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The Invincible Little Lady


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Chapter 1: Infancy

1. I Reincarnated

I was born with a weak heart and a feeble immune system. Now my life was nearing its end, and I'd never even stepped out of my sterilized hospital room.

I watched my father and mother as they held back their tears at me leaving them behind far too soon, trying to see me off with a smile...

I was happy being with you. Thank you.

Ahh... Looks like my life's drawing to a close with anticlimactic ease. In the end, I never could walk around or run. I needed people's help to do everything...and I couldn't even repay my parents for the love they've given me...

God, oh God...if I can be born anew, please...let me be born with a strong body that will never ever lose to anyone or anything...

With that wish in my heart, I let my heavy eyelids fall...and greeted...the end...

"I shall grant you that wish."

"Huh?!" I opened my eyes with a start upon hearing that booming voice echo through my mind, only to be blinded by a bright light.

Wh-What?! What's going on?! I can't see! I can't hear! I can't feel my arms and legs! Why? How is this happening?! No, make it stoooop!

"Whaaaa! Aaaaah!" I bellowed out.

"She's out safely. Can you hear how healthy she sounds? It's a girl, sir!"

And so, on this day, I was born anew—my name was now Mary Regalia.

A few days passed. With time, I gradually regained my composure. I decided

that my next move should be to try to get a grasp of what had happened to me.

So, umm...what's going on here, exactly? Okay, calm down. Just stay calm. I remember reading books like this in the hospital. What was it called again? "Regeneration"? Wait, no. It was "reincarnation"!

Now that I'd calmed down a bit, I examined my body. My hands were small. Little baby hands. There was no more doubting it: I'd been reincarnated with my memories of my past life intact.

Really... Well, I hope my body's a little healthier this time around.

Enveloped by a sense of relief, I fell asleep, my heart beating with excitement over the possibilities of my new life.

***

Ooooh! I can move! This body moves so easily!

Ever so slowly and ploddingly, I crept along the floor with my baby crawl. Your brave protagonist, Mary Regalia, was now a one-year-old. In stark contrast to the hospital room full of medical devices I'd spent my past life in, this time, I was growing up briskly in a serene, lavish mansion under the watchful gaze of my new parents. So far, my body was perfectly healthy.

I continued to crawl around impishly, only for a lady in a maid uniform to pick me up and cradle me in her arms.

Aww! But I wanted to move around some more!

Between the room's fixtures, my parents' attire, and the maids and butlers waiting on us, the place felt like some kind of medieval noble's mansion, like the ones I'd seen in TV, books, and video games during my time in the hospital.

Well, we really are nobles, though...

When I was born, my father happily declared that I was "the eldest daughter of the noble Regalia family!" as he held me. It turned out he was a duke.

I guess this means I'm a duke's daughter... It doesn't feel real. It's pretty far removed from my life in modern Japan.

Since I've gotten another chance at life while retaining my memories, I'm

going to do all the things I couldn't do before!

I believed the voice I had heard back then was the voice of God, so I offered my gratitude to the powers that be. *Thank you, God... I can't wait to grow up and do all the things I always wanted!*

As the months flew by, I grew up healthy at a brisk pace. Mary Regalia was now a three-year-old who could stand up, walk, and even talk. My hair, like my mother's, was long and a shade of silver that bordered on white, and I had alabaster skin. My frilly, high-quality baby dress, not to be outdone, was also pure white.

Although I tottered around the house, in truth, my motor skills had developed much earlier. I was capable of walking around just a few days after my birth, but I didn't do so because I realized it would be very strange to see a several-days-old infant walking around. Maybe I knew that because of my memories from my past life... Either way, I limited myself to moving around like a baby so as to not arouse suspicion.

Considering I'm still a baby, I haven't been capable of doing very much in the first place, so I don't think I've accidentally done anything too weird...probably?

As I matured, I grew to learn more about the world I inhabited. This place was nothing like the modern society I knew. I was in a country called the Kingdom of Aldia, and there were swords, magic, spirits, and monsters here. A fantasy world, as it were.

This is like an RPG! A world like I've only ever seen in games is now before my very eyes!

Well, that said, I'd have been fine with any world so long as I could live in peace. Going on adventures wasn't really on my priority list. I mean, adventures are dangerous! And this time around, I wanted to live a long life without worrying my parents so I could repay them for all they'd been doing for me. So I couldn't run headlong into danger.

So, whenever my parents asked me if I wanted anything, I'd always say I was fine with what I had.

Speaking of my parents asking me things, what was strange was that even

though they weren't speaking Japanese, I could understand their language perfectly well. I could only assume I had God to thank for that too.

"Thank you for everything you've given me, God! I'll live life to the fullest today too!" I declared, looking up to the sky and speaking my gratitude to God. "Ahh, life's so peaceful... I hope everything stays nice and quiet like this from now on. Oh, no! Did I just jinx it...? Pfft, as if! That wouldn't happen. I'm so superstitious."

As one might expect, I would go on to eat my own words in a most spectacular fashion.

What happened next can only be described as an unexpected accident born of carelessness. A large pile of stacked-up wooden crates stood before me, each of them large enough for me to fit inside, and they were all coming crashing down toward me. Needless to say, were they to have hit me, they'd have crushed me under their weight.

Oh no, I have to stop them!

While I was prudent enough to recognize the gravity of the situation, for whatever reason, I felt compelled to try to stop them from collapsing instead of doing the reasonable thing and getting out of the way. I flung one hand forward to stop the avalanche of crates and slapped the other over my face. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for impact, then felt something bump against me...

Whooosh!

What I heard next was a loud breaking sound, like the heavy wooden crates had just hit a large wall and shattered. I cracked open my eyes to confirm what had happened, only to be greeted by the sight of the crates all lying shattered and open on the floor. All I'd been doing the whole time was just standing there.

Huh...?

What?

2. Well, I've Really Done It Now!

It had all started about half a day ago.

“Oh, goodness! So this is where my little angel’s been hiding!”

As I was walking through the mansion’s corridors, I could hear someone hurrying over (if you could call it that) to me in the distance—a good-looking middle-aged man with a dandy beard.

“My, father. A fine day to you,” I said with a grin, pinching up the hems of my skirt in a curtsy and greeting my father.

My private tutor had taught me how to act and speak in a manner befitting a duke’s daughter, though there was still room for improvement. Thanks to my mental age being over fifteen, however, I was a quick learner.

“Oof!” Father let out a weird breath and looked up at the ceiling.

My father’s name was Ferdid Regalia. He was the duke and head of House Regalia and a marshal for the Aldian Kingdom.

“Father?” I cocked my head at his strange reaction, a small invisible question mark floating over my head.

“Aaach!” father squealed again, clutching his chest.

Why does this happen every time we see each other?

“Ahem...” The butler serving behind father whispered discreetly, “Sir, the conversation won’t move along like this.”

Father smiled, as if to tell the butler he knew, and carried on, “Mary, please follow me. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Someone you’d...like me to meet?”

Like I said earlier, I never asked my parents for much, so they never really insisted on getting me to accept any gifts. However, it seemed father had something in mind today. He picked me up and carried me off in his arms.

Father, why did you tell me to follow you and then pick me up? Let me walk on my own two feet.

And so, despite my silent complaints, I sat on father’s muscular arms as he carried me over to our mansion’s beautiful interior garden. He took me to a

spot set with a gorgeous desk and surrounded by chairs that offered a complete view of the area.

There was someone waiting for us there: a lady, seated on one of the chairs and enjoying a cup of tea. Father walked up to her and put me down before her.

“Mother!” I ran over to her as soon as I was freed from father’s grip.

“My, Mary, you’re such a spoiled little thing.” My mother, Aries Regalia, greeted me with a kind smile as I wrapped my arms around her knees. She was neither surprised by nor upset about my behavior.

The wind blew gently by, toying with mother’s silver locks. I was momentarily taken aback by her beauty. As I looked at mother with my large, round, golden eyes, she gently played with my own white locks.

In terms of looks, I got my mother’s hair (though my hair color was more white than silver) and my father’s golden eyes. My white skin looked pallid and sickly at first glance... At least, it did from my perspective.

The three of us carried on speaking to each other about nothing much in particular, just like any family would. As someone who used to only be able to communicate with my parents through the curtain of a sterilized room, however, feeling my mother’s warmth was something I never tired of.

“Ahem... By the way, Aries?” Father cleared his throat. “I was hoping we could introduce her to Mary today.”

“I’ll call her over, then.”

Father’s words put an end to my blissful moment with mother. I stepped away from her and looked up at him while she spoke to the head maid, who was waiting behind her. Mother said something that made the maid step out of the room for a moment.

Puzzled, I stood next to father, but before long, the head maid returned with a small girl in a maid uniform.

Whoa! It’s a little maid. Her hair and eyes are black. It really takes me back...

She wore a frilly black-and-white maid uniform. The head maid spurred her to

step forward, and she gingerly obliged, stuck out her arms, and bowed politely at a perfect angle.

“I-It’s nice to meet you, Lady Mary! M-M-My name is Tutte!”

Look at how flustered she is! She’s a cutie! ♪

“Starting from today, she’ll be your personal maid,” father appended, perhaps sensing that Tutte’s explanation was insufficient. “She’ll be taking personal care of you at all times.”

“My...personal maid?”

Wow, that’s, like...something a rich lady would have. Well, I guess I really am a noble’s daughter, but...

I looked at the maid again. She seemed to be older than me, but not by much. Mentally speaking, I was probably older than her, though...

I approached her, my golden eyes glittering with curiosity, and she straightened out her posture anxiously, looking back at me.

“I’m Mary! It’s nice to meet you, Tutte!”

I spoke to her not with a noble’s style of speech, but casually, like I would to a friend. I was excited because this was possibly my first time ever speaking to someone my age.

“Th-Thank you, my lady!” Tutte bowed tensely over and over.

I immediately took the chance to explore the garden with her.

“Father, mother, I will be exploring the garden with Tutte. If you’ll excuse us!”

I regarded her as a friend at once, but neither my parents nor the other maids said anything, so I pulled Tutte along behind me as I left the room.

“M-My lady, you shouldn’t run like that! What if you get hurt?!”

No, if anything, the way you run looks much less steady than the way I do!

I slowed down to walking speed and turned my face to glance at her.

“How old are you, Tutte?” I asked.

“Ah, erm, right.” Looking a bit flustered by my sudden question, Tutte took a

breath before answering. “I’ll be turning eight this year.”

If she’s eight, that means she’s five years older than me. Still, she has such a baby face.

Under my curious, golden gaze, Tutte’s adorable black eyes darted around awkwardly, and a slight pink blush crept over her tanned features.

She’s so adorable! ♪

After dealing with calm adults all the time, I really enjoyed her childlike reaction. Knowing she would be by my side wherever I went served to sweep away all the loneliness I’d felt in my past life.

“Hee hee hee! You better keep up, Tutte! ♪”

“M-My ladyyyy! Wait for meeee!”

I ran off again. Hearing her pitiful pleas behind me gave me the impression we were playing tag, which was fun. After running for a while, I happened upon a shed and slipped inside—now we were effectively playing hide-and-seek. Things I couldn’t do in my past life were now trivial tasks that I was both able and allowed to do; the thrill of it spurred me on to do childish, nonsensical things.

“My lady, where are you? It’s dangerous here!”

I silenced my breathing as Tutte entered the shed. I lay in wait, biding my time for the chance to pop out and startle her. I was on cloud nine. I was so excited, in fact, that I neglected to notice the poorly stacked, unsteady pile of wooden boxes piled up next to my hiding place.

“Boo!” I raised my voice and popped out to startle Tutte as she approached, bumping into one of the boxes with a thud in the process. I bolted by without incident, but then I heard the sound of wood snapping.

“Watch out, my lady!”

“Huh?”

Time ground to a halt as I watched Tutte’s pale face move, and I slowly turned to follow her field of vision. An avalanche of crates, each large enough for me to easily fit into, was rushing toward me. If those were to hit me directly, they’d surely crush and squish me!

Oh no! I have to stop them!

While I was prudent enough to recognize the gravity of the situation, for whatever reason, I was compelled to try to stop them from collapsing instead of doing the reasonable thing and getting out of the way.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my body tensing up as I braced for impact. Something bumped into me, and then...

Whooosh!

What I heard next was a loud breaking sound, like the weighted wooden crates just hit a large wall and shattered. I cracked open my eyes to confirm what had happened, only to be greeted by the sight of all the crates lying shattered and open on the floor. All I'd been doing the whole time was just standing there.

Huh...

What?

Taken aback by what had just happened, I looked around, trying to grasp the situation. The moment the wooden crates had touched my hand, they were crushed like they had just been rammed against a wall. The contents of the boxes had spilled out and rained down on me. What had felt like soft objects being crushed as they hit me turned out to be solid metallic tools that had been bent out of shape after bouncing off me.

What?! What just happened?

I stared at this unbelievable sight with stunned amazement. *Nothing hurts... All those things hit me and broke against my body, but I don't feel any pain whatsoever. What should have been solid, hard objects were like cotton brushing against me.* I realized the contents of the boxes were scattered in front of me and that none of them had gotten behind me, like I really was a wall standing in the boxes' path.

The final box lost all its momentum and fell down slowly, landing lightly against my palm. Without thinking about it, I firmly lifted up the box.

With one hand.



3. I Bawled!

It was a sight beyond belief: a little girl was deflecting falling wooden boxes like a brick wall, easily lifting up one of them with a single hand.

What's going on? Somebody tell me what's going on!

Unable to keep up with everything happening, my mind blanked out as I held up the box. But then, Tutte's voice pulled me back into reality.

"M-My lady..."

I hurriedly threw the box away and turned around flusteredly to face Tutte. But as soon as I did, I was stunned. The moment I turned to look at her, Tutte took a step back, her face washed over with...terror. Rejection.

In my past life, people pitied my sickly state, so I saw plenty of faces colored by pity and sorrow—but never rejection. No one would visit my hospital room just to reject me, after all. Even in this life, all the people I'd interacted with were the family and servants who cherished me.

So, the way Tutte was looking at me now, her features twisted by fear, felt like a fist clutching my heart.

"Um, I..."

I have to say something, anything! But, I mean, I didn't know I could lift these kinds of weights either!

My thoughts were running around in circles. In the meantime, servants had begun rushing into the shed, having heard the commotion. When they realized what had happened, they immediately checked that I wasn't hurt and took me to my room; I couldn't stop the horde of adults from carrying me away. *I give up on trying to figure this out.*

A few hours passed. I was sitting on my bed all alone, staring into space in the middle of the night while everyone else was fast asleep. I hadn't stepped out of my room once since the incident. *I don't want to see anyone. Especially not Tutte...*

The thought of being looked upon with such terror made me freeze up. *She must think I'm a monster. She hates me now... I never knew rejection could be this scary...*

I stared up at the ceiling, a self-deprecating smile playing over my lips. But then, I heard a knock on the door.

"Um... My lady...?" I heard Tutte's voice on the other side of the door.

Once more, I felt a tight grip squeezing my heart. "D-Don't come in! Leave me alone, please!" I bolted out of my bed in a hurry and locked the door. I realized what I was doing, but I couldn't stop myself. My young heart couldn't think of anything else to do.

"M-My lady...I understand that y-your anger is...justified, but..." I heard Tutte mutter.

Huh? My anger?

Tutte's unexpected words gave me pause. I brought my ear to the door and listened.

"When it happened, I...I should have thrown myself in front of you to shield you from the danger, my lady...but I was just... I was so scared, I couldn't move..."

What is she saying? If she'd jumped in to protect me, she would have just gotten herself seriously hurt!

I hadn't quite shaken off my typical citizen mentality from my past life yet, but I was a noble, and she was a commoner. What's more, she was under my employ, which created a clear disparity between us.

"I...!" Tutte raised her voice momentarily. "When...When you were born, and the master told me I'll be looking after you, I felt like I'd found my purpose in life for the first time. And in the three years since, I've studied so much to be of use to you..."

Her voice became more feeble as she continued to speak. "But I... When push came to shove, I froze up... No. I was so afraid of getting hurt, I couldn't take a single step forward..."

Silence settled over us for a moment.

“My lady...I realize how presumptuous it might sound, but please, please give me a second chance. Allow me...to stay by your side... Please...”

That final “please” was more muffled than the rest. Was she holding back tears?

I’m so stupid. I was only thinking about myself. I was like that in my past life, but I was so occupied with just staying alive that I couldn’t think about what other people felt.

Tutte is just as anxious as I am. She regrets not being able to protect me, thinks that I’ve become disillusioned with her, and probably fears she’ll lose her place...

“My lady... Please let me stay by your side...”

All the fear and emotion had finally reached a breaking point, and Tutte’s voice became choked with tears.

Three years. For three years, she dedicated herself to studying for my sake. Thinking back on it now, why did I think she was scared of me? If she were, why would she be here in front of my room now? She wasn’t the one rejecting me. I *was the one rejecting* her, *for fear of being rejected!*

My realization made me terribly ashamed of my actions. Before I knew it, tears were welling up in my eyes. *Just how small and self-centered can I be?*

“I’m sorry, Tutte... I’m so sorry... I’m so sorry I scared you...”

Without a second thought, I opened the door and tearfully apologized to the girl standing before me—and Tutte, who’d been hanging her head and holding back her own tears, looked upon my pitiful apology with confused eyes.

That night, the sound of my weeping and repeated apologies echoed through the mansion, baffling the grown-ups. As for the matter of Tutte seeing me crushing and lifting up those boxes...

“Oh, that?” Tutte said with a smile. “That wasn’t a surprise. I mean, I’ve heard tales of the master lifting up boulders twice his size when he was only five years old. It only makes sense you would be capable of the same.”

It seemed Tutte didn’t see the whole incident take place and only spotted me lifting up that last crate. She was under the impression that the rest of the crates had been crushed by hitting the floor in front of me. It only made sense she’d come to that conclusion, given I was harmless and the boxes were all scattered in front of me. Still...

You did that *when you were five years old? I’m impressed, my father... I guess this is a hereditary thing? Or maybe not...? I mean, it’s not like I went through training or anything...*

The truth of what my power was would go on to be revealed later down the line.

4. Oh, Bother

Hey, it’s been a while. This is Mary Regalia, now six years old. In the time that passed since that incident, my bond with Tutte had grown deeper. Three years had passed by before I knew it, and I was still growing steadily. And my goals for the future?

Longevity! Uneventfulness! A good life!

But the older I was getting, the more a certain issue was becoming more pronounced, causing concerns in my daily life.

As I was enjoying my teatime one peaceful afternoon, the handle of the cup I was holding broke off with a dry clink.

“Are you all right, my lady?!” Tutte, who was standing at my side, peered down to confirm I hadn’t been hurt.

“Not to worry, dear Tutte.” I waved my hand in front of her soothingly. “I suppose I just gripped the cup too hard when I put it down and broke it by accident.”

After confirming that my pale fingers were unblemished and unharmed, Tutte sighed in relief.

“Oh, thank goodness. But really, my lady, again? As soon as you put force into

your fingers, you break cups left and right. Is this some kind of technique you learned in your past life?”

“Nobody would want a technique like this!”

As we spoke, Tutte skillfully disposed of the broken cup and brought over a new one. She was very much used to me breaking things by now.

Since Tutte was my constant companion, I decided not to hide anything from her and told her about myself. When it came to my power and my memories of my past life...even though I didn’t want to hide things from her, I wasn’t sure whether she’d believe me at first. However, when I came clean, Tutte’s response was...

“Oh, my. You remember your past life? That’s wondrous! That’s just what I’ve come to expect of you, my lady!”

Well, huh. I’m not sure what kind of expectations you have of me, but if you’re not going to doubt me, I suppose I’ll just take the compliment.

Getting back on track, though, I’d come to realize since that incident that I’d been blessed with surprising physical strength—and by “realize,” I mean that I became keenly aware of how this blessing was actually a curse. If I applied even the slightest bit of force to anything, I ended up breaking objects.

Up until then, I’d been unconsciously holding back because I never knew how strong I was, but it seemed that now that I did, I could never go back to that kind of unnatural, subconscious restraint.

“How hard should I pull on this door’s handle so it won’t break...?”

I had to constantly be cautious, which made me do things a bit slower and more carefully than everyone around me. If my strength were the outcome of me training and getting incrementally stronger, I would’ve been more aware of my limits and would have been able to better control it. However, since I got all this power without even realizing I’d had it, I lacked awareness about my capabilities, so most of the time the reality of how strong I was just wouldn’t settle in.

My strength was one dangerous weapon. I felt like I was walking around with a gun pointed at everyone around me that could go off at any time. *I need to*

learn how to properly move my body and control my strength, or it could very much be a matter of life and death. With that in mind, I decided to ask father to teach me self-defense.

"A cute flower like you doesn't need to learn martial arts. Besides, if anyone tries to hurt you, I'll hunt them down and slaughter their family and friends before they can lay a hand on you. ♪" Thus spoke my dangerous father with a calm, collected smile, leaving me unable to petition him any further.

I considered just trying to keep myself in good shape and controlling my strength that way, but things weren't that simple. Being a duke's daughter, there was always someone watching over me or wanting to fuss over me, be it a servant or one of the various guests who visited our manor.

"You give off quite a presence, my lady. You have this air of mystical transience to you. I wish you'd be more aware of that," quoth Tutte. She seemed so amazed with me when she said it—and her face had become so very rosy—that I couldn't bring myself to retort.

As a result of all this, I was still trying to figure out some measure I could take to resolve the issue, and in the meantime, I'd have to spend my days dreading what I'd break next. I needed to rely on Tutte to handle most matters for me, which ironically meant my strength made me seem very frail and helpless.

Worse yet, my past life as an ill girl meant I was predisposed to letting other people take care of me. Thanks to that, my father, with his warrior's mentality, became intensely overprotective, calling me such dangerous things as "a fragile, frail flower to be cherished" without batting an eyelash and making no attempt to train me.

"Oh, bother... I never knew restraining my strength could be so difficult."

"That's because not everything is made to accommodate your strength, my lady. But more importantly, the Oracle Rite is coming up next year. It would be quite the disaster if something were to happen when you meet the other children. My, with your strength, you could blow a child's head off by flicking them on the forehead!"

"St-Stop describing me like I'm some kind of monster! I'm not that strong... I...think...?"

The Oracle Rite. When children turned seven, they were to visit the temple, where they would receive a revelation from God. It was a grand event meant to reveal one's potential. The oracle informed one of their capabilities with martial prowess, intellect, and magic, directing children to what they should study in the future.

I suppose I'll be focused on martial prowess, then. That should give me an excuse to get father to teach me martial arts.

I optimistically looked forward to this important event next year. But I still didn't know that what the oracle would reveal would exceed my every expectation.

5. To the Temple I Go!

Hello! This is Mary Regalia, now seven years old. A year had passed by as I struggled, to no avail, to control my strength. I'd become a dignified lady (if you will), and I'd even learned a bit of magic to help me in my daily life. Tee hee! ♪

Allow me to explain how the magic in this world worked. All the people in this world had mana in their body to some extent, but that didn't mean everyone was a wizard like in video games. Mana wasn't the same as magic, and even if one had mana, they had to study in order to use it to cast magic. Said studying cost money, of course, so most practitioners of magic were nobles.

Incidentally, that kind of "day-to-day" magic I used allowed me to turn magical tools, like lights, on and off, or to create fires that can activate stoves. That kind of theoretically simple magic anyone can use was collectively called first-order magic.

Magic in this world had been divided into eight grades, and once a person had reached the second order, they could use the kind of offensive magic I knew from video games.

Take, for example, types of magic that can create fire: the first-order fire spell would only start a small fire; a second-order spell could be used offensively; a third-order spell would reinforce the second-order spell's offensive potential; a

fourth-order spell would evolve the magic into a “blaze” spell, which would then be further reinforced on the fifth order; a sixth-order version would then be classed as an “explosive” spell, which would be further reinforced on the seventh order.

This is a bit of a roundabout explanation; it was all taught to me by my private tutor, which I then contextualized to myself using video game terms. The tutor did praise me for catching on quickly.

You might ask, then, what an eighth-order spell does. Eighth-order magic was untrodden territory, and while its existence was known, it was a thing of legend that no one had actually achieved, so it could not be explained.

Incidentally, first-order spells were said to be usable by all, but second-and third-order spells were only usable by skilled adventurers and wizards, as well as monsters. Fourth-and fifth-grade magic were only used by heroes, champions, and archmages—the kinds of people who would be protagonists in myths and stories—as well as demons, spirits, and angels.

Magic on higher orders wasn’t usable by humans, it seemed. Sixth-and seventh-order spells were used by beings that exceeded human knowledge, like dragons, archangels, and the Dark Lord.

It’s all so fantasy-style! ♪ It’s exciting! ♪

Returning to the present, though, I was currently putting on a dress with Tutte’s help—not the kind of dress I would wear around the mansion, but a fancier dress meant for an outing.

Hmm, this is one expensive looking dress. I feel like I’m definitely going to tear it up by accident... Ahh, at this rate, I’m going to be a useless girl who can’t function without Tutte to handle things for me...

I watched on as Tutte briskly and skillfully put the dress on me, dejected at my inability to do things on my own.

Be strong, Mary! The Oracle Rite is ahead, and based on what it tells me, I should be able to lead a regular old life...right?

I felt my confidence plummet, my assertion gradually turning into a doubt. Still, I had to try to stay positive!

“Excuse me.” A butler knocked and opened the door as Tutte was finishing putting on my dress and some other ornamentation. “My lady, the carriage is prepared,” he informed us.

“Understood,” Tutte replied without glancing at him, occupied with combing my hair. The butler accepted her reply without any argument and left the room.

“It’s finally time...” I took a deep breath and checked my reflection in the mirror. A tuft of my bright white hair had been braided on both sides and tied back, and my bangs were fixed in place with a hairpin. My silk dress was white enough to match my alabaster skin, and it was decorated with laces, frills, and pretty embroidery.

It’s finally the day. Today, I will be meeting other children my age! Ooh, I’m so nervous...!

I never got to spend time with other kids my age in my past life, but today, we would all gather in one place for the Oracle Rite. Today was only a gathering for nobles, so it wouldn’t be all the kids my age in the area, but I figured there would still be a considerable number of children. Honestly, that was what interested—and concerned—me more than the Oracle Rite itself.

I hope it all goes well... I thought to myself, half wondering if that thought in and of itself might be jinxing me, and made my way to the entrance with Tutte, where the carriage awaited me.

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The temple was atop a sloping hill to the north of the capital city. Its majesty gave the impression that it was less a place to be lived in and more of a gigantic piece of art. As I caught sight of it from the carriage’s window, I felt my heart beat loudly.

This kind of feels like I’m going to school for the first time... Not that I would know what that feels like.

As I was overcome by a mixture of stress and anxiety at the prospect of meeting new people, the carriage carrying me slowed down to a halt.

It’s finally time...for my debut!

“We’ve arrived, my lady.” Tutte stepped out of the carriage and prepared a step stool for me.

I glanced at her as she stood at the carriage’s side, her preparations finished, and I faced the door while trying to calm my nerves. The moment I stepped outside, I heard a slight commotion. My eyes fell on what looked like a group of children my age and their own attendants. At least, I thought that’s what they were, because before I could find the courage to meet their gazes, I’d lowered my eyes to the floor.

Oh, gosh, I’m so stupid! Aren’t I a duke’s daughter?! I wish I could be more up-front like the ladies in books and on TV!

But still, at this point, I felt too awkward to raise my head and look at them after doing this. I ended up stepping off the carriage with my head low, and in a predictable turn of events, I missed the last step and tripped.

Oh, noooooo! If I try to brace myself, I’ll end up punching a hole into the ground! But what if I end up tumbling down too hard?!

I started to panic and flail my arms around, but Tutte pulled me up by the arm so I didn’t tumble over.

“Th-Thank you...” I whispered to her as we walked forward. She continued to support me, relief apparent on her face.

Ahh... I was this close to making myself look like a clumsy girl...

The people looking at me walk in with my dejected expression seemed to believe I was a fragile girl who needed to be protected, but I was rather oblivious to this as I wearily let Tutte pull me along.

6. The Oracle Rite

I entered the temple and passed through the large door deeper in. I found myself in a large, silent, and solemn room with a tall, wide domed ceiling. I let Tutte lead me along, trying my best to look as inconspicuous as possible.

Why would I want to be inconspicuous, you ask? Well, it’s because I realized that the way I looked stood out.

You see, looking at the other kids, I couldn't mask my surprise. The first thing that popped out to me was their hair colors: most of the children had black, golden, or brown hair, albeit in differing shades and hues, but no one had silver or white hair like mine. Their eye colors were all quite varied too; some of them had the same eye color as me, so perhaps their mothers were originally from another country.

Also, everyone's skin was slightly toned and healthy-looking, which made sense considering the Kingdom of Aldia had strong sunlight and a warm climate year-round. *Why don't I have a tan? I spend time outside, but for some reason, my skin is white as snow...*

So, yeah, looking at the other kids made me realize that my appearance stood out from the rest. It was making me feel a bit awkward, so I tried to hide in the corner and not draw any attention to myself. In the end, being a duke's daughter did make people steal some curious glances at me, but no one really tried to approach me any further.

"Now then, we shall commence the Oracle Rite," began an acolyte as they called the room to order. "Once your name is called out, please step forward and place your hand on the Oracle Jewel."

At the back of the spacious temple were several staircases leading up to a faintly glowing, glittering crystal pedestal. The order in which we were to approach the pedestal was influenced by noble society's internal hierarchy. Houses that sought to stand out would go first, while houses that didn't wish to make as much of a show of themselves would go in the middle, and then the children of smaller houses would go later... The order was decided by those kinds of considerations. Whether a house's preferences were respected was mostly decided by their influence.

"Incidentally, Tutte, when's my turn?" I asked.

"I believe you're to be last, based on the master's request," Tutte replied. "He said something to the effect of 'Going last will make her shine the brightest.'"

Son of a biscuit! Father, I never asked for this! I don't want to stand out like this...

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply. Meanwhile, the Oracle Rite began, and

the children were called up one by one to the pedestal.

I watched a child nervously touch the crystal. It lit up faintly, releasing a glow that was a mixture of red, green, and blue. The kid then closed their eyes and stood there for a moment. Before long, they opened their eyes and stepped down from the pedestal with a pensive expression.

“What were those lights?” I asked.

“They’re a gauge of the strength, intellect, and magic of the person who touched the Oracle Jewel,” Tutte explained. “The thicker the color and the stronger the glow, the better a person’s abilities are.”

So, if it glows a hard red, that person excels in strength, and the brighter it glows, the stronger they are?

“Ooh... I’m surprised you know that, Tutte,” I said.

“I went through the Oracle Rite myself,” Tutte said with a shrug.

“Oh, really?” *True enough, she’s five years older than me, so it makes sense that she’s gone through the rite before me.* I’d forgotten about that. I wanted to ask her how it went for her, but I decided against it. It was probably a very private matter, and intruding on that would have been boorish of me.

“I understand the glowing part, but why do they just stand there for a while?” I asked.

“That’s because they’re hearing God’s words,” Tutte said.

“Huh?! You can hear God’s voice?!” That was something a modern girl like me found very hard to believe, so I ended up raising my voice despite myself.

Tutte cocked her head quizzically, as if to ask “Yes, what of it?”

God must be active and tangible in this world. For all I know, He may have even manifested in the world in the past. That’s a fantasy world for you!

The children went one after another, each of them touching the pedestal that shined in multicolored lights. It gradually made my eyes flicker.

As I watched, I could feel my pulse pick up. *Isn’t it almost my turn? How much longer is it?* I looked around restlessly. I couldn’t tell how many children were

left before me because they weren't lined up. Everyone was standing wherever they pleased, only stepping up when called, and the children who'd already finished the rite weren't leaving, so I couldn't tell how many were left before it was my turn.

My confusion ended up being short-lived, however. After an hour had passed since the first child stepped up to the pedestal, a visible difference in attitude began to develop between the children who were already done and those who weren't. Once I'd noticed that, I realized only a handful of people were left besides me, and my pulse picked up once again.

I can't mess this up... I'm not going to hold the pedestal too hard and smash it, am I? If that happens...I'll be done for...

My turn drew closer by the minute, and with it, my simple nerves started growing into overwhelming concern. I was starting to suspect everything I saw, and most of all, I was doubting myself.

Ahh... If I'd known about this, I'd have practiced holding a crystal ball or something... I mean, I don't think I'll crush it, but what if I crack it? Ah, what do I do, what do I do?! My hands are shaking from the stress!

What I believed to be the last child ahead of me had their name called, and a few minutes later, they returned to their place.

I-I-I-Is it finally my turn?! I crossed my fingers nervously, hoping for a miracle. *Never count out the power of a modern girl's good luck charm!*

"Next, Mary of House Regalia!"

At the sound of that call, I feel my heart explode with stress. *Noooo! I can't believe the modern girl's good luck charm let me down!*

I stiffened like a block of wood, and Tutte looked at me concerned, her eyes asking me what was the matter.

Oh, what's the point of worrying anyway?! I'm a duke's daughter, for crying out loud! I need to pull myself together!

I steeled myself, looking up and stepping forward. But just then, the heavy door to the temple opened with a screech, and several attendants in knight's

attire ran into the room.

“The Aldian Kingdom’s first prince, His Highness, Prince Reifus, has arrived!”

The atmosphere within the temple tensed up at once. The people standing by the doors moved to the room’s corners at once. I, however, was so tense that I ended up freezing in place halfway to the pedestal.

A single figure walked into the temple, knights in tow: the first prince of the Kingdom of Aldia, Reifus Lukua Dalford.

The sight of him made everyone look on in fascination—especially the girls. He was dressed in an outfit of white and blue, and his fair, slender limbs moved elegantly with every step he took. His golden hair was smooth as silk, and his blue eyes were profound and beautiful enough to draw you in. Although he had the delicate face of a young boy, his dignified expression nonetheless imbued his features with an air of nobility. The very image of a prince!

I had no idea the kingdom’s prince was my age. That having been the case, then, it stood to reason he was participating in today’s Oracle Rite.

With him being a royal, and probably very busy as a result, he was able to arrive late and also got to cut in line. No one complained, though—he was royalty, after all. The crowd circled behind him, allowing the prince to pass as he walked in my direction.

Oh, no, I should make way for him too... Despite my panic, my thoughts were catching up to what everyone else was doing. I decided to move, but then...I felt my body slump.

Oh, no! I actually screwed up!

As I tried to move away, my feet tangled because I wasn’t used to my shoes, and I tumbled to the floor.

“Whoa, there...” spoke a gentle voice.

As those words reached my ears, I felt someone catch me. *Wait. Who just caught me? Don’t tell me it’s...!*

I moved my eyes up fearfully, dreading to even raise my head, only to find myself gazing straight into the prince’s face.

I actually stumbled into thiiiis?!

7. Unbelievable!

Picture a handsome boy, his hair like golden silk, with his arm wrapped around a silver-haired girl's back, supporting her. Our audience observed this pastoral image in amazement, as if admiring a work of art. As for me, one of the parties involved...

Ummmm! Oh my gosh, what do I do?! If I push him away, I'm gonna blow the prince into a wall! The way I am now, I totally, definitely, one hundred percent have zero control over my strength!

...I was in a complete and total state of panic.

"You're shivering... No need to be afraid, lovely white princess."

...Huh?

"Now, take my hand... I'll turn all your nervousness into sweet heartthrobs."

What is this sappy mush coming out of your mouth, you seven-year-old dork! How can you say all this embarrassing stuff without cringing?!

All my panic got washed away by the awkwardness of the sappy lines I'd just heard, and I nearly burst out laughing. I hurriedly looked away, stifling my laughter.



“No need to be so shy, my darling brambling.”

I’m begging you, just stoooop! I’m in stitches here! Stitches! I’m gonna laugh in your face and get executed for lèse-majesté! I can’t believe this seven-year-old. Is he for real?! Is he trying to get me to laugh at him?!

I hung my head, shivering as I tried to restrain my laughter. Trying to keep myself from laughing probably made my face go red.

“Your Highness, it’s time...” one of the knights standing behind the prince came to his senses and spoke up.

“Right you are. As much as it pains me to part with her...” the prince said, wistfully stepping away from me, but not before brushing a tuft of my hair, as if he wished to hold onto me just a second longer.

No one wants your theatrics!

I suppose it may have looked dashing from the sidelines, but since I was (mentally) over twenty years old, he only looked like a kid standing on tiptoe to look mature. I had to keep my face down the whole time, lest my expression betray the rude impressions I had of him.

I felt sure everyone else was as grossed out as I was. But when I glanced around as the prince walked away, I could see all the other girls staring at him with entranced eyes.

No waaaay! Am I the crazy one here for thinking he was a dork?

Slightly shocked, I wobbled backward again, only for Tutte to catch me this time.

“Are you all right, my lady?” she asked.

“Y-Yes, I’m fine... Still, I did something very discourteous to His Highness. What shall I do? I hope I haven’t offended him.”

“You did? The way I saw it, the two of you looked glamorous, and I was under the impression you were sharing a sweet moment... I couldn’t help but watch in fascination, my lady,” Tutte admitted, looking as charmed as the other girls in the room.

No way... I thought you'd feel the same way I did, Tutte!

"Whoooa!"

While I was reeling from this second shocking revelation, everyone around us suddenly cheered. I looked around until my eyes settled on the pedestal, where the prince was glowing—or, to be more exact, the crystal in front of him was, but the light was so intense it cast a glow over him too.

It seemed that the prince was making the crystal glow more intensely than any other child before him had. Not unexpected, given his status. Still, he looked very much like God's chosen one, an impression that matched his handsome appearance. I found myself acknowledging, despite myself, that he did look quite cool.

After a few moments, the prince turned on his heels and stepped down from the pedestal. This time, I moved to the corner so as to not get in his way. The prince glanced around the room once like he was looking for someone, but I hurriedly hid behind Tutte's back, afraid he might say something to me about my blunder earlier.

A few seconds later, he ended up leaving, spurred along by his attendants, and the tension that hung over the room lifted.

"Now, once again. Lady Mary, step forward!" The moment I sighed with relief, my name got called again.

"Y-Yeees!" I replied shrilly.

I could hear a few chuckles from the onlookers, but I hurried for the pedestal, too tense to care.

I'm going after the prince, huh? It's not fun going after someone one-upped everyone else like that. If the crystal ends up hardly glowing for me, I'll just end up crying.

Hanging my head in disappointment, I raised my hand over the crystal pedestal. Suddenly, a white glow flashed in my eyes, intense enough for me to lose sight of everything around me.

***

“It’s been some time, girl from another world,” a voice boomed through the vast expanse of white.

Wait, that’s the voice I heard back then! So that really was God!

“Indeed, it was I. How are you enjoying life in your new world?”

I was a bit surprised at the fact he answered my thoughts without me speaking them aloud, but then again, it was God I was speaking to... That was a good enough explanation for me.

I looked around again. I was standing in a boundless expanse of white, and other than me and the presence standing before me, I couldn’t feel anyone else around us.

“It’s great! This world is a lot like the games I liked to play, so I’m enjoying it here.”

“I see, I see. I did well to grant your wish, then.”

“My wish? Hmm, did I ask to go to a world of swords and sorcery?”

I didn’t remember asking for that. I sifted through my memories of my past life, but I didn’t remember ever wishing to go to a world that’s like my video games...

“No, that much I did on my own discretion. I was under the impression you liked such worlds in your past life.”

“Oh, yes, thank you very much for that. So, what *did* I wish for?”

It felt like asking what my wish was might have been a bit rude of me, but I really had no clue.

“You wished to be born with a strong body that will never lose to anyone or anything.”

Hearing this, I felt my breath catch in my throat as I remembered. *Yes, I did ask for that.*

“However, since this is a dangerous world of swords and sorcery, where monsters prowl and heroic sagas are forged, making it so you wouldn’t lose to anyone or anything was a rather difficult task.”

“Huh?” I went very pale as I felt myself break into a cold sweat.

“Since I had no way of knowing what might befall you in such a world, I went ahead and adjusted all your basic parameters to their maximum values in this world to make sure you wouldn’t lose to anything. Your offense, defense, agility, and all other physical attributes are thus without peer.”

“Ah... Yes... Thank you very much.”

“However, since this world also has magic, I had to eliminate it as an avenue to your potential defeat, so I made your magical abilities unmatched too. Since sorcery in this world is divided into tiers based on your mana reserves, this means you are capable of casting spells of all levels.”

“Uh... Erm... Thank you...so much...”

“Of course, all that alone still left me concerned, so I also created a passive skill that nullifies all offensive physical and magical damage for you, and it is always active. With this, your body is completely invincible and impervious to any calamity, even a dragon or the Dark Lord.”

“Hm... Er... Thanks...a lot...”

My mind was struggling to keep up with all this shocking information, and I could only repeat vague, absentminded responses.

“Mmhmm. Good, good. And with that, I hope you spend your life well. Wherever your path takes you, you have my blessing.”

God’s voice grew distant. I, meanwhile, was the very image of slack-jawed and dumbfounded.

The white void soon faded away. I returned to reality, my mind struggling to process the absurd amount of information I’d just received, and I passed out.

This is unbelievable! My body is completely and utterly invincible. Absolutely nothing can deal damage to me!

Side Chapter: Tutte’s Lady Mary Observation Journal

My name is Tutte, a modest maid working at House Regalia's estate. My main duty is to serve as a personal attendant for the duke's daughter, Lady Mary, at all times. Lady Mary is a pure white girl who's extremely lovely, and she has an angelic charm to her. She always treats me and the other servants like family, making her a wonderful lady to serve.

And, when all is said and done, Lady Mary always greatly requires my assistance, which makes me extremely fond of her. Whenever she tries to do anything, she always gets all turned around and confused, crying out "Tuttteee!" with tearful eyes. When I see her like this, I always find it in me to do anything she asks.

Indeed: I help her eat. I help her get dressed. I open doors, pull back chairs, and turn pages in books for her. I pick things up for her, bring things over to her, brush her teeth, wash her face, anything she needs!

And whenever I do these things, she flashes a smile at me, like a white bud blooming into a flower! Oh, the elation it gives me. The absolute reward! And she's not just any flower, but the fairest flower blooming in the garden of the gods! Oh, no, even those words aren't enough to do her justice.

My lady is, well, she's more...ooh, how I loathe my lacking diction!

Oh, my. I got quite off track, didn't I? But still, that's a noble lady for you. Her inherent nobility has shined since the day she was born!

Seeing Lady Mary's dependence on me, the head maid once comfortingly said "I feel bad for you," but having sworn in my heart to tend to my lady with all my body and soul, I don't find it disagreeable at all. In fact, I'd prefer it if she were to rely on me even more, twenty-four hours a day!

And so, I've devoted myself to observing Lady Mary so I can tell what she needs and always have it ready before she even speaks up about it. And as I've observed my lady every day, I've occasionally found her doing some baffling things.

This happened one day...

"Tutte! Starting tomorrow morning, I'm going to do radio calisthenics! Doing radio calisthenics early in the morning was always a dream of mine!"

“Radio...calisthenics? And during the morning, you say? How early in the morning do you mean?”

“Hmm... About six in the morning. I’m counting on you to wake me up! ♪”

So Lady Mary said before retiring to bed. The next morning, I came over to wake her up, but...

“Ooh... Just five more minutes...”

After repeating such excuses several times over, Lady Mary got out of bed half an hour late. Admittedly, that wasn’t unexpected. Also, Lady Mary’s face when she’s sleepy is so cute!

“Well, it’s all right. Radio calisthenics start at half past six anyway. I’m still in the clear!”

Lady Mary sprinted through the garden, having changed out of her pajamas, while saying such incomprehensible things. *The way she doesn’t let anything discourage her is lovely!*

Upon stepping out onto the garden, Lady Mary looked around for a moment, and then suddenly fell on her hands and knees in a defeated gesture.

“M-My lady?” I hurried over to her, concerned.

“Right...I forgot... This world...doesn’t have radios...” I heard her whisper, a stunned expression on her face.

I didn’t have the first clue what she was talking about, but watching her get so flustered over wasted effort was quite adorable.

“You know what? Fine! I don’t need a radio to work out!” With that said, Lady Mary got up, straightened out her back, and took a deep breath.

“A one, two, three. ♪ Two, three. ♪ A one, two, three. ♪ Two, three. ♪” Lady Mary then burst out in a loud song, much to my amazement. “Radio calisthenics, first leg! E-Erm...”

Lady Mary raised and lowered her heels to the rhythm of her song, but then suddenly quieted down. The next moment, she fell on her hands and knees in a deflated manner once again.

“I’ve...never done any radio calisthenics before, so...I don’t know what’s the right order... Hey, Tutte, do you know how to do radio calisthenics?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have the first idea what radio calisthenics are, my lady,” I replied apologetically.

“Figures...”

And so, Lady Mary’s attempts at radio calisthenics came to a fruitless end on her first day. I later found out that radio calisthenics were something she wanted to do in her past life. After that, she mentioned something about “stamping her radio calisthenics card,” but sadly, I had no idea what that was either.

***

Another time, this happened.

“Tutte, I want to make rice balls!”

One afternoon, when she was looking out her room’s window absentmindedly, Lady Mary suddenly came up with that idea.

“Rice balls, my lady? Just what are rice balls?”

“You make them by squeezing rice real tight into a ball, and then you stuff them with all sorts of ingredients and eat them!” she explained.

“Oh, so it’s food. Well, I can ask the cook to—”

“No, I want to make them myself! I wanna do iiiiit!” She shook her head, sulking. *Ahh, she’s so cute when she pouts.*

I went to the head cook with my lady to state our intentions, to which they agreed and asked Lady Mary what she would need.

