was.

As long as I’m Alphina Shinn Sylvana, I’ll never give up! The princess swore to herself that no matter how many times she might repeat her life, she’d find a way to enjoy it up until the very end.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Yuji Yuji! It's nice to see you again after volume one. How did you find volume two of *100th Time*?

This time, there were two stories. The first one was Alphina rushing to save her brother and his friend. The second one was the prince capturing her and rushing their marriage. After he cut off all of her escape routes, Alphina finally decided to attempt her 101st loop. I hope you enjoyed both parts.

Like before, the highlight of this volume is in Nami Hidaka's illustrations! The cover art in particular is my favorite. She perfectly fulfilled my request of "Alphina walking down the aisle with a pinched expression," and turned it into such a beautiful, elegant, and comical piece of art. When I saw the finished product, I went, "Heck yeah!!!" and struck a pose. Personally, I thought Scarlet looking up from Alphina's feet like, "Lady Alphina, meow, you okay?" was super funny. I hope that everyone reading this enjoys the pictures as well.

Now, I'd like to express my gratitude. Thank you to Nami Hidaka, who was in charge of illustrations for volume two as well. Your design for Hipper was amazing. It was spot-on. This author has completely transformed into a normal fan of yours... I truly, truly, *truly* thank you.

Thank you to my editor, Kohara. This time around, I was super slow to hand in my drafts, and I deeply apologize for how tight the schedule was. The reason I managed to finish this at all was thanks to you, Kohara. Thank you so much.

And last but not least, I'd like to thank my readers. This volume has become quite a crazy story too, but thanks to all the fans, I was able to release it to the world. I'm truly grateful!

Now then, that's all for today. Thank you for reading all the way to the end.