“First we’ll need some freshly cooked rice. Then we’ll need some salt, and seaweed, and salmon flakes, and fried cod...oh, and rolled eggs!” Lady Mary adorably counted the items up on her fingers.

However, everything she mentioned except for the salt and rice were words that made no sense to me. The head cook seemed just as stumped as I was, and they simply said they’d prepare everything they could up to the salt.

“Yeah, let’s start by making them with salt for now!” Lady Mary said with a smile.

The head cook went about the preparations, looking apologetic for being unable to follow Lady Mary’s instructions to the letter. I could understand how they felt. After all, my first instinct is to fill my lady’s requests perfectly too.

While the cook prepared the rice, we waited in the dining hall for ten or so minutes. The head cook walked in with a plate of rice. I picked up the salt, thinking to apply it to the rice so we could eat it.

“Not like that, Tutte. You’re supposed to apply the salt to my hands.” Lady Mary wiped her pretty hands clean and extended her palms toward me.

Looking quite confused, I sprinkled salt over her hands. The head cook watched over the two of us, looking quite satisfied. But then, my lady did something I couldn’t quite believe.

She...grabbed the steaming, newly cooked rice with her bare hands.

“M-My laaady!” I hurried over to stop her.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Tutte?” Lady Mary looked at me, baffled, her hands still gripping the steaming rice.

“I-Isn’t it hot?” I asked, taken aback.

“Not at all,” Lady Mary shook her head, perfectly collected. “But I can’t really make them into triangles... Maybe I’m supposed to squeeze them harder?”

Seeing her so calm put my heart at ease, watching on as she continued to touch food with her bare hands like there was nothing unusual about the act. Lady Mary gripped the rice with her small hands, trying her hardest to squeeze it into a triangular shape. *Ahh. She’s so adorable it makes me light-headed.*

According to Lady Mary, gripping rice like this was how one produced rice balls. Apparently, you would normally include different ingredients to season the rice. The head cook listened to her, fascinated with the idea.

“There, ready! This should be right.” Lady Mary placed the prepared rice on a platter.

Sitting atop the porcelain plate was a roundish object. The rice had been

formed into a perfect sphere that seemed far too solid to resemble rice. Lady Mary seemed completely unconcerned about its shape as she looked upon the rice ball proudly.

“Let’s try it, then!”

Before either of us could say anything, she had plopped the rice ball into her mouth. The head cook and I watched in tense silence as Lady Mary’s expression visibly clouded over.

“...It’s haaaaard,” she whined. “It’s not like what I expected...”

Indeed, Lady Mary had gripped the rice ball with a great deal of pressure, basically compressing and...transforming it into a mass of something else.

Eventually deeming she couldn’t make rice balls herself, she let the head cook handle it, and before long, Lady Mary’s culinary idea was complete. As a digression, these rice balls became quite popular among the mansion’s servants and became a staple dish in our estate.

That’s exactly what one would expect of Lady Mary’s idea!

So, yes, Lady Mary’s attempts often ended in failure, but that’s just part of what makes her lovely. What do I like about her, you ask? Well, I like how her limbs are short and pale. And how she totters over to me like a kitten. It’s adorable and fills me with a desire to protect her...

No, she’s not as cute as a kitten. No kitten alive could match her in adorableness! She’s more...oh, my lacking diction frustrates me! If only I were smarter. How did I spend three years of my life training to only be able to come up with such a lacking description for her?! Surely I can do better! I must find the right wooooords!

Ahem. It appears I’ve lost my composure. I beg your pardon. And oh, would you look at the time? It’s almost time for me to wake Lady Mary up.

With that, I bid you good day, everyone. I look forward to my next chance to speak to you of Lady Mary’s exploits.

8. I Have to Do Something!

I woke up, finding myself in my bedroom. Apparently, I'd passed out during the Oracle Rite. As I stared blankly up at the ceiling, I heard a knock on the door, after which Tutte walked in.

"Oh, Lady Mary. You've come to," she said.

"Tutte...how did I get here?" I sat up and watched her approach.

"You fell unconscious soon after the rite ended, so I carried you over to the waiting room. I contacted the estate, and the duke showed up with a small retinue, looking quite distressed... The master was incredible, you know. He stormed into the temple furiously. I was quite startled."

Tutte recalled what happened, nodding the whole time. I sighed, exasperated. I could vaguely imagine it based on her words.

"Here you are." Tutte placed a cup of fragrant tea before me, hoping to lift my spirits.

"Thank you..." I picked up the cup and sipped on it. It calmed me down somewhat, and I was able to reflect on the ritual.

I never imagined that's what I'd find out. I'm basically the strongest person alive, and I didn't even know it. Well, at least in terms of physical abilities. I wish God made it so my mental prowess matched that too... I mean, I'm the type to always waffle when it's time to act.

I took another sip of tea...

"Speaking of the rite, you were amazing, my lady!" Tutte said. "The whole temple went white with light, and the crystal ball just shattered to bits!"

"Pffft!"

...and then I very nearly sprayed all the tea out of my mouth in shock, but I was able to stop myself at the last second. Spit takes and rich lady dignity are kind of mutually exclusive.

"I-I-I broke it?! Really?! I broke the holy treasure?!"

"I'm not sure if it was just you, to be honest," Tutte said pensively. "The

temple's people said the pedestal was already on the verge of breaking after the prince received his oracle, so you using it was just the final straw that broke it. I mean, it shined like that after you touched it, but it shattered a moment later."

"Can we...compensate them for the crystal?" I asked, sweating bullets.

The cup of tea I was holding was clattering in my shaking grasp, and I held it so hard it started cracking.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. It's a sacred relic, after all. It fixed itself a moment later," Tutte said reassuringly.

"Th-Thank goodness..." I sighed in relief.

"The temple's staff said that if you didn't end up successfully going through the rite, you could come back another day and redo it."

"No, I heard God's voice, so I think I'm fine."

If anything, what he told me is the problem... What am I supposed to do now?

Seeing my pensive silence, Tutte approached me after she disposed of the cup I'd cracked. "What's wrong, my lady? Was there a problem with the oracle you received?"

Tutte wasn't my maid for nothing; she caught on to my emotions quickly. I gathered my courage and decided to tell her about the powers God granted me. "I... Hmm, apparently I have some broken powers."

"Broken powers...? Do you mean your powers are defective somehow? I've never heard of anything like that."

"Well, they're not defective. It's more like... Hmm, in my terms, they're very strong and unbalanced compared to everyone else's."

"My, that sounds impressive. Oh, is this 'broken power' thing another idea from your past life?"

"If only it were just that..." I sighed and told Tutte about my powers as God had detailed them to me. At first she simply nodded curiously, but the more I told her, the paler her face became.

“Are you saying you’re going to become a legendary hero?! I think I probably won’t be a worthy companion for a hero... I’d probably just drag you down.” Such was her impression after I’d finished telling her everything.

“I’m not going to be a hero! All I want is to just enjoy an average, peaceful life with you! I don’t want to spend my life grappling with dangers...”

“My lady...” Tutte looked at me, looking very relieved. Her cheeks also looked kind of rosy...?

“But the real question is what I do next,” I continued. “I need to find some way to either suppress or hide my powers. Because if they come to light...”

I hugged myself, shivering. So far, I’d insisted on trying to live as a normal girl, hiding my powers because of the incident that had revealed my powers to me, when I saw Tutte’s expression of terror. Although it had all ended in a misunderstanding and nothing serious had happened, that moment was a traumatic memory for me.

Plus, having read all sorts of books and watched many movies, I knew that when people are faced with something they can’t understand, something common sense can’t explain, they usually act to dispose of it...

I told Tutte as much, and she embraced me even as I wrapped my own arms around myself. “Don’t worry, my lady. You always have us on your side. Me and the other servants, and the master and the mistress, we all love you very much.”

While those words did soothe me, they also gripped tightly on my heart. *There’s something else I know: when faced with the unknown, society also tends to expel those who side with it...*

“Thank you...” I said. “Lend me your help, okay? So we can figure out if there’s something I can do.”

I relaxed my arms and moved away from Tutte. “Tutte, let’s go meet with father and mother.”

For the time being, I have to learn how to control my powers as soon as possible. To do that, I need to study a lot. The way I am now, I’m basically a walking nuke with an exposed fuse.

A few days passed, and my family had summoned an instructor to teach me martial arts to pair with my private tutor for etiquette. I wanted to study how to use second-order magic too, but as it turned out, there was a law that forbade the teaching of magic on that level until one reached the appropriate age.

Thankfully, mana only exhibited its power when used for magic. If one didn't know how to use magic, it didn't matter how vast their mana reserves were, it all went unused. But still, there were cases of people's power going haywire once they tried to use even the simplest of spells, so I couldn't be too optimistic about this.

I wish I could learn how to use magic sooner rather than later. I mean, it's magic! It's so exciting!

Feeling a bit disappointed, I changed into the more convenient top and pants I had the tailor make for me and tied my hair into a ponytail. I stepped out into the estate's lawn, waiting for my lesson to start. My new martial arts instructor was scheduled to arrive today.

Hmm, I wish I had a tracksuit or something, but I guess those don't exist in this world. Maybe I can get my exclusive tailor to really make me a tracksuit... I pondered my attire as I waited for the instructor to arrive.

Come to think of it, father said the instructor was a friend of his. They fought on the same battlefield when they were younger.

Father had reacted quite badly to my request to learn martial arts. As always, he was overprotective to exaggerated degrees, and he said I didn't need to learn any of that, bemoaning what would happen if I got scraped. In the end, my tongue slipped, and I bellowed at him, "If you won't do what I ask, I'll hate you, father!"

I had to spend the few minutes that followed assuring him I was retracting my words. Father was in a state of complete depression and despair. It did work, though, because father begrudgingly agreed to my request.

"My lady, Count Elexiel has arrived," Tutte informed me as she approached with a knight following after her. He was a middle-aged man clad in full armor. He was quite muscular and had brown hair. He had a sword scar over one of his eyes, and overall, he had quite the intimidating face. I found myself

automatically standing at attention.

“Ah, my apologies for being tardy, Lady Mary,” the knight said. “This dunce was grumbling the whole time, so I had to knock him out, wrap him in a mat, and carry him over.”

“Pardon?” I asked.

The knight dumped a large bundle at my feet. I only barely noticed—because of the tip of their head and their feet dangling out—that the bundle was actually a person.

Huh, what’s happening here? How am I supposed to process this? God, some input?

My mind went blank at how fast things were developing, and I froze up. The bundle on the ground thrashed, and with the rope keeping the mat rolled up having loosened from hitting the ground and coming undone, the person inside was finally freed.

It was a boy. He looked to be about my age, and he had short red hair and healthy-looking tanned skin. He got to his feet with a sullen look on his face. As he glanced my way with his violet eyes, I felt my heart skip a beat. While his facial features paled in comparison to the prince I’d met not long ago, they were still quite fair, and he was a pretty handsome boy.

“Allow me to introduce you,” the knight said. “This is my son, Sacher.”

Another pretty boy... I’ve got a bad feeling about this, I sighed internally.

9. Oh, This Is So Much Fun!

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Sacher. I go by Lady Mary.” Given my current appearance, I bowed my head gently as I introduced myself with the most friendly smile I could manage.

“H-Hmm...” He looked away from me, his cheeks a bit flushed.



It was heartwarming to see a young boy act embarrassed but stubborn. But as I was watching over him, a chop descended on the crown of his head with the might of steel.

Whoa, that was a pretty heavy thud... That must have been a serious hit, what with that gauntleted hand and all. Yikes...

“What’re you acting all bashful and fidgety for, you little brat?!” the count bellowed. “Lady Mary, don’t bother calling him ‘Lord,’ just call him by his name, you hear?!”

Sacher crouched where he stood, cradling his head painfully.

That looks like it hurt...

“Hmm, Count Elexiel, I was told you would be teaching me martial arts? So why is, uh, Sir Sacher here too?” I ended up calling the boy “sir” since I felt too uncomfortable to just call him by his name.

“Just call me Klaus,” the knight said. “Being called ‘Count’ makes my skin crawl.”

“H-Hmm...” I nodded uncomfortably.

“Anyway, I brought him over to serve as your training partner today. Figured having someone the same stature as you might be for the best.”

“Wha— Father!” Sacher got to his feet and protested. “You’re telling me to train against a frail girl like this?!”

Whoa. He finally speaks up, and the first thing he does is call me “frail.” This kid has some nerve.

Sacher’s complaints were silenced with another heavy chop to the cranium.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Sacher! She’s not *your* training partner, you’re *her* training dummy. Your role here is to act as Lady Mary’s sandbag, understood?”

“What?!” Sacher called out in disbelief.

“You’ve gotten a bit too overconfident in your powers,” Lord Klaus chided him. “This should be a good chance to teach you what pain is like.”

Ah, hold up, Lord Klaus. Leave me out of your son’s education, please.

Lord Klaus went on to explain that Sacher had incredible martial talents and strength for a boy his age. He was too skilled for other children his age to handle, as well as some of the older ones. He was effectively unmatched, as they say.

His father's demands felt very unreasonable, but Sacher had to bitterly play along with his father. Looking at another family conduct itself really drove it home how pampered and sheltered I was by my own family.

Mother, father, I'm grateful for how you dote on me! I should tell father I love him for no reason the next time I see him.

"You're a quick learner, Lady Mary! It took Sacher three days to learn this."

"Wow, really?"

"Y-Yeah, when I was five years old! I could learn that in like, three minutes now!" Perhaps displeased with seeing Lord Klaus praise me, Sacher interjected, burning with competitive spirit. When all was said and done, Sacher deeply respected his father and craved his approval.

Still, learning martial arts by beating someone up at the age of five... Talk about combat nuts, just like father. I'd bet they at least didn't lift boulders like he did, though...

"Let's practice some paired exercises, then. Sacher, pair up with her."

"Yes, father..." Sacher said obediently, like he'd resigned himself to whatever was going to happen, and then stood in front of me.

On closer inspection, however, it turned out he wasn't all that obedient. His eyes were glinting with a fighting spirit that made a shiver run through me.

Um, Sir Sacher? Could you please not glare at me like that? I'm scared...

Lord Klaus didn't seem to mind the one-sided glaring contest between us and started instructing us on the exercise.

"If the enemy grabs you, first you need to tilt your body sideways and grab them by the arm."

I followed Lord Klaus's motions like a marionette.

“Then, while you pull them in, you stoop down and sweep their feet, starting from the left to the right.”

As I traced his movements, my foot hit Sacher’s defenseless legs, but he seemed intent to stay on his feet and didn’t budge. Still, I was moving slow and my movements were light, so I probably shouldn’t have expected him to trip.

“Good. Keep practicing these motions.”

“Yes!” I said.

I began mumbling the movements under my breath, silently repeating the exercise. Sacher seemed intent on not letting me trip him up, though.

After twenty or so minutes of repeating the same exercise, my movements sped up and became smoother. Doing it became kind of fun. Come to think of it, this might have been my first time exercising freely like this, and I was enjoying myself.

“Good, good, you’re on the right track, Lady Mary. You’ve got talent for this,” Lord Klaus complimented me, which excited me.

Seemingly displeased with this, Sacher’s attempts to grab me seemed to gradually pick up in speed. But his movements weren’t quick enough for me to fail to react in time. Burning with competitiveness, I started speeding up too.

“All right. Now, try to move in for real this time,” Lord Klaus said.

At his words, Sacher and I exchanged a glance, our eyes glinting. Sacher was the first to move in. He moved faster than ever before, trying to grab me. I swept at him with my hands, shifting my body aside as I crouched and slipped into his open flank to sweep at his feet.

Sacher braced himself so as to not get tripped up, of course, but...

Whoosh!

...with a satisfying sound, Sacher lurched forward and hit the ground. His face was blank with surprise, like he had no idea what had happened. I giggled to myself victoriously, straightening my posture. Sacher vigorously jumped to his feet, his face red with embarrassment.

“I just got careless this time! One more time!” he insisted.

“That’s fine with me!” I nodded with a combative smile.

We then spent the better part of twenty minutes with me sending him flying through the air and slamming him against the ground.

Oh, this is fun! This is so much fun! I love moving my body!

I let myself go, overcome with the joy of being active as well as the glee of putting a cheeky boy in his place.

“Hmm... I think we should wrap it up here for today, Lady Mary,” Lord Klaus said. “I think Sacher won’t last much longer.”

“Oh. Right, of course,” I said, snapping out of my glee.

Sacher was lying on the floor, covered up in enough mud to spoil his boyish looks.

“I brought Sacher over to teach him what it’s like to be on the receiving end of attacks for once, but...” Lord Klaus smiled. “I didn’t think you’d break the bridge of his nose. That’s Ferdid’s daughter for you, aha ha ha!”

While Sacher was gasping for air, I was breathing just fine. I hadn’t even broken a sweat.

I guess that’s just...the gap between our levels. With me finally having snapped out of my glee, I realized I went too far. I hurried over to Sacher and helped him to his feet in a fluster, but he got up without my help.

“I-I’m just out of it today...” he muttered sullenly. “There’s no way I would lose to a frail girl like you otherwise!”

I’m impressed he can act tough even now. I’m glad he doesn’t think I’m weird, though...

Honestly, I wasn’t trying to exert much of my strength, but I got the feeling that if I had taken this even a bit more seriously, he’d have grown totally suspicious. In that regard, learning that I can get away with restraining my strength this much was a valuable lesson.

“Mary! I won’t lose next time, so you better be read—”

“It’s *Lady* Mary, you stupid boy!”

Sacher tried to see me off with that line, only for Lord Klaus to cut him off by sinking another painful-looking chop to his head.

And so, I befriended a boy my age...or rather, got myself a cheeky training partner.

But really, moving around is so much fun! ♪ Thank you, God! Thank you for bringing me to this wonderful world! I'm so happy! I thanked God in my heart.

A few days later, however, I would be knocked down to the pits of misery. A letter addressed to me was gripped in my hands. The contents of the letter detailed that the prince wished to see me, and that I was to come to the palace and see him.

10. To the Palace!

"Huh? A summons from the prince?"

"Yes..."

It was a lovely afternoon, and I was elegantly sipping on some tea after my martial arts training. Seated opposite me was Sacher, who was also enjoying a cup of tea.

This boy's gotten awfully familiar with me after just a few days' acquaintance...

In every training session since that first one, Sacher would show up, challenge me to another match, and then get blown back spectacularly. While he was quite hostile toward me on that first day, he acknowledged me on the days that followed, and had since declared that I was his "worthy rival."

I don't know, are you okay with calling a girl your rival?

Speaking to him in the days that followed gave me a general idea of just what kind of person this boy was. Put positively, he wasn't the kind to hold a grudge, and he didn't dwell too deeply on things. Put negatively, he was an idiot, interested in fighting and not much else.

"In two days, you say?" asked Tutte, who was standing beside me and pouring more tea into my empty cup. "Why, we'll need to prepare you a proper dress."

“Did you do something to piss off the prince, Lady Mary?” Sacher asked bluntly.

“Sacher... I already told you this, but could you decide whether you want to talk to me respectfully or casually? Because the way you’re mixing them up makes me feel weird.”

“What do you mean, ‘casually’?”

“I mean the informal way you talk to me. I mean, you say things like ‘piss him off,’ and then you call me Lady Mary...”

“I’m calling you Lady Mary because father told me I have to call you that,” Sacher said, looking like he really believed there’s nothing wrong with that.

“Fine, whatever... Speak however you’d like.” I sighed deeply, bringing a hand to my forehead.

Talking to a boy my age while remaining respectful came across as distant, but this boy kept flipping back and forth from being brusque to calling me “lady,” which left me unsure of how to handle the situation. And in spite of my fretting, it seemed that Sacher didn’t really think much of it at all.

I should stop thinking about it too. I’ll just let this meathead do whatever.

“So?” Sacher decided to bring the conversation back on track. “Did you do something to make him summon you over? I mean, if you’re being called to the palace, you must have done something big.”

I suddenly felt very depressed. Being personally called to the palace in this country really was unusual. In most cases, it only happened when someone got in trouble for something. To me, this letter was like I’d just been ordered to report to the police department, and I was very much on tenterhooks.

“It must have been what happened at the Oracle Rite, yes?” I wondered.

That was the only time I’d come in contact with His Highness, so it must have been then.

“Hmm. I was sleeping outside after I had my turn, but I heard the prince showed up and something happened.”

You were there too? I guess you would’ve, since we’re the same age.

“Did you say something to offend him?” Sacher asked.

“Excuse you, I didn’t say anything...to...”

It’s at that point that I recalled something quite bad. I didn’t say anything to offend him...because I didn’t say anything to him *at all*. I didn’t apologize, I didn’t thank him, I didn’t say anything.

Ooooh noooooo! I cradled my head and agonized. *That’s not good! I got in a royal’s way and didn’t apologize, and then he helped me and I didn’t say a word of thanks! Oh, I’m so stupid!*

“M-My Lady, are you all right?” Tutte asked, alarmed.

“Oh, looks like you figured out what you did wrong! ♪” Sacher smirked.

One person was concerned for me, while the other was mocking me. The latter was going to get an extra hard wallop next time we practiced.

“Oh, I’ll need to apologize to him... I should practice prostrating myself...” I muttered.

“What does ‘prostrating’ mean, my lady?” Tutte asked.

From what she was saying, I gathered prostrating wasn’t a thing in this country. *I thought that was the most earnest way of apologizing, but...*

“Guess I should bring him a box of cakes, then...” I came up with something else.

“You want to bring sweets? I don’t think there’s much point in that unless you’ll be holding a tea party,” Tutte said.

“No, the sweets are just for appearances. What matters is the money we’ll put in. How much should I put in? I hope my allowance is enough to placate him...”

“...Are you for real?” Sacher asked.

While I was seriously worried as to what to do, the other two stiffened, looking stunned by my proposal.

Huh? Is that another idea that doesn’t exist in this country? I was sure it existed here...

“Ahem.” I cleared my throat and sipped on my tea with a composed expression. “That was just a joke, of course.”

The other two sighed in relief and relaxed.

Anyway, I’ll go to the palace, apologize, and thank him...and if he still blames me for something, I’ll just run like the wind! That’s my only option.

As I took another sip of tea, I planned ahead and prepared for what’s to come.

***

The day came for me to turn myself in—I mean, present myself to the palace.

That day, my attendants ran around me busily. Tutte and the other maids were all circling me to put me in this and that outfit. And since I had no idea what would be the right outfit to wear when meeting royalty, I could only leave it to them.

I was put into a one-piece dress in my trademark color, white. It featured a striking puffy shirt, and the maids decorated it with golden embroidery; it was an outfit perfect for a day out.

I got into the carriage that was prepared for me by the entrance. Only Tutte and I were riding inside it. As we took off, I took out a piece of paper and began mumbling what I’d written on it beforehand.

“What’s that, my lady?” Tutte asked.

“I wrote down my apology to the prince, so I’m practicing it so I can remember... I always get so tense when I have to talk that I can’t think straight.”

“I...really don’t think you were called over to apologize,” Tutte said, but I wasn’t listening. I was simply that tense and anxious.

The royal castle stood at the heart of the capital, guarded by tall walls. My carriage crossed the large bridge over the moat, carrying me into the castle. The coachman exchanged a few words with the guards, and after continuing deeper into the premises, we stopped.

“It seems we’ve made it. We’ll have to walk from here.”

As always, Tutte stepped out of the carriage and prepared a step stool for me. Waiting for the right time, I stepped outside. I was greeted by several of the palace's valets, who were standing there in a neat file. One of the palace's maids led me to a certain room.

"Please wait here," the maid instructed, opening the door and ushering me inside.

I walked inside fearfully, but then, suddenly, a curtain of water descended on me with a large splashing sound. A wash basin's worth of water came down on me!

What is this...? It's like when you walk into class and the blackboard eraser falls down from the door and bonks you on the head...

The curtain of water was gone, and all that remained was me, soaked to the bone. That much water was more than enough to drench my small body. The sheer shock of what had happened left me and everyone around me stunned.

Huh? Wait, can't I use this to weasel my way out of meeting the prince? Such conniving thoughts crossed my mind before I'd even fully processed the situation. *No, calm down, Mary... Everyone's still stunned, so no one knew this was coming. Did someone plot this against me on their own? Did the prince do this? I mean, water appeared out of nowhere, so it must've been magic. But the prince is my age, so he shouldn't be able to use much magic... Did an adult do this? But it's such a childish prank...*

Standing there, dripping with water, I continued to contemplate my position. *Wait, I'm supposed to be immune to offensive magic. Then this must be a day-to-day spell. Even I should be able to cast that, but...given how much water it produced, I'd assume whoever cast this must be pretty experienced...*

The more I tried to figure this out, the less it made sense.

"My lady, are you all right?!" Tutte was the first to come to her senses.

She hurried over to me, and upon realizing she had nothing to wipe me off with, angrily demanded that a nearby valet get me a towel.

Thank you for getting angry like it's you who got wet, Tutte...

While I was grateful to her, I'd all but given up on figuring out who did this. I couldn't let this chance slip me by.

"Tutte...let's go home. I can't show myself to His Highness like this..." I hung my head, looking deflated. I spoke softly, but just loud enough for everyone else to hear, and turned on my heels.

I get that this might be rude to the prince, but I didn't bring a change of clothes. This is a fair decision.

I made to get away before the palace's valets snapped out of their surprise and called for me to stay.

In any case... I don't know who's behind this, but thanks for letting me get away! I pumped my fists inwardly while trying to keep a disappointed facade as I left the palace.

Later that night, when father learned about what happened, he angrily stomped over to the castle demanding an explanation. I pretended not to see this.

Storming the castle to look for the culprit? You can't make that kind of a scene, father dearest...

11. Skipping All the Steps

"Wow, that happened to you? That's pretty unacceptable."

As always, Sacher participated in my after-training teatime. At this point, I'd gotten used to having three people here. When the training session ended, he asked me how it went, and I told him what happened in the palace.

"Unacceptable is exactly what it is!" Tutte fumed, outraged. "I'll have you know I got very angry at the people there!"

The way she talks when she's all angry like that is pretty cute, I pondered to myself with a grin and an evil aura rolling off of me. Sensing said aura, the other two retreated half a step away from me.

"Still, it's strange..." Sacher said, looking pensive.

Oh, wow, is he actually using his peanut brain for once?

“What’s strange, exactly?” I asked.

“I mean, there’s a barrier over the palace. Father said that if anyone used offensive magic, the guardpost would be alerted to it and they’d hurry over at once...”

“They didn’t say anything about catching the culprit at the time,” Tutte noted.

“Oh, it’s because that wasn’t offensive magic,” I said. “It was day-to-day magic. That’s likely why it didn’t get detected by the barrier.”

“Oh!” Tutte exclaimed. “But, day-to-day magic? There was so much water, I doubt a first-order spell can produce that much...”

“Maybe they reinforced that day-to-day spell to a second-order spell, then?” I conjectured.

“Mm... Well, day-to-day magic is indispensable for living, so casting that in the palace wouldn’t trip any alarms,” Sacher said. “But that means whoever cast that spell picked a pretty infantile way to pick on you. It’s not something a grown-up would do.”

“Agreed,” I said. “They must be around our age, and live in an environment or household that really focuses on teaching magic...and I can’t imagine any child like that.”

I heaved a sigh then took a sip of tea. Suddenly, Sacher patted his fist on his palm like he’d just come up with something.

“Huh, I think I actually know someone who fits that description,” he said.

“Huh?! Really, you do?!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah. She’s called, uhh, Magiluka Futurulica. She’s about our age.”

I felt a question mark pop up over my head, unsure what to make of what he said, but Tutte then whispered into my ear, “House Futurulica is a line of Marquises. Their great-grandfather was a wise sage, and they’re said to be a bloodline that produces mage elites. They serve the royal house as their court mages.”

“My family is the warrior house Elexiel, and Futurulica is called the mage house,” Sacher said. “Since both our families serve the royal family, we’ve been on good terms for a long time. So I met her a short while ago.”

“I’m surprised you remember that girl’s name,” I said. “Oh, don’t tell me you and her... Heh heh heh. ♪”

If this muscle-brain remembers a girl that well, it must mean...

“Yeah, I remembered her because she looked kinda strong,” he nodded.

Oh. Figures.

“Well, I guess it makes sense that lady would be at the palace and be more skilled at magic than we are,” I concluded.

“But why would House Futurulica’s daughter do that to Lady Mary?” Tutte asked.

“We don’t know she did it for sure yet, Tutte,” I chided her.

“Right... My apologies.”

“Yes, yes. Let’s just forget about this business! After all that happened, I don’t see them telling me to just come again.”

“Yes, you’re right... Mm?” Tutte looked relieved, but then stepped away from me.

Apparently, the head maid called for her in a hurry. Tutte bowed toward me and walked over to her. The head maid was talking very animatedly about something, and I could see all the color drain from Tutte’s face.

What’s wrong? I’m getting a bad feeling about this...

I tried to keep my cool, but I felt my heart start thumping fast. Having said what she needed to, the head-maid walked away, and Tutte hurried back to me.

“Hm... My lady...”

“I think I know what you’re going to say,” I said dryly. “Let me guess, we got another letter. When do they want me to come this time?” I’d pretty much resigned myself to this already and spoke of the reality I wanted to avoid.

“Hm, no, that’s not it. Hm... He’ll be the one coming over.”

“Huh? Who’s coming over?”

“No, erm, His Highness himself will be coming over to our estate. Hm, and he’ll be coming...now...”

In the face of this development that far exceeded my imagination, Sacher and I both stiffened like statues holding cups of tea. A couple of minutes later...

“I think I’ll be leaving then. Thank you for the tea—”

Sacher was the first to snap out of his shock and make a move. He thanked us for the tea—which he never ever did before—and got to his feet hurriedly. I grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him down into his seat. Forcefully.

“Hold it. Are you trying to weasel your way out of here? You stay here and welcome His Highness with me too.”

“O-Ow, ow! No, I’ve got nothing to do with this—ouch! How are you pinning me down like that?!”

If I’m going to take him down with me, I’m going to have to reveal a bit of my strength. My slender fingers sunk into Sacher’s muscular shoulder.

“Fine, Lady Mary, I get it, I’ll stay, just let go of meeeee!” Sacher called out in surrender.

I released him, relieved, and turned to Tutte.

“I’ll get changed right away. When will His Highness get here?” I asked.

“Well, he’s...um... He’s apparently very close by already...” Tutte replied, looking like she was on the verge of tears.

Sacher and I exchanged stares of disbelief.

Son of two *biscuits! Aren’t you supposed to announce your arrival ahead of time in situations like these?! Why is this prince skipping all the appropriate steps?!*

I announced I’ll be going back to my room to change into something more suitable anyway, and I ordered the maids to arrange a more presentable outfit for Sacher too. This was also to make sure he didn’t run off.

We were running around in a panic, but so were the estate's servants. It was terrible. The royal family was visiting, after all, so the Regalia estate had to be prepared to offer them the utmost hospitality, or we'd be the laughingstock of the kingdom.

And so, as turmoil hung over our estate, a glamorous carriage stopped at our gates.

The prince actually came here...

I made my way to the front door, with the maids still giving me final checks to make sure my attire was spotless. Along the way, I was pleasantly surprised to spot Sacher, who was tugging on his collar uncomfortably.

Overcome with emotion at having a friend with me in my time of need, I nodded toward him once before I stepped outside, escorted by my servants.

12. I've Really Done It Now! Again.

I stepped aside, my attendants in tow, just as the magnificent carriage stopped before the front door. The first to step out of the carriage was a girl who was clearly not a servant. I couldn't help but stare at her.

R-Ringlets! She's got hair ringlets! A blonde with hair ringleeeeeets!

Yes, the girl who stepped out of the carriage had her golden hair fashioned into curls that framed both sides of her face. I froze up, having encountered something I only ever believed to be imaginary.

"...Ahem." Tutte coughed dryly, pulling me out of my reverie.

I pinched up the hems of my skirt and curtsied toward the ringlet girl, who stepped out of the carriage.

"That's Magiluka," Sacher, who was standing nearby, whispered to me.

Goodness! So that noble girl we were talking about had blonde ringlets!

Next, a boy stepped out of the carriage, brushing a hand through his blond hair: Prince Reifus, First Prince of the Aldian Kingdom, and the very cause of my

current headache. I bowed more deeply, after which everyone behind me did the same.

I've really matured! I'm not as nervous anymore, and I can properly represent House Regalia as a noble lady!

"W-Welcome to the Regalia estate, Your Highness! B-But you did not have to come personally. I-If you'd only beckoned me, I would have come—"

Nooo, I'm still stuttering! I always screw up when it's showtime!

I hung my head awkwardly, but the prince simply narrowed his eyes and smiled, like he was looking at something precious.

"No, I'm only here on my own whim. I hope it isn't too much trouble."

"No... Of course not, Your Highness. However, it was just so sudden that our hospitality may fall short of how we would like to welcome you. If possible, we would prefer if you could inform us of your arrival sooner." I tried to imply our discomfort casually.

"You needn't worry about hospitality." He brushed off my admonition with a casual smile.

Can't this prince read between the lines?! Don't they teach you how to read the room in prince school?!

"Well, we shouldn't be talking standing up. Please, come this way," I insisted.

Unable to withstand the stress of this conversation, I let the maids lead the prince inside. We led Prince Reifus into the finest sitting room in the estate, where he elegantly took a seat at a sofa. I took a seat opposite him. I noticed Sacher remained standing behind the sofa.

Huh? Why are you leaving me alone?! Take a seat too!

I threw a glance at him, feeling like I'd been betrayed at the most critical moment. Noticing this, the prince glanced at Sacher.

"Come to think of it, I'm surprised to find you here, Sacher," Prince Reifus said.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness," Sacher said, his tone much more polite

and gentlemanly than usual. “I just happened to be here, but upon hearing of your arrival, I decided I would stay and greet you.”

Stunned by the change in his approach, I looked back to the prince.

“I didn’t know you two were acquaintances,” I said.

“Yes, I am taking fencing lessons from Sir Klaus, like him,” Prince Reifus replied. “And I assumed that it would be wise of me to learn to cooperate with my future royal knight captain... You haven’t shown yourself around the palace recently, Sacher. So this is where you’ve been.”

“My apologies,” Sacher said. “On father’s order, I came to assist Lady Mary’s training.”

“Assist her training, you say...”

I listened to their exchange, my eyes darting between the two of them.

“H-Hm...” I spoke up, changing the topic. “Erm, incidentally... Your Highness, what brings you to us today? I was not informed of the details of your visit...”

“Ah, right. Heh heh, it’s nothing too complicated. I simply came to see you.”

“To see...me?”

“Yes. Duke Regalia speaks proudly of his adorable daughter every day, so I’ve been curious about you for some time.”

Hey, pops. Look at the mess you’ve gotten me into.

“Then my heart was aflutter when I saw you at the Oracle Rite. You were more adorable than I’d imagined. A fair princess as white as the driven snow!” he said, brushing up his golden forelocks and smiling at me coolly.

“Pfftt!” I nearly burst out laughing.

I caaaaaaaaaaaan’t! Whenever the prince says these cringey lines, I just start laughing...

“And I heard what happened at the palace. A sweet princess like you, drenched and miserable! That image kept me up at night.” He hung his head. “If only I could have wiped every droplet off of you...” He then leaned forward, brushing up a lock of my hair like he was brushing it dry.

“I-I’m...honored...” I uttered, wringing the words out with difficulty. I was this close to laughing in his face...

Trying to distract myself, I picked up my cup of tea and took a sip, only to realize it was extremely hot.

“Ow!”

Drat! This can’t hurt me, but my reflexes kicked in...

My body nullified all physical damage, after all. I could have probably dunked my hand in magma and just considered it lukewarm, to say nothing of getting burnt. A hot cup of tea couldn’t possibly hurt me. Still, my head still operated on normal common sense, making me move on reflex.

But as everyone moved in to react to my surprised cry of pain, I spotted it. Someone standing behind the prince held up their hand toward my cup, then swiftly hid it behind their back. And there were traces of mana floating over their fingers...

Magiluka Futurulica... So she really was behind what happened at the palace.

I noticed my tea wasn’t the slightest bit hot anymore. *She must have momentarily raised its heat. That’s some skill with magic...*

Tutte took the cup away from me. As I confirmed her hands were fine touching it, I turned my eyes to the ringlet girl standing nonchalantly behind the prince. She’d probably hoped I’d drop the cup and humiliate myself by dirtying my dress.

“Excuse me, but I’ll need to step away for a moment. Sir Sacher, would you be so kind as to entertain His Highness for a moment?”

With that said, I walked away from the room with Tutte. I saw Magiluka also whisper something to the prince and leave the room too. She likely told the concerned prince she’d go check I wasn’t hurt. But this was an excuse, of course, and she had other intentions.

I left the room and walked to the adjacent room. Sure enough, Magiluka followed me. Once she entered the room, Tutte closed the door behind her, and I got straight to the point.

“Lady Magiluka...don’t you think you think you took that joke too far? You used magic to heat up my cup.”

“So you noticed...” she said. “I suppose I shouldn’t make light of you, Lady Mary.”

“And you were probably behind what happened last time too...” I said.

“Yes, that’s right. I did it all for His Highness.”

“Still, this is preeeetty infantile harassment...” I said.

“I-Infantile?!” She looked outraged. “What I’ve done is a frightening treatment that has humiliated and driven away many young ladies that have tried to approach His Highness...and you would call it infantile? The nerve!”

Wait... She was trying to keep me from approaching the prince, for his sake? Is this going where I think it’s going?

“So, you harassed me to keep me away from the prince. Does that mean you and the prince... Heh heh heh! ♪” I brought a hand to my mouth, snickering suspiciously at her.

She simply looked at me with an exasperated expression. “What are you implying? Do you think that I have romantic feelings for His Highness?”

“My, my. You don’t?”

“Ugh,” she groaned. “If only he wouldn’t talk like that, maybe you’d have been on the right track...”

Huh? If he “wouldn’t talk like that”?

All of a sudden, I was beginning to feel an odd sense of affinity for Magiluka.

“If only he would just stop talking like that. It... Well, honestly, it takes all my patience to not laugh at him...”

“Comraaaaaaade!”

With my eyes glinting with joy, I closed in on her with a speed that almost looked like I teleported over, clasped my hands over hers, and brought them to my chest.



“H-Huh? W-Weren’t you over there a second ago?” Magiluka asked, perplexed.

“Forget that! Finally, someone else who feels the same way as me! You’re my savior! I thought I was crazy for being the only one who thinks that way!”

“I must ask that you don’t include me among the crazy sort! And, oh, let go of my hands! Back away, woman!”

As I drew in on her, Magiluka went very red in the face and became quite flustered for some reason. I wistfully let go of her hands.

“Ugh... This cuteness of hers is unfair... I was very nearly done in myself...” she mumbled to herself, but I didn’t hear her properly.

I’m in such a good mood right now! And Tutte’s walking toward the door for some reason, but hell, I don’t care! I’m too happy!

“Everyone looked so enchanted with what the prince was saying, so I thought I was the weird one for thinking he’s cringey, but I’m so happy someone else feels the same way! Having a boy his age talk like that is just embarrassing!” I said, finally letting out the words that I’d held inside me all this time.

“Yes, yes, quite so! He needs to be at least a bit older to talk like that, or else it just looks too mismatched, and you just can’t help but laugh.” Magiluka also gave her frank opinion, emboldened by my outburst.

Suddenly, we heard someone knock on the door from the inside. We jolted in surprise and turned our eyes to the door, which opened with a slow creaking of its hinges.

“Ahh... I’m sorry to interrupt in the middle of something, but...” Tutte said, looking very anxious. “You probably shouldn’t be saying things like that in front of the person in question...”

She looked very pale as the door opened at the worst possible time, and standing in front of it were Sacher, wearing a very stiff expression, and one Prince Reifus, who was as stiff as a statue.

I...I went and did it again!

13. Maybe We Should Start as Friends

“We’re so sorry, Your Highness!”

Caring little for appearances, I fell to the floor as soon as he entered the room, got on my hands and knees, and dug my forehead into the floor. As they say—prostration. Self-flagellation. Orz.

I glanced to my side, finding Magiluka in much the same pose as me. I naturally assumed this position, but it seemed she’d followed my example and done the same without really knowing what the gesture meant.

Perhaps overwhelmed by the rather surreal image of two girls prostrating themselves before a boy, the prince approached us with a sardonic smile.

“Your Highness! We’re so sorry! Please just write off what you just heard as the hysterical cawing of a couple of crazy harpies!” I said, panicked.

“Yes, we were merely muttering nonsense in our utter stupidity! Just laugh it off and forget about it, we beg of you!” Magiluka rattled on too.

We were both so beside ourselves with fright that we honestly had no idea what we were talking about. I then looked down, noting that rubbing my head against the floor had left a small crack in the floorboards, but I was beyond caring about that.

“No, please, you don’t have to humble yourselves like this,” the prince laughed dryly. “And what’s with that pose? It doesn’t become you, ladies.”

Oh, no, he’s mad, he’s definitely totally completely mad!

“Besides, if you two say so... Yes, I suppose I should reflect on my behavior,” the prince carried on.

“Huh? R-Reflect on it?” I asked, still on hand and knee.

“The way His Highness speaks is something he picked up from his father. It wasn’t something he came up with on his own,” Magiluka whispered to me, still prostrating too.

“His father...as in, the king? He got that from His Majesty?!”

“Yes,” Magiluka confirmed. “My father tells me that in his youth, His Majesty

was quite the skirt chaser, and that manner of speaking made all the women around him fuss over him. So that way of speaking clung to him, and he just naturally speaks that way...and having seen it, His Highness assumed that is simply how men are supposed to interact with women, and began imitating him."

Seriously? I've never seen His Majesty before, but now I have an image of him as this gaudy person...

"I've been serving at His Highness's side, but I could not bring myself to deny the way he speaks. Doing that would have been tantamount to speaking up against the way His Majesty acts..." Magiluka continued whispering.

"Yeah, I understand where you're coming from..."

"So if nothing else, I assumed I'd push away all the women that tried to approach His Highness, so that manner of speaking doesn't stick with him...and now my efforts have all been ruined. Thanks to you."

"I'm sorry..."

"Won't you two raise your heads already? Even I feel embarrassed looking at you," the prince said.

"B-But, you cannot let us get away unpunished after the disrespect we have shown you! Others might get the wrong idea..." Magiluka said, oddly serious.

"Wh-What are you saying?! He's saying he's going to let us get away unpunished, let's just take it!" I whispered, criticizing her. *I'm pretty terrible, aren't I?*

"Hm, a worthy punishment, then..." the prince said, looking contemplative. "Then from now on, I ask that you approach me as a friend."

"Huh?" We both raised our heads in disbelief.

"Ah, but do act appropriately when we're in public." The prince kneeled and took one of our hands with each of his.

He then got up, pulling us to our feet.

"Is that fine by you?" Prince Reifus asked.

“Y-Yes... I-If that’s what you wish, Your Highness...” Magiluka replied, looking dumbfounded.

The prince watched Magiluka, satisfied, and then turned his eyes to me. I nodded vigorously.

“Heh heh,” Reifus chuckled. “Oh, and Sacher, since you’re as guilty as they are, the same applies to you.”

“Huh? Why me too? But, well, fine by me,” Sacher said, his tone turning much more frank as he approached us. “I don’t like all this formal stuff anyway. Talking all stiff like this has been getting to be too much for me.”

“You’re being overfamiliar! You duuuunce!” Magiluka kicked him in the flank.

“Gah!” he croaked.

Yeah, I’m pretty sure doing that in front of the prince is pretty rude in its own way, Magiluka.

I chuckled at the two of them, my tension all having faded away. Seeing this, the prince regarded me with a clear smile.

“Heh heh, your smile really is as lovely as a jewel,” he said. “I hope your smile will always be there to heal my heart so. I’ll do anything to make it happen, O princess.”

Hearing him say this, I brought a hand to my cheek. “Pffft!” I burst into laughter, not expecting him to start talking like this again right away.

“Ah...” the prince scratched his cheek awkwardly, having realized he’d done it again without meaning to. That gesture did look quite boyish, though, and I immediately felt some affinity toward him.

“Are you sure about this, Your Highness?” I asked.

“You can stop calling me ‘Your Highness,’ Lady Mary. Just call me Reifus.”

“Then, hm... Okay, Sir...Reifus.” I didn’t feel quite right just calling him by his name, so I attached “sir” to it.

“Hey, prince, do something about this savage woman!” Sacher called out thoughtlessly as he ran away from Magiluka.

“You’re being too casual!” I elbowed him hard.

I’m not venting out because I’m awkward here. Nope, not at all...

After this, the four of us moved to the courtyard, where Tutte served us tea.

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“But that said, prince, why do you want to be friends with them that badly—agghhh!”

As we sat around a round table, Sacher sipped on the tea and said this, only for both Magiluka and me to stomp on his feet. As we did so, anyone looking from the side would have only seen the two of us sipping elegantly on our cups.

“Hmm... Well, if I had to say, you three strike me as the kind of people that are easy to talk to, or, well, are interesting to be around,” Reifus said, oblivious to the battle taking place under the table. “I mean, I’m royalty, so everyone’s always humbling themselves around me. It makes things quite dull. What’s more, I’m always surrounded by adults, and I haven’t been able to talk to any children my age. The adults just keep telling me that I can’t do this and that... It’s quite stifling, really.”

Watching the prince explain himself with a strained smile, I felt myself relate to him...or rather, my past life related to him. Our status and position were entirely different, but being surrounded by grown-ups at all times, not being able to leave my sickroom, and living in a closed world where I couldn’t make friends was a memory that still lingered in me. I could understand how he felt.

But now, I was given a new life where I could spread my wings. Seeing Reifus like this felt like fate. I wanted to help him, to make him feel like this world was a good place to live in. Swearing this in my heart, I sipped on my tea.

God, it’s been a long way here, but today, I found wonderful new friends. Thank you. Relishing on my emotions, I wordlessly conveyed my gratitude to God.

14. It’s Magic! Magic!

Eight years had now passed since my reincarnation into this world, thus I, Mary Regalia, had become an eight-year-old. I had more friends in my social circle, and I was even getting along with the prince.

Of course, I couldn't just walk up to Reifus and say "Heeey, let's hang out! ♪" so my friendship with the other two was much closer.

"Magiiii, let's hang out! ♪" I crooned to her. My carriage had just pulled over in front of her estate, and I called out to her the moment she stepped outside.

She regarded me with a very sour expression. "What kind of greeting is that? It's quite silly, so I must ask that you stop."

"I just wanted to say it for once...but sure, I'll stop," I immediately agreed. I was honestly embarrassed with myself for saying it.

Magiluka led me into her estate and took me to a particular place—somewhere I'd been asking her to show me for a while. Today, my requests were finally paying off.

"This is our study," she said. "I ask that you don't clutter the place too much, though."

"Of course not. I knew I could count on a friend like you! ♪" I said, staring at the mountains upon mountains of books lined before me with twinkling eyes.

There's no point in hiding the facts: I was a rabid bookworm. It was probably because one of the few things I could do in the hospital was read. But upon reincarnating, I learned there were very few books in the Regalia estate, which made me a bit shocked. Still, with how hectic things had been with controlling my powers, I didn't have many chances to want to relax with a book.

Recently, however, things had been settling down, and I'd been itching to read. I tried looking through the books in my father's study, but they were all books on fencing, training manuals, litigation, monster biology, et cetera. There weren't the kind of romantic adventures that made my heart thump. Thankfully, just as I was about to resign myself to despair, Magiluka told me she had many books like the ones I wanted at her home, so I jumped at the chance to check them out.

"House Futurulica serves as the royal family's court wizards, so we investigate

the legends, traditions, and mystical events of this world. We research any and all books that deal with such matters, so we have quite a few unnecessary books gathered here."

"Hmm, hmm, that sounds terrible," I replied vaguely as I reached for a fairly thick book in arm's reach and started flipping through it.

Stories from this world, huh? I wonder what they're like. This is exciting.

And so, I became engrossed in reading.

Then, a few hours later...

"Hey... Would you put the books down already? You know, visiting a friend's house just to read the whole time is rather rude."

"Yeah, sure," I said distractedly as I shut the book I was holding. "Say, Magiluka, where's the last volume for this series?"

I put the book back on the bookshelf and started looking for the next one.

"Oh, it's over on that shel— Oh, would you listen to me?!"

Tch, she cut me off real well there. Fine, let's stop for today.

"Oh, I was only joking. ♪" I brought my hand to my lips and chuckled with an "Oh hoh hoh."

"I don't see how that was a joke..." Magiluka glared at me peevishly and then sighed. "But very well. Let's go out to the garden and have some tea, shall we?"

As she left the study, I followed her. We stepped out into a flower garden full of neatly trimmed roses. We sat at a spot that offered us a view of the entire garden, where Magiluka's maids and Tutte prepared us sweets and tea.

"My, this tea is delicious. It has a real depth to its flavor," I said in praise after taking a sip of the tea.

"I see. I'm glad you like it." Magiluka was the one to give an absentminded reply this time.

I glanced at her, only to realize she was reading a book. "Hey, isn't reading a book while your guest is sipping tea rude?" I said.

"Oh, did you pick up on my insinuation there?" Magiluka regarded me with a

cocked eyebrow.

“...I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

With her thrusting the way I was acting earlier in my face, I immediately became flooded with regret.

But all the stories in this world have more fact than fiction to them, and it’s just too interesting! These are like, real deal fantasy stories!

Seeing me hang my head and push my index fingers together in remorse, Magiluka snapped the book shut and chuckled. It was an impish sort of smile that felt a bit out of place on an intellectual beauty like her.

“Which book was that, by the way?” I asked. “It looks different from the one I saw in the study.”

The books in the study had pretty covers, but the one Magiluka was reading looked much older. It was quite frayed, actually, and it looked like its pages might crumble if you touched them too hard.

“Oh, this? It’s a grimoire,” Magiluka said offhandedly.

“A grimoire!” I exclaimed. “Like, a book that lets you use magic?!”

I was so surprised I couldn’t articulate myself properly, and I drew in on her enthusiastically. Magiluka pulled away from me, looking overwhelmed.

“Y-Yes, that’s right,” she said, looking a bit taken aback.

“But I thought they don’t let us see those until we go to school!”

“Hee hee hee,” Magiluka chuckled proudly. “Well, since House Futurulica is a long-running line of mages, I get special permission to read it. Spe, cial, per, mi, ssion. ♪” She puffed up her chest, which was already starting to mature, and I had to click my tongue.

Tch... Endowed at this age. How dare she!

“Hey, lemme look at it,” I pestered her.

“Huh? Even if you were to read it, none of it would make sense to you,” Magiluka said grumpily.

“Don’t worry, come on, just lemme take a look.”

I had honestly been curious about magic for a while, but I had to give up on it since I hadn't been given a chance to study it yet. But running into something that would let me use magic already made me excited.

"Oh, very well," Magiluka said, reluctantly handing the grimoire over to me. "This grimoire has basic second-order offensive spells written in it. But you can't use them unless you understand the theory behind them and can hold a firm image in mind. I have trouble learning them even with my tutor's help, so you learning them on your own is impossible."

Magiluka was prattling on about something, but I was so excited by the prospect of possibly using magic that I didn't care. True, some of the things written in the book were complex, so I couldn't understand them very well. But I could understand one line about a spell that could fire mana like an arrow.

So, this is like the kind of arrow spells you always see in anime and games, right?

"I think I understand," I said, reading about the spell.

"Huh?! Y-You understand one of these spells, already?!" Magiluka said in surprise.

I held up a hand, imagining what was going to happen next as I saw it in anime, and spoke the words of power.

"Magic Arrow!"

The moment I said the words, a half-transparent arrow burst from my hand with a whoosh and skimmed past Magiluka's side.

"Aaaah! I'm sorry, Magiluka! Are you all right?!" I asked her in a panic.

"I-It can't be..." Magiluka looked stunned, all the color draining from her face. "I only just managed to cast this spell the other day... But you just...cast it like it was nothing."

"G-Goodness, Lady Mary!" Tutte, who was standing by my side silently so far, exclaimed excitedly beside me. "You just used magic so easily!"

W-Well, it makes sense she'd be shocked, a magic arrow almost just hit her... But honestly, I didn't think it'd work on my first try!

“N-Now wait one minute!” Magiluka snapped out of her shock, standing up from her seat and leaning in toward me with fiery resolution. “How did you do that just now?!”

“H-Hey, I did apologize. You don’t have to be so mad,” I said, dejected.

“No, I don’t mean the arrow nearly hitting me. I mean, how did you fire that Magic Arrow to begin with?! Mana is a vague force! Being able to visualize it into something tangible is extremely difficult!”

“Huh? But firing off mana is just what magic arrows do, right?” I asked like it was obvious. “I mean, it only makes sense it’d take the form of an arrow.” I gave her a face that said *That’s just how magic arrows work, duh*.

“That’s just ridiculous...but, no. I suppose it does stand to reason...”

While Magiluka was stunned, I took a step away from her and sipped on some more tea.

Huh? Did I do something crazy again? I guess my spell did end up scattering some of the roses in the back of the garden. I’ll probably have to compensate them for it...

Thankfully, Magiluka didn’t seem to notice it, so I kept quiet about it.

I guess I learned how to use one spell, but looking at Magiluka’s reaction, I guess I should try not to use it where people can see me. But unlike my strength, it looks like I can actually control my mana just fine. When I get home, I’ll be able to pretend I’m in some fantasy anime!

It would only be a bit later down the line that I would come to realize that my knowledge from my past life meant I had a different but natural and clear understanding of the principles, effects, and forms of magic.

15. An Outing

“The...Evening Primrose Festival?” I asked.

“Indeed,” father nodded. He’d brought it up while we were having after-dinner tea.

“The evening primrose is a mystical forest flower that blooms under a full moon once every five years,” Tutte said as she refilled my cup with hot tea. “Many people gather at the nearby village of Eneres to see it, so the village decided to hold a festival there to cash in on the tourism.”

“And it’s going to bloom this year, father?” I asked.

“Yes,” father said, looking quite unenthusiastic. “It’s an event taking place in my domain, so I’ll have to attend, but Aries said you’ve gotten old enough to attend too... Personally, I’m against it, though...”

It seemed like he was afraid I’d tell him I hate him again if I didn’t want to go.

That sounds pretty fun. I’ve never been to a festival before. Can I call the other kids though?

“Father, may I bring my friends along?”

“Mm? Oh, yes! I don’t mind. Call as many friends as you’d like.”

“Thank you kindly, father!” I said with a grin. His expression shifted to a dopey, satisfied smile.

Next time I have training, I’ll ask Sacher and Magiluka to come along.

Sacher joining in on my training was part of the norm by now, but much to my surprise, ever since that incident where I’d used magic, Magiluka had started showing up to my sessions too. She would bring me all sorts of books to read in exchange, so I wasn’t complaining, though.

I doubt she’ll figure anything out by watching me though... I’m just working off of the broken abilities God gave me.

I continued to mull over such things as I bided the time until I could invite them out.

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“The Evening Primrose Festival? Yeah, I remember hearing about that,” Sacher said.

“So, I was thinking I’d go to the festival too. Would you two like to come with me?” I asked. It was afternoon, and I’d just brought up the matter to the two of

them in the courtyard.

“Aww, they’re just watching flowers bloom? I thought it was some kind of martial arts tournament.” He seemed disappointed.

“Goodness, Sir Sacher...” Tutte chimed in, looking astonished by his curt comment. “The Evening Primrose Festival isn’t anything that barbaric. It’s quite the romantic event, where couples use the enchanting atmosphere to confirm their feelings for each other. It’s said that those who confess their love just as the flowers bloom will be with their beloved for all eternity. There’ll be a great many couples attending.” She heaved a sweet, wistful sigh.

“That does sound interesting...” Magiluka, who’d held her tongue so far, agreed with a pensive expression.

“My, my. I never knew you were so romantic, Magiluka,” I said.

“I’m curious about the flower blooming once every five years, and the evening primrose is known as a mystic plant of sorts, so for all we know, it really could have some kind of magic effect. I’d love to take a sample with me and investigate it.”

Yeah, I take it back. That’s not romantic at all.

“So, Magiluka, do you want to come? You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Sacher.”

“What, and be left all by myself?! That doesn’t sound too great... All right, I’ll come too. Something fun might happen.”

Heh, you just feel lonely, right? Oh, you. I giggled to myself and smirked at Sacher, and when he noticed, he mouthed a grumpy “What?” before turning red and looking away.

“Let’s all go to my family’s villa in Eneres before the day of the festival to prepare, then,” I suggested, excited by the idea of going to a festival with my friends—and not yet knowing what was going to happen as a result...

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“Ah, Lady Mary.”

On the day of our outing, something I did not anticipate happened. A certain

blond boy stepped out of a rather plain carriage—perhaps his attempt at going incognito.

"O-Oh, i-i-it's you, Prince Reifus..." I stammered.

Seeing him again for the first time in a while made me tense up from the idea of having to deal with royalty again. As I scrambled to bow as respectfully as possible, I looked around expecting an explanation. My eyes met with my two friends who, after a moment, averted their gazes awkwardly.

Heeey! Don't run from me! Explain yourselves!

"Now, now, Lady Mary. No need to glare at them. I was the one who insisted on coming," the prince said apologetically, noticing the silent pressure I was giving them.

"My apologies for my shameful display, Sir Reifus. I simply haven't been told a thing about you joining us, so I lost my head a little."

"Yes, those two told me about the Evening Primrose Festival. When I expressed a desire to tag along and asked them to let you know, they said they would rather keep it a secret until the day of the event so as to surprise you, and I left it at that... And what do you know, it seems they really didn't tell you anything."

Those little...! They knew I'd just cancel the outing if they'd told me, so they stayed quiet on purpose. I mean, they're the ones who spilled the beans to the prince about it to begin with!

I glared at them for another long moment, then averted my face peevishly. I'd forgotten these two were a future knight of the court and a court magician for the prince—that is to say, they were more related to the prince than they were to me. That was my bad, but still, it seemed I was in for one long journey tonight.

It's an event sponsored by my family too... Ahh, my tummy hurts already...

"Ugh..." I heaved a deep sigh. "Well, no point talking about it here. Let's just depart."

I motioned for the other two to prepare to leave and ordered my attendants

to move. Onward, to the Evening Primrose Festival at Eneres Village!

The poor village headman's probably going to faint when he finds out...

16. An Incident!

As expected, the village headman fainted.

When we arrived at our villa in Eneres, the village headman and his wife frothed at the mouth and passed out cold upon finding out the prince was part of our group. We had them rest at the villa's guest room, where they were being looked after.

Well, that was all as expected...but what's going on here?

"So you've come, Lady Mary."

Sir Klaus and several other knights were also at the villa with us. As Tutte showed me and the others around, we were greeted by these stern knights.

"Good day to you, Sir Klaus." I curtsied at him. "I'd ask why you're here, but...I think that's obvious."

"Aha ha, I'm sure it's exactly what you're imagining. My son told me about His Highness coming here incognito, so we came ahead of you to make sure the villa is secure—with Ferdid's permission, of course."

"When did you find out he'll be coming, incidentally?"

"That would be last night."

"I'm so sorry!" I apologized profusely, imagining how difficult it must have been to prepare for this.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Lady Mary," Sir Klaus said. "Us arriving here actually turned out to be a stroke of luck."

"It did?"

"See, we hadn't really planned for this, but...we've received reports of monsters being spotted in the forest where the evening primroses grow. The village headman just came to us for help with that earlier."

“Monsters, you say...” I muttered. In my past life, those were merely imaginary creatures that didn’t exist. I wasn’t exactly glad to run into them either. Apparently, monsters were, for the most part, creatures that did harm to mankind.

“...Do those monsters appear in the forest often?” I asked.

“No, the village headman said the monsters have never before approached the area of the forest where the evening primroses grow. That was why he was at a loss as to what to do, and upon hearing we’d arrived, he came to us for help.” Lord Klaus laughed as he said that, and I could only wonder if this was God trying to help me out here.

“So, are they going to cancel the Evening Primrose Festival?” I asked.

“No, the headman wants to keep it hushed up. And he said that if the monsters were detected again, he’d like for us to handle them swiftly so the festival can be held on time. He was just telling us earlier that us being here had restored his confidence. Well, he might be feeling differently now...”

Sir Klaus glanced pityingly at the room where the village headman was being nursed.

Yeah, okay, I lost this bet, I thought as I looked up to the heavens, overwhelmed. *My first outing, and while escorting a royal at that, turned into a mess involving monsters... Heh. When it rains, it pours.*

“Not to worry. We’ll handle the monsters,” Sir Klaus said. “But for the time being, make it a point to not approach the forest, okay?”

“Yes, understood,” I said.

Sir Klaus was called over by one of the knights, so he concluded his brief check-in with me and walked off. I wondered what happened as I watched him leave.

Wait, no point even thinking about it. Just stay out of the forest! Just stick to that!

I considered telling the other three about this too, but I was so tired from the trip and exhausted from my nerves. I figured I’d tell them later, and I walked

over to Tutte, who had just finished showing the others around.

***

"You seem tired, my lady. The other three are resting in their rooms for a while. Perhaps you should rest too?"

I plummeted headfirst into bed upon entering my designated room, and Tutte called out to me, sounding quite concerned. Her worrying soothed my heart, and I was starting to contemplate dozing off as I idly turned over to look at the wall. It was then that I noticed a painting hanging on it.

"Huh? I think I've seen this painting somewhere," I said, sitting up and staring at the painting.

Tutte looked at it too, noticing my gaze. "Ah, that's the Argent Knight," she said.

I looked at the painting, and like she said, it depicted a knight in pure white armor standing in a field of white flowers. That name, Argent Knight, reminded me of some fairy tales and legends I'd read in Magiluka's estate. From what I'd recalled, it was the name of the protagonist of those stories.

"Wasn't the Argent Knight a fictional character?" I asked.

"Who's to say?" Tutte shrugged. "I've never met them myself, so I don't know for sure, but they say they once existed in the past. Apparently, they're a heroic knight of the Aldian Kingdom."

"You sure know a lot about this story, Tutte," I noted.

"Not really... I've heard most of this from Lady Magiluka."

Oh goodness, this girl has really taken to Magiluka, hasn't she? Well, this is Magiluka we're talking about. She probably just sees Tutte as someone to research...

"So, I understand this is the Argent Knight, but what about these flowers?" I asked.

"That's a field of evening primroses. It's said that when they bloom, evening primroses let out a white glow. I've never seen it myself, though."

“Wow... I’d love to see that.”

I made a mental note to ask Magiluka about this painting’s subject later, then remembered that I had to let the other three know about what I’d heard earlier. Bestirring myself, I left—with Tutte following me—and walked over to Magiluka’s room.

I knocked on the door, then opened it upon hearing her reply. “Magiluka, do you have a moment?” I asked.

“Yes, I don’t mind,” she answered. “Is there a problem?”

“You catch on quick.” I proceeded to tell my reliable, intellectual friend what I’d heard from Sir Klaus.

“I see... Monsters, huh? While we don’t yet have a clear grasp of the situation, we should warn His Highness to stay away from the forest just in case.”

“Agreed... I’ll go tell the other two about it, so you just relax.”

“Ah, let me do it instead.” Magiluka rose from her seat and walked past me. “I, hmm... It’s just, you see... I thought I should apologize for not telling you about His Highness, so... um... I figured I shouldn’t let you fuss over everything...”

She fidgeted, her face going red as she averted her gaze so as to not look straight at me. It was oddly adorable, and I couldn’t help but hug her. “My friiiiiend!”



“H-Hey, stop that! L-Let go of me, th-this is embarrassing!”

Oh, you little tsundere! So cute!

We made our way to Sacher’s room together, me with a huge smirk on my face. We knocked on the door, but...

“Mm?”

There was no reply.

Figuring maybe he didn’t hear us, we tried knocking a bit harder on the door, but there were no sounds of movement inside.

“What happened to him, I wonder? Sacher, we’re coming in!” I called out, turning the doorknob.

I peered inside, and then...froze up. The room was empty.

“Where did that dunce go off to?!” Magiluka, who peered in from behind me, soon picked up on the situation.

We looked around, then spotted one of Sacher’s attendants hurrying over to us in a flustered manner.

Oh, no, no, no, don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear it. I already know how this ends!

As I shook my head in denial, the maid hurried over to us and broke the news:

“Sir Sacher went into the forest on his own.”

The earsplitting ringing of a gong named Trouble resounded inside my head.

17. An Encounter

“That dunce has too much energy, unlike us. He probably felt like going on a walk through the woods,” Magiluka said.

I nodded. “We need to get him to come back before he gets in trouble.”

“Is something the matter?” The prince stepped outside as we raced to the front door.

Oh, no... We can't let things get even more troublesome...

"Oh, Your Highness," Magiluka said. "No, don't mind us... It's just, Sacher stepped outside on his own is all."

"Is there some reason he shouldn't go outside?" Reifus asked us.

"Oh, no, so long as you're in the village, it's fine... A-All right, Magiluka, I'll go call Sacher back."

I left Magiluka to keep the prince occupied and ran in the forest's direction. But for some reason, Magiluka ended up following me.

"W-Wait just a minute!" she chided me. "I can't let you go into the forest all alone!"

"Magiluka..." I was moved. "All right! Let's go together!"

And so, the four of us set out and hurried into the forest!

Wait, there's four of us?

I glanced back, then upon looking forward again, I counted the faces I saw.

There was Magiluka, Tutte, and the prince... The prince?!

Realizing the gravity of the situation, I looked back in a hurry. "Sir Reifus, what are you doing here?!" I asked.

"Well, I didn't quite follow the situation, but I figured letting a group of girls go into the woods alone was a dangerous idea, so I thought I'd tag along," he said calmly.

No, no, no, no, you're the last person who should go in here! If something happens to you, we'll be in trouble!

"Y-Your Highness..." Magiluka asked tensely. "What about your escorts?"

"Since I figured we'd be back soon, I had them wait in my room."

No good... He doesn't realize the trouble we're in. I can't blame him, considering he just doesn't know there are monsters infesting the forest...

I regretted not telling him right away, but there wasn't much to do about it now, so I had to put off my self-reflection for later.

“Huh? Is that Sacher over there?” the prince said, spotting something in the distance and heading deeper into the forest. “Did he go check on the evening primroses?”

Ahead of us was a well-worn trail between the trees. There was a simple fence built around it, implying this led to where the evening primroses grew.

“Ah, Y-Your Highness, wait...!” Magiluka hurriedly followed the prince.

For now, let’s just find Sacher and get out of here. I mean, come on, we won’t run into monsters that easily, right? Right! I mean, the road is paved so people can pass through here!

I followed the two of them with Tutte in tow. Since it was dusk, the forest was already quite dim, giving the place a pretty eerie atmosphere. Not many things could match a dark, quiet forest in the creepy department.

This was my first time in a forest, and the knowledge monsters might pop out weighed down my already heavy sense of suspense with an extra layer of fear. I was starting to lose my nerve.

Ahh, let’s just go home already... Why didn’t we bring some light? Why didn’t anyone invent a flashlight...

As I complained to myself, we advanced deeper into the forest. Although we went deeper and deeper, Sacher was nowhere to be seen. The prince reasoned he probably went to where the evening primroses were and kept pushing ahead.

We were walking along a paved, maintained road, so there was no getting lost. We were likely safe overall too. After ten or twenty minutes had passed since we entered the forest, the uneventfulness of our trek made me finally relax. *Nothing’s happening... Heh, I feel stupid for getting nervous. Whoever talked about monsters probably got it wrong or something.*

I patted down my chest in relief. But then, just as Magiluka hurried forward to catch up to Reifus, something swooshed through the trees and jumped out of the foliage!

“Aaaaaaah!” I screeched out.

In my fright, I hopped away, tightly wrapping my arms around Tutte—who had been standing nearby—in a bear hug, and squeezed as hard as I could.

“M-My... Lady... C-Can’t...breathe...” Tutte croaked out in my arms.

I regained my senses, and when I looked up to check what jumped out of the trees, I found it was a wild rabbit, looking up at me and twitching its nose with a face that seemed to be asking me what my problem was.

The rabbit hopped a few steps before sprinting in the opposite direction, disappearing into the trees. Left in its wake was me, half in tears and clinging to Tutte, and the maid in question, who was turning blue in my grip.

I then fearfully looked ahead, where I spotted the other two staring at us like we were some kind of heartwarming sight.

“Ah, no, this is... Uh...” I stammered in an attempt to come up with an excuse, going red in the face and accidentally applying more force to my arms.

“I understand you’re embarrassed, but please leave it at that,” Magiluka said, looking exasperated. “Poor Tutte’s going white in the face.”

Her words reminded me just what I was holding onto. I loosened my hold on Tutte, and her head limply fell sideways.

“Oh, Tutte, I’m so sorry! Hold ooooon!” I shook her body desperately, but Tutte’s head simply wobbled back and forth like a marionette with its strings cut.

“I-I’m...f-fine... S-So...please stop...shaking...me...” Tutte gasped in between headbangs. I stopped shaking her, relieved.

“Gosh, that caught me by surprise...” I whispered, the tension draining from my body. But then...

“Gaaaaah!”

...something large howled and hopped out of the foliage.

“AAaaaah!”

In my fragile mental state, I screeched out in a most unmaidenly manner, but my noble lady’s pride was the last thing on my mind. No, the only thing

occupying my thoughts was the urge to keep bolting in the opposite direction of the large thing that had popped out of the bushes.

I could hear someone call out from behind me, “Sacher, what are you doing?!” but my mind wasn’t in any state to process that. I ran into something with a thud and stopped in my tracks. For a second, I didn’t understand what was going on—I felt a cold, rough sensation, and I froze up.

I heard everyone sprinting behind me and hung my head, unsure of how to regard them. But as I did, I noticed the log-like mass before me...slither.

“Get away! Lady Mary!”

Sacher showed up behind me at some point, and sprinted toward me—only to suddenly be flung back, flying spectacularly through the air like a rag doll.

“Huh?”

The log-like mass before me had unfurled and sent Sacher hurtling back with a sweep of its body. Sacher slammed into a tree trunk and sank to the ground, and the base of the log rose up, rearing its head at me with a hiss.

It was a snake’s head—but this snake was far larger than any snake I’d ever known of. This was my first encounter with a monster in this world.

18. Give Me Courage

“A-A Gigant Snake...” Magiluka uttered the name of the monster with a shivering voice.

Like its name implied, a Gigant Snake was a gigantic snake. The problem with facing one was that it really was entirely too big; the one before me was a twenty-meter-long creature, for example. From its horizontal tear of a mouth extended two thick, long fangs. The characteristic hissing, rattling sound of its serpentine breathing was frightfully loud, and it sent shivers down my spine.

“Ugh...” Sacher, who had been slammed against the tree, got up, his feet still wobbly—but I wasn’t in any condition to be relieved that he was fine.

Magiluka moved on reflex, hurrying over to Sacher’s side. The monster

momentarily regarded her movement before turning its eyes back to Tutte and me.

With the way its eyes darted between the two of us, it seemed to be pondering which of us would be more appetizing. The thin slits of its reptilian pupils narrowed vertically as the snake sized us up. Caught in that glare, I couldn't budge. It was obvious what had left me so paralyzed.

Terror. Nothing else.

Where once I had felt the shock of being the object of Tutte's terror that one traumatic day, I was now experiencing such an intense fear for myself.

It was an emotion so eminently natural. But I had lived my past life in a peaceful modern Japan, a world removed from such dangers, and then I'd been born into this world, where I was protected by my parents and servants and shielded from any and all discomfort. I'd never known what having my life at risk meant—what the danger of being attacked meant. The gigantic monster before my eyes had all too suddenly thrust those realities before me.

My legs cramped up in terror, my hands shivered, and I broke into a cold sweat. *My body is completely invincible. This snake can't kill me...* I knew that. That information was definitely in my head, but my consciousness couldn't acknowledge it. As pathetic as it may have been, I was that paralyzed by fear.

But then, someone stood between me and the monster.

"Sir Reifus..." I said his name through quivering lips, my voice nearly inaudible. He, too, was afraid, too tensed up to even run, but even so, he was stepping up to defend me.

"Your Highness, you have to run!" Magiluka called out.

She was the only one to have come to her senses, and she was helping Sacher to his feet. But perhaps hearing her voice as a signal to attack, the snake plunged its head at us.

Oh, no! I have to protect the prince!

But I couldn't find the courage to move. I knew I could shield him from danger, but I couldn't issue the order to make my body run forward.

I'm about to cry... My resolve is so weak and fragile.

Just as the serpent's gaping maw was about to swallow us, a powerful impact struck the snake from the side and sent it flying.

"Phew...that was close."

Stepping up in front of us was a middle-aged man, clad in knight's armor and with a sword slash scar on his face.

"Sir Klaus!" Magiluka exclaimed.

"F-Father..." Sacher breathed out.

The two of them regrouped with me, Tutte, and Reifus. Sir Klaus stood between us and the snake and drew his sword.

"I asked the maids where you were, and I had a gut feeling you might have come here..." Sir Klaus glanced at Sacher. "You stupid boy! You better be ready for a scolding later."

"I-I'm...sorry..." Sacher said, his face contorted in pain, perhaps from his back still hurting from earlier.

"Sir Klaus... Sacher just didn't know... So..." I stammered.

It's all my fault. If only I'd told him sooner... I'm the reason he came here...

Washed over by sweet relief at Sir Klaus's arrival, I somehow regained enough composure to speak. But soon after that, I was overcome with regret and guilt at having frozen up with fear. It felt like the weight of those feelings was crushing my heart, and I ended up grasping at my chest, an expression of agony on my face.

"Sacher!" Sir Klaus ordered. "Take the prince and the ladies and get out of here! Lady Magiluka, call the knights stationed in the village over here!"

"Yes sir," Sacher nodded.

"Understood!" Magiluka said.

This was where having experience and resolve made a difference. Despite being the same age as me, Sacher and Magiluka immediately knew how to act. I, meanwhile, was so frozen in fear that Sir Klaus didn't even count on me for

help.

I was probably the strongest person in this group, but no one was expecting anything out of me—and rather than be frustrated by that, I was feeling relieved at being excluded.

“Leave this thing to me! Now go! Take care of His Highness!” Sir Klaus said as he swung his sword down on the snake.

As the snake evaded Klaus’s slash, Magiluka carried Sacher, who was still in pain, and started running out of the forest. Reifus followed her, and Tutte and I ran behind him.

Now I can escape this fear...

Just as that thought crossed my mind, however, I felt a shiver run down my spine. Alarm washed over me. I stopped in my tracks and grabbed the prince’s hand, forcing him to stop. A moment later, a heavy thud shook the ground. A large log collapsed, cutting the prince and me off from Magiluka and Sacher.

No... This isn’t a log.

It’s a tail!

The tail swung out of the bushes, flailing down at Reifus. The creature slithering out of the bushes was another snake—smaller than the one we met earlier, but still an unnaturally large fifteen meters long.

There was more than one monster.

“Your Highness!” Magiluka stopped in her tracks, turning to go back for us.

“Go on, you two!” Reifus stopped her. “Do as Sir Klaus says and call for the knights! Hurry!”

We stepped back, retreating from the serpent, which crept ever closer to us. Its sights were clearly fixed on Tutte, the prince, and me, and upon realizing that, the other two grimaced and ran to the village to call for help.

Realizing there was another monster, Sir Klaus tried to hurry over to us, forcing him to face them both at once. Even a skilled knight like him would be at a disadvantage if he had to protect three children from two monsters at once.

No, it was more than just a disadvantage—it was a lost cause. Most monsters were stronger than humans in almost every way. To compensate for that, humans used weapons, techniques, and magic, but even with all those, we could mostly only beat them in one-on-one situations. Otherwise, we'd need a numerical advantage.

But in this case, three of us weren't part of the count. Sir Klaus was pushed back bit by bit, and we slowly retreated into the forest, where we had nowhere to run. I turned my tear-filled eyes to the prince, who was looking my way. He regarded me with a kind smile that wasn't at all appropriate given the situation we were in.

"Don't worry... I'll protect you two," he said.

But hearing those words didn't give me any relief; they only squeezed my heart even harder. I was the least likely person to get hurt, and I could even beat these monsters on my own, but I was the one being protected here.

Why do I have this power, then?

What did I train for?

Was everything I learned so far just child's play?

It was at that moment that I realized what I truly needed to learn wasn't technique or skill, but something different altogether.

Courage...

Just then, I recalled something Sir Klaus told me during training. Since I was always bad at acting when the moment of truth arose, I'd asked him a question.

"Is being able to act when push comes to shove the result of training and experience?"

"You ask some pretty difficult questions, Lady Mary. I wish I could get Sacher to take a leaf out of your book." He'd laughed dryly. *"But well, if you ask me, there's something that's much more necessary you have to fall back on when push comes to shove."*

"And that is?"

"Well, it may sound hackneyed, but I think what separates the people who can

from the people who can't is the courage to keep going."

"The courage to keep going..."

"Yes. When push comes to shove, people make one of three choices. They either face adversity with courage, freeze up with doubt, or run for lack of courage. Experience and skill don't mean one bit without that. They're only worth something when you're willing to set out and put them into action."

"Courage..." I mouthed the word. *"But having experience and skill is what gives you confidence and courage, right?"*

"That just comes later. If you're not willing to put yourself out there in the first place, you'll never attain experience and skill. At least, that's what I think."

"The courage...to keep going..." I mouthed the words once more, my memory making way for reality.

"Lady Mary?" Sir Klaus seemed to react to my voice.

"Sir Klaus...if there were only one monster you had to handle, would you be able to break through this situation?"

He turned his gaze at me for a second, baffled by the question. "Yes," he replied. "If it's just one monster, I can keep it in check until the others regroup with me, but..."

That answer was what I needed to resolve myself.

God...please, give me courage...

"...Take care of Sir Reifus!" I said and ran off.

By the time Sir Klaus and Reifus turned to look at me, I'd already bolted away from them and deeper into the forest. I heard them both call out "What?!" in surprise. One of the monsters slithered in pursuit, standing between me and the two of them.

"Mary, Tutte, what are you doing?!" the prince bellowed at us in a way that clashed with his kind voice.

Sir Klaus, however, seemed to pick up on my intent, his expression bitter. I was initially surprised the prince called me by my name, but more importantly, I

was shocked to hear the other name he'd called out. I looked behind me in surprise, finding a maid who'd kept with me, shivering all the while.

"Tutte, why?!" I asked her.

"I...couldn't leave you all alone, my Lady..." she said, trying to smile despite her pale face.

I felt emotion clamp down on my heart again, but at the same time, I felt like the small spark of courage I'd found had grown larger for some reason.

"Go on!" I called out to the other two, having made my choice.

With this, the prince's side can retreat out of the forest. I'll just take the other snake in the opposite direction...

"...Forgive me!" Sir Klaus said, also having come to his decision as he picked up the prince and started moving.

"No, you can't! This isn't right! I can't be the only one you save!" Reifus protested, thrashing as he tried to free himself from the knight's grip.

"You must understand, Your Highness! You're not like us!" Sir Klaus said, holding the prince firmly, not allowing him to break free.

"I'm the same as her! Both she and I are citizens of the Aldian Kingdom! There's nothing different between me and her!"

Hearing him say this answered a doubt I'd been harboring.

So that's why... The prince treating us like peers, forgiving all those things we said, his kindness... It's probably because this is how he feels about us.

He was a prince whose kindness knew no bounds. With how he talked, I had a pretty wonky first impression of him, but at his core, he was a kind boy who held no sense of discrimination.

I have to keep him safe, so this kind prince can become king.

I felt myself become driven with a sense of purpose I couldn't quite understand. I couldn't tell if this was just the result of my education as a duke's daughter compelling me to devote myself to the royal house. And so, I told him.

"No, we're not the same, Your Highness. You're not only a citizen, you're also

a royal meant to guide the people. You have to realize that...”

This is so the prince can escape. I’m responsible for this. I brought this on...

I tried to smile proudly, like a duke’s daughter should, but I could tell that the fear still rooted in me twisted it into a sad smile. I couldn’t tell what Reifus felt as he saw that smile, but he stopped struggling to break free and hung his head.

Tutte and I turned on our heels and ran deeper into the forest, pulling away from the other two.

19. A Battle

We ran and ran desperately through the forest, pulling the monster away from the prince. I couldn’t remember which way we’d come from, so I was basically getting lost in the forest. I wasn’t sure we’d even be able to return to the village if we did somehow get out of this scrape.

Luckily—or perhaps unfortunately—we passed through the tall trees into a clearing. *I’ll face it here. You can do this, Mary!* I stopped in my tracks and turned around to face the monster that was about to emerge from the forest.

“Get back, Tutte,” I told my maid.

“Lady Mary...” Tutte looked at me concerned, but I wasn’t in a state of mind to smile or say anything to soothe her. I could only glance her way, my expression stiff, and offer a nod; with that, she anxiously moved into the trees behind me.

Let’s go! I can do this! I can fight! I’ve gotta be brave and step up to the challenge!

As I glared ahead, I heard a heavy slithering move closer through the leaves, then something suddenly lunged out of the foliage. The serpent charged out of the woods. Seeing it approach me so vividly, I swallowed nervously, and for a moment I was afraid I might get paralyzed by the shock.

The serpent lunged toward me, its large mouth gaping open like it was trying to swallow me whole. I couldn’t move at all. My mind was going blank from the sheer intensity of the situation, and I instinctively froze up in the stance I

learned during training.

“Lady Maaary!”

Hearing the scream behind me, I snapped out of my terrified state.

Right, Tutte came with me because she believed in me. I can’t...afford to lose!

Would I have been able to muster up this much courage on my own? No, nine times out of ten, I’d probably have just broken into tears and run around.

But if it’s for someone else... As hackneyed as it may be, those words filled me with strength.

The serpent’s jaws closed in on me rapidly. But I didn’t run!

“Because I’m invincible!” I screamed out for no reason and thrust out my hand, stopping the serpent’s rush with a heavy thud.

Truth be told, I squeezed my eyes shut halfway through the serpent’s lunge. Upon feeling something touch my hands, I grabbed tightly. But then nothing was happening, so I opened my eyes a crack, only to see the serpent’s gaping mouth in front of me. I could feel the monster’s breath, and I grimaced at the stench.

Wh-What happened? What’s going on? What did I do?!

Looking around in a panic, I realized both of my hands were gripping the serpent’s large fangs, fixing its head in place. The serpent couldn’t move its head at all, and it was writhing and flailing its tail around.

I stopped it from moving...but what now?! What am I supposed to do now? I can’t let go of it. How am I supposed to attack with my hands occupied?!

The serpent was spraying saliva and struggling under my grip. It was gross and terrifying, but I couldn’t kick it in this posture, so we remained locked in this position. That said, I wasn’t being pushed back, and the serpent was just flailing its tail helplessly...

“Lady Mary, use magic! Magic!”

Tutte, who was hiding behind the trees, approached and called out, advising me.

Right! Magic, I can use magic! I can attack without my hands, and this thing can't move, so I'm sure to hit!

But then I recalled what kind of magic I could use. *It's no good, aaaah! I haven't learned any offensive magic since that one time! All I can do is cast Magic Arrow, but that's not going to beat this thing!*

I was panicking as my stalemate with the serpent lingered on. But suddenly, I saw a white flower petal flutter in front of me.

White...? Right, the Argent Knight!

I'd heard a few of the Argent Knight's legends; while they used many spells, most of the spells' names didn't match memories I had from my past life, and their descriptions were vague. But there was one spell—a spell the Argent Knight often used to finish off their foes, one that was very well described and matched something I saw in a game once.

I might be able to use that! I...think...

I could imagine it as clearly as I did the magic arrow, and I knew its name. I was sure it'd work. At the final ticking of the eleventh hour, I made a gamble on this mysterious power.

"Tutte, get away!" I called out.

I didn't know how vast the spell's effects might be, so I ordered Tutte to take her distance and took a deep breath to prepare myself.

At worst, my mana might go out of control, but I have to gamble on this!

"Fourth-order spell!" I called out as hard as I could, my voice echoing against the trees. "Upon thee, I shall swing down the blade of justice!"

I wasn't sure how much chanting this was necessary, but I spoke the same line the Argent Knight did in the story.

"Sword of Judgmeeeeeeeeeeeeeent!"

At that moment, a large magic circle formed around me. It was wide enough to completely contain the serpent within it, and when it glowed brightest, its light converged at the center to form a gigantic sword.



“It’s all over.”

In my defense, I didn’t say those last few words because I wanted to. I only did it because that was what the Argent Knight always said in the story after using this spell. For all I knew, it was part of the incantation.

But it’s so lame, I’m cringing! I’m cringing so haaaard! Gaaaah!

A loud rumbling sound rang out, tearing through the sky, and the gigantic sword of light gouged into the serpent and stabbed into the ground. It only took a second. By the time the light died down, the serpent that had thrashed so vigorously earlier lay dead and lifeless on the ground.

I let go of the fangs, and with a loud hissing sound, the serpent completely crumbled away. For a good while, I remained rooted in place, my head unable to catch up with what had just happened.

“Y-You did it... You beat it. That was amazing, Lady Mary!”

Tutte, who had been an impartial spectator to the whole ordeal, came to her senses and hurried over to me. It was only then that I finally realized what had happened. At the same time, a thought crossed my mind like a warning bell.

This is bad.

Tutte approached, and I grabbed her hand and started running again.

“Wh-Wh-What’s the matter, Lady Mary?! We don’t need to run anymore!”

“No, this is bad, bad, baaaad! How am I going to explain the fact I defeated that thing?! Or fired that spell!”

“Huh? Just tell the truth and say that you beat it.”

“No! If I say that, everyone’s going to make me into a hero or something! And my motto is ‘lead a good, uneventful life.’ I don’t want to go through anything this scary ever again!”

Flying into a panic, I pulled Tutte along, not letting her get a word in, and continued running through the forest.

“Then what are you going to do? You defeated it just like the Argent Knight...and come to think of it, you used an amazing spell, Lady Mary!”

“I just imitated it, monkey see, monkey do. I had no idea if it would actually work. Wait, I guess I read it instead of saw it, so it was more like monkey read, monkey do?”

Neither of us was regaining her composure, so our exchange was pretty incoherent. But then, what Tutte said switched on a light bulb in my head.

“Right... Right, right! I’ll just say a traveler in silver armor saved us,” I exclaimed as I pulled Tutte along. “Yeah, let’s go with that! If we just say it was the second coming of the Argent Knight, nobody’s going to assume I beat it! Yeah, that’s a great idea! Good going, me!”

“Huuuuh?!” Tutte exclaimed as I tugged her deeper into the forest.

As one might expect, we ended up getting completely lost. By the time the sun set, we realized how bad our situation was. We ended up staying put, waiting for rescue half-in-tears, and before long we saw torchlight in the distance. Lord Klaus and his knights showed up to save us.

And so, the curtain fell on the tumultuous events of the day before the Evening Primrose Festival, thanks to the Argent Knight’s help (technically?).

20. How Peaceful!

The following day, Eneres Village was in an uproar. While the threat of the monsters was gone for the most part, Tutte’s and my testimony about someone similar to the Argent Knight appearing kicked up the rumor mill. Between this and the preparations for the Evening Primrose Festival, the village was abuzz.

What made our claims that the Argent Knight appeared all the more credible was that when Sir Klaus investigated the monster’s remains, he concluded that it was highly likely a hero-class magical attack had dispatched the serpent.

“Aah... Peaceful times are the best,” I sighed.

“Indeed they are, my lady,” Tutte agreed.

Despite being the source of the rumors, I was sitting nonchalantly in the villa’s garden and sipping tea elegantly.

“You’re awfully collected for someone who went through all that hubbub,” Magiluka said tiredly as she approached from the villa’s direction.

“Thank you for helping clean up that mess... You want some tea too, Magiluka?” I asked, holding up my teacup.

“I’d appreciate it, yes.” She sat at the table, cracking a smile. Tutte moved in immediately to fill a teacup for Magiluka with swift movements.

“So, how’s everyone else doing?” I asked.

“Sacher apparently cracked a few ribs when the monster attacked him, so he’s being treated right now. Well, the priests could heal it without issue if asked, but Sir Klaus insists that he heals on his own, as punishment for what happened.”

Talk about a Spartan upbringing. My condolences, Sacher... But I’ll come visit you. I owe you that much, since you took that hit for me.

“I should drop by and visit him later.”

“That won’t be necessary... I saw that dunce doing push ups earlier.”

Huh? What? He’s fine already? Is he one of those RPG characters that heal to full when they rest at the inn? As I joked in my mind, I maintained the appearance of gracefully sipping on my tea.

“I see... And what of Sir Reifus?” I asked.

“His Highness is currently accompanying Lord Klaus, who’s sweeping up what’s left of the monsters and inspecting the village’s security. It’s curious, really. He was never one to get involved in public affairs.”

“Really...? I wonder what changed his mind...” I looked away from Magiluka and took another sip of tea.

I got the feeling what I had told the prince was what had brought on this change, but that felt exceedingly presumptuous of me, so I decided to discard that thought.

“So, the Evening Primrose Festival is today?”

“Yes, it should be held without issue,” Magiluka replied. “Quite brave of them,

given the commotion with the monsters... But, well, this time, we'll have an extra visitor."

"We will? Who?"

"What do you mean, who?! The Argent Knight!" Magiluka looked up to the sky with twinkling eyes.

Huh...? Are you one of those girls that admire fairy tales?

"The legends were true after all! I must investigate this land further!" Magiluka declared.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The Argent Knight is said to visit this land when the evening primroses bloom. There are a few theories about it, but my personal favorite is that they promised someone they would always reunite with them here when the flowers bloom... And there's a theory that says their beloved passed away in these flowers' embrace, so they come once every five years to visit... Ahh... It's so lovely..."

You're making such a girly, entranced expression... Where did your intellectual curiosity and talk about "research subjects" go?

I narrowed my eyes with a feigned smile, sipping on my tea to pretend like nothing was wrong.

"But I'm fairly sure the Argent Knight this time isn't the same as the one from the legends," Magiluka then appended, her expression turning pensive.

I choked on my tea. "O-Oh..." I hummed, breaking into a cold sweat. "Wh-What makes you say that?"

The cup started clattering in my grip, and noticing this, Tutte wordlessly picked it out of my hands and placed it back on the table.

Thanks, Tutte. As always, I become useless when something surprises me...

I dropped my shoulders with a sigh, and Magiluka regarded me with surprise. "My, it's quite simple," she said. "The Argent Knight couldn't possibly be alive in our day and age. The events of their story are from centuries ago."

“R-Right...”

I guess I didn’t think it through... I mean, the Argent Knight is a legendary figure, so of course they wouldn’t be alive anymore!

“So, this is my theory! The Argent Knight that appeared this time must be a descendant or relative of the original one!”

She then squeed and wiggled excitedly, and I pulled away from her, a bit creeped out.

Well, either way, I guess I dodged the issue...

I looked to the side, glancing up at Tutte who knew the truth. She noticed this and looked at me, to which I raised an index finger to my lips in a shushing gesture. Tutte seemed to pick up on my intent and nodded vigorously.

The evening primroses are only going to bloom when it’s night, so what do we do now? Since it’s a festival, maybe there’ll be stalls set up?

I recalled the festivals I saw on TV, and my heart fluttered. “Let’s go check out the festival! Might as well, right?” I got to my feet with an excited expression and made to go out outside.

“Why, aren’t you lively...? It’s like I’m looking at Sacher,” Magiluka said, sighing as I got up.

Hearing this, I fell to the ground on my hands and knees. “I-I’m...being compared...to Sacher...” My expression clouded over with shock.

“M-My, I’m sorry... Maybe I went too far,” Magiluka said, looking very apologetic.

“Huh?” The very dunce who was the cause of my emotional breakdown showed up and looked at me. “Lady Mary, what are you doing? Observing the ants?”

“Of course not! I was just shocked, is all...” I got to my feet like nothing happened, then brought a hand to my mouth and laughed. “Oh ho ho! But, more importantly, should you be moving around, Sir Sacher? I heard your bones were cracked.”

“Cracked? Huh, they were?” he asked, looking genuinely stumped.

Don't forget about your own injuries, you idiot... I looked at Sacher, astounded, but then he laughed and said he was joking. *It's a shame, really. His face isn't too bad, but he's so disappointing on the mental front...*

"So, what are you two doing?" he asked.

"I was having tea, but I thought maybe I could check out the village and visit the festival," I answered.

"Oh, that sounds nice. Good timing too. I've been getting hungry," he nodded.

What, is he trying to get me to pay for him? Well, I guess he did get hurt for me, so I could get him something by way of apology.

"Fine, you can come along," I said, passing Sacher by with a composed face and walking away.

"Ah, wait, I'll come too." Magiluka, who was watching our exchange from her seat, hurriedly got up and followed after me with Sacher.

As we moved, we saw the prince part ways with Sir Klaus at the entrance. Spotting us, Reifus approached us, and we bowed.

"Good day to you, Sir Reifus," I said.

"Ah, Lady Mary. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine..."

"I see, that's good... Ah, so where are you all headed?"

"We're going to the village to enjoy the festival."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. Would you mind if I joined? I've never seen anything like this festival before."

"So long as you're not too tired, Sir Reifus..." I murmured, half-resigned.

I figured this was where things were going from the flow of the conversation, so I'd mostly given up already. Having gotten the go-ahead, the prince started walking by my side.

Somehow... I get the feeling that moving around with this group is going to land me in trouble, but... Ah, no, no, no! No need to jinx yourself like that, Mary. Right, this is my first festival with my friends. You've gotta make the best of it!

Have fun!

As I inwardly tormented myself, our group of five moved toward the village's center.

21. The Evening Primrose Festival

The festival ended up looking quite different from the kinds of festival grounds I was used to seeing. It was closer to an open-air market.

"There are all sorts of stalls around, aren't there?" I noted, a bit stressed out by the volume of people around. Still, I was curious about the assorted things on sale at the stalls. But just as I started looking around with glittering eyes, the growling of a stomach behind me put a damper on my excitement.

"Sacher... Good grief..." Magiluka chided him, disappointed.

"Sorry, sorry. But there's this nice, tasty smell..." Sacher said.

I sniffed the air—which was a bit questionable for a lady to do—but indeed, there was an appetizing smell.

It smells like meat being roasted... Oh, drat, now I'm getting peckish too...

"You're right. Is that meat?" I asked, looking around for the source of the smell.

"I think it's over there." Reifus managed to point out the stall that had started all this. It was roasting thick pieces of meat on skewers over a fire. I wobbled over, lured in by the appetizing scent.

"Welcome, little lady. You want some?" The stall owner greeted me with a smile. He was quite sweaty, probably because he was standing in front of a fire.

"After what happened yesterday, I'll pay this time," I said. "Feel free to eat as much as you want, everyone."

"Really?!" Sacher rejoiced, immediately letting it go to his head. "Then, mister, give me three of those!"

I discreetly stomped on his feet. "Five skewers, please," I said.

“Here you are!” The stall owner handed me the skewers, which he had prepared with an amused smile as he watched our exchange. I handed one to each of us.

“Are you okay with commoner food, Sir Reifus?” I remembered to ask as I gave him his skewer.

“Yes, I’m fine. If anything, the smell is so tempting that I’d love to have it,” he replied, accepting the skewer with a carefree smile.

Relieved, I handed a skewer to Tutte, who had just finished paying the stall owner. She stared at the skewer blankly, and then at me.

“Huh? Is this for me?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” I said, holding out the skewer with my head cocked. I wasn’t sure why she was so surprised.

“What, Tutte, you don’t want it? I’ll eat it, then!” Sacher approached the skewer like a starving hyena.

“Hush, you.” Magiluka held him back.

“But I’m... I’m just a maid...” Tutte fidgeted, and I recalled her position here. Even so, I held out the skewer toward her.

“You might be my maid, but you’re also my best friend, right?” I stressed, a smile on my face.

“Lady Mary...” Tutte raised her head, drawn in by my smile, and accepted the skewer. No one faulted her for it.

“Incidentally, how are we supposed to eat this?” Sir Reifus asked curiously.

“We weren’t given a knife and fork, so I suppose we’ll have to return to the villa...” Magiluka said, eyeing the skewer dubiously.

“You eat skewers like this,” I told them, relying on my memories of my past life. I unflinchingly bit down on a piece of meat on the tip of the skewer.

“L-Lady Mary!” Magiluka exclaimed in shock.

I mean, I get that it’s unbecoming of a lady, but...

“Mmm! It’s good...” I mumbled.

The meat was quite soft and scrumptious. I quickly munched on it and swallowed. Seeing this, Sacher imitated me and bit on the meat on his skewer.

“Ah, you’re right! It’s good!” he agreed.

“Y-You too, Sacher...?” Magiluka stared at him in disbelief.

The prince laughed uncomfortably and, after seemingly steeling himself, bit down on his own skewer.

“Y-Your Highness!” Magiluka called out, outraged.

“Mmm...” Reifus chewed on the meat, satisfied. “The way you’re supposed to eat it might be questionable, but it’s quite delectable.”

With the prince’s approval, Magiluka seemed to have resolved herself. She hid her mouth with her free hand and chomped down on the meat.

“My, you’re right... It’s moderately oily and delicious. What meat is this?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure which meat it was, so I turned my eyes to Tutte. Since she was a commoner, maybe she knew. Tutte, however, was simply staring at the skewer I’d given her and said nothing.

“Tutte, do you know what meat this is?” I asked casually, to which she smiled at me with a very pale face.

“This is, hmm... It’s Gigant Snake meat...”

The four of us froze up.

We went around the stands to get our minds off that disturbing discovery. We shopped a lot, and before we knew it, the sun was setting, and the area grew dim. We moved to a spot that offered a view of the village plaza, and I looked down in surprise.

“Wow, there’s so many people here all of a sudden... When did they all come here?”

There were twice as many people as we’d seen during the day. It looked like a lot of the people walking around were couples. Maybe they were waiting for the right time to come here.

“Ah, so this is where you were, Your Highness.”

While I was staring down at the village in amazement, Lord Klaus approached us from behind. The way he spoke made it seem like he’d just found us, but there had been knights watching over us the whole time in the village, so he likely knew what we were doing at all times.

But even with knights everywhere, no one in the village acted like this was unusual. With the monster incident the day prior, everyone probably assumed they were securing the village. The only ones who knew the prince was present for the festival were us, the village headman, and his wife.

“Did something happen, Sir Klaus?” I asked.

“Oh, not at all. The village headman insists that His Highness should be the first to see the evening primroses bloom. What say you?”

“Just me?” Reifus asked.

Perhaps predicting this question, Sir Klaus’s stern expression gave way to a grin.

“Of course, the rest of your group are welcome to come along!”

“I see... Shall we, then?” the prince said, reaching his hand out to me like he was inviting me to a dance in a ballroom.

“H-Hmm...”

He did it so naturally I felt confused, extending and then pulling back my hand. I timidly placed my hand in the prince’s own, and he gently wrapped his fingers around my hand. And so, with the prince leading me along, we walked toward the evening primrose field.

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We walked through the woods. The sun had completely set, with only moonlight shining down through the trees. But my heart was beating too fast for me to care about that; I could only walk with my head down, trying to hide my flushed face.

We passed by villagers, knights, and the prince’s attendants on the way there, but they all simply looked at us like we were some kind of charming sight. But,

once again, I was too out of it to pay them any mind.

Oh, my fast beating heart... Calm down... Calm doooown...

A few minutes later, even I, with my head hung, spotted a glow ahead of us. Realizing something was shining, I raised my head...only for my breath to catch in my throat.

The forest clearing was awash with white light. The pure white flowers had opened and bloomed, their petals glowing brightly.

“It’s so pretty...”

We all spoke up at once, and we were so utterly transfixed that we couldn’t tell if any one of us in particular had said it. Reifus let go of my hand, and I approached the flower bed. A flower bloomed before my eyes as if to welcome me. Then another.

“This white shining field suits your snow white visage perfectly... You’re like a fae among the blooms...” the prince said.

I turned around to look at him. I was wondering if he’d lapsed back into his womanizing talking style, but something felt different. He wasn’t imitating His Majesty, but speaking with his own words. Or maybe the atmosphere about him was simply different compared to the first time we met.

“Magiluka, Sacher,” he addressed the two of them, who stood behind us.

“Yes,” the two of them said in unison and approached.

He then turned his eyes to me. “Lady Mary.”

“Y-Yes...” I replied. Something about his demeanor felt different from his usual, gentle behavior. There was a dignity to his voice.

“I promise you three. I will become a king that will turn the Aldian Kingdom into a country where all can smile,” he said.

I froze up at his sudden confession. I stared at him in fascination. He was simply that dashing in that moment.

“So, I want you three to lend me your strength, to stand by my side and support me.”

Sacher kneeled where he stood, and Magiluka pinched up the hem of her skirt and bowed in a highly dignified curtsy.

“Of course, Your Highness,” Magiluka said.

“Yeah, of course,” Sacher nodded.

The other two looked the part too, but I simply stood frozen in place.

I have to say something. I have to honor his words too.

The prince watched me react, flustered, with a smile. When our gazes met, my thoughts were close to shorting out.

“But, you know, prince, I’m going to be a knight of the court in the future as it is,” Sacher said. “And Magiluka’s going to be a court magician anyway. How’s Lady Mary going to serve by your side? Oh, right, your queen! She can be your queen! That works!”

Sacher’s rude words tore through the sugary atmosphere hanging between us, and everyone present froze up. Magiluka was the first to react. I don’t know what she was imagining, but her face went red, and she stumbled back a few steps, mumbling “Huh? Huh?!” Everyone else started moving too.

“Erm, ah... No...” The prince’s face also flushed over. Apparently, he hadn’t thought of that either, but my face was even redder than his.

“N-No!” he said, approaching me. “I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Nyaaaah!” I covered my fuming face with my hands, made an odd squeak, and bolted away without regard for manners.

“Lady Mary?!” Tutte called out and took off after me, not having expected me to run away.

What was left in our wake was an awkward atmosphere. I heard later on that Sir Klaus, who had watched the whole thing, scratched his head in exasperation and landed a punch on his dense son’s thick cranium.

And so, that was how our tumultuous Evening Primrose Festival experience came to an end.

22. Grim Prospects...

The time had come for one of my long-awaited wishes to come true. I, Mary Regalia, was now nine years old, and on a certain afternoon, I was called over to my parents' side.

"Huh?! Father, what did you just say?!"

"Mhm," my father nodded. "Next year, you will finally be of age to attend the academy. And of course, as a daughter of House Regalia, I intend to have you enroll in an academy appropriate for a duke's daughter, but I wanted to ask if you have any preferences in particular."

"Father!" I looked at him, eyes glittering and breathing heavily. "By academy, you mean that place where everyone goes to study and exercise, working their hearts out till they're dripping with sweat and experiencing exciting youths?!"

"E-Erm, yes, I believe so?" father said, looking overwhelmed by my excited, rapid-fire questioning.

"If I can go to school, why, anywhere you'd send me will do! Yes, I want to go to school!" I said excitedly.

Father stared at me, a bit taken aback, and mother looked on with a smile.

School... The place I wanted to go to but never could in my past life. I finally get to experience a bittersweet school life. I'm looking forward to it!

As my heart danced with excitement, I soon came to confront the problem ahead...

The royal Altolia Academy was an elite establishment that produced skilled individuals in all fields, from martial arts to magic. Indeed, it was a place for the elites. A place for the elites! I said it twice because that's how important it was. And for whatever mean prank of a reason, I was to be enrolled in that academy.

I mean, I did say I didn't mind where I'd go, but...isn't that setting the bar a bit too high? Can I keep up with this place's level?

I was sure I wouldn't have any problems in terms of my strength and magic, but I wasn't sure my intelligence was up to par. I wasn't proud of it, but back in my past life, I couldn't attend school because I was hospitalized. I did all my

compulsory education privately from the hospital, and that was the extent of my academic achievements. I didn't think I had what it would take to go to such a prestigious school.

If this is how things are gonna go, I should have had God max out my intellect too... Huh. I feel like that's not the first time I've thought that.

What really made me doubt my learning abilities was the fact that there wasn't an entrance exam. Or rather, there was, but for some reason, it was decided I was exempt from it.

I guess that's just House Regalia's influence at play...

I didn't really like the idea of buying my way into school, but that actually wasn't all that unusual among the Aldian Kingdom's nobles. The academies stood to profit from it, and the nobles wanted their children to have the prestige of graduating from a well-regarded academy, so they made generous donations.

But with this in mind, being admitted into the school was fine and dandy, but what if I couldn't keep up with the studies? As the daughter of the noble house Regalia, that would be both humiliating and unacceptable. The last thing I wanted was to drag my parents' names through the mud.

I was so looking forward to going to school! But what if I can't keep up?

And so, I could only count the days, that heavy emotion hanging over my heart.

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"Oh, so you're going to Altolia too, Lady Mary?"

On one ordinary day, as I was having my usual afternoon teatime, I told Magiluka about the academy, and she didn't seem particularly surprised as she sipped on her tea.

"Jeez... So you're going there too?" I asked.

"Yes, of course." She placed her cup on its saucer and swung her ringlets proudly, puffing up her chest.

Seeing her more developed chest swell up like that struck a crack into my self-

respect. But that aside...her news was making me even more anxious. Magiluka was basically a child prodigy. She was smart, much smarter than most girls our age.

I don't see myself keeping up with any school that's on her level, I thought to myself grimly, feeling melancholy settling in.

"Ah, me too!" Sacher chimed in. "I'll be going to Altolia too!"

Sacher's carefree words blew away all my anxiety at once.

I'm sorry, Sacher. I...I took you for an idiot... I apologized to him in my heart, realizing the cruel reason why hearing him say that had dispelled my concerns.

"Really... I guess we're all going to the same academy, then," I said.

I took a sip of tea to mask that smidgeon of concern that going to school with this group gave me.

"That's right, and the prince is gonna be with us too! ♪" Sacher said with a crooked smile.

"You don't say!" I huffily looked away from his gaze and sipped on my tea.

Every so often, Sacher used the prince as an excuse to tease me. At first, I reacted bashfully, but once I got used to it, I started shrugging him off in a lady-like manner...or at least, that was my intent.

After his bombshell announcement, the prince had apologized, saying, "My intent was that you don't let social status stop you and treat me as a friend. If I make a mistake, tell me about it and correct my actions."

That said, you need to really not know your place to just speak up to the prince like that—well, I guess I'm already past that, aren't I? Gosh, what am I going to do?

During that incident, I ended up denying Reifus's core beliefs, so I wasn't in any position to argue about whether it was my place to talk. Still, I didn't want to say anything slanderous that might drag my family's name through the mud, so I haven't seen the prince much since.

Well, even if we go to the same school, I don't think I'll run into Reifus that much. Who's even to say I'll hang out with these two that often? Ahh, I hope I

get lots of friends...

Thanks to Sacher (unknowingly) relieving my anxiety about keeping up with my studies, I was once again able to look forward to my time at the academy with excitement.

“I see. So you’re finally going to the academy, Lady Mary...” Tutte said earnestly as she served me more tea cakes.

“Come to think of it, Tutte, do you go to school?” I asked.

“No, the master hired a home tutor to grant me my required education, so I don’t go to school,” Tutte said with a smile. “I don’t really need such comprehensive education anyway.”

I felt a bit discouraged at seeing the class difference show so clearly, and considered possibly teaching her all the things I learn.

“But Lady Mary, you do realize that if you go to the academy, you’ll have to handle your day-to-day matters on your own, yes? I can’t very well accompany you in the academy... Is that all right?”

“Hee hee hee, oh, Tutte, that’s no good,” Magiluka smiled. “Lady Mary is already old enough to take care of herself...right?”

Magiluka laughed it off, but my expression turned to panic as all the blood drained from my face.

“Wh-What?! You’re joking!” I exclaimed in shock. “No, I...I can’t even put my clothes on without Tutte!” (*Because I keep tearing them...)* “I need her to carry stuff for me!” (*Because I keep breaking everything...)* “Oh, goodness, what do I do, what do I do?!”

I started shaking at this emergency-level problem, and Tutte smoothly plucked the teacup out of my fingers before I shattered it.

“Come to think of it, Lady Mary...” Magiluka said. “You’re still having Tutte open doors for you... I think it’s high time you grew out of your slothful phase.”

Ugh... So up until now, she’s been seeing my restraint problems as me just being lazy...

Ever since controlling my strength had become a concern, Tutte had been

handling all of my everyday necessities for me. It was only now that I'd come to keenly realize that it had made me completely forsake trying to learn how to restrain my strength.

I could probably manage on my own now...I-I think... G-Gosh, putting off your problems really is a bad idea, isn't it...?!

Realizing that I had basically been acting like some kind of VIP until now, I reflected on my actions and decided that maybe it really was time for me to get used to acting independently of Tutte. I made a promise to myself to try.

Then again, if I use House Regalia's connections, getting the academy to let Tutte escort me within the premises wouldn't be hard at all... My dark side whispered seductively in my ear, imploring me to use my family's authority to have my way, but I immediately turned down that thought.

It was just a thought. Really, just a thought...

The days of my youth at the academy hadn't even started, but I was already starting to lose heart.

Chapter 2: Academy First Year

1. It's Finally Time!

The formalities of my entry to the academy were handled for me and proceeded smoothly. Before long, the day I'd been dreaming of was finally here. I'd finally reached ten years of age.

I stood frozen in place like a mannequin while the maids helped me put on my dress for my first day at the academy.

"Lady Mary...I know I've explained things about the academy to you, but will you really be all right on your own?" Tutte asked me.

"Honestly, I'm pretty anxious. But I need to do my best as a duke's daughter to not humiliate myself...or, well, to try not to humiliate myself."

Tutte had given me lectures on all sorts of day-to-day activities that I'd been wary about so that I could spend this year as independent from her as possible. Even so, I was constantly anxious, which basically reduced my brain to mush. I felt like the slightest discomposure would end up making my character class change from "Noble Lady" to "God of Destruction"—and to avoid that, I could only depend on my expectations, experience, and familiarity.

Oh, if only I was the sort to give no damns...

I wasn't even at the academy yet, and I was already tense out of my mind. To make sure I didn't needlessly rock the boat, I'd told the maids to get me a dress with colors that didn't stand out, but they'd ended up giving me a white dress as usual, made of expensive silk. It had handmade embroidery too, as well as a three-layer skirt with frills and laces. The whole ensemble was completed with white stockings, which themselves had laces, frills, and embroidery, making it overall very flashy.

Apparently, my private tailor's concept for this dress was an outfit that gives off a sense of splendor that's not immediately apparent...but this is almost a

wedding dress! Ugh, if only the academy had its own regulated uniform... If you can make something like this, you really could have made a track suit or something!

I sighed as the maids did up my hair and fastened it with a platinum hairpin. As always, I was dressed in full white.

Yeah, I totally stand out... I thought tiredly as I checked out my outfit in the mirror. *And I have to stay quiet about it because the maids look so proud and keep complimenting each other. I can't spoil their fun.*

Tutte led me to the mansion's entrance, where I got on a carriage; Altolia Academy was built atop a hill a short distance away from the capital. My carriage slowly set out. We left early so I wouldn't embarrass myself in a most unladylike manner by being late on my first day.

Before long, my uneventful trip there ended, and I found myself before the academy's gates. Unlike the capital's tall ramparts, the academy's vast premises were surrounded by a stylish brick wall. The campus was made up of several large school buildings, and a tall clock tower stood in their center.

"So, this is Altolia Academy..." I blurted out, overcome with excitement while looking out the carriage's window. The carriage passed through the gates, went down a boulevard lined with trees that bloomed with pink, cherry-blossom-like flowers, and then stopped at a designated drop-off point for carriages.

"The meeting place should be here, Lady Mary," Tutte told me.

"Y-Yeah..." I said, feigning composure as I followed Tutte to the place where the entrance ceremony would be held.

The place wasn't a gymnasium, but more like a large auditorium. It kind of reminded me of a large movie theater from my past life. Once I walked inside, a clerk exchanged a few words with Tutte. Apparently, my seat had already been decided. As it turned out, the nobles' influence was at play here too.

This was where I parted ways with Tutte for a bit. As soon as I walked into the hall, I heard people start whispering. Everyone seemed to be looking at me.

Huh? What? Do I look weird or something?

I checked myself out hurriedly, only to be surprised. My outfit was letting out a faint, glittery glow. The auditorium was a closed space, with the only illumination being light filtering in through the windows, and it was reflecting against my dress and giving me something of a faint aura.

I stood out. In a bad way.

While the fabric itself was high quality enough to reflect the light, on closer inspection, I also spotted small glittering gemstones sewn into the outfit. I turned my eyes to Tutte, demanding answers, but she simply remained where she was at the entrance, pumping her fists encouragingly at me. She was probably excited at me having successfully drawn everyone's attention.

Well, I'm glad you're happy about this, but I'm *not...*

"Is that the girl the prince called a 'white princess'?"

"She's more beautiful than the rumors say... I can see why Duke Regalia boasted about her so much."

"Such a pure white lady...!"

Such comments from the school's officials reached my ears, but I ignored them, straightened my posture, and walked to my seat as elegantly—and also as carefully—as possible, so I wouldn't end up stepping on my skirt.

I may have looked like a swan gliding over a lake's surface, but I had to really put effort into moving my legs...



I'd finally stepped out of the beam of light shining in from the window, so my outfit stopped shining, but it was already too late. I'd drawn too much attention to myself, and everyone was staring at me curiously.

The seat I was shown to only made things worse. It was right at the center of the auditorium, with a good view of the podium. And worse yet—it was an isolated seat. No one sat around me.

Aha ha, leaving me high and dry all on my own, huh...

I could only sit in my seat with a mirthless smile, gazing ahead with lifeless eyes.

"Heh heh... I see you've made quite the showing, Lady Mary," someone called out to me from the seat diagonally behind mine.

"Magiluuuuka!" I turned around to face her happily, relieved to see someone I know.

I found my friend seated there. Much like me, she stood out with her blonde ringlets, and she was wearing a fancy dress that was a mixture of blue and black. She hid her snickering lips behind a folding fan. Apparently, this was the area for all the VIP seats. Either way, I was relieved that I didn't have to sit here all alone. Students gradually filled up the auditorium, and the ceremony began on time.

Incidentally, Sacher's seat was close to Magiluka's, but ever on-brand, he showed up at the last minute and was nearly late, so I had to act like I didn't know him.

The ceremony went off without a hitch. As is cliché, the headmaster gave a long speech that nearly put me to sleep, but I forced myself to stay awake for the sake of my dignity as a noble lady. Actually, I was so occupied with staying awake that I couldn't remember a word of what he was saying. By the end of it, I was starting to suspect that the principal had used some kind of sleep spell that was managing to get through my magic nullification skill.

But then the auditorium erupted into noise, which blew away my drowsiness. The prince took the stand as the representative of the students. His kind eyes were visible behind his golden, flowing forelocks, but he stood straight, with a

dignified air to him. He made many of the young ladies in the auditorium gaze at him with flushed expressions.

Reifus is as popular as ever...

I was grateful for him giving me an excuse to shake off my drowsiness, and the rest of the ceremony ended without incident. Once it ended, everyone began leaving their seats in groups, and I remained seated for a while longer, not wanting to get swallowed up by the wave of people.

What if I get lost in the crowd and someone tries to do something to me?

It was still too soon to let all my tension drain, but seeing the ceremony end made me careless, so I relaxed my shoulders and closed my eyes.

“Heeey, how long are you going to keep sleeping, Lady Mary? The ceremony’s over!” a familiar dunce called out to me.

“Ah, stop that, you! I was not sleeping!” I glared at Sacher.

A couple of passing students started giggling at my outburst.

Ugh... I’ll kick you to the curb next time!

Sacher, who had been fast asleep during the entire ceremony, looked at me exasperatedly as my dark side silently swore to take revenge.

“Huh? Where’s Magiluka?” I asked. Normally, she would have been the one to criticize and correct his errant behavior, but I noticed she wasn’t anywhere in sight when I looked around.

“Magiluka went with the prince,” Sacher said.

“I see. Well, she must be busy. Shouldn’t you be with him too?”

“Yeah, but I fell asleep, so she left me behind.”

“Oh, is that right...?” I said, exasperated.

I looked away from him stuffily and started walking toward the now empty exit. Sacher followed suit.

“Why are you following me?” I asked him.

“’Cause Magiluka told me to. To like, guard you and keep boys from

approaching you...”

He had his arms crossed behind his head and averted his gaze from me, but I noticed his cheeks flushing over a little. Seeing him so bashful was kind of cute, so I decided to renege on that oath of vengeance I’d made earlier.

“Right... Thank you,” I said.

Like Sacher said, I realized that as I passed boys by, they would throw glances in my direction. But they were only looking, probably because Sacher really was in the way.

I am *House Regalia’s daughter, after all. Their parents probably told them to get along with me... Good luck with that, though.*

I sighed at the hardships of noble life as I left the auditorium.

2. So, This Is What Being Split into Classes Is Like!

After the entrance ceremony ended, I went to check what class I was in. I met up with Tutte, who was waiting outside the auditorium, and went with Sacher to see what class I was in. I soon found the spot where the class assignments were, thanks to the large crowd gathered there.

“Is that where they post the paper with the class assignments?” I asked.

Sacher stared at me, baffled. I’d been thinking back to anime, where the main characters often checked what classes they were in from papers put up in the hallway, but this world didn’t have an abundance of paper, so apparently a teacher in charge would carry the list of class assignments and verbally tell each student theirs upon being asked.

“I’ll go and ask then.” Tutte bowed and walked over to the teacher.

“Ah, ask which class I’m in too, while you’re at it!” Sacher called out to her from behind me.

“Hey...” I glared at him grumpily. “I must ask that you stop taking advantage of Tutte and having her handle things for you.”

“Come on, it’s no skin off your back,” he said casually.

“It’s skin off *your* back, since your friendship points with me are going down...” I grumbled at him and walked away grumpily.

“My friendship points! That’s bad, huh... I’ll be careful, then.” He hung his head, and I couldn’t help but pity and forgive him.

“So, which class number am I?” I asked naturally.

“Huh? What do you mean, Lady Mary?” Tutte asked me incredulously.

Huh? Aren’t classes divided into numbers? I froze up for a second, but then coughed dryly to compose myself. “So, which class am I in?” I corrected myself.

“Ah, right... The Solos class,” Tutte said naturally, and this time it was my turn to look incredulous.

Oh, no! I assumed the school system would be the same as my past life, so I never asked how it works!

“Oh, the Solos class, huh? That’s a surprise,” Sacher said. “And Magiluka must be in the Aleyios class. That’s not surprising.”

Sacher knowing what it all meant made me understand even less.

Oh no, with the way this is going, I’ll be left behind... Guess I’m better off embarrassing myself for a minute now than embarrassing myself a lot later.

“Hmm... What’s all this about Solos and Aleyios classes?” I asked with a stiff smile, swallowing my shame.

“Huh?” Tutte asked, but then realized what I was asking. “Oh, put simply, Solos is the class focusing on martial arts, and Aleyios is the one centered on magic. There’s also the Lalaios class, which is focused on academics.”

“Huh. So it’s split into science and humanities, cultural studies, and sports?” I asked.

Tutte and Sacher looked like I’d just started speaking in tongues. As always, our conversation didn’t quite mesh. *When will I learn my lesson?!*

“Oh, by the way, Sir Sacher is in the Solos class too.” Tutte changed the subject, noticing the conversation was drifting away from me.

“Well, I’m from House Elexiel... I guess it makes sense,” he shrugged.

“Does your family decide what class you’re in?” I asked casually.

“What? No, no!” Sacher said, looking surprised. “Remember the stamina test and practical exam we went through in the entrance exam? They decide what class you go to based on that.”

Hearing his explanation, I froze up and felt a cold sweat run down my back.

Oh, drat! I didn’t know that because I didn’t take the entrance exam, but I can’t go around saying that!

“R-Right...” I said and laughed loudly, looking away from the two of them.

“What’s wrong with you, Lady Mary?” Sacher asked. “Oh, don’t tell me you __”

“Wh-What?”

Sacher looked at me with a self-satisfied smile, and I panicked, fearing he’d figured out my family bought my way into school.

“You went too hard on your practical exam! You blew your opponent away like you do with me, and that’s why you’re in Solos. I mean, come on, that’s not ladylike.”

“I wouldn’t do that, you dunce!” I shrieked at him.

While I was grateful for Sacher not even remotely figuring out the truth, I was outraged at his rude comments.

But if I never took the entrance exam, how did they know to put me in Solos class? I guess father is a marshal, and he had a lot of military stories from his youth. So they figured that I’d belong there since I’m his daughter...? Yeah, maybe.

“W-Well... I guess this means that Lady Magiluka, being the expert magician that she is, was put in Aleyios?” Tutte chimed in on our exchange, trying to change the topic.

“Yes, that’s right,” someone else answered.

We jolted and turned around; a young lady approached us, her golden ringlets

wavering with each step.

“Oh! Really...” I said, disappointed. “So we’re in different classes, Magiluka...”

Honestly, I was hoping I could rely on Magiluka to get through school without Tutte around. It was probably wrong of me to lean on her, but I couldn’t help it. But more than anything, having my best and only female friend in another classroom left me feeling quite lonely.

“Wh-Why are you acting like that...?” Magiluka asked, taken aback by my forlorn expression. “This isn’t a final farewell... W-We can meet whenever we want, after all. I’ll come visit you whenever I have the time.”

She’s trying to comfort me...

“B-Besides, the classes get reassigned each year,” Magiluka informed me. “If you really want to, we could end up in the same class, Lady Mary.”

“Oh... Really?” I said.

Ahh, having friends is so nice... But, uh, why is she blushing so much?

“So, which class did the prince end up in?” Sacher asked bluntly.

“Ahem. His Highness was placed in the Lalaios class, as he intended. He said he wishes to learn politics, economics, history, and the like,” Magiluka answered precisely.

“Mm.” That’d been enough to satisfy Sacher.

That’s Magiluka for you... I wouldn’t even understand his question.

Once again I was impressed with my friend’s wisdom, and I was also a bit surprised by the prince’s ambition. Reifus was studying martial arts too, so I was under the impression he’d go to the same class as me.

“So, Sir Reifus isn’t in our class either,” I said.

“What, you lonely without him?” Sacher giggled teasingly, to which I elbowed him in the ribs to wipe the smug smile off his lips.

“Well, anyway, we’ll be seeing each other in the lounge tomorrow, so I suggest we head back for today,” Magiluka suggested with an exasperated expression to end the conversation. I left with her, leaving an idiot crouching on

the floor and writhing in pain.

3. My First Day at School

The next day, I got off the carriage, Tutte saw me off, and I made my way to the Solos class lounge on my own. When we got back home last night, Tutte told me more about how the academy worked. Much to my surprise, there weren't any classrooms with designated seats. Instead, the students of Solos gathered in a dedicated lounge whenever we needed to discuss anything as a group.

Ah, am I going to be able to do this? Everything I know from my past life is useless here.

More surprising still was the class's curriculum. To my knowledge, schools set a timetable for lessons, but in the academy, students took classes of their own choice. However, students of the Solos class had to take some required subjects to progress to the next year.

This feels less like a primary or middle school and more like a university...not that I've been to any of those.

I heaved a heavy sigh and looked down at the crest badge attached to my clothes. This badge was proof of my affiliation with the Solos class. Tutte received it without me knowing it and handed it over to me today.

Thanks to everyone pulling strings for me behind the scenes, I don't know the first thing about this place. That just makes me all the more anxious when I'm all alone here...

I looked at the people walking around, checking their badges and following the ones with the same one as mine.

I mean, excuse me *for not knowing where our lounge is!* I snapped back at some imaginary critic in my head.

Tutte told me most of my itinerary, but naturally, I couldn't remember any of it and had no choice but to map the place out in my head the old-fashioned way. For the time being, I'd just have to follow students going to the same place

as me.

Do I...have no sense of direction?

I was beginning to suspect that I had another skill I wasn't aware of, but thankfully, I found my way into a lounge full of students with the same badge as mine. The lounge was surprisingly spacious, with partitions set up around the room, plenty of desks and chairs, as well as sofas. It basically felt like a classy diner.

Everyone moved about and sat where they pleased, and while I looked around to find a good spot, I noticed a certain idiot waving toward me vigorously.

Don't make a scene, gosh... I placed a hand on my forehead and gave an exasperated sigh as I watched Sacher noticing me and approach.

"Good morning, Sir Sacher..." I greeted him with a stiff smile.

"Morning, Lady Mary," he said. "You're surprisingly late. What, did you get lost?"

"N-No, not...at all..." I said evasively, since me getting here without getting completely lost was pretty much a miracle. But as we talked, the sound of loud clapping cut us off. Someone stood up in the middle of the lounge and clapped to call everyone into attention.

"Now! All the students that joined the Solos class this year, gather around!" A young man, taller than all of us, regarded us all with an incredibly carefree smile.

Everyone who joined this year...? Does he mean there could be people from other grades here? I guess no one said this lounge is exclusive to our grade.

"Hmm... I see you've all gathered around. Then allow me to introduce myself. My name is Karis Yencho," he said, bowing gracefully. "Despite how I might look, I'm a third-year here. I've been placed here as the class master for your Solos class. Feel free to just call me Instructor Karis, if you'd like."

Class master has a cool ring to it. I guess that makes him like a class representative? Except he's older than us... Don't we have a homeroom

teacher? Mmm... My knowledge from my past life really is useless here, huh?

Troubled over how unreliable my knowledge was, I looked over Instructor Karis again. He looked to be two heads taller than me, and as one would perhaps expect of a Solos student, he had a sculptured, muscular physique. His short brown hair and thick eyebrows gave him the appearance of a vigorous young man. His toothy grin was pretty handsome, and it brought out maidenly behavior in some of the surrounding young ladies.

So he's like an eloquent, athletic upperclassman who takes care of his juniors, I suppose?

I tried to characterize him by leaning on the character tropes I saw in books and anime in my past life.

"So, yes, that's all the complicated stuff behind us," the nice instructor said, seemingly ending an explanation that I'd completely failed to listen to in my daydreaming.

Ugh... Dammit, Mary, talk about a fatal mistake...

"I'll show you around the school. Follow me," Instructor Karis said and walked out of the lounge, everyone else following him.

"What's wrong, Lady Mary? Aren't you going?" Sacher turned to look at me, baffled at me freezing up while everyone else was leaving.

"Uh, hmm, yes... I'm coming." I pulled myself back together and followed everyone else.

It was then that a girl turned to look at me, perhaps sensing my gaze. She was a petite girl with wavy hair that was closer to chestnut than blonde. When her jade eyes met with my golden ones, she ran off into the rest of the group, like she was fleeing from me...only to spectacularly trip over her feet and fall flat on the floor.

Sacher and I both stared at her in silent amazement for a moment. Time ground to a halt, and Sacher and I could only stare at the girl lying on the floor. And unfortunately, the lounge was currently only occupied by us and a few senior students looking at us from afar.

“H-Hmm... Are you okay?” I worked up the courage to call out to the fallen bundle of a girl lying on the floor.

Much to my surprise, she pushed herself up into the air at my question, and then, unbelievably enough, landed on her feet and stood upright.

Wait, so, does this girl have really good or really bad reflexes?

As I stared at her, slack-jawed, the girl turned around to face me.

“A-Ahm fain!” The girl was trying to say she was fine, but the tip of her nose was red and her eyes were full of tears.

Did she fall flat on her face?

“You don’t look fine at all!” I said, taking out a handkerchief and pressing it against the girl’s nose.

“Oh, you can’t, the handkerchief is still clean— Ughaa!” The girl leaned in to stop me, only for her face to hit mine.

Normally, we’d both have been reeling in pain, but thanks to my invincibility, I felt no pain and only the other girl ended up groaning.

“Hey, hmm, sorry. Are you all right?” I asked, holding out the handkerchief.

“I-I’m fine...” the girl said over and over, taking her hands off her forehead.

“Hey, do we really have time for chit-chat?” Sacher asked. “Everyone’s gone.”

We clearly weren’t exactly chatting, but before I could correct Sacher, I noticed that we were, in fact, being left behind. At this point, I couldn’t even see the shadows of the group going ahead.

“Oh, dear! We’re gonna get left behind!” I exclaimed.

“I-I’m sorry! It’s all my fault!” the girl apologized with a trembling voice, her face drained of color and tears streaking down her cheeks.

Seeing her cry so hard, Sacher and I ended up stumbling back. “Y-You don’t have to cry so hard about it,” I said.

“Y-Yeah... It kind of feels like we’re the ones who made you cry,” Sacher nodded, looking uncomfortable.

Huh. Wait... Aren't I normally losing my nerve in an emergency like this? Tutte and Magiluka aren't here, so how am I keeping my cool?

I looked at the girl in realization. She was probably why I was remaining collected. Seeing her act so flustered seemed to have calmed me down. Maybe I just looked at her as a negative example.

"Well, forget that for now... Where did everyone go?" I asked him.

"I dunno, don't ask me," Sacher shrugged.

Yeah, guess that's on me for expecting you to be helpful. I glared at him reproachfully for not even trying, then I sighed and seriously started asking myself what to do.

Messing up on the first day of classes is so bad... Oh, what do I do... Ahh, this is bad! I'm starting to lose it too!

As I was careening on the verge of changing my class to "God of Destruction," I heard a bashful voice call out to me.

"H-Hmm... I think they went...in the direction of the arena..." the whimpering girl said with a meek voice, giving us hope.

"Arena?" Sacher asked innocuously.

"Eeek!" The girl shrank away from him. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I spoke out of place, didn't I?!"

Is she terrified of boys?

"What arena?" I asked.

"Eeeeek! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I did speak out of turn, didn't I?!" she reacted the same way to me.

Yeah, okay, I think she's just terrified of everyone. Talk about having no spine...

I was a bit taken aback by seeing her act so scared around me too, but I tried to smile as much as I could. "You don't have to be so scared. So, what's this about the arena?" I asked gently, so as to not alarm her.

"H-Hm... Earlier...Instructor Karis mentioned the arena, so...I figure maybe

that's where they went...” Her voice tapered off at the end.

I glanced at Sacher, who simply shook his head with a straight face.

What do you mean? Did you not listen to the instructor, or do you just not know where the arena is? I glared at him peevishly.

“Both,” he replied, as if reading my thoughts.

I sighed again, disappointed in him all over again.

“Hey, come on, you weren't listening and don't know where the arena is either!” he protested, realizing my intent.

How does he pick up on stuff like that while being so oblivious about everything else?

“Hmm... I could, erm...take you there, if you'd like...” the girl said bashfully, to which I instantly took her hands and pulled her closer to me.

“Really? Please, take us there! Hmm...” I suddenly realized that I didn't actually know this shy girl's name.

“Ah, right... I'm called Safina Karshana, Lady Mary.” The girl, Safina, picked up on my confusion and introduced herself.

4. Why Did It Turn Out Like This?!

We walked through the academy with fast steps. I was wishing we could sprint, but Sacher and I ran at speeds that Safina couldn't keep up with; when we'd tried running, she'd ended up tripping again, so we had to give up on that idea.

“Is this the right way, Safina?” I asked.

“Y-Yes, Lady Mary. We should reach the arena if we take a right at the next corner,” Safina said, her voice as feeble and hard to make out as ever.

I was getting used to how quiet her voice was, allowing me to make out what she was saying despite that. *That's some good adaptability on your part, Mary*, I thought, patting myself on the back.

Incidentally, I had initially called her Miss Karshana, but she asked that I call

her by her given name. Apparently, she didn't want to hear her last name mentioned aloud for some reason.

We turned the corner, finding ourselves in an open space. Overwhelmed by the sight of the place, I stopped in my tracks. The arena was similar to the kind of middle-ages arenas I'd seen in movies. It had a spacious, circular stage surrounded by stone walls, and surrounding it were lines of seats for spectators. The spot we were in was the second floor spectator seats, and looking down, we spotted a large group of people huddled together.

Bingo! There's the other students! The students I saw in the lounge were all watching the center of the arena, and no one noticed us.

"All right... Let's sneak over and join the group," I whispered to the others, to which they nodded wordlessly. We moved, our bodies crouched down sneakily, and approached the back of the group of students.

All right... I think we made it without getting caught...

"Oh? You finally made it, you little pranksters?" said the one person looking the opposite direction of the rest of the group. Needless to say, it was Instructor Karis.

We got cauuuuught!

I panicked inwardly as the rest of our classmates turned to look at us, spurred by the instructor's words. Safina cowered and whimpered behind me.

No, you really don't have to act that scared. They're not going to draw and quarter us over this. My heart was beating fast as always, but seeing Safina act even more startled than me helped me regain my cool.

"Good timing, the Three Pranksters. Why don't you help me out?" Instructor Karis called us over with a bright smile and led us down the spectator seats.

He gave us a weird name too! The Three Pranksters?! What's that supposed to mean?! Huh? Hold on, that way is...

I got a bad feeling as I dragged my heavy legs after him, and sure enough, he led us onto the arena's stage.

"Hm, Instructor Karis... That's what we should call you, right?"

“Yes, go ahead. Should I call you Miss Mary? Or Lady Regalia?”

“No, just Mary will do. So, hmm... What’s the deal here?”

Being called Lady Regalia felt weird. This wasn’t to say I hated my family name or felt it was a burden; if anything, I took pride in it. But the Regalia name carried so much power that being called by it made me feel like I was in noble society instead of being at school.

I guess I feel the same as Safina in the sense that I don’t want my family name mentioned. I glanced at the girl cowering behind me, feeling something akin to empathy. I then looked around and tried to grasp the situation. Sacher, Safina, and I stood huddled in the arena, surrounded by its stone walls, with Instructor Karis standing a short distance away.

Wait, so what is this supposed to be? Is he telling us to duel?

“Basically, I’ll be using you for a demonstration, to introduce what the arena is like to everyone. You’ll all be using it in the future, after all... Besides, we’re all from Solos. I’m sure everyone’s excited to see a fight.”

He flashed a toothy grin that did suit him very much, and I couldn’t bring myself to return the smile.

Instructor... Don’t lump me in with the combat junkies...

“What I mean is, why does it have to be us?”

“Well...no one besides you three has had any kind of training. If they’re not careful here, they might get themselves hurt.”

“Oh... Well, yes, I suppose... I did get some basic training under Sir Klaus... Wait, huh?!” I exclaimed. Raising my voice wasn’t a respectful thing to do, but upon realizing what Instructor Karis said, my eyes jumped over to Safina in surprise.

Wait, she’s gone through combat training when she’s that clumsy?! It was a rude thought, but from the moment I met Safina, I kept wondering what a girl like her was doing in the Solos Class.

“What are you so shocked about, Lady Mary?” Sacher asked me.

He just can’t get a clue! The way he looked at me like he was asking “What

are you on about?” ticked me off.

But wait, Sacher only cares about strong people, right? Maybe his warrior’s intuition caught onto Safina’s true nature? That thought made me actually impressed with him.

“I mean, House Karshana’s a pretty famous line of warriors.”

So much for intuition!

“Pay me back for thinking well of you!” I demanded, venting at Sacher.

“The heck are you on about?”

While we argued, Instructor Karis apparently moved things along. A few students walked over carrying some things at his instruction and left one with each of us. I looked at the heavy object deposited in my hands with a displeased expression.

It probably went without saying, but that object was a sword.

“Don’t worry. It’s a model sword for training. It’s dull and can’t cut into anything,” Instructor Karis reassured me (ineffectively), noticing my displeased expression. He drew the sword slightly from its scabbard, showing off the blade and looking very satisfied.

Why do you look so happy about this? Are you actually some kind of sadistic instructor?! Is that why you’re abusing The Three Pranksters?! At this point, even the Safina Effect wasn’t able to stave off my panic.

“You see... We’ve been having high hopes about this year’s batch of newcomers,” Instructor Karis continued, drawing out the sword in a jolly manner. “After all, we have people from Houses Elexiel and Karshana, so we want to see what you’re capable of.”

Right. He’s not a sadist. He’s just a barbarian who gets off on seeing people fight... Aaaaaaah!

But then, I realized something very important. “H-Hey, Instructor Karis, if you put it like that, then what do I have to do with this?! You just dragged me into this!”

“Ah, well... I’m sorry, Lady Mary, but it’s just how things turned out... All

right?” He winked at me dashingly.

I am not happy about this... Talk about getting caught up in a mess...

As my spirits deflated, Sacher drew his practice sword from its scabbard and swung it a few times. “So, how are we doing this?” he asked. “You wanna be the vanguard, Lady Mary?”

“What are you saying, you fool...? Weren’t you listening?” I retorted at his tone-deaf comment with a voice that was too insulting for a proper lady. I was *that* done with the situation. Incidentally, upon hearing me insult him, Safina let out a feeble screech and backed away from me.

“Now, get started, you three. I hope you don’t disappoint,” Instructor Karis said, drawing his sword and aiming it at us.

Aaah, why did it turn out like this...? God, I didn’t want this kind of excitement in my life!

5. I’ll Put You in Your Place!

Our formation comprised Sacher and Safina taking spots as vanguards wherever they pleased, while I hung around in the back. We didn’t talk this out, but if both of them were to charge at Instructor Karis, Safina was bound to either trip or lose her nerve. So, without her even being too aware of it herself, she ended up taking her distance from Sacher.

I simply hung back since I wasn’t asked to participate.

“Heh heh... What’s wrong, you two? You’re already gasping for breath.”

Instructor Karis was still perfectly calm, but Sacher was breathing heavily. As for Safina, her problem wasn’t her stamina, but rather her nerves.

But even so, she’s... Yeah, I can see why the instructor’s interested in her so much. Her form is solid and her steps are steady. She’s well-trained...and she’s dodging Karis’s attacks, even if only by a hair’s breadth.

While I was correcting my impression of her, I did have to include an unfortunate addendum to my review:

A shame all of that gets spoiled by her being so skittish.

She was too scared to take any daring strides forward, which got her attacked. And when she dodged, she was too scared to counterattack, which only made her retreat back and then repeat the process. She wasn't making any headway.

Sacher's not trying to coordinate with her either...

Perhaps believing in a one-on-one approach, he didn't try attacking in tandem with Safina, and that got the two of them to bump into each other every now and then. Before long, Instructor Karis easily swept the two of them away, and they ended up falling back to where I stood.

"Damn... You can tell he's an upperclassman. He has no openings..." Sacher said, wiping the sweat from his forehead and tightening his grip on his sword.

"I'm scared... Scaaaared..." Safina whimpered, the sword in her hand trembling with a noisy clatter, like it had some kind of vibration spell cast on it.

You don't need to be that frightened!

"Good grief. This is a bit of a letdown... Is that really all you've got?" Instructor Karis spread out his arms in a composed taunt.

Seeing this made my brow twitch. I knew I shouldn't, but I wanted to put him in his place.

No one could blame me. It's his fault for bullying my friends like this... Maybe watching it all from a distance calmed me down enough to come up with that thought.

"All right, you two, gather around me," I said with a calm voice and motioned for them to come over.

"What do you want? We're in the middle of something," Sacher asked impatiently.

"U-Um, I'm sorry... I'm really sorry..." Safina said as she approached me with tears in her eyes for some reason.

"Lend me an ear," I told them.

I forced them to huddle around me in a circle, so I could tell them my plan. The whole time I was speaking, Instructor Karis remained in his spot patiently.

“Are you serious?” Sacher asked me, shocked.

“All right? We gang up, beat him down, and teach him a lesson!” I said.

“Eeek!” Safina screeched, terrified of me.

With our strategy decided, we broke our team huddle.

“Are you done with your little strategy meeting? Let’s continue, then.” The instructor swung his sword through the air to stave off boredom as Sacher and Safina held up their swords.

“Let’s go, Safina!” Sacher said. “Put your heart in it!”

“Y-Yaaaah!” Safina shuddered at his voice, but she still managed a reply (technically more of a noise).

“Now, go on!” I brandished my right hand all cool-like as I instructed them. At my signal, the two of them charged toward Instructor Karis.

“Oh, come on, if you two rush like that, you’ll just bump into—” the instructor said, exasperated, but then paused.

His surprise was justified; unlike their blind charges earlier, this time, Sacher led the charge with Safina following, hidden behind his back.

“Heh... And what’s your plan exactly?” Karis asked, looking very satisfied.

“Take thaaaaaaat!” Sacher entered his range. He stopped in his tracks, and with his legs planted firmly on the ground, he—of all things, threw his sword at the instructor.

“What?!” Instructor Karis cried out in surprise.

The instructor deflected the sword hurtling toward him with a swipe of his own sword, but upon taking another step forward, he was once again overwhelmed by a surprise. Sacher had stopped in his tracks and turned his back to Instructor Karis. He’d then faced Safina, leaning forward and holding out his hands in the pose of a volleyball receiver.

“Jump, Safina!” he yelled.

“Hiiiiiiyah!” Safina called out, planting her feet onto Sacher’s outstretched palms and using them as a foothold to jump high...half-sobbing the whole time.

Instructor Karis followed her with his gaze.

“Haaaa!” Safina slashed vertically as she descended in midair, still half in tears.

“Sir Sacher!” I threw my sword over at Sacher.

“Right!” He caught my sword.

This was a spare sword I’d taken from the bunch in case I’d ended up gripping mine too strong and breaking it. Sacher turned around, catching the blade and swinging it toward Instructor Karis’s body from the flank.

Being attacked from both the air and the ground at once, Instructor Karis’s judgment faltered. As light as Safina’s body was, if she were to apply all her weight after falling from such a height, he wouldn’t be able to block her with one hand. But if he were to block her by gripping his sword with both hands, it would leave him open to Sacher’s full force blow.

He could only stop one of them. Two on one—the very definition of ganging up on someone!

But then, I saw Instructor Karis’s lips curl up into a smirk as he whispered something. Instructor Karis was enveloped in soft light, and what happened next defied my expectations. He caught Safina’s attack, with all her weight behind it, while gripping his sword with just his right hand. And though he didn’t dodge Sacher’s sweeping attack, he caught it with his left hand.

“What?!”

Everyone was shocked at the sight of what he did, but Sacher and Safina were more surprised than anyone else. I could instinctively tell what had happened, though.

That was magic! He probably used some kind of reinforcement spell to boost his muscle strength!

“Not a bad plan, but you didn’t pull it off quite...right!” Instructor Karis victoriously spread out his arms, propelling his two attackers away.

But with them out of the way, his field of vision cleared only to reveal me with my sword thrust toward him.

Take this! Jet Stream Atta—

We'd used a three-man combo attack I saw in a certain anime to attack him all together! Instructor Karis had forgotten about me by now, and upon seeing me charge him, his expression filled with surprise.

Yes, that's that face! That's the face of someone that's been put in his place!

Overcome with an odd sense of elation, I held my sword tightly and prepared to thrust hard at his chest. But just as I was about to do it, I felt the sword's grip snap in my palm.

Oh no! Now I'm going to stab him! I'm totally going to stab him!

I realized that, caught up as I was in the heat of battle, I'd let my excitement peak and forgotten to control my strength. I panicked. A training sword was effectively a blunt iron pole; after I'd carelessly decided it'd be safe to use since it wouldn't cut him, I'd neglected to consider cutting him wasn't even an issue when I was going for a thrusting attack.

"That's enough!" A dignified woman's voice rang out in the arena as panic was starting to overtake me, spurring me to reflexively drop my sword—it was my only option, since I wasn't confident I'd be able to do something as cool-looking as pause inches away from my target.

For a moment, there was only silence, but then I heard Instructor Karis breathe out in relief. An adult woman approached us.

Huh? Who might this lady be?

As question marks filled my confused mind, I looked down at the sword I'd dropped. It was visibly clear that the sword's grip had been molded into the shape with which I'd gripped it. Seeing this, I panicked, scrambled to pick it up from the floor and tried to nonchalantly hide it behind my back.

"I believe I ordered you to show them around the school, so what is the meaning of this, Class Master?" the woman said with a stern voice. The mature air about her and her apparent age were far from ours, so it was likely she

wasn’t a student. As I edged away from Instructor Karis, I wondered if she was a teacher.

She had brown hair tied into a bun. Her dress, which had no frills on it, showed the nape of her neck, granting her a very upright sort of look. Her clothes were tight, allowing her to move lightly and giving a good idea of the curves of her mature body. Looking at her womanly figure made me awfully depressed about my own.

The lady looked at Instructor Karis severely with her red eyes, and he could only laugh in a guilty manner. The woman narrowed her eyes as she stared at him for a few seconds before sighing.

“I swear... You kids...”

She then turned her eyes to me while I tried to inch away and draw as little attention to myself as possible.

“I see your class master has caused you some trouble...” She regarded me with a kind smile, a stark opposite to the harshness with which she’d regarded Instructor Karis. “I am the grand master of the Solos class, Professor Elenoa Iks. But you can just call me Miss Iks.”

I bowed toward her, still hiding the sword behind my back. I honestly wanted nothing more than to get out of there as soon as possible and hide the evidence.

“I apologize to you two as well, for having to listen to his foolish demand,” Miss Iks told Sacher and Safina, who moved next to me, unsure of what was going on. “You can go back to the rest of the class.” She continued to smile at us warmly.

“Then I’ll be going too—” Instructor Karis said, casually trying to sneak away, but she grabbed him by the shoulder without even looking away.

“You stay right here...”

She turned her face to Karis, and though we couldn’t see her expression, somehow the terrifying aura about her told the whole story. We scampered back to where the other students were standing in the spectator stands.

“Everyone else, return to your lounge!”

Hearing this instruction from behind us, we fled the arena. On the way back, I was lucky enough to find a box containing broken and bent swords, and I was able to nonchalantly stick the weapon I’d broken into it. No one noticed, and good riddance.

6. I’m Shocked...

A week (as it turned out, they called periods of seven days a week in this world too) had passed since I’d started attending the academy, and I was getting used to studying there. Some aspects ended up being not quite as intimidating as I’d expected, but others had caused me a good deal of anxiety.

My first and biggest concern, the matter of my academic abilities, was alleviated when I realized the academic standards of my past life were much higher than this world’s. The academy taught us what had counted as elementary school level material in my past life. For someone like me who’d never shied away from memorization, I felt a bit let down by how little material we’d been asked to study.

Still, the Solos class’s central pursuit wasn’t academics, but rather physical activity. And so, something I used to be confident about—my practical skills—had now become something I dreaded.

“Ugh...” I returned to the lounge after my morning classes and sank into an unoccupied chair with a sigh.

“Hm... Are you all right...?” Safina, who was sitting next to me, asked me in flustered concern.

Ever since the mock battle on our first day of school, she’d been sticking to me like glue. Her presence wasn’t unwelcome, though; her being around me had the unintended effect of keeping me from panicking. More importantly, though, she knew her way around the place, and so long as I was with her, I wouldn’t get lost. She was a godsend.

“Don’t let it get you down,” Sacher said, sitting in the seat opposite mine.

“But I will say, I didn’t expect you to be that bad with sword skills, Lady Mary!”

I let out another sigh. Yes, my current concern was the discovery that I was pretty bad at swordplay.

In my defense, it’s not like I’m having trouble remembering the techniques themselves, I grumbled to myself as I scribbled over the table with a finger. *It’s a more basic issue... I can’t grip a sword right. I just can’t hold weapons without breaking them.*

All that was required of me was to hold a sword and swing it; simple enough, but it was terribly difficult for me. It meant that I had to hold the grip gently enough so as to not break it before swinging, which meant that the sword naturally slipped out of my hands. Also, if I were to swing as hard as I possibly could, I’d hit my targets too hard, so I had to suppress my strength.

All of that added up to me moving very awkwardly and stiffly, with my sword slipping from my fingers every now and then. I was embarrassing myself left and right. Who could fault me for getting depressed?

The way everyone looked at me with pity after I dropped my sword... I can’t take it...

Just remembering it made me want to scream and stomp on the ground in frustration.

Come to think of it, Sir Klaus’s training was all about bare-handed martial arts, so I never ran into this issue then. I can barely control my strength, so when I have to worry about a weapon, maintain my fencing form as I move, and keep in mind what my enemy’s doing... Aaah, this is frustrating!

Safina watched me cradle my head in annoyance, and then turned her eyes to Sacher, who simply made an exasperated face and raised his hands in a resigned gesture.

“What class do we have for the afternoon today, by the way?” Sacher changed the subject as I splayed my upper body over the table, projecting a negative aura.

I didn’t care enough to answer, but...

“E-Erm... I think we have, hmm, monster biology with everyone after this...” Safina answered in my place.

The academy’s system was such that we picked whichever classes we wanted, but since the three of us consulted each other over what to pick, we ended up sharing most of the same classes.

“Biology!” I looked up excitedly, my eyes glittering and my bad mood all gone.

“Do you like biology, Lady Mary...?” Safina asked.

“I mean, it’s monsters, you know! Monsters!” I exclaimed excitedly. “We’re researching fictional creatures, even seeing live samples! How would I not get excited?!”

“Fictional?” Safina asked blankly.

“Ah, erm... Ignore that, I was, uhm, talking to myself...”

“But I’m... Uh...” Safina looked like she was on the verge of tears. “Honestly, I don’t want to show up to class today...”

“Huh? Why not?” I replied.

“It’s because...today, we’ll be seeing a live griffin, and...I’m scared, so scared...” Safina answered, trembling.

“But if you’re going to join the army in the future, you better get used to griffins sooner rather than later,” Sacher told her, giving a realistic argument. “What if you have the talent to be an Aerial Knight?”

In this kingdom, griffins weren’t seen as terrible monsters, but rather as reliable mounts. They had an eagle’s front half and a lion’s back half, as well as large wings. They were highly intelligent and were regarded as partners to the knights that guarded the kingdom’s skies.

Being a griffin rider, huh? Aah... That sounds so cool... I trembled in joy, imagining myself riding across the sky atop a griffin’s back.

“Okay, let’s go!” I pumped my fists, getting up with enough enthusiasm to make my depression from earlier seem like a lie.

“Hmm, I think... I think I’ll...pass on coming...” Safina started muttering.

“Come on, Safina, let’s get going!” I hooked my arm around hers, pulling her up and dragging her along as I made for the site of the lesson.

“Eeeek!” Safina screeched.

Honestly, I didn’t know where the lesson would be held, so I had no choice but to bring her with me.

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I soon became dejected.

I was in the forest outside the school building. The other students were gathered around, and standing before us was Miss Iks. Miss Iks being there wasn’t the source of my negativity, of course; the cause of that was the creature behind her.

“Now then, for starters, I want you to interact with the griffin directly,” Miss Iks said, her words only making me all the more dejected.

Where did all my excitement go? I was still excited when I walked into the forest and saw the griffins, but... I mean, well...

I looked at the griffin behind her and grimaced again. *It stinks! It smells like an animal!*

This wasn’t the griffin’s fault, but since I’d never interacted with animals in my past life, I was shocked by the scent of a wild animal. The stench made my sparkling fantasies earlier fall apart with an ear-shattering sound.

“Now, I should tell you that this griffin served the Aerial Knights in the past and is a retired veteran,” Miss Iks said. “If you treat it disrespectfully, it could peck or tug at you, and you’ll get terribly hurt... It might even eat you, at worst.”

Miss Iks appended that last bit with a dangerous smile. It went without saying that this made Safina go very pale.

“So, who wants to go first?” Miss Iks looked around us, but no one stepped forward.

“Sacher and Safina...won’t one of you go first?” a student said.

“Huh? Me?”

“Eek!”

The other students all nodded. Seeing the match in the arena made the class respect Safina’s and Sacher’s combat prowesses. As for me, for all appearances were concerned, I’d done nothing during the match, and what with me dropping my sword all the time, no one really regarded me very highly.

Sacher glanced at me with a bothered expression. Or rather, at Safina, who was clinging to me...the same Safina who, upon noticing Sacher’s gaze, started shaking her head fast enough to give her face an afterimage.

I sighed once and raised my hand.

“Miss Iks... How about me and Sir Sacher approach it together?”

“Oh? I don’t mind, but what do you say, Elexiel?” She looked to Sacher, wondering if he was okay with having to team up with a girl to do this.

“Fine by me,” he said.

Ack, I was hoping it’d provoke his boyish pride and he’d decide to go ahead without me... You gutless idiot!

As I glared at him reproachfully, I still stepped forward, leaving Safina behind me and approaching the griffin with Sacher. Noticing us, the griffin rose to its feet, as if to ask what we were doing.

It’s big! I mean, I knew griffins are big, but it really is big! And the closer I get, the stronger the smell becomes!

“Griffins are smarter than you know,” Miss Iks advised us. “Approach it as you would another person.”

Like a person... So we want to treat it like a foreigner that doesn’t understand the local language. Let’s greet it, then...

The griffin puffed up its chest menacingly as I approached it, Sacher a step behind me.

“Hello, griffin,” I said, pinching up my skirt to bow. My smile was stiff as I put up with the creature’s stench.

I might look kind of creepy with this smile, but...it’ll be fine, for sure.

The griffin looked at me, reacting to my voice like he'd just noticed my presence, and...then...

...the griffin started fleeing from me with all its might.

It had a collar on for safety purposes, so it couldn't escape the place. But still, the sight of him fleeing from us—or rather, me—and flapping its wings desperately bordered on comical.

No, no, no, stop pulling so hard on the— Oh, look, now the collar's digging against your neck, and your face looks all ugly...

With its dignified aura from earlier thrown to the wind, the griffin desperately tried to escape, only to exhaust itself a few minutes later. It flopped to the ground tiredly, like it had resigned itself to some terrible fate.

You don't have to be so scared... I mean, I get I might be a bit creepy with this smile, but...

Maybe it's smart enough to know how strong I am, and it thinks I'm in a bad mood and might kill it...? Ugh... What a shock...

I walked back to Safina, all the more dejected while the rest of the class patted the miserable griffin, and that was how the class ended. The following day, rumors started spreading that the griffin reacted that way because it must have been terrified of Sacher's powers.

The fact I went unnoticed was a small mercy. But as a young girl, I was crushed by psychological damage at the realization I was scary enough to strike terror into monsters, and I spent my days down in the dumps.

7. Trying to Solve the Problem

The week came to an end, and on a day off, I spent an elegant, calming moment in our mansion's garden with Tutte.

"Oh... So that's what happened with the swords," Tutte said with a bothered frown.

"Yes... I wonder if there's some wonderful sword out there somewhere that

never breaks," I said wistfully.

We were discussing my problems with fencing. At this rate, I was going to get terrible grades in the midterm exam's practical tests, and I needed to find a solution as fast as possible. True, if I could have just controlled my strength properly, this wouldn't have been a problem, but much to my chagrin, I just wasn't that dexterous of a person. If anything, I was pretty clumsy.

"A sword that never breaks, you say..." Tutte said pensively. All the while, she skillfully poured just the right amount of tea into my cup without even looking, then put away the teapot. "Actually, I think there's a story about a sword like that."

"Huh? There is?! Where?!" I asked.

"Well, I wouldn't know, and I've just heard stories about it. I don't know if it's real."

"That's good enough for me! Tell me more about it!"

"Yes. It belonged to someone you already know, Lady Mary—it's the Argent Knight's Eternal Sword. It's said to have been given God's protection, and that it would never bend or break, no matter how hard what it hit was. One legend says it penetrated a dragon's scales...but again, those are all stories."

I thanked Tutte, who looked quite ill-at-ease at how unreliable her information was, and mulled over what she said.

The Argent Knight's sword, huh? I know stories have a way of being dramatized, but there's no smoke without fire. Even if the Argent Knight's sword wasn't completely unbreakable, maybe it was just very durable? Durable enough so it wouldn't snap even if I gripped it too hard?

"So, assuming this sword exists, where would I find it?" I asked.

"I don't know? Like I said, it's not a realistic option," Tutte replied.

Right, so she doesn't know... Ahh, if it's real, I want it! Like, really want it. I'd sink my whole fortune into getting it if it meant not humiliating myself like that again!

As I writhed from the memory of how the sword had slipped from my hands

during fencing training, the head maid approached me from the lawn.

“Lady Mary, Lady Karshana is here to see you.”

“Oh?” I asked, feigning composure. “Very well, bring her in.”

I got to my feet to greet Safina, who was walking over with the stiffness of a wind-up toy that was about to run out of power.

“L-Lady Mary, th-thank you for...i-inviting me over today...” she stammered.

Tutte watched over her with a smile, bowed, and led her over to the seat opposite mine.

“Come to think of it, Safina, this is your first time meeting Tutte, isn’t it?” I decided to introduce her to Tutte. “She’s been my personal maid and my best friend since I was a toddler. I hope you can get along with her.”

Tutte bowed elegantly, to which Safina hurriedly bowed her head in greeting.

That’s good... She doesn’t treat Tutte like a servant.

One thing that had shocked me since I’d started attending the academy was that some people treated their attendants like objects, or otherwise like they weren’t there at all. I was relieved to see Safina wasn’t like that, because I didn’t want to befriend anyone who treated their attendants like that.

“Say, Safina, do you know the story of the Argent Knight?” I brought up the topic Tutte and I were discussing just before she’d arrived.

I looked at Safina, who had just had her cup filled with tea. She took a bashful sip of it, looking quite reserved. Upon hearing my question, she jolted.

“Nng! Huh, the Argent Knight?” She choked a bit on her tea and turned her eyes to me. Needless to say, her gaze was sparkling just like Magiluka’s.

Oh... So you’re on that *side too, huh?* Letting out a very dry chuckle for a moment, I moved to the main topic. “That’s right. I was wondering if you know anything about the sword he used.”

“Oh, the Eternal Sword? Mother would often read the stories to me when I was little... Aah... It’s so lovely...” Safina said wistfully, basking in nostalgia.

“Mm? Lovely, how?” I asked.

It seemed Safina still hadn't broken out of her trance, so I leaned in and waved a hand in front of her.

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry... Hmm, it's lovely because, the story about his sword goes like this: The princess of that era fell for him. She prayed and prayed to God, and upon hearing her feelings, God decided to give her his blessing by producing an unbreakable, everlasting sword. After that, the princess met with many other trials and tribulations, but she never yielded... Aah... It's just so beautiful..." Talking about it made Safina trail off into another world again.

Hmm... That sounds too much like a fairy tale to be real. But then again, this is a fantasy world with lots of things I don't understand, so for all I know, this could be common sense here. Hmm. I'd like to hear an expert's opinion about this, but...who would be the right person to ask about this?

I took a sip of tea, trying to think of the right person.

"My, has the tea party started already? Pardon my tardiness." Another young lady arrived, her golden ringlets wavering with each step, accompanied by the head maid.

"It's yooooooou!" I got to my feet and exclaimed.

Safina, who was still in fairy tale land, jumped at my voice, and Magiluka took a cautious step away from me.

"Huh? What's this about?" Magiluka stared at me and took another startled step back.

Safina, meanwhile, looked between me and Magiluka in confusion, an invisible question mark popping up over her head.

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"I see. The Eternal Sword... A fascinating topic."

After Safina introduced herself to her, Magiluka had heard me out while relaxing with a cup of tea. Sacher also showed up, and so our group was assembled.

"Yes, there are a few theories regarding it," Magiluka continued. "And even though the royal house is involved in the legends, I could only find vague details

looking through my family's documents."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I looked into it, I discovered that the king at the time sought to grant the mightiest sword to the Argent Knight, so he sent letters to blacksmiths around the kingdom."

"And that's the Eternal Sword?" I asked.

"No, well...that's the vague part, you see... It's not clear if that's the case."

"This is such a drag..." Sacher griped with an earnest face. "If you don't know, just ask someone who was alive at the time about it."

Magiluka and I directed chilly gazes at him. *Does he really not have any idea how old this story is?*

"Wh-What...?" he asked uncomfortably. "I mean, you said the king reached out to blacksmiths all around the kingdom, right? That's not limited to humans. Dwarves are master smiths, and they have long lifespans. There might be someone who was alive at the time."

We both stared at him, shocked.

"W-Wait, is that true? There are dwarves?" I asked Magiluka, getting excited.

"W-Well, yes, I suppose it's true... Ugh, how did I not realize that? I can't believe this dunce pointed it out to me... This is humiliating..."

In contrast to my elation, Magiluka looked like she was getting more depressed with each word.

"Hm..." Safina looked at Sacher with expectant eyes. "Sir Sacher, since you came up with that idea, do you maybe know the name of a dwarf blacksmith who might meet our needs?"

"Hah! 'Course I don't!" Sacher said victoriously.

"Don't brag about that!" Magiluka and I snapped at him in unison.

And so, my day off ended, and I had to return to my life in the academy. And just when I thought I might have found a lead on my problem...

8. Visiting Another Class

Safina and I were headed for a particular part of the school—the Lalaios class's lounge.

My objective: Meeting Prince Reifus. I really want to find out more about that sword. If I don't find it, or have it made for me, or do something about this in general—I'm going to flunk the midterms' practical exams.

I walked with my back straight, steeling my resolve as we made our way to our destination. As for Safina, well, she had nothing to do with this, but I needed someone to guide me to the lounge.

I really am blessed with good friends... But I didn't tell her who I'm meeting, so she might just faint when we find him...

Since said sword was handed over to the Argent Knight by royalty, I figured that would be a good direction for our investigation. And I just so happened to be lucky enough to be acquainted with a member of the royal family.

Honestly, this is kind of my last resort...but I don't have much time to waste, so I have to do this.

As I walked down the hall, I spotted students who were dressed a bit different from us—in other words, they were dressed more like commoners. Incidentally, the outfit I was wearing was a replica of a school uniform from my past life that I'd had my private tailor make for me. My past life as a Japanese girl had spurred me to attend school in a uniform—plus, I'd always wanted to wear a school uniform, but never could.

It was a blazer-type uniform made with black and white fabric, with the crests of both the Altolia Academy and the Solos Class stitched onto it, which made my affiliation with them visible. Because they could see what class I was from, the Lalaios students walked a good distance from me, peering in my direction curiously.

But wearing this uniform excitedly at school taught me a valuable lesson—uniforms only work if everyone's wearing them. Me walking around in an outfit only I wore was more a fashion statement than anything.

It doesn't really feel like I'm wearing a school uniform like this...

As things stood, Safina at least was curious about my uniform, and one day she came to school with a matching outfit she'd apparently had prepared for her, which she was currently wearing.

Heh heh heh... Someday, we'll take all of the Solos Class by storm!

As I reveled in my plans for the Solos Uniform Revolution in my head, we soon reached the packed lounge. As we approached, I felt my nervousness suddenly build up.

This is...probably like walking into another classroom back in my past life. Like, the kid next to the door would be the one handling the reception, and it'd go like this...

"Hey, X! Y is looking for you!"

"Ooh, what's this, X? Someone came to visit you? You lucky dog, you!"

"S-Stop that, it's embarrassing! Hey, Y, can we talk out in the hall?"

Yeah, that's how it goes. Aaaah... ♪

Having never experienced such bittersweet moments in my past life, I was excited. But quite unfortunately this time, the Mr. X I was visiting was the prince, which made my stomach churn nervously. Needless to say, if I was nervous, Safina was so stressed she looked about ready to throw up.

"You don't have to stay," I offered for her to leave, concerned over how pale she was. "I can handle the rest on my own."

"N-No, staying here alone would...just be worse..." She shook her head desperately.

Yeah, figures... If you left me all alone in this corner of the academy, I'd be in tears too...

I took a deep breath and peered inside the lounge. It was much the same structure as our lounge, which wasn't much of a surprise. The people inside regarded us with surprise, but once they picked up we were from Solos, they lost interest in us.

Yeah, I guess there won't be someone in charge of showing people around since there are no set seats... Ugh, guess I'll have to look for the prince on my

own. This is nerve-racking... Where could Reifus be?

I looked around, hoping to end this ordeal as soon as possible, and spotted the prince quite quickly. It wasn't hard to find him; I just had to look at where all the young ladies were gathered. I approached the table, where a group of boys and girls were seated, and the prince was at the center of the group, chatting pleasantly with the others.

Maybe they're talking about class... Or maybe it's about politics, because I hear them saying some complicated terms. I can't understand any of this...

The prince wasn't just talking while everyone else listened; he responded to others' opinions, taking their stances into account and livening the conversation up. The other students didn't seem reserved about talking to a member of the royalty, but it was clear from their expressions that they respected him.

More than anything, the prince looked both respectable and like he was enjoying himself. All the young ladies looking at him seemed quite smitten with him.

I feel bad for cutting into this conversation...

I stood quietly, waiting for the conversation to naturally end, but Reifus suddenly noticed us. Or rather, his gaze, which scanned over his surroundings every now and then, met mine.

"Pardon me, a good friend of mine is here. Let's wrap it up here, shall we?" he said with a carefree smile.

None of the students objected or said anything, and they all scattered to different seats.

Uh, hmm... The other girls are glaring daggers at me...

I figured Safina would go into a panic at the prince approaching us, but she simply gripped my sleeve and stood frozen in place.

When did you get so brave, huh? I'm jealous... Hm?

But as I glanced at her in relief, I realized Safina wasn't just frozen in place—she'd passed out standing up!

Crap, sorry! You didn't get any braver, you're just overloaded already!

“S-Safinaaaa! Stay with meeee!” I grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her, but her head just dangled back and forth limply like a rag doll.

“Is she anemic?” Reifus asked. “That’s no good. Let’s have her rest on a sofa, shall we?”

“No, Reifus, she just got so nervous about meeting you that she went out cold!” ...not that I can really tell him that.

While I just mouthed a vague reply, the surrounding boys helped the prince carry Safina over to one of the sofas. I watched them do so, concerned as I was, but then I noticed the prince smile at me.

“What is it, Sir Reifus?” I asked.

“Nothing, I was just thinking your outfit is quite unusual.”

I looked down at my Japanese school uniform, which did indeed stand out quite a bit.

“I designed it and had it made for me... Does it look weird?” I asked, spreading out my arms to examine my uniform.

Back in my past life, I spent my time in my hospital room tracing art from anime and manga. I used that as reference for this uniform, but maybe basing it on anime made it a little too fictional-looking.

“Oh, not at all. It’s snappy and dignified, but has some cuteness to it... You look lovely,” he said.

“Oh, Sir Reifus... Imitating His Majesty again?” I asked, glaring at him half in jest.

“Oh, bother. No one pointed it out to me for a while, so I got careless... Aha ha.” Unlike his manner of speaking, his smile had an adorableness to it that actually did fit his age.

As he laughed, I felt the gazes of other girls stab at me from a distance. The prince sat, smiling, on the sofa opposite Safina’s. I took a seat next to the unconscious girl.

“So, did you need something from me? I’m sure it must be important if you came all the way here, Lady Mary.”

The way you're looking at me like you're expecting something impressive is a bit too dazzling for me, Reifus... I mean, I came here completely out of self-interest...

Feeling bad for betraying his expectations, I looked away from him and stated my business.

***

"The Eternal Sword, you say... Hmm... I can't say I've heard of it."

The prince's reply came as a surprise. There were all sorts of stories about the Eternal Sword, like the king scouring the kingdom for the right blacksmith to make it or the princess asking God for it, but all the stories surrounding the sword involved the royal family. So how could it be that the prince never heard of it?

"Based on what you and Magiluka, as well as other people, have told me, I find it very strange that something that important wasn't passed down in the royal house as a legend..."

"What do you mean? Are you saying all the stories I heard are just fiction?"

"I'm not sure... Apparently the part about all the blacksmiths in the country being beckoned was true, so I think that might be a good lead to investigate...and the royal family's personal smith was a dwarf, so asking him might be a good idea."

The royal family's personal smith... That's an impressive title! And they're a dwarf! I really want to meet them!

The prince chuckled; I suppose my eyes really were shining with excitement. He then said something quite absurd.

"Then how about we go see him together on our next day off? He's in the capital, so we can meet him soon enough."

I assumed by together, he meant our entire group of friends, but the vague way he put it made the glares stabbing at me from afar become even darker. Feeling myself break into a cold sweat, I laughed dryly, praying all the while that I had a skill to block these murderous eye beams too.

9. Onward to the Royal Blacksmith's Shop!

It was our day off, and I got on a carriage with Tutte that took us to Altolia Academy, where we'd all agreed to meet up.

"I guess in terms of my past life, this is like meeting my friends on a weekend to hang out in town... It sounds fun when I put it like that. But knowing I'll have to remain formal since we're going with the crown prince is making my stomach turn..." I mumbled grimly as I gazed out the window.

"Now, now, Lady Mary. This happens all the time, so you should get used to it..." Tutte tried to encourage me, half in resignation. "And don't forget the sword! We might expose the truth behind the legendary sword!"

"You're right!" I cheered up a bit. "No need to be gloomy about this! We might reveal the truth behind the sword, and who knows, we might even find it! And then my future will be set and safe!"

"That's right, Lady Mary!"

I tried to forcibly cheer myself up, imagining a future where everything went right. It was then that the carriage ground to a halt, marking that we'd arrived at the academy.

Is everyone already here?

I approached our meeting spot at the academy's footpath cafe with Tutte in tow. The place was basically an open-air cafe, with lots of tables and chairs set up on the sidewalk.

There really are fewer people here than on a school day.

The place was usually full of customers, making it hard to find a seat, but there were few people around due to it being a weekend. Thanks to that, I quickly spotted the one table where Magiluka, Sacher, and Safina were seated.

Good... Looks like I got here before the prince did. I know I'm early, but getting here after him would have been a blunder.

Relieved to see the prince wasn't there, I approached the group.

Ah! Wait, isn't this my chance to say that one legendary line you always have to say when you meet up with your friends?!

My heart beat fast at the prospect of living up to the cliché, and I tottered over to the group excitedly.

"Sorry I'm late, guys! Did I keep you wai— Aaaaaaaaah!" I spoke up with a glittering smile, only to spot someone leave the cafe itself and pass by me, at which point my expression stiffened.

Needless to say, that someone was Prince Reifus.

"Oh, not at all. I just showed up a few minutes ago," Reifus replied honestly with a smile, only twisting the knife deeper into my heart.

"I'm so sorrrrrrrrrrry!" I nearly fell to my hands and knees, but I managed to stop myself at the last second, instead electing to hang my head to apologize on many different levels.

"Oh, no, I just arrived early," the prince replied, looking taken aback by my apology. "You don't need to apologize, Lady Mary. You arrived on time."

"No, really, I'm just, I'm sorry!" His attempts at an apology just made my ears go red as I continued apologizing.

"We're all here, so... Let's just get to town, shall we, Your Highness?" Magiluka gently placed her hands on my shoulders, pulling me up.

"Thanks, Magiluka..." I whispered, thanking my friend for her support.

"Don't mention it... You were quite adorable when you hurried over to us, Lady Mary. ♪" she laughed impishly.

"Please just forget about that..." I muttered, feeling my shame being pressed on again.

And so, our group headed into the city.

***

As I walked through the bustling streets, I felt my attention drawn to a few of the places we passed by, but I restrained my curiosity as we made our way to

our objective.

“Here we are.”

Just as I was fighting off the temptation to veer off, the prince stopped in his tracks and showed us into a certain shop. Upon seeing the shop’s size, my mouth fell open.

It’s huge... He called it a shop, so I imagined a small smithy like in my RPGs, but it’s like a big factory.

The prince led us into the workshop, which was encircled by sturdy walls. As we entered, an old man who looked like he was dressed as neatly as he possibly could approached us, having seemingly expected us.

“We’ve been awaiting you, Your Highness,” the man said. “We’re quite honored to have you visit us today.”

“Thanks... I came here to see the chief. Are they in?” Reifus asked.

Huh? This isn’t the person in charge? Ah, well, I guess he’s not a dwarf...

Everything tugged on my curiosity so much I temporarily forgot we’d come here to meet a dwarf blacksmith.

“Oh my, I was wonderin’ what all the racket was about, but it’s you, isn’t it, boy?” a crude voice spoke up from within the building.

As I looked at the figure who walked out to greet us, I felt my breath catch in amazement. Standing there was a lady. She had short-cut reddish hair and tanned, sun-kissed skin. She had a muscular physique that made it clear she was very strong. But she was much too short to look like an adult. She was about my height, and I was a ten-year-old.

Ooh, so this *is a dwarf! A lady dwarf! She doesn’t have a beard, but her facial features really do look like the kind of thing I saw in video games! Ooh, it’s a real dwarf! What I wouldn’t give for a camera!*

I tried to keep a calm face, but I was squeeing on the inside. Everyone else looked very surprised to see a dwarf for the first time and stared at her from a distance. Reifus was the only one to approach her with an embarrassed smile.

“Aha ha, stop calling me ‘boy,’ Deodora... I’m ten years old already,” he said.

“You’ll always be a boy to me, wa ha ha!” Deodora, the lady dwarf, laughed and patted Reifus on the back like a jolly grandmother.

How brave of her... I guess dwarves fear nothing, not even royalty. I became ever more impressed by her thanks to my odd leap of logic, so I walked a few steps forward hoping to get a better look at her.

“Oh? And I see you brought some adorable little friends,” she said, noticing me. “You really are one to be attracted to looks, aren’t you?! Just like His Majesty!”

“N-No! They’re my friends,” Reifus said bashfully.

Deodora approached us, and I gave a ladylike curtsy, my heart a-pitter-patter.

“Hello...I’m Mary Regalia.”

“I’m called Deodora. I don’t like stiff formalities, so I’m sorry if it strikes you as rude, but I’m just gonna talk however I please. You don’t have to feel reserved around me either,” she said, flashing a toothy grin.

By now, the small lady felt like a friendly grandma, and after introducing herself to everyone else, she led us into her workshop.

“Now... I read your reasons for the visit in the letter you sent me, but what do you want to ask?”

She sat on a chair, signaling us to sit wherever we please and get down to business. Magiluka and Safina, who were very interested in the Argent Knight, were seated behind me, where they listened to her every word with rapt attention. The prince sat next to me. Tutte was setting candy and tea the workshop’s people got for us, and Sacher was examining some weapon Deodora made like none of this concerned him.

Wait, is everyone having me handle the conversation? Well, I guess coming here was my idea...

Noticing that everyone’s eyes were on me, Deodora looked at me and awaited my response.

“Umm... I wanted to ask about the Eternal Sword... We came here hoping you could tell us something, if you know about it.”

“Hmm... The Eternal Sword, you say? You mean the powerful sword that could pierce dragon scales, the one the king had my pa and the other smiths at the time make?” Deodora asked, sounding disinterested.

This is exactly what I was hoping to hear!

“Yes, that sword! The sword the Argent Knight received!” I said, my eyes shining with expectation.

“So, you mean that one... That sword, huh?” Deodora replied, sounding like she didn’t want to talk about it. “See, that sword, it...it was a failure.”

At the sound of Deodora’s dry laughter, my thoughts ground to a screeching halt.

10. Mystery Solved

“A failure?!” Magiluka exclaimed in my place, as my thoughts were currently frozen in an error screen. “You mean, the king never gave the Argent Knight that sword?!”

“Aye, that’s right,” Deodora said with a strained smile. “I was still a half-pint girl at the time, so I only followed my pa around, but none of the smiths could make a weapon that was better than the one the Argent Knight had.”

The expression on her face made it seem like it was a pretty bitter memory to look back on. They had all the first-rate smiths gathered in one place to craft a weapon without regard for budget and resources, but all the weapons they made were rejected for being inferior to the one the Argent Knight already had. It was no doubt a very dark moment for them and a blemish on their pride—the kind of dark past she probably didn’t want touched on. I could imagine some people being heartbroken by it.

“I imagine nobody really talked about it after the fact,” Magiluka whispered pensively behind me. “If the whole kingdom worked together to make a good weapon for the knight and failed anyway...I can see why the records about it would be vague. So that sword never existed in the first place?”

“Th-Then, what about the princess?” Safina asked, her voice meek. “What

about the story about the princess giving the knight the Eternal Sword?”

“The princess? Are you saying the princess of that time gave the knight the Eternal Sword? Aha ha, no, that’s not what happened. She was a little girl back then. I used to play with the princess in my free time back then, but I never saw her give such an impressive sword to the Argent Knight. Never heard anything about it either.”

Deodora laughed pleasantly while Safina deflated, crushed by the weight of cold, uncaring reality.

“Oh? Actually, wait. Come to think of it, I do remember something about the princess giving the Argent Knight a sword,” Deodora then whispered like she’d just remembered something.

“A-And that was the Eternal Sword?!” I leaned in enthusiastically.

“Oh, no, no. It’s just, when the princess heard the king wanted to send the knight she admired so much a sword, she decided she’d send him a sword of her own as well. Roped me into making one for her. And, well, that was a child’s handmade sword, you know?”

“Tell us more about how you made it!” I insisted, refusing to give up. “Maybe God ended up being involved in the process or something?!”

“Hmmm. Well, first, I had the princess draw the design for the sword she wanted, and I made a mold based on that. While I was doing that, I had the princess get us some ivory ore and crush it into powder. We added water into it, poured it into the mold and dried it, and once it hardened, it was ready. See? No involvement from divine powers.” Deodora spread out her arms in a joking manner.

From what she’s telling us, it really doesn’t sound like any miracles took place. So the story about the princess sending the Argent Knight the Eternal Sword was basically embellished by someone over the ages...

But just as I was about to give up...

“That’s it, Lady Mary!” Magiluka raised her voice behind me.

“What’s ‘it’?” I quipped.

“Miss Deodora, was the sword you made the princess created from pure ivory ore?” she asked the blacksmith.

“Hm? Yes, the princess wanted a blade as white as the Argent Knight, so we didn’t mix anything else into it. What about it?”

“Sorry, I’m not sure I quite follow. What’s ivory ore?” I asked, not caring about if asking this question made me look ignorant.

“Ivory ore is a rare type of gemstone. It’s a pure white and very light crystal,” Deodora explained. “It’s so soft, it’s said that even children can crush it with a hammer. But what’s interesting about it is that if you crush it into powder and then heat it up so all its liquids evaporate, it hardens again when you add water into it. We mostly use it to make fixtures and very artistic ornaments.”

Uh, so it’s like plaster? I nodded, finding a good comparison to something in my past life to make her explanation make sense.

“But like I said earlier, it’s very soft. You can crush it with a hammer, so any sword you make out of that wouldn’t be some legendary, unbreakable sword, would it?”

“Would it?” I parroted Deodora as I turned to look at Magiluka.

“Well, you see, there was a discovery in a neighboring country, in a research facility House Futurulica manages. The results aren’t entirely conclusive, but apparently ivory ore has another fascinating trait.”

“Which is?” Deodora asked, interested.

“Highly concentrated ivory ore has been long since observed as having a trait to absorb mana. But, as it turns out, once the amount of mana it absorbs crosses a certain threshold, ivory ore gains a hardness that’s proportional to the amount of mana it’s absorbed. However, that threshold is incredibly high, and most people can’t possibly achieve it. You need a person who can cast third-order spells for the material to become even a little harder than usual, which is why this trait had gone undiscovered until recently.”

“Right, and the Argent Knight was a hero who could use fourth-order spells,” I said, finally understanding enough to be able to comment on the topic. “So, the sword the princess gave him absorbed that mana and became harder.”

“Yes. This is only theoretical, but so long as it has enough mana, it’s possible that it could achieve a hardness that exceeds orichalcum and adamantite.”

“I see...” Deodora nodded at this surprising revelation. “So after the princess sent the Argent Knight the sword, the story around it changed until it became known as a silver sword... The Eternal Sword.”

I held my breath nervously, and for one long moment there was only silence. This meant...

“Wait...” The prince, who had remained quiet so far, finally spoke up. “So you’re saying... In other words...the legendary Eternal Sword existed because the Argent Knight made it that strong?”

Magiluka looked stunned by the prince’s point-blank question. We all froze up as the truth sank in.

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“Hm hm hm! ♪ ♪”

I hummed to myself as I left the workshop and walked to my carriage.

“I’m surprised you’re so chipper after finding out that was the truth behind the Eternal Sword, Lady Mary,” Magiluka said, seemingly taken aback by my good mood.

“Yes, very chipper! ♪” I beamed at her and kept humming as I approached the carriage.

Indeed, I was satisfied with the truth behind the legend. After all, it meant that I could just make that sword for myself!

Before leaving the workshop, I secretly ordered a sword made of ivory ore from Deodora. I boasted that money isn’t an issue, to which she laughed and agreed with a smile. We arranged she’d have the sword delivered to my house in a few days.

Aaah... There were a lot of twists and turns, but I finally solved my sword problem! Thank you, princess from ages ago! Thank you, ivory ore! Thank you, person who discovered ivory ore’s special properties!

I boarded my carriage, feeling like I could break out in dance. That was how I

solved the problem of the Eternal Sword.

The following day, the package I was expecting arrived in my room. I opened the wooden box with the same ravenous expectations as a child on Christmas morning, and then I froze up.

The sword was a thin, rapier-type sword, and even its tip was roundish, meaning it wasn't very good for stabbing. That was fine; it was how I'd ordered it. But the problem was that the design of the blade and hilt were, well, very fancy. It was like one of the legendary swords I'd seen heroes use in anime.

Deodora had probably assumed I wanted to put this Legendary Eternal Sword (Fancy Edition) up on a plaque on my room's wall, so she'd decorated it to look as legendary as possible.

"How am I supposed to go to class with this cringey sword?!" I shouted at no one in particular, my voice echoing through my room.

The academy allows students to pick between bringing personal weapons and borrowing training swords, but if I bring a sword that looks so fancy and gaudy, it'll look like I'm trying to show off how wealthy I am. People will make fun of me...

Ugh... Everyone's going to stare at me for different reasons now... Oooh, why does it have to be like this?!

I rolled over my body, agonizing over my fate like a prisoner on death row, just as Tutte walked into my room to inform me it was time to depart for the academy.

11. Huh? A Tournament?

"Why won't the world treat me well for once...?"

After school ended for the day, I went back to my room and fell headfirst into my bed. I buried my face into my pillow and grumbled to myself.

"Well, the sword didn't break. Isn't that a good thing?" Tutte said comfortingly, trying to bring up the one good thing that happened today.

“Well, yes, that was good... I held it as hard as I could and it didn’t even crack, and it absorbing my mana didn’t bother me. But still...”

I turned my head from the pillow and looked at my sword, which was resting on the desk. I’d had the bright idea to make a belt and a scabbard that allowed me to comfortably carry it. However, the fact it was completely white, from the blade to the hilt, had made it stand out—plus, I’d had a feeling that people realizing it was made of ivory ore might be trouble later down the line—so I’d asked House Regalia’s personal painter to paint the sword with a coating that wouldn’t come off easily, which was another bright idea if you ask me. To make sure the painter didn’t get too creative with it, I’d even set a short time limit of three days for him to do it. I’d thought it was the perfect plan.

Well, I’d *thought* it was the perfect plan...but I didn’t account for the painter’s artistic spirit to get inspired by the sword’s design, making him pull three all-nighters to work on it!

The sword I was looking at looked so perfectly normal you probably wouldn’t suspect it was made of ivory ore. And that was the issue.

Because the original design is so legendary-looking...the fact it’s painted over so perfectly makes it look like a complete replica *of a legendary weapon! And I can’t ask the painter to redo the sword when he looked so proud of himself handing it over to me! Aaaah!*

The way people reacted when I brought the sword to the academy today was so embarrassing. Everyone had been trying not to laugh out of consideration for me, but they didn’t manage to hide it. Worst of all was Sacher, who was my training partner that day. When he looked at it, he shouted, “What’s with this fancy sword? What, are you a hero now? Did you pull this sacred sword out of a rock or something? How old are you?!”

And then he laughed.

And then I performed a thrusting attack that blew him into a wall.

It didn’t really help brighten my mood any, though, so I sentenced him to the silent treatment, after which he apologized, and I forgave him.

Incidentally, I figured our classmates might think less of Sacher after seeing

someone they thought was one of the strongest kids in the class get blown back by me. But instead, they praised him for having the courage to say what they all thought and gallantly not resist when I lashed out at him angrily.

Not that I minded how the class viewed him, but I figured I should point it out.

“Oh, rumors fizzle out soon enough...” Tutte said consolingly. “People will get bored of pointing it out, and then they’ll treat you normally. You just need to endure until then, Lady Mary.” She pumped her fists encouragingly in an attempt to cheer me up. I sat up and decided to change my attitude.

“You’re right! Thanks, Tutte. I’ll try!” I drew my Legendary Sword (Cringe Edition) from its scabbard, holding it up.

“That’s the spirit—pffft!” Tutte tried to say agreeably, but she couldn’t help herself and burst out laughing.

“Heeeey! What was that?! You traitoooooor!”

I chased Tutte around the room, swinging my dull Legendary Sword (Cringe) here and there.

And so, a few months passed, during which I had to put up with my embarrassing sword...

“Huh? What did you say?” I asked.

“I-I’m sorry! Forgive me! I, um, I just said it’s almost time for the exams...” Safina replied, whimpering.

“Ah, I’m not mad at you or anything, so don’t cry... I mean, what did you say after that?”

“Hm? Huh... I said that they’ll be holding a combat tournament during the exam, and we have to compete, and I don’t want to.”

“Yes, that!”

“Eeeek! I’m sorry, forgive meee!”

It happened one afternoon, while we were chatting during a study session in the lounge. My rigorous questioning almost reduced Safina to tears.

“We have to compete?” I grumbled.

“It’s the fastest way to compare how capable all the students who joined the class this year are! Ooh, I’m pumped!” Sacher explained, more excitedly than usual.

Ugh, you barbarian...

“Plus, it’ll be a tournament, so whoever wins is going to be crowned this year’s top-achiever! Isn’t it exciting?” The suffocating boy drew in on me, to which I shooed him away with a gesture of my hand and forced him back into his seat.

Top-achiever, huh... As the daughter of House Regalia, I would like to claim that honor. But, hmm... Standing out would be no good... Maybe I’ll win once and then intentionally lose. The more I compete, the more people might start noticing something strange.

Over the last few months, I’ve gotten a good grasp on everyone’s practical skills, but... Even with all that in mind, if I go all out, Sacher’s about the only one who would walk away from a fight with me unhurt. Safina can probably dodge me too, so she’d be fine if we fought, but if I end up hitting her, she could be seriously hurt.

“How are they going to decide the brackets for the tournament?” I asked.

“Miss Iks said it’ll be done by luck of the draw so it’s fair,” Safina said.

Good... If there was any more noble favoritism involved, I could end up being set unfairly, and that would be bad.

“Luck of the draw, huh...?” Sacher mused. “Man, I hope I only run into you during the finals, Lady Mary. It’ll be a good chance to settle our score, right?!”

“Oh, stop... You’re making it sound like we’re rivals... Keep your rivalries to other boys, if you’d be so kind.”

I curtly shooed Sacher away again with a fed-up expression. As I did, I noticed Safina hanging her head with a grave face.

“What’s wrong, Safina? Something on your mind?” I asked, patting her small head gently.

“Lady Mary, um... I-It’s nothing...” She looked like she wanted to say

something, but she swallowed the words and giggled adorably instead.

“But...” I muttered, unconvinced.

“Ah, it’s almost time for practical training. Let’s go to the training grounds,” Safina urged us to go to martial arts training.

Safina never did like practical training, so I got the feeling she only said it to get away from me. That made me all the more curious. But with the timing to ask having slipped away from me, I couldn’t pursue the matter any longer, and I decided to make for the training grounds.

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The training grounds were a spacious area outside the school building. Unlike the arena, there were no spectator seats, and it was an open space without any walls or a ceiling. It kind of reminded me of a school’s sports grounds from my past life.

As always, we were to find training partners from the people present and start training voluntarily. The instructors went around looking over our training, giving us advice if they noticed something was wrong or otherwise when the students asked the teachers.

I was in the middle of training with Safina. I chose her because she was the best in our class at avoiding hits. I wanted to swing my sword without having to fear hitting anyone, so I asked her for help. This allowed me to try all sorts of techniques I saw in manga and anime. I actually pulled off a few techniques, much to my delight.

“All right, maybe I should come up with a finisher move or something for the upcoming tournament,” I whispered casually.

“A finisher?!” Safina fidgeted like she was moments from running away.

“Calm down, Safina! Remember what I always tell you, you’ve got amazing reflexes,” Sacher, who was watching us, told her. “It’s just Lady Mary. You can dodge her attacks no problem. Have faith in yourself!”

What do you mean, it’s “just” me? Maybe I should blow him into a wall again...but that’ll make people get impressed with me, so I won’t.

I sighed, drew my Legendary Sword (Cringe) and held it up.

“Pfft!” Sacher snickered. “Your sword is so fancy-looking, I can’t help but laugh.”

I glanced at him from the corner of my eyes, a vein twitching angrily in my temple.

“You are hereby sentenced to the silent treatment,” I whispered resentfully, to which he immediately clammed up.

I then recalled something and changed the way I gripped my sword. I raised the sword with just my right hand, drawing my right leg back with my eyes fixed on my opponent. I tilted my body sideways, crouched a little, and centered the sword inside a V shape made by my left hand’s thumb and index finger.

If I recall, I read a manga about a certain Bakumatsu-period patriot who had a thrust with this stance.

My fencing techniques consisted mostly of thrusts. One reason for this was that my sword was a rapier, but also, thrusting allowed me to restrain my strength more than swinging it around would.

“This is cool!” I exclaimed. “This stance is really cool. Heh heh heh, with this finisher move, I’ll be able to win in the tournament! ♪”

“Win...the tournament...”

I was so satisfied with how I looked, I’d failed to notice that my words had seemed to shake Safina. I pushed forward, performing the attack, only realizing that she was frozen in place and unresponsive when I was halfway through my thrust.

“Safina!” I called out.

My shout seemed to make her snap out of her unresponsive state. She moved to dodge my thrust, but it was too late: as she averted her body, she failed to evade...and my thrust landed a clean hit on her left shoulder.

12. I Got Carried Away

I couldn't quite process what happened immediately afterward. I froze up, stunned, as the teachers pushed past me and hurried over to Safina, who lay still and unstirring on the ground.

Aaah... I...I got carried away... Whenever I hit Sacher, he always gets up a few seconds later, so I thought that's what would always happen... But no, this is real.

I shivered, my field of vision blurry. As they carried Safina away, I saw her left arm tilted in an unnatural direction—a sight that shook me to the core.

I...I just hurt someone... No... I almost killed her.

The reality of what had just happened made the memory of how I swung my sword jokingly just a few minutes earlier feel all the more terrifying. I couldn't stand on my feet; my knees were trembling. I couldn't breathe properly. I was so out of it, I didn't realize I was starting to completely panic and hyperventilate in shock.

"What's wrong, Lady Mary?! Get a hold of yourself!" Sacher called out, noticing the state I was in.

"Sa...cher..." I croaked out, still gasping. "I... Safina, I..."

"Calm down. They can heal injuries like that in the infirmary no problem! See, the teachers are taking her there now. Let's follow them!"

He took my hand, pulling me along to the infirmary. At that moment, feeling another person's touch helped calm me down a little. And so, I desperately held onto his hand, clenching it hard without even realizing. I might have even been gripping it too hard, but Sacher either didn't notice or didn't mind as he pulled me along.

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After arriving at the infirmary, we waited outside the room for ten or so minutes. Magiluka and the prince also hurried over, apparently having heard that something had happened. The moment I laid eyes on Magiluka, all my pent up emotions overflowed, and I clung to her, sobbing.

"Magiluka... I...I hurt Safina..."

“Calm yourself, Lady Mary.” Magiluka wrapped her arms around me and patted my head soothingly. “From what I’ve heard, Safina is fine. The healing magic professor can heal injuries of that degree with ease.” Magiluka’s words helped calm me down a great deal.

Just then, the door to the infirmary opened, and a teacher dressed in a robe stepped out from inside. “Hmm? My, Your Highness, what a pleasant surprise,” the teacher said, surprised to see Reifus.

“No need for greetings. How is she?” Reifus said, urging him to explain.

“Oh, yes, she recovered just fine. No lasting consequences either. But the mental shock of what happened was quite serious, and it left her very exhausted. She’ll need to rest for the time being.”

“May we see her?” the prince asked.

“Yes, go ahead.”

I watched Reifus’s exchange with the teacher, which was followed by the prince motioning for us to enter the room. I timidly let Magiluka lead me into the infirmary. It was larger than I’d expected, with many beds each separated a good distance from each other. Spotting a familiar girl with fluffy chestnut hair lying on one of them, I hurried over to her at once.

“Safina!” I called out.

“Mm... Ah, Lady Mary?” Her eyes opened upon hearing my voice, and her jade eyes fixed on me.

“Safina, I’m so sorry, I...erm, I...”

I felt as guilty as I was relieved, and my eyes welled up with tears again. I felt frustrated at only being able to apologize, and when I tried to explain myself anyway, Safina sat up in her bed.

“N-No, don’t apologize, Lady Mary. It’s my fault for not paying attention and daydreaming...”

While I was on the verge of tears, Safina was in much the same state. In fact, she was already starting to sob. I heard our three friends sigh in relief behind us and approach us.

“I’m glad you’re unharmed, Miss Safina,” Reifus said.

“That’s... Y-Your Highness...” Safina noticed the prince’s presence and scrambled to get out of bed and greet him.

“Oh, no, stay as you are. Don’t force yourself. The professor said you’re to remain rested.”

“Ah, yes... I’m sorry,” Safina said apologetically, remaining seated on the bed.

“Hey, so now that we know Safina’s fine, can I get looked at too?” Sacher said, after remaining silent the whole time. He showed his right hand, revealing that his fingers were discolored into a terrible shade of purple.

“Wh-What happened to your hand, Sacher?!” I asked, unaware that I was the one who did this to him.

“I dunno, my hand was just like this before I knew it... I’ll have the professor take a look at it.”

Sacher went to the professor alone, seemingly ignorant of our concerns. I was still stunned by what had happened to him, but once the situation settled down somewhat, I felt myself mostly regaining my composure.

“I’m really sorry, Safina. Is your arm okay?” I looked at her, concerned.

“Yes... All better.” Safina rotated her left arm, demonstrating that it was fine.

Healing magic really is incredible... Modern medicine pales in comparison.

“But really, what happened to you, Safina?” Sacher returned, waving his newly healed hand. “I’ve never seen you zone out like that in the middle of training.”

“Hm... Ah... Well... I-I’m sorry, I...I just had something on my mind...” Safina said gloomily, looking like she might cry again.

I threw a scolding look at Sacher for asking that question.

“Something on your mind?” Magiluka asked her, following up on Sacher’s question. “Is something bothering you?”

“Well, um...” Safina looked flustered.

“Oh, I know! The tournament!” I said, trying to help her. “It made you worry,

didn’t it? So, um, how about you just don’t participate?”

“No, that’s no good!” Safina shouted in denial in an uncharacteristically loud voice.

The whole room froze up for a second. This wasn’t like her. Safina herself didn’t seem to notice she’d shouted until after a few seconds of silence, after which her face went very red.

“I-I’m sorry...” Safina picked up the blanket and pulled it up to her face while hanging her head.

“Uh... Well, I guess we all have our problems. Pardon us for prying.” Magiluka came to a realization and apologized.

“Aaah, well, it’s good to see she’s fine. Well, we have classes after this, and Miss Safina needs to rest, so let’s leave, shall we?” the prince said, wrapping the matter up and prompting us to leave.

And so, I joined the others and reluctantly left Safina behind at the infirmary.

13. That Cretin Deserves This Much

One afternoon, I was waiting in the lounge for Safina after class. We didn’t share every single class, with her taking some subjects I didn’t, so I had the free time to wait for her every now and then.

“Everyone’s really excited for the combat tournament,” Sacher said, looking around enthusiastically.

“Yes, they are...” I replied vaguely.

Honestly, I didn’t care much about that, at least not compared to how worried I was about the occasional concerned expressions Safina would make.

She pretty much made it clear she wants me to mind my own business. But I’m worried... I’m so curious about it!

Even though I’d been waiting for her, resolved to try to get her to share her concerns, she didn’t show up in the lounge at all.

That’s strange. Normally she’d come see us as soon as she was done with

class...

Concerned, I decided to leave the lounge. Sacher told me I was worrying too much, but he followed me just the same. We stepped out into the corridor leading to the lounge, and I ended up spotting her on the other end of it.

I guess I really was worrying too much...? In my relief, I realized I might have been being a bit too overprotective. I started walking toward her, trying my best to force a smile while kicking myself inside for being such a worrywart, but then I stopped in my tracks—I noticed a boy was pressing her against a wall and telling her something.

“What’s going on?” I whispered in a terribly displeased voice.

“He’s saying something,” Sacher said, standing next to me with narrowed eyes and a very serious expression. “I can’t tell what it is, but she looks scared.”

Safina tried to run from the boy, but he grabbed her arm to stop her from leaving. When I saw this, my anger soared past its boiling point.

“Sir Sacher,” I said flatly.

“Yeah.” Sacher picked up on what I was asking without any further explanation, approached the two of them, and, without another word, grabbed the arm the boy was holding Safina with and twisted it around his back.

“Ow, ow, ow!” the boy yelped as Sacher forcibly twisted his arm. I approached him with cold eyes. “Wh-What’s the big idea?! Ah, wait, you’re Elexiel!”

“That’s what I should be asking,” I said with a chilly voice. “What are you doing to my friend?”

“Tch... Regalia too?” He clicked his tongue, struggling to escape Sacher’s grasp.

Sacher, however, was seriously annoyed and didn’t let him go.

“Stop that! Let me go!” the boy protested, forcibly pulling himself away and elbowing Sacher in the stomach.

This made Sacher let go of him, and the boy stumbled a few steps back.

Hm? Wait, that stance...

The boy adopted a martial arts stance as I watched him. I could tell he was a Solos student based on the badge he was wearing, but the stance he was taking was very similar to one I was quite familiar with.

It's just like Safina's stance...

"Hah! See, Elexiel?! When I go all out, I can break free from your weak elbow lock no problem!" The boy smiled victoriously.

"You know him?" I asked Sacher, my eyes still fixed on the boy in a cold glare.

"Not really?" Sacher said, disinterested.

Hearing our exchange, the boy looked at us angrily, his face going red. "I-I'm —"

"Safina, are you okay? You're not hurt, are you?" I asked, ignoring the angry boy. I pulled her into an embrace and inspected the arm the boy had grabbed.

"Ah, yes... I'm, um... I'm fine..." Safina replied, her eyes flitting between me and the guy.

I could tell from how frightened she was that this guy had probably said all sorts of things to her before we'd showed up.

"That's good then. Now, we have classes coming up, so let's go." I smiled like nothing had happened, took her hand, and turned around to leave.

"Wait! I still have things to say to that woman!"

He reached for us—or rather, for my shoulder as I tried to take Safina away, but Sacher caught his hand. I cast a sidelong glance at them; this time, Sacher seemed to be twisting the boy's arm from behind, preventing him from raising it and locking them both in this posture. Meanwhile, I could feel my anger build from hearing him call Safina "this woman."

What do I do with him? Do I slap him for real*?* I let go of Safina's hand, turned to face the boy, and took a step forward. Safina, however, clung to me, trying to get me to stop. I looked at her in surprise, but she looked up at me with teary eyes, shaking her head like she was begging me not to do anything.

Right as our situation was on the verge of exploding, a relaxed voice diffused the tense air around us. “What are you doing there? No fighting, please.”

“Instructor Karis!” Safina, who clung to me, called out to our class master and dispelled my anger at once.

The boy clicked his tongue, having realized the situation wasn’t in his favor, and waved his grabbed arm. Seeing Instructor Karis come in, Sacher let go of him, as he had no intention of fighting any longer. Now freed, the boy shot one last glance at Safina and walked away.

“What’s with him? Who is he, anyway?” I asked, watching him leave with narrowed eyes.

“I dunno,” Sacher shrugged.

“What, you really don’t know?” Instructor Karis looked at us, surprised. “Sacher, he’s a strong contender to be your rival in the upcoming tournament.”

“Huh? Mine?” Sacher looked confused. I sighed in displeasure.

“I mean, he’s a practitioner of Lady Safina’s...I mean, House Karshana’s martial style,” Instructor Karis replied.

“Huh?!” We both turned around to look at Safina, who was hanging her head wordlessly.

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After all that commotion outside the lounge, we wanted to avoid the curious stares of our classmates, so we moved to the open café outside the school building. I was seated at a table with Sacher and Safina.

“So, who was that nasty guy?” I asked, my voice turning a bit harder at the end of my sentence. Just thinking about him made me angry, and Safina twitched fearfully at my visible disgruntlement.

“I mean, if he’s supposed to be my rival, I’d think I’d have heard of him.” Sacher was also pressing her for an answer, unusually enough.

“Hmm, um... Er...” Safina fidgeted uncomfortably.

“Don’t act like it has nothing to do with us after what happened, Safina,” I

chided her softly. “Is that *cretin* why you’ve been looking so concerned?”

The thought of that guy tormenting my friend made me unable to ignore this. After glancing at us for a few seconds, Safina took a deep breath to calm herself and started talking.

“Umm, first, his name is—”

“We don’t care about his name!” I yelled, cutting her off. “I don’t want to hear it, let’s just call him ‘cretin,’ okay?” My opinion of the cretin was so low I wasn’t even interested in learning his name.

“So, tell us about the cretin? Is he related to you, Safina?” Sacher asked, apparently on board with my idea.

“No, he’s not...”

“But he used the same stance as you,” I said. “And Instructor Karis said he learned the Karshana style of martial arts too.”

“The Karshana style isn’t reserved for just our family. We recruit others to study it so we may pass it down to other families.”

“Do you all have, like, a Karshana-style dojo going on?” I asked.

“‘Dough Joe’...? What?” Safina looked puzzled by my question.

“Uh, never mind... Go on.” I tried to shrug the matter off.

“So you’re saying the cretin studied under your family, and that’s how he got so strong?” Sacher asked, coming up with an explanation. “And now he’s letting it go to his head and messing with someone from the main family?”

That possibility made my anger boil up again. “Maybe I should have vented my anger out back there...”

If I’d seriously slapped the cretin, *I could have injured him hard enough that healing magic wouldn’t be able to help him. I’d have at least knocked him out.* What had happened with Safina had taught me how scary hurting people can really be, but I didn’t feel any qualms about doing it to him.

“You’re being so savage about this, Lady Mary... It’s scary...” Sacher said, drawing away from me.

“...Like Sir Sacher said, that boy looked down on my family,” Safina explained. “But it makes sense he would... He really is that capable, and he’s stronger than both me and my father...”

As I watched Safina force a smile in spite of all the blame she was placing on herself, I gulped down the tea I ordered in an attempt to quell my anger.

“But the cretin hasn’t been around you until now,” Sacher pointed out. “What made him decide to start worming his way into your life all of a sudden?”

I nodded in agreement. I was wondering about the same thing.

“Hmm... It’s because recently, the, umm... Someone brought up the topic of...” Safina trailed off evasively.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, finally calming down enough to peacefully sip on my tea again.

“The topic of him, uh...being my prospective...fiancé...”

“What?! Ack!” I gulped down my tea at once in surprise and started choking on it.

I’ve heard noble ladies have their marriages arranged at a young age, but I didn’t think it would happen to someone this close to me!

“I see... So the cretin let that go to his head and decided you belong to him, and that’s why he’s started messing with you.” Sacher nodded in realization.

I felt something snap in my mind, and the teacup I was holding shattered noisily in my grasp, like it was a standin for my patience. I hurriedly let go of it, pretending I’d dropped the cup to the floor in shock.

“S-Sorry... I was so shocked I dropped my cup...” I muttered.

One of the café’s workers hurried over to clean up the mess. They left a couple of minutes later, during which I cooled down and regained my composure.

“Still, this is a matter between their families,” Sacher said, bringing the conversation back on track. “We don’t really have a say in this.”

“Huh? What are you saying, Sir Sacher?” I immediately objected. “The matter

just came up. It hasn't been formally decided yet. Right, Safina?"

"Y-Yes, but...I-I'm not really concerned with who's going to be my fiancé... I've been prepared for this since I was little..."

I feel bad glimpsing the darkness of noble society, but this isn't something I can do anything about. After all, I could end up in much the same boat...

"So what's troubling you, then?" I asked.

"...He didn't like being just a prospective fiancé and brought up a condition. He demanded that if he ends up taking first place in the upcoming tournament, he'll be officially recognized as my fiancé, and the following year, I'll have to quit the academy and take on bridal training instead."

"What the hey?!" I got to my feet, my voice loud and my language filter fully disengaged.

Everyone stared at me in surprise, and the café's employees looked clearly uncomfortable as they began to approach, so I immediately settled into my chair.

"Don't tell me you agreed to his condition?!" I asked her with a bloodcurdling sneer, to which Safina cracked a bothered smile.

"The plan was that I'll spend a year at the academy, so as far as my father is concerned, his condition isn't all that strange," she said.

"What do you mean?" I demanded angrily.

"Hmm... Well, this is kind of a digression, but for generations, House Karshana has produced people skilled in the martial arts. That's not limited to boys or girls, of course. And I've been studying the basics of martial arts since I was little too."

Safina began telling us of her upbringing, so for the time being, I suppressed my emotions and listened.

"But, you know me... I'm a clumsy scaredy-cat, I keep fleeing... Whenever I use swords, I always start running when I'm on the back foot. So my father gave up on me and focused on training people outside the family..."

"People like the cretin," Sacher said, to which Safina nodded with a strained

smile.

“Father had his eyes on him, and he even paid for his tuition in the academy with me. But father doesn’t have the money to pay for both of our tuitions, so he decided we’d both attend for a year, and whoever gets the lowest grades will have to give up on attending the following year.”

We stared at her in silence, surprised.

“And I...I thought that was for the best... I mean, I figured enduring a year in this scary place would be good enough...”

“N-No...Safina...” I said, deflated in shock by Safina’s words.

“But... That’s just how I felt before attending. When I came here...I met you, Lady Mary, and I studied with everyone... And it was scary sometimes. There were times I wanted to cry... But now, I want to be with everyone next year too... Maybe me feeling this way might trouble you, but...I really feel this way.”

“Safina...you’re not troubling us at all.” Her confession blew all my shock away, and I gripped her hands over the table.

“So the problem is the cretin...” Sacher said, to which Safina’s resolute expression clouded over.

Right...if she wants to attend the academy next year, she’ll have to do something about him.

“Is he really that strong?” I asked.

“I dunno, but if Lord Karshana and Instructor Karis acknowledge him that much, I guess he is?” Sacher answered my question with a question.

“Nnng! Aghh! Drat! We can’t just sit here and twiddle our thumbs,” I said, clenching my fists as I got up. “Let’s go about this the old-fashioned way, then!”

“The old-fashioned way...?” Safina asked me timidly.

“Special training!” I exclaimed.

My voice earned us stares from the rest of the patrons, and someone who looked like the café’s owner walked over and kicked us out—that is, they asked us to leave.

14. This Is ___ Jutsu!!!

A few days later, when classes ended, we didn't go home as we usually did. Instead, we made our way to a private training ground the prince had reserved for us.

I have to hand it to Reifus... All he did was ask the teachers for somewhere he can train privately, and they reserved the whole place for him.

The facility was built a short distance from the school building, and it was about as large as a dojo. Its floor and walls were made of stone, and it had a firm roof that gave the place a very sturdy appearance.

"All right, Safina..." I told her. "We'll be training you thoroughly here until the tournament starts!"

"Y-Yes! Thank you!" She bowed politely.

"So?" Reifus, who'd graciously reserved the place for us, asked out of interest. "What kind of special training will you have her do?" The prince had already heard of Safina's predicament from us. "After all, she's already mastered the Karshana style, so what exactly is she going to improve on? And besides, that boy—"

"No, no, Sir Reifus," I corrected him. "The cretin is no boy. He's a creature."

"Hm, I see... 'The cretin,' you say..." the prince stammered, taken aback.

"Anyway, I think Safina doesn't need to work on her swordsmanship, but on something much more basic," Sacher said pensively.

"You're right," Magiluka said. "The Karshana style of swordsmanship isn't centered on brute force, but on using a combination of varied techniques and speed to maintain a ceaseless offensive... While Safina has superior speed, she's terrible at maintaining an offensive."

"I'm sorry..." Safina was rendered despondent by Magiluka's ruthless analysis.

"So that's why I'll be teaching Safina how to fight with a sword!" I said

proudly, trying to encourage her.

“Huh? You, teach her fencing?” Sacher asked incredulously. “Are you joking, Lady Mary?”

“Hmm? Are you sure? You’re not pushing yourself too hard for her, are you?” Magiluka said suspiciously.

“I think I need to take some time and ask you just what kind of impression you have of me,” I said dryly.

“Hmm... I guess, whenever I train with you, you do seem to be able to come up with these weird...” Sacher paused halfway through his rude comment and corrected himself. “I mean, *original* movements and techniques I’ve never seen before.”

They’re not exactly original. I’m basing them off of things I’ve seen in anime and manga in my past life.

I turned to look at Safina, who was staring at us blankly, unable to keep up with our conversation.

“Anyway, when I say I’ll teach you, I just mean on theory. Whether you can learn by watching and implement it yourself is up to you, Safina!”

“Y-Yes!” Safina replied, flustered.

“So, what fencing style will you teach her?” Reifus asked.

“Heh heh heh! It’s a little something I like to call...iai juju!” *Uh, I stumbled on the last word...*

“Ah, she stuttered...” Sacher commented.

“She did stutter, didn’t she...?” Magiluka said with a sarcastic smile.

“Aha ha... Come now, that’s adorable,” Reifus laughed.

“Ahem...” I cleared my throat and tried again. “It’s a little something I like to call iai jutsu, the art of the drawn blade!”

“Wow, she just acted like nothing happened,” Sacher said.

“Good on her, though, she actually said it properly this time.” Magiluka clapped.

“Would you stop teasing me already, you twoooo!” I drew my Legendary Sword (Cringe) and chased the two of them around for a minute.

“Aha ha...” The prince watched us, amused. “So, what is this iai jutsu thing? I’ve never heard of it.”

I lowered my blade and stopped chasing them.

“Allow me to demonstrate, Sir Reifus. Sir Sacher, if you would be so kind as to be my partner for this demonstration!”

“Huuuh?!” Sacher exclaimed. He was reluctant, but he still backed away and faced me.

“Try to keep my form firmly in mind and memorize it, Safina,” I said.

“Yes, Lady Mary,” she nodded, moving behind me and watching from a distance away as I faced Sacher.

“Heh heh heh! You’ll pay for humiliating me in front of everyone else. Brace yourself!”

“Ah, I knew it. You’re venting on me,” he grumbled.

“Now, come on, Sir Sacher. Try to cut me!”

I bent my body forward, pitching my right shoulder forward. I gripped my sword’s scabbard with my left hand and held the grip of my Legendary Sword (Cringe) with my right.

A moment of silence lingered, and then...

“All right, here I come!” Sacher held his training sword in an overhead grip and charged at me.

What followed was that Sacher was blown into the adjacent wall, and I remained standing there, my blade drawn.

“*This* is what iai juju means!” I declared.

The other three all stared at me in speechless silence. And needless to say, once I realized the strange atmosphere, I felt my face go very red.

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The following day, after classes ended, Safina and I went to Deodora's workshop. If I was going to have her practice iai, I'd need her to have the right weapon for it too.

"Hiya, girls. Not often I see just the two of you," Deodora greeted us in the workshop, surprised to see me and Safina wearing matching uniforms.



The world of fashion among the nobility stressed individuality, so seeing two of us wearing the same clothes struck her as surprising. I only realized this issue later, at which point I told Safina she didn't have to go to the trouble of matching outfits with me, but she was apparently satisfied with doing so.

"So, what can I do for you today?"

"Miss Deodora, are you familiar with what a 'katana' is?" I went straight to the point, deciding there was no point beating around the bush.

Deodora hummed pensively.

I guess katanas don't exist in this world?

"Can't say the name really rings any bells. Can you describe it for me?" she asked.

I took a pen and paper from her and began sketching a drawing of a Japanese katana I once copied from a manga, making sure to omit any little, unimportant details.

"Hmm, you call this a katana?" Deodora checked my drawing. "It's got a different shape from most swords, but this does remind me of something... Some traveling dwarves told me about these weapons they use in the eastern continent. They said these were weapons that stress sharpness and technique over destructive force."

There it is! There's always an eastern, Japan-like country in fantasy worlds.

"Could you make one for us?" I asked. "I want her to try holding one."

"P-Please..." Safina hurried over and bowed her head adorably to Deodora.

She's pretty nervous... It's a good thing I didn't have her come buy things here on her own.

"Hmm... I could try, but...I don't really know much about these katanas. I don't know if I can meet your expectations," Deodora said.

"That's fine," I replied. "Try to make it anyway. Please! Make it a special order weapon, just for her. And money isn't an issue!"

"L-Lady Mary!" Safina looked at me, mortified.

“Ha ha ha! As daring as ever,” Deodora cackled jovially. “You got it! I’ll make it for you!”

“B-But I don’t have that kind of money...” Safina waved her hands in a panic.

I cupped her hands in mine and held them over her chest. She relaxed, bit by bit.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be a present from me,” I explained. “In exchange, you need to beat the cretin black and blue for me!” I said with an impish wink.

“I-I will!” Safina beamed at me.

Good, so we have her weapon. All that’s left is for her to practice until she masters it!

I was up and ready to get her special training going. But there was only one snag in my whole plan, something I didn’t quite realize...

There were only three weeks left until the tournament.

15. Special Training Time

As the tournament loomed closer, Safina’s training continued nonstop, both in between classes and on our days off. This was all thanks to the private training ground, which was reserved for our use at all times.

“The katana is still experimental, but it’s the right shape, and her iai form is improving,” I said, nodding in satisfaction as I watched Safina repeatedly draw her sword against Sacher.

“Deodora said the length of the blade, the weight, the shape of the grip...everything was made to suit Safina’s physique.” Magiluka, who was seated next to me, watched Safina before turning to me in exasperation. “Just how much did it cost, Lady Mary?”

“Hmm?” I asked, an evil smile playing over my lips. “Oh, you really want to know? Do you really want to know how much it cost?”

“No... On second thought, I’d rather not know.” Magiluka withdrew at once.

“Owie!”

While we were fooling around, I heard a dull thud sound, and then Safina raised her voice in an adorable yelp. I turned to look at her, seeing that before Safina could finish drawing her sword, Sacher’s training sword had bonked her on the head.

“No good...” Magiluka sighed. “I thought iai would be perfect for Safina, since it’s a defensive technique and she has quick reflexes. But she’s so indecisive, she keeps hesitating when it’s time to draw her sword, and it makes the speed of her draw plummet...”

“Yeah, but still... If she had that kind of courage and decisiveness, we wouldn’t need to resort to this...” I muttered.

“True...”

This time, we both sighed.

Still, this doesn’t mean we can give up. The tournament’s right around the corner...and we need to do something.

“Hmm... This is just a thought, but isn’t Lady Safina taking this a bit too lightly?” the prince said severely, looking on from behind us. “She’s up against Sacher, so she probably unconsciously believes that even if she fails, he’ll go easy on her... After all, when she does fail, all he does is whack her gently on the head.”

“Lightly...?” Magiluka lingered on that word. “Are you saying that Miss Safina needs to feel like she’s more in danger?”

“Huh? What?” I immediately objected. “Are you saying Sir Sacher needs to actually hit her hard? The tournament’s coming up soon. If she gets injured, won’t it be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater?”

“Heh heh! Not to worry, I have an idea,” Magiluka said triumphantly. “I’ll head back to the school building to get ready... I’ll see you soon, then.”

Magiluka left the training ground, and I had Safina take a break. After that, we finished our classes for the day and returned to the training ground, where Magiluka greeted us.

“Thank you for waiting, everyone. This is my secret weapon!”

She spun in place and held up a bottle. Safina and I stared at the bottle, our jaws hanging open.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Like I said, it’s my secret weapon,” Magiluka said, pulling the bottle’s cork with all her might.

We approached and looked at it curiously, but...

“It stinks! What’s this smell?!” I exclaimed.

“Aaaah!” Safina pinched her nose.

...the stench rising from the bottle made us both back away quickly.

“Hee hee hee...” Magiluka giggled, puffing up her chest in self-satisfaction. “This is an undiluted solution I use to make a scent bag, which I developed for eliminating monsters that are sensitive to smells. Well, the odor is so intense it affects the people using it too, so I had to shelve it for the time being.”

Magiluka stuffed the cork into the bottle again, cutting off the stench. We kept our distance, though, since the scent was just that terrible.

“What did you bring that nasty, dangerous thing here for?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?! I brought it so Miss Safina could use it for training!” Magiluka replied.

“I beg your pardon, but I don’t quite understand what you’re getting at... Would you be so kind as to explain?” I said tiredly.

I got the feeling she’d just decided she’d found a use for this shelved masterpiece of hers and let the excitement go to her head. It made me feel pretty bad for her, because neither me nor Safina, who was hiding behind my back, understood what she was getting at.

“It’s simple. We’ll take a cloth, dip it in this solution, then wrap it around the other person’s sword. Then we’ll have Miss Safina slash it away. If she fails, the solution will splash over her head, and that intense smell will cling to her body...”

“Eeeek!” Safina screeched, mortified at that prospect.

“Th-That’s terrible... How do you come up with these horrible ideas?” I asked, taken aback by how evil the idea was.

“No girl would want to smell this bad, would she?” Magiluka dangled the bottle in our direction with a mean smile as she detailed her evil plot. “Ah, I should note the scent will linger for as long as you don’t wash it off, so do be on guard. Now, we’re short on time, so let’s get started! Lady Mary, dip a cloth in this solution and wrap it around the sword.”

“Huuuh?! Why do I have to do it?!” I objected right away as Magiluka jumped into the preparations. “Have Sir Sacher handle this dirty work!”

“But he still has classes, so he won’t be here for this.”

Without Sacher to do the heavy lifting, I didn’t have much of a choice.

Ugh, cheese and crackers... Why is it he’s always here when I don’t call for him, but never around when I need him?!

Trembling with anger with nowhere to vent it out, I began the preparations at Magiluka’s urging. A few minutes later, I stood opposite Safina. I had an utterly grossed-out expression, and she was half in tears. The cloth was tied around the middle of my blade, and it gave off a terrible stench.

“Ugh, it smells!” I complained. “This isn’t going to stick to my sword, is it?!”

“Who knows?” Magiluka shrugged vaguely.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?! Then who does?!” I looked at her nervously.

“Hey, don’t swing the sword around like that, the juices might splash on me.” Magiluka backed away, her eyes eyeing my sword like it was filth.

You little... I oughta whack you with it once we’re finished here...

Putting my revenge plot on the back burner for now, I faced Safina again.

“All right, Safina, I don’t really know how we got here, but you have to get yourself out of this mess before I attack you. If not, your life as a lady will be over.”

“Th-That’s absurd!” She cowered from my threat.

Should we really be doing this to her? I mean, I guess it won’t hurt her, and it feels like she absolutely can’t fail this. It could make Safina cast her doubts away and draw her sword, but...

I hardened my heart and held up my blade. Safina also seemed to steel herself, because she flusteredly kneeled and assumed an iai stance. And after a momentary silence...

“Brace yourself!” I charged toward Safina.

After that, we ended up in the academy’s bathing hall—in other words, in the showers. The reason for that was quite predictable—we wanted to wash off the stench clinging to us. Since the Solos class was focused on martial arts and weapons, we’d often become quite sweaty, so we had such facilities to refresh ourselves.

An hour had passed since we’d entered our training session with our maidenly dignity on the line. Safina had been truly desperate, more than I’d ever seen her before. She hadn’t taken her training lightly in the slightest; she truly, unflinchingly drew her sword as fast as she could. By the end of it she’d been hysterical, actually...

But she’d ended up missing a lot of swings, which naturally meant she’d gotten hit a lot of times.

At first, she’d panicked a lot and drew her sword before I got to her... There wasn’t much I could have done about that. It felt like executing a princess that’d been sentenced to death. But if I’d pitied her there, the training wouldn’t have meant anything, so I’d had to do it.

After the first time, I stopped hesitating... It’s scary how you can get used to anything... I shuddered thinking back on that nightmarish training session. And so, I was occupied with scrubbing my body clean.

“Heh heh heh... I didn’t expect this to happen,” I said in the aftermath. “But don’t worry! I prepared spare clothes for us, so once you’re all washed up, we’ll resume the training! Heh heh, aha ha ha!”

What happened later was like this. At some point, Safina's target shifted from me to my sword. I didn't expect her to draw her sword in an attempt to flick mine away. So, my sword—or rather, the stinky cloth wrapped around it, went flying and unfortunately hit Magiluka right in the face as she tried to get out of the way.

To make things worse, Magiluka had thrown the bottle with the stinky solution on us in some fit of joking anger. Needless to say, the outcome had been quite hellish. One thing had led to another, and Magiluka's sanity temporarily snapped, and I could only laugh dryly.

"It's pointless..." Safina said as she dragged her legs out of the bathroom, her eyes soulless and her expression washed over with despair.

"S-Safina?" I didn't want to let what she'd said go.

"It's hopeless... I don't want to anymore... None of this makes sense. Why does special training have to be this stinky...? What is this...? Who came up with this stupid idea...? I can't take it anymore... I can't... It's hopeless... I just can't..." Safina stared into space with blank eyes, mumbling without any emotion to her voice.

Oh, dear! Safina's broken...

As I watched the other two stumble away, each acting weirdly in her own way, I could only laugh quietly. We all went on to hide that this strange training session of ours had ever happened from the boys.

Safina and Magiluka were both back to normal the next day, and Safina started drawing her blade without any hesitation, so I guessed the training worked... But when I tried to bring the training incident up, the two of them started acting strange again, so I elected to never touch on the matter ever again.

16. The Opponent

With three days remaining until the tournament, we were all engaged in independent training. Our group, the so-called Three Pranksters, wasn't

gathering as often.

Sacher and Safina are working hard, so I have to do my best too. Well, mostly for the written exams...

I planned to intentionally lose in the tournament, so as to not draw any attention to myself. But such a poor result would tarnish House Regalia's dignity, so I decided to take first place in the written exams.

I was confident I'd be able to do that, thanks to my knowledge from my past life. I'd asked Instructor Karis for the exam questions from last year, and I'd solved them with almost disappointing ease.

Let's see who's around, then...

Having not run into anyone in the lounge, I made my way to our private training ground. Peering inside, I ran into a very unusual pairing of people.

Is that...Sacher and Instructor Karis? That's strange, Sacher asking an upperclassman for help with training.

As I watched them from the entrance, Instructor Karis stopped training and glanced in my direction, at which point Sacher noticed my presence too.

"All right, let's leave it at that for today. Looks like your friend's here."

"Thank you, Instructor Karis."

The two of them caught their breaths and bowed to each other, and Instructor Karis approached me, wiping himself off with a towel.

"Good day, Instructor Karis," I greeted him with a ladylike curtsy and a smile. "It's not often I see you helping someone from our grade."

As our class master, Instructor Karis had to have high marks in both practical skills and written exams. Having a high-achiever like him help a lower grade student struck me as unusual.

"Well, you see...he's pretty strong. He gets better by the day, and at this point students his age are no match for him. Well, except for that boy you like to call a 'cretin'..." he appended with a wink.

"Hm... Is the cretin really that strong?" I asked.

“Oh, yes. I had them paired up for training once, mostly as a joke, but... Well, neither of them went all out, but the fight ended in a draw, with both of them walking away with light injuries...” He told the story nonchalantly, as if there wasn’t anything particularly strange about that.

“Don’t worry about it. It was mostly just scrapes...” Sacher noticed my outrage and stood up for Instructor Karis. “And seeing what he’s capable of before the tournament was useful, so I’m grateful to the instructor.”

“Hmm... Well, that’s fine, I guess... So, what’s your take on the cretin, Sir Sacher?” I asked.

“Well, like he said, the cretin is strong. He’s absolutely confident in his sword... Heh, he reminds me of the way I used to act before I met you, Lady Mary,” he appended with a wry smile.

“Sir Sacher...could you stop making it sound like I destroyed your confidence? I’m offended.”

“No, no, I mean, you really snapped it like a twig and broke it to little bits.”

“I did?” I cocked my head adorably, playing the fool, to which Sacher gave a heavy sigh and said nothing else.

Then, another unusual pairing of people walked into the training ground—Magiluka and Safina.

Come to think of it, they’ve been coming to the training ground together a lot recently. When did they start getting along?

“Ah, Instructor Karis.” Safina bowed upon recognizing him.

Magiluka didn’t know him that well, but she likewise bowed politely.

“Oh, you’re all here now. I guess I’ll make myself scarce, then. You don’t need an outsider like me here,” Instructor Karis said. “But you three, don’t forget to gather at the lounge during the afternoon. Don’t be late.”

With that said, he flashed us a toothy smile and left the training ground.

“Is something supposed to happen at the lounge this afternoon?” I asked curiously, watching him leave.

“Huh?” Safina blinked, staring at me. “Lady Mary, today’s the raffle to decide the seeding for the tournament.”

“As complacent as ever...” Sacher looked almost impressed with me.

“Oh, goodness, I was just joking, of course.” I cleared my throat and looked down at myself, trying to avoid their gazes. I covered my mouth with a hand and laughed loudly, trying to feign composure.

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Later that afternoon, we gathered in the lounge. It felt like the first time in a while that all the first-years were gathered in one place.

“Ahem. Let us begin the raffle for the tournament seeding, then,” Miss Iks said, her clear voice filling the lounge. “Once your name is called out, step forward and draw your lot.”

We all quieted down tensely.

The moment of truth has finally arrived... If Safina or Sacher end up being my opponents in the first round, I’ll be able to lose on purpose in peace.

As that irresponsible thought crossed my mind, the raffle continued.

“Next—Safina Karshana.”

The sound of a familiar name being called pulled me out of my thoughts. I looked at Miss Iks as Safina approached her and nervously pulled her lot.

Please, God! Having Sacher face Safina in the first round would just be a bad joke! Anything but that!

I watched Safina, breath held, praying as hard as I would have if it were my seeding on the line. Safina handed her note over to the person in charge, who read the result out loud.

“Safina Karshana will be participating in the first round’s eighth match!”

Everyone started whispering at the sound of that announcement. Fearing for the outcome, I looked to the bracket list. Finding that her opponent had already been decided, I looked over to the name in concern.

“Thank goodness, it’s not Sacher...” I sighed in relief. “Don’t scare me like

that...”

I turned around, seeing Safina approach me with wobbly steps and a very pale face.

“Looks like your opponent is Creighton Gold,” I said. “Huh. Who’s that?”

“That’d be me,” a boy approaching us said.

It’s the cretin?! “Noooo!” I hung my head upon realizing it was him.

“Heh heh heh, don’t be that disappointed.” The cretin smiled victoriously at my disappointed gesture. “It makes things simpler. Right, Safina? We’ll be able to decide which of us is stronger that much faster... Right?”

“What a disaster... I was trying so hard to not find out what the cretin’s name is, but I had to run into this spoiler!” I fell to my knees in shock. “Plus, ‘Creighton’ and ‘cretin’? That’s almost the same anyway!”

“I, umm... What?” Creighton’s expression went from smug to shocked. “What?! That’s what you were so shocked about?!”

“Oh, well... I guess I’ll just have to live with this spoiler. Let’s not worry about it anymore.” I roused myself, ignoring his reaction, and got to my feet. “You’re right. This really does make things simpler. It’s a good chance to settle things, and if you lose, you don’t get to make silly claims about cheating.”

“Um, Lady Mary...” Safina said, cowering behind me.

Creighton reacted to my firm—or rather, mocking—statement with anger, his temples twitching. “Hmph!” he huffed, glaring at Safina without so much as regarding me. “You can’t do anything on your own and have to cling to powerful nobles for help. You good-for-nothing! There’s no chance I’ll ever be defeated by a loser like you! I’m not going to waste a second more than I have to on beating you on the day of the match. I’ll show everyone just how pathetic and weak you are, so just you wait!”

At his words, I could feel Safina’s grip on my sleeve slacken. I felt my emotions drop to absolute-zero levels of cold.

This cretin... He thinks this is what our friendship is like? The simpleton...

In his eyes, Safina’s relationship with me was based on her being a flunkie

who sucked up to me because I was a powerful duke's daughter. That thought unleashed a cold snap in my heart, freezing my emotions over.

"Looks like you really want to anger me," I said. "Let me wipe that smug, arrogant smile of yours off your face. With a fist..."

Sacher, who was standing next to me, and Safina both stared at me silently. I turned around and made to leave, but I stopped as I felt something tug on my sleeve again. Safina was once again reaching out to me. She shook her head, imploring me not to make a fuss.

"A-Anyway, I look forward to the match," Creighton said, looking a bit overwhelmed by my anger. "Better train hard, you Regalia brown-noser!"

With those spiteful parting words, Creighton walked away. I watched him leave, my frozen glare stabbing into his back.

"Wow, Lady Mary... You can be really scary, you know that?" Sacher whispered.

"H-Hmph." His words made my numbed feelings defrost. "Th-That guy just annoys me too much!"

I turned on my heels briskly and glanced at Safina. She once again moved away from me, hanging her head apologetically. *It must be because of what he said...*

"Safina!" I cupped Safina's hands in my own, bringing them to eye level. Seeing this, Safina looked up at me. "You can't lose to that guy, okay? You have to beat him!"

"Lady Mary..." Safina met my words of encouragement with a strained smile. I got the feeling my attempt at cheering her up didn't work.

Can't I do something to help her...?

"Mary Regalia!" I heard Miss Iks call out to me in this inopportune time. "Is Mary Regalia present?!"

"Ah, yes! Present!" I squeaked, earning a few giggles from the students around me.

In a total one-eighty from my frozen anger from earlier, I approached Miss Iks

with my face flushed.

17. To Keep Going Forward...

“Ah, tomorrow’s the day... Tomorrow’s the tournament.”

That night, when I came back from the academy, I gazed out my room’s window at the night sky.

“So, Lady Safina’s first match will be the one to decide her fate...” Tutte said, standing next to me. “I can only imagine how she feels...”

I thought back to the raffle’s events.

“Say, Tutte,” I said. “Is my friendship with Safina one where she’s toadying up to me because I’m a duke’s daughter? Is our relationship calculating like that?”

“If that’s how you feel, maybe it is,” Tutte said, easily affirming the suspicion that’s been eating away at me.

“No, that’s not what I think at all!” I shouted, outraged by her implication.

“Then you shouldn’t let it bother you,” Tutte smiled softly. “Let other people think whatever they’d like. So long as you know it’s not true...”

Seeing her beam at me like this dispelled the cloud of gloom hanging over my heart.

She’s right. I shouldn’t let this trouble me. So long as I believe that’s not true, that’s all that matters. Ugh, I can’t believe I let what he said get to me...

“Thanks, Tutte. You cheered me up, I think...” I said sheepishly.

“I’m happy I could help.” She smiled back at me and bowed. “Incidentally, Lady Mary, are you really going to go along with this script?”

She changed the topic, displaying a pile of papers I’d handed her.

“Of course,” I nodded. “I’ll be acting according to this script during the tournament, so you should practice it too.”

“W-Will I be good enough? I know they allow servants on school grounds for

the day of the tournament, but I'm sure there's someone better suited for—"

"No, I want you to do this, Tutte." I approached Tutte, clasped her hands in mine, and met her gaze with glittering eyes. "It's something I can only do with your help! Let's both make this work!"

"Y-Yes, Lady Mary!" Tutte nodded, taken in by my enthusiasm.

"Let's keep practicing so we make sure we have the script memorized!"

"Yes!"

And so, with the papers in hand, we read out the script like we were rehearsing for a play and discussed our positions and movements.

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And so, the day of the tournament was upon me. Much like in a sports meet, parents stood impatiently outside the gates to watch their students perform. The usually vast training grounds were divided into three areas, each with a stage for the matches.

With each Solos first-year student going through a match that day, the first leg of the tournament would have a lot of matches, so there were multiple stages set up to cut down on time. Once the brackets had narrowed down to the top eight, the matches would be performed in the arena instead, in a one-on-one format. The audience for those matches would also be bigger. At least, that was what Instructor Karis had told us.

I don't want to get to the point where I fight in the arena because that would already be standing out a little too much. If anything, I'd prefer to lose while we're still in the earlier stages... The first round, when there's still not much of a crowd, could be a good time.

I took a preliminary glance at the stage, earnestly planning my lazy defeat. *The rest of the guests will arrive at the academy in a bit, so I'll have to go over the last checks with Tutte then. Whoa... I think I'm starting to have butterflies in my stomach...*

I felt like I was about to perform in a play or something. I took a deep breath to suppress my impatience. My legs ended up carrying me, perhaps as part of

habit, to our reserved training ground. *I guess this is the last time I'll be using this place. It sounds kind of sad when I put it like that...*

It was still too soon to get sentimental, but as I peered into the room, I found there was someone else there. She was standing still and silent, calmly assuming her stance. Her eyes were closed as she was focusing on an image in her mind, her breathing was steady, and then—in the blink of an eye, her sword flashed through the air in a brilliant trajectory.

A beautiful performance. Light shined into the room just as she slashed, casting a backlight on her that made her look all the more impressive.

"Phew..." She breathed out, took another deep breath...and then noticed me. "Ah! L-Lady Mary... You were there?!"

Safina noticed me standing at the door staring at her in fascination. She sheathed her sword and hurried over to me.

Oh, wow... It was such a beautiful iai slash that I couldn't tear my eyes off of her.

Noticing my mouth was hanging open, I slapped a hand over it and talked to her with feigned composure.

"That was impressive, Safina. You mastered iai so quickly! The match is as good as yours."

"N-No... I'm not impressive. And I'm not confident I can win the fight at all..." she responded to my compliment with modesty...or rather, resignation. She looked depressed, even.

"That's not true..." Rather than try to encourage her with words, I decided to take her hands.

And as I did, I noticed; her small hands were visibly shaking.

She's nervous... I can't blame her, though. Her very first fight is going to decide her fate. She must be under so much pressure... If she fights when she's this tense, she really will...

"Heh heh... I'm just no good," she said with a bitter smile. "It feels like I'm gonna cave under the weight of it all if I don't do something. I'm just...scared...

So scared... I don’t know what to do...”

She slipped her hands away from mine and made to leave the training hall.

Right... No matter how refined her technique might be, it’s not like her heart’s any stronger for it...

“Don’t worry, Safina,” I said, trying to encourage her in whatever way I could. “I know you can win this.”

I knew my words came across as terribly hackneyed and unreliable.

“I...I don’t think so... I always...whenever it’s the crucial moment, I just...fail... I was hoping maybe I’d be fine this time, but...it’s like I thought...”

Maybe my words had made Safina finally voice her fears in earnest. She stared at her trembling hands, looking like she might give in to the pressure. Feeling like I couldn’t speak like a noble lady right now, I called out to her.

“Don’t worry, you’ve got this!”

“But...”

“You have to believe you’ve got this... Otherwise, all the effort you put in would have been for nothing.”

“My...effort?” Safina looked my way.

One more push should do it... But what do I say? What can I say to make her put her all into this match? If only I could make it so she’s only as tense as I am... Wait, like me?

Come to think of it, my path in life isn’t on the line here like Safina’s, and I have so little motivation for the match that I shouldn’t have to feel nervous at all.

If I were in Safina’s shoes, would I be able to keep going myself...? Hmm, wait. “Keep going”? I remembered something I was once told.

“Listen, Safina... Everyone gets nervous every now and then. Even Sacher gets nervous... I, uh... I think...?”

A barbarian like him probably gets anxious for *a fight rather than* about *it.* I wasn’t confident that what I was saying was even true, so I decided to leave

Sacher out of it.

“My point is, we all feel the same way. We all stand on the same starting line, so if anything makes the difference in how far we can go, it’s in what you do when the race starts,” I said, enveloping Safina’s hands in my own.

“...What you do?” she asked back, looking at me with surprised eyes but still visibly interested in what I was saying.

“Yes. You either face adversity with courage, freeze up with doubt, or run away in fear. I think that’s the only thing that makes the difference,” I said, remembering what I’d heard at the Evening Primrose Festival.

“Then, maybe I should run...”

“No! That’s not it at all, Safina. You’re just stopped in your tracks right now because you’re wavering. You worked so hard so you could stay in the academy, Safina. You mustn’t give up on fighting. You mustn’t run from this. Believe in all the effort you put in!”

“Lady...Mary...” she started, and I could feel her negativity setting in.

“Don’t hesitate, and find the courage to keep going onward... Okay, Safina?” I kept going resolutely, holding onto her hands tightly.

“Lady...Mary...” Safina whispered.

“Yes, Safina?” I asked, bracing for her response.

“It hurts...” she protested, her eyes teary.

“Ah, sorry! Aha ha!”

Whoops, I held her hands too hard! That’s not good.

I let go of her hands with a dry laugh, which she met with a strained smile.

“Lady Mary, you’re amazing... I’ve never thought about it that way.”

“Ah, well, I was actually borrowing Sir Klaus’s words... Wait, would I have made a better impression if I’d pretended I’d come up with it?” I added teasingly.

“Heh heh... I guess you would have,” she said with a smile.

She raised her katana, examined it, and clenched her quivering fingers.

“Safina?” I asked.

“Believe in everything I’ve done so far...and then...find the courage to keep going forward...” she whispered as she looked at her sword, steeling herself.

It was then that the bell marking the start of the martial arts tournament rang out, beckoning her.

18. The Fastest Ever!

The tournament had begun. Participants with upcoming matches were to be on standby in a waiting room, and everyone else was allowed to spectate.

I went to watch Sacher’s fight, since he had the earliest match. Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of spectators gathered around his match, eager to watch the promising child of House Elexiel. I noticed instructors walking about too. Spotting a familiar face, I walked up to him.

“Hello, Instructor Karis,” I greeted him.

“Oh, Miss Mary. Here to watch Sacher’s match too?” he said.

As we spoke, the participants appeared, and the spectators started whispering excitedly.

“The third match of the first round will now begin,” the referee said.

Sacher and his opponent entered the stage. Sacher had a serious expression, the kind I hadn’t seen him make in a while—but when he noticed my gaze, he turned to look at me and gave me a thumbs up, displaying his enthusiasm.

Aha ha, confident, huh? I guess he just doesn’t know what being nervous is. I feel silly for worrying about him.

I met his gesture with an exasperated expression, and he simply chuckled and got on the stage. The judge stood between the two combatants, and upon confirming both were positioned a good distance from each other, he gave the signal for the match to start.

The moment he did, Sacher charged in and closed the distance.

“Aaah!”

His opponent stepped back a bit, taken by surprise. Sacher moved in with his sword aloft, to which his opponent responded by blocking the attack with his sword. Sacher’s slash proved heavy, though; as the sound of metal clashing with metal rang out, his opponent grimaced and staggered back.

Sacher pressed the advantage, sweeping horizontally. His opponent somehow blocked the blow, but they staggered again.

“Like I thought... The difference in their strength is too big,” Instructor Karis whispered.

“It is?” I whispered back.

“Hm? Well, the Elexiel style is to pressure the opponent with sword blows. And Sacher’s swings are heavy enough that even my hands go numb from blocking them. He has promising talent, so it’s fun to imagine how he’ll end up.”

Instructor Karis spoke jubilantly, making it hard to tell if he was joking. Then I heard loud cheering. It seemed Sacher’s opponent had had their sword flicked from their hands, unable to block his slash. With that, they were unable to attack.

“It’s over...” Instructor Karis said. “The other participant did their best, though. They didn’t get instantly beaten, after all.”

“Yeah...” I said.

Having safely ended the match, Sacher bowed to his opponent and made to leave the stage.

That was kind of anticlimactic. I guess I don’t have to worry about Sacher, though.

All right, let’s go see how Safina’s doing. She must be in the waiting room by now. I gave my regards to Instructor Karis and returned to the waiting room. The air in the room was buzzing with excitement and nervousness, making it a bit unpleasant to be in. Walking in, I found one girl standing curled up against the wall and a certain guy who was approaching her, apparently having beaten

me to the punch.

“Hmph! You’re still serious about facing me?! You just don’t know your place. You’ve never once beaten me in a fight!”

Creighton stood in front of Safina with an indomitable smile, and Safina looked up at him with her head hung low, shrinking in place. I got between them before he had the chance to say anything else and glared at him.

“Tch... You again, Regalia?!” Creighton backed away from Safina, looking annoyed at my repeated interference. “You know, Safina’s weak, but I can say the same about you. You’ve got no skill, and all you do is hide behind your parents’ influence like you’re a big shot. You’re both annoying, you good-for-nothings!”

I was stunned at his words, but then...

“Y-You take that back!” Safina exclaimed behind me.

Her voice was fairly small, but for Safina’s standards, this was loud. Creighton froze up and turned his eyes to her.

“Huh? What was that?” he asked coldly.

Safina gripped her katana hard with both hands and looked up at Creighton directly.

“You can say whatever you want about me, but don’t insult Lady Mary.” Safina’s voice became feeble every now and then as she got the words out, but she was still speaking her mind clearly. “Please take back what you just said! Lady Mary is nothing like that!”

“Hah! Beat me in the match and I’ll consider it. Not that you ever will!” Creighton scoffed at her and left the waiting room.

“S-Safina...” I stared at the small girl in front of me, stunned.

Safina...actually talked back to someone...

“You’re...not like that, Lady Mary...” she whispered, hanging her head. “What does he even know about you...?”

Her expression looked surprisingly livid. She was angry at seeing someone

else—not her—get insulted. And that anger eclipsed her stress and fear, enabling her to keep going.

Back when I had to fight, I did it to protect Tutte... Defending someone else, and not just myself, is how I found my courage. So I guess Safina found her courage by getting upset for someone else, rather than herself?

I was confused about how to interpret this development, but time marched on. The other matches were ending, and soon it was Safina's turn to take the stage. As a teacher walked in to tell her it was time to go, she raised her head and walked outside. As I watched her leave, I could only say one thing.

"You can win this, Safina!"

My words made her stop in her tracks for a moment. I saw her nod firmly without turning to look at me, and then Safina left for her match.

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I reached the stage, where I found Magiluka, Sacher, and the prince.

"My, Sir Reifus, you're here." I curtsied, surprised by his presence here, but he raised a hand to stop me.

"It's finally time for Miss Safina's match," he said.

"Y-Yes," I nodded.

"Let's see how it turns out." Instructor Karis stood next to us, looking on curiously.

"We will now begin the first round's eighth match. Both participants, please step forward," the referee said.

Both of them got on the stage. I watched over Safina, my heart beating faster than it would have if I were on that stage myself. Maybe my hearing was good, or perhaps he was just being too loud, but I heard their exchange.

"Hmph. I'll teach you where you stand," Creighton said. "I'll wrap this up fast and humiliate you so you know not to oppose me anymore."

"Go forward with courage... Forward with courage... Forward..." Safina roused herself. "I'll teach you a lesson for insulting Lady Mary..."

Good luck, Safina! I pumped my fists and swallowed nervously.

At the referee's signal, both of them walked to opposite sides of the ring, standing outside each other's range. Despite hailing from the same school of fencing, they'd adopted different stances, and seeing this made the audience murmur curiously.

"That's a weird stance you're taking," Creighton mocked her confidently. "But nothing you pull is going to work. Don't bother!"

Safina didn't flinch, however, and took a deep breath.

"Now... Begin!" The referee gave the signal to start the match.

Creighton charged at Safina. Silence hung over the air—the stage venue, which was noisy just moments ago, was now completely quiet. The audience held their breaths in surprise. Even the participants of the other matches froze up in their stances, their eyes fixed on one girl.

Her drawn beautiful blade glistened in the sun, refracting its rays. And past that swung blade was one pathetic man, huddled up on the stage, his eyes rolled back into his skull and his mouth frothing.

Creighton lay unconscious.

One hit...one blow was all it took. Safina's iai slash hit him across the flank, sending him flying back like a leaf in the wind. It'd only taken a few seconds. Safina exhaled and sheathed her sword, the sound of the metal clicking into place echoing loudly in the stage.

The first to snap out of his stupor was the teacher serving as referee.

"Th-The winner is Safina Karshana!"

The stage erupted into cheers at the referee's announcement.

"Sh-She won?" I whispered, astounded.

"Yes! She did, Lady Mary!" Magiluka said, happily wrapping her arms around me in an embrace.

"I'm stunned..." Instructor Karis whispered. "It only took seconds, and she settled the match with one slash. It's the first time I've seen Miss Safina

perform like this. Talk about a dark horse!”

His words made Safina’s victory finally truly register in my mind. I took Magiluka’s hands, which she’d wrapped around me, and hopped with her in a cheer.

“Heh heh... You’ve created one hell of a rival, Lady Mary,” Sacher said.

“What?” I glanced at him from the corner of my eyes. “A man of House Elexiel scared of competition?”

“Aha ha! Of course not!” he said with a satisfied smile.

Yeah, figures, you barbarian. Maybe you should *be a bit scared.*

I sighed as the source of all the cheering walked over to me wearily.

“L-Lady Mary, I...I won...?” she asked in disbelief, unable to stomach the reality of her victory.

“Yes! You won, Safina! Victory is yours!” I gripped Safina’s hands and affirmed her victory over and over.

My words finally made the understanding sink in for her. Her eyes filled with tears, which soon ran down her cheeks. All the tension that’d kept her going so far had finally snapped like a string. With cheering all around her, she wept into my chest.

The fencer who’d won the fastest fight in the academy’s history was born at that very moment.

19. It’s My Turn

“It’s almost my time to take the stage,” I said.

“I’m...a little excited now...” Tutte said. “I’m not sure I can act according to the script...”

Tutte and I were a short distance from the waiting room, hiding where we wouldn’t be seen. We looked at each other, planning ahead, and for some reason, we were huddled together.

“By the way, Lady Mary, why aren’t we in the waiting room?”

“If I had to wait in that stressful place, I’d just get nervous,” I replied.

With that said, Tutte got to her feet and made to get away from me, but I pinched the hem of her skirt.

“D-Don’t leave me here. That’d make me nervous too.”

“But what if they call for you—”

“It’s fine. I asked Safina to come here and tell me when it’s time to go.”

“...Will Lady Safina be able to do it?” Tutte asked anxiously.

I cocked my head, unsure as to what Tutte meant. And just then, with perfect timing, Safina hurried over to me, breathing huffily.

“I’m sorry, Lady Mary! It’s time for your match!”

“Why are you telling me this at the last minute?” I asked.

“If I had to guess, she was too busy fussing over whether to call you now or later and ran out of time to decide,” Tutte said, looking like she’d expected this to happen.

Even after that match, she’s still indecisive... Well, I guess that’s just how Safina is. As that tired thought crossed my mind, Tutte grabbed my hand and started walking me over to the stage with hasty steps.

“W-Wait, Tutte, why are you in such a hurry?” I asked her, flustered.

“What are you saying? With Lady Safina in such a hurry, everyone’s probably already at the stage. We have to hurry, Lady Mary!”

“W-Wait, I need to prepare myself mentally!”

Tutte dragged me over to the stage, and indeed, my opponent—along with all the other competitors—were already there.

Whoa... I’m standing out... Everyone’s staring at me...

I slowly climbed to the stage, leaving Tutte behind. Looking around, I saw there was quite a crowd. This was probably because the prince, Magiluka, Sacher, Safina, and Instructor Karis were watching my match.

Everyone's less curious about my match and more interested in the crowd... Looks like Safina and Sacher are drawing the most attention.

I took a deep breath and looked at my opponent. He was looking at me curiously too.

I wasn't quite aware of this, what with how much of a hurry I was in, but... I really am going to fight in a match, huh...? I'm starting to tense up...

I tightened my grip on my Legendary Sword (Cringe) that I had sheathed at my waist and felt the sword's hardness increase.

"Begin!" The referee gave us the signal, and the crowd cheered.

I steeled myself, drew my sword, and aimed it resolutely at my opponent. Spurred on by my gesture, he held up his spear and aimed it at me.

"Heh heh! Now, this is my big moment. Dance for me!" I exclaimed.

My opponent kept his weapon raised and fixed at me, perhaps surprised by my daring attitude and taunt.

Great, I stuck to the script! He hasn't made the first move yet, though... How come?

Instructor Karis was giving commentary that answered my question from the spectator stands.

"Huh?" Safina asked, surprised by his explanation. "She did it on purpose...?"

"Yes, Lady Mary is a different type of fighter compared to you two," Instructor Karis said. "She doesn't have technique or strength like you two do, but she makes up for it with strategy. Her fighting style focuses on investigating the opponent, confusing them, and guiding them to defeat with her tactics."

"Yes, in other words, Lady Mary started the fight by telling her opponent she'll fight on his level, so he should dance to her tune," Magiluka appended. "It's a bit too theatrical. One has to wonder if she's serious."

"Yes, it takes confidence," Instructor Karis nodded. "It took the wind out of her opponent's sails. I'm sure Lady Mary planned that too."

However, at the time I was blissfully unaware that they were talking about

me. I was instead busy with acting out the script I'd written for my lovely defeat.

So, first I act tough, and then when I go on the attack... I let my opponent counterattack...

My plan went as follows: I'd use simple attacks my opponent could easily stop, and the next moment, my opponent would go from defending to attacking. I'd take a hit, make a pained face, and stagger back. With me on the back foot, my opponent would start thrusting away at me, and I'd deflect their blows with a pained expression.

All right, I'm on the defensive, as per the script. I'll make it look like I'm struggling to block each blow, making myself seem weak and helpless!

Everything was going so smoothly that I was honestly surprised. I had to restrain the urge to smile at my success as I stayed on the defensive. Seeing this, Instructor Karis enthusiastically offered commentary again.

"Her opponent's panicking... Lady Mary's had this fight under her control the whole time."

"W-Well, it seems to me like Lady Mary has her back against the wall," Magiluka said, her face full of suspense.

"No, she's acting. Overacting, even," Sacher said. "And it might not be clear to an amateur, but Lady Mary's blocking is moving slightly ahead of her opponent, like she's reading him. It gives her opponent the impression she lured him to strike her at that spot."

"And what's more, Lady Mary...looks like she's holding back a smile," Safina added, excitedly watching me fight. "And every time she does, it just makes her opponent feel like they're being cornered."

Hearing their exchange, the audience oohed and aahed in amazement.

"Whoaaa!" Unaware of their analysis, I let out a cute screech and pretended to get blown away from my opponent. I fell to one knee dramatically.

"Lady Mary! Please, just stop! The match is all but decided already!" Tutte shouted according to script, reaching out toward me so as to make me seem all

the more helpless.

The crowd started murmuring noisily. *Hmmm. Maybe Tutte's not being convincing enough?* I was oblivious to my own acting skills, but when it came to her, I was a bit worried about how fake her lines sounded.

"Wow... She even got a third party involved," Instructor Karis continued his skewed commentary, by now not so much impressed as shocked. "The maid's acting is an issue, but they must have planned this picture ahead of time. She knew that rather than telling her opponent to his face that he'd lost, it'd be better to have an outsider say it. For a tactician, nothing could be more effective when it comes to showing off her superiority."

"No... It's not over yet... I can still...fight!" I said, staggering to my feet.

My opponent stepped back and lifted his spear too.

I need to look like I'm trying my hardest here, so...

"...I'll be pinning everything on this next attack."

"What?!" My opponent was surprised by what I'd said.

Oh, drat... I ended up saying that out loud. But yes, once my next attack gets countered, I'll try to get to my feet, but Tutte will cry and throw in the towel, eliminating me on a technical KO! Perfect!

I raised my sword, confident in my defeat, and—

"I...I forfeit," my opponent said.

"Huh?" My jaw fell open.

"Mary Regalia is the winner!" the referee declared loudly, and the whispering of the audience turned to cheers as the match drew to a close.

"Jeez, I completely lost." My opponent approached me for a handshake with a smile. "Seriously, you didn't leave me a single opening. My hat's off to you."

I shook his hand, my mouth agape and my expression frozen, and the boy left the stage. I walked away too, with Tutte following me. Tutte didn't seem to understand what had just happened, and she held the towel she was planning to throw in for my technical KO like she wasn't sure what to do with it. She

ended up simply handing it over to me.

“Hmm... I suppose the maid telling him his loss was more or less guaranteed made him feel like he had to prove he can still fight,” Instructor Karis continued his mistaken commentary, unable to mask his surprise. “The taunt made him throw away his strategy and gamble on an all-or-nothing attack. But then Lady Mary whispered what she’d done, and he realized she’d read his every move... And what settled it was the maid’s towel. Even though Lady Mary never made a move and hadn’t broken a sweat at all, she had the maid hold a towel for wiping her sweat. It showed him this whole match had gone according to her meticulous script and completely took the wind out of his sails...”

“Lady Mary’s scary...” Sacher said fearfully. “She completely read into her opponent’s tactics and beat him thoroughly...”

“L-Lady Mary’s as impressive as I thought!” Safina sighed, fascinated.

As everyone greeted me, I finally realized the situation I was in.

Mary Regalia had won her first round match.

I also later found out that in this world, throwing in the towel in the middle of a match didn’t signify a loss. Tutte didn’t know why I had asked her to do it, and she’d simply obeyed me without asking any questions...

20. It Wasn’t Supposed to Be like This...

The tournament had entered its second day. Sacher easily overpowered his opponent, and Safina, emboldened by her victory, used her speed to win her match.

Me, on the other hand...

“Aaah... I’m sleepy...”

I stood languidly in front of the stage, bags under my eyes. I’d spent all night long revising my script, reflecting on yesterday’s mistakes. I stood there, giving off negative vibes as the audience’s cheering boomed in my ears. Tutte, who stood near the stage’s corner, was nodding off sleepily. She, too, had spent all night helping me.

“We will now commence the competitors’ second match,” the referee said. “Let both competitors step forward.”

I wobbled toward the center of the stage, exhausted. *I wanna sleep... No, no, I need to keep it together! I’ve got to get a spectacular defeat! Especially now that Instructor Karis said all those strange things that made everyone start paying attention to me...*

In spite of the thoughts crossing my mind, I was actually just standing there, dozing off with my hand on my sheathed sword. *If I’m not careful, it’ll be a repeat of yesterday. So this time, I need to slash fast...and then...*

“Begin!”

While I was mumbling away, confirming my plan, I heard the referee say something. I raised my hung head to look forward—only to spot my opponent charging at me. With the audience’s cheering throbbing in my ears and the frustration of my plans going awry turning into anger, my negative aura swelled up and a vein throbbed in my forehead.

“Graaaaaph!” I blurted out something nondescript, then took a step forward and drew out my sword.

I only swung out to keep my opponent in check, imitating Safina’s iai draw to get them to step back. But instead, my now-hardened Legendary Sword (Cringe) landed a clean hit on my opponent’s body.

“Gah!” my opponent groaned.

“Ah...”

The turn of events blew away my fatigue for a moment, all my tiredness suddenly replaced with the panic of having messed up again. My opponent had been hit directly by my riposte, which sent him tumbling to the ground, where he lay twitching.

“W-Wait, that didn’t count!” I demanded in a panic. “Get up, on your feet! You can’t let it end like this. You’re a Solos class warrior, right?! Show me your pluck!”

My opponent groaned as he tried to get to his feet.

“I’d forgotten, but Lady Mary was the one who’d taught Safina that technique to begin with,” Instructor Karis said. “It only makes sense that she’d be able to use it as well. How could it have slipped my mind? She lured her opponent into a swift attack, seeming defenseless the whole time. But for how defenseless she was, she’d always had her sword gripped. Her opponent should have been wary of that.”

“And she did an iai slash with that flimsy sword of hers,” Sacher said. “I thought it was just a fancy-looking dull sword, but I guess that’s not the case.”

“Well, I’m not quite sure, but...when Lady Mary had Deodora make me my katana, I think she mentioned it wasn’t the first time she had her make a sword,” Safina chimed in. “Maybe Deodora forged Lady Mary’s sword too...”

“If that’s true, we shouldn’t look down on her sword.” Sacher looked convinced. “Deodora’s the best blacksmith in the capital, and any sword she makes is gonna be great.”

As the three of them offered commentary, the surrounding spectators nodded in agreement.

Stop iiiiiiit! Stop making people impressed with me! That’s not what I’m going for here! I pleaded inwardly in response to the commentary I could faintly hear, praying all the while that my opponent would get up.

“Guh!” My opponent got to his feet, gritting his teeth and holding onto his stomach.

Relieved, I turned to look at Tutte, preparing to carry on to the next step in the script. But as I did, I heard a thud as something hit the ground. I glanced sideways at my opponent, fearing the worst—and the worst had come true, as my opponent had sunk to the floor, unconscious.

“She didn’t finish her opponent, instead scolding him for his shameful performance,” Instructor Karis whispered, impressed. “She’d watched him get up, encouraged him with a smile, then turned her back to him to look at her maid... She’d predicted the exact moment he’d collapse. What’s more, in doing so, she’d spared him the shame of being instantly downed by her blow. No wonder they call her the White Princess. She really is brimming with nobility and grace.”

The audience cheered at Karis's astonished and mistaken commentary.

"Winner! Mary Regalia!"

I-It wasn't supposed to go like this! What did I pull an all-nighter for?! Ahhhh! My internal screaming overlapped with the referee's declaration.

Tutte jolted, seemingly stirred awake by the cheering, and looked around in confusion.

You were sleeping standing up the whole time? I thought to myself dryly.

Tutte approached me, looking apologetic, and whispered into my ear with a very pale expression. "I-It looks like you won, Lady Mary... What now?"

"It was out of our hands this time," I said. "Don't worry, next time, I'll—"

"But Lady Mary, the next round... It's, um, in the arena."

"...Huh?" I realized Tutte was right and crumbled to my knees. "N-No, you don't mean... I'm in the quarterfinals already? How?! What about my next match?!"

"You see, you'd have gone up against the winner of the match before this one, but they got injured. They were healed with magic, but they still need a day or two of rest in bed. Since they were forced to retire from the next match, it's considered a technical victory in your favor, moving you up to the quarterfinals..."

I think I might have heard something about that before my match started... I don't remember, I was too sleepy...

The cheering in the tournament grew ever louder while I, the winner, fell to my knees and hung my head in depression. I'd somehow reached the top eight and was currently in the highest ranking in the tournament.

Even me falling to my knees ended up getting an embellished story attached to it. People said I had actually been quite afraid but had kept up a brave front, and the victory made all the tension drain from my body. Or that I had actually been quite sickly, but I'd pushed myself to overperform...

Gaaaah, why does everyone make all these stories up?!

***

“Aaaah, what am I going to do?! How am I going to get out of this?!”

As soon as we left the stage, I took Tutte to that deserted spot from the other day, grabbed her by the shoulders, and shook her, demanding help.

“L-Lady Mary, c-calm down, please! Don’t shake my head, pleeease!”

I was on the verge of tears. I let go of Tutte, but she wobbled for a while after that, her head spinning.

“N-Now that it’s come to this...” she mumbled dizzily. “You should just go up against Sir Sacher or Lady Safina and lose after they hit you once. No one’s going to question you losing to them.”

“Y-You’re right!” I lunged at her offer. “I’ll just have those two help me out! But Sir Sacher’s not likely to catch on... I’ll depend on Safina. She’ll help me, for sure.”

But as that sinister thought crossed my mind, Tutte trembled as she looked at the tournament brackets.

“L-Lady Mary...” she said fearfully. “Sir Sacher and Lady Safina... According to the brackets, they’ll only meet in the semifinals... And you’ll only face whichever of them wins that match in the finals.”

I fell into stunned silence, and then panicked.

“What am I going to do?! Tutte, what am I supposed to do?!”

“L-Lady Mary, c-calm down! Stop shaking my head, pleeease!”

We’d looped back to where the conversation had started.

21. The Tournament Finals

A day after I’d reached the quarterfinals, the rest of the matches to determine the top eight took place. That night, while I was having dinner with my parents...

“Oh, Mary, I heard you got to the top eight in the school’s tournament,”

father said with a smile. “I didn’t want you to compete in something dangerous, but I’ll admit I was proud to hear how far you’ve gotten. You really are our daughter.”

“Th-Thank you kindly, father...”

While I *was* thanking him, I was hoping he wouldn’t touch too much on the topic, so I made no sign of wishing to talk about it. Father, however, hadn’t mentioned the tournament so as to ask me about it, but rather to tell me something himself, so he paid no heed to my silence and carried on unperturbed.

“We’re so proud, in fact, we’ve decided we’ll come watch your match in the arena tomorrow.”

“Huh?! B-But, father, don’t you have work?” I panicked at his unexpected announcement and brought up his job, desperately hoping to dissuade him.

“Oh, hush now,” he said with a grin. “A girl your age shouldn’t need to worry about that. I adjusted my schedule to make sure we’ll have time to watch your matches.”

Father seemed insistent on going, and I realized nothing I could say would change his mind. I finished my dinner quickly and wobbled back to my room.

“It’s all over. I’ve got nowhere left to run.” I sat on my bed, hanging my head.

“Yes, with the master and the madam looking forward to your match so much, you can’t very well lose on purpose,” Tutte, who’d followed me to my room, said in disappointment. “And being late to the match so you take a technical loss isn’t a possibility either.”

“What am I going to do?!” I made to grab and shake Tutte again, but perhaps sensing my intentions, she hurriedly walked a few steps back. “Why are you running?!”

“Ahem...” Tutte cleared her throat reproachfully, looking away from me as she tried to change the subject. “I think you should focus on solving this problem, Lady Mary.”

“How did this even happen?! I made all these plans so people wouldn’t notice

me, but they all blew up in my face!”

“Is it possible you perhaps shouldn’t have made those plans at all?” Tutte suggested, clapping her hands together.

“What do you mean? Are you saying my plans were flawed somehow?”

“Not at all. I mean that perhaps the mistake was in trying to make plans to begin with. Normally, you panic in the middle of matches and do unexpected things, but when you make plans, you move according to script and end up handling your opponents calmly, without losing your nerve...”

Tutte’s suggestion made an important realization dawn on me. She was right: when I moved according to plan, I’d become so occupied with sticking to the script I’d end up perfectly handling situations I would normally panic and fumble in.

“I can’t believe it... My scripts ended up working against me...”

“So, I think you should walk into the next match without any plans. Knowing you, you’ll panic right away and do something ridiculous. Maybe that’ll make you lose.”

Huh? I think she just said something really rude... But I’ll leave that aside for now.

“Right! If I just go in blind, I’ll lose right away. And if nothing weird happens, people won’t have any reason to bring any misunderstandings into this.”

“That’s right! Lady Mary, you have the mental fortitude of, uhh, what was it again? Tofu? So you’ll just end up laughing at the wrong time and ruining every _”

I cut Tutte’s rude remark off by squishing her cheeks.

“What was that just noooow?” I asked menacingly.

“W-Waidy Mawy, schtop it... It howts...” Tutte apologized with tearful eyes.

I pinched her for a while longer before eventually freeing her and going to sleep with lighter spirits.

***

The next day of the tournament had arrived. There were many more spectators now that the matches had moved to the arena.

The rest of the tournament would take place in the arena and would last two days. The quarterfinal matches would be today, and the semifinal and final matches would be on the second day. The academy treated these two days as a grand affair and canceled all classes for the duration of the tournament. As such, the students flooded the arena, leading to the visible increase in spectators.

“There’s so many people out there...” I said as I discreetly spent my time up to the match walking around the arena.

“There certainly are,” Tutte agreed.

“I shouldn’t have come out to look,” I said tensely. “Seeing so many people in the audience is just making me more nervous...”

“But if you’d stayed in the waiting room, you’d have just imagined the worst, and the pressure would have weighed on your mind and made you more nervous.”

I couldn’t deny that. *Tutte really does know me well. She truly has been with me the longest.* As I glanced at my maid, impressed and moved by her, I noticed more familiar faces approaching—namely, Sacher and Safina.

“Ah, Lady Mary!” Safina noticed me and jogged over, excited.

Aww, she’s like a puppy. I greeted her with a smile and softly patted her soft hair. “Did you come to check the arena too?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t expect you to come scout out the arena, Lady Mary.” While I was frolicking with Safina, Sacher approached me, surprised. “You always disappear somewhere and end up running late to your matches.”

I kept smiling at Safina as I carefully poked my sword’s grip into Sacher’s flank in response to his annoying statement. He grabbed his side in pain, shaking, and shambled away from me.

“What’s wrong, Sir Sacher?” Safina asked, looking baffled by his sudden

behavior.

“You little...I’ve got a match coming up. I can’t take damage now...” he said through pained gasps.

Given a few minutes, he’ll recover as always. I looked at him peevishly, not feeling the slightest bit apologetic. “Your opponent needs a handicap, if you ask me,” I said curtly. “You’re all sorts of overwhelming when you fight.”

After all, both Safina and Sacher were ahead of the rest of the first-years by leaps and bounds, and their matches had all been one-sided victories so far thanks to that. *If they win their upcoming matches, they’ll clash in the semifinals. Only one of them can win...I can’t help but feel anxious for them.*

“If you both win your matches, you’ll face each other in the semifinals tomorrow, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Sacher said confidently. “Sorry, Safina, but I’m going to be the one to face Lady Mary in the finals.”

“No, I think I will be the one to face Lady Mary in the finals,” Safina said, still a bit diffident.

Look at Safina, speaking up for herself! I’m happy for her. But...

“Why are you two assuming I’ll make the finals?” I asked them, bringing up an important point.

“Huh?” Both of them glanced at me, like they were asking what I was saying.

Stop it! Don’t look at me like you’re expecting me to get to the finals! It huuuurts! You’re making it harder for me to lose!

I looked away from them, full of guilt. Then the teacher in charge approached us and wished us good luck. The fact that the final leg of the tournament was upon us really sank in.

This time, I’m gonna lose! I returned to the waiting room with renewed resolve.

22. No Tricks This Time!

The final leg of the tournament began. The first match of the day was Sacher's, and it ended without any trouble. Following that was Safina's match, which also ended in her winning without much difficulty.

Those two are really strong. If I knew things would turn out this way, I'd have wished to have set myself up to face them much sooner...

I sat in the waiting room, waiting for the third match to end and lamenting my current predicament. Before long I heard cheering from afar, and realizing the match ended, I felt myself tense up.

Jeez... I didn't know I'd be this nervous without a script to follow. But now I'll be sure to have myself a nice loss since I'm not relying on any tricks.

A teacher walked in to tell me I was up. I nodded at Tutte's encouragement and made my way to the stage. As I entered the arena, I was greeted with more applause than any of the other competitors. I took a deep breath, calming myself so as to not be overwhelmed. My opponent appeared on the other side of the arena and faced me.

Sacher and Magiluka gave me this impression too, but people in this world really are quick to grow up. I can't believe this boy is my age.

He stood taller than me and had a toned body that reminded me of sporty boys from my past life. He carried a wide, two-handed broadsword, which he was swinging menacingly through the air in a show of bravado.

"Heh heh, so, what kind of tricks are you going to try on me?" he asked confidently. "Whatever you're planning, I'll power through it!"

Encouraged by my opponent's confidence, I drew my sword and aimed it at him.

"No tricks this time!" I said enthusiastically. "This'll be a head-on fight!" My voice echoed loudly through the arena.

My opponent was initially surprised, but he soon returned to his confident smile and bowed respectfully. "You have my gratitude! That's what I'd expect from the White Princess!"

H-Huh? Did I do something to be thankful for? Someone tell me, please!

With a question mark floating over my head, I found myself glancing wearily at Instructor Karis, who was standing in the audience. He was just starting his commentary track, as always.

“Like I thought. This time, Lady Mary intends to go about it nobly, fighting fair and square on her opponent’s level.”

“What do you mean?” Magiluka asked.

“Well, as you can see, her opponent is a power-type attacker, like Sacher. In terms of brute strength, Lady Mary’s at a disadvantage. However, her opponent is susceptible to psychological warfare and tactics, and if she chose to fight that way, he’d lose right away. That’s why he made that boast. Even so, Lady Mary said she’ll fight him on his playing field to clear away his doubts, even if it means she’ll be on the back foot.”

The audience oohed in realization at Instructor Karis’s explanation. Everyone nodded in agreement and looked at me in admiration. I could only surmise he somehow brought forth yet another misunderstanding.

“Now then, let the fourth quarterfinals match begin!” the referee said.

I sighed deeply and braced myself as the match began.

Get it together, Mary. I need to focus on the match. Focus! Father and mother are watching. I can’t lose right away!

I held up my sword and gazed at my opponent, who inched toward me carefully, wary of any sudden movements I might make.

Aaaah, what do I do now?! What am I supposed to do next?!

I guess I’ll just see how it goes for now...

I didn’t know what my opponent was capable of, so if I wasn’t careful, I’d end up winning by accident. I decided to stop thinking ahead and instead focus on reacting to developments as they happened. Play it by ear, as they say.

“Haaaah!”

Growing impatient, my opponent launched an attack. He was slower than Safina, though, and his movements were as dull as Sacher’s, allowing me to react in time. I dodged his wide, horizontal swipe by ducking. He then delivered

an overhead slash at me, which I evaded by moving diagonally.

I should attack him a few times too. It's my turn!

Since my opponent's style was so similar to Sacher's, I found myself spurred to rush ahead like I would do in my mock battles with him.

"Not good enough!" my opponent shouted.

H-Huh?

He deflected my forward thrust by holding his broadsword horizontally, but I kept moving ahead, my momentum unstopped. My body spun around as I ended up stumbling another step forward.

"What?!" he exclaimed.

In the moment he was confident he'd stopped my attack, I ended up seemingly launching another attack. As he looked at me, shocked, I ended up spinning out of control, launching a sweeping attack on him.

Ah, w-wait! Stop!

"D-Dammit!" my opponent breathed out, releasing his left hand's grip on his sword.

As my sword approached him, he held out his arm over his stomach in an attempt to block it...

"Gaaah!"

...a *failed* attempt to block it.

As I let habit take over and hit him the way I would when I'd sent Sacher hurtling into a wall, my opponent went flying, his arm incapable of blocking my blow.

Oh no, I blew it! He's not like Sacher! I'm just so used to fighting him, I—

As I looked at the boy being blown away, all the color drained from my face. Meanwhile, the audience cheered loudly.

"Wow..." Instructor Karis said. "For those who launch such strong, wide attacks, they leave their biggest openings right after their attack. Lady Mary knew this and moved accordingly. She even spun her body to add centrifugal

force to her blow. With his stance broken like that, trying to defend himself wouldn't have amounted to much when she'd put so much force behind her attack. Still, I never expected Lady Mary to overcome the difference in their physiques this way."

The cheering only intensified at his explanation.

"Ugh... S-So that's how you fight..." My opponent looked at me with an expression of agony, his left arm hanging limply, either numbed by my strike or broken.

No good, no goooood! The way this is going is just no good!

Right, his next attack! I just need to have his next attack connect with me, and then I'll lose! I have to lose!

Based on past matches, if things kept going, I'd end up winning again. Realizing this, I decided to just let his attack hit me so I could lose as soon as possible.

"But I'm not done yet!" He answered my expectations, holding his sword with just his right hand.

He swung it down at me from an overhead grip. Overwhelmed by the intensity of his attack, I reflexively swept my sword across, trying to deflect his blow.

No! What am I doing?! I thought as his sword swung down on me. *Why am I blocking it? I'm supposed to get hit, fall over, and end the match! If I pretend like his vigor shocked me, I can still fake a loss!*

The moment his sword was about to connect with mine, I promptly pulled down my sword so as to cancel my guard...only for his sword to end up sliding over my sword's blade and falling to the ground.

H-Huh? Somehow, without intending it, I'd ended up warding off his powerful blow and simultaneously moving to the perfect position to beat him.

When his sword had been completely driven outside my sword's range, I felt my thoughts grind to a halt. A momentary silence. I stood frozen, having dodged his attack cleanly. He stared at his sword, which lay stuck in the ground,

for a few moments, and then closed his eyes. All the intensity he'd been showing moments ago had all but drained from his body.

"I forfeit," he said simply before letting go of his blade.

"Mary Regalia is the winner!" the referee declared my victory as I stood frozen in place, still in the same stance in which I'd dodged the attack.

The audience exploded into cheers.

"Marvelous," Instructor Karis said, unable to mask his shock. "Realizing he wouldn't give up to the bitter end, Lady Mary didn't run from his attacks, accepting them head on. But the way she dodged that attack... Amazing. She rendered him completely defenseless, but she didn't attack...or rather, she didn't land a finishing blow. She left the final decision to him."

"Whoa... That's scary, Lady Mary..." Sacher said, both impressed and afraid.

"Lady Mary's so lovely when she's ruthless!" Safina said, entranced.

Hearing the three powerhouses praise me like this, the audience applauded and cheered as I ended up advancing to the semifinals.

Why does this keep happening?! Are you pranking me, God?!

23. The Semifinals

"This time, I've decided! In my next match tomorrow, I'm just going to stand still! I'll go defenseless this time!"

On the night I'd advanced to the semifinals, I went back to my room after my parents had praised me to no end during dinnertime and made this declaration.

"But won't it be obvious you're losing on purpose, Lady Mary?" Tutte asked as I lay in bed, my eyes full of frustrated tears.

"Yeah, but... Whenever I do anything, I just end up winning!" I said, flailing my limbs around in a small tantrum. "So I just won't do anything! This time, I really won't do anything!"

"Now, listen to me please, Lady Mary," Tutte said, sighing. "Much like Lady

Safina, many people put their hearts into this tournament. Your opponents, too, challenged you seriously. I think throwing a match like that would be disrespectful to those people."

"I-I'm...sorry..." Convinced by her sensible words, I sat up and hung my head apologetically.

Still, I had no intention of winning, so as I got under my covers, I tried to come up with a way to lose that would convince everyone. But nothing came to me, and I ended up falling asleep. Before I knew it, the last day of the tournament was upon me.

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Perhaps because this was the final day, the crowd was even bigger than yesterday's. I somehow ended up watching Safina and Sacher's big showdown from the spectator seats. Maybe it was just escapism and I wanted to pretend I wasn't a competitor in this tournament.

"Should you be here, Lady Mary?" Magiluka, who was seated next to me, asked with concern.

"Yes, it should be fine," I replied with the biggest grin I could muster.

She cracked a sardonic smile in response, apparently giving up on questioning why I was in the spectator stands.

"This is going to be quite the match," Prince Reifus said, seated nearby. "Who do you think is going to win? I'm frankly not sure."

"It's bound to be Sacher, Your Highness," Instructor Karis said.

"It's going to be Safina, of course." Magiluka gave the opposite answer at the same time.

The two of them exchanged surprised gazes.

"Oh? Miss Magiluka, you're cheering for Miss Safina?" Instructor Karis asked. "That's a shame, because I think Sacher is bound to be the one to meet Lady Mary in the finals."

"Oh, no, the match in the finals will be between Lady Mary and Safina, I'm sure of that." Magiluka shook her head with a confident smile.

Both of them had smiles, and the atmosphere between them was cheery, but there was a definite sense of inexplicable pressure hanging in the air.

Come to think of it, Instructor Karis trained with Sacher a lot, and Magiluka has spent a lot of time with Safina. I guess it makes sense they'd be sure the person they've been giving their support to is going to win.

"But why are you all so confident I'll get to the finals?" I asked, only to be stared at in confusion again.

"W-Well, forget about that," the prince said and pointed at the arena. "Their match is about to start."

The starting time for the match was upon us. Safina and Sacher stood on the stage, facing each other with the referee between them. Hearing the cheering around me made me realize, for the first time, that I didn't know who I wanted to see win.

Ah, who should I cheer for?! I want Sacher to do well, but I want Safina to win too!

"I think you'd do well to cheer them both on in this case," Tutte whispered into my ears, noticing that I was fidgeting and reading my thoughts.

"Tutte...can you read into people's hearts or something of the sort?" I asked her, a bit afraid.

"Only yours, Lady Mary," she replied with a composed expression.

Meanwhile, the referee gave the signal for the match to begin. The arena went silent at once, with the crowd watching the two contestants. Safina assumed her iai posture, while Sacher held up his sword as he slowly inched forward, gradually closing the distance by moving left and right repeatedly. Each time he did, Safina angled her body so as to keep facing him.



“That’s unusual,” I noted. “I’ve never seen Sacher approach an opponent so cautiously before.”

Up until now, he stuck to a one-track strategy of going straight on the offensive and charging at his opponents. This time, however, he seemed to be fighting with his head. I was impressed.

“That just means Sacher recognizes Safina as that much of a threat, Lady Mary,” Magiluka whispered in reply, looking quite pleased.

“Who’s to say?” Instructor Karis said, objecting to her words. “Maybe Miss Safina is the one being pressured here? Who’s to say how many minutes she’ll be able to maintain her mental balance. For all we know, she could cave in under the pressure and leave an opening for Sacher to exploit.”

“Ah! So you were the one to give Sacher this weird suggestion!” Magiluka pressed on him. “That man, using his head and employing tactics? I did think it was strange.”

“Aha ha, I just gave him advice as his upperclassman and instructor,” Instructor Karis said with a smile.

While this strange battle was beginning in the spectator stands, I distanced myself from them, hoping to stay out of the splash zone. But then the cheering grew louder, drawing my attention back to the match in the arena.

“What?!” I heard Sacher exclaim.

Safina had jumped over to him, still in her iai stance, and closed the distance in one bound. Her sword swept through the spot he’d just occupied. Instructor Karis was just as shocked as Sacher, and he turned his eyes to Magiluka, who had a very self-satisfied expression on her face.

“Maintaining her iai stance while in movement... You must have put that idea into her head,” Instructor Karis told her.

“Oho ho, it was an anti-Lady Mary tactic,” Magiluka laughed. “It’s a shame she had to reveal her hand this early, but I suppose she had no other recourse.”

“Anti-Mary?” I asked, stung. “I’m not some kind of monster you need countermeasures for.”

While I did feel I should overlook it, I couldn't help but feel a bit offended. The cheering grew louder again as Safina's assault gave her the upper hand. She took advantage of Sacher backing away to gauge the situation to close the distance and slash at him. If Sacher were to try to attack, she'd hit him with a powerful iai strike that would finish him off at once. She had him in a stalemate.

Sacher, who was one step behind Safina's actions, ended up being forced into the defensive.

Safina's style really matured in such a short time. It's awe-inspiring. I was half praising her and half feeling afraid of her as I watched her in the arena—I really had ended up making her into one fearsome fencer.

With their exchange of blows momentarily settling down, they both kept their distance, pausing for breath while wary of each other's movements.

What now, Sacher? Safina is stronger than you'd expected.

Sacher being backed against the wall was extremely unusual. I swallowed anxiously, watching my two friends face off. But then, Sacher seemed to have come up with something, because he held his sword in an overhead stance. It gave off the message he was about to deliver a diagonal slash, to which the audience started murmuring, and Safina fixed her iai posture, eyeing him carefully.

They glared at each other for a few moments. Sacher took a deep breath, then raised his voice in a howl and charged at Safina with his sword held aloft. It looked like a reckless assault—everyone present probably felt this way. But when Sacher closed the distance with Safina, I noticed it.

Sacher's expression didn't look resigned at all. And then, I heard him whisper.

"Body Protect."

The moment Safina's blade flashed, Sacher's body was enveloped in light that seemed to have been beckoned by his words. I'd seen something similar in the past. This was similar to the spell Instructor Karis had used when we'd fought him on our first day in the academy.

I heard a loud clinking sound—the moment Safina's blade hit Sacher's exposed flank, it was deflected by the thin membrane of light, and the speed of

her slash was curbed significantly.

“Magic!” Magiluka exclaimed.

“Aha ha! And there you have Sacher’s anti-Lady Mary measure!” Karis said victoriously.

Stop calling it anti-Mary! What am I, a seasonal flu?!

The use of magic wasn’t a big surprise in this world. The shocking part was that the spell Sacher had used wasn’t an application of day-to-day magic, but rather combat-oriented magic of the second order. The Solos class typically taught the first-years only the basics of combat magic, and only by the second year did the academy actually start delving into actually applying it in combat. The fact that a first-year student could use such a spell was something no one had expected, and the audience was shocked.

“Got iiiiit!”

Declaring his victory, Sacher withstood Safina’s slash and swung his sword down on her. With his physique and the aid of the spell, he was able to cut the force of Safina’s attack to less than half of its intended impact. He likely had a cracked bone or two, but that was hardly enough to stop his charge.

Everyone was confident Safina was about to lose.

“Miss Safina! Go ahead and use it!” Magiluka called out, her voice reaching Safina’s ears.

“Accel Boost,” Safina whispered in response, and light enveloped her.

The next moment, Sacher’s sword swung down...only to breeze through nothing but empty air and slam against the ground.

“What?!” Sacher called out in surprise.

Before his eyes, Safina appeared half a step beside where she’d stood a moment ago, her sword once again sheathed as she stood in her iai stance again.

“Her movements accelerated for a moment!” Instructor Karis looked at Magiluka in surprise, to which she brought a hand to her mouth to hide her triumphant smile.

“Oho ho ho, Sacher isn’t the only one who can employ magic!”

“Ack! I’d forgotten you’re a student of the Aleyios class!” Instructor Karis said.

“Yes, yes, and next you’ll say it’s a countermeasure against me...” I said tiredly.

“Of course it is!” Magiluka said victoriously, her back straight and her chest puffed out.

I sighed at their bickering. As they spoke, Safina once again drew her sword on Sacher.

“Urgh! Body Protect!” Sacher chanted the spell again, realizing he couldn’t dodge her hit, and held up his left arm to guard himself.

“Accel Boost.” Safina accelerated herself again, dodging a counterattack from Sacher.

But just when everyone began expecting this battle to last a while, it all ended abruptly. The sound of something hitting the arena with a thud filled the venue; suddenly, without warning, both of them had toppled over in the arena and gone unconscious.

The crowd let out a collective “Huh?!” The two of them remained unstirring on the ground. I looked to Instructor Karis and Magiluka, seeking an answer, but the two of them stared at the stage with pale faces.

“Darn... I forgot to teach him about that...” Instructor Karis muttered tensely.

“Mana exhaustion...” Magiluka mumbled bitterly.

“Huh?” I was puzzled by their answers.

“When you use magic too many times in succession, you temporarily deplete your body’s mana reserves,” Magiluka graciously explained. “That’s what happened to them. And since mana is tied to one’s mind, depleting your mana makes your consciousness muddled, which at worst can lead to fainting.”

“Hmm... So, what does this mean?” I asked, not quite grasping the situation.

The referee answered the question soon after.

“Both competitors are unable to battle! As such, this match is considered a

draw!”

The referee’s declaration was met with confused cheering from the crowd. I could only stare at my unconscious friends with a blank expression.

24. It’s Over... It’s All Over...

The arena was in an uproar. The two most promising competitors ended up knocking each other out and having to be carried off to the infirmary. No one could have expected this outcome.

As they brought in stretchers to carry Sacher and Safina away, I hurried over to escort them. “Sir Sacher! Safina!” I exclaimed, but neither made any signs of waking up.

I trembled. *Does mana exhaustion really do this to people?*

“We’re in a hurry,” the medic told me as I approached, to which I stepped back and let them carry the stretchers away to the infirmary.

I watched them leave and then followed close behind. I imagined it wasn’t used that often, but there was a small quasi-infirmary set up within the arena where those injured during matches were treated, and this indeed was where the two of them were taken.

The medics opened the wooden door, carried them inside, and shut the door behind them as I looked on. “Will they be all right...?” I asked anxiously, unsure of what mana exhaustion entailed.

What if they never wake up? My thoughts spiraled toward negative territory. I could only clasp my hands in prayer.

“Don’t worry. They’re just asleep,” Magiluka reassured me, seeing my concern. “They’ll wake up on their own once they recover some mana.”

“That’s right,” Instructor Karis confirmed. He’d also followed us, perhaps feeling responsible for teaching Sacher magic. “It’ll take them a while to wake up, but their lives aren’t in any danger.”

Before long, the door opened, and a teacher stepped out from the room.

“How are they doing, sir?” I hurried over to him and asked.

“They’ll be fine,” the teacher said with a smile. “Miss Safina has no injuries to speak of, while young Sacher fractured his left arm and has a few cracked ribs. Those are all treatable with healing magic.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“However, my magic can’t do much to help with their mana exhaustion. They probably won’t wake up today, so I’ll have to talk to the teachers in charge of the seeding.” Saying this, the doctor left and walked off to the arena.

With the news that the two of them were fine settling in, I felt myself relax and reconsidered my situation. *Hmm. So, since the two of them passed out in the semifinal, they won’t be in the next match. And since the semifinals and finals are both today, there won’t be a match tomorrow... That makes sense. Hmm, but if that’s the case, once my match is done, what about the finals?*

I was beginning to realize that this situation was very bad for me. I broke into a cold sweat. *So, wait... Does this mean the second semifinal match is effectively going to be the finals? Really?*

With that thought in mind, I started considering all sorts of irresponsible options. *Maybe if I just stay here, the match will end inconclusively?* I looked around suspiciously, wary of someone showing up to beckon me back to the arena. Thankfully, no one seemed to be coming at the moment.

Perhaps I was looking too wary and suspicious, because Tutte spoke up, like she’d just realized something.

“Speaking of, Lady Mary, should you be he—mmmf?!” I slapped a hand over her mouth, stopping her from saying the words I was dreading most.

I dragged her over to a spot where the others won’t see us and whispered, “Listen, I’ll say I’m too worried for my friends and stay here to avoid the next match. If all goes well, it’ll be a technical loss, and I’ll be spared from the match.”

“Lady Mary, I really think that after you’ve come this far, it really doesn’t matter if you win or lose,” Tutte protested.

“No, it does. I’m going to lose this, all right?!”

At this point, I was doing it half out of principle. I wanted to lose this. Nothing had gone my way this whole time, so if I didn’t end up losing at the very end, I’d have just been frustrated. Maybe I’d gotten desperate.

“So Tutte, you go back to the arena and keep an eye on the situation for me. Be discreet!”

“Ugh...” Tutte sighed. “Very well, Lady Mary...” Tutte returned to the arena, looking quite unconvinced, and I pumped my fists inwardly.

A few minutes later, as I was standing innocuously with everyone else, Tutte hurried over to me. “O-Oh, Lady Mary, it’s terrible!” she said in a loud voice that made the rest of the group jolt when they realized I was there.

“Huh? Lady Mary, why are you still here? What about your match?” Magiluka asked.

“Oh, that? That doesn’t matter.” I waved a hand dismissively and directed a sharp gaze at Tutte. “So, why did you come back, Tutte?”

She looked at me with a pale expression, shivering. *Whenever Tutte is like this, it’s pretty much always because she has really bad news for me, I think.* With that bad feeling brewing in my stomach, I got the impression I didn’t want to hear what she had to say next. But Tutte would carry on in a fluster, unaware of my wishes.

“Oh, Lady Mary, it’s terrible,” she began. “Your semifinal opponent wants to resign and have you win by technicality. He says he’s not a worthy match to you, and the difference in strength is noticeable enough that everyone knows you’ll win.”

“Huuuuuh?!” I exclaimed out loud.

“Also, he said he doesn’t want to face you when you’re worried about your friends, because it might get in the way of you winning... He fervently told the whole crowd that he’s moved by you asking to resign and being willing to throw away your victory and glory for your friends.”

“Wh-What...?”

My excuse had been glorified so much unbeknownst to me that, according to Tutte, no one in the audience seemed to object to my opponent's decision. *Have the teachers in charge of seeding already gotten wind of all this?*

"S-So... What happened? Don't tell me the teachers agreed to his proposal...?" I asked. I honestly didn't want to hear the answer to it, but the situation demanded that I did.

"The teachers unanimously accepted his forfeit and counted it as a technical defeat," Tutte said. "When I left, the crowd was applauding him as he exited the arena."



I felt everything go dark. I was bad with handling these kinds of things as it was, but seeing absolutely everything refuse to go my way went beyond my capacity to accept. Left with nothing to do, my mind could only give way to despair, give up, and let my consciousness slip away.

In retrospect, that was the worst thing I could have done. Instead of fainting, I should have walked out to the arena and voiced my objection to this outcome before everything was fully decided. But instead, I'd passed out and let that chance slip by.

By the time I came to, it was all too late. I'd managed the unheard-of achievement of winning the finals without fighting, and ended up etching my name into the academy's history. So it was that that year's martial arts tournament ended with hectic developments.

When I woke up at home, I was in such a state of shock I ended up shutting myself off in my room for two weeks and ended up skipping a whole lot of time at the academy.

25. You Just Made Everything Much Messier

I spent two weeks shut off in my room after the tournament, curled up in bed and skipping most of my meals. I succumbed to self-abandonment.

All I'd wanted was to be the most inconspicuous student in my year. The kind of person who sat in the corner of people's minds, whose mention only conjured up a casual "Oh, right, they were there." But somehow, I'd won one match after another in the tournament and ended up taking first place. And during the tournament, some people started calling me that absurd name, "the White Princess."

I'd never fought Sacher or Safina, the most promising students in the tournament, and I'd ended up winning in a way that had felt almost contrived. Surely no one was satisfied with this, I thought. I figured everyone else was definitely suspicious of me. And if they weren't, it was actually worse: I didn't want people expecting that kind of greatness out of me. All I wanted was to

relish my life quietly, without drawing attention to myself.

And so, I wanted to be left alone, so I spent my days in a downward spiral of negative emotions. I only buried myself deeper into bed, refusing to go outside.

But one day, two weeks later, I had to crawl out from under the covers, my hair a mess. What had spurred me to leave the room was quite simple; that day, the written exams for my first year were beginning.

I stared outside idly, my hands on the window's wooden frame, my eyes fixed on the soft morning dew. I heard a knock on the door, to which I gave a vague reply. Tutte, who was the only person I allowed entry into my room, brought in a change of clothes, a hair brush, a wash basin, and other such necessities.

"I'm surprised you knew I'd be going to school today," I said gloomily.

"Well, your written exams start today. And I know you're very serious and earnest, Lady Mary, so I assumed that would get you to leave your room."

"I guess you really do know me," I sighed with a smile.

Tutte bowed respectfully and began helping me prepare so I would look presentable enough to leave the room. With practiced motions, she prepared the wash basin, wiped my face and body, and helped me put my clothes on.

I sat gloomily on my chair, and Tutte began combing my hair. This one moment we were spending together—going through the morning as we always would, despite me having neglected to do so for a while now—really made me realize how devoted she was to me. For two weeks, Tutte had simply played along with my whims, patiently waiting for me to come to my senses.

"Thank you, Tutte..." I said.

"What's this all of a sudden, Lady Mary?"

"No, I just... I just felt like I should say that."

As we conversed, we gazed at each other's reflections in my full-length mirror.

Afterward, once I was done getting dressed, Tutte escorted me to the dining hall. For the past two weeks, my parents had been concerned for me, but they waited patiently for me to calm down. I felt like I had to apologize to them.

As I walked down the corridor leading to the dining hall, I happened upon my father, Ferdid, as he was talking to a butler about something. He was dressed in full uniform—which doubled as his work attire—and ordered the butler with a stern expression. I wasn't quite mentally prepared to meet him yet, and stopped in my tracks, unsure of what to do or say.

But then, father noticed me, and his stern expression washed away, making way for a broad grin. He hurried over to me.

"Maaaaary! My cute little angel!" He charged at me and caught me in a bear hug.

I stiffened up in surprise as father picked me up in his thick, burly arms.

"Are you all better now? Are you ready to go back to the academy?" he asked, holding me close enough to gaze into my face.

I could tell how concerned he was for me, and bowed my head meekly. "Yes, father. I apologize for worrying you," I said with a smile.

"Oh, my little angel." He hugged me again, holding back tears of joy, and rubbed his cheek against mine. "Thank goodness, it's truly a relief. If you'd have stayed cooped in your room any longer, why, I'd have had to go out and crush the academy to bits."

Hm, father, what did you just say? I get the feeling you just said something very dangerous. Even held in his tight embrace, I couldn't help but notice the dangerous undertones to my father's words.

A moment later, we heard a dry cough from behind us. We turned around to look, where we found mother watching us with a pleasant smile.

"Mother!"

Freeing myself from my father's embrace, I hurried over to my mother, Aries. She got to her knees and enveloped me with a warm embrace, her soft chest pressing against my face.

Ah, so warm...and, so suffocating! I squirmed, trying to free my face from mother's embrace, and managed to look up at her.

"Mary..." she said. "You're all right now, right?"

“Yes... I’m sorry I made you worry,” I said cheerfully, trying to wipe away the concern I could see behind her kind eyes.

Right, I shouldn’t have been this depressed. I have people that care about me so much. I should reflect on my failures so I never repeat them.

And so, I made for the dining hall to have breakfast with my loving parents.

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After breakfast, I put on my prided uniform and got on the carriage waiting at the entrance. Seeing that Tutte and I got on the carriage, the coachman brought the horses to a trot. We approached the academy, and as we did, I felt my stomach start hurting.

I had no idea how to face everyone after playing hooky for two whole weeks. The closer we came to the academy, the more anxious I became, and all the resolve I’d built up that morning was starting to shake.

Despite my anguish, the carriage arrived at the academy without incident. The carriage ground to a halt at the usual stop, and we got off. I took a deep breath, straightened out my back, and looked at the campus building.

“Are you all right, Lady Mary? You look very pale,” Tutte said, concerned.

“I’m fine, really. I’m off to the lounge,” I replied, trying to appear as firm as I could.

I took another deep breath and made my way to the lounge. Along the way, I spotted students whispering around me. Silencing my tense emotions, I ignored them and continued to my destination.

After taking another deep breath, I entered the lounge. Hearing the murmuring in the room made me momentarily lose my nerve, but Tutte spurred me forward from behind, and I quietly shuffled into the room. But just then...

“Lady Maaaaaaaaary!”

A puppy—or rather, a girl with fluffy brown-hair clad in the same uniform as me—plunged into my field of vision. She essentially tackled me, charging into my abdomen, but my attack-nullifying skill activated, allowing me to catch her

in my arms.

But, uh, the fact she charged me hard enough to trigger the skill...must mean she was that worried about me.

Safina clung to me, half in tears, and I patted her head encouragingly. Sacher approached me too.

“You all right now, Lady Mary?” he asked me, looking unusually worried. “Is your body all better now?”

I was a bit taken aback by his uncharacteristic show of concern, but my guilt at making him worry about me made me regard him with a smile.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry I made you worry. Sir Sacher, Safina, I’m glad you’re both fine too.”

I hadn’t seen the two of them since they’d passed out from mana exhaustion, so seeing them fine now was a great relief.

“All I had was mana exhaustion, and I ended up waking up that day,” Safina said, still clinging to me. “Your case is much more concerning, Lady Mary. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Mm?

I was taken aback by her question. It made it sound like I was hiding something.

Huh? Did they...figure out my broken abilities? I realized the possibility and felt a sense of dread creep down my back.

“Huh? Wh-What are you talking about?” I said, trying to look as collected as possible, but unable to hide the trembling in my words.

The two of them looked at me with concern. It made sense, after all. Given time, my special abilities would become clear to all, and those two were close to me.

“Lady Mary...” Tutte called out to me in concern, realizing the situation. I turned to look at her for a moment, nodded, and then gathered the courage to look back at my two friends.

“I’m sorry, but I...” I resolved to tell them the truth.

“You really were hiding your weak constitution from everyone else, weren’t you?” Safina cut me off, convinced of something that wasn’t true.

“Right...” Sacher hung his head. “I didn’t quite believe it when Magiluka gathered that information, but it does explain everything.”

“E-Explain what?” I squeaked.

The other two were utterly convinced...of something I’d never thought of.

“I guess it’s like they say, ‘God doesn’t give with both hands.’” Sacher shook his head, moved. “You have so much talent and skill, but your body just can’t keep up with it... It makes sense you’ve never stood out so far.”

“Erm, what?” I gradually started to panic.

“But you never let it show, worrying about me more than you did yourself, and then you pushed yourself to answer our self-centered expectations...” Safina said, her eyes full of tears. “I didn’t see you before your match, but your illness must have truly been tormenting you.”

She held my hands comfortingly and raised them to her chest.

“The moment your victory was announced, you passed out like you’d run out of strength after accomplishing your task and had been teetering between life and death since. You worked so hard, Lady Maaaary!” Safina burst into tears like a dam had broken. Her loud weeping filled the lounge, and everyone else started whispering.

“S-Safina, stop it! Who told you that?! It’s made-up!” I protested.

“You don’t have to hide it anymore. Magiluka told us everything,” Sacher said. “She said that while you were unconscious, Lord Regalia told the headmaster all about it.” He placed a hand on my shoulder with a smile that said “It’s fine, I understand everything,” but I only understood less and less the more he spoke.

“Huh? Father and the headmaster?”

I didn’t hear anything about my father coming to the academy. I turned to look at Tutte, who simply nodded in assent to my silent question. *Father really did come here, then.* Magiluka then entered our lounge, her blond ringlets

bouncing with each step, with the prince following her.

"Lord Regalia said you were always frail and weak and fragile, and you couldn't even go through your daily life without the help of your private maid," Magiluka explained. "He said you getting so far in the tournament was a surprise, and he was sure you'd become stronger and healthier without him knowing it. But you actually simply forced yourself to try hard to meet everyone's expectations. He greatly regretted that this happened, blamed the academy for not noticing, and said you wouldn't attend until you were all better."

"When he was done speaking to the headmaster, Sir Regalia found out you had passed out after being declared the winner, and said with tears in his eyes that you must have kept it a secret so as to not burden everyone else," Reifus appended. "I've never seen Duke Regalia so emotional before... After that, he told us you were asleep all day long and refused to leave your room. He said that you refused to let anyone in your room so people wouldn't see you being weak and feeble and worry about you."

As he spoke, the other students all listened curiously.

Oh, my, Gooood! Father, how did you twist the story this hard?! You just made everything that much messier!

As I could only react to Magiluka and Reifus's story with a dry, mirthless smile, Tutte approached me and whispered, "They're telling the truth. As proof, the headmaster granted me special permission to escort you within the academy. The master told me this the other day."

At Tutte's words, I realized that she was, indeed, escorting me within the academy too. I had very mixed feelings. While I was relieved my secret was still safe, the fact I couldn't do anything to change the way people saw me now was something I could only lament.

Why does everything have to turn into such a mess?!

26. Rapid Developments

A few days later, the results of the written exams came in. I went with Tutte to two pieces of parchment pasted on the plaster wall by the entrance to our lounge. They were about the size of an A4 page.

“Here you are, Lady Mary.” Tutte spotted my name on the list. “It seems you’re in fifth place among your class.”

“Phew, fifth place,” I breathed out in relief, though I was a bit frustrated. “I was aiming for tenth place, but given everything that’s happened, I should probably be happy I didn’t land in first place.”

Still, given how certain it seemed that God’s whims would place me in first place both in practical and academic grades, I decided I was better off not complaining about this outcome. And indeed, looking at the grades of the person who took first place, I could have easily gotten that high if I’d tried.

I mean, I could have flunked on purpose, but if my grades ended up worse than Sacher’s, it’d have obliterated my self-worth. I kind of had to aim high.

With that admittedly rude thought in mind, I looked over the list for familiar names. Safina’s name was around the middle of the list, leaning into the higher marks. Sacher’s wasn’t quite at the bottom, but it was still closer to the lower marks.

“Oh...” I heard a sigh, and turned around to see Safina checking the list. “So I was placed here. I guess that’s what I’d expect.”

“W-Well, I mean, you’re above average, so that’s good,” I said. “And you ranked high on your practical exams.”

I tried to comfort Safina, to which she raised her head and nodded with a smile, looking a bit encouraged. The tournament had also decided whether Safina would go on to continue her time at the academy, so I was relieved that she was fine.

Incidentally, the cretin hadn’t appeared in the academy ever since he’d lost the tournament. In other words, he missed the written exams, and he was considered to have dropped out. Of course, with his attendance next year being questionable to begin with, it wasn’t all too surprising. Not that I really cared much about him...

“Yeah, our practical grades are more important in this class,” Sacher, who was in the worst ten of our class, piped in unapologetically.

“If anything, you need to study more.” I glared at him, crossing my arms.

“But really, you’re something special, Lady Mary,” Safina said, her brown eyes glittering. “You got first place on your practical exams, and you’re in fifth place in the written exams too!”

“O-Oh, it’s not a big deal...” I said, stepping half a step away, refusing to look her in the eye when she praised me so unabashedly.

“That’s right, and rumor has it that if you hadn’t spent two weeks in bed, you’d have been first place in your written exams too,” Sacher said.

“Huh? Who’s spreading that rumor?” I questioned Sacher as to the source of his dubious information.

“Instructor Karis,” he answered.

Him again...? Ugh, always doing unnecessary things!

Come to think of it, I did rely on him for help to get test sheets from last year and study for the exams. And being the faux commentator that he was, I could easily imagine Instructor Karis coming up with that theory.

My shoulders drooped. I figured I shouldn’t even try to deny that rumor. The tournament had taught me a painful lesson about trying too hard to fix a situation. The more I struggled, the more things went against my wishes.

“Oh, it’s true. Lady Mary is fifth on the list. That’s impressive.”

“I guess Instructor Karis is right, and she really could have been first if she hadn’t gotten sick...”

Our classmates started gathering around the sheet and whispered. I realized that after that flurry of misunderstandings, everyone had decided to start acting off-puttingly sympathetic toward me. It almost felt like I was being pampered.

In the days that followed, whenever I tried to do something, people would trip over themselves in an attempt to do it for me, telling me to sit down and not exhaust myself. People worried about me too much; it was bordering on being overprotective. And they were doing it so much that Tutte, who was

coming to the academy every day to help me, ended up complaining to me at home that she had nothing to do because everyone else was taking over her work.

This is bad. At this rate I'll get spoiled rotten. I have to do something.

With Tutte taking care of all my needs since I was a toddler, I was already halfway to becoming completely lazy, so I had to find a way to avoid stumbling into that fate again. With that in mind, I tried proving to everyone that I was fine and healthy. I lifted up objects and waved them around to demonstrate that nothing was wrong with me. But they just looked at me with pitying eyes and told me that they understand and I shouldn't overexert myself. Some ladies even looked away from me and covered their mouths, holding back tears.

If I showed them what I'm really capable of, it would clear up this misunderstanding... But if I did that, people might stop seeing me as a person and start treating me like some kind of alien.

After talking it over with Tutte, that was the conclusion I'd reached. And so, that was where things would stand for the time being, with me still unable to really change people's mistaken notions about me.

"Lady Mary?" Safina asked in concern, noticing the way I was hanging my head wearily. "Are you feeling unwell?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine." I snapped out of my thoughts and raised my head.

"Maybe you should take a seat? Everyone, clear the way for her," one classmate suggested, and then they looked at the crowd gathered around the parchment, which parted in two to let me pass. "Over here, Lady Mary."

"Th-Thanks..." I muttered uncomfortably.

Ugh... I want to run away...

I met everyone's goodwill with a stiff smile as Safina led me away.

***

A few days later, as I finished my classes and returned to the lounge with Tutte, I ran into Miss Iks.

"Oh, Regalia, good timing," she told me. "The headmaster is calling for you.

Come with me, please.”

With that said, she briskly left the lounge without waiting for my response and beckoned for me to come along. With a question mark over my head, I looked at Tutte, who seemed to be just as puzzled as I was. Miss Iks urged me to hurry along, and I followed her.

We left the academy’s campus building and headed down a flagstone road that led to the large clock tower. I never knew this until then, but after finding out my father spoke to the headmaster, I learned that the headmaster’s office was on the top floor of the clock tower.

As we approached the clock tower, I looked up at the imposing building with my mouth hanging open. It wasn’t as tall as the Tokyo Tower, since it only stood about five stories tall, but owing to it having been built back when the academy was founded, it did have a certain aged dignity to it. The surrounding campus buildings were all three stories tall, so the clock tower did stand taller by comparison.

Miss Iks led us to the front of the clock tower, and as I stood directly beneath it, I could only let out an impressed “Oooh.” It was a square brickwork building. At its top was a large timepiece with large iron needles serving as the hands of the clock. The sheer size of the clock tower was quite imposing, but more daunting still was the realization I’d have to climb all the way up this tower.

“What are you doing? It’s this way.”

While I was looking up at the tower, slack-jawed, Miss Iks stood by the entrance and turned around to urge me ahead. I hurriedly followed her. As we entered the clock tower, the first thing that came into view was the large mechanism in the center of the room, consisting of lots of gears meshing against each other. I exclaimed in wonder upon seeing it, and I followed Miss Iks up a fairly wide staircase that snaked along the wall.

The room above the clockwork mechanism was, unlike the one before it, just a brickwork room with nothing else in it. It had a spiral staircase in its corner that led into another room. I didn’t realize it with the clockwork mechanism, but the empty tower was actually arranged to be quite spacious.

Having to climb up another story made me exhausted, but Miss Iks strode up

the next staircase like she knew no fatigue, so I could only sigh and follow her up the spiral stairs. We found ourselves in a room that looked like it was lived in.

Bookcases lined the walls, and the floor was adorned with a neatly placed carpet with geometric shapes in bright colors weaved into it. The room's ceiling stood tall, with the room comprising two stories that were basically connected via an open ceiling. Instead, two staircases spanned from both sides of the room. It was like an open library where one could overlook both the first and second floors.

"Wait here, please. I'll call the headmaster."

Saying this, Miss Iks left us behind and climbed up one of the staircases. We watched her leave, following her with our gaze...unaware of the suspicious shadow approaching us from behind.

I heard a squishing sound, and then...

"Mm, mmhm. Now, here is a chest that shows some promise..."

"Hyaaaah!" I heard Tutte screech behind me.

I turned around in a hurry, finding Tutte standing there petrified with a pair of hands fondling her developing breasts over her maid uniform from behind.

"What?!" I froze up in shock, but then felt something rush behind me quickly.

"What are you doing, you perverted old coot?!"

The one passing behind me was Miss Iks, who drew her sword and pointed it at the disrespectful lout who had accosted Tutte.

"Now, now, Miss Iks. I'm still the headmaster of this academy. Watch your tone," the person said.

"I'm not going to watch my tone around a deviant who attacks women," Miss Iks said coldly. "Get away from her."

Overwhelmed by Miss Iks's attitude, I watched in shock as the person behind Tutte stepped away from her. It was an old man clad in a fancy robe, his aged face wrinkly but still brimming with vigor. His white hair was shoulder-length, and his mustache and beard, which were as long as his hair, were quite striking.

He'd have looked quite respectable, were it not for the oddly indecent glint in his eyes.

Freed from the old man's grasp, Tutte hurried over to hide behind my back, tears in her eyes. I stood wearily, bracing myself so as to guard her.

"Oho ho ho, no need to be so wary! That was just a little greeting," the headmaster said, stroking his beard with an amiable smile.

Miss Iks sighed and sheathed her sword, standing between us and the headmaster.

"Um, Miss Iks..." I looked to her for an explanation.

"I know what you're going to say, Regalia," she said with a visibly fed-up expression. "Believe it or not, this is Altolia Academy's headmaster, Fortuna Futurulica."

I did see him once during the entrance ceremony, but I was nodding off back then and hardly remembered him. I had to ask myself if I was under the effect of some kind of sleeping charm. But now that I was introduced to him, his name made me even more surprised.

"Huh? Did you say Futurulica?"

"Yes," another voice cut into our exchange. "As ashamed as I am to admit it, this man is my grandfather." Magiluka descended down one of the staircases, her ringlets bouncing with each step, and said that with an apologetic expression.

"Oho ho ho, now that we're all here, let's get down to business, shall we?"

I was lost trying to keep up with the situation as everyone climbed up to the upper floor. I could only follow them, confused, as I tried to make sense of things.

***

The second floor section of the room doubled as a parlor and a study. We sat at a wooden table with elaborate carvings, set with matching tall chairs, with the headmaster seated at the head of the table.

Tutte had stepped away to prepare us tea. A slender, handsome, middle-aged

man sat next to Miss Iks, a pleasant smile on his face. Magiluka told me that he was the Aleyios class grand master—in other words, he was to her what Miss Iks was to me—which only left me even more puzzled as to what I was doing here.

“Now then, little Mary,” the headmaster said, knocking away any semblance of seriousness the situation had.

“Little?” I quipped back.

“I called you here because we have a certain matter we want to discuss with you.” He ignored my accusatory stare and moved things along.

“What matter, sir?” I sighed, giving up on pursuing his manner of referring to me.

“Well, little Mary, I’ll cut right to the heart of the matter. How do you feel about transferring to the Aleyios class next year?”

I stared at him in disbelief. The matter had, indeed, been split right open.

27. This Is My Chance!

“Um, pardon me, but why would I need to transfer to the Aleyios class?” I asked the headmaster this perfectly reasonable question, my mind otherwise emptied of thoughts.

“Hm... A fine question.” The headmaster stroked his beard. “Well, let me ask you this: did you study in the Solos class because you wanted to become a mighty warrior?”

I felt a bit irked to have my question met with a question, but I gave my answer.

“No, I only want to live a peaceful, uneventful life. I have no desire to dedicate my life to warfare.”

I looked at the headmaster, expecting a more concrete answer from him. Noticing this, he looked away from me uncomfortably.

“Oho ho ho, you see, many go from Solos to becoming full-fledged warriors and knights. As they move up in the years, their training becomes more similar to real combat,” the headmaster said. “In that regard, it’s quite a taxing curriculum for a young noble lady. You could end up hurt at worst, so it’s not a curriculum you should go through unprepared.”

This wasn’t an answer, though. I already knew this.

Did something happen to make it uncomfortable for the school to keep me in Solos? Something they don’t want to tell me?

As I thought things over, the room filled with silence, except for Tutte, who took advantage of this lull in the conversation to set the teacups in front of us. I picked up my cup and sipped on the tea, calming myself. And, after relaxing somewhat, I came up with one possible explanation for this sudden offer.

“...Is this because of my father?” I asked, my cup still in hand.

The headmaster and the two grand masters both froze up visibly, which confirmed my suspicions. My father, Ferdid, was involved in this. He was likely worried about me ever since the tournament and applied pressure on the academy.

Typically speaking, one family’s matters couldn’t possibly influence the academy’s decision-making, but when said family was the powerful House Regalia, it was a whole different story. Father was a marshal of the kingdom, giving him a great deal of influence on military affairs, and he was highly respected among the top brass, owing to his strength and past achievements. He could throw any tantrum he wanted and everyone around him would be glad to let them have his way.

What’s more, House Regalia’s domain was deeply involved in the kingdom’s economic interests, and it was also at the center of the nobility’s power balance. To that end, despite Aldia being a monarchy, the nobles were so deeply ingrained in politics that the royal family couldn’t disregard their opinions.

And so, if the royal family were to decide to directly antagonize House Regalia, it could result in a major political struggle between the aristocrats and the royalty. These were all things my parents, butlers, and private teachers had

told me when I was little, and so I knew better than to abuse my family's authority.

Yet despite that, my father had stormed into the Academy and forced them to do his bidding because of me. That much was clear from their reaction.

"He said that if something like that were to happen to his daughter again, there'll be repercussions," the headmaster said, looking helpless. "He had this really deadly smile on his face... Let me tell you, I was trembling! He didn't say much when we put you in Solos...and he knows a bit of injury is to be expected in the Solos class, that stubborn father of yours."

The fact that the headmaster of all people was whining like this really made me feel bad for the state of this academy. And yet, there was one bright spot in this entire situation.

"Very well. I'll change classes," I said coolly, placing my cup on its saucer.

"Huh? You will?" the headmaster asked, visibly surprised by how quickly I'd agreed. "I know we're the ones who brought it up, but you can take some time to think it over."

"Is there a problem with me deciding right now?" I asked.

"Oh, not at all."

Miss Iks and the Aleyios grand master, who were likely here to persuade me, looked quite surprised. But in my eyes, there was no need to think twice. Thinking about it calmly, this was actually my chance.

After I made such a big impression in the Solos class, God has given me another chance to redo things. I'm getting a second chance in the Aleyios class. And this time, I'll have the most uneventful school experience ever!

I kept my impression composed, but inwardly, I was happily regaining my resolve.

"But may I ask why I'm going to Aleyios? Couldn't I have gone to the Lalaios class?" I asked, my heart still aflutter with excitement toward my new life.

"Hmm, well, I've seen the results of your written exams, and they were quite good. With such high marks, no one would question you transferring away from

Solos. I considered placing you in Lalaios in light of that, but somehow, my granddaughter heard about this whole affair and insisted I place you in Aleyios instead."

I looked to Magiluka, who was sitting next to me, in surprise. She simply beamed back at me.

"Lady Mary," the Aleyios class grand master, who had remained silent so far, spoke up. "I've heard that you were able to use a spell after reading through a grimoire once, even if it was only a second-order offensive spell. If that's true, then that's quite an impressive feat."

The Aleyios class grand master, Mr. Erik Fried, looked at me with a pleasant smile. His raven-black hair was cut short, its ends standing up in a frizzy way that I could only describe as cool.

All the boys and men I'd seen in the Solos class were muscular and toned, but he was so slender I had to ask myself if he was eating properly. He was wearing a simple gray garb that resembled a modern suit. From a noble's perspective, his outfit was lacking in glamor, but with his warm expression and the gentle tone of his voice, it matched his overall sincere impression he gave off. He was, put simply, handsome enough to shake a maidenly heart.

"Erm..." I stuttered, taken aback by the expectation in the handsome teacher's eyes. I had a bad feeling coming, like I had to lower his expectations of me right away. However...

"It's all true, Professor Fried," Magiluka said. "I witnessed it personally."

Ugh... She beat me to the punch.

I considered denying it anyway, but there was no denying the fact that Magiluka did see me do it. And so, realizing there was no talking my way out of this, I simply fell silent.

"Oho ho ho, when Magiluka told me about it, I could hardly believe it," the headmaster said. "But if that's true, not helping your talents grow would be a waste. And so, I decided on changing your class assignment to Aleyios instead."

"I...see..." I muttered.

I was anxious over whether I'd be able to actually lower their expectations of me before I transferred to my new class, but I also felt like I needed to put this topic behind me as soon as possible. So I simply gave a noncommittal response.

Professor Fried then gave me a simple explanation of the transfer procedure. I simply let Tutte, who nodded at his explanations the whole time, handle all of it as I waited for my meeting with the headmaster to end.

Magiluka left the clock tower with me. On the way back, I found out it'd actually had a makeshift elevator installed. Miss Iks, being the teacher of the Solos class, naturally preferred to walk up the stairs instead of relying on it. She hadn't let me use it out of her philosophy of seeing everything as training.

With classes for today over, I took the carriage home. I talked to Tutte, who sat opposite me, her back turned to the front of the carriage.

"What do you think about me changing classes, Tutte?"

"I think it's a godsend, given how much attention you've drawn to yourself," she replied.

"Right?!" I nodded. "God definitely gave me this chance! And this time, I'm going to take advantage of it. A good, uneventful life!"

"That's the spirit, Lady Mary!"

As the carriage rattled, moving us along, I clenched my fists and pumped them up excitedly. But then, in a stroke of bad luck, the carriage ran over a rock, and made my body jump. My clenched fist hit the ceiling, producing an unpleasant snapping sound.

An uncomfortable air filled the carriage...

Afterword

To both newcomers and readers from the novel publishing site, thank you for picking up *Invincible Little Lady*! I am Chatsufusa, the author of this story.

I'd like to extend my thanks to everyone who picked up a copy of this book. I hope you'll recommend it to your friends! And for those who only picked up the book and are wondering if you should buy it, please make your way to the cash register and buy this copy!

Now then, this work is my first published story. It makes me feel like pumping a fist and brandishing it at the heavens, celebrating my career...but even if I've ascended to cloud nine, reality will sadly have to pull me back down. I still need to write the next volumes, after all!

I was inspired to write this story while I read novels on the novel publishing site Shosetsuka ni Naro. I figured I'd try writing something, came up with a title and an outline, and just tried uploading it. This series basically started as a snap decision.

Thinking back on how reckless I was makes me break into a cold sweat.

I slowly but steadily updated the story, and one day, when I woke up, I found my number of readers had suddenly spiked. I panicked and didn't know what to do! I had to check a few times to make sure my computer wasn't glitching out and showing me the wrong numbers! Looking back on it now, it's a funny memory.

I'd like to thank everyone involved in the making of this series. To Micro Magazine publishing, who decided to bet on a maiden work written by a newcomer like me. To my editor Mr. I, who helped revise my script despite my inexperience. And to fuumi, who graced my novel with beautiful, adorable illustrations! The way you draw Mary is so cute, I wish I could print it out and decorate my room with it.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the novel publishing site Shosetsuka

ni Naro for granting me the chance to get started.

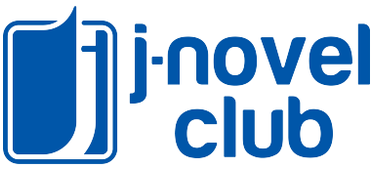
Lastly, I would like to thank everyone involved in publishing this book, the readers who've supported me since the web novel days, and most of all, those who bought this novel. I can only hope seeing Lady Mary's struggles brought a smile to your face.

Now then, I look forward to seeing you in volume 2. Until then, I bid you adieu!


1
Author
Chatsufusa
Artist
fuumi
The Invincible Little Lady


Tutte
Sacher Elexiel
Reifus Lukua Dalford
Mary Regalia
Magiluka Futurulica
Safina Karshana
Characters


“I’m sorry, Tutte... I’m so sorry... I’m so sorry I scared you...”
Without a second thought, I opened the door and tearfully apologized to the girl standing before me—and Tutte, who’d been hanging her head and holding back her own tears, looked upon my pitiful apology with confused eyes. That night, the sound of my weeping and repeated apologies echoed through the mansion, baffling the grownups.



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The Invincible Little Lady: Volume 1

by Chatsufusa

Translated by Roman Lempert Edited by Zubonjin

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